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Review

BAIRU TAFLA, *Troubles and Travels of an Eritrean Aristocrat: A Presentation of Kāntiba Gilamika'él's Memoirs*

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Reviews

Ein bedeutsamer Faktor für die Bewahrung einer Argobba-Identität liegt im sozio-religiösen Bereich. Die muslimische Glaubenspraxis ist äußerlich nicht nennenswert von jener der Wällo-Oromo und 'Afar verschieden, und dennoch hat sie für die Argobba offensichtlich einen besonderen Stellenwert. Die Islamisierung reicht in eine für Äthiopien nachweislich kaum übertroffene historische Tiefe zurück, und es besteht eine auch im sprachlichen Repertoire erkennbar werdende Bindung an arabische Herkunfts- und Kulturtraditionen. Abbebe Kifleyesus hat einen wertvollen Fundus von Informationen über bedeutende religiöse Persönlichkeiten, die ihnen zugeschriebenen Mausoleen als Kultstätten sowie die mit ihnen assoziierten mystischen Vorstellungen und Handlungsmuster zusammengetragen. Nach seiner Überzeugung hat die von der Orthodoxie missbilligte sufistische Heiligenverehrung insgesamt zu einer Stärkung der islamischen Religiosität geführt.

Während ich mir in einigen Bereichen – wie oben erwähnt – zusätzliche Informationen gewünscht hätte, weist das Buch in anderen Passagen Redundanzen auf. Vor allem die „Conclusion“ am Ende eines jeden Kapitels ist verzichtbar. Auch erscheint es nicht erforderlich, bei den „References“ Bücher und Artikel in zwei Rubriken zu trennen.

Desiderate für Ergänzungen und weitere Forschungen sind für jede Studie vorzubringen. Als Fazit kann jedoch festgehalten werden, dass Abbebe Kifleyesus mit seinem Werk über die Argobba eine wichtige Lücke in der kulturanthropologischen Dokumentation äthiopischer Ethnien geschlossen hat. Die Studie zeigt eindrücklich auf, wie es einer aus nur noch mehreren zehntausend Menschen bestehenden Gruppe mit einer im Aussterben begriffenen Sprache gelingt, dank eines starken kulturellen Zusammenhalts ihre ethnische Identität zu bewahren. Das föderalistische System Äthiopiens bietet dafür eine günstige Grundlage.

Ulrich Braukämper, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

BAIRU TAFLA, *Troubles and Travels of an Eritrean Aristocrat: A Presentation of Kántiba Gilamika'él's Memoirs*, Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2007. 99 pp. Price: € 45,80. ISBN: 978-3-8322-5980-8

Bairu Tafla has produced an interesting and stimulating work on an Eritrean minor figure in colonial politics, *Kántiba Gilamika'él*, whose life and work spanned late 19th–early 20th century. The essay is based on Gilamika'él's Memoirs, unpublished and preserved by the family in Asmara (a partial copy is available in the Addis Ababa Archive of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies). The memoirs, written around the 1930s, are one of the few biographical works that we know in Eritrea during colonialism, given the fact that “auto-

biographies and family history were traditionally often imparted by word of mouth” (ibid. p. 7).

The first part of the essay (pp. 5–15) introduces the topic, the life and work of the author in the context of the Ethiopian state and colonial Eritrea. The second part (pp. 17–48) is an abridged translation of the *Käntiba* Gilamikaʼél manuscript including details of an historical nature. A useful list of personal names and places (pp. 49–67) and the chronology of Eritrea (pp. 69–93) conclude this small but productive volume.

The original manuscript was written in Amharic with some intercalations in Tigrinya and is divided into 45 chapters and includes a table of contents at the end. For the main topic see the list reproduced in pp. 12–15 of the present essay.

Bairu Tafla offers us some reflections on the context and the relevance of *Käntiba* Gilamikaʼél’s experiences during his lifetime (1870–1941). He has a deep knowledge of the intellectual and cultural milieu in which the manuscript is located, the complex colonial world and the question of rivalry and hegemony in Northern Ethiopia and Southern Eritrea, where Italy played a leading role. Moreover, the author conducted in Asmära, over a long period of time, many interviews with *Käntiba* Gilamikaʼél’s family, friends and descendants of the most prominent political figures active in the period he covers.

I agree about the need to make knowledge of this manuscript more widely known among scholars. The historical context of these memoirs is extremely interesting and innovative. Many intellectuals in Asmära were apparently working for the Italian administration, whilst working underground for Emperor Mənilək and the maintenance of Ethiopian sovereignty. Their role was crucial in the period of ʿAdwa and the struggle for independence.

The protagonist as well, as many of his friends, were in fact official translators for the colonial government, among whom the most famous was Gäbrä Əgziʼabəḥer, who thus became acquainted with secret matters dealing with political issues. For this reason both Gäbrä Əgziʼabəḥer and Gilamikaʼél were accused of being in contact with Ethiopia and exiled. The manuscript is “a typical history of a highland Eritrean” (p. 8); it tells us social and cultural details of the villages, and based on oral sources transmitted through the generations. As Bairu Tafla points out in his introduction, “three components were held in great value: land of settlement, the church and kinship” (p. 8). This is not a story of prominent figures in power, but a story of people and land. The historical context is relevant to some minor figures in Ethiopian politics only, with few exceptions, mainly *Ras* Alula and *Ras* Makʼännən and Emperor Mənilək. The focus is on a private life spent in both imperial Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea, a destiny that many others shared with *Käntiba* Gilamikaʼél, but few had written about.

Reviews

This essay qualifies Bairu Tafla as an attentive historian looking at details, substance, innovative material of a period in which historical memory was mainly produced by Italian administrators, scholars and explorers. A work about the Eritrean highlands written by a native living in Hamasen is very welcome, because the memory of the past transmitted through generations is no longer, today, an instrument that can be used in history.

The hope of finding more written sources such as journals and biographies is still alive, given the fact that many families in Asmara preserve today documents not often available to scholars.

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RAINER BAUDENDISTEL, *Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936 = Human Rights in Context*, vol. 1, ed. by MARGUERITE GARLING and GUGLIELMO VERDIRAME. New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, first edition 2006. xvii + 342 pages + a map. Price: US-\$ 80,-/GB-£ 47,-. Hardback ISBN: 1-84545-035-3

Most of the studies on the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-36 have so far concentrated on the military activities and their impact on international politics. But the repercussions of the war extend far beyond these themes, as the work under consideration shows. At long last we now have a cogent study on the medical and logistical aspects of the history of the war, thanks to the Swiss historian who pursued the subject. When in connection with the famine of 1984-85 the author visited northern Ethiopia, where the greater part of the military campaign had taken place some five decades earlier, he wondered what the logistics of transport and medicare of the huge Ethiopian army (estimated at 250-350 thousand men) had looked like. His curiosity eventually resulted in a substantial book.

The research shows that the Ethiopian army had one physician per 12,000 persons in contrast to the adversary who could afford one medical doctor per 400 soldiers. The discrepancy in the amount of medical and food supplies and the availability of qualified personnel in every field was also enormous. The Ethiopian Red Cross was established only a few months before the outbreak of the war; and, in spite of the active support given by the women's association, the organisation was in no way capable of rendering the desired service. It lacked the financial and medical means as well as the necessary transport vehicles and the medical personnel. Some help came from sister-organisations in Egypt, France, Great Britain, Sweden, Norway and other countries.