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Review

BAIRU TAFLA (ed. and trans.), *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era: Selected Amharic Documents from the Nachlaß of Alfred Ilg, 1884–1900*

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BAIRU TAFLA (ed. and trans.), *Ethiopian Records of the Menilek Era: Selected Amharic Documents from the Nachlaß of Alfred Ilg, 1884–1900* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 54. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000. xiii, 563 pp. Price: Eur 114,-. ISBN: 3-447-04258-3.

Professor Bairu Tafla of the University of Hamburg has already acquired a secure place in the history of Ethiopian historiography for his numerous contributions, which can be grouped into two categories: original reconstructions of an aspect of the past and translation, annotation and publication of primary Amharic and Ge'ez sources. In the latter case, he ranks, together with Sven Rubenson (of *Acta Aethiopica* fame), as the leading historian of Ethiopia. The book under review, one more substantial addition to his already impressive list of publications, falls into this category.

Ethiopian Records contains 312 letters written to Ilg by various Ethiopian historical personages (some of his most frequent correspondents were men and women in the order of *Ras* Makonnen, Menilek and *Itege* Taitu) and vice versa as well as letters addressed to, or signed by, other foreigners. The originals are reproduced and printed in the first part of the book (pp. 36–359) while the translations and the annotations are given in Part Two (pp. 360–550). They are arranged in strict chronological order.

This work has been long awaited. Indeed, Professor Bairu is to be congratulated for his success in getting access to the documents and in deciphering some of the copies, which have faded badly. To talk about the use of these documents and of the historical significance of Alfred Ilg is simply to belabour the obvious. Suffice it to state that this book contains precious sources for the political, diplomatic and social history of the period as well as for the history of the Amharic language. It is a great addition to the literature. The index (pp. 551–563) is a useful tool to track down references to particular individuals or events or treaties. The annotation is erudite and therefore very helpful to researchers. Bairu Tafla has succeeded in obtaining biographical information even on very obscure personalities.

Yet, there are letters where annotations are missing, which would have shed light on obscure or difficult points. We can take as an example the creation of Ilg as *bitwädäd*. It was suddenly (in letter no. 187 dated 10 April 1897 addressed to *Ras* Makonnen) that he calls himself *Bitwädäd* Ilg (p. 231 for the Amharic original and p. 484 for the translation). Then in a letter written a day later by Makonnen (no. 189 dated 11 April 1897, p. 233 for the Amharic original and p. 485 for the translation), Makonnen congratulates him on his appointment. He wrote that he had heard it (presumably by hearsay). It is too early for Ilg's letter to reach him. A note would have clarified

for the reader the date of the appointment and what it exactly meant when Menilek bestowed such a title on a foreigner.

Another very striking, even shocking (at least to this reviewer) thing is the degree to which Ilg could go in reprimanding some of his highly placed correspondents. He was so peeved by a letter from Gabre Selassie, none other the *Šāhafé Te'ezaz* of Menilek, that in his response he uses very harsh words (letter dated 12 September 1900, no. 295, p. 341 for the Amharic original and p. 541 for the translation). He dares to reprimand Makonnen himself (letter dated 5 October 1900 no. 301 p. 347 for the Amharic original and pp. 544f. for the translation). The main theme of his complaints is that his correspondents do not care for him as a friend; rather they see him as a merchant who is there to run errands for them.

Moreover, Makonnen consistently addresses Ilg using the *antä* form. But suddenly towards the end of the book Makonnen addresses him in the polite form. (See letter no. 306 dated 2 November 1900, p. 352 for the Amharic original and p. 547 for the translation). It is very unusual for a highly placed lord such as Makonnen to address a *faränj* in the polite form and so suddenly. An annotation would have been in order to explain the anomaly. Like this, there are quite a few letters where an annotation, if supplied, would have been helpful to the user. Or the issue could be taken up in the introduction.

But, the introduction is rather short and does not at all introduce the protagonist. One would have complained if it were not for the promise of the author that he is planning a major biography of Alfred Ilg (p. 26). We look forward to this work because the well-known biographies of the man (KELLER 1918, LOEPFE 1974) are linguistically inaccessible to a large community of students of the period. Moreover, it is time to update them on the basis of the massive sources that Professor Bairu has uncovered and on the basis of recent research.

The way the original and the translations are presented makes it rather cumbersome for users. It would have been more convenient to place them on opposite pages – first the original on the verso of the page and then on the page opposite to it (or, in other words, on the recto of the next page) the translation with its annotations. This would have enabled the reader who has access to both languages to compare the rendering with the original. As it is now, he has to go back and forth across many pages, which is time consuming.

And comparing the two is a must for any serious historian because doing translations between unrelated languages is always difficult particularly when it comes to rendering idiomatic expressions and nuances from the one into the other. This book is no exception due to the fact that Amharic and English do not have any linguistic proximity. I can only cite a couple of examples to illustrate my point.

Letter no. 289 dated 17 August 1900 (p. 332) informs Ilg that his friend Grazmach Yoseph died by using the Amharic expression “*arāfā*”. Rendering this word as “he rested” (p. 537) may not fully carry over the meaning to the native English speaker. The accurate expression is “he went to his rest”.

The idiomatic expression that Ilg uses in his letter to Ras Makonnen (no. 311 dated 23 December 1900, p. 357f. for the Amharic original and p. 550 for the translation) is a nice one in spite of its grammatical mistake: *menāw känantä gara šibät siṽyawäta läzäläläm engeda tadärguñalaçhu?* The verb form *siṽyawäta* should have been *sawäta*. What Ilg is trying to say in a rhetorical language is that he has lived for all his life with the Ethiopians. The sentence is translated as follows: *how is it that you make me always a stranger in spite of my graying among you?* I would like to suggest that this rendering would sound better if it was modified as follows: *how is it that you treat me as a stranger in spite of growing gray among you?*

These problems in translation do not characterize the book, however. On the whole, the translation is well done. *Ethiopian Records* is indeed an extremely useful book of source material. It deserves to sit on the shelves of scholars and students of the Menilek era. We look forward, with much expectation, to the next volume of documents as well as to the monograph on Ilg that Professor Bairu promises us in the introduction.

Shiferaw Bekele

ANTHONY D’AVRAY (ed. and annotated in collaboration with RICHARD PANKHURST), *The Nakfa Documents. The despatches, memoranda, reports and correspondence describing and explaining the Stories of the Feudal Societies of the Red Sea Littoral from the Christian-Muslim Wars of the Sixteenth Century to the Establishment 1885–1901 of the Italian Colony of Eritrea* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 53. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 1999. xiii, 307 pp. Price: Eur 84,-. ISBN: 3-447-04198-6.

Anthony d’Avray came to the attention of the scholarly community of Ethiopia and Eritrea with the publication of *Lords of the Red Sea: The History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (= Aethiopistische Forschungen 45, 1996). What makes it a rare work is the fact that it gives a historical account spanning no less than three centuries of a small ethnic group of a peripheral region. Indeed, it is the most comprehensive history of the Habab to date.