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Review

SVEIN EGE, *Class, State, and Power in Africa. A case study of the kingdom of Shäwa (Ethiopia) about 1840*

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SVEIN EGE, *Class, State, and Power in Africa. A case study of the kingdom of Shāwa (Ethiopia) about 1840* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Vol. 46. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996. Xii + pp. 267. DM 160,-.

The kingdom of Shawa, core of the modern Ethiopian state built by Menilek in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Ethiopian historians like AT SMA-GIYORGIS and HERUY WALDA-SELLASE have made it the focus of their major historical studies. For Menilek's own chronicler, Tsahafe Te'ezaz Gabra-Sellase, it is the essence of all history. It has not been lacking in attention from foreign scholars, either. MORDECHAI ABIR devoted a significant portion of his study of nineteenth century Ethiopia to that kingdom. KOFI DARKWAH and VOLKER STITZ dealt with it more centrally. The latter's work in particular, tragically short-lived as his academic career was, stands to this day as living testimony of how an intelligent blend of history and geography can contribute to a thorough understanding of the past.

SVEIN EGE's work, which grew out of his PhD thesis, engages in a fruitful dialogue with these earlier works and adds a fresh perspective of its own. Fundamentally analytical in approach, its greatest single contribution will probably be its critical use of the rich travel literature. Indeed, it appears it was the abundance of that literature around 1840 that has determined the rather curious chronological frame of the work. The author has mastered that literature in a way that few other historians have done, utilizing them to the full and yet maintaining a critical distance when required. Thus, few historians have bothered to give the kind of thorough analysis of these sources that is offered here on pp. 10–17, complete with tabulated data and a map of itineraries. Contributing to this is the author's penchant for a methodological approach pertaining more to the social sciences than to the humanities – early indicator perhaps of his current major research preoccupations.

Divided into nine chapters, the book gives a comprehensive description and analysis of the Shawan polity as it looked at the height of power of its most famous king, *Negus* Sahla-Selasse. The focus is not only on the central power but also on the Oromo who constituted such an important component of that polity. A dominant theme running throughout the whole work is indeed the steady incorporation of the Oromo into the Shawan kingdom and the dynamics

and modalities of that process. Part of the merit of the book is its detailed investigation of Oromo society in its own right rather than merely as a target of Shawan expansion. In a way, the author's discussion of the complicated *gada* system is probably one of the most detailed and instructive that has ever been offered to students of Oromo history, even if it is retrospectively based mainly on the travel literature of the final quarter of the last century and more recent anthropological studies.

The author defines the Shawan economy as one dominated by agriculture, with trade and crafts playing a supplementary role. What he thus characterizes, perhaps not so helpfully, as the "peasant mode of production" was applicable to both the Amhara and Oromo communities. Although, unfortunately, the author seems to have found the two Ethiopian authorities on land tenure, Mahtama-Sellase and Gabra-Wald "difficult to read", he does introduce some new conceptual tools to help understand this ever-complex terrain of Ethiopian studies.

The Oromo society that obtained at this time was far from pristine. It was rather a society in transition, with a clear pattern of class differentiation emerging. The ruler of the Salale Oromo, Abba Maallé, was for instance said to have had a court that "was inferior only to that of Sahla-Sellase himself" (p. 94). While the influence of the neighbouring Shawan state might have been an important factor in this process, the author insists that it should not be exaggerated. In line with the studies of the emergence of classes and states in other Oromo societies (such as in the Gibe region), he concludes: "The internal structural changes predisposed the milieu for the evolution of a chiefly class, the external link was one of the factors that could be exploited by individual chiefs to strengthen their position". (p. 95)

The description and analysis of the political institutions of the Shawan state is another major contribution of this work. On pp. 106–108, the author gives a highly instructive table of the palace personnel, with their names, titles and functions, although the description of the office of the important governor of Aleyu Amba, Qallamawarq, is clearly inadequate and Nishing does not strike one as an Ethiopian name. It is a matter of some interest that the function of the *liqamakwas* at the time (governing Ankobar in the absence of the king) was rather different from what it later came to denote (serving as the king's double in order to misdirect enemy attacks). One wonders whether that was a temporary arrangement or a permanent feature. The analysis underscores the royal patronage of crafts, with the *alaqa* of the *tabib* (chief smith), Habte, heading a

hierarchy of craftsmen. The slaves of the Shawan court are said to have numbered more than 5000. Here, EGE takes issue with Darkwah, disputing the latter's assertion that slave labour eased off the burden of the peasantry. As slaves were rarely, if ever, employed in agricultural labour, EGE argues convincingly, there was no way they could have shared in the peasants' burdens. On the contrary, by providing specialized personnel for the services of the king, slavery tended to strengthen the coercive power of the state.

Another major focus of the study is the administrative structure of the Shawan state. The author identifies three major administrative divisions: the old Amhara provinces or the core (Manz), the reconquered areas in the east (Bulga and Yefat), and the tributary Oromo states to the south and west. Contrary to general perception, royal power – as measured at least in sources of military recruitment – was anchored on the second rather than on the first. On the other hand, the land tenure system enabled the peasantry of the Manz region to enjoy a larger measure of freedom than its counterpart in the reconquered areas, which was subjected to the *malkagna* system. The author highlights the centrality of allegiance to the Shawan political structure and argues for the utility of the concept of class, albeit in its simple rendering of a productive and a non-productive one, to understand that structure.

No book can be perfect and this one too has its blemishes. The penchant for tabulation, useful as it often is, tends to be sometimes overdriven. Thus Table 10 (p. 156) is far from clear while one might as well have done without Figure 2 (for ecological zones). *Wayna daga* denotes an intermediate zone between *daga* and *qolla* rather than valleys and mountain slopes (p. 35). Ethiopia may be said to have high temperature in May, but rarely in June (p. 36). The division of the Shawans into Amhara, Muslims and Oromo (p. 48) clearly mixes up categories. Finally the use of the concept of “absolutist” for Sahla-Sellase's Shawa raises more questions than it answers.

That said, however, both author and publishers are to be commended for having finally brought to light a seminal investigation of an important polity of nineteenth century Ethiopia.

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