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Review

WOLBERT G. C. SMIDT and SOPHIA THUBAUVILLE, eds, *Cultural Research
in Northeastern Africa: German Histories and Stories*

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by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper †, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

monde'. À signaler également la présence de trois cartes (pp. 10–12) et de trente reproductions photographiques (sur papier glacé) à ce jour inédites (entre p. 64 et p. 65).

Valentina Calzolari, Université de Genève

WOLBERT G. C. SMIDT and SOPHIA THUBAUVILLE, eds, *Cultural Research in Northeastern Africa: German Histories and Stories*, Extra issue of *Ityopis*, 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Frobenius-Institut, Addis Ababa: Goethe-Institut, Mekelle: Mekelle University, 2015). xii, 253 pp. Price: no price indicated. ISBN: 978-3-9806506-7-0.

The publication under review is a study of how North East Africa is seen by, and presented in, the history of knowledge of German-speaking countries over several centuries. In fact, according to the Introduction, German–Ethiopian relations seem to be an ‘inexhaustible subject matter’ (p. 1). The book’s main focus is a cultural investigation into the players and institutions that were involved (and, in some cases, still are) in gathering such knowledge. Special interest is paid to social anthropology and its precursors. In November 2014, the symposium *Cultural Research from Germanophone Countries in Northeastern Africa: Stories and Histories* was held at the Goethe-Institut in Addis Abäba. The collaboration between the Goethe-Institut, Mekelle University and the Frobenius-Institut of Frankfurt am Main made the publication of the symposium’s findings possible. It comes in a line of studies testifying to the high degree of interest on the part of German-speaking countries towards the Horn of Africa, as well as to the conflicts of interest between Europe and Africa. The editors, Wolbert G. C. Smidt and Sophia Thubauville, aim to enrich this field of study with new information and research findings, taking into account—and this is a very valuable aspect of the approach underlying the publication—the fact that research history is not the history of ‘Western’ researchers dealing with foreign and exotic regions: rather, it ‘has to be understood as an interaction of many personalities, and certainly not as the history of officially recognized academic researchers coming from outside’ (p. xi).

Following the Introduction by Wolbert G. C. Smidt—which summarizes Ethiopian–German relations from medieval legends until today—this special issue of *Ityopis*, the academic journal of Mekelle University, offers nineteen short contributions and the translation of three unedited texts: the first was written by *Abba* Gorgoryos in about 1652 and concerns the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; the others are letters written by two Oromo, Ochuu

Agaa and Akkafedhee, they date back to October 1840, and represent early examples of Oromo writing.

Throughout the publication, the reader will encounter well-known personalities from Ethiopian studies, as well as less familiar figures in the field, from the seventeenth century until today. For instance, *Abba* Gorgoryos and Hiob Ludolf are not only the focus of an article by Wolbert G. C. Smidt concerning their encounter in Gotha in 1652, but also appear as the Ethiopian and German forefathers of Ethiopian studies in many other articles. A contribution by Dorothea McEwan is dedicated to the multifaceted personality of Georg Wilhelm Schimper (1804–1878) and provides an overview of the life of the German explorer in the middle of the nineteenth century and of the research he conducted on botany and geology, and on the culture of northern Ethiopia. Many aspects of the social, economic, and cultural life of the region emerge from his studies. A further article is dedicated to Werner Munzinger (1832–1875), the well-known Swiss-born orientalist and ethnographer who became a politician serving, at different times, in the British, the French, and the Egyptian administrations. Yet his biography, as presented by Wolbert G. C. Smidt, looks more complex: the author adds new details taken from various archival sources and adopts new perspectives, showing that Munzinger's change of political sides, for example, was not due to a personal strategy of power politics (as frequently assumed by historiography), but is quite coherent when considered from the Bilin perspective, since Munzinger had accepted the position of a Bilin notable, looking for the best political partner available (p. 113). Interestingly enough, this also shows how modern historiography still suffers from a Eurocentric view of history. The contribution of Smidt is a good attempt at changing this kind of history.

Other researchers from German-speaking countries also receive attention. Herma Plazikowsky-Brauner (1888–1965), for example, has attracted the interest of Sophia Thubauville who devotes an article to the rarely mentioned life and work of this woman—a woman who was firmly committed to Ethiopian studies both in Ethiopia and in Germany. A further interesting contribution concerns the Bieber family history. In this family, a strong passion for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa has endured for generations, starting with the anthropologist Friedrich Julius (1873–1924), then his son Otto (1906–1988), the Vienna-based businessman with a strong passion for Africa who was dedicated to preserving the work of his father, and on to the author of the current article, Klaus, who is now engaged in collecting information, and writing in honour of his forebears.

The book also pays serious attention to non-European players. In an article on the contribution of the Protestant mission to today's knowledge of Oromo

culture and language, the biography of Ruufoo (the first Oromo research assistant and translator of the Bible) is offered to the reader. Formerly an Oromo slave, Ruufoo spent much of his short life at the Saint Chrischona mission near Basel. Apart from individuals, the histories and missions of research institutions such as the Frobenius-Institut für kulturalanthropologische Forschung in Frankfurt am Main, the Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik in Hamburg, and the Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung in Halle (Saale), that have played an important role supporting research on the north-eastern African region, are also presented. This publication, edited by Wolbert G. C. Smidt and Sophia Thubauville, is an informative and evocative reading that will surely encourage interested scholars to continue an important tradition of research on North East Africa.

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EVA POLUHA and ELEHU FELEKE, *Thinking Outside the Box: Essays on the History and (Under)development of Ethiopia* (n.p.: n.pub., 2016). xxx, 383 pp., 4 maps, 9 tables. Price: \$34.99 (HB), \$23.99 (pb). ISBN: 978-1-5144-2228-1 (HB), 978-1-5144-2224-3 (pb).

In essence, this self-published book is an attempt to find an answer to the question of why Ethiopia, in spite of its long history and rich culture, remains one of the poorest nations in the world. The work is the joint achievement of a family who have spent much time pondering over this mysterious question. The authors make the purpose of their work clear in the Preface (pp. ix–xi): ‘This book of essays is the product of a sincere attempt to try to understand why Ethiopia continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world’ (p. ix).

The writing of the book was shared by at least three members of the family. The father, a physician by profession and an Ethiopian by origin, wrote the first part which is a survey of the country’s history from the Aksumite period to the twenty-first century. That must have been tedious work for a non-historian, and the result was apparently not fruitful. An historical narration without interpretation and analysis cannot give an answer to the question posed above.

The mother, an anthropologist who had already written several books and articles on various aspects of Ethiopian society, dealt with the second part. She examined various scientific fields and significant events that took place in the country in the twentieth century trying to track down the caus-