



# Aethiopica 22 (2019)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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## Review Article

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Transnational Research in Ethiopia and Beyond*

Aethiopica 22 (2019), 262–268

ISSN: 1430-1938

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Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut  
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik  
der Universität Hamburg  
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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## Review Article

### Cultural Creativity and Transnational Belonging: A Glimpse on Transnational Research in Ethiopia and Beyond

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CHRISTIANE FALGE, *The Global Nuer: Transnational Life-Worlds, Religious Movements and War*, Topics in Interdisciplinary African Studies, 38 (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2015). 270 pp., 9 maps, illus. Price: €39.80. ISBN: 978-3-89645-908-4.

DIANNA J. SHANDY, *Nuer-American Passages: Globalizing Sudanese Migration*, New World Diasporas (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007). 224 pp. Price: \$59.95. ISBN: 978-0-8130-3047-0.

KAY KAUFMAN SHELEMAY and STEVEN KAPLAN, eds, *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora: Perspectives from Across the Disciplines* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2015). 224 pp. Price: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-59-907106-0.

This selection of books may give the impression that diaspora studies are a burgeoning field in the North-East African or in the Ethiopian context. While much has been happening, such assumptions are still debatable. Additionally, the three volumes under review date back several years. Most notably, *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora: Perspectives from Across the Disciplines* is the republication of a special issue of the journal *Diaspora* (2006) that first appeared in 2011 and was reissued by Tsehai Publishers in 2015. It is a pioneering attempt to capture a sense of the Ethiopian diaspora and a stimulating point of entry for further research. Dianne Shandy's volume on the Nuer goes back to 2007 and Christiane Falge's work, more recently published, is based on her PhD thesis, defended at the Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung in Halle (Saale) in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Both books build on

<sup>1</sup> Falge 2006.

long-term fieldwork with a migrant community from Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, the Nuer. This is not to say that these books are outdated. On the contrary: they each signal the growing importance of diaspora studies in the realm of area studies, anthropology, political science, and, last but not least, Ethiopian studies. ‘The emergence of a Nuer diaspora in the United States’, writes Dianne Shandy, ‘feeds a growing effort to rethink anthropological association with peoples and place’ (p. 45). There is an emerging ‘Ethiopian’ *diaspora* that both transcends ethnic identification of the homeland and recreates new patterns of *transnational* identification. The books provide for the continuity of Africanist inquiry and discuss its classical themes in a global perspective. The Nuer, for instance, were famously introduced into anthropology as typifying Evans Prichard’s agnatic lineage system,<sup>2</sup> and they retained their prototypical anthropological ‘note’, despite their changing life-world, war, and migration. The ‘Ethiopians’ have also been a focus of Orientalist and Africanist imagination, but few studies place them in their global contexts. These three books challenge the conventional focus of the ‘plight’ of the migrants, and look at their lives. Dianne Shandy pointedly opens her volume with a crucial observation, that ‘popular images of African forced migrants, particularly refugees fleeing conflict situations, often depict people leaving “Stone Age” societies, en route to Western countries’ (p. 1). Often overlooked are both the changes in their style of life at home, and the multiple technologies, linkages, and networks migrants use both en route and in the places of resettlement.

All three books are an important starting point for an understanding of the East African diasporas which have received much less attention than the diasporas of the black Atlantic and Caribbean. This, of course, is relevant to the wider field of diaspora studies and to the consequences of the transatlantic model that has overshadowed much work on the Indian Ocean, the black Middle East, African diasporas in the former Ottoman world, and so on—themselves burgeoning fields in recent years, albeit usually connected to the historiography of the slave trade.<sup>3</sup>

While Dianne Shandy and Christiane Falge focus on the South Sudanese/Ethiopian Nuer—a distinct, if complex, ethnic community—and their experience as migrants within East Africa (their flight to refugee camps in Ethiopia, followed by migration to the United States and resettlement), *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora* offers an overview of the experiences of various Ethiopian communities, though mostly Təgrəñña, Amhara, and

<sup>2</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1940.

<sup>3</sup> Allen 2015; Alpers 2014; Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003; Mirzai 2017.

Oromo.<sup>4</sup> While the two monographs offer an in-depth ethnography of the experiences of Nuer refugee communities, the volume edited by Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan looks for a common theoretical and thematic point of entry—cultural innovation, expressed in music, religion, poetry, and, last but not least, food/cuisine—to understand the multiple scenes of Ethiopian diaspora life in the United States (and one case from the Netherlands). The theoretical lens, that is, cultural creativity, further develops the theoretical notion of *cultural incorporation*, borrowed from the late Ethiopianist, sociologist Donald Levine, and reissued in the volume under review.<sup>5</sup> Levine opens the volume *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora* with a fresh look at creative incorporation, originally meant to describe the ‘Ethiopian’—highland Ethiopian (Semitic)—ability to incorporate foreign cultural patterns in art and religion. In his rather brief opening chapter (‘On Cultural Creativity in the Ethiopian Diaspora’, 23–28), he gives too broad a view of creativity. He argues that creativity is a problem-solving approach, is open to renewal, is a spontaneous expression of energies, or is an invention of model forms (p. 26). While this approach brings to light many of the problems which arise in the diaspora—revealing the clash between the native culture and the new environment, which generates processes of ‘fission’ and ‘fusion’ and new forms of cultural expression—it is less effective in uncovering problems concerning bureaucracy, rights, acceptance, or the experience of racism as a diasporic experience. *Transnationalism* then, not diaspora, can take the important issues raised in *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora* further:<sup>6</sup> ‘transnationalism’, popularized by Aiwah Ong, sees transnationality not as an unstructured flow of people but as contained, governed, and constructed within the system of governmentality.<sup>7</sup> Transnationalism is the core topic of the two monographs under review, while the volume edited by Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan offers various exploratory cases of diaspora experience, largely focussing on the wave of immigration to the United States since the 1980s. While some of the chapters deal with the diaspora–homeland link, the self-proclaimed focus of the work is to understand the life-worlds of the Ethiopian diaspora through their creative productivity.

<sup>4</sup> An earlier book on the Nuer diaspora in the United States is available for comparison: Holtzman 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Levine 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the concepts see Bauböck and Faist 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ong 1999.

Nancy Hafking in her chapter, “Whatsupoch” on the Net: The Role of Information and Communication Technology in the Shaping of Transnational Ethiopian Identity’ (29–54) focuses on the importance of IT and the Internet in keeping relations between the diaspora and the homeland. With increasing accessibility, she claims, the Ethiopian diaspora has made increasingly creative use of the options provided in cyberspace, and the chapter provides a challenging array of cases which show the options the Internet has given the Ethiopian diasporas: from resistance (Anywaa) to identity formation (Harari), or the formation of nationalistic discourses (Oromo). The development of Unicode script and *fidäl* writing for the Internet, and the availability of smartphones and 4G connectivity changed the game on the World Wide Web, both at home and abroad.

Steven Kaplan’s chapter, ‘Vital Information at Your Fingertips: The *Ethiopian Yellow Pages* as a Cultural Document’ (55–72), offers a striking example of the Ethiopian diaspora’s sense of entrepreneurship in the Washington DC area, showing how the *Ethiopian Yellow Pages* function as a cultural linkage between home and the new world. Marilyn Heldman discusses the creation of sacred spaces abroad in the newly founded Ethiopian Orthodox churches (‘Creating Sacred Space: Orthodox Churches of the Ethiopian American Diaspora’, 93–112). Focusing on church painting and interior design, this chapter shows the creativity of the Ethiopian diaspora, the ability to remodel their life-worlds in a close relationship with their lives at home and the myriad possibilities of cultural fusion which offered themselves since leaving home. While Heldman’s article also touches on the artistic formation influenced by life abroad, it is the three articles in the middle section that centre on the mutual feedback of artistic production between home and abroad. Kay Kaufman Shelemay introduces the creative lives of three Ethiopian musicians (‘Ethiopian Musical Invention in Diaspora: A Tale of Three Musicians’, 113–130), and Getatchew Haile portrays the development of Amharic poetry in the United States (‘Amharic Poetry of the Ethiopian Diaspora in America: A Sampler’, 131–150). I believe Getatchew summarizes both of these articles when he says, ‘The four poets discussed here provide insights into the Ethiopian American literary creativity. Their poems, like their lives, open a window on the world of the immigrant, suspended between memories of Ethiopian homeland and the challenges of the American sojourn’ (p. 137). Solomon Addis Getahun describes the concept *səddät* (‘migration’) in Ethiopian song texts (‘Səddät, Migration, and Refugeeism as Portrayed in Ethiopian Song Lyrics’, 151–170). His overview looks at love stories, homesickness, longing, and the dangers which typify life in strange places, and accounts for the established feeling of ‘home’ in the diaspora. Terrence Lyons (‘Transnational Politics in Ethiopia: Diasporas

and the 2005 Elections’, 73–92) and Jan Abbink (‘Slow Awakening? The Ethiopian Diaspora in the Netherlands, 1977–2007’, 171–192) provide in-depth analyses of the micro and macro level of process: Lyons offers a glance at the strategies of political mobilization in the Ethiopian diaspora showing it to be an immensely important force in Ethiopian politics. Based on the Dutch experience, Abbink describes the trends of formation in the diaspora, the political obstacles and the social hurdles of making a new home. The volume closes with some critical remarks by James McCann (‘A Response: Doro Fänta: Creativity vs. Adaptation in the Ethiopian Diaspora’, 193–200).

The volume offers an impressive range of topics and is a wonderful first insight into the constitution of the Ethiopian diaspora, especially through their artistic expression. The focus, of course, is very much on Christian Orthodox communities, and one may well ask which Ethiopian diaspora is being portrayed. Muslim communities are not studied,<sup>8</sup> and the reader may also miss insights into the question of social stratification within the diaspora. The term *Ethiopian diaspora* covers more nuanced perspectives on the various communities and on their mutual interplay. Such information is found in the other two publications.

In this regard the two studies by Falge and Shandy are an interesting addition. They provide the in-depth background to the formation of a conflict-generated diaspora,<sup>9</sup> an ethnography of flight, arrival, and adaptation. The Nuer, both South Sudanese and Ethiopian, have a history of migration both as refugees in Ethiopia and as international migrants in America. For the Nuer communities portrayed in these two volumes, war and migration create a rupture, not a continuum, in their traditional pastoral life. ‘From the perspective of the Nuer refugees, incorporation into the US society is simply one more point on a trajectory of migration. The process of incorporation is open-ended and will endure through the life span of each individual, their offspring, that of the next generation, and perhaps, beyond. Similarly, incorporation in the United States does not signal a severing of ties to Africa’, argues Dianne Shandy in her study (p. 59). In these ethnographies, the refugees are not victims but agents of their own cultural production and reproduction, as many of the personnel portrayed have experienced a life of uncertainty and movement from war zone to refugee camp to their resettlement in the United States.

<sup>8</sup> Dereje Feyissa 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lyons in *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora*.

Falge's and Shandy's investigations span an impressive time frame and include multiple geographical arenas, from the refugee camps of Ethiopia, Kenya to the United States. Thus, the studies are able to detail the war experience as well as the formation of an emerging diaspora in the United States. Falge's description of the oral expression of the emergence of an Itang diaspora in Ethiopia is stunning in this regard. While Falge focuses on aspects of religion as a shifting mechanism of collective identification, Shandy brings to light an ethnography of process, bureaucracy, and adaption. Crucial to understanding the realities of migrants is Shandy's description of the administrative processes that 'make refugees'. As in Abbink's chapter in *Creating the Ethiopian Diaspora*, the migration regime is the core issue in making and unmaking a life abroad. What a migrant is, is defined by the legal procedures and often ambiguous decisions of the bureaucracy in the country in which the person arrives. Shandy also brings to light migration as an economic project, the networks of support and the return of remittances. While in both studies the idea of transnational networks is of seminal importance, Christiane Falge builds her investigation on the inner workings of Christian *congregational* networks, that inform the Nuer transnational linkages. Building on a theoretically rich opening chapter ('Orientations', pp.17–48), Falge makes a case for an actor-based approach focusing on lineages with different religious and political identities. Based on an impressive duration of fieldwork, the book illustrates the necessity of understanding the historical formation, background, and genesis of migration through long-term ethnographic fieldwork. Falge's book brings to the fore the complex life-worlds and challenges of a generation of war and conflict-induced migration. Migration is not a unilineal process: all three studies are proof of the need to understand transnational systems linking the diaspora and homeland communities. In this, Falge and Shandy answer questions that the volume edited by Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Steven Kaplan rightfully opens.

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### Summary

The three books under review provide different approaches to North-East African transnational studies. However, their descriptions of migration and transnational life are unified in that they focus on the migrants not as mere victims of their plight but on their agency and creativity both during the process of migration and in the descriptions of their settling and making a new life.