



## Aethiopica 23 (2020)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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### Review

SILVIA BRUZZI, *Islam and Gender in Colonial Northeast Africa:  
Sittī ʿAlawiyya, the Uncrowned Queen*

Aethiopica 23 (2020), 291–295

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

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

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of the book is southern Ethiopia, more specifically, the area from Šäwa to Sidamo, with only a few references to the northern provinces. The choice is quite acceptable here as, up to the present, historical studies of southern Ethiopia have been insufficient.

Further obscurity lies in the relation between the monarchy and the *čäwa* prior to the restructuring of the latter toward the end of the nineteenth century. The book depicts differences in concept and practice between the two regarding communal land (cf. Chapter 3). Is it possible that the monarch emerged from the *čäwa* originally and, after achieving power, went on to claim more and more rights which had belonged to the *čäwa* as a whole? Perhaps the next edition may tell us more!

The author, an Ethiopian by birth and Oxonian by erudition, has lectured for decades in various universities in Africa, Europe, and the United States and has produced and/or edited numerous academic works in different fields. After approximately fifty years of research, she has now opened a new aspect of Ethiopian history by publishing this multifaceted work. She should indeed be congratulated for her splendid contribution to Ethiopian studies.

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SILVIA BRUZZI, *Islam and Gender in Colonial Northeast Africa: Sittī °Alawiyya, the Uncrowned Queen*, *Islam in Africa*, 21 (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2018). 252 pp. Price: €105.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-34800-4.

In 1919, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, one of the most illustrious Italian orientalist, wrote that, with the sole exception of Məṣəwwa<sup>c</sup> and Kärän, Islam in Eritrea was the result of a recent expansion and that, among other things, it did not involve the more cultured sectors of the society.<sup>1</sup> What he found much more interesting was Libyan Islam, which he paid greater attention to, especially as he was encouraged by the Italian government, which frequently asked for his advice. Unaware that the Horn of Africa was the first African region to be touched by Islam, Nallino and the leaders of Italian Orientalism seemed convinced that beneath the equator there really was an

<sup>1</sup> C. A. Nallino, 'Trattamento degli indigeni e loro partecipazione all'amministrazione coloniale. Ordinamento politico-amministrativo', in Ministero delle Colonie, *Relazione della VII sezione della Commissione del Dopo-Guerra (Quistioni coloniali)* (Roma: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1919), 111–124, especially p. 111.

*Islam noire*, a belief widely shared in the early twentieth century. The fact that *Islam noire* was presented as spurious and in a class by itself attracted more the interest of anthropologists than of historians and scholars of Islam. Aside from the works of John Spencer Trimingham and a few others, it was not until the last decade of the twentieth century that a revival of interest in the history of Islam in the Horn of Africa took place, largely due to the work of Hussein Ahmed. A revival that has touched on Eritrea only since the new millennium, with the studies by Alessandro Gori, Jonathan Miran, and Joseph L. Venosa, to which this book now adds. Silvia Bruzzi's study has several interesting features, the first being the situating of a woman's life at the centre of the narrative: *Šarīfa* ʿAlawīyya bint Sidī Ġaʿfar al-Mīrḡanī (1892–1940), better known as *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya or *Šarīfa* ʿAlawīyya, was a leading figure in the religious landscape of Italian Eritrea. The 'uncrowned queen' of colonial Eritrea, in whose veins flowed—perhaps—the blood of the Prophet, and certainly that of the founder of the Ḥatmīya, Muḥammad ʿUṭmān al-Mīrḡanī, was regarded as a saint, and not only among Muslims. Emphasizing the fact that colonial Eritrea's past has been, at least till now, an exclusively male-dominated history, Bruzzi has set out to narrate not so much the life of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya—and in fact anyone looking for a classic biography of the 'Sceriffa of Massaua' (p. 130) is bound to be disappointed—as the world in which the *Šarīfa* lived (p. 8). Her personal story also gives us an insight into women's participation in Islamic movements, and challenges the assumption that Islam is incompatible with the political power of women. Indeed, the Horn of Africa presents several examples of pious women who played a socio-educational role by teaching the faith and passing on Islamic learning.

Secondly, this work focuses on Ḥatmīya in Eritrea, when the existing literature was mainly interested in the *ṭarīqa* history in Sudan, and offers some interesting facts about the relationship between the Eritrean and the Sudanese branches, and of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya's role in the process of Eritreaz-ing the Ḥatmīya.

The book's ten chapters can be grouped into two blocks. The first is historical and traces the arrival and spread of the Ḥatmīya in Sudan and Eritrea in the first half of the nineteenth century, and later the relationships it was able to form with the Egyptian, British, and Italian authorities. Through a policy of prebends and co-optations, Governor Ferdinando Martini laid the groundwork for Italy's 'Muslim policy' and built a special relationship with the Ḥatmīya that lasted throughout the Italian domination. In adherence to the orientalist paradigm that in an Islamic society a woman could not play any public role, when it became necessary to decide which branch of the Mīrḡanī family to support, the Italian authorities opted for *Sayyid* Ġaʿfar al-

Mīrḡanī's, despite the fact that *Sittī* °Alawīyya's was 'closer to the Prophet' (p. 52), as she was the second child of the son of the Ḥatmīya's founder. A situation that, according to the author, points to how the colonial system, instead of contributing to women's emancipation, further reduced the margins available to women in Islamic societies. However, the combative *Sittī* °Alawīyya did not give up and continued stubbornly to claim the legitimacy of her leadership, first gaining the grudging attention of the Italian authorities, and later on, during the Fascist period, managing to become the figure of reference of the Eritrean Islamic community. However, the question of the relationship between religious orthodoxy and the legitimacy of her authority marked her entire life and did not always bend to her favour, as evidenced by her voluntary exile in Suakin from 1919 to 1923.

After outlining the history of the Ḥatmīya and *Sittī* °Alawīyya's personal story, the book goes on to analyse the strategies she used to affirm her social and religious role. Writing the history of women in Africa means dealing with a predictable scarcity of documents, for which the author tries to compensate by seeking new sources and perspectives. Constant experimentation of approaches and the use of a wide variety of sources are the distinctive traits of this book. Firstly, a critical reading and a deconstruction of colonial sources is presented, followed by a systematic and very careful use of oral and visual sources. Bruzzi then casts a keen anthropologist's eye on the body and sensual experiences, two areas analysed, for example, through the *zār*—here defined as a 'multifaceted cult of spirit possession' (p. 206)—which is seen as a form of historical narrative and one of the ways in which the past can be made present by allowing us 'to shed light on women's impression of the colonial world' (p. 210). By applying the paradigm of embodiment, Bruzzi treats *Sittī* °Alawīyya's body as a vehicle of history, effectively managing to give her figure shape and depth. It is then that the visual sources enable us to grasp what the author defines as 'the somewhat surrealist and fantastic [...] fashion style' (pp. 105–107) of *Sittī* °Alawīyya's way of dressing and the variety of furniture in her 'strange' (p. 108) residence. In both instances, it was a way to show her openness to the material culture of her overseas visitors and her transnational networks. Although some of her European guests found her at times excessive, *Sittī* °Alawīyya always wound up impressing the many visitors she hosted in her residences and used her public image to foster her charismatic power. Her body, her court, her luxurious residences, and her generosity became the channels through which she conveyed the prestige of her *ṣarīfa* status.

As is often the case in biographical works, it is easy to detect the author's clear and understandable sympathy for *Sittī* °Alawīyya. For instance, the question of where the resources to support the *Ṣarīfa*'s high standard of

living came from is only marginally addressed. Vittorio Fioccardi, regional commissioner of Kārān from 1904 to 1921, often had to deal with *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya, and between the two, the documents tell us, there was an unconcealed dislike. Fioccardi did not tolerate the ‘life of a real sultana that this ambitious woman led and the constant manifestations of delusions of grandeur by which she is strongly possessed’.<sup>2</sup> Fioccardi’s claims should be taken with due caution, but they raise an important point: *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya’s generosity came at a price. Her monthly allowance financed by the Italian authorities, equivalent to the salary of a fourth class colonial agent (6,000 lire per year in 1916), was relatively generous, but also completely inadequate to cover the costs of what was nothing less than a court. It is no coincidence that *Sittī* °Alawīyya referred to it jokingly—or almost—by calling it the ‘five lire pittance’ that the government gave her. Where did *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya’s and, more generally, the Ḥatmīya’s resources come from? From ‘voluntary’ donations (p. 77), the author seems to suggest; it is certain that the Mīrḡaniyya was in the habit of organizing missions within the territories under its control, where the *Šarīfa* would collect what was across between donations and tribute. The gifts collected, for example, from the people of the Saḥəl region (who cannot be described as wealthy) in a visit that lasted from November 1915 to February 1916 amounted—again according to Fioccardi’s reliable information—to 2,634 Maria Theresa thalers, 103 camels, 323 head of cattle, and 150 sheep, in addition, obviously, to the maintenance of *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya and her retinue (60 people) for the duration of her three-month visit.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the redistributions that the Ḥatmīya certainly carried out went hand-in-hand with extractions that still await full investigation and that could perhaps be of interest to political and social historians.

A complex, original work always presents some inaccuracies. Here the most evident is having confused the mosque of Məşəwwa° with that of Asmāra (pp. 124–125), perhaps due to an incorrect title by the Istituto Luce to which the author referred.

Although the history of the relationship between the Italian authorities and Islamic personalities is yet to be adequately studied, Silvia Bruzzi’s

<sup>2</sup> Fioccardi to Giovanni Cerrina Feroni (Kārān, 10 March 1916) to be found in Rome, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 1024.

<sup>3</sup> Fioccardi to Giovanni Cerrina Feroni (Kārān, 6 March 1916) to be found in Rome, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 1024.

book is an original and stimulating contribution that gives Eritrea the history of one of its foremost female protagonists.

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MOSTAFA MINAWI, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). 219 pp., 11 illus. Price: \$85.00. ISBN: 978-0-804-79514-2.

The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 is largely regarded as the peak of aggressive Western imperialism toward Africa and the true expression of European arrogance in its belief in being the determining authority to rule over non-European regions and their inhabitants. This main political and diplomatic event has been long considered as the stage for global players like Great Britain, France, and the newborn German Empire—the role of other players being downsized or even neglected in the context. This was especially true for the Ottoman Empire, also a participant at the conference, where a narrative was shaped making the Sublime Porte’s capacity to act politically become non-existent. In general terms, the fact that the Ottoman Empire could be questioned as ‘civilized’ or ‘uncivilized’ was controversial and polarized opinions at a time in which civilization (as seen from the European perspective) became an ambiguous ideological category imposed to serve the legitimation of colonialism and the legal framework that supported it. Nonetheless, the Ottoman Empire joined the conference regarding its civilization to be at a level high enough for recognition by other ‘civilized’ states. Yet, contemporary observers and later historiography—the latter largely generated in the Western world—interpreted Ottoman policy at the Berlin Conference as driven purely by a defensive agency. The narrative was formed firstly by a long dominant Eurocentric view of international relations which, among other things, marginalized the role of non-state formations in the political arena, secondly by the teleological view of the Ottoman Empire as an empire bound in a few years for inexorable collapse bringing with it enormous consequences affecting the political map of the Middle East.

Mostafa Minawi’s book engages with this interpretation of that historical period and rewrites the presence of Ottoman Empire in the so-called ‘Scramble for Africa’. One of the major instruments for this task are the sources contained in the huge collection of local archives the author accessed in Istanbul and treated with great care and precision in his book. In