



Aethiopia 24 (2021)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

SERAWIT BEKELE DEBELE, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*

Aethiopia 24 (2021), 299–301

ISSN: 1430-1938

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

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Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Susanne Hummel,
Alexander Meckelburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

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Reviews

work in Amharic or any other Ethiopian language for its analysis or discussion on these topics. It also does not consider Ethiopian philosophy writings on Ethiopian conceptions of time and history for its research. It seems worthwhile to consider writings in Ethiopian languages prior to and post-revolution for contextualizing the revolutionaries and their writings. This might even help us understand why the social sciences were predominantly dominated with research for purposes of positivist outcomes and what the relationship was between those engaging in the social sciences in this way and the rest of Ethiopian society. Let us hope for a succeeding book on this.

A book that developed out of a PhD research, it is written for individuals with knowledge of Ethiopian history and of modern Ethiopian historical developments, as well as for students of critical theory in the Horn of Africa. It is remarkable in demonstrating how to engage in the social sciences and guides readers to reflect on the indigenization of Marxist social science ideas in Ethiopia. Elleni's book highlights some of the consequences a positivist approach to the social sciences has had and continues to have in shaping Ethiopian politics, for example, in selecting which local issues, individuals, and ideas become dominant topics of discussion (p. 11). It seems Elleni hopes that those who study Ethiopia investigate (Ethiopian) history without presupposing that investigations and knowledge productions should lead to certain practical outcomes.

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SERAWIT BEKELE DEBELE, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, Studies of Religion in Africa, 49 (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2019). xii, 209 pp. Price: €149.00. ISBN: 978-9-004-41006-0 (HB), 978-9-004-41014-5 (e-book).

The Irreecha festival is annually held in Bishoftu. It is a paradigmatic expression of the rise of the Oromo national identity. Since the 1970s the Oromo question has been a crucial factor in Ethiopian politics, being central to the land issue and the influence it had on the socialist revolution, the overthrowing of the military junta by ethnonational insurgency, the introduction of the multi-national constitution—with the full participation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other Oromo organizations—and the recent renewal of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling coalition.

The traditional ritual annually held on the shore of Hooraa Arsid (Lake Arsadi) by the Tuulama section of the Oromo is the central element of the Irreecha festival. From 1991 it grew from being a ritual of local relevance to an event capable of attracting millions of Oromo annually, from all areas and social clas-

ses, from both rural and urban settings, thus becoming the icon of the pan-Oromo national identity (pp. 18, 26). Yet, no systematic study of this fascinating story has so far been presented. Serawit Bekele Debele fills this gap. Building on David Kertzer's proposition on ritual as an integral part of political processes, and on some studies of comparative cases from Iran and Senegal, she analyses Irreecha as the arena of political engagement by local actors, national political associations, movements, parties, and both governmental and customary institutions, also considering the ideological and religious dimensions of the game, the role of the media and the impact that such actions had in transforming the ritual.

The Introduction clarifies the theoretical and methodological grounds of the study. It also presents the main leitmotif of the book, the accident that occurred in 2016, in which hundreds of participants died (pp. 2–3).

The festival is described in Chapter 1. *Irreecha* as a term refers to the religious act of offering ('thanksgiving') to Waaqa, Sky-God. By presenting two mythical stories about the sacredness of the lake, Serawit introduces two competing ideological and performative versions of the ritual. One refers to an established ritual practice in Ethiopia—variously known as Ayyaana, Wəqabi, Awaleya, Kārama, Zar—based on spirit mediums and possession trance. The spirit medium sessions tend to be ethnically accommodative, with women often playing a major role. This is presented as the prevalent practice at Hooraa Arsid during the imperial and the *Därg* historical phases. The second version refers to a more dogmatic interpretation within the Oromo traditional religion (*Waqqeefana*). Performance is based on a central ceremonial role by institutional figures, including the *abbaa gadaa* and the *abbaa malkaa*, with active involvement of the *kuusa* and *foolle* generational classes of the Tuulama *gadaa* system.

Serawit distinguishes two temporal phases of this second version. Chapter 2 is dedicated to its revival, promoted from 1991 by the OLF, until the political organization went underground, and by the Macha Tulama Association (MTA). The author clearly links this phase to the essentialist efforts by Oromo intellectuals to reshape Oromo national identity, with specific reference to the notion of *oromumma*. This concept was discussed in some detail by Gemetchu Megerssa in a 1996 international publication. It can broadly be translated as 'Oromoness' and is considered to be the underlying factor behind current pan-Oromo identity.

The ban of the MTA in 2004 marks the transition to the second phase, when the institutions of the Oromia Regional State and the ruling party politicians took control of the festival, its organization, the performative sequence, and the symbolism associated to the ritual spaces and the ritual time (Chapter 4). This directly leads to Chapter 5, dedicated to the analysis of Irreecha as an arena for political resistance. The 2014 and 2016 celebrations took place at the time of the Oromo youth protest—*qerroo*. In 2014, the youths limited themselves to the

exposition of visual emblems recalling the OLF emblems and popularizing Oromo political songs, for which they faced harassment from the authorities. In 2016 they openly contested governmental authorities during their speeches held from the stage built at the ritual site of Hooraa Arsid. The massacre was the result of crowd panic caused by the army's reaction.

The establishment of the dogmatic interpretation of the ritual was accompanied by the marginalization of its mediumistic version. This is the specific subject of Chapter 3 and a second leitmotif of the book. Here the author expresses two correlated lines of critique about the process, the first in terms of gender inequality (p. 97), and the second against the essentialist nature of the new version. As outlined in the Introduction, the book also aims at uncovering 'the pitfalls of the homogenizing and essentializing tendency' that derives from the 'the idea of a unifying national culture that is captured by the conceptualisation of Oromumma' (p. 18). However, this critical line does not seem rooted on solid ground if the full story of the ritual is not considered. Indeed, the reader gets the impression that the mediumistic version constitutes the zero phase. Although the author mentions Hooraa Arsid as a specific site of the larger ritual circuit of the Tuulama, and reports on the women-led opening performative acts of the official version of the ritual, key elements are missing from the reconstruction presented in the book. What of the Irreecha ritual in the pre-imperial or early imperial phases? How does Irreecha relate to the Oromo world view, the *gadaa* and the *qaalluu* institutions? How do the post 1991 developments of the ritual relate to the parallel revival of the *gadaa* institution among the Tuulama? Insights concerning the first two questions can today be found in *Sacred Knowledge Traditions of the Oromo of the Horn of Africa*, Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam's last book (2020),¹ not yet available at the time Serawit Bekele published her book. Despite this gap, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual* provides the most systematic and comprehensive account of this fascinating and highly politicized festival. It is a book that through the narrated story and its refined analysis is capable to unveil key aspects of the Ethiopian post-*Därg* politics.

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¹ Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam, *Sacred Knowledge Traditions of the Oromo of the Horn of Africa* (Finfinne–Durham: Fifth World Publications, 2019, pub. 2020).