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Review

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MAY YDLIBI, *With Ethiopian Rulers: a Biography of Hasib Ydlibi*, ed. by BAHRU ZEWEDE. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2006. 333 pp. Price: Birr 98

Hasib Ydlibi was one of the most intriguing foreign personalities involved in Ethiopian trade and politics at the turn of the 20th century. He was born in 1866 of a Syrian father and a Circassian mother.¹ As of 1897, Ydlibi served as an interpreter for the British Expeditionary Force in the Sudan. After leaving the service, his trading in gum brought him to Kordofan, which was followed in 1905 by his trip to Ethiopia as a representative of the Kordofan Trading Company. After discovering rubber trees in the south of the country, Hasib Ydlibi was granted monopoly rights for the trading of gum by Emperor Mənilək II and gradually became involved in Ethiopian state matters and the politics of the Empire.² The life story and personality of this man, equipped with a violent character as well as certain obvious charm, can easily serve for a number of stories to be told. One of them, the biography of Hasib Ydlibi written by his daughter, May, makes not only for a page turner but also provides a splendid source for historians of Ethiopia. The book tells the story of the author's father from a completely different perspective to the one available until now in British Foreign Office documents.

The book consists of twelve chapters (pp.1–279); a preface presenting the period of Ydlibi's activities in Ethiopia written by the book's editor, Bahru Zewde (pp. IX–XV); an appendix composed of a collection of Ethiopian letters equipped with the seals of Ethiopian rulers and landlords (pp. 311–322); two pages of references (pp. 323–324) and an index of names and places (pp. 325–333). There is also a five page insert (between pp. 176 and 177) containing photographs of Hasib Ydlibi, his family and various Ethiopian personalities, including *ləğ* Iyasu. Within the text of the book, excerpts from the diaries of May Ydlibi and her father are included. They are clearly marked in the text with italics. The diary by May Ydlibi gives an interesting description of historical personalities introduced from the perspective of the

¹ According to the editor Hasib Ydlibi was born in England (p. X), while according to the biography itself he was brought to Manchester at the age of six months (p. 89).

² The facts concerning Ydlibi's origin and career are presented in the preface to the book. They are also to be found in Foreign Office documents available in the National Archive in London, for example: FO: 371/3500, C.R. Enever to The Secretary of State, January 9th, 1920; FO: 371/2594 Précis of Abyssinian Intelligence received in Somaliland during week ending Oct 7th, 1916.; FO: 371/4393, 14 December 1290; Ibid. "The following British-Imperial considerations in relation to the case of Mons. Ydlibi claim attention", 89f.; Ibid. Ydlibi to Enever, 15 November 1920; Ibid. Minute of FO, of Sep 17th, 1920, describing a letter from the French Ambassador, dated Sept 16th, 1920; FO: 371/5507, R.S. Fraser to Phillimore, 21 September 1921.

teenage foreign girl, who was familiar with Ethiopian culture, spoke and was able to read the language and obviously felt at home in the country and at ease with its ruler, *ləḡ* Iyasu. Another diary, by her father and the main hero of the biography, presents Ydlibi's views on the situation in the country. He describes his opinion on Iyasu's ideas on politics, which the ruler had been planning to introduce in the country. Ydlibi expressed his views on various aspects of Iyasu's methods of, and concepts on, conducting politics, while at the same time he introduced his own opinions on how the state functioned. Another essential topic discussed by Ydlibi in his diary is an analysis of European involvement in Ethiopia's state of affairs.

The biography, or more correctly, the account of Hasib Ydlibi's career in Ethiopia, describes the years from 1905, when he first came to the Empire, until 1919 when the Ydlibi family was released from a concentration camp at Pontmain in the department of Mayenne in France. According to one sentence within the book (p. 259) the biography was written in 1929, thirteen years after the *coup d'état* in Ethiopia, which resulted in the overthrowing of *ləḡ* Iyasu and in the Ydlibi family leaving the Empire. From the Ethiopian perspective, this period covers the peak of Mənilək's power, its decline as a consequence of the Emperor's deteriorating health, and finally Iyasu's reign terminated by the *coup d'état* in 1916.

The major advantage of the book is its "significant contribution to the reassessment of Iyasu", as Bahru Zewde, the editor, puts it (p. X), as well as a presentation of the influence and political activity of European legations in the Empire. One of the major questions, which the biography refers to, is the international situation and how it influenced events in Ethiopia in the first two decades of the 20th cent. The book describes various aspects of the economic penetration of the Empire by European powers and the Ethiopian answer to this situation. Another asset of the publication lies in how it reveals the background of a number of incidents in Ethiopian history in which Ydlibi was involved. Events from Ethiopian history of the period are presented providing details, which allow for a better understanding of what happened in the country between the reigns of the two great emperors: Mənilək II and Həylä Šəllase I.

The story is told with gradually increasing emotional involvement, as it goes from Mənilək's times, when the author was a child and not present in Ethiopia, to Iyasu's rule when May Ydlibi participated in court life. May Ydlibi leaves no doubts concerning her feelings towards those who are described in the book. The characters are presented in a black and white manner with no shades of grey. Her feelings towards Iyasu are at least friendly, with some slight hints at a teenage emotional fascination with the young ruler. Both May and her father draw attention to Iyasu's view on Ethiopia's situation in the Horn of Africa. According to May Ydlibi's account, the foreign policies of Iyasu were not based on his personal feelings towards the surrounding coun-

tries, but were derived from a desire to guard the best interests of his own country, Ethiopia. (p. 245) On the other hand, May Ydlibi presents a completely different attitude towards Täfäri Mäk^wännən (later Ḥaylä Śəllase I). The description of Iyasu's opponent is full of anger. This can be easily explained by the events of the years following the detention of the Ydlibi family in Djibouti and France. The Ydlibi fortune left in Ethiopia was appropriated by the Ethiopian Government, in which Täfäri Mäk^wännən played an important function. Moreover, after 1916 in spite of many attempts, Hasib Ydlibi was allowed to enter neither the Ethiopian Empire nor the British territories surrounding Ethiopia. British documents provide source material proving that after 1916 Ydlibi was perceived by Täfäri Mäk^wännən as *persona non grata* in the country and as a public enemy by the new regime.

It is not difficult to guess that the portrait of Hasib Ydlibi by his daughter belongs among those painted in a one-sided, positive light. On many occasions Ydlibi's daughter stresses the trust which the Ethiopian government had for her father. Apart from Ethiopian home affairs, there is a perspective also of the international situation during World War I, in the context of which Ydlibi played an important role. This gives us a better understanding of British hostility towards the main character of the biography. At the time of the war, the British and their allies treated Ydlibi as a "Turkish agent", which resulted in the arresting of the Ydlibi family after they had escaped from Ethiopia to Djibouti as a consequence of the *comp.* However, the exact character of Hasib Ydlibi's involvement in international affairs during the war still cannot be fully determined. Neither the story told by May Ydlibi nor the British documents provide sufficient material to obtain an answer, which would fully explain Ydlibi's role in these events.

The project of editing May Ydlibi's account of her father's career, which according to the editor took many years, has provided splendid material for studying early 20th cent. Ethiopian history as it has presented many of its lesser known aspects.

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TESEMA TA^oA, *The Political Economy of an African Society in Transformation: The Case of Macca Oromo (Ethiopia)*. Edited by Catherine Griefenow-Mewis = Asien- und Afrika-Studien der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Band 25. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2006. 136 S. Preis: € 49,-. ISBN 978-3-447-05419-0

Die wissenschaftliche Geschichtsschreibung war lange geneigt, das äthiopische Kaiserreich als kulturelle Einheit christlichen Ursprungs zu begreifen.