



Aethiopia 26 (2023)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

AMELIE CHEKROUN, CNRS

Review

JEFFREY M. SHAW, *The Ethiopian–Adal War 1529–1543:
The Conquest of Abyssinia*

Aethiopia 26 (2023), 293–295

ISSN: 1430-1938; eISSN: 2194-4024

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

Aaron Michael Butts, Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Hewan Semon Marye,
Susanne Hummel, and Alexander Meckelburg

Editorial Team

Sophia Dege-Müller, Karin Ghion-Hamadu

JEFFREY M. SHAW, *The Ethiopian–Adal War 1529–1543: The Conquest of Abyssinia, From Retinue to Regiment 1453–1618*, 8 (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2021). 146 pp., illus. Price: \$35.00. ISBN: 978-1-914059-68-1.

Jeffrey M. Shaw’s work is presented as ‘the first book in English (and may perhaps also be the first book in any language) to focus specifically on the entire 14 years of the Ethiopian–Adal War’ (pp. V and 138). The jihad led by *Imām Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī* against the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in the 1530s–1540s is one of the great events in the history of the Horn of Africa and traditionally marks in historiography the end of the Medieval time in this region. Nonetheless, it is true that despite its central place in regional history, this war has been the subject of very few historical studies. However, it is documented by several sources of the period, including the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, a long narrative in Arabic written shortly after the end of the war by a Muslim author nicknamed ‘Arab Faḳīh. Mention should be made of the various translations into European (French, Italian, and English) and Ethiopian languages (Amharic, Somali, Harari) of this Arabic text, and also of my own PhD dissertation, defended in 2013 and dedicated to an historical analysis of it.¹

J. Shaw, who is neither an historian nor a specialist of Ethiopian history but a professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College, shows an astonishing lack of knowledge of the medieval and early modern history of the Horn of Africa and of its historiography, which has been profoundly renewed over the last twenty years—with, in particular, the *Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, published (in English) in 2020.² What is surprising, however, is that the bibliography mentioned at the end of the book is relatively up to date, but these works have not been used in the body of its text.

The first two chapters (pp. 19–58), comprising a full third of the book, are intended as a synthesis of regional history before the beginning of the war. Its factual errors are numerous and crude: I will not list all of them, but one should note that the author considers that the Solomonic dynasty dates back to the Aksumite period (p. 29), that ‘Ethiopia suffered as Islam prospered’ (p. 28) or that ‘Menelik I, the first recognized Ethiopian emperor, reigned in the tenth century BC’ (p. 19), thus repeating quite outdated stereotypes.

¹ See A. Chekroun, *La conquête de l’Éthiopie: Un jihad au XVI^e siècle*, Zēna ൩൮ (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2023) and A. Chekroun, *Le Futuh al-Habasa: écriture de l’histoire, guerre et société dans le Bar Sa’ad ad-din (Ethiopie, XVI^e siècle)*, Paris: l’Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (2013) available at <https://www.theses.fr/2013PA010699>.

² S. Kelly, ed., *Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2020).

The other chapters of the book (chapters 3 to 6, pp. 59–128) are devoted to the ‘conquest of Ethiopia’, which the author calls ‘the Ethiopian–Adal war’. Here again the historiography is not up-to-date. The sultanate from which the war was launched is certainly most often called ‘Adal’ in Ethiopian Christian sources, but never by the Muslim populations nor by the texts written within the sultanate and then the Islamic territories that succeeded it (including the Emirate of Harar in the seventeenth–nineteenth century and the Sultanate of Awsa from the end of the sixteenth century). This sultanate bears the Arabic name of Barr Sa‘d ad-Dīn (the ‘territory of Sa‘d ad-Dīn’, named after a fifteenth-century sultan). Moreover, the author says that *Imām Aḥmad* is called ‘Imam Gurey, the Sultan of Adal’. First of all, *Imām Aḥmad* was never appointed sultan; the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* is very clear, as are the other sources of the time: a sultan named ‘Umar Dīn, from the legitimate dynasty descended from Sultan Sa‘d ad-Dīn, governs the sultanate from Harar throughout the war. Aḥmad has only the title of *Imām*, as recalled in the 1540 Gə‘əz apologetical text of Christianity against Islam, so to say, the *Anqäṣä Amin* written by the abbot of Däbrä Libanos, Ḥnbaqom. In addition, ‘Gurey’ (‘left-handed’ in Somali) is the current nickname given by Somalis to *Imām Aḥmad*. This appellation is not attested until the late twentieth century. *Imām Aḥmad* is much more commonly referred to as ‘Grāñ’ (‘left-handed’ in Amharic) in the historiography and in everyday language in Ethiopia. But again, sources in both Arabic and Gə‘əz never use this nickname before the seventeenth century, even though the *Imām* was indeed left-handed as attested by these sources themselves. The fact that Shaw uses the Somali nickname shows his ignorance of the historical sources, but also the Somali bias of his statement. Moreover, he considers that the sultanate was in present-day Somalia; even though the borders of this territory cannot be traced with precision, it is clear that this sultanate straddled present-day Somaliland, between Zayla‘ and Berbera on the Gulf of Aden, as far as west of Harar, in present-day Ethiopia. Overall, Shaw’s analysis of the war is certainly based on historical sources, and essentially rightly so on the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, but the author lacks the basis of the methodology of historical critical analysis of sources. He largely takes at face value that which is written in the sources. In this sense, his text is very similar to the old analyses of Trimmingham (1952) and Cuoq (1981) without adding any new elements.³ Furthermore, it is clear the author knows neither Arabic nor Ge‘ez, meaning he is totally dependent on the sometimes dated or erroneous translations of the sources.

Lastly, I would like to warn the reader about the illustrations. I will not dwell on the often totally irrelevant photographs. More problematic, however, are the

³ J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 76–97, and J. Cuoq, *L’islam en Éthiopie des origines au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1981), 219–270.

maps, that must be regarded with great care. Some have been redone from those in my own 2013 PhD dissertation, but with the addition of many errors. For example, on the map on p. 71, the locations of most toponyms are wrong: Lalibäla is positioned in the Səmen; a region named ‘Gondor’ appears even though Gondär was not established until a century later and this region was then called Dämbəya; Däbrä Bərhan is located very close to the south of Lake Ṭana, as is the Šäwa region; the Təgray is indicated west of the Tökkäze river ... As for the maps created for the book, they are fanciful: for example, the map on p. 25 presents the territory of the ‘kingdom of Aksum’ in 500 CE which encompasses all of southern Arabia and a large part of the Sudan, as far as the current Egyptian border to the north, as well as present-day Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, and most of Ethiopia! And finally, the numerous diagrams illustrating the main battles have been based on the descriptions in the sources, taken literally the numerical data of the different army corps mentioned by ‘Arab Faqīh, even though it is more often than not the classic literary procedure of over- or under-valuing the forces involved.

In conclusion, I can only warn the reader that this book cannot be a reference for those wishing to know more of the history of the Horn of Africa, and more precisely on the ‘conquest of Ethiopia’ of the 1530s–1540s.

Amélie Chekroun, CNRS

AZMZÂDE SADIK EL-MÜEYYED, *The Ethiopia Book of Travels*, ed., tr., GIYAS MÜEYYED GÖKKENT and FAMILY (n. p.: Published by G M Gökent, 2021). xxi, 307 pp. Price: \$34.99. ISBN: 978-1-73712-989-9.

This is an English edition of the 1906 Turkish book *Habeş Seyahatnamesi* by Şādiq bāšā al-Mu’ayyad al-Azm (Turkish: Azmzâde Sadık el-Müeyyed). It is basically a diary of the 1904 voyage to Ethiopia of an envoy of the Ottoman sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II to Emperor Mənilək II. The story of an attempt to strengthen relations between two independent eastern empires, one Islamic the other Christian.

In 1904 both the sultan and the emperor were in their prime. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd had celebrated his twenty-eighth year as an all-powerful ruler of a vast empire, stretching from Libya to the Balkans. He had managed to revive Islamic tradition as an ideology behind his authority, blending it with cautious modernization of education and transportation. The Sultan sought to solidify his indirect control over Arabia by constructing the railway to Ḥiğāz (inaugurated 1908) and was fretting over Italian imperialist designs on Tripolitania. Promoting relations with Ethiopia could serve his interests well.