



Aethiopica 27 (2024)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

FELIX GIRKE, Lake Constance Arts and Sciences Association

Review

DAVIDE CHINIGÒ, *Everyday Practices of State Building in Ethiopia: Power, Scale, Performativity*

Aethiopica 27 (2024), 337–339

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 Aaron Michael Butts

in cooperation with

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

Editorial Team

Sophia Dege-Müller, Karin Ghion-Hamadu

tage' as a universalizing concept, that is based largely on touristic considerations within a development agenda. This is an important contribution to the field of heritage studies, which should lead to further interrogation of the normative ethics behind defining 'world heritage' sites.

Nadine Appelhans, Technische Universität Berlin
and University of the Witwatersrand

DAVIDE CHINIGÒ, *Everyday Practices of State Building in Ethiopia: Power, Scale, Performativity*, Oxford Studies in African Politics and International Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). xii, 256 pp. Price: €75,12. ISBN: 978-0-19-286965-4.

Davide Chinigò's recent book offers a rarely seen consistent focus on local permutations, variations, and vicissitudes of Ethiopia's developmental state. Special attention is paid to—as the back cover correctly sums up—'how policies of resettlement, decentralization, agriculture commercialization, entrepreneurship, and industrialization inscribed dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in both rural and urban areas'. I am citing this sentence because it is a useful metric for readers to decide if the book is for them: if you tick two or more of these boxes (and/or ethnic federalism), engaging with *Everyday Practices of State Building in Ethiopia* will be fruitful and stimulating. The author's fieldwork experience is evident, even as the case studies encompass five distinct locales (in Amara, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), Oromiyaa, Addis Abäba, and Mäqäle), each developed separately in chapters 2–6. Throughout these case studies, most of the 'policy' topics are reliably addressed with nuance and detail, lending an admirable coherence to the volume.

Readers drawn in by the subtitle—the more conceptual triad of power, scale, performativity—might have a harder time with the book. Initially, chapter 1 develops by interrelating these three and other abstract/theoretical considerations. I appreciated parts of this, even if some programmatic statements might have borne out further elucidation in order to be fully convincing. As an example, the author proclaims that 'if we want to escape depictions that conflate experiences of state formation across space and time, and the reification of micro-empirical realities, we need an empirical focus on social change' (p. 2). I am at a loss what 'the reification of realities' would even be and am not convinced that this conflation is actually occurring. Specifically reading just page 2 will indicate to readers how they will benefit from the conceptual parts of chapter 1.

I remained unconvinced by Chinigò's efforts to distance himself from 'culturalist explanations of state power' in Ethiopia (pp. 20–27)—he discusses other scholars (Vaughan/Tronvoll, Abbink, and of course Levine) to document their

varying endorsements of political culture as a field of study, only to cut short this seeming debate with a caricature of his opponents' positions: 'While the contemporary Ethiopian nation-state has indeed been shaped along the imperialist ambitions of Abyssinian state builders, reducing this deeply contradictory experience to the notion of a single Abyssinian culture of power [...] presents a number of problems' (p. 24). This to me is a misrepresentation of the other position: if any of these authors were that reductionist, he could have quoted them to that effect but does not. Several other sections in chapter 1—e.g. arguing for less 'linear' or 'negotiation'-oriented perspectives on state-and-subject formation—offer more food for debate and disagreement, sometimes profitably so; in terms of the literature reviewed, an appreciation of the plethora of empirical studies in Ethiopianist anthropology in recent years that consistently addressed the very question of how efforts at state formation interpellate groups and shape individual biographies might have prevented this tilting at strawmen. But maybe they were too culturalist, too.

Again, other readers might be more taken by the introduction, which in its historical sections seems better founded to me, but the most jarring moment while reading the book was when I encountered the chasm yawning between chapters 1 and chapters 2–6: none of the conceptual and theoretical discussion from the beginning is required reading for the case studies. To keep this brief, just looking up the keywords from the subtitle in the index makes the case for me: 'Performativity theory' comes up on pages 28–30 and 34–35 in chapter 1, and again on 221–222 and 224—the conclusion. 'Scalar dynamics' are indexed for pages 15–16, 19, then briefly for 114, 118, 123, 186, and then again in the conclusion. 'Power' is not indexed at all, but the word does no conceptual work in the case studies either. This separation of case and theory raises questions.

I understand that publishers can impose demands on structuring a book and that there is such a thing as 'the theory chapter'. But what is the point of (high) theory and conceptual work if it can be so cleanly separated from our empirical discussions, which proceed fine with maybe some mid-range reflections that can be easily grasped without—say—referencing Judith Butler? What good is a theory chapter that stands apart, other than providing an arena to position ourselves—plausibly or not—vis-à-vis others? Why would we engage with theory that is unnecessary to explicate our data? These are not questions I am asking the author to answer, of course (maybe Oxford University Press would be the better addressee), but besides various careful observations and their plausible contextualisations in the empirical case studies in *Everyday Practices of State Building in Ethiopia*, this is for better or for worse my main takeaway from this book: Its empirical contributions to our knowledge of state formation in Ethiopia are largely independent of its theoretical positions.

As an addendum: Even though the fieldwork preceded the recent developments in Ethiopia's macropolitical field, the author has managed to usefully address the ascent of Abiy Ahmed and his Prosperity Party (and even a little bit the conflict in Təgray) in the introduction and conclusion, which is a plus.

Felix Girke, Lake Constance Arts and Sciences Association

BAHRU ZEWDE, ገብር ሕይወቴ: ግለ ታሪክ (*ḥabr ḥaywāte: gällä tarik*, 'My Composite Life: Autobiography') (Addis Abāba: Eclipse, 2015 EC = 2022/2023 CE). 313 pp. Price: ETB 550, USD 20. ISBN: 978-99990-995-6-1.

Autobiographies and biographies dominate the Ethiopian books scene today, only being rivalled by history books about Ethiopia that appear every now and then on the market. Memoirs and life histories by generals and officers, pilots and captains, historians and children of notable figures appear regularly. The primary cause for this phenomenon is that there is now a generation of literate and educated Ethiopians who, having retired from public service and offices, are writing about their lives. Among these individuals is Professor Emeritus Bahru Zewde, whose autobiography is under review here.

The towering figure of Ethiopian history has contributed yet another book that could potentially rival his magnum opus: *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*,¹ a key reading for any student studying history at Ethiopian as well as foreign universities. I say this because of the systematic and calculated way that he has written his autobiography. The book is a well-curated picture of Bahru, and he admits that he had kept a diary, albeit intermittently, from early on in his life, which helped him reconstruct and at times correct some of the information contained within.

The book is neatly arranged in fifteen chapters along thematic categories, such as ልጅነት (*lağənnät*, 'Childhood'), የዕብደት ሰመቻ (*yä 'əbdät zämäčä*, 'The Lunatic Campaign'), and የኢትዮጵያ ጥናት ተቋም ዲሬክተርነት (*yä 'ityop'ya tənāt tāq'am direktärənnät*, 'Tenure as Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies').² It is written in Amharic for Ethiopia's youth, whom he urges not to give up hope, pointing at how he himself rose from the economically lower strata of Ethiopian society to where he is today (p. 10).

Bahru Zewde was born in 1947 in Addis Abāba on the eve of Epiphany. This link with the Ethiopian Orthodox celebration of *Təmḳātā Baḥr* ('Sea of Baptism') is why he was named Bahru. All four of his grandparents are Kəstane

¹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*, Eastern African Studies, 2nd edn (Oxford: James Currey; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press; Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002). The first edition covered the years 1855–1974.

² Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES henceforth).