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## Review

BAHRU ZEWEDE, ገብር ሕይወት: ግለ ታሪክ (*ḥəbr ḥəywäte: gällä tarik*, ‘My Composite Life: Autobiography’)

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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 ZEWEDE, **ገብር ሕይወቴ: ግለ ታሪክ** (*ḥəbr ḥəywāte: gəllä 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*,<sup>1</sup> 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** (*laḡənnät*, 'Childhood'), **የዕብደት ሰመቻ** (*yä 'əbdät zämäčä*, 'The Lunatic Campaign'), and **የኢትዮጵያ ጥናት ተቋም ዲሬክተርነት** (*yä 'ityoṗya ṭənat tāq'am direktärənnät*, 'Tenure as Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies').<sup>2</sup> 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 *Təmqätä Baḥr* ('Sea of Baptism') is why he was named Bahru. All four of his grandparents are Kəstane

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES henceforth).

(Soddo) Gurage, and the neighborhood in which he was born is called *Gäḡḡa Sāfār*.<sup>3</sup> Readers get a sense of the life and history of the Gurage community in Addis Abāba throughout the first few chapters, which cover his childhood and his family.

Bahru was educated during the reign of His Majesty's government, to whom he credits a good education system, at least in comparison to the one in Ethiopia today; this is particularly true of the formerly Haile Selassie I, now Addis Ababa University (AAU). His life revolves, in one way or another, around this institution. Through his experiences there, Bahru invites us to appreciate the academic culture of the university in its earlier years. In the chapters where he describes his life as a student, we read about the people who taught him and the students who studied with him. We learn about the personalities of Richard Caulk and Donald Crummey, and how different one was from the other. We read that one of his classmates was Walelign Mekonnen, a household name for anyone aware of Ethiopia's current ethnocentric political dilemma. Tadesse Tamrat, Shiferaw Bekele, and Merid Wolde Aregay, who are famous within the confines of the academic world of Ethiopian history, are also mentioned. This is one of the greatest values of the book: we as readers meet these individuals whose works we read in awe, but some of whom we can no longer hope to meet.

Bahru went to England to continue his post-graduate studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) under the supervision of Professor Peter M. Holt. Alongside his education, he was involved in the Ethiopian Student Movement, which landed him in prison a month after he returned to Ethiopia following the completion of his studies. He stayed in prison for five years, and the chapter discussing this experience is personally the most interesting, primarily because it allows the reader to observe the prison as a space that epitomised the Därg's (r.1974–1991) broader administrative incompetencies. The general realities that prisoners faced, namely, how they spent their days, what they were allowed to do, the sort of daunting physical punishments, abuses and tortures that they faced, and the question of whether or not they would survive, in sum their fears and hopes, are all laid out. Thus, Bahru enables his target audience, the youth who are too young (or who were not even born yet) to remember the Därg, to learn about the darkest features of this dark period. The social realities that feed the beast, colloquially, are also explicated by this quote, 'Though there might be one government doing the arresting, there were many who helped get people arrested' (p. 121). In addition, the terror that also reigned outside of the gates of the Därg's prisons at the time can be exemplified by the example given about the

<sup>3</sup> *Gäḡḡa Sāfār*, also now more frequently known as *Geḡḡa Sāfār*, is among the earliest neighborhoods established in the capital city, located by the Lādāta church on the way to the Molla Maru liqueur factory.

parents who would meet on a street and ask each other about the whereabouts of their children. They would go on thanking the heavens that their kids are in prison as it was more dangerous then to be young and on the streets.

After his release, Bahru immediately joined the AAU's history department to teach and conduct research. He writes that his colleague and long-time friend Shiferaw Bekele had wanted to take him out for lunch soon after his release but could not find him, as Bahru had locked himself up in the library to read through the published books and articles that he had missed while in prison (p. 127). In the sections dealing with his life after he rejoined the AAU, Bahru shows the at times strenuous relationship that successive governments held with the AAU's history department (as well as the IES) (pp. 208–209). One example of this is his spearheading of the centennial celebration of the victory of Adwa as director of the IES, which led to difficulties with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, r.1991–2019). We also read about the points of tension between Ethiopia's scholars and their rulers, and the narrative leaves us wondering what the motives behind Bahru's removal from his directorship were. There is also the matter of his retirement from the AAU, a tale to be considered among the saddest in the book. Bahru narrates how he received a short note informing him that he was essentially too old to continue working there in 2001 (p. 230). Though his humor and his positive outlook on life downplay the incident, we as readers cannot help but lament the lack of gratitude shown by Ethiopia's institutions towards their faithful and devoted members.

Besides those concerning the AAU, there are also chapters about Bahru's wife and children, his trips to various countries for research and conferences (Germany, England, Japan, and so on), his experiences with pan-African research networks, such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), as well as Ethiopia-based civil society organizations such as the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, the Forum for Social Studies, and the Association of Ethiopian Historians.

The book is supplemented with pictures as well as footnotes and references to his articles and books. These references contextualize how some of his writings were produced. For instance, one of his major works, 'Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia (1916–1935)',<sup>4</sup> arose from his reading of Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State*<sup>5</sup> while in prison. Thus, this autobiography would prove useful for anyone who wishes to study the history of ideas in (modern) Ethiopia.

<sup>4</sup> Bahru Zewde, 'Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia (1916–1935)', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 17 (1984), 1–29.

<sup>5</sup> P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, (London: NLB; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1974).

In conclusion, Bahru's autobiography is yet another testament to the meticulous scholar that he is. The simplicity of the Amharic, the thorough editing that has been undertaken, and the book's linguistic clarity all confirm the respect that he has both for his work and for his Ethiopian audience. Bahru has presented his life as intricately woven with the history of Ethiopia in the twentieth century, with diverting humorous anecdotes and jokes included throughout the narrative. But ultimately, what stands out in this book is the academic rigour of the early years of the AAU, making the book a mirror that reflects the tragic state of contemporary Ethiopian universities and the ever-declining quality of education and scholarship in the country.

In the end, one is still left wondering about some things regarding the historian. For example, is Bahru religious? And what does he think about Ethiopia today (post-EPRDF)? And what exactly was his role in the Ethiopian Student Movement? Such are things the historian brushes past, but perhaps he will allow us to ask him these much more personal questions in other settings.

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MICHAEL W. THOMAS, *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres*, World Cinema Series (London–New York, NY–Oxford–New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023). xviii, 261 pp. Price: £81.00. ISBN: 978-1-350-22740-8.

Michael W. Thomas's *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* is an original, well-structured and well-researched book that will definitely become a reference in African film studies, and in film genre studies in the years to come and will constitute a valuable resource for scholars in Ethiopian studies interested in contemporary popular culture in the Horn of Africa. Its exploration of the processes of formation of film genres in a specific cultural and geographic context (Ethiopia) offers thought-provoking contributions to the study of film genres and film industries globally—two field of studies that have remained mostly focused on western case studies or on dominant film industries (Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood) up until today. And its monographic focus on Ethiopian cinema, and particularly on commercial Amharic language films produced in Addis Abāba (the dominant production trend in Ethiopia), fills a gap in Ethiopian studies, offering important insights for the understanding of one of the most prominent forms of contemporary Ethiopian popular culture.

Of particular interest is the inductive approach adopted in the book. The author does not try to make local productions fit into already existing generic categories, but he rather makes an attempt to develop a bottom-up cultural and historical un-