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Review

MARCO DI NUNZIO, *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and
Development in Urban Ethiopia*

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Thus, I know from personal experience what an asset Salamon's study can be for better understanding aspects of the rich cultures and heritage of the northern Ethiopian Highlands.

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MARCO DI NUNZIO, *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and Development in Urban Ethiopia* (Ithaca, NY–London: Cornell University Press, 2019). xiv, 245 pp. Price: \$36.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5017-3626-1.

The inner city of Addis Abäba is a testament to the profound changes urban Ethiopia has undergone over the past two decades. Since March 2024, large parts of the historic district of አራዳ ፒያሳ (*Arada Piyassa*) have been demolished as part of the so-called 'Addis Ababa Corridor Development Project', which foresees a grand reconstruction of the (inner)city. Several reviews have already been written on Marco Di Nunzio's scholarship about urban life in Addis Abäba, most of which were published closer to the study period. However, considering the ongoing developments in the capital, Di Nunzio's book, *The Act of Living*, has become particularly relevant and has garnered renewed attention. This is exemplified, for instance, by the exhibition 'Remembering Arada' at Birmingham City Hall (7 until 18 March 2024), curated by the author in collaboration with Adelaide Di Nunzio, a photographer and visual artist.¹

This book, published by Cornell University Press in 2019, is a fascinating account that depicts the transformative journey of the Arada district, or what the author calls the city's 'historic soul', since the early 2000s. The reader embarks on this journey through the eyes of the two protagonists, called 'Haile' and 'Ibrahim'. Both men are trapped in a particular economic and social context in Ethiopia's major urban center at the time of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rule (1991–2018/2019). And regardless of personal efforts or moments of promise for change, they are unable to climb the social ladder. This is what Di Nunzio describes as their persisting 'condition of marginality'—the main theme of the book.

The first chapter takes the reader to the central setting of the study, the Arada neighbourhood. The area is, however, more than just the home to the protagonists; it represents the concept of socio-economic existences. The author argues

¹ 'Remembering Arada – A New Exhibition on the Demolition of Addis Ababa's City Centre in Birmingham', *University of Birmingham* (2 May 2024), <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2024/remembering-arada-a-new-exhibition-on-the-demolition-of-addis-ababa-city-centre-in-birmingham>, accessed on 26 August 2024.

that *becoming* and *being Arada* defines the particular experiences of marginality of these two men and, by extension, most of its residents. Di Nunzio takes a deep dive into the different facets of being Arada, ranging, for instance, from the ‘gentlemen’ to the ‘thug Aradas’. As for the latter, the process of developing and cultivating street smartness is seen as the key to survival while still failing to escape from subjugation and oppression. Significantly, Di Nunzio claims that the form of marginality in which Haile and Ibrahim are trapped is in its purest form a ‘political product’ (p. 103). This is an important aspect, and the book delves more closely into Ethiopia’s recent political history and, more specifically, into the dynamic state-society relations following the 2005 election outcomes in Addis Ababa. The reader learns how the then ruling party coalition, the EPRDF, intervened directly in the street economy through a diverse set of policy measures. This resulted in a growing political subjugation and reinforced social exclusion, as the life trajectories of the individuals described in the book illustrate.

The Act of Living is grounded in close to a decade of fieldwork that started in 2009. Di Nunzio spent two years living in Addis Abäba. Whith Ethiopia recording impressive economic growth since the mid-2000s, the government launched pro-poor housing projects and low-cost commercial sites aimed at promoting urban entrepreneurship. While these initiatives became a central impetus for urban transformation, they were characterized by top-down policies implemented by the city administration with minimal consultation and consent of the people affected. More often than not, the positive effects of these policies were scarcely sustainable, a conclusion substantiated by the stories of Haile and Ibrahim. The position of the two protagonists on the edges of socio-economic change continued to remain fragile, and their participation in Ethiopia’s growth miracle of the early 2000s was limited, despite all personal efforts and benevolence of the government to improve the living and working conditions of the urban poor. Growth and transformation, as it was lauded by the government and no less the better part of most economic observers, was a phenomenon that existed more on paper, while ultimately failing the economic aspirations of most people—this continues to be noted too rarely.

The book provides a unique glimpse into a world that remains closed off to most outsiders and is likely to be lost for good with the government’s aspirations to model the new Addis Abäba around Dubai. The dynamics of this world are difficult to grasp and are multi-faceted in its dimensions of *being*, as the author conceptualized it. *The Act of Living* is, therefore, a unique read not least because of the sources that inform Di Nunzio’s analysis, ranging from the street hustlers to government officials, along with the diverse social groups that make the inner city of Addis Abäba. Street life as such and its conjunction are not thoroughly studied and little accessible to outsiders. This gap in the field of urban ethnogra-

phy is filled with this book. However, one must naturally also question the author's own positionality as an ethnographer. Di Nunzio explains these limitations in his research regarding gender, which is used to analyze marginality and street life. He states that '[n]egotiating my presence in the streets across gender lines turned out to be the hardest challenge I encountered in the field, as male and female spaces of sociality and the everyday remained fundamentally separate' (p. 22). Despite interviews with older female residents or sex workers, the author acknowledges that his knowledge and insights are largely focused on the male experiences of the book's protagonists.

Fast forward to the year 2024, one could argue that the book gives little attention to issues of ethnicity that have continued to emerge, especially post-2014 in the context of the Addis Ababa City Master Plan. Today, the government of prime minister Abiy Ahmed promotes projects of a magnitude much larger than what the city has seen before and what Di Nunzio described in his book. Significantly, allegations of 'demographic re-engineering' have also grown louder with the recent reconstruction and relocation projects in the inner city, and most notably in the Arada district. Spaces of living are (ab)used, more than ever before as it seems, as political tools and changes are implemented without prior informed consultation.² In light of recent developments, readers are bound to understand this book in its contemporary context.

When Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, one of his main promises was to reform the economy, moving away from the top-down approach of the government and state-led economic development. However, this alternative did not materialize and the vision of an inclusive society failed.³ Thus, while the overall context in Addis Abäba and Ethiopia at large has ultimately not changed since the publication of the book in 2019, marginality as a concept has also not diminished in its significance. In this regard, the idea that the capital belongs to its diverse residents and all of Ethiopia contrasts sharply with the openly growing claim of the Oromo political leadership over Finfinnee/Addis Abäba, making 'who owns the city' and the question of (economic) marginality an increasingly ethnicized issue.

² See 'Dismay in Addis Ababa as "The Soul of the City" is Razed for Development', *The Guardian* (4 April 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/apr/04/dismay-in-addis-ababa-as-the-soul-of-the-city-is-razed-for-development-ethiopia>, accessed on 26 August 2024.

³ See Marco Di Nunzio, 'Hustling at "The End of History": Development and Inequality in Inner City Addis', *Ethiopia Insight* (14 November 2019), <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/11/14/hustling-at-the-end-of-history-progress-and-inequality-in-inner-addis/>, accessed on 26 August 2024.

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Moreover, during the study period, government initiatives demanded new forms of political allegiance—the same seems to be the case now. Such attempts of inclusion increased the degree of marginality, as argued by the author. Nevertheless, an enduring optimism for a better life, despite political authoritarianism and widening social disparities, is visible. Di Nunzio boils the concept of marginality down by describing it as ‘the result of actions, responsibilities, and relationships of force’ (p. 214). This conclusion raises important issues that are extremely topical today. On the one hand, the current administration has invested a lot of effort and resources in the beautification of the capital city. On the other hand, the display of wealth amassed by a novel elite is unprecedented in scale and excessiveness. Growing authoritarianism, widening social inequalities, coupled with instability, economic uncertainty, and hardship, overshadow the optimistic mood that was visible with the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed one year prior to the publication of the book. Di Nunzio described the feeling of Ibrahim and others as doubtful with little hope for actual change. This dovetails with a recent quote of a resident regarding the major demolition that started in March 2024 across Arada—‘[i]t’s my heritage that’s been destroyed in front of my eyes, without any consultation at all. We were never told the plan’.⁴ In the end, it seems Ibrahim and Haile were right after all.

Benedikt Kamski, Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute

TAMARA PRISCHNEGG, *Sälam! ሰላም! Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch Amharisch, I*, (Hamburg: Buske, 2024). 347 pp. Price: €48.00. ISBN: 978-3-96769-377-5.

The book under review is a newly published teaching and learning tool of the Amharic language. The author of the book, Tamara Prischneegg, learned the language while studying at Addis Ababa University. For more than ten years she has taught Amharic and Somali at the University of Vienna alongside German as a foreign language in Graz, Austria.

The book comprises both a textbook and a workbook. The main goal of anyone who will conduct classes with this book is to have their students reach the A1 level of competence according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is generally known among language teachers in Europe and elsewhere that the A1 level includes, first and foremost, the ability to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction

⁴ See fn. 2.