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Review

EZEKIEL GEBISSA, *Leaf of Allah. Khat & Agricultural Transformation in Harerge, Ethiopia 1875–1991*

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Reviews

entstanden. – Der Buchtitel *Anqäṣä amin* (von ʾĪnbaqom) ist nicht amharisch (so im Index p. 160), sondern gəʿəz.

Stefan Weninger, Philipps-Universität Marburg

EZEKIEL GEBISSA, *Leaf of Allah. Khat & Agricultural Transformation in Harerge, Ethiopia 1875–1991*. Oxford: James Currey – Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, Hargeisa: Btec, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. pp. 210. Price: £ 16.95. ISBN: 085255480X

For observers of the recent Ethiopian economy and culture it is hard to imagine how negligible was the role of the production, trade and consumption of khat (*čat*) before the first half of the 20th century. Today there is practically no segment of Ethiopian society where there is no khat consumer and there is practically no interurban bus without a considerable number of bundles of the stimulant leaves. In many day-to-day situations it is as usual to see somebody with his cheek filled with a small ball of green substance as the sight of a smoker in Europe. Chewing khat has become a common cultural feature transcending regional limitations and ethnic or religious boundaries. The importance of khat goes far beyond the national sphere: in 1999 khat became the second largest foreign exchange earner for Ethiopia.

By using khat as a unifying concept Ezekiel Gebissa has managed to write a history of agricultural transformation in Haräрге which correlates the political, demographic and economic circumstances. His description of khat economy combines in a well done manner the “frog-perspective” on the local farmers with the “bird’s view” of regional and macro-history. Taking into account climatic peculiarities, botany, agricultural techniques, time management, transport opportunities as well as prices, commercialisation strategies and structures of khat marketing, the author follows in a diachronic perspective the career of the leaf from the soil to the rituals of consumption and cultural appraisal.

Ezekiel Gebissa’s *Leaf of Allah* describes the dramatical development of khat from a local “holy” plant to the basic cash-crop of the majority of farmers in Haräрге and to a catalyst of socio-economic developments. Between 1875 and 1991 the region of Haräрге underwent a process of significant change. During this period its agriculture transformed from coffee-based economic strategies to a system which mainly relies on khat. Until the late 19th century the production of *Catha edulis* was exclusively in the hands of the Harari. It was consumed mainly by the urban elite of Harär and by those who wanted to use the altered state of consciousness evoked by the drug for

religious purposes. The most important trade good from Harär was coffee. Khat, which is preferably chewed fresh, was only traded at local markets; areas outside of Haräрге it could only reach in an undesirable dry state.

The spread of khat among the Oromo started with their adoption of sedentary agriculture and their conversion to Islam. As the author reports, the transfer of the knowledge related to khat cultivation was facilitated, when at the end of the 19th century, Hararis started to hire Oromos on their plantations where they grew vegetables, coffee and khat. The sedentarization of the Oromo and the increase of agricultural production and trade were strongly promoted by the Egyptian administration. Pastoral land was expropriated, and sold to the Egyptian and Harari elite who in turn leased it to Oromo farmers. The Egyptian administration gave farmers usufructuary rights on their land and the right for hereditary transmission. It was also Egyptian policy to introduce new crops and to encourage the growing of coffee. The Egyptians started to secure the trade routes to the coast and in doing so supported trade. When Mənilək of Šäwa took over Haräрге, it was already a rich agricultural region which now had to feed the Šäwan soldiers and the new administrators. Under Mənilək's rule trade was further encouraged. The land became more concentrated in the hands of the state and the governing elite controlled the access to all lands. Although new agricultural land was frequently acquired population growth and land shortage became increasing problems.

Ezekiel Gebissa presents farmers not just as poor peasants who only react to the land and tax policies of different governments. He shows how small farmers grasped the opportunities of modern infrastructure and developed new economic strategies. Only after the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railroad was established in 1902 could khat commerce reach beyond the local scale. Now, fresh khat was exported from Dirre Dawa to Djibouti, Aden and Addis Ababa. When trade infrastructure became more dense and coffee prices fell in the following decades, Oromo farmers introduced new farming techniques and increasingly planted khat as a new cash crop. This again integrated the farmers more and more into monetary economy.

The history of khat is a history of growth, the demand grew, the production grew and the prices increased. Khat became big business. The importing countries spent a significant amount of money on khat and when their balance of payments was affected, they started initiatives to ban the trade. On the exporters' side khat commerce gave the opportunity to gain political ends. Accordingly, Ethiopian governments tried to control the market, first through monopolies and later through taxes and duties. Uncontrollable smuggling or contraband trade and parallel markets, based on kinship and traditional commercial networks, were the result. The khat

economy made possible a tremendous increase of other illegal or unofficial economic activities, but also the legal sector was fuelled by khat. Khat profits and contraband goods helped to improve the standard of living of Harärge farmers and facilitated investment into other economic strategies.

The author shows persuasively the multiple economic benefits of the “holy” leaf. However, reading about its positive impact on the economic development of the region, one can imagine the negative: an almost total dependence of the Harärge economy on only *one* product. A product, by the way, which obviously harms the psychological constitution of, at least, a considerable number of more or less addicted consumers; and a product that can aggravate family problems. This last aspect, the sometimes destructive side effects of khat, are only discussed very sparsely in the book.

The book is recommended to all those interested in the history of Harärge. Furthermore, it is indispensable for those who want to understand how and why khat restructured the economy and society of this region and how this is interrelated with the economic and political history of the Horn of Africa in general. Beyond the regional perspective, Ezekiel Gebissa’s book helps to comprehend similar processes of an increasing influence of khat on the economies and societies in other areas of Ethiopia.

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ULRICH BRAUKÄMPER, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia. Collected Essays* (= Göttinger Studien zur Ethnologie, Band 9), Münster – Berlin – Hamburg – London – Wien: LIT Verlag, 2004. XII + 195 pp. Price € 27.28. ISBN 3–8258–5671–2.

As well known, Ulrich Braukämper is one of the few outstanding ethnologists who during the 70’s and, more recently, at the end of the 90’s devoted a great part of their activity to the study of the society and of the history of the peoples of Southern Ethiopia. In his long and extensive research he managed to make use of the keen perception of anthropology and of a refined historical insight thus demonstrating a combination of gifts which is often lacking amongst other anthropologists.¹ In his career he accomplished some invaluable scholarly achievements which are and will remain for a long time to come essential references. In particular, with his fascinating

¹ On the problem of the use of oral and written sources in Southern Ethiopia see his “The Correlation of Oral Tradition and Historical Records in Southern Ethiopia: A Case Study of the Hadiya/Sidamo Past”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 11 (1973), pp. 29–50.