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Review

HAGGAI ERLICH, *The Cross and the River*: *Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*

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craft traditions in the current context of Ethiopia's rural development. Strategies of rural development are usually marked by prejudices toward craft workers and the favouring of the cultivators. But status inequalities and perceptions of social distance and of different personhood between mainstream people and minorities will take a long time to be transformed. They are socially and culturally internalised by members of both groups and durable socio-economic conditions in the countryside perpetuate them.

And when differences become eroded, one might even expect to see tensions between (the descendants of) both groups increase because of the phenomenon that Sigmund Freud called the 'narcissism of small differences': if people of various backgrounds become 'too equal', problems may resurface. If the opportunity structures of rural life do not change, the problem of inequality and the lingering marginality of craft workers will continue to be around. This book will help us understand why. In all, it is an excellent contribution to the comparative study of marginalized craft worker groups in Ethiopia.

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HAGGAI ERLICH, *The Cross and the River*: *Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile* (Boulder, Denver – London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002) x + 249 pages and a map; hardcover. Price: $ 49,95. ISBN 1–55587–970–5.

"In the coming decades, gradually and perhaps inescapably, the Nile River will become an issue of life and death." (p. 1). With these pregnant words the author opens his book, not because he claims to be a prophet, but because his study, which is based on history and current international relations, shows precisely that very danger. The book under consideration is a unique survey of an historical aspect of the Nile and the Red Sea region which has apparently been hitherto neglected in Ethiopian studies; at least the subject was hardly treated from that perspective. In recent times, the problem of the Nile sharply increased in importance, as one can notice from the series of international conferences and consultations related to it; the recurrences of droughts and famine in the upper basin of the river, which prompted this study, and the increase in number of various Nile basin countries interested in using the waters of the river and its tributaries underlined the urgency of the problem. By the end of the twentieth century, the number of the Nile countries increased from three to ten; seven riparian claimants – Burundi, Congo, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda – have expressed their wish to use their respective waters to alleviate their poverty. Egypt is of course very sen-

sitive to such claims and plans, for the river is its sole source of life. But its fear-ridden diplomatic moves and unwise remarks of its journalists and intellectuals often exasperated its southern neighbours. For instance, the treaty of 1929/1959 with the Sudan to divide the amount of water exclusively between the two angered the other Nile basin countries which felt that they were ignored and their rights violated and, hence, the question of the Nile was complicated more than ever.

The longest river in the world has perhaps had the longest history in the continent of Africa. Its history is not only long but also rich and multifaceted: The Egyptians celebrated it since time immemorial as the source of their life; the Nubians and Ethiopians revered it. Other Africans, too, probably entertained some thoughts about it, but they seem to have scarcely been recorded. The fascination with the mystery of the river extended far beyond the African continent. For centuries, the Greco-Roman intellectuals and the medieval Arab writers were fascinated by its "obscure" source as well as its seasonal rise and fall. European explorers and missionaries were invariably interested in its vast basin in the last five hundred years, and last but not least, the colonial powers tried to bring it under their control. But at no time, our author tells us, could any power unify the whole valley: "The enormous, mysterious Nile, the home of humankind since its very beginning, has never experienced such human unity. No single political or cultural force has ever been able to control the entire basin. Islam failed in the seventh century to penetrate southward from Egypt beyond Aswan. Late-nineteenth-century European imperialism failed to subdue Ethiopia. Before, between, and after these periods no all-Nile unification of any sort has ever been achieved. The Nile system has remained a multicultural cosmos, a theater of ethnic diversity, of religious barriers, and of political dams." (p. 3)

Actually, the book is not a biography of this mighty stream; rather it is about the impact of its mystery on the culture and politics of the various nations. The author chose to concentrate on the two distant points of the river: the source of the water and the final utiliser of the water and silt. In other words, he deals primarily with Egypt and Ethiopia, both of which are of a special interest to him, because he is "a student of both countries' history" (p. ix). These countries were not only connected by the Nile, but also by Christianity whose history goes beyond the tenet they have in common. The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahdo Church was dependent on the Seat of Alexandria for a millennium and a half, which in turn was under the shadow of Islamic rulers. Hence, Islam (which spread gradually in northeast Africa since the early times of its inception) was also inevitably involved in the relations of the two countries. Just as Egypt shuddered when-

ever the flow of the Nile declined, so were the Christian Ethiopian rulers angered by any unfavourable treatment of their co-religionists, the Coptic Christians, at the hands of the Sultans. In this respect, the book could as well have been entitled "The Cross, the Crescent and the River".

At the same time, the Ethiopians struggled for a thousand years to separate their church from the Alexandrian one and make it autocephalous. Other issues involved were the rights of the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem, Egypt's attempt to colonize north-east Africa in the nineteenth century, Ethiopia's interest in profiting from Egypt's modernization, and last but not least Israel's strategic interest in the region.

The author, a prominent historian who has been writing on and teaching various aspects of the history of the Horn and the Middle Eastern countries since the early 1970s, is no doubt the authority on the subject.[1] In this monograph, he gracefully reconstructs and analyses the complicated history of the relations between the two countries from the fourth to the end of the twentieth century in ten chapters. With the exception of chapter eight, which tends to be journalistic in its presentation, all chapters are sound in their content and persuasive in their arguments. Laxities, which seem to emanate from overconfidence rather than ignorance, are seldom and mostly of little consequence. In any case, they occur mainly in areas peripheral to the theme. For instance, the reader may be surprised when he comes across such statements as: "The patriarch then persuaded Frumentius to return to Ethiopia as a bishop of the Egyptian (later Coptic) Church … and the new bishop for Ethiopia was given the spectal title of abuna ('our father' in Gəᶜəz and Arabic) or abun (in Amharic). Back in Aksum, Frumentius, now renamed Abuna Salama, was welcomed by the royal court and recognized as the head of the church. During his lifetime he worked closely with two kings and was referred to as Kassata Berhan, the 'revealer of light'" (cf p. 17). For some obscure reason, several basic elements have gone unjustifiably wrong in this quotation: What is the difference between "Egyptian" and "Coptic" in this context? Western travellers and their disciples have indeed referred to the Ethiopian church as "Coptic"; needless to say, however, that scholarship is in no way obliged to absorb such a fallacy. We have no evidence that Amharic existed in the fourth century nor is "Abun" an Amharic term, though it is well used in that idiom. The assertion that Frumentius

[1] Among the works related to the monograph under review which he authored and/or edited are: HAGGAI ERLICH, "Ethiopia and Egypt — Ras Tafari in Cairo, 1924" in: *Aethiopica 1* (1998) pp. 64–84; and, HAGGAI ERLICH and ISRAEL GERSHONI (eds.), *The Nile. Histories, Cultures, Myths* (Boulder, Colo., - London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999).

was "renamed" "Abuna Salama" can also be taken as a legend at best; at least one cannot make such a categorical statement. The possibility that the phrase might have been attributed to him retroactively as an epithet of praise (of course if "Salama" is etymologically related at all to "sälam" = peace) cannot be excluded.

Another statement related to the church bears some serious implications in which it is difficult to distinguish whether it is an intentional subtlety or a hasty presentation. On p. 19, we read: "by the eighth century the Monophysite doctrine was adopted by the Ethiopians." What is the evidence that "… the Monophysite doctrine was adopted by the Ethiopians"? What tenet did they maintain in the earlier centuries? Is this a revival of the Franciscan theory that Ethiopia was Catholic in the early centuries of its Christianity?

As stated earlier, these inaccuracies are more or less peripheral to the main theme which is no doubt well argued and documented. The documentation alone would have merited special attention and an extensive appreciation had more time and space been available. It is gratifying on the one hand to see the abundance of works available in Arabic on subjects related to Ethiopia, and rather sad on the other hand how little these opportunities have so far been exploited in Ethiopian studies. Students of Ethiopian history unfamiliar with Arabic can only be grateful to Haggai Erlich for summarizing the tenor of the books and articles he consulted in the course of his research.

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HERVE PENNEC, *Des Jésuites au Royaume du Prêtre Jean* (*Éthiopie*). *Stratégies, rencontres et tentatives d'implantation 1495–1633*. Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2003. 373 p. Preis € 30,00. ISBN: 972–8462–32–8.

Das anzuzeigende Buch möchte der Fachwelt die neuesten Forschungsergebnisse zum Verlauf der Jesuitenmission in Äthiopien bieten. Die Zeit vor der Ankunft der Jesuiten wird bewußt mit einbezogen. Das Ziel des Autors ist es, die Art der Beziehung zwischen Südeuropa, insbesondere der iberischen Halbinsel, und Äthiopien nach neuen Kriterien zu beleuchten. Pennec will nicht nochmals die Geschichte der Jesuitenmission in Äthiopien beschreiben, ihn interessiert vielmehr die Frage, unter welchen Umständen sich aus den diplomatischen Kontakten zwischen Portugal und Äthiopien eine Beziehung entwickeln konnte, bei der religiöse Fragen im Vordergrund standen. Diese Wechselwirkung zwischen der jesuitischen Strategie und den politischen Aktivitäten der äthiopischen Machthaber möchte er analysieren.