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Review


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nating evidence. In many Ethiopian churches, carpets or fragments of carpets survive that are not only of intrinsic interest in themselves, particularly those of some age, to carpet specialists, but also point to a number of places of origin that help to elucidate aspects of international trade at different periods. Through the merchants of different countries, these luxury objects reached Ethiopia, and by good fortune survive; though often in a lamentable state! It is a study unexpectedly informative, and unexpectedly rich, in both trade and cultural information.

Stuart Munro-Hay


Introduction

Some things are important, not because of their familiarity and frequency of appearance but because of the place, the context that they occupy. They are significant not because of the answers they give but because of the questions they raise and the research they generate. These words are true of the term rim, which is the designation for a certain type of land or land-related privileges in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Commenting on chronicler Gabra Selase’s records on Emperor Menelik’s decree converting land tenure to rast, BAIRU TAFLA describes it in his contribution The Notion of Rim in Traditional Christian Ethiopia as “… the most enigmatic of the major conceptual terms related to land tenure” (p. 52). The term has a share in what DONALD CRUMMEY calls, “our sense of the labile character of terminology referring to land” (p. 73). According to Bairu Tafla, “there is no work containing all the relevant conceptual terms with their appropriate definitions and/or descriptions” (p. 48). However, the term rim is a key to a fascinating panorama of land-related complex of cultures and traditions. This is the impression one gets from the publication of the symposium held on the subject of rim in Bologna, Italy 1999.

Motive, Material, Methods

The motive for a symposium on rim is the simple fact that the term had been, up to the time of the symposium, practically unattended to as far as
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scholarly research was concerned. Irma Taddia’s presentation Rim workshop: opening remarks (pp. 5–21) is a helpful survey not only of the studies undertaken on rim in particular from colonial days up to the present, but also on the gaps and loopholes which exist in our understanding of the term. Crummet’s words at the end of his contribution Rim in Ethiopian Land Documents of the 18th and 19th Centuries say something about the motive for the symposium: “The neglect of rim has ended: we have many studies of interest to await.” (p. 81)

The essays are about studies carried out on the basis of personal initiative, assignments originating from colonial authorities or revolutionary governments in independent countries. They build on manuscripts in the libraries of churches and monasteries. They consist of records of court cases and royal decrees. Some build on recent fieldwork in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

There is a total of ten contributors in the publication under review, representing scholarship from Italy, Ethiopia, Eritrea, The United States, Norway and Germany. Sources quoted and referred to include the works of Portuguese (p. 23), British, French and Polish scholars (notably J. Mantel-Niecko) to mention some. The contributors have treated their topics from different angles but there is a good deal of overlap and ‘cross fertilisation’ among them.

Some contributions (MANFRED KROPP’s Land for service or rim ante litteram. The case of church land at Däbrä Estifanos [Hayq], and VERONICA SIX, The rim documents of Lake Tana manuscripts) are based on texts and have the virtue of providing us with a broader historical, philological and juridical context for the study of land-related terms. I sometimes have the impression that the references to rim in them are somewhat limited, though enlightening and fruitful. In his Documents Collected during Field Work in Eritrea (1992–94) ALESSANDRO BAUSI states, “The word rim never occurs in the documents we collected in Eritrea” (p. 148). This means that his analysis builds on deductions from genetically related terms and concepts.

A Family of Land-related Terms

Rim belongs to the family of land-designations, which comprise the terms rest, gult, madarya and rim (BAIRU TAFLA, p. 50). One can probably say that the terms represent, in a rough sense, a descending order of importance and permanence as far as the use of land is concerned. Rest is “the right to claim to a share of land based on kinship to a historical ancestor held in common with other rest holders” (BAIRU TAFLA, p. 50). According to Tafla, “Gult and madarya represent systems devised by the rulers to procure revenues by exploiting the rest system. Gult or gwelt … refers to a royal grant of a piece of land, a village or a district to a full-fledged church, monastery,
a nobleman or noble lady of merit in order to derive an income from it for a living” (p. 52). Rim or erim, “an appellation for church holdings as opposed to madarya,” was known in Shawa, Gojjam, Bagemdir, Lasta, Tegray and Eritrea (BAIRU TAFILA, p. 52).

IRMA TADDIA quotes T.L. Kane’s (1990) definition of rim, which could serve as a general orientation of the meaning of the term: “land around a church deeded to it by the founder and assigned by the church to those who serve it for their upkeep (in lieu of pay). This land did not pass out of the possession of the church” (p. 15).

SHIFERAW BEKELE has pointed out that rim was also “lay holding” (A Historical Outline of Land Tenure Studies, p. 40), that there is not only an ecclesiastical but also a secular dimension to the concept and its usage (Some Notes on Secular rim from the Liberation to the Revolution, p. 86). Shiferaw in fact points out that rim has been regarded as a synonymous with madarya, which comes from the infinitive mader (to spend the night, i.e. live or dwell). One is reminded of what a person needs for his daily bread.

There is however also an element of continuity or perpetuity in the understanding of rim as a church-related term. The descendants of a rim holder can inherit rim, as long as the services required of a rim holder remain uninterrupted. In the Gondar marginalia studied by CRUMMEY, rim “appears to refer exclusively to land held individually by the clergy attached to particular churches …” The services required of a rim holder could however be carried out by a second party (p. 71).

Glimpses into the Evolution of the Concept of Land Ownership in Eritrea

Even though the main concern of the symposium is rim, the studies open a much wider vista as far as the study of land ownership and disposal are concerned. In an article entitled The Rise and Decline of rim in Eritrea, by TEKESTE NEGASH and KJETIL TRONVOLL we get a very instructive account of the evolution of kinship or lineage ownership into collective ownership in Eritrea (pp. 95–99). The authors make the interesting statement that “The impact that the growth of churches had on the evolution of collective forms of ownership can hardly be overestimated” (p. 95).

We get fascinating glimpses into the more personal aspects of rim-based privileges in Eritrea. On the basis of AMBAYE ZEKARIAS’s study, Land Tenure in Eritrea (Ethiopia), NEGASH-TRONVOLL write, “The first privilege was that the names of rim holders were mentioned first at the end of mass celebration. The second privilege was that the households of the rim holders were the first to get their Easter palms distributed by the priests of

the village during Palm Sunday (a week before Easter). Ambaye writing in the mid 1960s, stated that the “usage of the rim still creates discontent and unrest within the villages and the function is almost obsolete” (p. 108).

In Eritrea, the rim holder had to be a descendant of the original inhabitants of the village, one of the daqqi abbat. A descendant to strangers to the area, ma’ekalay ‘alet, could not administer the periodical administration of land. Both categories had however equal rights to usufruct in land.

A Rich Source of Multifaceted Knowledge

The essays in the book we are reviewing are an impressive witness to the co-operation of scholars from different countries, traditions of research and disciplines. The mutual respect and scholarly interdependency between, for example, Shiferaw Bekele (from Ethiopia) and Donald Crummey (from the United States), especially in the area of research into land-related marginalia in 18th- and 19th-century documents, is exemplary. Shiferaw’s article is a handiwork characterised by clarity, breadth and depth. He lifts forth the positive qualities of individual research undertakings but also points to weaknesses and new possible directions of research. To take only one example: Shiferaw not only underlines the virtues of C. Conti Rossini’s and R. Perini’s works but also points out that their works are static, that they don’t make efforts “to show the evolution of the tenure through time” (p. 36). Crummey’s greatest success, according to Shiferaw, is “his attempt to weave a narrative of land tenure over an extended period for the first time in Ethiopian historiography” (p. 39).

Against a Rich Background of Discipline and Sources

The publication is not only about the land-related designation rim, but also about broader spheres of research. Philology, historiography, political and social history, ecclesiastical law and the legal implications of the ownership and disposal of land – all these disciplines are touched upon. The lexicographical works of renowned Ethiopian scholars like Mahtama Sellase Walda Mesqal, Gabra Wald Engeda Warq, Kasate Berhan and Dasta Takla Wald are both mentioned and referred to (p. 30).

This book can be regarded as a potential textbook in the history of land ownership and use in Ethiopia and Eritrea for the layman with some basic knowledge of the history of the region. For the professional historian, it can serve as a good, annotated and updated inventory on more recent studies and editions of texts around the issue of land-related terminology in Ethiopia and Eritrea. A book well worth reading!
The text of the book appears to be somewhat provisional. I have noted some misprints. Some pages, especially towards the beginning, give the impression that they have been typed somewhat hastily. Titles should be standardised, since English like capitalising words in titles!

Ezra Gebremedhin


Aspen comes to northeastern Šawa (and not northern Šawa as claimed by the author) with genuine openness. He lets himself be led by his impressions. He walks through the neighbourhoods of the Gännät community southwest of Däbrä Sina in Mafud wäräda, Yefat awrajja. He meets people, particularly clients and mediums; he gets them to talk to him in private households, public drinking parlors and markets. There he allows them to express their thoughts and speak their minds and records their information. The clients talk about their dialogues with spirits, their families, their hopes, their fears, their religious concerns. All this is then examined in the context of the actual everyday life of the *balà weqabè* and his clients. His study is a long awaited completion of a project that began in 1988. Although the author has published essays related to the book, the insights provided in those pieces are pale by comparison with the richness of this monograph. The result is an evocative book in which the secret lives of clients and spirit mediums are all vividly described in a revised version of a doctoral dissertation in social anthropology written for the Norwegian University of Trondheim in 1994. This is the context in which Aspen’s work, as well as the following review, should be read.

The author offers excellent translations of both historic and recent Amhara possession cult accounts and presents a valuable ethnographic assessment of this possession cult complex by drawing upon already collected data as well as his own fieldwork. The silver lining to this work is the fact that it is at core an ethnographically sensitive handling of a complex interconnection between the practice of spirit mediums and their clients on the one hand, and their cultural constructions and discursive practices on the other. Much of it is about the practice of the *balà weqabè* and the clients and their dialogue with the spirits. However, the theoretical analysis, the literature review, the historical context of Ethiopia in general and northeastern Šawa in particular allow the author to describe the interpenetration of the Christian tradition and ‘folk’ religion. The followers of both tradi-