



Aethiopica 6 (2003)

International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies

EZRA GEBREMEDHIN

Review

ALESSANDRO BAUSI – GIANNI DORE – IRMA TADDIA, *Materiale antropologico e storico sul “rim” in Etiopia ed Eritrea. Anthropological and Historical Documents on «Rim» in Ethiopia and Eritrea*

Aethiopica 6 (2003), 236–240

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

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

ALESSANDRO BAUSI, GIANNI DORE and IRMA TADDIA, *Materiale antropologico e storico sul "rim" in Etiopia ed Eritrea. Anthropological and Historical Documents on «Rim» in Ethiopia and Eritrea = Il Politico e La Memoria*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2001. 165 pp. Price: Euro 16,-. ISBN: 88-87605-47-5.

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 Selsa's records on Emperor Menelik's decree converting land tenure to *räst*, 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

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. Crummey'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-Niec'ko) 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 *rist 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 TAFLA, 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 Gondär 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)*¹, 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

¹ Addis Ababa, Addis printing Press, 1966.

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^cekalay ^calet*, 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!

Reviews

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

HARALD ASPEN, *Amhara Traditions of Knowledge. Spirit Mediums and their Clients* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 58. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 2001. xx, 270 pp. Euro 64,-. ISBN 3-447-04410-1.

Aspen comes to northeastern Šäwa (and not northern Šäwa 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 *balä weqabé* 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 *balä weqabé* 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 Šäwa in particular allow the author to describe the interpenetration of the Christian tradition and 'folk' religion. The followers of both tradi-