



# Aethiopica 5 (2002)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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**Review**

PAUL B. HENZE, *Layers of Time. A History of Ethiopia*

*Aethiopica* 5 (2002), 235–238

ISSN: 1430–1938

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Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

#### Reviews

PAUL B. HENZE, *Layers of Time. A History of Ethiopia*. London: C. Hurst & Co. 2000. xxiv + 372 pp. Price: £ 45.00. ISBN: 1-85065-393-3 (casebound); Price: £ 16.95. ISBN: 1-85065-522-7 (paperback).

Paul Henze's book *Layers of Time* is the most recent addition to a sudden upsurge of general histories of Ethiopia that appeared in the past few years (MARCUS 1994, BERHANOU 1998, BAHRU 2000, first edition 1991). This general interest in one of the most complex and interesting countries in Africa is long overdue, and Henze's book is a readable and welcome addition to it. It is a very complete and accessible account, treating the entire span of Ethiopian history, from the earliest days, beginning with the archaeological record of humanity's origins in this area, up to the present. The book reflects the author's close and long-term involvement with the country, both as a US policy-maker in the 1970s and as an intrepid traveller-observer with a broad range of interests. The text has benefited from comments by experts in the field of Ethiopian history. The title of the book is particularly well chosen: since Antiquity, Ethiopia is a composite of interlocking civilizations, cultures and ethno-regional groups, connected in multiple narratives of contact and conflict that set the country apart from the rest of Africa, and producing a specific and unique national amalgam.

The book follows a fairly conventional chronological perspective and periodization, going from prehistory and Aksumite times through the Zagwe period, the Solomonic empire, to the 'Era of Princes', and then from the modernizing monarchs Tewodros, Yohannes IV and Menilek to Haile Selassie I, finally on to the period of the military *Derg* government (to 1991) and the present. The chapters on medieval and early modern, pre-twentieth century history are well-told narratives and skillfully summarize the outlines of our current historical knowledge on Ethiopia relating to the expansion of the Christian highland state; religious life, art and architecture; the violent confrontations with the 'Fälasha' and with coastal Islamic rulers; the expansion of Oromo-speaking people in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Gondarine period and the emerging contacts with Europe (travellers, explorers, diplomatic missions and the Italian imperialist venture in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century). In these chapters the author does not present new interpretations, but he tells the story in absorbing and accurate detail.

The rise and reign of Emperor Haile Selassie is treated in chapters 7 and 8 (pp. 188-281), containing a long and solid assessment of his historic importance, his successes and failures. To say that the post-1991 government permitted a rehabilitation of his reputation (p. 188) is incorrect; it only allowed a modest reburial last year, many years after the Emperor's remains were found. Henze also calls proper attention to the war of the Italians against

Ethiopia and their brutal mass murder of intellectuals, monks (in Debre Libanos) and common people during their occupation.

The period of the *Derg*, a destructive and traumatic watershed in modern Ethiopian history, is treated in chapters 9 and 10. Henze gives a good overview of this period and rightly underlines the effects of the insensitive and violent campaigns of the *Derg*-regime against the social and cultural (e.g. religious) sensibilities of the Ethiopian population. The changing international-relations context of Ethiopia is also well explained. This chapter also has an interesting account on the last months of the *Derg* in early 1991. Incidentally, the huge explosion of the largest Ethiopian ammunition dump in Addis Ababa on 3 June is incorrectly blamed on “*Derg* remnants” (p. 331. This is now alleged, on fairly credible grounds, to have been the work of armed units of the seceding country).

The eleventh and last chapter is called ‘Ethiopia Resurgent’ and deals with the problematic post-1991 period, in which the former armed insurgent movement, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front), holds the sceptre. In this last chapter, the author abandons his until then fairly neutral position as a chronicler of Ethiopian history for a more interpretive one, endorsing the post-1991 government’s ideology and policy approaches in a premature and uncritical manner.

The book is a straightforward narrative account and does not aim to be a theoretically inclined argument aimed at explaining factors and processes of change in historical development. For instance, there is no effort systematically to connect ecological and economic developments with political or social ones, although in the account presented their interrelations become clear.

All chapters contain much, often surprising, detail. For instance, the chapter on the most ancient history of North-east Africa before the rise of the Aksum state is an admirably complete and balanced introduction to our present state of knowledge. The later chapters, on political developments in the 1970s and later, are often supplemented by information to which Henze had access as policy-maker with high-level contacts or as some one with a broad range of acquaintances [his friendship with the writer Abbie Gubegna is a case in point (pp. 283–84)]. This makes for fascinating reading, although one cannot, of course, agree with all of his comments. Often the author tends to present and analyse too much the views of the elites among whom he dwelled rather than the common people. A puzzle remains the US (and Henze’s) negative, or at least, very cautious attitude toward the secession of Eritrea in the years before the fall of the *Derg* in 1991 and the sudden acceptance of the same idea afterwards – seemingly a classic case of *Realpolitik*

without a long-term view on Eritrea's possibilities and constraints. Henze includes a discussion of the Eritrean question on pp. 240–45 and 273–79 and in the chapter on the Mengistu-regime (Chapter 9). The scenario unfolding today (in late 2001) in Eritrea – entrenching of dictatorial autocracy, far-going political repression and the stifling of freedom – was in part predictable, but was not what US policy can be in agreement with. Incidentally, on what evidence he bases his assertion that Ethiopia's prime minister "at heart" preferred that Eritrea remain within Ethiopia will be a riddle to every reader.

Even more questionable is the praise-song of the author on the current Ethiopian regime in the last chapter. Henze is quite happy with the style and policies of the current government, with a prime minister talking the West's language and acting as a skillfully manoeuvring domestic power-politician. Henze tends to judge the record of the current regime always in the light of what the pro-communist Mengistu-regime did. Indeed, there are important changes and improvements, among them possibilities for political party organization, more freedom for the press (in Addis Ababa) and a more liberal atmosphere, especially in the business world. But this makes the author close his eyes to the deep underlying problems of present-day Ethiopia and the suffering of its people. It thus inhibits a broader and more nuanced view of political developments in the past decade. The problems of food security were not solved (*contra* also the assertions on p. 342), as the regime arrogantly claimed a few years back. Poverty is not significantly declining. Local government is not doing well. Communal relations (ethnic or religious) show signs of worsening. Health problems are catastrophic. The equally alarming environmental destruction is hardly addressed, not least because of the dogma of state ownership of land and interference with notions of individual or communal ownership. A robust and solid policy on development and nation-building is lacking. The 'peaceful, brotherly relations' with Eritrea were a figment of the imagination and a serious conflict with this country was predicted a decade ago by many Ethiopians, very sceptical about the secret policy-deals in 1991–92. More serious ethnic antagonisms since 1991 are a disturbing fact and not a matter to joke about (top of p. 3), especially not if you are not of the ruling group, or are an Ethiopian living in the south and experience recurrent repression and abuse. A more critical attitude, based on deeper contacts with common Ethiopians from all walks of life, especially in the countryside, is necessary to come to a more balanced evaluation and to spur the current regime to improve its record and deliver on promises made. In the preface (p. xiii) the author says: "I have no sympathy with the naive deconstructionists who denigrate Ethiopia's historical experience and claim that the country is an artificial, even mythical construct." These are nice words, but he ignores the fact that such people are

still found at the highest government and ruling party level in Ethiopia and still shape policy. In addition, the Ethiopian constitution of 1995 is the only one in the world where the strange clause of the 'right to self-determination up to secession' is included for any 'nation', 'people' or 'nationality' that so wishes.

The history of Ethiopia, as set out in this book, illustrates Henze's remark above: despite the conflicts, the disagreements, the fights, there is a more or less connected body of peoples and cultural groups that make up the Ethiopian polity and sets them apart from other political units in the East African region. Henze's account also underlines the fact that the Ethiopian people and government, in an insecure and volatile region, would do well creatively to capitalize on these interconnections instead of fragmenting and hence make themselves vulnerable to outside domination and further economic decline.

All this is not to discourage readers from consulting this book - a well-written, good history of a fascinating and increasingly important African country - but just to urge one to forge a more critical opinion about a regime and a country in trouble. Not all is rosy dawn on the horizon.

The book is nicely illustrated with many photographs, both some lesser-known historic ones, and others taken by the author. There is also a good bibliography of historical works on Ethiopian studies. At the beginning of the book there is a section of maps, but the one on medieval Ethiopia has the wrong scale (0–500 km. instead of 0–50 km.!). All in all, Henze has done a solid job, and this book will rank well – with the provisos mentioned above – among the modern histories of Ethiopia.

Jon G. Abbink

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