



Aethiopia 5 (2002)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

SHIFERAW BEKELE

Review

ANTHONY D'AVRAY (ed. and annotated in collaboration with RICHARD PANKHURST), *The Nakfa Documents. The despatches, memoranda, reports and correspondence describing and explaining the Stories of the Feudal Societies of the Red Sea Littoral from the Christian-Muslim Wars of the Sixteenth Century to the Establishment 1885–1901 of the Italian Colony of Eritrea*

Aethiopia 5 (2002), 257–260

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

Letter no. 289 dated 17 August 1900 (p. 332) informs Ilg that his friend Grazmach Yoseph died by using the Amharic expression “*arāfa*”. Rendering this word as “he rested” (p. 537) may not fully carry over the meaning to the native English speaker. The accurate expression is “he went to his rest”.

The idiomatic expression that Ilg uses in his letter to *Ras Makonnen* (no. 311 dated 23 December 1900, p. 357f. for the Amharic original and p. 550 for the translation) is a nice one in spite of its grammatical mistake: *menāw känantä gara šibät siyawäta läzälaläm engeda tadärguñalaçhu?* The verb form *siyawäta* should have been *sawäta*. What Ilg is trying to say in a rhetorical language is that he has lived for all his life with the Ethiopians. The sentence is translated as follows: *how is it that you make me always a stranger in spite of my graying among you?* I would like to suggest that this rendering would sound better if it was modified as follows: *how is it that you treat me as a stranger in spite of growing gray among you?*

These problems in translation do not characterize the book, however. On the whole, the translation is well done. *Ethiopian Records* is indeed an extremely useful book of source material. It deserves to sit on the shelves of scholars and students of the Menilek era. We look forward, with much expectation, to the next volume of documents as well as to the monograph on Ilg that Professor Bairu promises us in the introduction.

Shiferaw Bekele

ANTHONY D’AVRAY (ed. and annotated in collaboration with RICHARD PANKHURST), *The Nakfa Documents. The despatches, memoranda, reports and correspondence describing and explaining the Stories of the Feudal Societies of the Red Sea Littoral from the Christian-Muslim Wars of the Sixteenth Century to the Establishment 1885–1901 of the Italian Colony of Eritrea* = *Aethiopistische Forschungen* Bd. 53. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 1999. xiii, 307 pp. Price: Eur 84,-. ISBN: 3-447-04198-6.

Anthony d’Avray came to the attention of the scholarly community of Ethiopia and Eritrea with the publication of *Lords of the Red Sea: The History of a Red Sea Society from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (= *Aethiopistische Forschungen* 45, 1996). What makes it a rare work is the fact that it gives a historical account spanning no less than three centuries of a small ethnic group of a peripheral region. Indeed, it is the most comprehensive history of the Habab to date.

D'Avray came to the subject by a quirk of fate. As a young military officer in the Second World War, he was appointed in July 1943 to be the political officer of the British Military Administration of the Sahel district where he stayed for exactly a year. In Nakfa, the administrative town of the district, he discovered the archives of the district administration left behind by his Italian predecessor. They aroused his interest. The above-mentioned book was the result.

After the book came out, d'Avray decided to publish the sources (with commentaries) on which he had worked. *The Nakfa Documents* brings to light 83 pieces of varying sizes – memoranda, dispatches and reports – sent from the district to higher authorities and vice versa. The book is organized in two parts. Part One offers the commentaries on each of the documents included in the book with their partial translations (pp. 4–144). Part Two gives all the documents in the original Italian language (pp. 146–288). This arrangement forces readers to go back and forth between the commentary and the full text, which makes it cumbersome. It is true that the general index (pp. 291–305) is very helpful to make cross-references. Nevertheless, the best arrangement would have been to place the commentaries next to the text of the document itself (ideally on opposite pages) so that each document is followed by annotations and commentaries.

The order of the documents is neither chronological nor thematic; it is very unfortunate that both Anthony d'Avray and Richard Pankhurst decided to retain the manner in which the former Italian district officer had kept the documents for his own reasons. The commentary places together documents according to their themes. The remarks consist of very often partial, but sometimes full, translations accompanied by the editor's notes. Thus, we see that d'Avray tries to connect different pieces. Most of the notes are very helpful, but a serious editing would have made them even more useful.

When one reads the comments, one sees that they were in actual fact notes of the author, which he jotted down as he studied the documents. It appears that, in these comments, the author tried to make sense of his sources, to see connections between them and to put them into some kind of narrative. In other words, they are not really editorial comments in the true sense of the word; rather they are, what one could call, “working notes” of a researcher.

These valuable notes indeed help the user find his way through the documents, or make sense of some of them. For example, Document 30 is not dated; nor is it signed. Yet, it contains extremely valuable data. It is a table of six columns giving information on the names of the fractions of the Habab ethnic group (column 1), the names of the chiefs of the fractions (column 2), their place of residence (as at July 1890) (column 3), number of rifles in the possession (or under the command) of each chief (column 4), amount of

annual tributes paid in thalers to the Egyptian administration by each chief (column 5), and finally remarks (column 6).

Without doubt this table furnishes valuable data to social historians. Yet, as it stands, it cannot be used. The extensive commentary (pp. 26–28) comes to our help; the document is dated and the remarks enable us to understand, evaluate and use it. In his comments, d'Avray displays a profound knowledge of the various clans, their territories and their movements.

These notes are found in Section Four of Part One: The Commentary (pp. 18–41). It is a significant chapter of the book in many ways because it deals with documents (documents 9–15, 19, 27–29, 31) that are basic for the history of the Habab (their early history going back to the 17th century, the genealogy of the Bet Asghede, their relationships with their far-off Egyptian rulers and the newly arrived Italian masters). The discussion does not follow the number of the documents; rather it takes each one of them by its theme. Thus, we see d'Avray reshuffling them to lay the foundations for a coherent narrative, which eventually found its way into *Lords of the Red Sea*.

The section entitled, *Defezione Habab Febbraio 1895 – Habab Defection February 1895* (pp. 88–109) is the biggest division of the book. It also constitutes the meat of the collection because this event is treated as a decisive landmark by d'Avray. It starts out with a rather surprising generalization that “The episode of the Habab Defection is virtually without parallel in colonial history, or indeed, in history generally, save that described in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament” (p. 88). Migration as one way of revolt against colonial rule has been a well-established fact in African colonial history for quite some time now. Nevertheless, the statement shows how much d'Avray was taken in by the documents and by the event itself.

This rubric brings together for comment the largest number of documents (nos. 36–52, 62, 72–73). The reader can see that the commentary is actually a first attempt to string together all the documents with a view to narrating the story of the defection from the beginning to the end. They show how the news of the defection was broken to Italian colonial rulers; they also bring out Italian reactions and military preparations to reverse the phenomenon. Actually, some of these documents make serious attempts to dig to the bottom of the revolt. Yet, the fact remains that they are explanations gathered by Italians and processed and presented by them with a view for decision-making.

Hence, the comments themselves should have been edited particularly in light of the fact that the phenomenon of the Defection has always been seen by contemporary commentators and by historians (and d'Avray is one of them) through the glasses of the colonial rulers who had generated these sources.

This shortcoming notwithstanding, *The Nakfa Documents* has many virtues. It brings within easy reach of researchers documents that would

have disappeared altogether. One can only express one's gratitude to the sense of duty and obligation to scholarship that d'Avray displayed in publishing them. The sources brought together supplement the archival materials available in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAI). The Habab are one of the few small ethnic groups on whose history and ethnography a considerable amount has already been written.* This book will be a very useful addition to this body of literature.

Shiferaw Bekele

UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR and GIANNI DORE, *Carte Coloniali: I documenti italiani del Fondo Ellero*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2000. 165 pp. + index. Price: LIT 31.000. ISBN: 88-87605-47-5.

Recently one notices a vigorous trend in the search for new sources on the history of Ethiopia and the Horn among the younger generations of European historians. The search requires establishing a good relationship with the descendants of the historical personalities who have left behind records. It involves winning their confidence. Or one has to have a personal connection of some kind with the family. Notable achievements have already been recorded.

Bairu Tafla's success in getting access to the papers of Alfred Ilg and in bringing to light hundreds of letters is nothing short of a *tour de force*. The book is a subject of another review in this journal. Paolo Borruso published the diary of his father (a functionary in Italian East Africa, 1937-1941) together with some extremely useful and original photographs (*Il mito infranto: La fine del "sogno africano" negli appunti e nelle immagini di Massimo Borruso, funzionario coloniale in Etiopia, 1937-46*, Mandauria-Bari-Roma, 1997). He wrote an erudite introduction to the book in which he challenged some of the established views in Italian colonial historiography. Federica Guazzini discovered the existence of a large body of correspondence of Peleo Bacci, a colonial official in Eritrea at the turn of the 20th century and

* Over the last two centuries, the Habab have attracted the attention of travelers, colonial functionaries and scholars who have given accounts of varying size and value (Munzinger, Sapeto, Baratieri, Visconti Terzi, Conti Rossini, Pollera and Crawford). Marco Lenci, the latest scholar to be interested in the Habab, has taken up the study of their history very seriously. He has already produced two useful and stimulating essays, "A margine dello "scandalo Livraghi". Crisi al vertice degli Habab (1890-1896)", *Studi Piacentini*, No. 19, 1996, pp. 127-142); and "Gli Habab d'Eritrea e il governatorato di Ferdinando Martini: dalla defezione alla sottomissione", *Africa*, LIV, 3, 1999, pp. 349-378. It appears that he has also directed a graduate student who has worked on an aspect of their history.