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Review

GUSTAV ARÉN, *Envoys of the Gospel in Ethiopia. In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers, 1898–1936*

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Reviews

meccanica, di recensione aperta e chiusa, di diffrazione *in absentia* e *in praesentia*.

Alberto Camplani

GUSTAV ARÉN, *Envoys of the Gospel in Ethiopia. In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers, 1898–1936*. Stockholm: EFS förlaget, 1999.

Envoys of the Gospel is the posthumous work of the Rev. Gustav Arén, the foremost historian of Protestantism in Ethiopia. It is a successor volume to Arén's dissertation, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia. Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS förlaget, 1978), and contains a verbal portrait of and tribute to, the author, by Qés Ezra Gebremedhin. *Evangelical Pioneers* told the story of the Lutheran background to and founding of the Wälläga and Eritrean and Tegray components of what was to become the Mäkanä Yäsus Church. It covered the years from the 1830s down to the early years of Italian colonialism in the north and to the early twentieth century in Wälläga. *Envoys* picks the story up and carries it forward to the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa in 1936. Since neither the terminal date of the first book, nor the starting date of the second book, was rigidly fixed, there is a modest degree of overlap between the two volumes. However, wherever Arén treats of the same events, in *Envoys* he does so on the basis of new material.

Envoys is organized into three sections — “Spiritual Fathers”, which covers the period from roughly 1900 to the early 1920s; “In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers”, which carries the story of Lutheran initiatives and Ethiopian responses forward to the eve of war in the mid-1930s; and “New Partners and Threat of War”, which introduces new missionary actors — American Presbyterians and the North German Hermannsburg Mission — and then discusses the early impact of the Italo-Ethiopian War on missionaries and converts alike. Like *Evangelical Pioneers*, *Envoys* rests on meticulous archival research and is fully referenced. It is further informed by the author's deep personal knowledge of the places, institutions and people of whom he writes. Finally, *Envoys* is richly illustrated with historical photographs of key individuals and important sites. Arén writes as a missionary with a keen eye to the churches which arose from missionary enterprise. Thanks to the accidents of documentation, the missionary side of the story is more detailed. Nevertheless, at least for this reviewer the most

valuable and memorable parts of the book deal with the first generation of Ethiopian Protestant founders. Arén paints vivid pictures of *Aläqa* Tayyä, the first Ethiopian to attempt a modern history of the country, of the groups of Evangelical Christians in Bägämder and Gojjam and Tegräy, and of Onesimos Nesib, translator of the Bible into Afan Oromo. The portraits of both *Aläqa* Tayyä and Onesimos are important for understanding trends in the secular history of Ethiopia, well beyond the religious sphere, which is Arén's principal concern. Both were pioneers of Ethiopian intellectual modernity. Tayyä's history is still in active circulation and may still be the most influential book on Ethiopian history within the country itself. Onesimos is a figure deserving to be known far beyond Protestant circles. His translation of the entire Bible is a leading candidate for recognition as the most prodigious intellectual achievement of an Ethiopian of his generation. It is also, of course, the most influential text in the history of Afan Oromo. In the missionary sphere, Karl Cederqvist, who established the Evangelical Lutheran presence in Addis Ababa, gets his own chapter from which he emerges as a multi-dimensional personality.

Envoys is indispensable for an understanding of the historical development of Protestantism in Ethiopia and is likely to remain a seminal text for decades to come. The scholarship is exhaustive and the judgements sympathetic and compassionate. But the book does have limitations. This is an insider's history, written by a participant in the later stages of the processes, which it describes. Ethiopian history is given little logic of its own, apart from providing the stage for the growth of an indigenous evangelical community. Nor are the missionaries themselves set within any larger framework of developments in European or world history. Events and developments are judged primarily in light of their meaning for missionary enterprise and the responses of their local protégés. Perhaps the most serious dimension of this limitation is its narrow and shallow treatment of indigenous forms of religion, both what the missionaries viewed as "paganism", and Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

Indigenous religious practice, separate from Orthodoxy, gets pretty short shrift. Orthodoxy looms much larger in the story, but is given little life apart from its impingement on Protestantism, an impingement which is largely seen as an impediment driven by ignorance and prejudice. To be sure, we get glimpses of a more generous response by local Orthodox churches and clergy, but these glimpses do not develop into an alternative perspective. Arén touches repeatedly on the running debate within the early Protestant communities concerning how Protestants should relate to Ortho-

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doxy, and documents how slow these communities were completely to sever themselves from the Orthodox milieu by forming independent churches. Nonetheless, when Protestants began to observe the Eucharist among themselves, and then to carry out their own Baptisms, thereby founding separate churches, Arén treats the developments as having a kind of inevitability and spends little time mourning this rupture in Christian community.

Yet there is so much of value in this book that these limitations ought not to hinder the wide circulation which it deserves. Protestantism is an important facet of today's Ethiopia, influential beyond the modest number of its adherents. Its story is an integral part of Ethiopia's modern history. In the two volumes which he has left us, Gustav Arén has served all Ethiopians.

Donald Crummey

DIDIER MORIN, *Le texte légitime, Pratiques littéraires orales traditionnelles en Afrique du nord-est* = Langues et cultures africaines, 25; SELAF, 380. Paris: Éditions Peeters, 1999. 293 pages. € 40,-. ISBN 90-429-810-6, ISSN 0775-9305.

DIDIER MORIN continue de nous impressionner avec sa série de publications sur la littérature couchitique. Après le *Ginnili, devin, poète et guerrier afar* de 1991, *Des Paroles douces comme la soie* de 1995 et sa remarquable *Poésie traditionnelle des Afars* de 1997 il nous présente une œuvre de conception plus large. S'étant toujours concentré sur les Afars, Morin s'est aussi toujours intéressé à leurs relations avec les cultures avoisinantes et à leurs traits communs. Maintenant nous pouvons cueillir les fruits de ce travail unique.

Dans son nouveau livre Morin nous fournit des textes, qui donnent de très vives impressions des traditions littéraires orales de l'Afrique du nord-est. Le point de départ de cette œuvre est une question théorique: Comment s'explique-t-il que les peuples musulmans de la Corne de l'Afrique ont fidèlement sauvegardé leurs traditions littéraires et leurs langues en présence d'une forte influence de la culture arabe si proche? L'idée principale est celle d'un rôle-clé des *langues et littératures* locales pour la sauvegarde de la communauté (restant quasi exclusivement dans un contexte d'*oralité*), pendant que l'arabe (en contexte d'*écriture*) n'est la langue supérieure que dans un contexte extra-