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JON ABBINK

Review

IRMA TADDIA, *Autobiografie Africane. Il Colonialismo nelle Memorie Orali*
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Reviews

Hinblick auf die Urkunden zu orientieren. Inhaltlich aber dürfte der vorliegende Sammelband als eine reiche Informationsquelle auf jeden Fall von großem Nutzen sein.

Michal Jeřábek

Autobiografie Africane. Il Colonialismo nelle Memorie Orali. By IRMA TADDIA. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1996. 157 pp. Price LIT 28.000 (Paperback).

The Italian historian Irma Taddia has edited an interesting collection of testimonies of elder Eritreans and Ethiopians on the colonial experience in their countries. It is mainly a source book of personal narratives and memories that are neither contextualised as such nor connected closely to current issues in the historiography of Italian colonialism in Northeast Africa. But the stories in themselves contain many vivid observations, reflections and viewpoints of the people who were colonised, and therefore are very valuable in the effort to “reconstruct the subjective remembrance of colonialism” (p. 10).

As Taddia remarks in her introductory essay, there is – in view of the great amount of written documentation mostly produced by governmental and administrative agencies – a ‘silence of the colonised’ about the colonial experience and the specific impact of foreign rule in their countries: there is insufficient material on the views of the common Africans themselves, due in part to the predominant ‘orality’ of African societies (p. 11) where the possibility or need of ‘writing down’ everything was usually absent. At present, this dearth of original source material of Africans reflecting on the challenges and changes brought about by colonialism is not easily remedied, all the more so because many people in Africa who experienced the colonial impact first-hand as a shaping influence in their lives and transforming their societies are old and are passing away. This point of the lack of testimonies and of the declining possibility to retrieve them is repeatedly emphasised by Taddia. The material that has been published (mainly on other parts of Africa) is enumerated by her in the footnotes to her Introduction.

Taddia has collected her material over a period of several years. The accounts presented by her in this volume have been recorded through interviews in the Italian, Amharic, Tigrinya or English language (p. 45) and were slightly edited and grouped according to thematic similarity.

In the Introduction she also addresses the core methodological points, as well as some theoretical issues relevant to the study of oral traditions and testimonies. She makes a distinction between these two: the first relate to a more codified

and standardised body of stories and traditions handed down as a whole, as more or less part of the social and cultural order of people, while the second are personal stories, reminiscences, and interpretations, necessarily non-codified and more individualised and 'subjective'. Although the distinction may not be very strict in the last instance, there is indeed a qualitative difference between the two, which Taddia relates in large part to the changes wrought by colonialism on African societies, and which have led, she suggests, to the destruction of "institutional structures that took care of the transmission of the word" (p. 12). Also the "imitation of the West" has played its part (*ibid.*; p. 13). However, her argument that due to the structural transformations in African societies the traditional ways of oral tradition have been lost, and that the "Africa of the anthropologists" (presumably meaning historical ethnography based on purportedly 'unaffected' oral traditions) no longer exists, may be too simple. First of all, in many places in Africa where the written word is not fully predominant, it still exists, insufficiently explored in its full complexity. In the second place, an anthropological interpretation of oral traditions and oral narratives is a question of a point of view on how cultures, as complexes of meaning among certain groups, work, not of intact ethnographic corpuses of ethno-historical material [Taddia even goes so far as to state that the loss of codified oral traditions has led to an impoverishment of Africanist studies (p. 14)].

The emphasising of the value of oral testimonies — i.e. personal, informal, destructured orality (p. 15) — that have to be purposely elicited by interested scholars, is indeed valuable, but the limitations of this genre for a reconstruction of history must be recognised. Taddia does this (*cf.* p. 25). She intends neither to declare such testimonies now as the alternative (p. 26), replacing other methods and sources, nor to 'radicalise' historiography with it (p. 37). Oral testimonies, as personal statements and interpretations, cannot by themselves provide the basis for an alternative writing of history outside the mainstream discussions, although they provide essential illustrations and substantiations of certain wider historical interpretations or arguments. If oral testimonies are allowed "to speak for themselves" then the basis of serious historiography will be impoverished: anything can be proven by citing an appropriate oral testimony. In the view of the multiple and divergent responses to colonialism by the colonised (*cf.* p. 29) this would not be difficult.

Therefore, the study and comparison of these testimonies is most pertinent for the exploration of the nature and scope of 'orality' in (post-)colonial African societies, in the past and in the present. Questions as to how formal oral traditions and oral testimonies are, and were, related can be further explored on the basis of

this collection. In this domain there are still many puzzles. Taddia states (p. 17) that the colonial moment has not produced any documents on the part of the colonised (apart from a literary corpus), but has woven its experiences and interpretations into personal memories and oral narratives. The question is how fully to elicit and understand this 'moment' and trace its multiple dimensions. She is right in suggesting that here we are faced with an analytical and methodological challenge. Perhaps it can only be tackled within the context of more comprehensive research into aspects of colonial dominance and socio-cultural transformation as reflected in present-day society in Africa and is to be conjoined with looking into other domains of expression (like dance, song, ritual performance, and popular arts). The 'colonial experience' is too broad a category to be addressed, it is only traceable through various domains of politics, social and religious life, cultural expression, ritual etc. To study these, anthropological and historical approaches could profitably be used in combination (cf. p. 25).

Somewhat disappointing in this introduction is the fact that the author does not really substantiate any of her arguments on the value of using oral testimonies in correcting and completing conventional historical insights and arguments with empirical examples. What do the statements cited later in the book say about crucial events and developments in ex-colonial Eritrea and Ethiopia – and how representative and reliable are they? It is left to the readers to use these testimonies for their own research purposes. That this is, however, possible the author has already demonstrated in her own previous work on colonialism in Eritrea.

Incidentally, another approach to oral testimonies could be a sustained thematic study of the life-history and testimony of key persons, through which the changes of a society can be discussed. A notable recent example is J. Olmstead's book *Women between Two Worlds* (Urbana – Chicago 1997) on a Dorze woman in southern Ethiopia.

The thirty-four accounts presented in the second part of the book (pp. 46–157) are given without further explanations or annotations – as source material. There are few women narrators, because, as Taddia states (p. 46), it was extremely difficult to find women who were willing to be directly interviewed, and what she got from them was not very relevant.

The stories included are lively and varied and offer fascinating reading. They reveal different attitudes towards the colonisers and the impact of colonialism as a system of governance. But most people, understandably, appear to have been concerned primarily to survive and improve their life chances and the well-being of the families. Not all show political consciousness or nationalist feelings.

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It is not very clear what socio-economic and educational background the interviewees have, but most appear to be educated, literate, middle class people, not illiterate peasants, labourers or petty traders, whose testimonies one would however also have liked to see. Also a choice of informants from members from different ethno-regional groups might have been interesting.

The statements by Ethiopians are relatively less rich and largely predictable, related to issues of material changes or improvements and collaboration and resistance in the short period of Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941. The testimonies by Eritreans are more varied, and reflect their much deeper and longer involvement with colonialism. They occasionally also give socially desirable answers to the Italian interviewer. In the accounts of individuals from both groups, contradictions are often apparent, some saying that the Italians “were good, paid well”, or “developed the country”, but at the same time that they “discriminated”, were “racist” or “violent, unjust”, etc. Despite the mixed verdict on colonialism that many informants give, they often agree that the Italians did not pay serious attention to educating the Ethiopians/Eritreans, mainly used them for their own purposes, and destroyed their indigenous elites.

Many more interesting and valuable observations can be found in these interviews, and the importance of Taddia’s call to pay more attention to the collection and analysis of oral testimonies for historical purposes is amply demonstrated by this book.

Jon Abbink

UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR, *L’Africa nell’esperienza coloniale italiana: La biblioteca di Guerrino Lasagni (1915–1991) = Ricerche bibliografiche*. Collana a cura del Centro Amilcar Cabral 14. Bologna: Il Nove, 1996. 254 pp. LIT. 28.000.

Ein Teil der Generation, die während der kolonialen Ära und danach in Eritrea und Äthiopien gelebt hat, entwickelte mitunter wissenschaftliches Interesse an ihrer Umwelt. Das beweisen deren Sammlertätigkeit sowie die Bücher- und Handschriftennachlässe, die seit geraumer Zeit bekannt und nun für die Fachwelt aufbereitet werden [s. z.B. *Aethiopica* Nr. 1 (1998) S. 243–47]. Die Auswertung wird erleichtert, wenn die Erben oder auch noch der Sammler selbst diese Bestände einer Institution – wie beispielsweise im vorliegenden Fall – überlassen haben, so daß sie der Nachwelt leicht zugänglich sind. Guerrino Lasagni stammte aus der Emilia Romagna und wurde als 19-jähriger Offiziersanwärter während der italienischen Okkupation Äthopiens nach