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Review

REIDULF K. MOLVAER, *Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia*

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REIDULF K. MOLVAER, *Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Vol. 44. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995. 365 pp. DM 198,-.

How can a child be brought up in a culture characterised by a wide gap between a high ethical standard anchored in religion, and an everyday life which puts different demands and considerably relaxed moral norms? What kind of personality fosters such a gap, bridged by the sympathetic intervention of saints and the generosity of the Church in administering the forgiveness of God?

Every society of course knows the gap between high ideals and human weakness. Many cultures bridge it through institutions like cleansing rituals or confession and eucharist. But how can parents guide a child to a secure stand in life, where such conflict takes on dimensions which shape culture? Do Ethiopian parents escape by leaving moral education to the Orthodox Church, while they concentrate on shaping a child's manners and everyday behaviour?

This highly fascinating issue is raised, but not explored in REIDULF K. MOLVAER's book on *Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia*. It offers a valuable collection of three sets of data: A rich ethnographic material on socialisation of the Amhara child; a collection of Ethiopian folk tales; and a long list of oral insults in Amharic language. A wealth of original data for scholars in many fields of Ethiopian studies is presented.

Yet the book disappoints the high expectations raised by an ambitious title. Equipped with no less than four Tables of Contents, the book lumps three essays which preferably should have been published separately. Their combination under one title mystifies rather than clarifies the complex relationship between a rural Amharic culture and the Amharic-speaking multi-ethnic and pan-Ethiopian urban people.

The first essay describes child socialisation in a rural Amhara society. A pity it does not continue where DONALD LEVINE's well known book *Wax and Gold*¹ (1965) left the analysis of Amhara personality, nor notice the corrections offered by Levine's critics. In 1967², GEDAMU ABRAHA punctured LEVINE's main thesis: The Amhara peasant is suspicious not because his mother weaned him with a traumatising shock, but because his landlord gives him all reason to be. What Gedamu overlooked is that landlordism was not as big a problem in

¹ DONALD LEVINE, *Wax and Gold. Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago/ London 1965.

² GEDAMU ABRAHA, "Wax and Gold", in: *Ethiopia Observer*, Addis Ababa, XI, 3, 1967, pp. 226-243.

the Amhara heartland as it was in the Amhara-dominated South; yet the Amhara nobility predated no less exploitatively on the Amhara peasant in the North. MOLVAER quotes LEVINE but does not tell us whether he thinks the Amhara peasant is suspicious because he suffers from the distance between God's commandments and the shrewd practice of human life.

Even more disturbingly MOLVAER ignores the recent discourse around the very concept of "*Amhara*". The question "Who is *Amhara*?" became politically sensitive in 1991. It had a political and a scholarly dimension³. In the political debate, Prof. Mesfin Wolde Mariam claimed that the Amhara do not exist as a distinct ethnic group. President (now Prime Minister) Meles Zenawi insisted there is an Amhara ethnicity. He was accused of bedeviling the "ugly imperialist Amhara Herrenvolk" to hold them responsible for the terror regime of Mengistu. On the other hand, the "All Amhara People's Organisation" organises those (predominantly urban) Amhara speakers who feel discriminated against and who identify with a unified Ethiopia, to defend the rights of the Amhara minorities everywhere in the country.

The academic debate was summarised and clarified by SEVIR CHERNETSOV⁴. Already in 1977⁵ he had described *Amhara* as a culture of assimilation at the Imperial Court⁶. This process produced an Amharic-speaking population of mixed ethnic stock. Today, this predominantly urban elite group maintains a distinctive supra-ethnic and pan-Ethiopian outlook. At the same time, and parallel, there is a rural Amhara population living in large parts of Northern Ethiopia, much wider than the area of origin of the Amhara, which is probably

³ See the contributions by MESFIN WOLDE MARIAM, MELES ZENAWI, ENDREAS ESHETE and MAKONNEN BISHAW in a widely televised panel discussion in Autumn of 1991, later joined in the press and in scholarly debates by among others GETATCHEW HAILE and BIRRARA NEGASH. The debate is summarised also by TAKKELE TADDESE in his presentation to the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Michigan 1994 (TAKKELE TADDESE, *Do the Amhara Exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?* in: HAROLD G. MARCUS (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies*, Lawrenceville, NJ. (Red Sea Press) 1994, Vol. II, pp. 168–187.

⁴ SEVIR CHERNETSOV, *On the origin of the Amhara* = *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 1 number 1, 1993, 97–103;
—, *On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara = Sudan Past and Present*, Peter Lang – Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1995, pp. 17–35.

⁵ SEVIR CHERNETSOV, *What are the Amhara? Attempt at a Historical Examination of the Term and its Content = Ethnic History of Africa*, Moscow 1977, pp. 18–45 (in Russian language).

⁶ Because the Emperors after 1270 happened to be from the Amhara area, whoever entered their service, as a slave or servant, a soldier or an administrative officer, had to adopt their culture and language. Thus, the administrative elites and the military, inclusively those soldiers who were settled in different parts of the Empire, as well as the modern urban elites and those who received an education through the Imperial state, were Amharised.

no less ethnically mixed, but has adopted a rural Amhara culture, self-consciousness and ethnicity.

MOLVAER disregards this discussion completely. He claims that “almost all Amhara are settled farmers or peasants”, with less than 15 per cent living in towns. He notes that “very many who call themselves Amhara are of mixed ethnic stock” and that the Amhara “may be a minority” in some Amhara towns. Implicitly, he describes socialisation in the rural (ethnic) Amhara areas. But he explicitly says he took much of his material from discussions with urban Amhara in Addis Ababa.⁷

Also other literature of relevance for the analysis is sovereignly ignored. What MOLVAER says about land tenure among the Amhara, for example, is – to say the least – confusing and confused, ignoring all academic discourse on the subject⁸.

Part two of the book presents an interesting collection of folk tales. Unfortunately it can not be allocated to the same social or ethnic group as the observations in part one, so that the interpretation does not add to the insights produced there. Alone, the attempt at interpreting how folk tales are used in educating children is not very convincing. It claims that Ethiopians (or the Amhara?) prefer to teach their children through indirect examples, instead of giving moralising lessons and admonishing the children. But MOLVAER has to admit he does not know whether children grasp and internalise the messages, and how such indirect educational application of folk tales works.

Part three, on “Orality, socialisation and social control” basically exhibits a list of oral insults collected through years of attention in everyday life, mainly in Addis Ababa. The reader who is acquainted with DONALD LEVINE’s vivid picture of a refined culture of subtle oral finesse, double meanings and indirect

⁷ There may of course be some justification to analyze socialisation in those groups that have adopted and are living in an Amharic culture, regardless of whether they are ethnically pure, mixed, or assimilated Amhara. But once it has been made the subject of political discussion and scholarly discourse, it is not permissible to overlook the qualitative difference between an urban “Amharic” culture of pan-Ethiopian assimilation and a living rural Amharic culture, however pure or mixed blood its members inherited.

⁸ MOLVAER quotes ALLAN HOBEN’s book on land tenure among the Amhara (*Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent*. Chicago 1973), but his own scanty remarks on land ownership do not reflect knowledge of this book, and are just simply wrong, assuming a tradition of private property rights. MOLVAER does not refer to the extensive literature on land tenure by other authors, especially DESSALEGN RAHMATO, JOHN COHEN, ALEMNEH DEJENE or MICHAEL STÄHL, nor to the eminent expert and political practitioner ZEGEYE ASFAW.

insult, will be thoroughly disappointed. MOLVAER does not give any new examples of sophisticated mastery of “wax and gold”. To the contrary, he clarifies several times that he observed crude, everyday routine curses and insults, as they are common in any society and culture. There is a distinct suspicion that the book inflates into cultural peculiarities what really is no more than a relief of aggression. Most of the insults collected, translated into other languages, are eagerly used by children anywhere in establishing their position in a peer group. Not surprisingly, as everywhere, adolescents and taxi drivers in Ethiopia have a solid fund of insults and curses, and know to employ them so they hurt.

This list of idioms from the subculture of insult offers little insight into Ethiopian or Amhara culture. And the analysis attached, insisting that insults are used to correct deviation from accepted norms, is not very convincing. It adds no new insights to LEVINE's description of the Amhara's sophistication in encoding and deciphering their oral aggressivity. It rather reads like an attempt at systematising gossip.

At times annoying is MOLVAER's preoccupation with sex – or rather with the more exotic and sensational aspects of sexual practices gossiped about. The repetitive recollection of such episodes raises a bit of uncertainty as to the validity of his empirical material. As it is not quantified – which appears a wise decision in view of the difficult research situation – the reader remains in doubt about which parts are describing typical and general patterns, and where the thrill of sensation carried the author away to over-emphasize events reported for their exciting quality. Behind it one sometimes feels a thoroughly conservative author committed to his own particular culture and ethical code, and thrilled and disgusted at the same time by peeping into the hidden lives of people who do not follow the same code.

Nonetheless, especially the first essay, the most serious study of the three and closest to the author's heart, contains a lot of interesting and valuable observation and interview material, which deserves attention. However, in this form, the best a reviewer can recommend is to use this book like a quarry, to take out whatever one can use, and leave what remains behind. For that, there should be a few good building blocks to pick.

Siegfried Pausewang