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Review

HAGGAI ERLICH, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics
Entwined*

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Reviews

anglophones. Bien que l'auteur l'explique par le souci de ne pas présenter un livre trop long, nous ne comprenons toujours pas ce choix. Ces sections avaient l'immense avantage de présenter des caractéristiques peu connues et qui permettaient de comprendre les enjeux contemporains internes d'une Eglise. Ce n'est plus le cas dorénavant et c'est la chose la plus préjudiciable dans cet ouvrage. Car il s'agissait bien là des passages les plus intéressants. Ils permettaient également au lecteur de ne pas se perdre dans ce qui peut par moment passer pour une énumération sans fin de titres, d'organisations et de positions souvent obscures, même pour un lecteur averti. Là où les données brutes pouvaient contrebalancer le manque d'analyse et de synthèse, nous ne trouvons désormais qu'une énumération de faits sans profondeur. Cartes et schémas complétaient les éditions anglophones et leur absence dans la présente édition est un problème. Pour ne prendre que l'exemple de l'Eglise éthiopienne, la section sur l'organisation de l'Eglise, présente dans l'édition anglaise, aurait pu permettre à l'auteur d'exposer au lecteur francophone le processus amenant à la séparation d'avec l'Eglise copte en 1959. En effet, une seule phrase fait mention de ce phénomène dans le chapitre historique! Les Eglise copte, syrienne et arménienne pâtissent du même manque. On se demande par ailleurs pourquoi l'Eglise malankare syrienne est traitée de façon si rapide (15 pages seulement!) en comparaison avec les autres. Si le manque d'information est à l'origine de cette lacune, il aurait été sans doute nécessaire d'en faire mention.

Sans analyse ni profondeur historique, politique ou sociologique, le risque est ainsi de présenter des Eglises en un mode figé, offrant l'image de christianismes fossiles et folkloriques. L'ouvrage de Mme Chaillot n'en est heureusement pas là. L'exposition quasi encyclopédique de faits liturgiques est en fait un outil, indéniablement imparfait mais utile à ceux voulant approfondir leurs connaissances sur les Eglises orthodoxes orientales. Il est néanmoins dommageable qu'en raison de ses manques, cet ouvrage ne puisse pas s'adresser à un large public, irrémédiablement perdu dans la masse d'informations, ni aux spécialistes, frustrés par l'absence d'analyse et de rigueur scientifique.

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HAGGAI ERLICH, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined*, Boulder, CO – London: Lynne Rienner, 2007. xi-249 pp. Price: \$ 49,95. ISBN-13: 978-1-58826-493-0.

Professor H. Erlich, emeritus of Middle East and African History at Tel Aviv University dedicated a great part of his academic activity to the analysis of the Ethiopian relationships with the Near East in modern and contemporary times.

In two previous pioneering books,¹ Erlich analyzed the most relevant stages and aspects of the long lasting political, economical and cultural connections tightly binding Ethiopia to the East Mediterranean basin and Egypt. The book under review can be thus considered as the third part of a trilogy, widening the perspective of the author's analysis to the Arabian Peninsula. Erlich's researches are in their broadest sense a further confirmation that one of the essential constituents of Ethiopia's cultural and political structure – separating it from other Sub-Saharan countries – is its unavoidable interrelation with the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. Both in ancient and in present time, no adequate knowledge can be secured in any field of Ethiopian studies without inserting Ethiopia in its most natural cultural and historical setting: the Near East.

It is of course in the interplay of the two religious traditions of Christianity and Islam, both deeply rooted in the Ethiopian cultural landscape, that the Mediterranean connection of the country can be exemplified at its best. Professor Erlich is fully aware of the crucial role played by religious thought and religiously oriented ideologies in creating the mutual image of (Christian and Islamic) Ethiopia and the (Muslim) Middle East. In his previous *Ethiopia and the Middle East* and *The Cross and the River*, he acutely draws a general interpretative framework in which Ethiopia's relationships with the Islamic world can be accommodated. The "Islām al-Naḡāšī" versus "leave the Ethiopians alone" dichotomised paradigm which Erlich utilizes as a kind of litmus test to assess the nature of a given fact or event involving both Ethiopia and the Islamic world proves to be an effective heuristic tool for the historical reconstruction.² The great place occupied in the contemporary Ethiopian Muslim (and Christian) discourse by the harsh discussion on the origin of the Islamic presence in the country demonstrates once more the exceptional importance that the different interpretations of the very first encounter of the two religions at the Naḡāšī's court have had in building the base of the Christian-Islamic relations in Ethiopia.³

In the book under review, Erlich undertakes the analysis of the relationships between Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia since 1932 (the year of the proclamation of the Saudi kingdom) until 2005. The interaction of two countries is regarded by the author as a significant example of the highs and lows of Ethiopia's relation with and view of Islam (and vice versa). Hence comes – I think – the reference of the title to "Islam, Christianity and Politics entwined" which may sound too

¹ H. ERLICH, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, Boulder, CO – London: Lynne Rienner, 1994, and ID., *The Cross and the River*, Boulder, CO – London: Lynne Rienner, 2002.

² ID., *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, pp. 3–19, and ID., *The Cross and the River* pp. 22–33.

³ On the persistence of the issue of the origins in the Christian-Islamic debate in Ethiopia see A. GORI, "L'Islam in Africa Orientale: crisi islamica e/o crisi dell'Islam?", *Africa* (Roma) 62/3, 2007, pp. 429–438.

straight and simplistic to many⁴ but is undoubtedly a concise and effective way to express the reality of the mingling of theology, myth and history with geopolitical, economical and military interests.

The book is made up of eight chapters. The first chapter (“Politics and Religious Legacies: An Interplay”: pp. 1–12) is basically a general introduction to the text where the main topics are summarily presented and inserted in the above-mentioned conceptual framework (the “Islām al-Nağāšī” position is fully endorsed by the Wahhābi leadership of the Saudi state). The subsequent six chapters are chronologically ordered and follow up the developments of the Saudi–Ethiopian relationships through the crucial phases of the birth of the Saudi state (Ch. 2: “The Christian State and the Islamic State”, pp. 13–37), the Ethio-Italian conflict (Ch. 3 “Camels for Mussolini”, pp. 39–65), the Second World War and its immediate aftermaths (Ch. 4 “The *Wahhabia* and Ethiopia”, pp. 67–96), the Cold War (Ch. 5 “The Saudis and the End of the Christian Kingdom”, pp. 97–131 and the establishment of Māngāstu’s Communist regime (Ch. 6 “*Wahhabism* and Communism: Mutual Demonization, 1974–1991”, pp. 133–173) to end with the post-*Dārg* era and its crucial challenges (Ch. 7 “Wahhabism and Ethiopian Identity”, pp. 175–222). Finally the eighth chapter (“Local Dilemmas, Global Perspectives”, pp. 223–231) summarizes the main results of the research carried out in the book and casts a glance at the possible future scenarios.

The historical reconstruction is well conducted and soundly based on the critical analysis of several different first-hand sources in various different languages (from Foreign Office archival material to Arabic periodical press and political pamphlets). Previously unknown facts and details which are brought to light for the first time make the book informative and insightful. These qualities are most particularly evident in two sections of the book.

The third chapter punctually describes the negotiations between the Italians and the Saudis on the eve of the invasion of Ethiopia. The Italians wanted to buy 12,000 camels from the Saudis to be used for the army in Eritrea. In exchange, they were ready to sell arms to the kingdom and to host Saudi young people to be trained as pilots of the Saudi Air Force.⁵ After a long

⁴ See the late HUSSEIN AHMED’s review of the present book in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* 19/1, 2008, pp. 121–128 (here p. 121). I personally think that identifying the Ethiopian state until 1974 with “Christianity” is no less justifiable (and/or disputable) as equating the Saudi Kingdom with “Islam”.

⁵ On the first Italian-Saudi contacts see also M. PIZZIGALLO, *La diplomazia dell’amicizia. Italia e Arabia Saudita, 1932–1942*, Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000; IDEM, “La prima missione del SIM in Arabia Saudita”, *Gnosis – Rivista Italiana di Intelligenza* 2, 2010 (online publication) and also G. ALEGI, “La missione aeronautica italiana in Arabia Saudita”, *Informazioni della Difesa* 1, 2007, pp. 48–54.

skirmish among two Italian agents (Celso Odello and Giovanni Persico), King Ibn Sa‘ūd and some of his court officers (Fu‘ād Hamza, Prince Fayṣal and Yūsuf Yasin), the Italians, obtained 1,000 camels for their troops and a kind of “favourable” neutrality in the Ethiopian conflict which implied that Saudi Arabia did not join the League of Nations in sanctioning the Italian invasion. Erlich not only reconstructs the facts according to their chronological order but also justly analyzes them in the frame of the contemporary geopolitical arena and against the background of the strategies of both Great Britain and Italy in the Middle East and the Red Sea area.

Chapter four focuses on another so far scarcely investigated but momentous bend of the recent Islamic history in Ethiopia, the so-called “fitna of the Club” (*fitna* being a word of the religious vocabulary of Islam meaning internal strife among the faithful). In January 1948, some representatives of the nationalistic group of Harär (*al-Waṭaniyya*) secretly joined the Somali Youth Club (the Somali independence movement) in Mogadishu to try to drive the attention of the International Committee on Somalia towards the issue of the future status of Harär (as if the town was a part of Somalia and not of Ethiopia). The Harari envoys failed in their mission and fearing the reaction of the Ethiopian monarchy went into exile first in Saudi Arabia, and eventually to Egypt. In Harär many members of the *al-Waṭaniyya* were arrested and deported to other regions of Ethiopia. The episode was a turning point in the evolution of the Ethiopian Islam, and its consequences last until today.

With his already proven skill in the critical reconstruction of Ethiopian history, Haggai Erlich managed to produce a reference book which is of great help to approach some previously almost unexplored aspects of the dynamical relationships of Ethiopia with one of the main countries of the Islamic world. Further research on this fascinating field has thus now found a solid basis to start with.

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KARL JOHAN LUNDSTRÖM – EZRA GEBREMEDHIN, *Kenisha: The Roots and Development of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea 1866–1935*, Trenton, NJ – Uppsala: The Red Sea Press, 2011. 520 pp., paperback. Prize: US-\$ 34,95. ISBN: 978–1–56902–350–1.

The book under review, henceforth simply *Kenisha*,¹ is the voluminous and detailed summary of the foundation and development of a European Church

¹ The term *Kenisha* is discussed in detail on pp. 26–28. Its most simple translation would be “readers” and designates the local converts, in this way it is also often used in the book.