



Aethiopia 15 (2012)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

HANNA RUBINKOWSKA, University of Warsaw

Review

RUDOLF AGSTNER (Hrsg.), *Arbeiten und Leben am Hof Haile Selassies I.
Lore Trenkler: Erinnerungen 1960–1975*

Aethiopia 15 (2012), 290–291

ISSN: 2194–4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

RUDOLF AGSTNER (Hrsg.), *Arbeiten und Leben am Hof Haile Selassies I. Lore Trenkler: Erinnerungen 1960–1975*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011, X + 218 pp. [incl. index]. Price: € 38,-. ISBN: 978-3-447-06447-3.

Rudolf Agstner has edited an interesting book which presents life at the court of Ḥaylä Śəllase I during the final years of his reign. Lore (actually Eleonore) Trenkler is the author of the memoirs, covering the 15 years she worked as a cook for the Emperor. She came to Addis Abäba as a dietician, whose main responsibility was the preparation of food for the Emperor's wife, Mänän, who suffered from diabetes. Mänän died only a year after Lore Trenkler arrived in Ethiopia. However, following his wife's death, Ḥaylä Śəllase offered the Austrian cook a position within the household which she readily accepted. The period described in the book covers what can be perceived as the final years of Ḥaylä Śəllase's reign. One of Lore Trenkler's first experiences in Ethiopia was the unsuccessful *coup d'état* of 1960 – she arrived just before the event took place. She also opted to stay in Ethiopia after the 1974 revolution and left it some months later, following the death of the Emperor.

The memoirs of Lore Trenkler are an account presenting life at Ḥaylä Śəllase's palace from the perspective of the kitchen and with a description of the Ethiopian culture of food. This rare perspective not only provides an opportunity to learn about the Emperor and his family, but also sheds light on certain features of state functioning and on Ethiopian culture as such. A large part of the book is dedicated to the problems Lore Trenkler had to face while working in a country where the culture was very different from what she was accustomed to. There is no doubt that her duties were made more difficult due to certain cultural differences – the Empress's diet needed to be prepared in accordance with specific religious requirements. She was forced to observe the strict rules of the prolonged Ethiopian fasting periods. Trenkler was also confronted with Ethiopian food, including fruit and vegetables, which she had not been familiar with beforehand. Additionally, the people she supervised and their attitude towards work were also strongly influenced by their different cultural background, which complicated their cooperation.

The picture of the Emperor painted by Lore Trenkler is a positive one. It might seem surprising that even though the author's job was to prepare food for Mänän, she does not write much about the Empress. Actually, Trenkler only met her on one occasion, while she had many more opportunities to become acquainted with the Emperor, and was therefore able to develop an opinion about him which she shares in the memoirs. The book is also a rare opportunity to read descriptions of the large number of palaces in which Ḥaylä Śəllase and members of his family resided.

Working in the kitchen allowed the author to participate both in the everyday life of the imperial family and in various official events, including small and grand banquets, those more traditional and those influenced by European standards. Lore Trenkler's experiences were diverse, as she was asked to cook for a large variety of people: both for Ethiopians and foreigners, for heads of states and various politicians who paid visits to the Ethiopian ruler, as well as for the children of diplomats – when parties for such guests were organized in the palace. She was a witness to grand events as, for example, the launching of the Organisation of African Unity.

As a cook, Lora Trenkler also had the opportunity to observe huge imperial feasts, or *gəbərs* (even though she never uses this term). These were traditional ritualized dinners which symbolized the return of taxes previously collected by the rulers from their subjects. For a historian, the book grants the possibility to observe the changes introduced into this traditional Ethiopian ritual through an attempt to bring in “modern” elements during the last period of Həylā Šəllase's reign. This period was marked by a clash between tradition and modernity and the results can be traced in Trenkler's account.

Quite obviously, the author's descriptions of her 15 years in Ethiopia do not only focus on the tasks of cooking and serving food, and completely exclude other aspects of life. According to the book, Trenkler became interested in, and eventually familiar with, different aspects of Ethiopian culture. She travelled to and visited different parts of Ethiopia. Some of the voyages she undertook as part of the Emperor's retinue, others she conducted on her own. Trenkler describes places, people and events, but she also gives other information about the country. Chapter IV is dedicated to Ethiopian celebrations (pp. 72–85) and various details can be found here for those interested in the subject (e.g. regarding Muslims who were employed in the imperial butchery during the fasting period, when Christians were obliged not only to give up eating meat but also the slaughtering of animals).

The book is illustrated with 33 black and white pictures, edited with a preface by Prince Asfa-Wossen Asserate (p. VII), information from the editor (pp. IX–X) and a short biographical note on Eleonore Trenkler by Edith Stumpf-Fischer (pp. 1–10). Lore Trenkler's account is divided into eleven chapters (pp. 11–197) and is followed by an index of place names (pp. 199f.), as well as a name index with basic biographical information (pp. 201–215). Other information, in most cases with the intention to update the data given by Trenkler, is provided by the editor in the footnotes to the text.

Hanna Rubinkowska, University of Warsaw