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BAIRU TAFLA, Universität Hamburg

Review

NINA VON NOLTING, *Nation im Exil? Eritreer in Deutschland*

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by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

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

NINA VON NOLTING, *Nation im Exil? Eritreer in Deutschland* = Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung 26, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2010. Paperback, 262 pp. Price: € 34.80. ISBN: 978-3-89645-826-1.

In the last 40 years, thousands of Eritreans have taken refuge in the Federal Republic of Germany. Most of them were assigned to the federal states Hessen, Baden-Württemberg and Nordrhein-Westfalen. The main reasons for leaving their home country and not returning later have been the raging war between Ethiopia and the liberation fronts, as well as the political dictatorship that followed the liberation in 1991. Nonetheless, they did not forget their country, their culture, and their relatives who remained at home. They sought each other and founded associations not only to maintain their culture and languages during their stay in the host land, but also to raise funds to help the fronts and eventually their home country. After the liberation, however, unexpected factors – primarily resulting from the political development in Eritrea – weakened their dream of returning for good and diversified their common interest so that subsequently balkanization prevailed. This division seems to be so serious in its nature and process that the author states in the conclusion: “On what basis the exile community will come together in the future and how it will deal with the evolved differences will depend on the political development in Eritrea” (p. 232).¹

This brief summary of the complex study may give the impression that the work is a facile narrative about a temporary community; but it is not. The aim of the work is to examine the different and complex problems of the country of origin, the refugees themselves and the reaction of the host country: “This work aims at presenting how the twofold influences of the societies of then-country of origin and their host country, through historical and current political and social developments, affected the Eritrean exile community, and in this way elucidating the changes and the ways of community shaping and their protagonists” (p. 15). The ten chapters (the eleventh is a summary and conclusion) contain numerous sections dealing with fascinating, but complicated academic, social, religious, political, economic and psychological problems. Hence, it is a dexterous research work of several years based on written and oral sources.

Nina von Nolting is an academic whose research interest lies in north-east Africa with particular emphasis on Eritrea. Migration, flight, exile, and transnationalism have been her study preferences since when she was a student of Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology and African Studies in Marburg and Frankfurt. As early as 2000 she began to publish articles on various

¹ All cited parts of the reviewed book are translated by the author of this review.

aspects of migration of Africans in general and Eritreans in particular. Since 2003, she has worked as an academic assistant at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz. It was during this period that she toured most of the major German cities, including Berlin, Hamburg, Kassel, Stuttgart, München, etc. to interview Eritrean exiles and to collect written materials. In 2008 she successfully presented the doctoral dissertation, now under consideration.

The research is no doubt legitimate in the choice of topic, scientific in the use of sources as well as in the application of analytical methodology. A few laxities are, however, noticeable in the text, and academic criticism requires mention of some examples. The first lacuna a reader notices is the absence of an index its addition would have enhanced the value of the book. Apart from the minor orthographic errors such as “Nafka” instead of “Nakfa” (cf. pp. 38 and 139), the names of the interviewees are given in single form (i.e. only the first name) throughout the quotations and related comments. It is true that the first name of a person is very important in Eritrea and Ethiopia; but the second name (i.e. father’s name) is necessary to distinguish the person from others with the same name. The name of the given individual is mostly followed by the name of the city where he or she lived at the time of the interview. But it is possible that several Eritreans in the same city bore the same name. Perhaps the author intended to protect the interviewee against opponents to his/her remarks. In any case, it would have been necessary either to include an explanation in the introduction or to list each interviewee with full name, date and place of interview at the end of the book. By this the interviews are established as valuable and legitimate sources, equivalent to the written sources.

If the above-mentioned cases belong primarily to technicality, here follows a question of establishing historical facts. On the basis of a secondary source, the existence of Eritrean nationalism is described rather negligently in connection with the beginning of Italian colonization of the country: “There was, indeed, in Eritrea neither a ‘primary’ nor a ‘secondary’ anti-colonial resistance against the Italian colonial occupation. Only in Kebessa, the Eritrean highlands, were there some local leaders who rebelled against the occupation, but this was not a movement to involve all regions and ethnic groups. Twelve of these leaders were killed by Italian soldiers between 1889 and 1890, and the sequel never saw another anti-colonial resistance movement ... that might have served as something to build upon later to establish a national identity” (p. 85). Whether the Eritreans were politically and economically in a position to resist any domination after the troublesome decades preceding the arrival of the Italians is not taken into consideration at all. That is, of course, a colossal theme which cannot be summed up here. Let me mention simple factual errors. Actually the resistance commenced in the coastal area and the Italians

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began transferring suspects to Italy and hunting rebels as early as 1887. The resistance of Abärra Kassa in 1892 and Baḥta Ḥagos in 1894 indicate that the alleged Italian victory of 1889–90 was not a permanent achievement. The numerous prisoners of Nakhura were members of resistance of the subsequent century. Those who fled to Ethiopia in the first three decades of the 20th century, also resented the Italian domination of Eritrea and hoped to drive the Italians out with the help of that country.

The book is otherwise rich in information, objective in analysis, well readable in style. Nina von Nolting has made an excellent contribution to Eritrean studies for which we should all be thankful.

Bairu Tafla, Universität Hamburg

GERTRUD SCHNEIDER-BLUM (ed.), *máakut(i) t'awá shuultáa – Proverbs Finish the Problems: Sayings of the Alaaba (Ethiopia)* = Verbal Art and Documentary Literature in African Languages 28, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2009. 102 pp., Paperback. Price: € 19.80. ISBN: 978-3-89645-284-9.

The description of a language with little knowledge about is increasingly based on the analysis of empirical data collected by the describer. Today's grammarians inductively elaborate analytic solution from the observation of rich repertoires of predominantly textual material. In order to record that largest possible variety of linguistic structures, these texts are varied in genres and topics. The result is that the descriptivist collects an amount of data that are not of exclusive linguistic interest, but contain extensive information of the speech community, their knowledge and their oral arts.

This is the case of Gertrud Schneider-Blum's research activities among the Alaaba of South Ethiopia. She conducted several weeks of fieldwork for the redaction of *A Grammar of Alaaba*,² and she ended up possessing a fair amount of proverbs in this Highland East Cushitic language. Apparently, the greater effort of the author was to understand their meaning rather than to collect. In the introduction she states that most of the sayings were collected by the local authority Shunkalla Mohammed, who also helped to interpret them.

The 418 proverbs presented in the book are enough to reflect fairly well Alaabas' culture and wisdom, furthermore study their social values, rhetoric

² GERTRUD SCHNEIDER-BLUM 2007, *A Grammar of Alaaba. A Highland East Cushitic Language of Ethiopia* = Cushitic Language Studies 25, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, reviewed by the author in *Aethiopica* 13 (2010), pp. 300–302.