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### Review

ESTELLE SOHIER, *Le roi des rois et la photographie. Politique de l'image et pouvoir royal en Éthiopie sous le règne de Ménélik II*

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Šəmāzana, in ʾAkkälä Guzay (Eritrea). In the praise to God, after the “Miracle of the tree”, the words *nəsebbəho ʾəgziʾabəher səbbuḥ zä-täsəbbəha ...* (§ 201) is the initial line from the (First) Prayer of Moses (Ex. 15:1), from the “Songs of the Prophets” in the Ethiopic Psalter. The edition indicates rhyming only for § 160; however, the hagiographer stylistically emphasized also some other passages, rhyming a few lines elsewhere, s. e.g., § 51, ll. 22–26 (rhyme on *-tu*) § 72, ll. 7–10 (rhyme on *-ra*), almost entire § 80 (rhyme on *-hu*); § 89, ll. 5–9 (rhyme on *-wwa*).

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ESTELLE SOHIER, *Le roi des rois et la photographie. Politique de l'image et pouvoir royal en Éthiopie sous le règne de Ménélik II*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2012. 378 pp. Price: € 35.00. ISBN: 978-2-85944-717-5.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, photos taken in Africa by Europeans did not only reflect their colonial desires or only their wish to promote a European look at peoples which they considered as inferiors. Photos were also used by some African rulers as instruments to promote their own power and legitimacy. After the introduction of photography at the Ethiopian courts during the 1880s, Ethiopian rulers quickly understood the political functions of photos and the advantages of using them. At first, these documents permitted them to promote their power throughout the country and to counter political claims of local lords. For example, a photo of the king, staged in majesty with all political and ideological signs and symbols was a powerful mean, easily printed, to convince the population that the royal power is not vacant and kept by powerful and legitimate people, particularly when the king was sick or even dead. But these images allowed them also to promote their country outside Ethiopia, particularly in Europe. By permitting Europeans to take photos of Ethiopian leaders and by allowing them to publish these images in European newspapers, the Ethiopian royal power could promote and insure its independence.

Divided in nine chapters (gathered in four parts), the book of Dr. Estelle Sohier (University of Geneva) perfectly highlights these two aspects of the use of photos by the Ethiopian rulers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her study focuses on the political use of images by the aristocracy of Šäwa. The historical period studied here is not only Mənilək II's reign time as king of kings (1889–1913), contrary to what the title suggests. The author studied a longer period, from Yoḥannəs IV's reign (1872–89) to the coronation of Ḥaylä Šəllase I (1930). In fact, this choice is particularly wise

because the establishment of a propaganda including photos really started with Mənilək's claims over Ethiopian throne while he was king of Šäwa (1866–89). Such policy was improved during his reign as king of kings but it continued after his death (in 1913). The aristocracy of Šäwa used photos and images as instruments to legitimate the position of Zäwditu as queen of queens and of *ras* Täfäri Mäkännən as regent. The author collected an impressive amount of documents and information from European and Ethiopian collections of photos. Nevertheless, the study does not deal only with photos but with different types of images like paintings, seals, coins, stamps and post-cards. This is particularly interesting and it really improved our understanding about the phenomenon. The use of photos cannot be understood actually without notions concerning the preparation and the use of images in Ethiopian political context and the author did not miss the chance to explain it clearly.

In two particularly well done chapters (chapters 1 and 2), the author explains how the Ethiopian aristocracy adopted photography and its codes, and how photos showing Ethiopian rulers from these times reflected “staging” elaborated by Ethiopians themselves. This part is followed by three chapters, maybe less remarkable but still interesting, which confirm the opinion of Donald Crummey concerning the neo-Solomonic ideology but in the iconographic world. Indeed, chapters 3, 4 and 5 show us that at Mənilək's court a new iconographic apparatus was developed, which included old historical and mythological themes. In presenting references to king Salomon or to the mythic foundation of Ethiopian dynasty, and in introducing symbols like the lion of Juda, different types of images (paintings, seals and photos) produced by the royal court aimed at promoting and insuring Mənilək's power over Ethiopia. In chapters 6 and 7 the author explains how photos and other types of images commissioned by Ethiopian rulers participated in the foreign policy which aimed at guaranteeing the independence of the country from colonial power. Obviously, these chapters represent the best part of the book. Ethiopian rulers understood the crucial political role of photos published by newspapers in European countries. And finally, they used photos commissioned by them to promote their country in Europe. Thanks to this policy, the Ethiopian state could be perceived step by step by the European public as a real political entity, as a state with all characteristics familiar to European eyes. In fact, as the author says, if European government could easily convince European people of the need to submit “barbarian peoples”, described definitively as strangers to “civilization”, it is more difficult to convince them of the need to submit a country which they saw as familiar. The book ends with two chapters (chapters 8 and 9) which highlight the political use of images during the period after the death of Mənilək and during the reign of queen Zäwditu. The aim of the iconographic policy of aristocracy of Šäwa was at that time to

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convince Ethiopian population that royal power was still strong and still in the hands of legitimate rulers. Even if the Sāwa rulers had deposed *ləḡ* Iyasu, the heir to Mənilək, in 1916, they continued to promote Mənilək's memory all over the country. Through the production of images, they definitively confiscated Mənilək's heritage and presented Zāwditu and Tāfāri Māk<sup>w</sup>ännən as the real heirs of this heritage.

So Estelle Sohier's book contributes actively to our understanding of the political role of iconographic production in contemporary Ethiopia. The author rigorously studied a large amount of sources and her book highlights an important phenomenon. Besides, the presence of a good glossary of Ethiopian terms, illustrations throughout the text with details on their provenance, and an index make this book particularly pleasant to read. Some minor points for correction and addition may be pointed out but the main lack of this study is that the author does not propose any comparison with other extra-European countries. For example, it should have been interesting to compare the Ethiopian situation with Merina kingdom's one. And is it possible to present the Mahdist state in Sudan as the exact opposite situation of Ethiopia in the eyes of Europeans? But this lack of comparison does not depreciate the high scientific value of the book.

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HANNA RUBINKOWSKA, *Ethiopia on the Verge of Modernity: the Transfer of Power during Zewditu's Reign 1916–1930*, Warsaw: Agade, 2010. xiv + 287 pp. Price: ca. PLN 28.00. ISBN: 978–83–871–1152–6.

The reigns of *ləḡ* Iyasu and Zāwditu, sandwiched between those of Mənilək II and Ḥaylā Šəllase I and separated by the 1916 *coup d'état*, remain an awkward and interstitial period in modern Ethiopian history, of which a definitive account has yet to be given. Not only are historians drawn to the preceding and succeeding reigns, each of which can be fitted into a narrative of a kind that is hard to devise for the interregnum, but the understanding of the whole period is affected by an ahistorical awareness of what came after it. This book represents a heroic but sadly only partially successful attempt to remedy the deficiency.

Part of the problem rests with the sources. Rubinkowska has an admirable grasp of the available published Amharic language sources, including notably the works of Gäbrä Šəllase, Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl, Märsə'e Ḥazän Wäldä Qirqos, Täklä-Šadəq Māk<sup>w</sup>əriya, Yared Gäbrä Mika'el, and indeed Tāfāri Mak<sup>w</sup>ännən (as he then was) himself, and has trawled through the archives of the British Foreign Office, though other external diplomatic records