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Review

HANNA RUBINKOWSKA, *Ethiopia on the Verge of Modernity: the Transfer of
Power during Zewditu's Reign 1916–1930*

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Reviews

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 Tāfəri Māk^wännən 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 Ḥaylä 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^wəriya, Yared Gäbrä Mika'el, and indeed Tāfəri Mak^wännən (as he then was) himself, and has trawled through the archives of the British Foreign Office, though other external diplomatic records

appear to have been neglected. However, the British appear to have had only a very limited insight into the internal workings of the Ethiopian government, and their vision was badly hampered by a pre-occupation with their own extensive imperial interests in the region, while the Ethiopian sources were all published long after the period to which they relate, and are tainted by the determined efforts of Ḥaylā Šəllase to disparage Iyasu and at least to downplay the reign of Zäwditu as no more than a prologue to his own glorious accession. They are also almost exclusively Šəwan. The records of the French and the Italians, each with their different though doubtless equally prejudiced attitudes to the country, might well yield additional insights, but any definitive account will be possible only if original and contemporary Ethiopian material were miraculously to emerge.

After a methodological chapter, and a historical survey of the role of women in Ethiopian politics, Rubinkowska takes us through the story of the 1916 *coup d'état*, Zäwditu's birth, upbringing and early life, and an account of her reign divided between the three periods 1916–19, 1920–26, and 1927–30. The significance of 1926 is that it marks the death of *fitawrari* Habtä Giyorgis Dinagde, Mənilək's faithful Oromo retainer and army commander who, with Zäwditu and Täfäri, was the third member of the triumvirate who effectively governed Ethiopia for the decade after 1916. Much of the story of the regime lies in the relationships between these three individuals, and Rubinkowska plausibly argues that these were far more complex than the crude division between 'traditionalists' (i.e. Zäwditu and Habtä Giyorgis) and 'modernisers' (i.e. Täfäri) that has resulted from Täfäri's own efforts to secure his place in history. Notably, all three shared interests in preserving the status of Ethiopia against external encroachment, and likewise in protecting a Šəwan-dominated power structure against other regions of the country, and notably the northern nobility. Though Zäwditu's forced estrangement from her own husband, *ras* Gugsä Wäle, provides a dramatic illustration of her subordination to the essentially Šəwan power structure that brought her to the throne, Rubinkowska shows that she had a critical influence over key decisions, such as her veto over arrangements for foreign mining concessions in Ethiopia that Täfäri had sought to negotiate. After Habtä Giyorgis' death, however, her opportunities for leverage were sharply reduced, and in the last four years of her reign she became little more than a hidden presence in her own palace, as effective power passed to Täfäri.

Despite valiant efforts, Rubinkowska is able to provide little insight into the personality of Zäwditu herself, masked as this was behind an ignorance of European languages, and a seclusion that recalled the medieval Ethiopian monarchy. There is no doubting the strength of her religious convictions, which also helped to enhance the roles of *əččäge* Wäldä Giyorgis and *abunä*

Reviews

Matewos, but there is no sign of the character and intelligence that for example marked Menilek's widow *atege* Ṭaytu Bəṭul, and she comes across as dim and dull. Had she been more assertive, or indeed more intelligent, she would undoubtedly have made a much greater impact on the historical record, and we would consequently understand more about her than is actually the case.

The principal weakness of the book, however, is that it is written so much from within the frame of reference defined by its sources, that of the imperial administration in Addis Abāba, that it does little to extend our understanding of the Ethiopia of that time, and the dynamics of relations within the country – such as the shift in economic power from north to south, or the political implications of the vast late-19th century expansion of the national territory – or between Ethiopia and the colonial territories that then surrounded it. Though there are brief sketches of some of the principal political actors of the time (identifying *ras* Ḥaylu Ṭäklä Haymanot, mistakenly, as ‘a representative of the Tigrayan aristocracy’, p. 169), these are not integrated into any broader analysis of the significance of Zāwditu's reign, or even of the ‘verge of modernity’ that figures in the title. Nor is there any sense of how the reign related to the greatest cataclysm of modern Ethiopian history, the Italian invasion and conquest that took place only a few years after it ended. These issues will have to await a study that moves beyond the documentary sources uncovered by this book, and asks more searching questions than it attempts.

Inevitably, in a work originally written for a Polish Ph.D., there are numerous cases of awkward phraseology and translation, and the text would have benefitted from thorough editing by a native English-speaker. One particularly irksome feature is the constant use of the term ‘landlords’, as in ‘the role of the Shewan landlords’ as subtitle to the chapter on the 1916 *coup d'état*, presumably meaning *māk^wannənt*, when ‘aristocracy’ or ‘nobility’ would have been more appropriate. Overall, *Ethiopia on the Verge of Modernity* provides valuable material on this intriguing period in modern Ethiopian history, but still leaves many questions to be answered.

Christopher Clapham, Cambridge University

UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR – SILVANA PALMA – ALESSANDRO TRIULZI – ALESSANDRO VOLTERRA (a c.), *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici: Attraversamenti di memorie, identità e confini nel Corno d’Africa* = Studi Storici Carocci, Roma: Carocci, 2011. 406 pp. Price: € 37.00. ISBN: 978–88–430–5922–5.

The long, complicated Italian title of this book can be translated into English as: *Colony and Postcolony as Diasporic Spaces: Crossings of Memories, Identi-*