



Aethiopia 16 (2013)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

CHRISTOPHE VAN DER BEKEN, *Unity in Diversity – Federalism as a
Mechanism to accommodate Ethnic Diversity: The Case of Ethiopia*

Aethiopia 16 (2013), 301–302

ISSN: 2194–4024

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

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CHRISTOPHE VAN DER BEKEN, *Unity in Diversity – Federalism as a Mechanism to accommodate Ethnic Diversity: The Case of Ethiopia* = Law and Politics in Africa 10, Münster – Berlin – Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2012. 368 pp. Price: € 39.90. ISBN 978–3–643–90172–9.

Federalism in Ethiopia (mostly coined ethnic – or ethno-linguistic federalism) has provoked considerable study during the last 18 years. These studies added insights from various disciplines, such as political science, anthropology, law, and economics to the general field of Ethiopian Studies. Since Ethiopia has adopted this form of government in 1995 (*de jure*) individual presentations as well as panels are being organized on international *Ethiopianist* meetings, or dissertations, articles, numerous national and international conferences, and whole institutions (e.g. Institute for Federal Studies) all attest for the huge interest and demand in the subject.

This high interest is explained, partly, by the fact that federalism in Ethiopia has tremendously affected large parts of social and political life. No other multi-lingual state has elevated *ethnicity* a guiding principle of daily life. Federalism has probably also changed the face of Ethiopian Studies (especially in the area of cultural studies), which today can hardly avoid *ethnicity* as a topic.

Conventionally federalism is mostly analyzed in the light of power-sharing arrangements/conflict prevention, in its potential for minority empowerment and the “accommodation of diversity”, fiscal decentralization and in its functionality of political/territorial control.

Christophe Van der Beken has recently published an extended version of his Ph.D. (Ghent University), with focus on the aspect of minority empowerment and federalism as a tool to accommodate ethnic diversity. His main point of departure is – much in line with the reading of the current regime – that “the protection of ethnic rights is not only an objective, but also an instrument in the national and state building strategy. In other words: the constitution aims to guarantee the stability of the Ethiopian state through protecting and implementing the right to self-determination” (p. 3). Focusing on the political management, the book sets out, in the words of the author, to “evaluate the capacity of the Ethiopian constitutional concepts and structures to achieve the constitutional objective of unity in diversity” (p. 4).

This evaluation is carried out in eight chapters, all of which not only consider the *intrinsic* features of Ethiopian federalism, but also the historical foundation of the political quest to solve the national question in Ethiopia.

Chapter 1 (pp. 9–16) outlines the concept of ethnicity in a general theoretical perspective while in chapter 2 (pp. 25–52) the author theorizes on constitutional mechanisms for the accommodation of diversity in general. The chap-

ters 3–5 (“The Rise and Fall of the Ethiopian Empire”; “The Military Regime”; “Political and Constitutional Development in Post-Revolutionary Ethiopia”) give a general introduction into the political history and the Ethiopian context.

These first chapters do not contain new insights. Despite this, they are well annotated and presented. The book proceeds to give a remarkably detailed analysis of the federal constitution (Chapter 6: “The Ethnic Foundation of the Ethiopian State: An Analysis of the Federal Constitution”). This is followed by the main pillar of the study, an analysis of the regional constitutions (“Constitutional Accommodation of Diversity on the Regional Level”, chapter 7). Chapter 8 offers an “Assessment of the constitutional mechanisms” and closes with a general summary of the research findings.

While field-cases about regional experiences with federalism do exist, the regional comparative approach is less explored in comparison to those aiming at the federal constitution (s. also p. 225). This gap is filled in this study, which offers a comprehensive overview of the regional constitutions, showing that the accommodation of diversity is not only a federal project but every regional constitution has to be questioned for its mechanisms and applicability. In chapter 7 of the study these findings are being presented. The chapter sets out to analyze in a largely comparative perspective the constitutions of Amhara, Oromiyya (chapter 7.1), Təgray, ʿAfar and Somali (chapter 7.2), Harär (chapter 7.3), Beni Shangul-Gumuz and Gambella (chapter 7.4), the Southern Region (chapter 7.5). All sub-chapters are presented roughly along the following lines: General Introduction to the region and their ethnic composition; the territorial organization; the regional institutional structure (regional parliament, regional government, regional judicial structure); the institutional structure and all parts sum up their findings with an assessment of the institutional capacity to accommodate diversity on the regional level.

Van der Beken’s book offers an extremely detailed assessment of the constitutional mechanisms of Ethiopia from federal to regional level. In this sense it is well placed in the general context of Heinrich Scholler’s “Law and Politics in Africa”. The detailedness, though, presented in a very tiny fond, unfortunately sometimes makes the book hard to handle. Despite this, if endured a detailed companion to constitutional law in Ethiopia as of today will be found.

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