



Aethiopia 19 (2016)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

CHIKAGE OBA-SMIDT, *The Oral Chronicle of the Boorana in Southern Ethiopia: Modes of Construction and Preservation of History among People without Writing*

Aethiopia 19 (2016), 300–303

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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Editorial

The present issue of AETHIOPICA, like the preceding one, is partly monographic, with a section containing the proceedings of the Panel on Islamic Literature in Ethiopia: New Perspectives of Research, from the '19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies', held in Warsaw, Poland, on 24–28 August 2015.

Starting from this issue, the annual bibliography on Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics held from its inception in 1998 for eighteen years by Rainer Voigt is handed over, on Voigt's own will, to a pool of younger scholars, with the substantial support of the AETHIOPICA editorial team. I would like on this occasion to express the deep gratitude of the editorial board of AETHIOPICA and of all scholars in Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics to Rainer Voigt for his fundamental and valuable contribution.

Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
ÄthFor Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
AethFor Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
AION *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
EAE S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
EI² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I–XII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2005).
EMML Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
JES *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
NEASt *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.
OrChr *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
PICES 9 A.A. GROMYKO, ed., 1988, *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow, 26–29 August 1986*, I–VI (Moscow: Nauka Publishers, Central Department of Oriental Literature, 1988).
RSE *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli 1983ff.
ZDMG *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Leipzig–Wiesbaden–Stuttgart 1847ff.

Reviews

might have been dangerous for the narrator. And in fact the text published now only covers the early period of Baldambe's narrative, describing the political and diplomatic activities of his father Berimba.

The book is a continuation of the series *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia* by Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker, of which the first three volumes *Work Journal*, *Baldambe Explains* and *Conversations in Dambaiti* were all published in 1979.¹ *Berimba's Resistance* is an important part of the oral tradition and history of the Hamar.

gulphano yessa ko kaié, nagaia ko dé, yir sia d'á! (*May all sickness leave you, let all be well, let all badness disappear!*) (p. xi)

Alke Dohrmann, Hamburg

CHIKAGE OBA-SMIDT, *The Oral Chronicle of the Boorana in Southern Ethiopia: Modes of Construction and Preservation of History among People without Writing*, translated by Roger Prior and James Watt, *Northeast African History, Orality and Heritage*, 4 (Zürich: LIT-Verlag, 2016). 775 pp. Price: € 79.90. ISBN: 978-3-643-90521-5.

At first glance the use of the term 'chronicle' to describe the oral traditions of the Boorana section of the Oromo people seems to be a daring choice. We are in fact speaking about narratives that were orally transmitted in the context of a society having neither dynasties nor a bureaucracy. Yet, the text that Oba-Smidt collected from 11 local experts in *argaa-dhagettii*—'things that were seen' – 'things that were heard' (p. 624)—provides a systematic, organized and structured account of events in chronological sequence starting from the fifteenth century, and providing insights on earlier periods (pp. 13–14, 635–638). Comparison of the versions provided by the different experts reveals the consistency of the narrative (pp. 14, 738) in a fashion that Oba-Smidt describes in terms of 'coherence with a degree of incoherence' (p. 744). The book is constructed with the purpose of explaining how this achievement was possible in the non-literate society of the Boorana, and of describing the mechanisms underlying the production, memorization and transmission of this historical narrative.

¹ I. Strecker and J. Lydall, *Work Journal*, *Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität zu Göttingen*, 12; *Baldambe Explains*, *Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität zu Göttingen*, 13; *Conversations in Dambaiti*, *Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Völkerkunde der Universität zu Göttingen*, 14 (Hohenschäftlarn: Klaus Renner Verlag, 1979).

The author has chosen to give prominence to ethnography. Accordingly, Part I consists of the transcription of the oral traditions of the Boorana in the form they were collected. They are classified into three genres, each reported in a different chapter or paragraph: the chronicles in a strict sense (Chapter 2 of Part I), oral traditions focused on prophets (paragraph 3.1 of Part I), and traditions involving heroes (paragraph 3.2 of Part I). The text is organized by the informant and provided both in Oromo and English. Since the English version is a translation from the Japanese translation (from Oromo) prepared for an earlier edition (pp. 9–10), the availability of the Oromo original transcription is particularly valuable, considering that part of the text is highly stylized and symbolic. The traditions on prophets and heroes are provided with the purpose of highlighting reciprocal feeding across historical genres and the modalities of construction of the chronicles. This becomes clear in the chapters of Part II dedicated to the analysis of the collected texts. Chapter 2 of Part II provides an overview of the overall structure of the chronicle, and the detailed quantitative analysis of recurrent patterns. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the analysis of texts concerning prophets and heroes respectively. Chapter 6 discloses the cognitive structure used to construct and memorize the chronicle. The theoretical approaches in oral history and relevant literature on the Oromo are presented in the Introduction to Part II, with Chapter 7 providing concluding remarks on the overall correlation of the three main historical genres; in addition some very interesting insights on oral history in the kingless social environment of the Boorana are offered.

Part II contains components that one would expect in the introduction of the book. Readers who are not well acquainted with Oromo culture may find it useful to read Chapter 1 ('Basic Information for Decoding the Oral Chronicle') and Chapter 2 ('Background to the Oral Chronicle') in this section before reading the ethnographic text. Chapter 1 describes the environment and livelihoods of the Boorana, their social organization based on the descent system, social rules addressed in the historical traditions, their religion, and, especially, the *gadaa* generation class system which provides the conceptual structure of the chronicle. Time is marked by periods of 8 years, called *gaada*, during which one generational class (*luba*) is responsible for implementing key rituals and organizing major political events. The leader of the class—known as *abbaa gadaa*, 'father' of the *gaada*—becomes associated with the events of the period: historical time is recalled using the name of the *abbaa gadaa*. At the end of the 8 years, the next generational class becomes the *gaada* with overall responsibility. The generational rule requires that children are enrolled 5 generational classes after that of their fathers. Thus five generational lines—*gogeessa*—take shape, each formed by the class of the fathers, the class of their children, the class of their grandchildren and so on. Each

gogeessa assumes overall responsibility in the *gaada* grade after the other 4 lines have completed their terms, thus forming historical cycles of 40 years. Chapter 2 provides the emic classification of the different types of oral traditions based on content and style. This is followed by a discussion of the social and political contexts in which the historical traditions are recalled. The essential technical terminology for reading the historical text is provided in useful tables at the beginning of Part I.

The chronicle is strongly influenced by the cyclical conception of time of the Oromo and by the idea of recurrent destiny expressed by the emic notions of *dhaccii* and *maq-baasa*, ethnographic issues that were addressed in some detail by Asmarom Legesse in the 1970s, and more recently by Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam. *Dhaccii* refers to individual fate transmitted through patrilineal descent. However, since the title *abbaa gadaa* and other *gadaa*-related offices tend to be passed from father to son, the term *dhaccii* also relates to the 40 years *gogeessa* cycle. *Maq-baasa* is more structural in nature. It consists of a sequence of 7 names given to each subsequent generational class. Each *maq-baasa* name is associated with a typology of historical events—such as internal or external conflict, drought ...—that are deemed to recur after a cycle of 7 *gadaa* periods. The combination of the *gogeessa* and *maq-baasa* cycles produces a longer historical cycle of 280 years (pp. 729–735). The cyclical notion of time and the emic concepts of destiny provide the ‘structural mnemonics’ (p. 738) for correlating events into meaningful sequences. Oba-Smidt suggests that in the past the Boorana experts in *argaa-dhagettii* did not recall events in the chronological order of each subsequent *abbaa gadaa*, but rather by correlating them within each *gogeessa* or *maq-baasa* line. Only during the second half of the twentieth century did anthropological enquiry, technical devices and Western education change the narrative pattern to the linear, *gaada*-based temporal sequence that we can now call ‘chronicle’ (pp. 631–634).

The predictability of a cyclical notion of time is complemented by mechanisms for accommodating unique or exceptional events. Narratives concerning prophets are characterized by the presence of rhymes and riddles with obscure or multiple meanings. References to prophets in the chronicle announce exceptional natural and social events, catastrophe, and radical change. The prophets’ words and their suggested rites work as a narrative device for building a causal explanation—rooted in the supernatural realm—for such occurrences (p. 690). History is also changed by the acts of heroes and innovators. This is a diffused epic knowledge, being stylized in rhyme, poetry and song recalled on ordinary ritual occasions. Oba-Smidt suggests that poetry and stylized text are easy to remember and difficult to modify. As such they are powerful mnemonic devices that allow a certain persistence of the

memory of a specific event through time (pp. 658, 711). Elements from these different genres are thus quoted and used by the experts in *argaa-dhagettii* to build their version of the chronicle. They fit events into the structured sequence of time and complement the quoted verses, riddles and rhythmic rhymes with their own annotations and interpretations. This is a specialist knowledge, in the sense that such experts tend to belong to lineages engaged in political competition for *gaada*-related offices. As mentioned, such positions tend to be hereditary within the generational line (*gogeessa*), but different clans, lineages and individuals do enter into competition and are selected during public debates: history is used as a powerful means of legitimizing or delegitimizing claims. Historical knowledge is thus instrumentally used as in societies with kings, and perhaps constructed accordingly. Oba-Smidt's ethnography reveals the absence of monopolistic knowledge, with different experts from various clans building and transmitting their own narrative in an environment of reciprocal checks, by using the same conceptual structure and reference to broadly shared historical traditions (pp. 743–745).

The author claims that she is not interested in the actual historical content of the gathered traditions. Yet, the chronology of events summarized in Chart 7 indicates that the oral chronicle of the Boorana is not only an outstanding piece of ethno-history from the perspective of this southern section of the Oromo, but also a key reference for the history (and environmental history) of the region, adding to other important recent contributions, including those by Mohammed Hassen, Mekuria Bulcha, and Gufu Oba. As recalled by Ezekiel Gebissa in his Foreword to the book, Gəʼəz script is losing its traditional centrality in Ethiopian historiography. It is perhaps also in this sense that we should read the choice of the title of this book, evoking the famous 'royal chronicles' of Abyssinia.

Oba-Smidt is presenting one of the most refined analyses of how oral history is produced. The relevance of her work extends far beyond the specific case of the Oromo and the sub-field of oral history. Her descriptions of cyclical time, the identified mnemonic devices and the ways they are combined in forming coherent narratives may well offer general insights into classic texts based on transcription of oral traditions, either in the form of chronicles or other genres, including sacred texts. The accuracy of the ethnographic enquiry and the methodological transparency of the narratives will enable other scholars to develop their own considerations. We congratulate the publisher and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science—funders of the project—for having decided to include the ethnography as an integral part of the book. The complexity of the book justifies the presence of some misprints.

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