

## Book Reviews

### *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*

Richard Pankhurst.

Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 489; illustrations, tables, bibliography, index. Paper, \$24.95.

This volume of history on the Ethiopian "borderlands" is a study covering the areas outside the historical core of the Christian highland state. It is based on a large array of historical texts of Ethiopia, like reports of antique inscriptions, royal and eye-witness-chronicles and the rich travel literature on Ethiopia and the Horn. The narrative is derived from the author's unsurpassed knowledge of this corpus, especially of the travelers' literature. Due to this emphasis, it is also a study of premodern perceptions and interpretations of Ethiopia and its surrounding regions by these (mainly European) visitors and observers, although it is not always clear what exactly is the opinion or interpretation of the author and that of the sources used.

This book may serve as an essential introduction for the general reader, for historians and other scholars interested in Ethiopian society and history. The chronicles and literature of travelers on which it is largely based are still fascinating and in many respects historically valuable. They have had a considerable influence in shaping the themes and interests of Ethiopian historiography, and remains an inevitable source to consult or check in any historical study. Professor Pankhurst has provided yet another contribution to the opening up and putting to good use of this vast body of early testimonies.

As the author states in the Introduction, the coverage of the borderlands is unbalanced due to the "unequal availability" of sources, and the text thus "... reflects the historical records at our disposal," not the "... actual importance"

of the various places (ix). Considering the size of this book and the nature of the information presented, the borderlands are, however, not an uncharted or unknown area. The author has used several classic texts, like the chronicles of the great emperors, the chronicle of Chihab ed-Din on the Grañ period and the text of Bahrey on the Oromo (both 16th century). It certainly cannot be said that the subject of the "borderlands" has hitherto been neglected in Ethiopian historiography. In the work of many Ethiopian historians (both in M.A. theses and in several Ph.D. theses and books), the borderlands and their relation to the state-forming political "core" have been addressed in rich detail.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in modern social anthropological studies, of course, these areas and their cultures have also been analyzed in depth, partly on the basis of previously unrecorded oral traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The material surveyed is arranged in six parts, on ancient times, on the early medieval period, on the era of emperors Zar'a Ya'eqob and Libne Dingil, then one long part on the era of Ahmed Grañ and on the time of emperor Galawdewos and Sers'e Dingil, to end with a part on the Oromo migrations and the Gondarine monarchy, taking the story up to ca. 1800. These periods are surveyed in (often too much) detail, largely by region and hence with partly overlapping chronological sequence, and closely following the sources. Each part is concluded with a summarizing chapter called "The borderlands and the interior." Throughout the text, interesting illustrations are provided, from old maps to portraits and landscapes.

The account has an emphasis on matters of war, as the author underlines (ix), but also on economic relations. Economic factors were of course closely intertwined with the perennial fight for power and dominance pursued by all parties in the Horn, from the Christian state to the Afar and Somali sultanates and other state-forming peoples (Oromo, Kafa, Hinnario, etc.) in the east and south.

One of the conclusions of the author is that the borderlands "... were far from isolated from the central Ethiopian core" (443). We might indeed say that in many respects they were one of its essential preconditions. Already early in recorded history, the peoples and policies on the Ethiopian highland massif were partly economically dependent on products and trade routes and ports of the surrounding lowlands, which therefore have interacted with it—often in a

predatory economy—for ages, even if local cultural and religious identities remained distinct. It is now a matter of common knowledge that the trade routes, markets, social relations, religious campaigns and contacts—not only on the level of "official" Christianity and Islam but also on that of "folk religion"—were much more widespread than formerly thought (xi). The sources used in this book also make it clear once again that ethno-cultural labels were fluent and difficult to delineate, as they mention many ethnic or regional groups which can no longer be identified (the Tsarane, "Bareya," Maya, Dobe'a, Gambo, Balaya, Danges, etc.). In a situation where the "tributary state" was the political model (cf. 433), the issue of "boundaries" was indeed secondary, and ethno-regional and ethno-religious identifications were always shifting (see, e.g., the 14th century raids and fights between the Islamic principalities of Adal, Ifat and Bali (which was then partly Christian and partly Muslim as it had a Muslim governor, 71).

Apart from these general points on interaction and exchange, few generalizations are made about socioeconomic and political processes. Many interesting and often surprising details are presented (especially for those who have not consulted all the original sources) but neither new explanatory hypotheses on historical developments are really offered, nor topics for new research are clearly identified. Thus the book reflects the state of our current knowledge on the subject of the peripheral areas of the highland state. What is remarkable in this state of knowledge is, among others, the gap on the time between ca. 700 and 1100. Also in this book there is virtually no information on this period, during which Islam made great strides in the eastern parts of the Horn up to the Ethiopian highland plateau. We still do not know much more about this period other than what, e.g., Sergew Hable Selassie wrote in his classic *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History up to 1270* (1972).

While this book is thus a valuable introductory survey of the history of "borderland" Ethiopia and may contribute to the debate about the country's historical identity and frontiers, it has, unfortunately, not set itself the aim of engaging in discussion with other scholarly works and theoretical interpretations on Ethiopian history. Indeed, while the bibliography of this book is extensive and the narrative itself has references almost exclusively to the travel and other older source literature mentioned above. For instance, in the long chapters on the

Oromo advance, no reference is made to the findings in Mohammed Hassen's book (1990).

In addition, more than the title of the book would suggest, the relationship of the developments in the borderlands with those of the highland Christian state is still at the center of the account—it is difficult to escape this.

It might also have been interesting to address the problem of reliability of the authors of the various historical sources; is it necessary and possible to more critically evaluate these accounts, apart from the obvious biases as evident, e.g., in the Christian royal chronicles, the Portuguese accounts and the chronicle *Futuh al-Habasha* on Ahmed Grañ's  *jihad*? This goes especially for the works of the travel literature of the last 400 years (i.e., including the period not covered by the book under review). How are they related to the *genre* characteristics of travel-writing over the ages? There are differences in the organization, style and narrative conventions of, e.g., 16th-century accounts (by Alvares, Bermudes, etc.) and those of later date (like Almeida, Bruce, etc.). One can read them and find many things empirically credible and thus of value, but other details will remain very ambiguous if they are not weighed against the genre conventions underlying the accounts. If Alvarez is said to be (108) “. . . not prone to exaggeration,” does it hold for all of his observations? The problems with Bruce's account are also well-known.

Nevertheless, sorting this out such matters may be work for the future, and does not detract from the general point Professor Pankhurst has made that one should always return to the old historical and travel literature to get an idea of how things were or might have been (and seen) in the past. There is simply a lot of factual information to be found about actual events—and their interpretations from various sides—which makes them a source. By emphasizing this, therefore, Professor Pankhurst's work of reference is of great value and abiding interest.

A final peculiarity is the bibliography, where the order of the cited works of one author is very confusing because of the apparent listing of the titles on some kind of alphabetical ordering, and not, as would be standard anywhere, on the year of publication.

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## Notes

1. For example, already in Bahru Zewde's Ph.D. thesis of 1976, *Relations between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier, 1898-1935* (London: SOAS); see also A. Naty, *The Culture of Powerlessness and the Spirit of Rebellion among the Aari People of Southwest Ethiopia* (Stanford 1992); more recently in the M.A. theses of students of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology of AAU. Of these, the following (on the Southwest) were up to now published: Ayalew Gebre, *The Arbore of Southern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1995); Gebre Yntiso, *An Exploratory Study of Production Practices among the Ari, Southwest Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1993); and Melese Getu, *Tsamako Women's Roles and Statuses in Agro-pastoral Production* (Addis Ababa 1995).
2. It is not feasible to mention such works here, but the names of Tornay, Bureau, Turton, Strecker, Lydall, Triulzi, Almagor, Donham, Braukämper, Schlee, Hamer, Baxter, Hultin, Haberland, Kurimoto, Fukui, Matsuda, Miyawaki, Shigeta, etc. spring to mind. See also M. L. Bender (ed.), *Peoples and Cultures of the Ethio-Sudan Borderlands* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, African Studies Center, 1981); and D. L. Donham and W. James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia, Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

## *Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Federal Experience.*

Tekeste Negash

Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997. Pp. 234; illustrations.

Few histories have been as contentious as that of Eritrea's association with Ethiopia. Historians of Ethiopia have rarely found the need to look at Eritrean history detached from that of Ethiopia, except for the sixty years or so it had come first under Italian colonial rule and then British administration. On the other hand, the Eritrean liberation fronts and their sympathizers have been at pains to forge a separate history for Eritrea. Now that the Eritrean struggle for independence has been crowned with success, it is conceivable that the historiographical battle would also give way to a more sober reconstruction of the Eritrean past.

Tekeste Negash's recent book is an important step in that direction. Appropriately enough, the book focuses on the decade-long federation of the two entities—a period that crystallizes their troubled relations, a period of some hope and yet ultimate frustration. He prefaces this with a synopsis of the