



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Negash,G. : A history of Tigrinya literature in Eritrea: The oral and the written 1890-1991

Gewald, J.B.

Citation

Gewald, J. B. (2000). Review of Negash,G. : A history of Tigrinya literature in Eritrea: The oral and the written 1890-1991. *African Affairs : The Journal Of The Royal African Society*, 99(397), 670-671. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4831>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4831>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

had little opportunity to spend longer periods in Africa, and much of the international literature was not available. Marxism-Leninism was the ideological order of the day, which manifested itself especially in the numerous publications on national liberation movements. In this context, for instance, the 'historical mission' of the working class or the role of the October Revolution for the emerging African independent states was, to say the least, highly overrated.

It would certainly be misleading to see East German African studies as a monolithic bloc. As an outsider, it is difficult to judge to what extent Africanists have made themselves henchmen of the system. Obviously, the majority abstained in advance from themes and questions which could lead to results contradicting the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, later censorship was often not necessary. As a result, African studies were characterized by a lack of scientific curiosity and the abandonment of theoretical competition and discourse. Political consultancy was seen as lasting achievement; publications, on the other hand, were by no means a must for an academic career.

Humboldt University, Berlin

ANDREAS ECKERT

A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The oral and the written 1890–1991, by Ghirmai Negash. University of Leiden, The Netherlands: CNWS, 1999. 236 pp. US\$23.00 paperback. ISBN 90-5789-022-4.

The book under review is Ghirmai Negash's published doctoral thesis, which was defended at Leiden University in 1999. After two introductory chapters dealing with aspects of literary theory, methodology and justifications as to why one should choose to research the history of Tigrinya literature, the text becomes truly interesting. In a series of chronologically arranged chapters the author details the development of Tigrinya as a language of literature.

Negash aimed to investigate Tigrinya oral and written literature, but by force of circumstances was obliged to concentrate primarily on written texts. As such, his work begins with the first texts written and published in Tigrinya in the nineteenth century. Significantly these first texts are, as in so many parts of Africa, translated Bible texts. The author unfortunately fails to draw out the significance of the standardization of Tigrinya vernacular, orthography and grammar with the increased European missionary presence in the area. The first Tigrinya printing presses and publications were those of the Catholic and Protestant missions. Prior to this, religious texts were written in the liturgical language of Giiz, which, for the common man, was accessible only through the intercession of the clergy. With the publication of the New Testament in the vernacular, scripture became directly accessible to the layman and undermined the authority of the clergy and the *status quo* as a whole.

Similarly, when dealing specifically with Tigrinya literature, Negash fails to make the connection and discuss this in the light of socio-political developments at the time, specifically colonization. The first written work of literature in Tigrinya dealt with the journey from Ethiopia to Italy in 1890 of an emissary of Emperor Menelik, Fesseha Giyorgis (pp. 77–87). Significantly Giyorgis, after he lamented the abject poverty and starvation of his homeland, praised Italy, the colonizer of Eritrea, as a 'land of peace and paradise' (p. 85). Between 1890 and 1917, as Italy strengthened its hold on Eritrea, there was a flourishing of published materials in Tigrinya. Thereafter, particularly with the rise of fascism in Italy, there appears to be a dearth of material. Tigrinya literature truly came to life with the ending of

Italian colonization in 1941 and the establishment of a British administration in Eritrea. The British-sponsored Tigrinya newspaper, *The Eritrean Weekly News*, has been described as 'by far the most weighty body of written Tigrinya' which was 'instrumental in evolving a style of writing contemporary Tigrinya' (E. Ullendorf, *A Tigrinya Chrestomathy*, Stuttgart, 1985, pp. 19–20, cited pp. 115–16. It was from within this newspaper that the Tigrinya Language Council, committed to the development of Tigrinya as a modern written language, emerged. It was also in this period that the first Tigrinya novel, *A Story of a Conscript* by G. Hailu, came to be published.

Interestingly Negash does not see a break in literary tradition between 1955 and 1974. Between 1952 and 1962 Eritrea formed part of a federation with Ethiopia, following which it was annexed by Ethiopia. The demise of Emperor Haile Selassie and the rise to power of Mengistu Haile Mariam had an impact on Tigrinya literature, as they did on all other aspects of Eritrean society. Referring to literary production in the Dergue-controlled areas of Eritrea, Negash notes, 'Except for some small "love and family" stories . . . no literary texts worth mentioning were produced' (p. 178). Instead, 'significant' literature was produced by writers during the Eritrean war of independence. The reign of terror unleashed by the forces of Mengistu caused tens of thousands of Eritreans to take up arms and forced hundreds of thousands into exile. It was from among these people, particularly those attached to the liberation fronts, that substantial quantities of nationalist Tigrinya literature emerged. Not surprisingly, much of it consisted of direct and brutal depictions of the war; 'He [Tesfai] wrote essays about the war, such as the famed "Heart of a Struggler", a piece which imaginatively surveys the feelings and thoughts of a dead fighter whose blown-out heart was found still fresh in the vicinity of the battlefield in Afabet in 1988' (p. 181). Sadly Tesfai's work appears to sum up a great deal of Tigrinya literature as it is presented by Negash. Undoubtedly much material worthy of literary criticism will emerge from the current war being waged between Eritrea and Ethiopia; unfortunately even more will be lost.

To sum up: the work of Negash is well organized and presented. Indeed, one can clearly see the strict controlling hand of the thesis supervisor at work in the way the chapters have been structured and arranged. Unfortunately, though, this influence appears to have strayed also into the realm of analysis. There is a somewhat heavy and uncritical reliance on insights clearly to be found in the published works of the thesis supervisor—a reliance that leads to near-sycophantic sentences which suggest, amongst others, that 'For such a summary one can do no better than to start by embracing Mineke Schipper's concise outline of the formal characteristics of auto-biographical writing' (p. 82); (see also pp. 13–14, 24–26, 44–45). Negash's book would have benefited enormously from the services of a professional editor. That said, it is a study which will remain essential reading for anyone dealing with Eritrean and specifically Tigrinya history, literature and society.

University of Cologne

JAN-BART GEWALD

The Mazruiana Collection: A comprehensive annotated bibliography of the published works of Ali A. Mazrui, 1962–1997, compiled by Abdul Samed Bemath. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1998. xiii+348 pp. £14.50. ISBN 81-207-2119-5.

The core of this volume is an annotated bibliography covering Mazrui's writings (and his video and film recordings) from 1962 to 1997. This bibliographical core