

about US intentions in North Africa were strongest in Algeria, where a variety of links had been established with the nationalists. Indeed, for the French, here was the place where US loyalty had to be tested, especially as the intensification of the war was tarnishing their image.

Given the international pressures being put on the metropole to grant independence to Algeria, the French needed as much support as they could acquire. Their suspicions as regards the real intentions of the Americans were unfounded, since the option preferred by Washington was for the French to reach the same kind of successful compromise with the leaders of Algeria as they had with those of Tunisia and Morocco. The two newly independent nations and the FLN hoped in vain that the United States would put pressure on France to conclude an agreement with the Algerian nationalist movement, and Senator John F. Kennedy's critique of US neutrality in 1957 did little to change American policy towards the ongoing conflict. This was only ended when General Charles de Gaulle decided to move towards negotiations in order to grant Algerians their independence.

Samya El Machat has written an outstanding trilogy. True, her analysis would have been strengthened if she had examined, even in outline, the rôle played by the Soviet Union in the region – see my 'US and Soviet Policies towards France's Struggle with Anticolonial Nationalism in North Africa', in *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d'histoire*, 30, December 1995, pp. 439–66. She could also be criticised for not having shown the implications of Washington's support for France on US relations with post-independent Algeria. But, despite these shortcomings, she has provided a well-documented diplomatic history of US policies and actions which no serious student of the Maghreb can ignore.

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Ethiopia: power and protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century by GEBRU TAREKE

Lawrenceville, NJ, and Asmara, Eritrea, The Red Sea Press, 1996. Pp. xxi + 272. £13.99 paperback.

This paperback edition of Gebru Tareke's account of three major peasant revolts is an unmodified re-issue of a book first published in 1991 by Cambridge University Press. It was reviewed in several scholarly journals and generally hailed as a major study of rural resistance in modernising Ethiopia. There can be no doubt that now, five years later, this meticulously researched and densely written work remains essential reading, not least in helping us to understand some of the antecedents of the régime that has been in power in Addis Ababa since May 1991. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) emerged during the 1940s in the same region as one of the revolts described by the author, and his epilogue entitled 'From Rebellion to Revolution?' reflects on the ascent since 1976 of this guerrilla movement from the north, with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) at its core. Some readers might expect to find an added assessment of the

record of the EPRDF-led Government – but Gebru has perhaps wisely refrained from such an endeavour, which is not really necessary in the context of his subject matter.

Ethiopia: power and protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century is a methodologically and theoretically convincing study of uprisings by rural Africans who were challenging the social and political order, although in all three cases discussed, they acted under the guidance or instigation of other groups: threatened provincial élites or nobility, or rural bandits, or disgruntled civil servants and students. The Ethiopian peasants have been the subject of many publications from a socio-economic, agricultural, or 'developmentalist' point of view, but rarely in their rôle as active social agents. The author has obviously been influenced by the works of Eric J. Hobsbawm, Eric R. Wolf, Jeffrey M. Paige, James C. Scott, or Theda Skocpol, although he does not directly 'test' their theories.

Gebru's interpretative and insightful approach is neo-Marxist and shows a keen eye to the complex interaction of cultural/ideological and material/infrastructural elements involved, notably class antagonisms, surplus extraction, ethno-regional differences, and the rôle of kinship, as well as symbolic factors. An underlying theme of his analysis is that the revolts could arise because of the incomplete and unsuccessful efforts at centralisation and economic and administrative modernisation which Emperor Haile Selassie had started, but which led to systemic contradictions in Ethiopian feudal-absolutist society.

Notable in the three revolts discussed was their lack of urban linkages, their roots in local problems, and their 'non-revolutionary' character that harped back to a restoration of *status quo ante*, before the state's efforts to assert its authority in tax matters and administrative reforms. They were, in a sense, protests against the loss of local-regional autonomy, threatened by a government trying to centralise its administration (taxes, system of justice, political authority), while characterised by unscrupulous exploitation and incompetence at the local level, often by people imposed from outside the region or by a locally dominant ethnic group. The author, of course, discusses ethno-cultural identity and conflict (the so-called 'nationality issue'), but does not believe that this explains why the peasants became mobilised so effectively, albeit linked with politico-economic and regional problems. He emphasises the lack of national integration, which contributed to the revolts not going beyond local confines, not least because of a lack of organisational capacity.

There were both similarities and differences. In Tigray (1943), the element of resistance by the local nobility, traditionally accustomed to autonomy within the Ethiopian polity, was strong. In Bale (1963–70), the religious and ethno-cultural differences, articulated sharply in the wake of the late nineteenth century conquest, were unique, as was intervention by the Somali state. In Gojjam (1968), perhaps the most authentic grass-roots revolt was more directed (in contrast to Tigray) against the local gentry. The failure of Haile Selassie's régime – despite containing these rebellions by a combination of armed force and minor concessions – was shown in the underlying contradiction, revealed by all three revolts between the often rapacious and grossly unjust local or provincial governors and the rural population,

exploited in a predatory and often humiliating fashion. They were irreconcilably pitted against each other. Even if the Emperor ultimately might have wished for honest and non-corrupt governance, he failed to establish the preconditions for this during his long reign.

It is obviously fruitless to judge the revolts in terms of a moral 'good' versus what was 'bad', since this was not a fight between a completely depraved and evil government and a noble and just collection of peasants. Cruelty, looting, destruction of property, revenge actions of terror, and wanton killings were not exceptional features of the rebel movements (less so in Gojjam, however). There were also opportunists and traitors who suddenly went over to the régime in power. What Gebru describes is the violent political culture of Ethiopia in general, a country that harbours the paradox of having a well-developed and rich indigenous tradition of justice and law, but which has been flouted and travestied in an appalling manner during its problematic march to modernity under the régimes of the twentieth century.

Needless-to-say, some questions for further reflection remain. For instance, how and why did the peculiar combination of parties allied in the *Weyane* revolt emerge? The author mentions general background factors, as well as the tension between the leadership factions (from peasants, nobility, and bandit groups), but the precise causal sequence of events is perhaps not explained fully. The complex relations between the various ethnic groups (Tigray, Wajirat, Raya, Azebo) also need to be studied further. Although the information is equivocal there is reason to believe that the air support given to British forces still in Eritrea was not as vital as some scholars have suggested: without the 116 bombs dropped from the three planes, the Imperial army would have won anyhow, only it would have taken more time. It seems certain that the British over-estimated their own rôle.

The chapter on Gojjam is sub-titled 'a vendée revolt?', but the concept is nowhere elaborated, although the French precedent is known. This 16-month rebellion is yet another illustration of the substantial diversity between Ethiopian regions, even within what was seen as a largely Amhara-dominated, politico-cultural order of the old days: an exploited core-area refusing the predatory rule of an administration mainly based in the Shewa region. It may also show that *regional* identification, based on the original meaning of the Amharic word *beher*, was always more important than any other, though it sometimes coincided with ethnic or linguistic identification.

The most remarkable and important revolt described was undoubtedly in Bale. It simmered on for almost seven years, an example of what one would call nowadays a 'low-intensity' conflict: not a full-scale, intensive war, but a long drawn-out armed confrontation with relatively few casualties. Although generated by local, indigenous grievances (as in Tigray and Gojjam), the Bale revolt saw the decisive involvement of the Somali state, which provided military training, supplies, food, and weapons, thereby prolonging the conflict and not offering any constructive help towards a solution. It is not entirely clear whether this can be called a 'peasant revolt': the Arsi-Oromo may have been largely peasants, but the Boran-Oromo and Somali are mostly nomadic pastoralists, and this may have affected the nature and length of the revolt.

There is no doubt that the position of the central administration and its grip

on the country has been immensely strengthened since the fall of the Emperor in 1974, not least because of the virtual destruction of the landed gentry in Ethiopia after the decrees of the revolutionary régime in 1975. Land is no more a basis of power. This is hinted at by Gebru in his epilogue, and is probably why the present Government – contrary to expectations and to economic advice – has not instituted some system of private ownership of land (which is still the property of the state). The autonomy of action of the rural population has also been much reduced, the regional élites (of indigenous feudal nobility) who functioned as the local dominant class are gone, and no new groups have taken their place: there is no intermediary stratum. Moreover, the rôle of religious authorities, especially the Orthodox Church, has been greatly diminished.

Of course, the three guerrilla wars in Eritrea (1962–91), in Tigray and in parts of Oromo (1976–91), were prime examples of peasant-supported revolutionary movements against a repressive and exploitative central régime. But the Tigray and Eritrean rebellions (initially underestimated by Ethiopian leaders in Addis Ababa) took place in old core-areas of the Empire which had retained more autonomy than the conquered south, and where peasants still had some tactical leverage *vis-à-vis* a state that had not fully penetrated their life-world. Compared to the situation described in this book, the subsequent ideological incorporation and bureaucratisation of the countryside has progressed at a stunning pace: first under the *Derg* headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, which by spreading its Marxist–Leninist principles and vocabulary, politicised the inhabitants to an unprecedented degree, and thereafter by the current EPRDF régime. But today's peasants in Ethiopia have been more co-opted within governmental structures, and their associations are continuing to function under official guidance or supervision, perhaps for their own benefit. Those in power at least claim to rule primarily in the name and interests of the peasants, while neglecting other, allegedly more 'privileged' classes or occupational strata. The supreme irony is that spokesmen at the national level have left the peasants with less autonomy of socio-cultural and political action than ever before.

The author may appear to be anachronistic in some passages – e.g. in judging the *Weyane* rebels to have had a low level of 'class consciousness' (p. 121) and lack of 'ideological clarity' (p. 123). He also tends to be overzealous in presenting various reasons to explain the underlying factors or causes – e.g. four are given for the revolts on p. 18, and then again at least four others on p. 22. But his overall presentation of the three revolts is very good and gives readers a rich insight into the historical and social complexities involved. He has made use of many interviews with protagonists, as well as a multitude of documents, although it is not always clear what those sources actually said, since they are more frequently interpreted than literally cited. It is likely that the Ethiopian archives contain even more materials that would enable us to understand better what was happening in the rural areas and their administration. Although Gebru has indeed unearthed much vital information, his book is probably not the last work on these revolts since other documents, including those in the Ethiopian Ministry of the Pen, may hopefully soon become accessible.

Nevertheless, *Ethiopia: power and protest* remains an excellent and very enriching contribution to our understanding of Ethiopian society and its dramatic processes of change, as well as a source for continued discussion of contemporary developments in the Horn of Africa.

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Black Lions: the creative lives of modern Ethiopia's literary giants and pioneers by REIDULF K. MOLVAER

Asmara, Eritrea, and Lawrenceville, NJ, The Red Sea Press, 1997. Pp. xix + 426. \$21.95 paperback.

A Modern Translation of Kebra Nagast (The Glory of Kings) compiled, edited, and translated by MIGUEL F. BROOKS

Lawrenceville, NJ, The Red Sea Press, 1996. Pp. xxxi + 193. \$18.95/£12.99 paperback.

The Ethiopian literary scene is not well-known to scholars, to put it mildly. Very few can speak let alone read Amharic, the national and official tongue of the state, which admittedly is a most difficult and 'challenging' idiom, as claimed by Professor Edward Ullendorff, to whom *Black Lions: the creative lives of modern Ethiopia's literary giants and pioneers* is dedicated by its Norwegian author. Further, hardly any Amharic works have been translated into world languages, which is most unfortunate, since not many African states can boast of a national literature in an African vernacular tongue. Scholars have been indebted to Reidulf Molvaer since he published *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: social and cultural life as reflected in Amharic fictional literature* (Leiden, 1980), his doctoral dissertation that had been supervised at the School of African and Oriental Studies by Ullendorff, and his 1997 sequel is most welcome.

Black Lions presents the biographies (often even the autobiographies, suitably edited) of 32 of Ethiopia's leading authors, past and present, up to the year 1990. They include Hiruy Welde-Sillasé, the most prominent writer before the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, who is described as 'The Father of Amharic Literature'; Welde-Giyorgis Welde-Yohannis, 'The Father of Ethiopian Journalism'; Kebede Mikaél, the country's first gazetted Prime Minister and 'The Grand Old Man of Amharic Literature'; Haddis Alemayyehu, 'Statesman and Ethiopia's Most Popular Author', who is widely appreciated for his monumental trilogy; and Abbé Gubennya, introduced as 'Ethiopia's Only Writer Who Almost Made A Living From His Books' (p. 181). Mention must also be made of Tesemma Habte-Mikaél, Desta Tekle-Weld, and Girma-Tsion Mebrahtu, three outstanding lexicographers; Tesfayé Gessese, who has made an important mark on the theatre in Ethiopia; Aseffa Gebre-Mariyam Tesemma, the author of revolutionary Ethiopia's national anthem; Tseggayé Gebre-Medhin, 'poet, playwright, director, research historiographer and anthropologist in the art of black Ethiopian pre-classical and classical antiquities' (p. 269); Mengistu Lemma,

pioneer of Amharic comedy; Birhanu Zerihun, novelist, playwright, journalist, and stylistic innovator; and the late Be'alu Girma who 'might have become over-confident because of his close association with Chairman Mengistu' (p. 347), and who appears to have been executed by the *Derg* because of his very popular but critical novel *Oromay*.

The Marxist régime was still in control of Ethiopia when Molvaer wrote all these portraits and sketches, and as he explains: 'A society finds expression through its authors, and in this way it is the co-author of literary works... I do not pretend that a series of biographies of creative writers will explain Amharic fictional literature, but these life histories do throw light on the society, the surroundings, and the times in which Amharic literature was born and created' (p. ix). All scholars interested in Ethiopia will find much of importance in Molvaer's latest labour of love. May he continue ever onwards.

Miguel F. Brooks has recently translated what is arguably the most outstanding work in all of Ethiopian literature. *Kebra Nagast* was compiled in Ge'ez by the *nebura ed* (prior and governor) Yeshaq of Aksum in the early fourteenth century, in particular to legitimise the recently re-established Solomonic dynasty of Kings in Ethiopia. It 'was also intended to make the people of Ethiopia realize that their country was specially chosen by God to be the new home of the Spiritual and heavenly Zion' (p. xxvi). It is based on oral legends and traditions long-known in Ethiopia that go back to Old Testament times, with numerous strands of influence that have been traced to a myriad of other sources – see David A. Hubbard, 'The Literary Sources of the Kebra Nagast', Ph.D. dissertation, St. Andrews University, 1956; Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford, 1968), ch. 3; and James B. Pritchard, *Solomon and Sheba* (Oxford, 1974), and their references. This *chef d'oeuvre* has at its core the brief story about Solomon and Sheba that is to be found in the Bible (I Kings 10: 1–13, and, with minor differences, II Chronicles 9: 1–12). This romantic and tantalising tale of the meeting between the illustrious King and Queen had great vogue in the Near East and in North and Northeast Africa, and went through a long period of gestation involving many elaborations, conflations, ramifications, transformations, and metamorphoses not only in the Ethiopian version but also – and perhaps even more so – in neighbouring literatures and traditions: Jewish, Muslim, and Christian.

Indeed, *Kebra Nagast (The Glory of Kings)* is rather classical and restrained in tone, in contrast to the more whimsical and extravagant features of other, non-Ethiopian traditions. Very briefly put, it tells of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon; his wisdom and his riches; her conversion to Judaism and her marriage to the King; the birth of their son, following her return to Ethiopia; Menelik's visit to see his father in Jerusalem; the removal of the Ark of the Covenant from Israel to Ethiopia, the new Zion, and its enshrining in Axum, the second Jerusalem; the rule of King Menelik I, the new David, over Ethiopia; the Beta [House of] Israel, the new Dakika [Children of] Israel; and the establishment of a Messianic line of Kings for ever.

A full translation of *Kebra Nagast* exists in English – *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek* (London, 1922) by E. A. Wallis Budge, a Semitist and Near Eastern scholar who was keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities in the British Museum. However, this has long been out