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Abstract

Ethiopian historiography is a separate field of research within the domain of African history. The article discusses the implications – in both positive and negative sense – of this area of studies in the context of African historiography. Eritrean studies are also included in this perspective given the impossibility to separate the two regions by an historical point of view.

I outline three main challenges in Ethiopian studies today that I think deserve further attention: (1)the need to relocate Ethiopian studies in the wider field of African studies; (2)the importance of conducting oral research in a literate society; (3)the focus on a new research on political history after decades of social history. The article also discusses the role of Prof. Joanna Mantel Niecko in the field and her contribution that deserves a special mention.

Ethiopian studies are today a solid branch in African history. They deserve a lot of attention, and scholars' commitment has really been increasing over the past decades. Moreover, Ethiopian studies have reached credibility not only in African historiography, but also in the wider field of history. History is, naturally, only a component of this area of studies, with philological research, anthropology, sociology, archeology and linguistics being its most developed and consolidated disciplines. History is my matter of concern here: the peculiarity of this discipline defines Ethiopian historiography as a separate field

¹ This essay is a revised version of the paper I delivered at the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, in July 2003, in a special panel dedicated to Ethiopian studies in Poland and the role of Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niecko.

of research within the domain of African history. I would like to discuss the implications – both in a positive and in a negative sense – of this approach.

Discussing Ethiopian history and its development has been recently a real historiographical exercise.² Not only Ethiopia deserves our attention here; we have to consider the recent development of a separate branch: Eritrean studies, and the implications of this new area of research. I tend to develop a critical discourse on these two different domains and I use the term “Ethiopian studies” not in a strict sense; Eritrean studies are included in my perspective, given the impossibility to separate the two regions from a historical point of view.³ Modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea are part of the same historical process; their roots also belong to a common civilisation.

The great bulk of research on Ethiopian social issues appears at international conferences, unique conferences on African studies that represent a big achievement in the field of Ethiopian studies. The last event, the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, took place in Hamburg in July 2003 and was very well organised. Many scholars representing a wide range of disciplines attended a number of panels; an impressive organisation was set up, the participants offered new themes for discussion, a great debate, ongoing research and new suggestions for the future.

It was a good opportunity, at an important international conference like this one, to acknowledge worldwide-recognized Ethiopian historiography. A very particular area of African research, very well established and with its own rules and methodologies. We owe such a tribute to the many scholars in the field of modern Ethiopian studies, the area of study in which I have been involved for many years. The special occasion for my presentation in Hamburg was a panel dedicated to Ethiopian studies in Poland, with Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niecko attending as the guest of honour, as I will discuss below.

I have mentioned the wide audience and the great number of scholars in Ethiopian studies in Europe, the United States, Africa and Asia. We should also mention the widely recognized and very well attended conferences like the last few before Hamburg, the one held in Kyoto in 1997 (the three volumes of proceedings offer us some idea of the impressive work put into it)⁴ and the Addis Ababa conference in 2000 that deserves equal attention.⁵ The Kyoto and Addis Ababa conferences, like the latest one in Hamburg, involved very diverse sessions, areas of study and panels, a high degree of specialisation, many fields of research, challenging debate and discussion; they were truly remarkable conferences. This consolidated area of research has reached a wider audience in many countries of the world.

² See the recent analysis offered by Christopher Clapham, ‘Rewriting Ethiopian History’, *AE*, 18 (2002), pp. 37–54.

³ See my critical analysis in I. Taddia, ‘Modern Ethiopia and Colonial Eritrea’, *Aethiopica*, 5 (2002), pp. 123–138. I do not regard Ethiopia and Eritrea as two separate fields of research.

⁴ See *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of the XIIIth International Conference*, ed. by K. Fukui, E. Kurimoto, M. Shigeta, Kyoto 1997, 3 voll.

⁵ See *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Baye Ymam, Addis Ababa: IES, 2003, 3 voll.

Besides, it should not be overlooked that Ethiopia is an African country with its own highly developed national historiography. Ethiopian national conferences in the field of humanities deserve our attention as much as international conferences. National conferences are well structured, and the history department has consolidated its research over the last decades, in cooperation with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, an important and recognized institution. So Ethiopian studies are now a very well established and solid discipline in contemporary historiography, in a national and international context. There is no doubt about that.

Research in the field of humanities has reached a very high level. The main themes of investigation in world historiography are related to the environment, land tenure systems, gender issues, social research into the pre-colonial and colonial periods, as well as the postcolonial economic and political development. However, some problems remain to be solved. Ethiopia has been usually referred to as a country with Christian identity; the Amhara society and Christian Ethiopia in general have received our attention. There is a serious lack of research on Islam, with few exceptions in Ethiopia and abroad. Even at the Hamburg conference Islamic studies were very poor, or simply non existent. These characteristics are peculiar to the Horn: Somali studies on Islam suffer the same situation. We as historians have a duty to increase the importance of religious studies – on Islam in particular – making use of both oral and written sources in our research.

Moreover, in world historiography there has been a decrease in research on the last decades of colonialism. There is a need today to rediscuss the role of colonial powers in modern Africa, the Horn included. It is time to re-examine the political implications of colonialism as reflected in the colonial economy and society.⁶

Given the above, I would like to organize some reflections around the three main themes of discussion in an effort to put Ethiopian studies in the context of African historiography.

The Need to Relocate Ethiopian History in a Regional Context

First, I would like to emphasize that Ethiopian studies are a completely separate field of research in the African panorama. Although this may offer a good outlook for the large autonomy of this area of studies, at the same time it could be seen as a negative aspect regarding the potential isolation of this domain. The organisation of separate conferences and the peculiarity of the discipline – the knowledge of written languages is a prerequisite – is an obstacle for other scholars on Africa to carry out research within this area of studies, given the high level of specialisation and in-depth knowledge.

⁶ On the contrary, colonialism in the Horn of Africa has been recently investigated in Italy by a young generation of scholars; see I. Taddia, 'Notes on Recent Italian Studies on Ethiopia and Eritrea', in *Africana*, 2003, pp. 165–171.

The discipline has developed its own themes, has peculiarities that seem difficult to extend into other areas; technicians in Ethiopian studies have a high level of competence and knowledge. On the one hand, this could be seen as an advantage, but on the other this feature may highlight a gap in Ethiopian studies. I believe that Ethiopian studies need to work alongside other different and not homogeneous African historiographies. This field must be opened to other relevant areas of research on tropical Africa in order to find a common ground and common interests. Ethiopia shares many issues and historical events with other African countries. As historians of Africa, we need to work from a different perspective. State boundaries were created by colonialism, ancient and modern history must be based on an African ground.

We can take as an example Crumme y's perspective in the recent volume *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa*.⁷ This volume is a result of a conference held in 1993 at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, that opened a new field of research based on a truly interdisciplinary approach and covered a wide geographical/historical area. In this approach, modern African history is analysed in a broader perspective, taking into consideration not contemporary African states but, rather, complex and integrated areas like Sudanic Africa. I would like to stress the importance of investigating wider regional areas sharing common historical and political backgrounds that cannot be limited to colonial history. We should not take into consideration the present state boundaries on the African continent, basically inherited as a legacy of the Western powers, but we must widen our research to broader geographical and historical areas of relevance before colonialism. We should not forget that colonialism is a recent development: African history requires a far deeper background. A serious attempt to reopen this kind of research must now be made, and I would like to stress the importance of this newly oriented work.

The Horn of Africa as a whole is an interesting area of research from this point of view, a regional and historical entity that colonialism divided and integrated artificially into different colonial states. The Horn of Africa as a historical entity embraces many different societies with a complex historical heritage and a heterogeneous social background.⁸ My reflections here challenge the concept of national conferences as a separate area of studies. I would like to question and to discuss here the role of Ethiopian studies on the one hand and the role of a separate field of study that has recently emerged as a counterpart, Eritrean studies. I have already emphasized this peculiarity and outlined my own thoughts on two separate occasions, during the Addis Ababa conference of 2000 and the Asmara conference of 2001.⁹ It is pointless to split up academically this important field of research that must have many themes in common and many fields of interest to be discussed together.

⁷ D. Crumme y ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa*, Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2005.

⁸ See Clapham, 'Rewriting' quoted above, on the emphasis on 'the search for a unifying history of the Horn', an article that I was able to read only after the Hamburg conference. I share many of Clapham's views.

⁹ See the paper presented at the Addis Ababa conference: I. Taddia, 'Notes on Recent Italian Studies', quoted above; for the Asmara conference, see I. Taddia, 'Modern Ethiopia', quoted above (in n. 2).

No division between historical Ethiopia and Eritrea must be made in modern history. History should be analysed on a regional basis, and we cannot speak of two distinct and separate histories. The entire area needs to be analysed as a component of the history of the Horn of Africa. In many respects national historiographies need to challenge this trend and face this problem, putting the modern history of both countries into a new context: the context of critical research into the past.

It is thus imperative to investigate the Horn of Africa as a single historical entity; this area must be confronted against a larger historical entity and put in the wider context of tropical Africa. Not only Ethiopian history should be studied within the Horn of Africa context, but also the Horn of Africa itself must, in its turn, be analysed in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Africa as a whole has many characteristics in common from a historical point of view. Moreover, the disintegration of the Ethiopian Empire and recent political developments have offered new insights and questioned the “great tradition” of an independent and unitarian state.¹⁰

Modern history must challenge contemporary boundaries and engage in a common debate, confrontation, and interrelations. Scholars need to explore many different historical contexts. Ethiopian studies must be made more flexible and more open to exchange with scholars from other areas. This is the beginning of a new trend: national historiographies in Africa had a historical importance for the new nations but in many respects they have concluded their role in nation-building and do not have any new legitimacy in contemporary Africa. I hope future research in Ethiopian studies will promote this trend and I am optimistic that the old pattern of contemporary African historiography will be broken. The present war in the Horn has prevented any possibility of developing a serious historical discourse.

Oral History as a Critical Issue

The second reflection I would like to propose here concerns the main characteristics of Ethiopian social studies that have emerged in historiography during the last few decades. We have developed a very solid pattern of research based on different fields of study, disciplines, and regional areas. If we look from the historical viewpoint, research seems to be concentrated in the Amhara-Tigrinya areas, where written documentation is historically important and represents the main source to help us reconstruct the past. History and written sources are two aspects that have for many years played an important role in Ethiopian studies. Anthropology, by contrast, appears to be limited to an area without written records, i.e. secular and religious documentation. The North therefore belongs to

¹⁰ See A. Triulzi, ‘Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography’, in *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, ed. W. James, D. Donham, E. Kurimoto, A. Triulzi, (Eastern African Studies), Oxford: J.Currey, 2002.

history, and the South to anthropology, a characteristic outlined a number of years ago by historical research and by scholars concerned with modern Ethiopia.¹¹

I would like to stress an important point: no significant systematic research has been done on the core of the Empire, the Amhara and Tigrinya areas, regarding the transmission of tradition in general and oral tradition in particular. There is no Vansina for Ethiopia, I mean no codification of oral sources in the above-mentioned areas. This seems neither banal nor trivial. To underline this trend in Ethiopian historiography means to develop a pattern of research that involves interdisciplinarity, combining disciplines, cross-references and contributions of different scholars. So we need to investigate the role of oral tradition in a literate culture like that of Christian Ethiopia. Is it too late for this? Everybody knows how hard it is to work with oral tradition today and Ethiopian studies have probably missed the opportunity to develop this discipline.

I can remember some workshops and contributions dedicated to this issue, not too many in reality.¹² Few scholars have investigated orality in northern Ethiopia and the role of oral tradition in a literate culture; research has been basically oriented towards a historical and philological approach, whereas orality has long been an underdeveloped subject.

I would like to recall that the SOAS in London has recently organised a symposium on orality and literacy in the Horn of Africa, and I hope this could be the start of a consolidated approach in this field of study.¹³ However, if we look at the full papers in detail, it seems to me that some contributions reproduce the old cliché of the historical research on the Horn. The division of studies between the North and the South of Ethiopia must be recomposed and reframed, seriously and definitively, for further research.

When speaking about orality and oral research in Ethiopia, it is surprising to find an interesting and really innovative essay in the Italian colonial literature that I would like to mention here. I am referring to an article written by the Italian anthropologist Giovanni Ellero that deserves a few words. We should note here his important contribution published in 1941 *Importanza della tradizione orale per l'etiopistica* ('The importance of oral tradition for Ethiopian studies') which anticipates the discussion on the value of oral sources in writing history.¹⁴ Ellero explores the value of oral tradition as a body of linguistic, ethnographic, religious, ethnological, legal and historical knowledge useful to

¹¹ See particularly D. Donham & W. James ed., *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986.

¹² See D. Crumme y, Shumet Sishagne, Daniel Ayana, 'Oral Tradition in a Literate Culture: The Case of Christian Ethiopia', in: *Unwritten Testimonies of the African Past: Proceedings of the International Symposium held in Ojrzanów n. Warsaw on 7–8 November 1989*, ed. by S. Piłaszewicz & E. Rzewuski, (*Orientalia Varsoviensia*), Warsaw 1991, pp. 137–149.

¹³ Language, Power and Society: Workshop on Orality and Literacy in the Horn of Africa, London SOAS, 16–18 July 2003, organized by Cedric Barnes (proceedings forthcoming).

¹⁴ G. Ellero, 'Importanza della tradizione orale per l'etiopistica', in *Archivio per la raccolta e lo studio delle tradizioni popolari italiane*, 16 (1941), fasc. 1–2, pp. 27–36, now republished in G. Ellero, *Antropologia e storia dell'Etiopia*, ed. by G. Lusini, Udine 1995, pp. 55–64. The Italian civil servant Giovanni Ellero worked at the political office in Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941. For more details, see: G. Dore & I. Taddia, 'I documenti inediti di Giovanni Ellero sull'Etiopia', *Africa* (Roma), 48:1, (1993), pp. 21–46.

scholars and viewed as a unique source of knowledge. All these aspects taken together help to build up a picture of Ethiopia. We have already discussed the contribution of this Italian civil servant to Ethiopian studies in a number of essays and we have recently edited some of his unpublished manuscripts related to the social history of Ethiopia.¹⁵

The real benefit that Ethiopian studies can now gain from oral tradition is probably limited, given the extreme difficulty, today, to collect oral sources in a profoundly and completely changed country. This is a serious matter to be considered by contemporary historiography. The decodification of oral sources is a limit of anthropological research.

Towards a New Political History?

The third reflection is organized around a new aspect of historical work. Ethiopian studies have been dominated for quite a long time by social history. Social studies have been the characteristic of at least three generations of scholars during the last few decades of African historiography. Major works in this field of study have contributed to Ethiopian historiography and offered us many suggestions.

The themes covered by social history, an important area, do not need to be developed here, as they are very well known to scholars and have been discussed for a long time. Social history has in many respects represented an important turning point in contemporary historiography, not only in the field of African studies, offering a break with traditional historiography. There is no doubt about that.

Today, it is time to reconsider the role of political history in African studies. Given the extremely important background highlighted by social history, there is a need to reread the old-fashioned area of research represented by political and diplomatic history and put old data into a new context. Social history can be the background for our work. The work done by many scholars in social studies is, today, the prerequisite for a new historical discourse. The social background is a consolidated acquisition today, but now we have to move on and beyond this phase. What I suggest is that there is a need to go back to political history, in a new context of studies, and this is not intended as a provocative statement.

Certainly, the sources for writing history need to be reconsidered. This insight came to me when reading – recently – Berhanou Abebe's essay on the 1916 Ethiopian coup d'état¹⁶ and Tekeste Negash's article on the development of political parties in

¹⁵ I would like to mention that an important collection of Ellero's manuscripts is available at the Department of History at the University of Bologna and a catalogue has been published in 3 volumes. See: Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, A. Gori & I. Taddia, *Lettere tigrine. I documenti etiopici del Fondo Ellero*, Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 1997; Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, G. Dore, *Carte coloniali. I documenti italiani del Fondo Ellero*, Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2000; G. Dore, J. Mantel-Niećko, I. Taddia, *Quaderni del Walqayt: Documenti per la storia sociale dell'Etiopia*, Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2005.

¹⁶ See Berhanou Abebe, 'Le coup d'état du 26 septembre 1916 ou le dénouement d'une décennie de crise', *AE*, 16 (2001), pp. 309–360.

Eritrea,¹⁷ just to speak of Ethiopian/Eritrean history. I also have in mind G. Nicolosi's essay on the diplomacy of the Mad Mullah in British Somalia,¹⁸ an essay based not merely on diplomatic history, but a history focused on the importance of international diplomacy and its impact on society. Finally, I would like to mention Federica Guazzini's work on the diplomacy of borders in Eritrea,¹⁹ and Uoldelul Chelati Dirar's essay on the political/diplomatic role of missionaries in Italian colonialism.²⁰ I am in fact convinced that there is a lot to investigate in the field of political history today.

I am wondering: what kind of political history? I am speaking of political history in a broader sense, not merely diplomatic history, but a history focused on interrelations between power and institutions. We need to focus our attention on the importance of political power as a source of change in people's lives, not only on the destiny of the country and not only in the international context. We have to investigate the role of political power and the role of institutions as the main agents of change in history and in people's lives.

I would like to focus on the nature of political power as a source of control, restrictions and limitations, but also to stress the nature of political power as an active and indeed the main agent in shaping human destiny.

We need to concentrate our attention – again – and we have to go back to the high sphere of politics. A lot has been done on history made from the bottom up. We now need to relocate and rediscuss the importance of the highest institutions. Power as an agent of consolidation, but also power as an agent of destabilisation. This double impact of power is the source of the precarious condition of humanity.

History is a result of a process, I believe, basically controlled from the top and moving from the top downwards. The role of a new investigation into political history must be twofold: on the one hand, it should study the effect that power has on society, on the other it should be the task of political history to analyse the interrelations and the responses of society in the face of political power that comes from above. Each individual element of the internal dynamics of political power is useful in the reconstruction of the complex events that make up history.

Thus I have outlined the three main challenges in Ethiopian studies today that I think deserve our attention:

- the need to relocate Ethiopian studies in the wider field of African studies;
- the importance of oral research in a literate society;
- the focus on a new wave of political studies, or political history in the sense I have outlined above.

¹⁷ Tekeste Negash, 'Italy and its relations with Eritrean political parties 1949–1950', *Africa* (Rome), 59 (2004), pp. 417–452.

¹⁸ G. Nicolosi, *Imperialismo e resistenza in Corno d'Africa*, Rubbettino editore, Catanzaro, 2002.

¹⁹ F. Guazzini, *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale Eritrea 1898–1908*, Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 1999.

²⁰ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, 'Church-state relations in colonial Eritrea: missionaries and the development of colonial strategies (1869–1911)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8:3 (2003), pp. 391–410.

Finally, let me return to the Hamburg meeting. The XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies was a special occasion for me. I developed these suggestions in this context at the special panel devoted, as I have already mentioned, to the role of Polish studies in the field. So this conference also offered us another great opportunity: to recognize, among many outstanding contributors, the role of Prof. Joanna Mantel-Niećko and her career in the field of historical, social and linguistic studies in Poland, but not only in her own country.²¹ Joanna's c.v. and her career represent an excellent occasion to put Polish studies into a wider context, the one of the international academia. Joanna has opened new areas of study in Ethiopian historiography: the focus on linguistic issues, historical research and social dynamics that are just three aspects of her lively and continuous work in Ethiopian studies. In many respects her work is out of the scheme I have outlined in Ethiopian historiography. She gave me a lot of insights for writing this contribution and I would like to recognize her work as a source of inspiration for me.²²

Joanna is a very well esteemed scholar. We know her ability to coordinate philological and rigorous work with many themes in social and political research concerning a country that deserves a special role in African historiography. Her publications bear evidence to her broad, diverse interests and solid commitment and are very well known to scholars, so there is no need to quote them here. Let me only mention two brief essays that captured me from the beginning for her lucidity, humour and historical sense. The first one: "African Studies: an intellectual challenge"²³, proposes a new vision of Africa and Ethiopia as a "world of thought, speech and emotion", with the awareness that "The longer I study Ethiopia, the more it seems to escape me". The article is a vivid picture of the circumstances and contradiction in which a European scholar reflects on an oral culture. The second one, "Who Lives in Ethiopia, where and who is the Governor?"²⁴, explores the semantic ambiguity of the modern Amharic words for "nation", "people", "community" and "identity" used in the 20th century Ethiopian constitutions, as well as the changes in Amharic reflecting the introduction of European institutions into the country. Reflections based on a solid linguistic knowledge and a deep historical background. Two stimulating articles among a vast scholarly production.

Joanna has worked on many subjects in Ethiopian studies, for a long period of time, and she is still working as a dedicated scholar. This tribute to her work is not a formality. Her role in the Polish academia and in international scholarship is well recognized. Her

²¹ The conference panel was introduced by Donald Crumme y, and Joanna Mantel-Niećko with her students were the main protagonists of this special event. See Plenary session: *Ethiopian Studies in Poland*, Joanna Mantel-Niećko, *Ethiopian studies in Poland and the knowledge of Ethiopia in Poland*.

²² See her view on Ethiopian historiography in J. Mantel-Niećko, 'Aethiopica: Journal of Ethiopian Studies', *Miscellanea Aethiopica reverendissimo domino Stanislaw Kur septuagenario... oblata*, Warszawa 2000, (= *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*, 12:2 (1999) [publ. 2001]), pp. 149–157.

²³ See: J. Mantel-Niećko, 'The Clash of Europe and Africa on the Threshold of the 21st Century', in *Studies of The Department of African Languages and Culture*, (Warsaw), 16, 1994, pp. 19–26.

²⁴ This essay was published in *AfrBull*, (Warsaw) 1998, pp. 65–75.

ability to discuss past events and to put Ethiopian history in the context of present-day issues is worth mentioning, as well as her command of Ethiopian sources.

I would like her path to be a prototype in dealing with the main issues of Ethiopian research today. I think she has a lot to say in the future, and what I would like to stress finally is the role of her students in Ethiopian studies: Joanna's scholarship shows a continuity that is not so common in our discipline, which is quite often characterized by the emerging role of single scholars, isolated in their research, without any impact or any continuity through time. Joanna has many students who can continue her work and their presence in Hamburg at the international conference was a sign of her dedication to this area of studies.