
The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1913; by Brian J. Yates, University of Rochester Press 2020, pp. 236.

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The author of the book is a historian based at St. Joseph's University in the United States of America. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the political history of the formation of modern Ethiopia between 1855 and 1913, emphasizing the role of the Oromo in the former provinces of Wällo and Shäwa. He has also a couple of publications on the political history of modern Ethiopia. The current book can be viewed as a culmination of the previous works, along with fieldwork data gathered in Ethiopia. The work thematically narrates the contributions of Wällo and Shäwan Oromo society towards the formation of modern Ethiopia between the years 1855 and 1913. The author claims that despite wide-ranging contributions, the Oromo of these areas have not been properly included in the macro-historical narrations of northern Ethiopia.

The book is divided into five chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, the author explained how the history of Oromo (mainly in Shäwa and Wällo) was excluded from mainstream Ethiopian history and intended to reconstruct this part of the history and show the contributions of the Oromo of northern Ethiopia in the making of modern Ethiopia. After conceptualizing the term *Habäsha*, the first chapter sets forth the contribution of the Yäjju Oromo to the existence of the Gondär imperial court. In this regard, the author argued that if the Oromo community had not been incorporated into the *Habäsha* ways of life, the history of the Gondär period might have been different.

In chapter two, the author deals with the roles of the individuals in the process of integrating different populations (of Oromo, Amhara, Guraghe, etc.) into unity. This integration occurred not only militarily and culturally, but also through socio-cultural institutions, resulting in various *Habäsha* communities

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in Gondär, Wällo, and Shäwa, all of which contributed to the making and reshaping of Ethiopia. The third chapter focuses on Menelik and his great Oromo men who integrated into the *Habäsha* community, as well as their roles in creating and reshaping Shäwa first, and then Ethiopia later. The integration of Oromo in Wällo and Shäwa is indicated in chapter four, as “Wällo *Habäsha* Oromo” and “Shäwa *Habäsha* Oromo” regardless of their cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. The fifth chapter is the final section in which the author presented his core idea, namely that the Ethiopian centralized state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was created by the undeniable roles of the Oromo in the formation of the state in Shäwa under Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913).

In terms of data, the author drew on a variety of sources, including archival materials as well as published and unpublished documents. The author also interviewed informants in Shäwa and Wällo to gather firsthand information and supplement the evidence. In general, the book is written by analyzing and describing a wide range of evidence of historical and lived experiences that shaped a portion of Ethiopia's political history in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this regard, the author contends that the historiographies of Oromo and Amhara writers of the time ignored these parts of the Oromo in some way. In terms of presentation, the author wrote the book in an analytical and descriptive style, describing the details of facts and events that occurred at least four centuries ago.

To address the main goal, the author brings up a number of issues relevant to Ethiopian politics today. He discusses the importance of *re-conceptualizing the term Habäsha as opposed to its previous meaning, the importance of the community framework, the importance of the northern Oromo in Ethiopian political history*, and other major interrelated issues. These three issues are discussed in greater depth below.

1) *Re-conceptualizing the term Habäsha*, which historically was considered rigid, should now be seen as fluid in nature. According to the author, historically, the term *Habäsha* has been defined in various ways; specifically, in terms of identity, the meaning has been attributed to Semitic, Orthodox, communal land tenure system, and Solomonian line. The meaning has also been used as an antonym for non-Semitic, non-Orthodox, and non-Solomonian lines. Having looked at the Oromos in Northern Ethiopia, the term *Habäsha* can be redefined as “a community- not a single community, [but] as mixed” (p. 4). Regardless of their language, culture, religion, etc., the Oromo in the central

and northern part of the country were habituated into the *Habäsha* ways of life. Through time, the Oromo have been incorporated into the land tenure systems of the Amhara (*rist* and *gult*) (p.28). The Oromo became kingmakers militarily and politically from the 17th to the 20th centuries, and they also held key positions in the Imperial Courts. There have also been marriage alliances between the Oromo and those of the proper *Habäsha* ruling classes, and thus “[p]articipation in these marriages confirmed the ‘*Habäshaness*’ of both parties and regulated the *Habäsha* community” (p. 29). For example, the Amhara communities in Shäwa, mainly in Mänz, were heavily influenced by Oromo cultural practices. According to the author, “the influence did not stop with culture, as the Mänz dynasty married extensively with the surrounding Oromo groups” (p. 34), and this brought the Oromo to become part and parcel of the Mänz social, political, and economic system (p. 62).

2) By taking the northern Oromo community as a case in point, the author intended mainly to revisit the historically known identities in Ethiopia and “argued for a culturally dynamic, inclusive, community-based identity as opposed to the exclusive, static ethnic identities that dominate Ethiopian studies” (p. 133). The author preferred and used the framework of community in his analysis rather than the framework of ethnicity, which allowed him to present the common cultural practices shared by the Oromo, Amhara, and others who have been considered as a community (p. 25). The fact that the framework of community is concerned with inclusiveness and entertains commonality and shared values (Redfield 1955) while looking at these integrated communities from their ethnic background, has often been destructive and divisive that excludes the most important members of a given population. In this regard, the Oromo had always been at the center of power in the major former provinces of Shäwa, Wällo, Bägemedder, and even Gojjam (p. 20). In these provinces, the Oromo have mainly been integrated into the highland community and became *Habäsha* through local institutions such as *Gabicha* (marriage), *Christina* (God Parenthood) (p.30). The Oromo have also shared their institutions with the Highland Amhara such as *gudufächa* (adoption) and also created hybrid other institutions such as the practice of breastfeeding akin to *harmahodha* (Orommifa) (Tsega 2002) and ‘*tut Matibat*’ (Amharic) (Takele 2016). These institutions cemented the different social groups, unified and enabled them, and contributed to the creation of modern Ethiopia (p. 30). As the author argued, as a result, most populations of the non-*Habäsha* in all directions have become *Habäsha* cemented into unity

through the process of “marriage alliances, God-parenting, and mutually beneficial political and economic relationships” (p. 106).

3) The author also presents the importance of *the Oromo and Muslim communities in Northern Ethiopia, particularly in Shäwa and Wällo, in the political history of Ethiopia*. In a long time, these have become *Habäsha* and an integrated community with the Highland Amhara. Thus, the author suggests the importance of reconstructing the history of Northern Oromo as a continuous political history of Ethiopia in which the author’s intention is “liberating Northern Oromo experiences from competing Nationalism” (P 1). This meant that the Amhara and Oromo ethno-nationalist writers had deliberately neglected the Northern Oromo communities. However, significant Oromo personalities such as Habtä Giorgis Dinägge, Gobäna Dache, and many others (p.77), who were able to balance their local and national interests (p. 93), cannot be forgotten. Despite their Oromo identity, these leaders built the Ethiopian empire and established successful governance and unity (p. 80), and later demonstrated their unity to the world at Adwa (p.97).

Most of the arguments in the book are convincing in that, for example, the community framework used by the author to convince the reader, the evidence presented in the narration, and the attempts he has made to include the northern Oromo community in Ethiopian macro history are real and not speculations. In this regard, the book is timely reading material and convincing for those who want to understand Ethiopian unity and the people's inclusive nature cemented through interactions by sociocultural institutions. The best example can be the northern Oromo community, who through time have become *Habäsha* and contributed to the creation and reshaping of modern Ethiopia.

However, there are a few points that the author should reconsider. In the book, there is an idea that claims the history of Oromo has been erased from the mainstream of Ethiopian history mainly due to the ethno-nationalist narrations that the Amhara or Tigrrian history writers used, who also considered the Oromo as “other” (p.2). However, this claim looks fallacious, at least for three reasons. Firstly, the author used the archival materials and written sources that the Amhara writers have tried to preserve during the periods mentioned. It seems, therefore, there is no deliberate avoidance of the historical narrations about Oromo. The author might be correct if he explained the limitations and methodological and historiographical errors the writers made. Second, it would make sense if the author had thought the other way around. That is, the

Amhara writers regarded the "*Habäsha Oromo*" simply as Amhara, as did the Amhara community at the time. This also implies that they may overlook the "difference" (p.13) of the already integrated Amhara and Oromo communities. Thirdly, as the author stated, the Amhara have only local-based identities- *Gondäre, Gojjane, Wälloye, Shäwe*, etc., who believe in the Ethiopian Nationalism, not as ethnic-based nationalism. This means, against the author's argument, there is no ethno-nationalist writer in the Amhara context. Furthermore, it should also be noted that ethno-nationalist sentiments emerged in the 1970s from both the North (often referred to as Tigrian writers) and the South (often referred to as Oromo writers) such as Asafa (2020).

Finally, those social groups with no ties to the Imperial Courts of the Ethiopian ruling class in the north, i.e., those of non-Habäsha origin (such as Oromo, Muslim, Cushitic, and so on), became the architects of the Ethiopian State in the 17th and up until the 20th centuries. As the author argued (p. vii.), the current Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who comes from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds (i.e., Oromo, Amhara, Muslim, and Christian), represents such a trend and the continuation of the previous political ascendancy.

In a nutshell, according to the book, the nature of the Ethiopian State is in the Process of *Habäshanes*, where one can introduce the functional theory anthropologists used, and in the battle of Adwa, everyone "was expected to act as one unified whole." Thus, in the functionalism theory, the systems must work together. If from the system, one of the sub-systems does not properly work and has some problems, other sub-systems would not properly function. All systems should work together. The analogy is that in Ethiopia while creating the *Habäsha* community, every community seems to have become unified, and the contributions of the northern Oromo in creating this unified whole to function together (in creating and reshaping Ethiopia) are irreplaceable, despite being underappreciated.

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