

## Book Review

Ronald A. Reminick, *Addis Ababa: the Evolution of an Urban African Cultural Landscape*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-7734-1387-0

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*Addis Ababa: the evolution of an urban African cultural landscape* is one of the books written by Ronald Reminick with a forward by Richard Pankhurst who has produced several books and articles on Ethiopia. The book is divided into four parts and twelve chapters. In the first part, it introduces theoretical and ethnographic realms of anthropology where the writer brings into attention some major players in the emergence of anthropological perspectives and paradigms by looking at some of the specific paradigms such as evolution, ecology, and research perspectives by stressing on periods of anthropological orientations and the emergence of cities in the world. In this introductory part, Reminick has discussed the timeline of the emergence of urban places in Africa. Chapter two introduces the land, peoples and cultures of Ethiopia while the third chapter presents the formulation of early urban places in Ethiopia. Chapter four describes the geomorphology and natural resources of Addis Ababa. Following this, the book details the development of Addis Ababa city from the time of its foundation to the period of the five years Italian occupation in its chapter five up to eight. The subsequent three chapters of the book discuss urban ecology by stressing on roads, capes, architectural styles and settlement patterns, economic institutions and venues in historical perspectives, and challenges to public health and welfare. The last chapter emphasizes on future prospects of research on motivation and modernization in which the writer has analyzed Korten's (1972) urban psychological study of modernization and development in Ethiopia where problems associated

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with adaptation to the modern urban organizational structure and the Abyssinian socio-cultural personality profile are presented. Finally, the book concludes with describing the state of Addis Ababa city in comparative perspective where he has also indicated areas of future research by way of tipping some recommendations.

I feel that Reminick's *Addis Ababa: The Evolution of an Urban African Cultural Landscape* is one of the thus far comprehensive urban anthropological studies in Ethiopia. Based on his field work first hand encounters and that of his students, Reminick presents detailed accounts of Addis Ababa as a developing African urban area from its emergence to the present. Great care has been given for all aspects of the city such as cultures, geography, economy, psychology of the people, and its challenges to be part of the global culture. However, since it is difficult to cover all the points raised in this book, I would like to focus on three major issues that have caught my interest with regard to anthropological undertaking of urban Ethiopia. These are Reminick's framework of anthropological theories at large, the still prevailing people's feudalistic perception of space or land within the context of urban development, and the present and future challenges of the city to be part of the globalizing world.

Anthropological theories are a key to the framing and explanation of global urban milieu. In this connection, this book presents cavernous theoretical and ethnographic contexts of anthropology where the writer has explored various realms of anthropological thought and major players in the development of the discipline within the scope of social sciences. It goes without saying that we should recognize the contribution of prominent anthropologists whose works and intellect are behind the theoretical orientations that Reminick has exhaustively addressed in this book. In this regard, anthropologists such as G. Frazier, B. Malinowski, F. Boaz, founding father of American anthropology, Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown from Great Britain who pioneered the school of structural-functionalism which has laid down a move both in methodology and theoretical paradigm are acknowledged by Reminick for their leading roles in anthropological orientations. I found this part interesting although, in my opinion, it would have been much more interesting if the author had put light on the development of urban anthropology as a sub discipline of anthropology today.

What we, including the writer himself, often talk about in anthropology is human evolution, a scientific paradigm which was one of the theoretical emphases of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here evolution, though still contentious, is depicted as a dominant thought employed to explain and give meaning to the existence and activities of human beings. In analyzing human evolution traced back to the works of Darwin, Ronald Reminick seems to stick to the structural – functionalist approach whose main postulate is that the human function is part of the larger ecological unit where each part has a responsibility to execute and in so doing maintain the survival of the system. At the same time, the four anthropological postulates (biological, psychological, social, and cultural) presented by Reminick seem to strengthen social Darwinism of the early anthropologists. Regarding urban anthropological research methodology or approaches, the writer argues that a researcher should employ a historical and diachronic approach in which he/she could relate the past to his/her contemporary urban milieu to clarify the evolution of cities and the regions of urban development as he himself has done in this book.

The second major point of discussion in this review is the idea that Reminick has exhaustively discussed the emergence and development of early urban centers in Ethiopia. Several contributing factors are discussed including the legend and mythologically dramatized Israeli-Ethiopian Christian connection to emphasize the contribution of this connection for the emergence of urban spaces in the northern part of the country. Regarding the emergence and development of Addis Ababa the book has depicted population dynamism of the city from the early settlement in terms of ethnic background where it puts the Oromo population to be the highest, nearly 31% of the 65,000 total population but does not reveal how long political and historical processes have created favorable conditions to change the population patterns where, today, the majority are members of non-Oromo ethnic groups. In connection with its development Reminick argues that Addis Ababa had no urban models to draw up on as a cultural resource because of the persistent feudal concepts of hierarchy and feudalistic acuity of land/space. The space, since the establishment of the city, has been ordained to serve the interests of the ruling system and the loyalists. This reminds me of my earlier reading on urban landholdings of

Addis Ababa where it was shown that the whole space of the city was held in the hands of 171 members of the feudal lords. This concentration of the land in the hands of a few was an overriding factor for the population dynamism the writer raised above, because it helped members of the ruling ethnic group to unconditionally migrate to the city.

Third, Roland Reminick has used original data that are not yet touched by the authors he cited in his book. These data reveal Addis Ababa's ever unabated problems of tracks and roadways in connection with space. Reminick questions why the city administration of Addis Ababa could not solve the problems related to the utilization of urban space and the persistence of the past mistakes in the present. He points out that the public buildings against the streets in Addis Ababa are either narrow pedestrian passages or none at all. Although the writer does not mention any major cause for this bottle neck to the future development and the beauty of the city, anyone who has some background reading on the 100 years development process of Addis Ababa can dwell on the unchanging feudalistic perception of land or ignorance, or lack of far sightedness in urban planning. The uncontrolled/unregulated, in some cases such as Sunday Markets on some main roads encouraged by the government, street side informal activities, lack of sufficient number of street signs and numbers, and pollution of rivers in city are all indicators of mal-urban management. Architecture is a key to the future of African cities such Addis Ababa where several continental and international organizations are hosted. The author of this book presents a list of types of housing ranging from the plastic sheltering against walls for the destitute to the first class modern buildings for foreigners and native residents.

Reminick, towards the end, discussed the importance of understanding the development and future of Addis Ababa within the present global political economy. Alike other cities of the developing world, Addis Ababa can be influenced by four dimensions of globalization. There is an economic dimension or aspect which involves the acquirement, production, distribution, and consumption of material resources. This involves the intensification and widening of economic interrelations with gigantic flows of capital and technology all of which are assumed to happen on a natural resource that we call land. It is the political economy of this crucial natural resource that Reminick has not given a due attention to. In the development process of Addis Ababa today, land has become a source of income for both

the government and for some individual speculators with no value addition. As clearly put by the writer, the political dimension of globalization is related to power which presumably strengthens political interdependence and power globally through the coming into picture of transnational corporations, intergovernmental agencies, and under the masquerade of the so-called “warfare against terrorism” today. Cultural dimension of globalization exerts its influence on cities of the developing world through the construction, articulation, and dissemination of meaning in all forms such as music and literature. For all the above three dimensions of globalization to be rewarding, a fourth dimension, technology, is a decisive tool. Finally, what would Ethiopia in general and Addis Ababa in particular go and get out of these all dimensions of globalization?

In general, Roland Reminick’s book, *Addis Ababa: The Evolution of an Urban African Landscape* has shown his cumulative research experience and rigorous exploration of Addis Ababa by using anthropological theories and perspectives in urban studies. Acknowledging Reminick for his clear understanding of the persistence of tradition, particularly the view that people and the government have for land, even today, that has hampered and likely would continue to do so if not changed, one could say that the writer does not dare to raise the political economy of urban land in and around Addis Ababa although this has a significant impact on the land holding mechanisms/processes, who does and who does not secure land in attaining the expected healthy rural-urban linkage. One more, while discussing the current landscape of Addis Ababa, Reminick has touched the pressing problem related with the use of urban spaces particularly in relation to tracks and roadside walks. Here, he should not have underestimated how the traditional perception of land and or the use of space have intensified the competition between tradition and modernity. Reminick, at least through the observation of his MA Social Anthropology students at Addis Ababa University, could add a part which deals with how people of any age in Addis Ababa make it possible to cross roads at any place any time. While one can observe that the city is renewing itself by demolishing its slum areas and by creating new modern residential /business quarters in almost every direction, its people are still crossing roads without looking; they can change their direction in the middle of the

road, or turn across any where suddenly and/ go back. Equally, animals are constantly present in all roads of any type. How far will all these take Addis Ababa to be one of the African urban centers in this impulsive globalizing world?

The final part of my comments fit tightly to Reminick's observation of the city's waste management problems. The rivers and small streams in Addis Ababa have been the main dumping sites of both liquid and solid waste. Even in the newly emerging modern residential and business buildings, many people, organizations, and institutions direct their sewerage systems to the rivers. As a result, someone who has got a close look at these rivers may label them as "Black Rivers of Addis Ababa City." Finally, I can say that Roland Reminick's work has a huge potential to initiate other anthropologists to pick up research agenda from the book itself and leaving more queries for others, in my opinion, this is the quality of an academic book of this kind.