



BOOK REVIEW

James De Lorenzi. *Guardians of the Tradition: Historians and Historical Writing in Ethiopia and Eritrea.* Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015; Rochester Studies in African history and the Diaspora series; xii + 219 pp. ISBN 9781580465199.

James De Lorenzi opens this insightful book by speculating on the contemporary historical discipline as a European-brokered synthesis of the world's many ways of representing the past. He goes on to give a masterful account of the origins and growth of historical writing in the Horn of Africa in recent times and centuries past, including interesting institutional developments, with a focus on a small but prolific cohort of relatively obscure Ethiopian and Eritrean intellectuals in the past 100 years.

The principal claim of the book is that both Ethiopia and Eritrea possess a developed vernacular historical tradition that flourished in the early twentieth century through its complex interaction with Western scholarship. This interaction did not entail the export or hegemony of abstract ideas related to intellectual 'modernity' or a culturally alien prose of history, but rather a process of selective appropriation by intellectuals from the Horn of Africa. Vernacular history was not westernised but instead it was Ethiopian historiography that was indigenised.

De Lorenzi contends that early authors of vernacular histories are best understood as public intellectuals who wove together multiple traditions of knowledge. The *Kebra Negast* is the best-known text compiling histories of the Solomonic dynasty; other ancient compilations, often linked to the Ethiopian Church or the royal family and nobles, are also discussed. But as the nineteenth century progressed the hybrid compositions of historians reveal the pervasive influence of ideas, politics and historical forces originating in the wider world, as African intellectuals grappled with the intrusions of the modern world. Into the twentieth century these new Ethiopian historians presented an alternative view of modern historiography, one 'that occasionally spoke a Rankean language with a thick local accent' (p. 9).

De Lorenzi argues that Ethiopian historical tradition is a fact-based field of learning with deep local roots, a stable canon of texts, a coherent set of

genres and methods, and a tremendous capacity for assimilation of external thought. He also makes a broader point, that history is a pluralist undertaking and can emerge anywhere and can be written in many genres and modes. De Lorenzi has done a fine job in bringing us a nuanced understanding of a grand yet evolving historiographical tradition and its 'guardians.' He concludes that while Ethiopian and Eritrean historical writing is Africa's oldest form of historiography, it is largely unknown outside the societies that produced it, a 'situation that has impoverished our general historical understanding' (p. 137). This book goes a considerable way toward expanding our historiographical vistas.

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