

MODERNIST ART IN ETHIOPIA

Modernist Art in Ethiopia.

By Elizabeth W. Giorgis.

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Modernist Art in Ethiopia presents an absorbing study of Ethiopian modernism and modernity, a largely under-theorized genre of Ethiopian scholarship. The book is divided into five chapters, three of them on the imperial period (1900–74) and the other two on Ethiopia under succeeding revolutionary regimes. Written with verve and lucidity, Elizabeth W. Giorgis' first monograph takes its readers into a world of complicated encounters between Ethiopia, Africa, and the West, and to the intersections of art, culture, history, and ideology. While examining the development trajectory of Ethiopian modernist art, Elizabeth also interrogates the idea of Ethiopia, the entangled histories of its modernity, and the politics of its complex and constantly evolving engagement with the world. Chapter Four, for instance, captures the author's arresting meditations on these crucial questions, but also reveals the problematics of interpreting the making of culture in a time of radical, and violent, revolution.

Reading the book makes one point very clear. Understanding this time period, which is under-studied and often viewed through the prism of intellectual and artistic bareness, requires a framework — a vocabulary of social analysis — that is more expansive than the limiting language of resistance versus accommodation. This expansive approach is evident in explorations of how subversion can simultaneously become collusion when state and art drew from the same hegemonic understandings of past, future, history, and nation.

Two contributions of the book are particularly crucial. First, the author links her discussion of art, culture, and cultural politics to an analysis of Ethiopia's history of ideas, considering art and culture not as a distinct category of analysis, as often is the case (at least in Ethiopian scholarship), but one that intersects deeply with politics, economy, and ideology. Second, she situates her analysis of Ethiopia and its cultural history within broader discussions of coloniality, the colonial project, Western modernity, and global capital. Such a transnational methodology avoids the pitfalls of a deeply entrenched and obfuscating Ethio-centric epistemic structure. At the same time, the author employs this approach as a critique of the 'paradigm of difference', an exceptionalist and exceptionalizing thesis that abnormalizes Ethiopia, not to mention the global south, as the 'other', outside of the global currents and narratives of progress. She argues instead that these areas are never peripheral to history but rather are deeply implicated in its constitution. Such a methodology is refreshing, and the resulting interpretation liberating of the sterile assumptions and understandings of Ethiopia and its encounters with and experiences of modernity.

However, a caveat is needed. Giorgis' recurrent critique is that Ethiopian scholars have neglected to engage critically with discussions of colonialism and global capital, or to delve into deep conversations on the coloniality of Ethiopia's modernity and its social

formations. An alternative approach is to analyse and enrich Ethiopia's intellectual development in at least two ways. One is to argue, as we recognize the validity of Giorgis' critique, that a tradition, albeit embryonic, of critical interrogation existed since the early twentieth century in the works of such intellectuals as *Neggadras* Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, who, unfortunately, is not included in the book.¹ A decolonial pan-Africanist episteme also informed the intellectual and cultural productions of the 1960s and 1970s. Alongside the deeply critical works of Skunder Boghossian, which the author discusses in detail, there are also other works by his contemporaries, some theoretically thick like those of the playwright Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, that equally engaged with discourses of black aesthetics, alterity, coloniality, and the Eurocentric foundations of global modernity.² After all, most intellectuals of Ethiopia's long twentieth century were products of a (post)colonial political and intellectual environment that was changing under conditions of decolonization, the civil rights movement, and the 'Cold War'. The other way to liberate and enrich Ethiopian scholarship is to substitute the largely ineffectual idea of exceptionalism with the more generative idea of entanglement and ambivalence under which Ethiopia operated and interacted with the world.

A critical reading of *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* underscores the need for a theorization of the idea of Ethiopia and the practice of modernity that is expansive and critical. This is more than replacing one hegemonic discourse (the orientalist–Semiticist conception of Ethiopia) for another (a decolonial pan-Africanist rendering) that engenders a reductive one-dimensional account that is theoretically obfuscating and politically constraining.

Notwithstanding the few omissions of critical Ethiopian literature and occasional slip-pages into a positivist teleology, Giorgis' *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* raises fundamental questions about knowledge production, global structures, history, and historiography, while it also makes a forceful case for a new decolonial pan-Africanist framework of analysis. Therein lies the significance of this book as an important contribution to transnational-global discussions about coloniality, decoloniality, modernity, global capital, and the political and cultural ramifications of these discourses and practices. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* is as much a book on Ethiopia as it is about the world, its exclusionary configurations, and their differentiating implications. This makes this well-written and illustrated book an essential text for anyone interested in a deeper probing of ideas of Ethiopia, Africa, the 'global south', and the entanglement with the north, especially in the time of neoliberal globalization and struggles for decolonization.

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1 G. Baykedagn, *Mengest-ena YeHezb Astedader* [Government and Public Administration] (Addis Ababa, 1960–1 [1953 Ethiopian calendar]).

2 S. Deressa, 'Skunder: in retrospect precociously', *Ethiopia Observer*, 10:3 (1965), 8–14; 'Skunder in context', *Ethiopian BIR*, 3:1 (1997), 14–28; T. G. Medhin, 'World dimensions of the community of black peoples', *Presence Africaine*, 123:3 (1982), 3–19; and *Ha Hu Besedest Wor Ena Enat Alem Tenu* [ABC in Six Months and Mother Tenu] (Addis Ababa, 1975), the latter being major plays by the author.