

MEMOIRS AND BIOGRAPHY

Bereket Habte Selassie. *The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel.* Trenton, N.J., and Asmara, Eritrea: The Red Sea Press, 2007. 350 pp. Index. \$29.95. Paper.

The memoir is an underdeveloped genre in Africa. Some might wonder whether many Africans live a life worth recording, since we are often condemned to be the object rather than agent or author of history. Those Africans who do manage to make history—or play a significant part in it—sometimes feel better off not telling their stories, particularly while they are still alive, often for understandable reasons. And those who make history may indeed not have the time to record it. Bereket Habte Selassie has overcome these impediments in writing *The Crown and the Pen*. In writing a memoir, an author sometimes fall victim to the temptation of stretching the truth, exaggerating one's role in historical events, or trying to anticipate or preempt criticism from imagined skeptical readers. One finds in Selassie's memoir ample expressions of these challenges, and how he tries to overcome them.

Like all good memoirs, *The Crown and the Pen* tells the story of the roads traversed by a dynamic and brilliant man, from his early childhood to the moment of his induction into the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The historically important story, therefore, is interspersed with the mundane personal one, the politically trenchant observations with the casual remarks, the extraordinary details with the commonplace, and so forth. But the author deftly makes smooth transitions from one part of the story to another, holding a reader's attention.

In a relatively short period, Selassie succeeded in vertical penetration of the citadels of power; he was at the center of Ethiopian politics both during the imperial rule and in the early part of the military regime. He met with prominent African leaders, too, from Patrice Lumumba, Milton Obote, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda and Emperor Haile Selassie to Aman Andom and Mengistu Haile Mariam. He also had encounters with freedom fighters and theorists such as Frantz Fanon.

Selassie rose and fell in the royal politics of Ethiopia, as symbolized in his ascendancy to the position of attorney-general and his relegation later to the mayoralty of the provincial town of Harar. But given his encounters more than once with deadly threats, one conclusion that can be drawn from the book is that he was not only a crafty son of Eritrea, but also an incredibly lucky one. In other words, he escaped prosecution, overcame machinations and even defied death—sometimes by dint of his tactful maneuvering, but more often by chance.

The memoir gives a rare glimpse of royal politics in Ethiopia in all its forms—loyalty and manipulation, politics and power—as it unfolded in front of the eyes of a remarkably talented man who arose from humble

origins. The writer's account of his observations of and participation in the creation of the Organization of African Unity, as well as his retrospective reflections about it, is especially illuminating and spell-binding.

Particularly informative in this regard is chapter 10, "As the Sun King Becomes Africa's Father." Here Selassie captures, in all of its nuance, the drama surrounding the OAU's founding in 1963—with its seriousness of purpose, hilarious moments, gratifications and disappointment, mischief and intrigue—as played out at one of the largest gatherings of the first generation of postcolonial African leaders. Still, a reader interested in the subject will be disappointed by the brevity of his account unless it is realized that this is a memoir and not a treatise.

In short, these are the reflections of a participant-observer who helped create, or at least closely observed the creation of, unity in Africa, however embryonic. Selassie also presided over (or perhaps contributed to) the splintering of Africa, and managed the secession (or as Selassie puts it, the liberation) of Eritrea, although from early childhood he was wary of a border's tendency to "divid[e] people" (45).

Selassie's extraordinary proximity to the corridors of power in Ethiopia and beyond gives authority and credence to many of his theories. But the best way to read this book would be to focus on its most objectively factual observations rather than on the author's subjective interpretation of historical events. This is one of the most valuable memoirs to be penned by a postcolonial African. It shines useful light on the making and unmaking of the Ethiopian empire.

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Samba Gadjigo. *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*. Translated by Moustapha Diop. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xxvi + 188 pp. Illustrations. Biographical chronology. Index. \$50. Cloth. \$19.95. Paper.

Three years ago, Samba Gadjigo published his first volume on the life of Sembène Ousmane, *Ousmane Sembène: Une conscience africaine* (Editions Homnispheres). It has now appeared in English translation, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*. Although a number of excellent studies of Sembène's work have appeared, including Françoise Pfaff's important early *Cinema of Sembène Ousmane: A Pioneer of African Film* (Greenwood Press, 1984), and the more recent *Ousmane Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (Africa World Press, 2003) by David Murphy, neither of these or the many other collections, articles, or books on Sembène's work could be properly called a biography.