

A NEW TRANSLATION

The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman.

By Galawdewos. Translated and edited by Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xxxvii + 500. \$39.95, hardback (ISBN 9780691164212).

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Key Words: Ethiopia, northeastern Africa, biography, Christianity, women.

The book under review takes us to the Christian Ethiopian highlands of the seventeenth century. The aftermath of the *jihad* against the Christian Empire was still tangible and manifested especially in the presence of the Jesuit missionaries, who were crucial in defeating the Muslims. In the Christian Orthodox Emperor Susenyos they had found a willing candidate for promoting their Catholic faith and succeeded to convert him and large parts of the royal elite around 1615. The majority of the country's people were less happy with the new religious creed and several resistance groups emerged, mainly around charismatic leaders. One of which was a young woman, Walatta Petros. Of noble birth and married to a high court official, she managed to leave her husband and take up religious life, grew to become a spiritual leader of the highest esteem, and founded no less than seven monastic communities. Today she is venerated as a saint in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and remembered especially for her resistance against the Jesuits.

Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner's book presents Walatta Petros's *gedl* (hagiography), which was written by the monk Galawdewos in 1672, thirty years after Petros's death. It illustrates the 'Life and Struggle' of this outstanding female figure and allows us a fresh glance on the life and times of seventeenth-century Ethiopia.

The book falls into three parts, shared between Belcher and Kleiner. A brief introduction by Belcher sets the stage for the following hagiography and explains the political and religious context in which it is set. Unfortunately, preference is given to generic terms like 'Habesha' and 'Tewahedo' to address the Christian people of the Ethiopian highlands – an avoidable and problematic choice, seeing that it fails to do justice to the serious Christological debates raging within the Ethiopian Church. A footnote explaining why preference was given to these imprecisions would have been desirable. The majority of the book is occupied by the English translation of the text of the *gedl*, written in the ancient Ethiopic language Ge'ez. The translation by Kleiner is enhanced by a rich set of footnotes. These footnotes contain linguistic variants of the 11 compared manuscripts, references to the Biblical quotations of the text, as well as explanations of Ethiopic personal names, Ethiopic titles and functions, place names, calendars, customs, history, and politics. The Ethiopic manuscripts that contain the *gedl* are adorned with a number of elaborated illuminations that were added to the book in beautiful colored prints.

The translation of the *gedl* is followed by two shorter poetical pieces praising Saint Walatta Petros, translated in a 'poetic style' by Derek Gideon and Kristin Fogdall. The book is closed by a substantial glossary, treating 'people, places and terms' in alphabetic order, written by Belcher.

Albeit it accounts for the whole genre of *gedl*, this hagiography is a treasure of information. If you look at it with a feminist eye (as Belcher promotes it), you will notice that the classic distribution of gender roles is challenged. Walatta Petros was the uncontested leader of several mixed-gender monastic communities; she debated with kings, missionaries, and high clerics; and, she led a self-determined life after leaving her husband. When her death was near, male community members conferred with her on who should succeed her rule. Her decision to name her loyal companion Eheta Kristos – another woman – was not contested.

Even without a feminist focus, the text offers fascinating insight into its time of composition. It presents the Ethiopian side of history and reveals how unpopular the Jesuits were and how the Orthodox resistance suffered and was contested by the king, missionaries, and court members alike.

We learn that it was challenging for the community members of Wallata Petros's monasteries to keep the vow of celibacy, as she assembled large groups of men and women at the same time. And we read that former slaves could live together with former slave owners in the same community and with the same social status.

In advertising the book, Belcher unfortunately reduced the noteworthiness of the text to the mention of same-sex desire included in a short episode of Petros's hagiography. This is a fact worthy of note, especially for a seventeenth-century text from Orthodox Ethiopia; however, it is simply one short episode. It also is not clear who the intended audience would be. The introduction appeals to the interested laymen, while the translation of the text and especially its annotation are of high standard. It would be desirable for its author, Michael Kleiner, to publish the whole Ethiopic text in a critical edition, since he has delivered such a meticulous work already.

Despite the criticism, the book under review is a welcome piece as it opens Ethiopian history to the broader public and presents the, rather unexpected, influential role women exerted in the religious and political society of seventeenth-century Ethiopia.

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SOMALI MIGRATION

Elusive Jannah: The Somali Diaspora and a Borderless Muslim Identity.

By Cawo M. Abdi.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 289. \$94.50, hardback (ISBN 978-0-8166-9738-0); \$27.00, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8166-9739-7).

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Key Words: Somalia, northeastern Africa, diaspora, Islam, migration, refugees.

This pioneering study compares the refugee and migration experiences of Somalis residing in three very different parts of the world: the United Arab Emirates (UAE); South Africa (especially, but not only, Gauteng Province); and the US (especially Minnesota and Ohio). Combining approaches that often remain apart – the anthropologist's focus on