

Book Review

Ayele Bekerie. *Ethiopic: An African Writing System--Its history and principles*. Lawrenceville, N.J., and Asmara, Eritrea: Red Sea Press, 1997. xiv + 176 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56902-021-0; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56902-020-3.

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Ethiopian history is notoriously a history abounded in mystifications, phantasms and de-Africanizations. A key aspect of these mystifying narratives is about the social origin of the so-called Ethiopic writing system. However, Ayele Bekerie's *Ethiopic* is the first break with reproduction of flaw. In his book about the history and principles of Ethiopic system, Bekerie exploits his ideographical, syllographical, astronomical, grammatological and theological knowledge and argues that Ethiopic is part of the Ancient African societies' philosophy. For the conservative Abyssinianists, Bekerie's work is disconcerting, while for the few relatively liberal Ethiopianists it is disillusioning. Yet, for a critical Africologist, it is a step in the right direction. Yet, for non-Semitic scholars and peoples in the Horn of Africa it is a swerve between the former two, Abyssinianism and Ethiopianism. In other words, it is reification—a history book without human agents. Using theories in historical linguistics, discourse analysis, social semiosis and history of philosophy, this paper attempts to unveil these anomalies in Bekerie's *Ethiopic*. Directions for future research are also pointed out.

Key words: Ayele, Bekerie, Ethiopic, Ge'ez, Oromo, Cush, writing, system.

INTRODUCTION

Though the central theme as in the title suggests it is a book on a 'Writing System', Ayele Bekerie's work (*Ethiopic*) can be approached as a critical philological-historical analysis of the narratives of non-African (Indo-Semitic) civilization built into Africa, particularly North-East and Horn of Africa. The first time I run through Bekerie's book, I felt that it was Ethiopianized version of

Martin Bernal's semiticized *Black Athena* (1987), critical works yet perpetuating the usual gulf between Ancient African and Arabian landmasses. The moment I began to read it the second time, I found him, just in the early few pages, transgressing this artificial boarder. Note that Bekerie's book comprises six chapters. The introduction (chapter) is a bit lengthy (pp.1-30). The main

body comprises five chapters: "The Arabian Peninsula in Ethiopian Historiography" (pp. 31-60); "The History and Principles of the Ethiopic Writing System" (pp. 61-103); "*The Book of Hénok* and African Historiography" (pp.105-18); "*Se'en*: Aesthetics and Literary Traditions of Ethiopia" (pp.119-39); and, Conclusion (pp.141-49). Each chapter comprises bibliographic endnotes, in addition to presentation of a comprehensive Bibliographic notes (pp.151-64) and Index (pp.165-76).

So crucial to his scholarship, Bekerie locates himself in the Africologist framework, namely the *Locational Model* of history of philosophy (pp.12-18). The tenet of this Model is that African people are subjects of their own as well as the whole world's historical and social experience rather than, as Eurocentrists insist, objects in the margin of European experience (Asante, 1992). With this framework, Bekerie's ultimate goal is to locate the social-historical origin of Ethiopic system in an African context. This is his response to the mainstream Indo-Europeanist "persistent interjection of the Semitic Paradigm" (p.18) that thrives to dislocate "Ethiopic system" to South Arabia. Nevertheless, he himself could not successfully break with the same paradigm which veiled truth about the history and agents of the *Ethiopic* system. The purpose of this paper is to explicate some of Bekerie's groundbreaking perspectives as well as unveil some of the mystifications he still perpetuates quite not unwittingly. Firstly, his style, both in the traditional and critical sense (Fairclough 2003), shall be discussed. Secondly, how the author braved challenging the commonsense about *Ethiopic* shall be pointed out. Next, an explication of how the author leaves intact a 'history' abounded in mysteries shall be made, chiefly focusing on alternative perspectives that he neglected. Finally, conclusion and implications for future action shall be presented.

STYLE

Primarily, in the traditional sense of *style*--the distinctive choice of language--Bekerie needs to be appreciated. He writes in simple, clear English in African nuance which makes any graduate student not only appreciate but also understand what he wants to mean. Overall, he skillfully avoids the usual colorful, bombastic and non-lively vocabulary which by contrast is the favorite of some African writers. Short and precise sentences and paragraphs are styles which good writers employ and so does Bekerie. Nevertheless, especially in Chapter 1, lengthy and numerous quotations and dotted and numbered lists, with insignificant level of his own voices, are among Bekerie's stylistical drawbacks. This crippled not only illumination of alternative perspectives but also renders the book to appear a graduate student's notebook taken, however, in a critical historian's classroom lecture. Moreover, strange transcriptions unknown to IPA

are widely employed. This repulses 'appetite' of an international reader.

In Faircloughnean (Fairclough, 2003) critical linguistics sense, an author's style also textures identification. As such, the lion share of Bekerie's book is ascribed to Abyssinian Orthodox Church identity crisis: the dogmatic hymn and celebratory music to Eurocentrists' Virgin Mary, Angels and Kings. Still, his too liturgical language, a manifestation of his infatuation with the Abyssinian Orthodox Church history, at least offends readers from different background: Islam, Waaqeffanna (the pre-Christian Oromo religion, worshiping *Waaqaa* 'Black God; Sky, Heaven'), Protestantism or Atheism. At worst, they categorize him under '(Orthodox) Christian terrorists.'

The ultimate goal of the book seems to advance "our contention that" the "Latin script currently in use among some *Oromo* circle" is made "without a thorough knowledge of the [Ge'ez] system" (pp. 94-95; emphasis original); that the system can address the "explosive [ejectives?] sounds" found both in "*Orominya* and *Amarinya*" and the choice of Latin "limit or compromise the rich and varied polyrhythmic sounds of the Oromo language" (p. 95). At the end of his book Bekerie reiterates, "Whatever the distress other parts of the system, *priests and monks* had support, facilities, and protection that enabled them to keep alive the central ideas of their tradition" (p. 148). This suggests that he is also open to critique or criticism.

CRITICALITY: CHALLENGING COMMONSENSE

In Chapter 1, Bekerie explicates and explains away the "Semitic Paradigm" or "Indo-Semitic" mindset responsible for "external paradigm". He also adds to this group the students of the latter, namely "the miseducated Ethiopians" (p. 35). In Chapter 2, he treats on "the history and principles of the Ethiopic writing system". In the last two chapters he chiefly analyzes, *Ethiopic Book of Hénok* and the Ge'ez 'philosophy' especially *Se'en*, which he defined as at several places as "aesthetic and literary tradition of Ethiopia". His key argumentation is that Ge'ez or Ethiopic, as a language, and the texts *i* are African text and philosophy.

Bekerie adopts multidisciplinary approach--history, linguistics, theology, calligraphy--which makes the book so interesting and, indeed, proves that he has read widely to present his point. More interesting, Bekerie appears from outset so progressive and transgressive that he lends to negative critique those traditional extremist Ethiopian 'historians', whom he calls 'Ethiopianists', albeit, he avoids the term 'Abyssinianists', a term that other critical social scientists like Asmarom Legesse (Legesse, 2000, 1973), to mention a few, prefer. Bekerie's critical stance unfolds especially when he articulates that the "Hamitic/Semitic divide" (p.44) that "Ullendorff the teacher and Sergew the student" are fancy of is "but a

means to keep the Ethiopian people divided” (p. 44). That Ullendorff “the teacher” drew parallelism between “South Arabia”, the origin of Ethio-Semites, and “Aksum”, on the one hand, and “Wales” and “New South Wales” or “New York”, on the other, is one of his skillful disentanglement of a good stuff of ridicule. Yet, Bekerie’s main effort is to falsificate the God-Selected, Orthodox-Semite Ethiopia, fabricated through the window of Eurocentric scholars. His double-face sword pointed also at the local Semitists, who, in their joint anti-aboriginals, built a pile of myths as ‘history’ over the past two centuries. The author then, in his critical lashes proceeds to listing critical questions that the “external paradigms” and “the miseducated Ethiopians” should collectively take as their homework: What is south Arabia? What is the evidence for South Arabian origin of the Ethiopian Civilization? What is South Semitic?—a language? a group of languages? writing system? ethnographic or linguistic category? Why was there no internal source for the Ethiopian civilization? (pp. 34-35).

CAVEATS: SWERVING BETWEEN POSITIVISM AND CRITICALITY

Bekerie’s big caveat in his masterpiece seems that he continues to point to *unexplained* Proto-Ethiopic and/or Ethiopic society which had had age-level based social philosophy and advanced curricula: linguistics, grammar, theology, astronomy, mathematics, military, medicine, literature and so forth. In this respect Bekerie seems to suggest ‘(Proto)-Ethiopic’, ‘Geez’ speakers or ‘Sabaeen’, ‘Axumite’ people, preemptively and pervasively, if these were unblemished. It is so striking that he never touched the ancient-to-contemporary advanced age-/generation-based theologico-political Gada System of Oromo-Cush founded upon the supreme creator, Waaqaa ‘Black-God’ (De Salviac, 2005[1901]). Indeed, in his later work, Bekerie unveils the discovery of “ancient Egyptian documents and artifacts” in which “significant Oromo conceptual terms” are found: Egyptian *Auqas* “a name of the divine ferryman” and what “Oromos call their God Waqaa [Waaqaa]”; Greek “term Sirius, the beautiful star that rises once a year towards the source of the Nile”, which corresponds “both in meaning and pronunciation with the Oromo term for a dog, *Sarre*” and the “star warns the Egyptian farmer against the coming water” (Bekerie, 2004:116). Bekerie’s reference to Oromo language, which the speakers significate as *Afan Oromo* for themselves, as “Oromiyña” /oromiñña/ speaks directly to his continuation of the Abyssinianist hegemony, while, he, on the other hand, accuses the Western for their “hegemonic epistemology”.

At some point (pp. 65-66) he implicitly agrees with many who believe the present day Ethiopia does, historically and geographically, never stand for the Ancient Ethiopia. He also appears to deconstruct the idea

of ‘Hametic’ as a quite racist term fabricated by extreme Indo-Semitist scholars to legitimize the false impressions of ‘white Ancient Ethiopians’ or what Chiekh Anta Diop (Diop, 1975) says ‘white-pharaohs of Ancient Egyptian’, with the intention to muddy the African origin of civilization. But he distances himself from the great scholars like Houston (1926). Given his critical stance that classical Aksumite people are Black Africans and their civilization is non-imported, his ambiguous, unclear position from the outset not only leaves the reader wade in the traditional wisdom but also makes him exposed to what the critical linguist Fairclough (2003: 10) says a “managerial style”, a style that inculcates big claims in “business-like ways.” This ambiguous and positivistic attitude demeans the author’s commitment with respect to truth, obligation, values and evaluative sense. For instance, why could not he add to his critical questions the “external paradigms” and “the miseducated Ethiopians”: How come that powerful language called Ge’ez died after few centuries of its emergence? According to Ullendorff (1960) it emerged in the A.D. 3rd century and substituted the Classical Greek serving as a *lingua franca*, documentary, official and communicative language of Axumite, only in A.D. 8th century evolved into two different languages, Amhariña and Tigiriña, in A.D. 10th or 11th century.

NEGLECTING OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Bekerie rarely uses etymology-cum-history for his argumentations. For instances a large portion of his book is devoted to what he calls Geez *siwasiw*, ‘grammar’, which he acknowledge as originally meaning ‘ladder’. This is in actuality an anagram of Oromo word *wazaza* ‘a bier upon which the dead bodies are carried to the grave’ (Tutschek, 1844:153), a symbol of *wadaa* ‘alliance, oath’ with the deceased. The Oromo and Classical Greek concept of grammar correspond both in form and meaning. In Oromo, the polysemous word *qaraa* means, among others, ‘read, sharpen; inquire, be wise, civilized’ from which the metaphorical *qoro* ‘wise, aristocrat, hawk’ comes. The same concept must be at work in Meroitic *kerma*, *qore* ‘chief, king’ (Aubin 2003: 31) and Egyptian ‘hawk’ and its symbolic representations. It is not by chance but by influence of Africans that in Classical Greek *χάρα* means ‘pierce, sharpen, engrave,’ the embryonic stage of grammar and grammatology.

Bekerie uses sometimes so ecclesiastic etymology, which does not connect to reality. For instance, he draws our attention to “the great book”, namely, “Māzmura Dawit”, one of “the only” Abyssinians gospels, that *B’alu*, a counterpart of *Baal*, which the Middle East Semites claim patent right for and Bekerie seems to refute, is, according to him, Ge’ez, on one hand, and is the invention of the Abyssinian Orthodox Church, on the

other, as observed in the banner “*Ba’ala Igzia’bher* or God is Lord” (p.71). He has to defend himself because, since time immemorial, the Oromo (Cush) peoples have been instituting and practicing social praxis whose names are very much connected to the radicals b-l- (or b-r-, w-l- with rhotacization and ablauting). Few examples can be mentioned: the cosmogony (*βala*, *Wala-bú*) and genesis of Man (*Ba*), the cradle land of origin (*Baalí*, *Baalee*), the genealogical lineage-formation (*balbala*), the solemnest ritual of adoption of infants (*baallii*), the Gada ceremony of power-handover after every 8-year (*baalli*) holding the sacred, symbolic ostrich feather (*baallii*) or leaves of sacred plants (*baallii*), and so forth (Hassen, 1990). Beyond dogmatically and circularly defining “*Ba’al* is a crucified God” (p.72), the author never explains the socio-cultural meaning, generative mechanisms or the human agents.

CONFUSING DOGMA AND PHILOSOPHY

Somewhere in his book (pp. 97-98), Bekerie lists five “principles of writing systems”, each of which he used to justify the emergence and grandioseness of *Ethiopic* system. Among them is that “writing is philosophy” and, hence, a philosophical book was first written in “Ethiopian classical writings.” According to him this book was translated from Geez or Ethiopic into English by Willis Budge, the London Museum guard, under the title “The Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great.” Here comes the argument. This writing is philosophical because “Alexander the Great, the conqueror of Egypt and the founder of Alexandria...and his deeds were glorified” by church “scholars” and “philosophers” of “Ethiopia”.

This statement contains a very injurious sense, because, among the discourse community of African scholars, the deadliest insult one can do to a (African) person is to glorify Alexander of Macedonia as “conqueror”, “great”, “founder”. On the one hand, this amounts to thrashing ‘philosophy’. Philosophy is, rather, a practice of advancing human “pulse of freedom”, to a system where the flourish of each is (considered as) a precondition for flourishing of all of us and all of us are never free inasmuch as a single woman is enslaved for freedom is, as Martin Luther King would say, *indivisible*. On the other hand, Bekerie fails to understand that for millions, Alexander came as perpetrator of genocide and looter of African documents of science and philosophy. Did he conquer Egyptian to advance freedom? Perhaps, it is him that not only interrupted African civilization ahead of Europe, but also the one who reduced Africans to today’s Third World. Simple questions for Bekerie: What exactly is the meaning and purpose of philosophy? Who are the Ethiopian “philosophers” or “scholars” who accomplished Luther-King-like philosophy? History of Ethiopia tells us that never in history was an Abyssinian Orthodox priest preached love, equality, respect but hat-

red, ethnocentric stereotypes against ‘pagans’. In the name of church and state, his ‘scholars’ and ‘philosophers’ only committed genocide alongside Abyssinian “kings” like Minilik, Theodros and Yohannes.

LACK OF INTERTEXTUALITY: A BARRIER IN ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

Bekerie is rather one-sided in selecting resources for his argumentations. He could have been more sensitive and inclusive to ‘non-Ethiosemitic’ texts for competing theoretical concepts and arguments. He is totally fixated on the spatiotemporally and epistemologically narrow, monastic ‘scholarship’ which Legesse (2000), one of the most respected and objective social scientists on East and Horn of Africa, treated under “The Barriers in Ethiopian Studies”. As a reader reads through and through, it becomes clear that the ultimate goal of Bekerie is to revitalize the dominance of “Amharic Language” and the often repeated nonsense of “Ethio-Semitic” grand narratives (p.136). To disentangle it more, Bekerie’s *Ethiopic* appears to be the last battle to save the dominant *mythocracy* of the Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity, the champion of “Ethiopic” and the Ethiopian State, but a worldview that, in fact, disapproved iconographic engravings and signs such as of *Ethiopic* as “satanic” and “pagan” since its very inception in the A.D. 4th century. Indeed, Bekerie (p.116), a subaltern scholar, has speculated:

Western scholars’ consistent intent to exclude, without any evidence, the [ancient] Ethiopic language as one of the possible languages of [the ancient documents], perhaps, suggests that the Ethiopic language is not part of the Indo-Semitic languages...[rather it] is an African language and thus it is not suitable within the hegemonic paradigm of the western scholarship.

Nevertheless, without explicitly stating the owners his statements like “the Ethiopic writing system [is linked] to the material and historical reality or experience of the people” (p.136) becomes an empty word display. If Bekerie braves truth more, as he has begun it well, then, he should agree with Houston (1926:17-18):

Stephanus of Byzantium, voicing the universal testimony of antiquity wrote, ‘Ethiopia was the first established country on earth and the Ethiopians were the first to set up the worship of the gods and to establish laws.’ The later ages gained from this ancient empire, the fundamental principles upon which republican governments are founded. The basic stones of that wonderful dominion were equality, temperance, industry, intelligence and justice.... The gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans were but the borrowed kings and queens of this Cushite Empire of Ethiopians.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The general aim of this paper is to critically analyze Dr. Ayele Bekerie's *Ethiopic*, an unusual book in the historiography of Ethiopia, a historiography notoriously known for fabricating and perpetuating fairy tales and legends as "true history". No question Bekerie is perhaps the first historian to destabilize the myths built up for over a century about the current Ethiopia. He sheds new light on where to look for in our inquiry into social-philosophical history of Ethiopia and especially for students of (evolutionary) social semiotics mainly because the Horn of Africa is, indeed, the epicenter of origin of not just humanity but also civilization. Yet, if Bekerie would have re-written or edited his book and came up with '*Ethiopic: Another stolen legacy of Cushites*', modeling himself on the critical philosopher George James (James, 1954), his book would have been read as a truly Locational Model book. In only doing so—that is, putting the transformative power of humans at the centre--will his work be read as true 'history' instead of the reified, *peopleless* 'history'.

Further research would reveal whether *Ethiopic* is different or just a gradual development out of its precedents. Nonetheless, scholars are concordant on not only African origin of social semiosis as social praxis (representation, storage and reproduction of social knowledge, including writing system, grammatology, rhetoric, logic and mythology), but also origin of this in African mythical metaphors as well. Therefore, how different is *Ethiopic* system from the Ancient Black Meroitic, Nubian, Egyptian, Zimbabwean social semiosis? How different is the *Ethiopic* system from, to mention only few: The prehistoric Konso, T³iya stone slab cultures of storing their mythological, ancestral knowledge (Jensen, 1942)?; The pre-Egyptian Laga Oda, Laga Gaḥra on-rock rhetorics (Červíček and Braukämper, 1975)?; The ancient, paradigmatic and sophisticated (Oromo-Cush) Gada system—cosmogonal, theological, genealogical-generational, sociopolitical, lunar-stellar calendrical systems (Tablino, 1994; Legesse, 1973; Doyle, 1986; Bassi, 1988)? Unfortunately, the vast majority of documents on these civilizations have been written by Eurocentric, colonial-mentality scholars who either saw them from spatiotemporally narrow perspective or de-Africanized them or just ascribed them to imaginary agents such as "Gudit", "Harla", "Belu", etc (Červíček and Braukämper, 1975:49). Apparently, these strange names are the usual linguistic play through alchemy (deforming *Gada* to "Gudit") and rhotacization of the liquids // and /r/ (hence, changing Bora and Harar, or related, to "Belu" and "Harla"), for the principle of *consonantal compatibility restrictions* in Afroasiatic phylum does not allow these liquids to co-occur in base-words (Rowan, 2006).

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