

Conference Reports

The 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Dirre Dawa: “Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement”, 29 October to 3 November 2012¹

1. Introduction

On 29 October to 3 November 2012 the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES18) was held in Dirre Dawa in Ethiopia, with the leading theme “Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement”². This city is located in the east of Ethiopia, a commercial city, historically connected to Djibouti by railroad. Around 300 researchers participated in this conference, which was held at venues in Dire Dawa University (DDU) and the city administration building.

The conference was organized by the French Centre of Ethiopian Studies (CFEE), Addis Ababa, the French research institution in Ethiopia, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) of Addis Ababa University, in cooperation with DDU. As the organizer of the conference was France, with a French Committee having been set up by the CFEE³, it was originally expected that it would be organized in France, but finally it was decided to convene it in Dirre Dawa. The reason for this was (1) the scarcity of funds, which caused considerable difficulties to organize it in France, and (2) considering that the

¹ A Japanese version of this conference report is accessible on the internet, at the website of the Japan Association for Nilo-Ethiopian Studies in Kyoto (JANES), Japan: Wolbert Smidt (ウォルバート・スミット) & Ōba Chikage (大場千景): 第18回国際エチオピア学会学術大会, *JANES Newsletter / JANES ニュースレター*, 21, p. 28-32 (<http://www.janestudies.org/drupal-jp/node/165>). We thank Yoko Furusaki, Mekelle University (member of the organizing committee of ICES18), for assisting in the translation of this text.

² On the participation of researchers from Mekelle and the conceptual framework of the conference see: Wolbert Smidt: “Report on the Participation of Staff Members of Mekelle University at the 18th ICES, Dire Dawa, Oct./Nov. 2012”, in: *voice, The Magazine of the College of Social Sciences and Languages*, No. 10, [May] 2013, p. 20-22. – In the conference announcement of 2011 the conference theme was described in these terms: “The agreed theme of the ICES 18 is ‘Movements in Ethiopia / Ethiopia in Movement’. This theme is aimed at encouraging panel proposals and subsequently paper proposals that would deal with the issues of ‘movement’ in its widest sense. Not only studies on social, religious, political, cultural movements are likely to fit into the theme, but also any focus on circulation of words, ideas and peoples; the dynamics of contacts and exchanges; the effect of intellectual or economic change on societies, etc. Movement can also be understood in its concrete physical and spatial meaning encompassing travels, migrations and transportation of goods and commodities at different scales. Dances and gestures are also movements.”

³ Chaired by the CFEE director Dr Eloi Ficquet, and, after the decision was made to convene it in Ethiopia, jointly chaired by Dr Ahmed Hassen, director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (honorary chair: Andreas Eshete, former president of AAU).

Conference Reports

CFEE was located in Addis Ababa, it would be more feasible to organize it in Ethiopia. (3) In addition, organizing it in a regional university would assure attention and recognition to the new academic landscape of Ethiopia which has gradually been forming outside Addis Ababa, where the conference had already taken place regularly, and (4) from among the cities with new universities, Dirre Dawa was chosen as it has a deeply rooted historical relationship with France.

In the conference, researchers from Ethiopia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Israel, Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland and Djibouti participated. Compared to past conferences whose participants were mainly Europeans and Americans, we observe a strong tendency of increased Ethiopian participation, which had already characterized the previous conferences in Hamburg (2003), Trondheim (2007) and Addis Ababa (2009).

2. Panels and plenary sessions

2.1. Panels

After the opening ceremony on 29 October, presentations by individual researchers were held from 30 October until 2 November in the panels. There was a total of 44 panels. These panels can be classified into seven research themes: (a) Archaeology and physical anthropology – 4 panels; (b) History and archive studies – 8 panels; (c) Religious studies – 4 panels; (d) Anthropology and various studies based on anthropological method – 10 panels; (e) Development studies and current issues – 10 panels; (f) Linguistic and socio-linguistic studies – 5 panels; (g) Visual arts and cultural heritage – 3 panels.

As there were about 300 paper presentations, it is not possible to treat them all here, but at least some of them will be mentioned. In (a) - Archaeology - there was a panel focusing on recent excavations of pre-Aksumite archaeological sites and their findings, such as in Wuqro and Yeha in Tigray. In this panel, new insights were presented resulting from the excavations led by archaeologists of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI). The following two points were presented: (1) On the one hand, the society formed in the pre-Aksumite period (the Di'amat kingdom) was strongly marked by South Arabian culture, and on the other hand there was a distinct indigenous culture which left its own mark, today discernible through local cultural-political elements in the inscriptions and material remains. These two elements came together to form an Ethio-Sabaic culture. (2) It was strongly underlined that the older hypothesis of a "Sabaean domination" having been the basis for the Aksumite kingdom was going too far; rather, the culture of South Arabia and a local political system mutually intermingled and created the basis for the formation of the Aksumite kingdom, of which many details are still unknown and some are becoming clearer just now.

Conference Reports

In the area of (b) – History –, there were numerous presentations based on new perspectives and approaches. For example, there was a presentation which went beyond the usual focus on the Christian world and elaborated in detail on the historical relations of Ethiopia with the Ottoman Empire, i.e. the Muslim world. In a presentation focusing on the history of Ethiopian-Egyptian relations, the deeply rooted interconnection of the two countries was described with details from ancient times until now. Also, the history of slavery, never well discussed in Ethiopian history, was presented for the first time in detail.

One panel focused on the formation of boundaries between the nations of the Horn of Africa, which constitutes an important aspect in historical studies of Ethiopia. Some part of the following discussions was marked by strong individual viewpoints, showing to what degree this is still generally considered a burning topic. The panel organizers made clear that there is a need for more comprehensive approaches using the complex methods and tools of international law, anthropology, sociology etc. and combining them dispassionately with data from all sides of the existing borders, where radically different viewpoints, perspectives and experiences persist independently from each other.

The panel on the history of cartography in the Horn of Africa was especially interesting. Although its importance had been pointed out in the past by a limited number of historians, this panel was the first attempt to focus on it as one theme, and to comprehensively discuss the matter. Doing research on the history of maps will offer important insights in the field of history, but also the field of anthropology. By analyzing the development and change of maps over time we can for example clearly understand the change of local concepts of territory as defined by individual ethno-political groups.

There was also a new dynamic approach in the field of (c) – Religious studies. There were many presentations on (1) Islam, (2) new religious movements originating in different streams of Protestantism, such as Pentacostalism and Evangelical Churches, (3) in contrast to the previously quite exclusive focus of researchers on the Orthodox Church. One panel, which tried to clarify the mechanism and history of religious conversion, was especially interesting. In previous religious studies in Ethiopia, it was conceived that the religious situation is basically conservative and stable. However, when one looks at the different regions, in some regions a great number of conversions have taken place over many centuries, while other regions were marked by stability, suggesting that the religious landscape should generally be perceived as more dynamic than previously considered.

In the panel on Pentacostalism, the spread of new religious movements in the cities of the highlands and southern regions was analyzed. The Protestant creed had been considered a foreign religion by researchers in religion and therefore neglected, thus previously no serious research had been undertaken.

Conference Reports

But it is expected that more research in this area will result in new insights in the field of religious studies.

In (d) – Anthropology and various studies based on anthropological method – a panel focused on oral tradition for the first time in the history of this series of conferences. Although such research is considered important also in the field of anthropology, so far it has not been carried out much by anthropologists working on Ethiopia. Anthropologists as well as archive researchers had heretofore largely been neglecting oral tradition, but now numerous new studies in this field were presented. There were presentations on local perceptions of history, and on local methods of keeping historical memory in societies without traditions of writing. Also, there was a presentation helping to understand the impact of local, orally preserved traditions on the creation of written literature, through a comparative analysis of contrasting oral information and religious texts.

There was a panel on diaspora communities focusing on the dynamic relationship between Ethiopian societies and the world, which has not received much attention until now. One interesting case was a paper on an Indian dynasty which belonged to a group of people migrating from northeastern Africa to India (the Habshi), who had become kings in India after several centuries. Also there was a presentation on the Rastafarian community inside Ethiopia.

It was now the second time in the history of this conference series that a panel on visual anthropology was held (the first having been organized in Trondheim). In this panel, it was demonstrated convincingly how important films are for recording and documenting cultural phenomena such as spirit possession and other customary ceremonies, which sometimes go well beyond what can be described in words. For example, spirit possession is a phenomenon, known in many parts of the world, that can be well presented in the form of film documentation; a rising use of the method of visual presentation in comparative studies is expected in the future. Also historical film material on Ethiopia from the beginning of the 20th century, which was unknown so far, was presented.

A new perspective on territories was provided in the panel on socially and culturally important spatial networks created by rivers and wadis. Until now, rivers have rather been considered as an obstacle creating boundaries between spaces of separate ethnic groups, and dividing cultural zones. However, in this panel there were several presentations on rivers as networking tools, dynamically connecting societies far away from each other, thus suggesting that essentialistic ideas of ethnic boundaries and territorial separatedness need to be re-conceptualized.

Regarding (g) – Visual arts and cultural heritage - although there are many excellent works of art and cultural heritage in Ethiopia, the number of presentations was unfortunately very small. In one of the panels there was a

Conference Reports

presentation on destruction of cultural heritage linked with economic development, suggesting that some aspects of the rapid economic development of Ethiopia can endanger cultural heritage in some cases, where growth happens without taking into account the great cultural, communal (and touristic) potential of historical or cultural sites.

2.2. Plenary sessions and round tables

The following were the themes discussed in the plenary sessions and in smaller round tables: (1) Modern music in Ethiopia (key-note speaker: Francis Falceto), (2) the recent history of development in Ethiopia (key-note speaker: Bahru Zewde), (3) a round table on sound pollution in modern Ethiopia (“megaphonism”), (4) a session providing an overview of academic journals on northeastern Africa, and (5) a plenary session discussing the future of economics and politics in the Horn of Africa.

During conferences such as this one, opinions on hot issues regarding political or economic matters in Ethiopia are often passionately discussed, as the conference provides a framework for an open discussion in an academic setting. In the historian Bahru Zewde’s talk on the 20th-century history of development in Ethiopia, hot discussions were indeed triggered.

In an extra round table session on academic journals on northeastern Africa, offered by the historical anthropologists Eloi Ficquet and Wolbert Smidt, a total of 16 such journals and bulletins were presented. The following were introduced in the session by their respective representatives: (1) *Annales d’Éthiopie*, published by the CFEE; (2) *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (JES), published by the IES; (3) *Northeast African Studies*, Michigan University Press, published in the USA; (4) *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (RSE), Istituto per l’Oriente, published in Italy; (5) *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Cambridge University Press, published in Great Britain; (6) *ITYOPIS, Northeast African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, published by Mekelle University; (7) *Ethiopian Review of Cultures*, published in Ethiopia; (8) *Aethiopica, International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies*, published by Hamburg University; (9) *Pount, Cahier d’études, Corne de l’Afrique, Arabie du Sud*, published by Les éthiopiens associés, Bièvres, France; (10) a new internet journal, *Afrique – débats, méthodes et terrains d’histoire, revue consacrée aux études sur l’Afrique ancienne*, Centre d’études des mondes africains. In addition, the following were presented briefly without representatives: (11) *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (IJES), Tsehai Publishers, published in the USA; (12) *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*, published by OSSREA, which is an international research organisation based in Addis Ababa; (13) *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*, published by JANES; (14) *Eritrean Studies Review*, published in the USA; (15) *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, Asmara University, published in Eritrea; (16) *Journal of Oromo Studies*, published in the USA.

Conference Reports

Outside the conference halls of DDU, publications were sold by the CFEE, the Southern Omo Research Centre (SORC), the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* project of Hamburg University and the Max Planck Institute of Ethnological Research, Halle, Germany.

At the end of each day there were receptions, musical events, movie presentations (such as with records of Ethiopia in the early 20th century, provided by Hugues Fontaine, who is a photographer and researcher on historical films), in venues such as the Alliance éthio-française in Dirre Dawa or hotels. On the final day there was an excursion to the historical city of Harer.

3. Concluding remarks

Despite some expectations of difficulties in the organisation of such a large academic conference in an Ethiopian regional city, concerning the arrangement of hotels, electricity supply, or other infrastructural challenges, the conference in fact ran very smoothly. There were numerous minor problems, which were, however, quickly solved and did not become obstacles to the conference.

Two ways to publish the paper presentations are envisaged: The first possibility is an independent separate publication of papers, as each panel of the conference is considered as an independent unit focusing on one specific theme. Therefore, every panel organizer could collect the papers from his/her panel and independently publish them. The second option is for individuals to send their papers to the organising committee for publication after review. These partial proceedings would be published as an extra issue of the *Annales d'Éthiopie*, by the CFEE, together with the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, published by the IES.

In the closing ceremony, chaired by the International Organizing Committee (IOC), it was discussed where the next conference will be held. The following points were re-confirmed by the international committee: The conference should continue to be alternately organized in Ethiopia and in another country every two to four years, and every third conference will continue to be organized by Addis Ababa University.

There was also a new suggestion regarding the organisation of future conferences. It was discussed that in the future Ethiopian local universities should be increasingly involved in conference organisation. There were three such suggestions: (1) As was the case in this conference, an organising country other than Ethiopia could collaboratively organize a conference together with a regional university; (2) several regional universities could organize the conference jointly (e.g., a group of three universities); (3) one regional university could independently organize the conference. These three new concepts of organisation were proposed at the closing plenary session by the members of the IOC, representing the different countries with strong traditions of Ethiopian Studies. In any case, the IOC strongly urged those

Conference Reports

interested to submit a concrete conference organisation proposal, if there is an institution which would offer to organize one of the future conferences.

The next conference (ICES19) is planned to be held in Warsaw, Poland, in 2015, as Dr Hanna Rubinkowska had offered representing Warsaw University. This was unanimously accepted by the International Organizing Committee.

Wolbert SMIDT⁴ – Chikage OBA-SMIDT⁵

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National Workshop: “Socio-cultural Impact Assessment of the Welqayt Sugar and Irrigation Project”, 6 October 2012, Mekelle University

The national workshop discussing the socio-cultural impact assessment of the Welqayt Sugar and Irrigation Project was opened by *Ato* Solomon Tesfa-Mariam, acting Director of IPHC (Institute of Paleo-Environment and Heritage Conservation, Mekelle University). Dr. Joachim Herzig, President of Mekelle University, then made an opening speech. Prof. Herzig, after welcoming the guests, discussed the complex relation between climate, culture and nature. He underlined that this complex and dynamic world of ours needs empirical understanding of the relation between conserving culture on the one hand, and developing agricultural practices and preserving the environment on the other. Conducting interdisciplinary research and cooperation between institutions, organizations and the public at large is a key to understanding the issues at hand. He said that the initiative taken by Mekelle University staff to carry out a large-scale study on the Welqayt lowlands and the impact of the planned development projects should be appreciated. He stressed that social, cultural and local knowledge should be an integral part of any development activities, with a feasibility study and impact assessment beforehand.

The first speaker, *Ato* Demes Yigzaw (a parliamentarian) of the Ethiopian Sugar Corporation, focused on two major issues: the status of the sugar project and its impact on the local community in general and the Monastery of Waldibba in particular. He summarized the potential for sugar development in Ethiopia, which aims at gearing the country's sugar production in the coming 12 to 15 years into one of the top ten in the world. He discussed the need and urgency of sugar development in the region as a key to Ethiopia's future. The speaker outlined major comparative advantages of the site for sugar plantation and irrigation compared to nearby sites. The potential of the area for sugar cultivation is because of the relative cost effectiveness of the area and its suitability for sugar cane plantation. Yet, he also mentioned that the nearby villages would be affected. There will be steps taken by the government to

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