

## Volker Stitz and the Ethiopian Studies A Reappraisal of His Multi-Disciplinary Research Method

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### Introduction

This modest article has two objectives. The first one is to contribute to the symposium organized by the Goethe Institute with its Ethiopian and German collaborating institutions on 'Cultural Research from Germanophone Countries in Northeastern Africa'.<sup>1</sup>The second is an attempt to pay homage to the late Volker Stitz, a German geographer and historian, who undertook original research in Central Ethiopia in general and Northern Shawa in particular. His name and his research trips, as well as the intimacy he cultivated with the local people, continue to resonate today. I was lucky enough to belong to this field of study since my family originates from Northern Shawa and my life is intimately connected to this region. Moreover, my research as a historian on the same region, albeit with a different area of focus, benefited a lot from the experience of Stitz and his contemporaries.

Stitz lived for only thirty-one years having been born in 1944 and died in 1975. Without being able to communicate with him directly, his research agenda on Ethiopian studies is very difficult to determine at this time. The only thing we can do is carefully read his works and present the themes of his research priorities, which covered: the human geography of Central Ethiopia, an ethnological survey of the inhabitants of the region and the economic and population history of Harar during the nineteenth century. Stitz's research dealt with both geography and history and, as such, was quite challenging, treating, on the one hand, the geographical background of history and, on the other, the historical evolution and dimensions of human settlements. His arguments and solid research find-

ings have never been surpassed by his contemporaries who conducted their research in the same geographic setting and picked up similar or related themes. Nor have the researchers who came after him come up with such meticulous findings as Stitz successfully managed in his short life.

The name of Volker Stitz has not yet faded away in Ethiopian living memory among, for example, the inhabitants of the central Ethiopian region where he frequently researched and among the Ethiopian intellectual community with whom he had contacts at the then Haylé Sillasé I (later Addis Ababa ) University. There must be few such individuals in Germany or elsewhere and I hope that his last reminiscences can be charted either from Bonn or above all from the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Giessen or perhaps even by members of his own family.

### Professional career and research

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ethiopian studies both at the Haylé Sillasé I University and abroad was at its height. Catalogues at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at, what is now, Addis Ababa University carefully registered the names of eminent researchers dominating this terrain from different disciplines. Among these names, the American historian Richard Alain Caulk from the Department of History at the Haylé Sillasé I University and the German geographer, historian and socio-ethnologist, Volker Stitz from the Department of Rural Sociology, University of Giessen (Germany), were known for their meticulous and far-reaching careers. Their academic objectivity and professional intelligence are witnessed and judged not only by their contemporaries but also by the quality of works



Fig. 1: Aerial photo of the T'ana lake shores, March 2011

left behind them and by their indefatigable determination, and their respect and love for their chosen profession. Both men were gifted, clever and bright in handling their research career and it is a source of sadness that their presence on the research scene and their lives were both short-lived; Caulk died in 1984, almost a decade after Stitz passed away in 1975.

Taking into account their remarkable research output, the quality of their research methods and their unfailing dedication, Stitz and Caulk would undoubtedly have achieved a rich output, both in quality and in quantity had they been rewarded with a longer time on earth. Collegial research tasks and joint projects had shown an early promising collaboration between them (see Stitz n. d.). Caulk and Stitz had, for instance, microfilmed on behalf of the Kennedy Library 41 of the 170 Arabic, Amharic and Italian manuscripts then preserved in one of the archives of the provincial administration of Harer.<sup>2</sup> It is quite monumental that such films were deposited in the manuscript section of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. In doing so, these two colleagues genuinely and significantly contributed rich source materials for the socio-economic and ethno-cultural study of the eastern Ethiopian region in general and the cultural city of Harer in particular.

Before Stitz's outstanding contribution to knowledge about the Argobba (1975a: 185–192), all that was really known of them was the existence of their settlements in Aleyyu Amba and Chänno. Stitz's finding was quite instrumental in confirming not only the presence of the Argobba Semitic linguistic community in those settlements but also its wider distribution in several centres of eastern and central Ethiopia. His work directly contradicted that of Leslau (1959: 251) and Ullendorff (1973: 126), who had both argued that the Argobba language had virtually died out. Although in comparison to neighbouring languages, such as Amharic, Afan Oromoo and that of °Afar, the use of the Argobba language is insignificant, compared to dead languages such as that of Gafat, the Argobba language is currently used by thousands.

In this this crucial field study, Stitz used the methodology of the human geographic settlements distribution work he had undertaken in central Ethiopia where he had categorized the environment into six categories: Bäräha, Qolla, Wäyna Däga, Méda, Däga and Gwassa (Stitz

1974: 349). Seen very critically, however, his Méda and Gwassa are not different climatic categories; the former is a sort of relief to be identified everywhere in all climatic zone and the latter is a special grass typical feature of the Däga climatic zone.

One very remarkable task Stitz accomplished in his field investigations into the status of the Argobba and their language, was to apply a geographical background to the history of Argobba and the distribution of the Argobba settlements. He registered the inhabitants of the Argobba according to the altitude of the settlements. For example, in 1974 (Stitz 1975a) he registered the distribution of the Argobba people in various settlements and at various altitudes. His findings can be summarized as follows:

| Settlement  | Height above sea level | Number of Argobba speakers |
|---|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Ch'oba  | 1600 m                 | 150                        |
| Wasil and Bärhät  | 1800 m                 | 300                        |
| Mätäkälya   | 1900 m                 | 400                        |
| Abd Al-Rasul  | 1700 m                 | 200                        |
| AleyyuAmba  | 1700 m                 | 400                        |
| Dulecha   | 1200 m                 | 150                        |
| old Argobba village of Gatchenné                                  | 1400 m                 | 150                        |
| Goncho  | 1850 m                 | 200                        |
| Farré   | 1400 m                 | 100                        |
| Channo  | 1400 m                 | 500                        |
| Korugussa   | 1700 m                 | 250                        |
| Channo-Goze   | 1650 m                 | 150                        |
| near DäbräSina, Mafud-Tikuré                                      | 1800 m                 | 300                        |
| Robi-Gozé   | 1400 m                 | 150                        |
| Rassa-Gubba   | 1500 m                 | 2000                       |
| Shonké  | 1800 m                 | 1000                       |
| Avaxos north of Essoyyé Mountain but in the middle of Riqé chains | 1900 m                 | 300                        |
| Ancharro  | 1700 m                 | 500                        |

Table Showing Stitz's coverage of Diverse Human geographic Settlements in Central Ethiopia.

Stitz's determination served him well. He not only successfully explored the human geography of central Ethiopia, but he also disproved the conventional view that held that the Argobba language, like its ancient neighbor Gafat, was already extinct. Stitz's careful look at the distribution of the language groups reflected the history of the area from the sixteenth century: the interaction of the physical geography of the area with the history of Amhara/Oromo relations, as well as the prevalence of malaria, forced the Argobba to quit their original settlements and disperse here and there. The confusion, which several linguists had failed to avoid through linguistic research, was addressed by Stitz. According to Stitz, the fact that the Argobba had quit their settlements and dispersed here and there might have affected the survival of their languages in its entirety as they interacted with linguistic neighbors like the Amhara, the Oromo and the Afar. However, this does not mean that the Argobba language became extinct as the language is still spoken among the Amharic, the Afan Oromo and the 'Afar speakers in a series of rural and urban settlements of central Ethiopia.

Stitz was a German geographer and historian, yet his skills were broader than that and he appears to have even been a better linguist than trained ones, who, among other things, feared crossing the malaria-ridden lowlands of central Ethiopia and preferred to erect their tents in the better weather conditions of the high plateau or just remain in the hotels of Addis Ababa or other Ethiopian urban centers. The following description of Stitz, by Sheikh Nurhussein Oumer, one of his closest informants during his research, shows just how his experience as a geographer helped him approach his work in Ethiopia:

T-shirt and shorts wearer, sack on his back and notebook, pens and pencils in his hands and regional maps in the hands of his assistants. Undying, wounded on his face and wounded on his knee and above all scratches on his body, these are testimonies about the courageous field person who regularly faced all these odds while crossing the rather bushy and thorny rugged terrain in search of reliable data suitable for his research. He used to appear from his field trip with a body showing heavy perspiration, in the horrible climate; and, energetically crossing the un-

told rugged terrains with an objective and determination. He was undying field researcher who preferred to be wounded on every part of his body for professionalism and solid scientific research. He seems to be living forever on this planet though the opposite was the case as he left it very quickly at his early age.

According to Sheikh Niurhussein Oumer (Debre Berhan, 2003)

In comparison, the following lines, quoted from Leslau (1952: 73), reveal how remote the linguist's approach to his subject was:

The next day we went down to Aliyu Amba at a distance of about 4 hours ride to the southeast of Ankober [...] The climate is hot and numerous flies do not add much to comfort. [...] I was told that the inhabitants of the village of Channo to the south of Aliyu Amba speak only Argobba. This village is in the region of the Qolla (hot lowland area), which implies torrid heat and uncomfortable conditions for work. Since I had occasion to work on Argobba with the inhabitants of Channo living in Addis Ababa, I did not go to the region of Channo.

Little wonder, then, that Stitz's robust methodology led him to disprove the rather shoddy conclusions of his more senior contemporaries. It can also be argued that only a historian with some sort of geographical training could determine the role of the physical environment in the shaping or reshaping of human history. Stitz was able to reconstruct human history in the complex geographical environment of central Ethiopia better than a trained historian could have done.

It is not still constructing a redundant or superfluous argument if one underpins that Stitz had approached sociological events of the past. In doing so he tried to look at a population and economic history of Harer in Ethiopia to understand how the survival of Harer was successful. Stitz's research did not leave this question in a mystery and he concluded that the resource of human intellect at work proved the creation of an organized business community and its mercantile life.

Although Stitz's research methods definitely involved geography, history, sociology, linguistics and ethnology, it is difficult to state the

academic credentials he had in any of these disciplines. His sources (Stitz 1970: 71), however, included purely historical, sociological and historio-geographical works (conclusions derived from settlement patterns and location of places, distribution of languages, place names, dates of churches, oral, genealogies and archaeological sites). Stitz was wise enough not to jump straight into the, unknown to him, geographic environment of Central Ethiopia and plan a study of human geography in the area. He himself admitted that he had been in the field not to study human geography but to produce, what he modestly coins as 'a brief historical survey of the region'. However, there is no doubt that he critically reconstructed a two-hundred-year



Fig. 2: Aerial photo of agricultural areas near the T'ana lake, March 2011

history of northern Shewa (*ibid.*70–81) through the lens of the Amhara resettlement process in the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is what Stitz himself wrote (*ibid.* 70):

Historians, unfortunately, do not consider the geographical background of events. Geographers, however, are less prone to overlook the political and cultural history of the region they are studying. This was my orientation when I started conducting research on rural settlement in central Ethiopia. Since I could find only a limited literature about the political history of Shoa during the eighteenth century [...] I was obliged to spend much time in historical investigation before beginning geographical field-work. My object was to obtain a short ‘historical description’ of northern Shoa and southern Wollo.

#### Field trip to the island monasteries of Lake Tana and the end of the story

In 1975 Stitz and a fourth year history student named Tesfayohannes Fessehaye took a week-long field trip to the island monasteries of Lake Tana. Based on the reminiscences of the late Hussein Ahmed (1996), the intention of their visit was to extend Stitz’s research. The student had joined him as field assistant. Although no-one knows the end result of their mission, local informants on the island monasteries of Lake Tana and from the regional city of Bahir Dar recount that the two researchers stayed there and collected both oral and written information. It is with deep sorrow they explain that disaster struck Stitz and his student when they took a locally made boat named *Tankuato* to cross the lake from one of the islands to Bahir Dar for an urgent appointment Stitz had fixed with key people in his research network.

It was late in the afternoon, informants recount that both Stitz and Tesfayohannes Fessehaye rushed to the boat to start their unusual journey on Lake Tana. The wind was against them to the extent that the boat could not function as usual. The boat sank beneath the waves, taking the lives of the boat’s handler and the two researchers. Sadly, all efforts to find their bodies proved unsuccessful.



Fig. 3: Aerial photo of agricultural areas near the T’ana lake, March 2011

#### Reading the personality of Stitz as a researcher

Stitz had a particular quality to his writing. His sentences are constructed in a humble manner, which seems to reflect both the peoples and the environment he used to frequently visit to conduct his research. With the intention of disseminating the basic concept of his book to non-German-reading scholars, instead of publishing the whole work in English he provided a short summary (Stitz 1974: 348–360 in English and 361–367 in Amharic). His longtime translator and close collaborator, Getachew Tesfa, created an abridged Amharic version of the summary. Stitz was quite serious in respecting those who helped him, for example he extended his gratitude and thankfulness (Stitz 1970: 70) to Getachew Tesfa, who had translated for him the ‘History of Galla’<sup>3</sup>, the Oromo history written by Asma Giyorgis.

All who knew him are unanimous in recalling what he used to say to those who posed questions to him about this indefatigability and his physical strength in field research along with his determined ethical and moral excellence in respecting both his professional skill as well as the social environment. These questions were posed to Stitz in a neighborly manner and he used to reply to them with joy. *Ato Bäqqälä Molla*, then neighbor of Dr Stitz in Addis Ababa had shared us the questions he used to pose to him. One of Stitz's assistant *Ato Getachew Tesfa* also corroborated the same trend. The following were some few examples:

Questionner:

Do you sleep at all? If you really sleep for how long is it?

Stitz:

Yes I do but short hours, let us say six hours. You, too, please do the same.

226

Questionner:

Why do you work for such long hours?

Stitz:

We in Germany are hard workers. We work eighteen hours and are left with six to sleep. There are also other peoples and countries working for longer and sleeping for less time than the Germans. It is not bad if you do the same.

Two neighbours posed a question to Stitz in Addis Ababa:

You are driving your noisy Volkswagen about midnight in the evening when you come back from field trip. This is only to wake me up and disturb my sleep. Are you such a mad neighbor one of the neighbors asked? For how long are you going to create such a noise?

Stitz:

What you two are posing are the questions of those who are going to be mad. I am sure my noise will continue around midnight until you two get mad.

### Dedication to Volker Stitz

Almost thirty-nine years after his death in 1975, The Goethe Institute in Addis Ababa, in cooperation with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, the Mekelle University and the Frobenius Institute Frankfurt, is organizing this symposium on 'Cultural research from Germano-phone countries in Northeastern Africa: Stories and histories.' It is an appraisal of the over 300 scholarly activities and cultural interactions particularly between Ethiopia and Germany. In the course of such cultural interaction and scholarship several German names of linguists, medical practitioners, ethnographers, geographers, historians and anthropologists continuously appeared in the Ethio-German cultural saga. Giving due respect and recognition to all of them, this paper is an appraisal of Volker Stitz, whom one can qualify as a German geographer and historian although his methodology and training skill seem to us more than what is stated here. He appeared on the research scene in Ethiopian studies from the late 1960s until 1975. The study area he frequented, the diverse Ethiopian linguistic communities with whom he spent time are part and parcel of the Ethiopian social values, country with long history of civilization and culture- a platform of mutual cultural exercise and enrichment among the members of humanity on this planet. Volker Stitz performed that task. There is no doubt his research on Ethiopia clearly fits the symposium as part of the stories and histories of cultural research.

If Hiob Ludolf's *A new history of Ethiopia* is quite influential on matters related to Ethiopian studies so Volker Stitz's *Studien zur Kulturgeographie Zentraläthiopiens* must rank as one of the influential works within the rank of Germano-phone researchers on Ethiopia in the mid twentieth century. This statement is not to overlook the works of other contemporary scholars be they German or not. Nevertheless, it is clear that Stitz can be said to have succeeded in accomplishing a great deal despite challenges related both to the methodology and to the environmental reality of central Ethiopia in the late 1960s and mid-1970s.

The late Hussein Ahmed dedicated his M.A. thesis, which he had submitted to the Center of West African Studies, University of Birmingham (1981), both to Volker Stitz and Tesfayohannes Fessehayye. Hussein

should be acknowledged for what he has done but, given the key research activities and sound research skills he exercised in Ethiopia, Stitz deserves much more. And I call on the Goethe Institute, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and any German researchers working in Ethiopian Studies to continue to think about how to honour his name and work.

### Photo credits

Fig. 1: Aerial photo of the T'ana lake shores, March 2011, photo by Wolbert Smidt

Fig. 2: Aerial photo of agricultural areas near the T'ana lake, March 2011, photo by Wolbert Smidt

Fig. 3: Aerial photo of agricultural areas near the T'ana lake, March 2011, photo by Wolbert Smidt

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227

### Endnotes

1 I am grateful to Irmtraut Hubatsch, Director of the Goethe Institute Addis Ababa, Tenagne Tadesse, Coordinator of Cultural Programs and my long-time colleague Wolbert Smidt for inviting me to co-organize the conference participate and present a paper as well on this occasion.

2 For example records of civil and other court cases. Most of these materials are in Amharic from the period 1916–1936. Other files cover the late nineteenth century and the Italian times of 1936–1941.

3 The term Galla is after all a derogatory and irrelevant term to be used as an identity name and represent the Oromo people.