

Enno Littmann's Contribution to the Study of Islam in Ethiopia*

Hussein Ahmed

1. Introduction

German scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries played an outstanding role in the development and expansion of Oriental and Islamic studies in Europe through research, scientific missions, explorations, publications and teaching at well-known academic institutions.¹ It was scholars of German Romanticism who secularized the theological-historical problem between the West and the East and who

“...began with the notion that there was something fundamentally wrong with the excesses of scientism or rationalism or philosophy in the modern West and that it was necessary to supplement it with the poetic, religious and spiritual dimension of human life, which can be found in the East... Living Easterners and Eastern societies were of interest only to the extent that they exhibited elements of the Romantics' ideal past.”²

There is now a new academic trend among German scholars of Islamic and Oriental studies towards a redefinition and reassessment of classical Orientalism. In its latest special issue, *Art and Thought* (Arabic title: *Fikrun wa Fann*, should be *Fann wa Fikr*), the German trilingual (English, Arabic and Persian), published several perceptive and stimulating articles on the theme “German Orientalism after Edward Said.”³ The articles were contributed by Roman Loimeier,⁴ Gudrun Krämer,⁵

* A paper prepared in advance for discussion at the 2nd International Littmann Conference held in Aksum, Ethiopia, 6-12 January 2006. I wish to express my warmest gratitude to the Goethe-Institut, Addis Ababa, for its generous financial assistance that enabled me to attend the conference.

1 See Muhsin Mahdi, “Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1 (1990), 73-98.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

3 No. 81 (May-October 2005).

4 “German-Speaking Orientalism Revisited: A Polemic,” p. 4-9.

5 “Conflict of Values: Remarks on Contemporary Islamic Discourse,” p. 11-21.

Stefan Weidner,⁶ Christoph Burgmer,⁷ Navid Kermani,⁸ Ludwig Ammann,⁹ Andreas Pflitsch,¹⁰ Katajun Amirpur,¹¹ Albrecht Metzger,¹² and Alfred Hackensberger.¹³ An analysis and discussion of the contents of these contributions is beyond the scope of this paper. The editorial, written by Weidner, the magazine's editor-in-chief, argues that Oriental studies and Orientalism are not the same and describes three new developments in Islamic studies: the integration of scientific and philosophical theories into academic Oriental studies; differentiation of Orientalists into political scientists, literary scholars, sociologists, historians, linguists, and students of comparative religion; and the diversity of geographical focus and the fact that many scholars have roots in the Islamic world itself.

Mahdi also wrote about the Muslim counterpart of this view: a non-Western or Oriental Orientalism, a longing for the perfect Islamic past but which lacked Western science and technology. Unlike German Romanticism, however, it did not evolve into a scientific discipline.¹⁴ Many of the German Romanticists were pioneers in certain fields and made valuable contributions to others. Among the leading representatives of Oriental and Islamic studies were Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933), Paul Kraus, Carl H. Becker (1876-1933)¹⁵, Hans H. Schaeder, Gustav E. von Grunebaum (1909-1972),¹⁶ H.L. Fleischer¹⁷ and Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003). Not a few traveled to the Islamic world and conducted extensive research on ethnography, archaeology, prehistory and languages and literature, and produced a massive corpus of published material that was later utilized by generations of German and other European and North American scholars.

Islam and Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa in general and those in northeast Africa in particular, including Ethiopia and its neighbours, also became the subject of scholarly research, the latter beginning from the 1830s. German and Austrian missionaries, explorers, and members of scientific, diplomatic and commercial missions entered and visited different parts of the country. They collected data on many aspects of the history and culture of the peoples of Ethiopia

6 "Was Huntington Right?: On Hard and Soft Interpretations of Islam," p. 22-28.

7 "The Quran as Philological Quarry: A Conversation with Christoph Luxenberg," p. 29-36.

8 "Towards Trialogue: On the Future of Islamic Studies," p. 37-40.

9 "Conservative Reform: Some Observations on Tariq Ramadan," p. 42-47.

10 "No Orient to be Found: A European Myth Past and Present," p. 49-52.

11 "Permanent Revolution: New Challenges for Islamic Studies," p. 53-56.

12 "Coping with Islamism: A Personal Approach," p. 57-59.

13 "Orientalism/Orientalismus," [in verse], p. 66, 68-69.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.

15 Author of a study of Islam in East Africa entitled "Materialien zur Kenntnis des Islam in Deutsch-Ostafrika" (Loimeier, p. 6.)

16 Author of *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation* (An Oriental Institute Essay, Chicago, University of Chicago Press [1946] 1947).

17 Fleischer reviewed the first three volumes of Butrus al-Bustānī's encyclopaedia entitled *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif in Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 34 (1880), p. 579-582.

and published their findings in articles and books. They included, among others, Carl Bezold (1859-1922), August Dillmann¹⁸ (1823-1894), Hugo Dünsing (1877-1961)¹⁹, Sebastian Euringer (1865-1943)²⁰, Eugen Mittwoch (1876-1942)²¹, Philip Paulitschke (1854-1896),²² Franz Praetorius (1847-1927), Gerhard Rohlfs (1831-1896), and Eduard Rüppell (1794-1884).²³ Among their successors who are still active in the field are Ewald Wagner, Ulrich Braukämper, Manfred Krop, Franz Amadeus Dombrowski and Franz-Christoph Muth, and a younger generation of graduate students and researchers.

Enno Littmann (1875-1958) was the last representative of the old generation of pioneers as well as the first of the generation that superseded it. After pursuing his Oriental studies and publishing works on Egypt and South Arabia, he decided to turn his scholarly attention to northeast Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular "...because at that time the Orientalists in Germany neglected Ethiopian studies."²⁴ He led the Deutsche Aksum Expedition whose centenary we are presently celebrating. Although the scope of this paper has been restricted by the present writer's lack of proficiency in the German language in which Littmann wrote most his contributions, and by their inaccessibility,²⁵ it is intended as a tribute

18 Martin Kleiner, "Christian Friedrich August Dillmann", in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 2 D-Ha (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), p. 16-161.

19 *Idem*, "Hugo Duensing," *op.cit.*, p. 203.

20 Stefan Weninger, "Sebastian Euringer," *op.cit.*, p. 451.

21 "Exzerpte aus dem Koran in amharische Sprache," *Mitteilungen Jabr.* 9 (1906), p. 111-147.

22 The author of *Harar* (Leipzig, 1888) and "Le Harar sous l'administration égyptienne 1875-1885," *Bulletin de la Société Khédiviale de Géographie*, série 2, no. 10 (1887), p. 575-591.

23 For an in-depth description and assessment of the contribution of German scholars to Ethiopian studies, see Ernst Hammerschmidt, "A Brief History of the German Contributions to the Study of Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, I, 2 (1963), p. 30-48; *idem*, *Ethiopian Studies at German Universities* (Wiesbaden 1970); Wolbert Smidt, "Five Centuries of Ethio-German relations" in *Ethio-German Relations* (Addis Ababa: Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2005), p. 6-14; Bairu Tafla, *Ethiopia and Germany: Cultural, Political and Economic Relations, 1871-1936* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner GmbH, 1981), p. 33-50, 51-71.

24 Enno Littmann, "After 60 Years of Study of Ethiopian Languages and Culture," *Ethiopia Observer*, II, 2 (1958), p. 99.

25 I went through the catalogue of the Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and found less than twenty titles under Littmann's authorship. I would like to thank David G. Hirsch, Librarian for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of California at Los Angeles, for sending me a list of Littmann's works in German and copies of those in English. Without his cooperation and assistance, I would not have been able to write this paper. I am also grateful to Zhenia Sokolinskaia for sending me a bibliography of Littmann. It contains about seventy titles but not the two entries (discussed below) which are also missing in the bibliographical section of R. Voigt's study, "Enno Littmann: Leben und Werk" in Walter Raunig and Steffen Wenig (eds.), *Afrikas Horn* (Akten der Ersten

to, and a token of recognition of, his modest but significant and ground-breaking contribution to the history of the Muslim peoples of the region. This is all the more so since he produced these works at a time (late 19th and early 20th centuries) when there was hardly any interest among European scholars in the subject as it was a period of transition between the colonial expansion and conquest and the First and Second World Wars in the aftermath of which the process of decolonization and new European engagement with Africa provided the background to the beginning of African studies in both Europe and North America.

2. Biography

According to Bairu, Littmann was born in Oldenburg and, after completing his advanced studies, he undertook research and excavation in Syria, Egypt and Ethiopia, and taught at Strasbourg, Göttingen, Bonn and Tübingen,²⁶ before he moved to Princeton, N.J., USA.

A short piece of appreciation of Littmann's scholarly achievements was published in *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 3 (1959). It noted that Littmann was a disciple and son-in-law of Nöldeke, whom he succeeded in 1906 as chair of Semitic studies at the University of Strasbourg, and that he was the last representative of the great Orientalists of the nineteenth century. Littmann was an explorer, philologist, Arabist and a specialist of Aramaic. He undertook a linguistic, philological and archaeological mission to Ethiopia and wrote a Təgré dictionary. As Bairu noted: "...the Austrian *Leo Reinisch* [1832-1919] and the German *Enno Littmann*...did firsthand research in northern Ethiopia, thus breaking the curious practice of treating the country of study from a distance."²⁷

Littmann's edition and publication of one of Tewodros's chronicles in Amharic is another major contribution to Ethiopian studies.²⁸ However, his intention to prepare an English translation of the chronicle was never realized.

Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz 2. bis 5. Mai 2002 in München) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), p. 247-264. However, in another material which Zhenia Sokolinskaia subsequently sent to me: Anton Schall, "Verzeichnis der Schriften von Enno Littmann," *Ein Jahrhundert Orientalistik* (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 141-195, there are references to the two entries, in addition to his articles on Abū Sufyān (published in *EI* new ed. [1954], Schall. P. 145), *Alf Layla wa Layla*, and "Harari-Studien" in *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und Verwandte Gebiete*, 1 (1922), p. 58-84. See also Thomas Zitelmann, "Enno Littmann (1875-1958), Äthiopische Studien und deutscher Orientalismus", in Steffen Wenig (ed.), *In Kaiserlichem Auftrag, Die Deutsche Aksum-Expedition 1906 unter Enno Littmann*, vol 1, Aichwald: Linden Soft Verlag (:, 2006), p.

²⁶ Bairu, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁸ *The Chronicle of King Theodore of Abyssinia* (Princeton: New Jersey: the University Library, 1902).

3. Littmann's Writings on Islam in Ethiopia

Littmann contributed two entries – on Adāl²⁹ and Harar³⁰ – to E.J. Brill's *Encyclopaedia of Islam 1913-1936*. Below are a summary of, and a commentary on, these seminal works.

Although the entry on Adāl, unlike the one on Harar, has no bibliography, it is based on the chronicles of Amda Şeyon (r.1314-44), Zar'ā Yā'eqob (r.1434-68) and Ba'eda Māryām (1468-78). Littmann noted that both al-Maqrīzī in his *Kitāb al-ilmām bi akhbār man bi ard al-Ḥabasha min al-mulūk al-islām* and Shihāb al-Dīn in his *Futūḥ al-Ḥabasha* did not mention Adāl. According to Littmann, Adāl, first mentioned in the chronicle of Amda Şeyon, and corresponding to the territory of "Côte française des Somalis", was one of the Muslim states that actively participated in, and led, the wars against the Christian kingdom and whose history was connected with the sultanate of Zayla'. One of its rulers was Aḥmad Badlāy who belonged to the ruling family of Zayla'. Beginning from the second decade of the 16th century the Muslim troops of Adāl under the command of *Imām* Ahmad b. Ibrāhīm (Grāñ) fought and defeated the Christian kingdom. Although the state of Adāl had ceased to exist by the 19th century, the rulers of the Shawān kingdom like Sāhla Sellāsē styled themselves as kings of Adāl.

The entry on Harar is longer and better documented than the one on Adal. Littmann estimated that in the beginning of the 20th century, the town's population was 50,000 of whom a third were Harari, a highly exaggerated figure. After describing the wall and its five gates, he noted that there were several mosques and Qur'ānic schools. Strangely enough, however, he does not make any reference to the many shrines for which Harar has been, and still is, famous. Of the major mosques, he cites those of *Shaykh* Abādir and 'Umar al-Dīn. The former was the patron saint of the town who, according to local tradition, is believed to have introduced Islam in *ca.* 1000 A.D.³¹ (We are not told about whether he was a local saint or had come from abroad.) The latter was the *sultān* of Adāl in the early sixteenth century. Harar is also described as a "centre of Muslim propaganda in East Africa" which maintained links with Egypt and Arabia. It was in fact a

29 Eds. M. Th. Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Basset and R. Hartmann, vol. I (Leiden, New York, København and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1987), p. 125-126.

30 Eds. M. Th. Houtsma, A.J. Wensinck, T.W. Arnold, W. Heffening and E. Lévi-Provençal, vol. III, p. 263-264.

31 This is a more plausible date than the assertion made in the recent issue of *al-'Alam*, the Arabic weekly published in Addis Ababa, according to which Islam was brought to Harar in the early seventh century by 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, one of the Muslim refugees who came to Aksum and who later became the third historical caliph (r.644-656): *al-'Alam*, A.H. 14 *Dhū'l-Qa'da* 1426, 7 *Tābsās* 1998 (E.C.), 16 December 2005, p. 7. On Abādir 'Umar al-Ridā, see, among others, Ewald Wagner, "Abādir 'Umar ar-Ridā" in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.) *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Vol. 1 A-C (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), p. 4-5. Wagner wrote: "According to the *Fath [madīnat Harar]*, written by Yahyā b. Nasrallāh, A[bādir] with several other saints came from the Ḥiḡāz to Harār in 1216..."

centre for the diffusion of the dominant mystical order, the Qādiriyya. It is doubtful whether Harari teachers had the inclination and the resources to travel throughout East Africa in order to preach Islam.

Littmann's characterization of the Harari as "fanatical Muslims"³² should not be taken literally as he most probably intended it to mean that they were actively engaged in the teaching of Islam among the surrounding Oromo whom they eventually converted. He mentions three types of plants cultivated around Harar: coffee, *qāt* and *wars* from the last of which a red dye was extracted. This is most probably a reference to the henna used for decorating the hands and feet of Harari women. Littmann states an interesting fact in connection with *qāt*: the attempt of some of the *amīrs* [*sultāns*] to restrict and ban the consumption of *qāt* on what he calls 'religious grounds'.³³ A clue for the date of the writing of Littmann's entry on Harar is found in his statement on the trade of Harar: "But Harar's trade has in late years declined as the Abyssinian railway, which will soon unite Djibuti with Addis Abeba, passes north of the town of Dire Dawa" (p. 263). (The railhead reached Addis Ababa in 1917).

Another remarkable observation made by Littmann was on the influence of the Oromo, Somali and Arabic languages over the Amharic spoken in the town, but his prediction that Amharic was "doomed to decline, as it cannot hold its place against these languages" (p. 264) is unjustified and has not been borne out by subsequent developments. In fact Littmann himself alluded to the growing influence of Shawān Amharic as the dominant local dialect and language of administration.

While discussing the early history of Harar, he proposes a vague period for the beginning of 'Abyssinian' rule over the town: the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. He also writes that the reason for Abū Bakr's decision to transfer his capital from Zayla' to Harar was the Turkish expansion. (In fact the change of capital was from Dakkar to Harar.) Littmann then presents a brief account on the rise of *imām* Aḥmad whose nickname 'Grāñ' was given to him by the Christian Abyssinians.³⁴ The *imām* had served under the *Amīr* (*sic*) and later rebelled against him and seized power. The launch of his first campaign against the Christian Kingdom is wrongly dated 1576! In fact the *imām* had died in 1543, a fact which Littmann mentioned later in the passage. The conflict between Adāl and the Christian state continued during the time of Emperor Galāwdēwos and Nūr [b. Mujāhid], the successor of the *imām*, but the old sultanate of Adāl declined until 1875 when it was occupied by the Egyptians who ruled it until 1885. Two years later Menilek's generals conquered it in collusion with the Italians. Littmann makes a reference to the correspondence

32 Half a century earlier, Isenberg and Krapf described the Wallo Muslims as "fanatic and bigoted Mahomedans": C.W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf, *The Journals of C.W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf* (new edn. London, 1968), p. 323.

33 Similar and unsuccessful attempts were also made by the Wallo scholars of the 19th century.

34 This is a long-established popular and scholarly view. That he was left-handed is confirmed by his chronicler, Shihāb al-Dīn.

between Menilek and the king of Italy which was published in "*Documente Amariña*" (Rome). However, this work does not appear in the bibliography.

The bibliography includes the works of R. Basset, P. Paulitschke, Kobecchi (*sic*) Bricchetti meaning Robecchi Bricchetti, Littmann (*Die Heldentaten der Dom Christoph da Gama* [Berlin, 1907], Praetorius and C. Mondon-Vidailhet.

Were these two entries reviewed above originally written in English? Or were they translated from German? This question is not aimed at casting any doubt on the proficiency of Littmann in the English language.³⁵ Did he also contribute articles in English on Islam to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*?³⁶

Despite the few factual errors and chronological imprecision, Littmann's two entries in English represent a significant contribution to scholarship, given the fact that by the early twentieth century, the research on the history of Harar had not made any advances and indigenous sources had not yet come to light. In fact Littmann lived at a time when, as stated earlier, European academic interest in Islam in Ethiopia and the Horn was marginal, if not nonexistent. The literature available to him at the time of writing the entries could not have enabled him to produce more detailed and complete studies than those which he published.

Littmann's outstanding publications in German on Islam in, and the Arabic literature of, Ethiopia include the following:

1. "Bemerkungen über den Islam in Nordabessinien," *Islam*, 1 (1910), p. 68-71;
2. "Arabische Inschriften aus Abessinien," *Zeitschriften für Semitistik und Verwandte Gebiete*, 3 (1924), p. 236-246;
3. "Abessinische und Semitische Poesie," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (1930), p. 207-235; and
4. an article on Ethiopia in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

The present review of Littmann's scholarly contributions to the study of the history of Islam and languages in Ethiopia is restricted only to those written in, or translated from German into, English. His numerous publications in German deserve a separate study. Only then can we truly and objectively assess his academic achievements in, and impact on, the field of Islamic studies with reference to Ethiopia.

35 Besides his native German, he spoke and wrote in English, Dutch, Italian and Arabic: Littmann, "After 60 Years Study" of Ethiopian Languages and Culture," p. 99.

36 The Kennedy Library at Addis Ababa University has never acquired the complete set of volumes of *EI*. There are only two worn-out volumes (I and II). This has long been a major constraint for researchers and the academic staff.