

Introduction

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The contributions to this special issue came out of the ‘Documenting Southern Ethiopia: Recognizing Past Legacies and Forging the Way Forward’ conference organized by Hawassa University in cooperation with the Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt in February 2017. The idea of bringing together international scholars for the conference came up in the course of a research project aimed at indexing and digitizing the archival material on Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute. The project, entitled ‘Indexing and Digitizing of the Archival Material on Ethiopian Studies of the Frobenius Institute’, was funded by the German Research Foundation and ran from September 2014 to August 2017. The comprehensive visual documentation of southern Ethiopia between 1934 and 1974 was extraordinary and nearly all the ethnographic research explored in that project was pioneering work, since not much research had been done in southern Ethiopia before the 1930s. Apart from indexing and digitizing the archival material, which dates back to the very first research activities undertaken by the Frobenius Institute on southern Ethiopia, the project intended to open up a dialogue about the research activities, research findings and methodological approaches of former institute members. The first part of this dialogue was a lecture series in which internationally renowned scholars commented on the research of the Frobenius Institute members in southern Ethiopia. The second part was a series of reviews from Ethiopian anthropologists who spent time in the archives of the institute. These critical assessments were then brought together and published in 2017 (Dinslage and Thubauville 2017).

The conference at Hawassa University was devised as the third part of this dialogue. Instead of merely focusing on the earlier research activities of the Frobenius Institute, the conference was meant to show that the research findings of the past are still relevant in today’s ethnography of southern Ethiopia. Given the pioneering studies carried out by researchers affiliated to the Frobenius Institute and the growing achievements of Hawassa University in problem-solving research and technology transfer, the conference was specifically designed to create a platform for discussion and exchange of ideas by mapping out key trends over the last eight decades in southern Ethiopia.

With the exception of Hanna, all the articles in this special issue were presented at the conference at Hawassa University.

The first two articles (Thubauville and Getachew) mainly focus on the research done by members of the Frobenius Institute in southern Ethiopia. While Thubauville gives an overview of the research activities, publications and archival material that can be found today in Frankfurt, Getachew’s contribution on the age grade system of the Gedeo provides one example of the relevance and insights that can be gained from unpublished work found in the archives of the Frobenius Institute, in this case, an ethnography by A.E. Jensen on the Gedeo.

Epple and Gellebo, the authors of the next two articles, also tackle the published and unpublished material of the Frobenius researchers (compare also their earlier publications Epple 2017, Kansite 2017). Their contributions in this issue focus on two topics that were of central interest to the Frobenius researchers: the crafts people and slaves (Epple) and ancestral statues (*waakka*) of the Konso (Kansite). Both issues are of renewed relevance today: social categories because of ethnic federalism, which has led to a revival of cultural values and local traditions; and *waakka* because of increased tourism and the global art market's interest in these sculptures.

The remaining five contributions focus on current research. Conducted by Ethiopian researchers currently working in different Higher Education Institutions within Ethiopia, these contributions can be grouped under three broad themes: women and gender studies; conflicts and frontiers; and indigenous religions and biodiversity. The topics being researched show that anthropology training and research in Ethiopia is rooted in practical application, partly because researchers have an obligation to do community work (see Bosha and Temechegn), and partly because research in Ethiopia is often commissioned by governmental and non-governmental organizations (Zerihun). The contributions of Ethiopian researchers have played an important role during the above mentioned conference not only in bringing scholars working in southern Ethiopia together but also in creating a much-needed platform for debate among researchers and other stakeholders who are interested in the various issues raised.

Two contributions – Hanna's work on the Maale of southern Ethiopia and Temechegn and Bosha's work on the Alle of southern Ethiopia – fall into the category of women and gender studies. While Hanna explores the active role women take in devising survival strategies among the Maale people in the face of prolonged contact and interaction with outsiders; Temechegn and Bosha turn our attention to the practice of marriage among the Alle, shedding light on polygamy, the status of women in it and the changes observed in its practice through time.

Elias's work on the Nyangatom of southwestern Ethiopia and Nigussie's contribution on the Gedeo of southern Ethiopia fall into the second category: conflicts and frontiers. Elias focuses on the myriad of intertwined scenarios that shape the voices, experiences and lives of the Nyangatom along the borderlands adjoining Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan. Nigussie explores the process of conflict resolution from the perspective of the Gedeo, showing us that the breakdown of communication might lead to conflict, and that folk media can provide the means by which it is resolved.

Last but not least, Zerihun's contribution focuses on the linked endangerment of indigenous religions, ecology and biodiversity in southern Ethiopia. He argues that, as most native religions are seriously endangered today, syncretism may be an important factor in the continuity of at least certain elements of these religions and their positive effects on biodiversity.

References

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