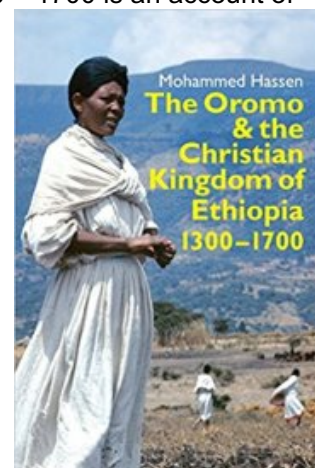


Book review: The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia 1300 – 1700 by Mohammed Hassen (2017)

Aleksander Engeskaug says this book is an important contribution to the field of Oromo studies but also to the contemporary discourse on the Oromo people and their place in modern day Ethiopia.

Mohammed Hassen's recent book *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia 1300 – 1700* is an account of the historical, social, and economic interactions between the Oromo people and the Christian Amharic kingdom of Ethiopia from roughly 1300 AD to 1700 AD. The book is not only an important contribution to the emerging field of Oromo studies, but also to our knowledge about the medieval Amharic kingdom itself. Furthermore, the stated aim of the book is to redress some unfortunate misconceptions about the role of the Oromo in Ethiopian history. It is thus a revisionary account which is clearly meant not only as a historical study, but also as a contribution to the contemporary discourse on the Oromo people and their place in modern day Ethiopia.



As Hassen explains in his Preface, the book has three major goals: First, to establish the historical narrative of the interactions between the Oromo and the Christian kingdom from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Second, to discuss the “dynamics of Oromo migration within and beyond Ethiopia during the sixteenth century”. And lastly, the book attempts to investigate how the Oromo population movement affected the Oromo people themselves, and not only its “adverse impact on Christian society”, as has usually been the main focus in previous scholarship.

The book consists of 8 core chapters in addition to the Introduction and Epilogue. Chapters 1-3 are dedicated to the period before the major Oromo migrations in the sixteenth century. The main purpose of these chapters is to demonstrate that Oromo and the Christian Amhara population were in contact with each other already from the fourteenth century, and that what Hassen sees as the original Oromo “homeland” was situated within the borders of present day Ethiopia. Chapters 4-8 present the history of the Oromo migrations and the seemingly endless wars between the many Oromo groups and the Christian kingdom in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In chapters 7-8 the focus is on the integration of the Oromo into Amharic society, their Christianisation and their involvement in imperial politics.

One of Hassen's main arguments in the book is that the Oromo had been in close contact with the Amhara population from the fourteenth century and that Oromo groups already lived within the borders of present day Ethiopia at that time. This is significant because the Oromo are commonly portrayed as foreign invaders who first arrived in Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. At first Hassen's point may appear to be a distinction without a difference, but he argues persuasively that it has ramifications for how the Oromo and their role in Ethiopian history is perceived. As he writes: “At the heart of Ethiopian historiography is what has been dubbed ‘the sixteenth-century sudden arrival of the Oromo’. The underlying assumption is that the Oromo are ‘newcomers to Ethiopia’, a historical fallacy, itself a product of anti-Oromo prejudice” (pp. 4-5).

In order to substantiate the case for extensive pre-sixteenth century contacts between the Oromo and the Amhara population, Hassen devotes much space in the first chapters to demonstrating the influence of Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions on Oromo religion and world-view. This approach is only partially successful. Some of the similarities he cites as evidence are admittedly striking, whereas others are easy to dismiss as mere structural parallels. Many weak arguments do not necessarily make a strong case, and by including even doubtful examples one runs the risk that the argumentation seems forced and desperate. However, Hassen's historical evidence makes a persuasive case for the early presence of Oromo in Ethiopia.



Photo credit: In Search of Lost Places

Another issue that may be raised is that, even if some Oromo groups were already present in Ethiopia from the fourteenth century, this does not change the fact that there was a major Oromo population movement which began in the sixteenth century. Furthermore, even if we accept Hassen's claim that the geography of this population movement was largely confined to what is present day Ethiopia, it does not change the fact that Oromo people attacked and conquered regions and districts which mainly were inhabited by Amhara people. In other words, it is not all that difficult to understand why the Amhara population would conceptualize the Oromo as foreign invaders. Needles to point out, they did not know at the time where the borders of modern day Ethiopia would be and that the Oromo people should be considered Ethiopians too.

It is also necessary to raise a few critical remarks regarding the use of primary sources and secondary literature in the book. With the exception of Abba Bahrey's sixteenth-century manuscript *Zenahu le Galla*, a general problem is that the many different primary sources utilized in the book, with all their inherent problems and challenges, are not sufficiently discussed and often not even adequately introduced to the reader. For example, in Chapter 1 when Hassen compares Oromo songs and prayers word by word with Judaeo-Christian texts in order to demonstrate their similarities, he does not seem to be interested in the fact that these Oromo "texts", as they are preserved today, were themselves written down either by Christian travellers or by Western scholars in modern times. In short, if the Oromo songs look Christian, it may very well just be because they were recorded by Christians.

Another example is the use of onomastics (both place names and personal names) to trace the settlement pattern of the Oromo people and their involvement in Amhara imperial politics. An ingenious approach, however, Hassen never discusses the limitations of this evidence. It is also problematic that he never once refers the reader to dictionaries of the Oromo language, reference works on Oromo toponyms, or to any literature about Oromo naming practices. Thus, a reader unacquainted with Oromo names and language has no choice but to trust the author blindly when he claims that a particular name or word is in fact Oromo.

Furthermore, Hassen relies heavily on secondary literature. There is in itself nothing wrong with that. It shows that the writer has a good command of the field. However, Hassen is extremely fond of using direct quotations from the works of other scholars. It is not an exaggeration to say that on average there is at least two quotations from secondary literature on every page of the book. This is problematic because it sometimes obscures the distinction between historical primary sources and modern secondary literature. Quotations from secondary literature are frequently cited as evidence in support of the author's arguments. Secondary literature, however, is not evidence. This, combined with little discussion and poor introduction of primary sources, in addition to the unfortunate detail that the reference style in the footnotes does not allow for a clear distinction between editions of historical texts and other academic literature, seriously impede the transparency of the argumentation in large parts of the book.

These criticisms of methodology and writing style aside, Hassen's book has many merits and it is justifiable to say that he achieves his three goals listed in the Preface. A particular strength of the book is its focus on socio-economic factors in the analysis of the dynamics of the Oromo migrations. Although the book's narrative closely follows the political history, it also contains much insightful material about the social and economic organization in the two cultures. It is admirable how well Hassen manages to integrate social and economic history into a chronologically structured narrative. As such, the book should be of particular relevance not only to people interested in the Oromo and Ethiopian history, but also to anyone fascinated by those moments in history when people and societies of different social, economic, and political backgrounds meet and interact with each other.

[The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia 1300 – 1700](#)

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

[1] Please note that the page references in this review refer to the 2017 paperback edition.