

Book Reviews

Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, Trans. and ed. Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). pp. 544.

David B. Spielman

The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros is a translated edition of a 17th century Ethiopian *gädl* (hagiography), which centers on the life of Qiddist (St.) Wälättä Petros (1592-1642 C.E.), an Ethiopian female saint and her resistance against Portuguese Jesuits and their attempts to Latinize the Ethiopian Church. Originally composed in Ge'ez (the now Liturgical language of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church) by Gälawdewos, an Orthodox clergyman, Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner's translation is a first in English. A previous translation appeared in Italian (Lafranco Ricci, *Vita de Walatta Piētros, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* vol. 316, SAe 61, Louvain, 1970) but had limited readership as few had access to the text. Thus, this edition is a valued contribution as it undoubtedly opens up the text to a wider audience.

The translated text is introduced by Belcher and Kleiner in an incredibly thorough fashion, providing the reader with historical context on both the *gädl* and life of Qiddist Wälättä Petros, as well as sections on "Philological Annotation" and the principles and procedures of translating the text. In addition to the heavily annotated *gädl*, the volume includes two praise poems dedicated to Qiddist Wälättä Petros, as well as books documenting her miracles. The volume is bookended by a comprehensive timeline, appendix, and detailed glossary respectively. The comprehensive composition of the volume gives it accessibility, especially to the non-expert reader. Belcher and Kleiner have gone above and beyond to deliver an accessible and valuable source to the fields of African History, Religious studies, African literature, and Gender studies.

The *gädl's* protagonist Qiddist Wälättä Petros' life spanned the 16th and 17th century, which was an extremely tumultuous period in Ethiopian history. The infamous Emir of Adal, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (commonly known as Ahmad Grañ) mobilized a transnational *jihād* (1529-1543 C.E.) that nearly decimated the Christian empire and unfolded into a narrative of human

tragedy that drove the Solomonic dynasty into decline. The empire scarcely survived, due in part to direct intervention of some 400 Portuguese soldiers, who at the request of *Negus* (King) Lebnä Dengal came to assist in the war. In the time period following the defeat of Grañ (1543 C.E.) the famed Society of Jesus (Jesuits) commissioned missionaries to Ethiopia in order to convert and bring the Ethiopians under the authority of the Roman Church. While the Portuguese Jesuits were successful in eventually converting the *Negus* Susānyos, who declared Catholicism the official religion of the land in 1622, a resolute local resistance to Catholicism existed across all social strata.

Much of the historical focus on the resistance has been on Susānyos' son, *Negus* Fasilädäs, who restored the Orthodox faith as the religion of the state, expelled the Jesuits, and ordered the burning of Catholic books following his ascension to the throne in 1632 C.E. While the majority of Qiddist Wälättä Peṭros' *gädl* is composed mostly of accounts of her miracles as well as her time establishing monastic communities, she is notably celebrated for her disdain for Roman Catholicism as well as her open resistance to conversion. Qiddist Wälättä Peṭros was an Ethiopian noblewoman who left her abusive husband for the monastic life and resisted conversion, despite the efforts of Emperor Susānyos, who had employed the efforts of the notoriously uncompromising Jesuit missionary Alfonso Mendes. Qiddist Wälättä Peṭros herself is uncompromising in her faith, and her utter contempt for the Jesuits is highlighted by the *gädl's* routine reference to Roman Catholicism as the "filthy faith of the Europeans" and "the filthy faith of Leo," the latter being a reference to the main theological dispute between the two churches over the nature of Christ (119, 155).¹ The *gädl* of Wälättä Peṭros thus presents an expanded view of the resistance including, the agency possessed by woman in early modern Ethiopian society, as well an intimate view of the polarizing affect the Jesuit incursion had on Ethiopian society.

Among the notable assertions Belcher presents in her introduction, she makes it a point to deviate from the historical trend among scholars of Ethiopia to "Semitize" the region, the people, and their historical development.² Belcher opts to instead rightfully assert that Gadla Walatta Petros is a biography about an African woman, composed "in an African language by Africans for Africans about Africans"(1). While the field of Ethiopian

studies is filled to the brim with scholars regurgitating the “Semitic narrative” Belcher has done us all a service by reframing that narrative, and preventing the eradication and interrogation of African agency.

Sure to spark debate is Belcher’s interpretation of Wälättä Petros’ relationship with fellow nun Ehute Kristos, which she describes as a “romantic friendship” and perhaps a case of same sex desire (39-40). The implications of utilizing a church document in telling the story of a nun and Saint’s sexual desires is problematic in itself, let alone asserting that those sexual desires were same sex. Belcher offers little context on gender and sexuality in the Church, region, and time period which leaves a question mark hovering over her assertion. Is this interpretation a case of taking poetic license or artistic freedom?

While Belcher’s introduction is sure to spark debate, the volume is a valuable and welcome edition. Historians of Africa will undoubtedly be thrilled to have an accessible source detailing African agency and specifically African women’s agency in the early modern period.

Notes

¹ The reference is to Pope Leo I of the Roman Catholic Church during the 5th century C.E. He was part of the block who accepted the Chalcedon Doctrine on the nature of Christ. The Täwähädo Church is part of the block that rejected the Doctrine. (456)

² The removal of Ethiopia and Eritrea out of Africa so to speak, occurs when scholars attribute a majority of the social, political, and cultural developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea to peoples across the Red Sea in the Arabian Peninsula. This historical trend in Ethiopian studies stems for Eurocentric views of development and civilization in Africa as backwards, inherently inferior to Europe and the rest of the world, and in the case of Ethiopia which is seen as an outlier, developed because of outside intervention. See Messay Kebede, “Eurocentrism and Ethiopian Historiography: Deconstructing Semitization,” *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (2003): 1-19.