

Spirituality, reality and history

Both 'Ethiopia' and Ethiopia — both the **idea** of an ancient and independent black kingdom, and the **reality** of an actually existing state — continue to play a special role in the consciousness of the people of Africa and the African diaspora. The **idea** manifests itself powerfully through such cultural-religious expressions of black pride as Rastafarianism, as well as through the 'Ethiopian' churches of southern Africa and the diaspora. As Bob Marley is alleged to have remarked, 'Ethiopia is a spiritual nationality.' But the complex **reality** which Ethiopia constitutes, especially since the overthrow and murder of Haile Selassie in the mid-1970s, has had quite a different impact in the popular mind, with its forceful television images of starving children and pervasive civil war. What the books under review, all published or co-published in Ethiopia, and all by European authors, show quite clearly, is that even for scholars it is difficult to separate myth from reality. The legend of Prester John and the 3 000 year old Christian kingdom lives on, and masks Ethiopia's other histories and realities from our view.

The fact is, however, that for unprepared visitors even a trip to the Ethiopia of the tourist brochures can be quite literally an eye-opening experience. During a recent visit to Addis Ababa to take part in a conference, we were taken to the National Museum, a rich repository of art and *objets d'art*. A colleague from Durban, exposed to this tradition for the first time and amazed by the actuality of a vibrant, ancient and untainted African civilisation, asked quite rightly the key question — how did this particular Ethiopia survive?

African Zion, the illustrated catalogue of an extremely comprehensive exhibition of Christian art and artefacts from Ethiopia's ancient Orthodox Church, goes a long way towards explaining what it was that survived, at least in the central high-

• Roderick Grierson (ed), *African Zion: the sacred art of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies; New Haven; Yale University Press, 1993. 272p

• Richard Pankhurst, *A social history of Ethiopia: the northern and central highlands from early mediaeval times to the rise of Emperor Téwodros II*. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1990. 371 p.

• Sven Rubenson (ed), *Téwodros and his contemporaries, 1855-1868*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press; Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994. 379p. (*Acta Aethiopica*; vol. 2)

Reviewed by **Colin Darch**

lands and the orthodox north. The exhibition has been touring eight major art centres in the United States from October 1993 and will close at the Cleveland Museum of Art on 1 January 1996. If you plan to go to Cleveland before the end of the year, go to see the exhibition.

The book is beautifully and extensively illustrated with high-quality full-colour plates showing gorgeous illuminated manuscripts, elaborate processional crosses, pendant crosses, panels from wooden icons, golden chalices, and gold coins, some from as long ago as the fourth century. There are photographs, too of the rock-hewn churches. The text is made up of a series of synoptic essays by a range of well-known academics, on such historical and art-historical topics as the relationship between the church and the state, Ethiopic (that is, Ge'ez) literature, manuscripts and palaeography, illumination of manuscripts, and the coinage. No other sub-Saharan African state issued its own coinage as early as the Aksumite kingdom, which had gold, silver and bronze money as long ago as AD 270. There has been a cathedral dedicated to Mary of Zion on the same site at Aksum since the fourth century.

Looking through this book,

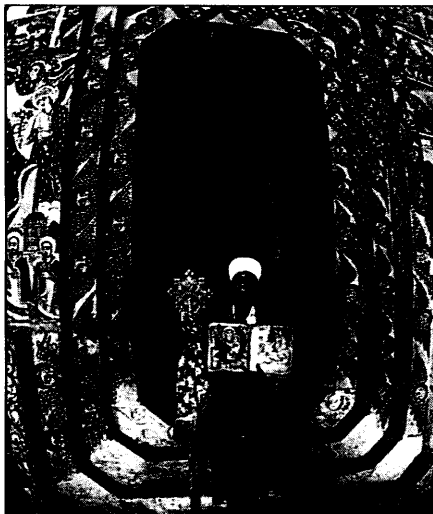
however, apart from pride at this multi-faceted African achievement, the question also comes to mind, is this what we really mean by Ethiopia? Is not the Ethiopia described here as mythic in some sense as the nation which Bob Marley described as 'spiritual'? Genuine and appropriate recognition of the importance for Africa of this extraordinary artistic, literary and religious accomplishment requires that we recognise that there is a Moslem Ethiopia as well, an Ethiopia of non-Semitic peoples, of southern nomadic hunter-gatherers and of Somali desert clans. We should not allow these other realities to be appropriated and obscured by the more glamorous aspects of the history and culture of Tigre, Showa and Manz.

Awareness of these imperatives is growing. It is the sub-title of Richard Pankhurst's most recent volume, *A social history of Ethiopia*, which gives the game away. By making explicit reference to the 'northern and central highlands,' Pankhurst implicitly acknowledges the shifts in perception which have taken place during the recent past of his adopted country. First, of course, the very inclusion of 'northern' is a nod towards the recent independence of Eritrea, and the vitally important shift of power back

to the Tigrinya-speaking north which took place after the overthrow of Mengistu in 1991, by the movement led by Meles Zenawi. But even the reference to the 'highlands' is in itself a recognition that the history of the Amhara and Tigrinya speakers is not the whole history of Ethiopia, and that the Oromo and the Sidamo and even the Hamar peoples also have a social history of their own.

Pankhurst is a veteran historian of Ethiopia, whose first book, an economic history of the country, was published as long ago as 1961. He has played an important role as a populariser of Ethiopian history, and has published with L. Ingrams, a collection of engravings from the European travel literature⁽¹⁾ which is a best-seller of its type. Pankhurst is an old-fashioned historian, working almost exclusively with published accounts. He has an unrivalled knowledge of the sources in the major European languages, and has mined them extensively. His new book is a synthesis, offering little room for Ethiopian voices and making no use of archival or oral research. The work is organised into three main periods, the middle ages, the Gondar period and the early 19th century, with sections on such social groups as the soldiery, the nobility, traders, slaves and women repeated in each. The book closes with a section on change, which includes an assessment of Téwodros's modernising reforms in the 1850s and 1860s.

Pankhurst is content to present



this particular view of his subject, without looking for grand patterns or meanings in the changing society he describes. "The present volume," he writes, "is primarily descriptive. It is intended to present a survey [...] for other writers to develop more ambitious, comprehensive and interpretative studies of old-time Ethiopian life." But sometimes, as indeed, with his account of Téwodros, virtually innocent of the work of other historians in recent times, the result is ultimately tantalising rather than satisfying, for the many questions it leaves unanswered.

Téwodros, however, continues to exert his fascination across the years. Another veteran, the Swedish historian Sven Rubenson, has published a book, *Téwodros and his contemporaries*, which is a collection of virtually all the official diplomatic and political correspondence which the editor could find for the thirteen year period of Emperor Téwodros's reign, up to his suicide.

As such, it includes letters from the Emperor and other high nobles to the Pope, Queen Victoria, Napoleon III and each other, as well as more mundane correspondence from lesser mortals addressed to explorers, missionaries and scholars. Almost all the letters, pragmatically written as occasion demanded in Amharic, Arabic, Ge'ez, Italian, Latin and French, are reproduced in facsimile, all are translated into English with a commentary.

Here the authentic voice of nineteenth century Ethiopia, missing from Pankhurst's work, calls from the detail and tone on every page. "May this letter reach so-and-so," writers frequently begin, reminding us that letters got lost even before the Post Office was around to lose them for us. Another writer, lonely in Rome, shyly hints to a French friend that "What I



really want is a small watch [...] I bought one in this country [...] It is worthless."

But great matters are dealt with too. Here are the treaties between the European powers and various Ethiopian kings and here are the letters addressed by Téwodros to the British general Robert Napier as the two unequal armies, Ethiopian and British, move closer and tragedy becomes inevitable. "[...] after I had written to you, when I cocked the hammer of my gun and put it into my mouth, though I pulled and pulled the trigger, it refused. When people came running and tore it out of my mouth, it went off," writes the doomed Emperor. Later on, he tried again, and succeeded. The British hauled their booty off the mountain and away to the British Museum. But the Ethiopians went on modernising, and were not defeated by European armies again until 1935.

Now Ethiopia is one of the poorest nations on earth, and depends as much as any Third World country on tourism for meagre hard currency earnings. As long as the myth can be turned into dollars, it will continue to obscure the harder complexities of Ethiopian reality.

Notes:

(1) Richard Pankhurst and L. Ingrams (eds) *Ethiopia Engraved* (London; Routledge, 1988)

Colin Darch is University Librarian at the University of the Western Cape. He lived in Addis Ababa from 1971 to 1975.