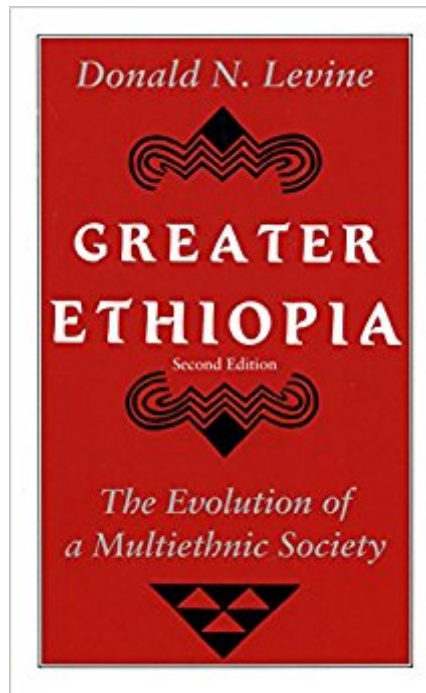




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Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution Of A Multiethnic Society



Synopsis

Greater Ethiopia combines history, anthropology, and sociology to answer two major questions. Why did Ethiopia remain independent under the onslaught of European expansionism while other African political entities were colonized? And why must Ethiopia be considered a single cultural region despite its political, religious, and linguistic diversity? Donald Levine's interdisciplinary study makes a substantial contribution both to Ethiopian interpretive history and to sociological analysis. In his new preface, Levine examines Ethiopia since the overthrow of the monarchy in the 1970s. "Ethiopian scholarship is in Professor Levine's debt. . . . He has performed an important task with panache, urbanity, and learning." "Edward Ullendorff, Times Literary Supplement" Upon rereading this book, it strikes the reader how broad in scope, how innovative in approach, and how stimulating in arguments this book was when it came out. . . . In the past twenty years it has inspired anthropological and historical research, stimulated theoretical debate about Ethiopia's cultural and historical development, and given the impetus to modern political thinking about the complexities and challenges of Ethiopia as a country. The text thus easily remains an absolute must for any Ethiopianist scholar to read and digest." -J. Abbink, Journal of Modern African Studies

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Customer Reviews

Donald N. Levine's classic work on the social evolution and integration of the many ethnic groups that make up Ethiopia has been a must reading for all sociologists and those concerned with economic and social development in Africa and elsewhere since the book was first published by the University of Chicago almost 25 years ago. The author has now (year 2000) updated his work with the addition of a new and comprehensive introduction that incorporates recent developments that have occurred in Ethiopian society and culture since the book was published. The book has just been translated into Ethiopia's official language, Amharic, testifying to the importance and relevance of the work, in spite of the major transformation, including a revolution, that the country has gone through. The book provides new perspectives and fresh analyses on multi-ethnic societies, and is highly recommended to all who wish to understand the interplay among sub-groups, whether ethnic or otherwise, in today's conflict-ridden societies of Africa, Asia and even central Europe.

The great contribution of Professor Levine's book, as I see it, is its very broad picture of the history and ethnography of the various people who inhabit what he terms Greater Ethiopia. This would include, at least, the current countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea. He manages to give an extremely valuable accounting of both the ethnographic (anthropological) and the historical scholarship -- two worlds that are not customarily combined. By and large, he sees two contrasting cultures: a) that of the Amhara (and associated Tigreans), and b) that of the Oromo, also known as Galla. The ancient civilization of the Amhara is Christian and Jewish, while the culture of the Oromo is, traditionally, African pagan, although today the Oromo have largely adopted Christianity and Islam. In Levine's view, it is the synthesis of Amhara and Oromo, under emperors who trace their origins to King Solomon, that makes for the unique social system that he calls Greater Ethiopia. The key to the self-understanding of the people who embrace this synthesis, according to Levine, is the fourteenth century Tigrean literary work "Kibre Negest" ("Glory of Kings," sometimes transliterated as 'Kebra Nagast'). Levine's work is now more than thirty years old, so we would not expect it to cover all of the latest scholarship. The second edition of 2000 has a new introduction and additions to the bibliography, but is otherwise unchanged. One of the virtues of these additions, however, is that Levine explicitly mentions the fact that "three important studies have transformed our understanding of the Beta Israel (Falasha)," i.e. the Ethiopian Jews. Here he lists the works of Steven Kaplan, Jim Quirin, and Kay Kaufman Shelemay. In addition to the history and ethnography in this work, there is also an attempt to apply the theories of Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, S. N. Eisenstadt, and other "grand theorists" of sociology. Being more empirically minded, I do not find this kind of theory very helpful in the present context. This may very well be my own shortcoming rather than that of the

author. In any case, no amount of "grand theory" can substantially diminish the value of this book for anyone looking for empirical description. All around: an astounding feat of scholarship.

A very informative book about a people who have never been colonized by the corrupted cultures of "Western European" civilization.

This book is one of those classics that never stays on the bookshelf for long. It should be required reading for all those interested in sociology or development studies in Ethiopia. The model describing the evolution of Ethiopian society presented by Levine has withstood the test of time, and is indeed proving more and more useful as time goes by.

This is an old book without much needed updating. I have a special interest in southern Ethiopia and this book was too out of date to be helpful.

Guess I wanted more about spiritual/religious ethnic information.

Throughout history there have been large traditional polities inhabited by a number of different ethnic groups. Such countries exist right up to our own days, but their number has shrunk. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottomans, Russia and its offshoot the USSR, and the Incan Tahuantinsuyu are examples of such political entities in the past; Iran, India, Myanmar, and Indonesia may be examined today. Ethiopia is another. Many ethnic groups, speaking a large number of different languages, practicing several religions, and living in a wide variety of ecological zones following different styles of life, inhabited the country we know as Ethiopia (and Eritrea as well). Is there anything that such conglomerations of people have in common ? Or is there really no reason why they shouldn't break up as did the Soviet Union or Ottoman Turkey ? They could form small, ethnically homogenous states. (or could they ?) Perhaps, on the other hand, there IS something they all have in common. Levine, in this highly-interesting overview of Ethiopia and its multiple cultures, tries to establish what exactly the many ethnic groups of Ethiopia do share. Why can we look at it as a 'culture area' and not just a bunch of unrelated peoples and tribes? Unfortunately for him, soon after his first edition got published, Ethiopia broke up into a welter of conflicting groups, most ethnically based. One could comment that it seemed they didn't have much in common. It took many years and the loss of Eritrea before things quieted down once more and Ethiopia began to develop into a modern state. He tried to address this situation in the second

edition. No doubt the peoples of Ethiopia DO have commonalities, starting with a shared history and the tendency to use Amharic as a lingua franca. The many small kingdoms that existed up to the mid-19th century modeled their rule on the Amhara version, claiming descent from Solomon etc. Trade and even warfare brought all the peoples into contact, many ritual practices, food taboos, and ideas about the supernatural existed across ethnic lines, some peoples (ex. Galla) changed their religions, practices, or lifestyles as they came into contact with others. Finally, though fighting amongst groups was more or less endemic, they would unite to oppose external aggression.

GREATER ETHIOPIA is also an attempt to describe the chief elements of Ethiopian society, both Amhara and Galla (along with a bit about others) to establish what the overarching culture of the Ethiopian culture area might consist of. It was a tough task to undertake and it seems to me that Levine has accomplished it very well. Perhaps more emphasis might have been put on Islam and the Muslim segment of the population. On occasion, he seems to fall back on sociological jargon from Talcott Parsons and S.N. Eisenstadt which may not have stood the test of time, but never mind, this book, like his "Wax and Gold" must be read by anyone seriously interested in Ethiopia.

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