

Bosc-Tiessé, Claire and Wion, Anaïs. 2005, *Peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie: Collection de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti*. Paris, Sépia.

Review by:

Manuel João Ramos, ISCTE-Lisbon

The French ethnological expedition Dakar-Djibouti (1931-32) has been an infrequently debated event in the history of Africanist anthropology. Led by Marcel Griaule, then in his early thirties, it was conceived as both an extensive ethnographic survey and an art and artefact collecting mission to enrich the Parisian Musée du Trocadero (now the Musée de l'Homme).

Its inspiration deriving both from the grand 18th-19th century scientific expeditions and from the fashionable American and European motorized expeditions that were crisscrossing various regions of the globe (financed by Dodge, Citroën, etc.), after the end of the First World War, it was a high profile expedition that benefited from comprehensive support from the French government and from private donors (among them the American carmaker Ford).

Apart from Griaule, who had practised fieldwork in Northern Ethiopia in 1928-9, none of the members of the expedition had any serious anthropological training. They were, for the most part, self-confident youths, somewhat bored with Parisian intellectual life. Michel Leiris, a promising writer who had recently dropped out of André Breton's circle, was charged with writing the expedition's journal (see Leiris, 1934).

The expedition's plan included two intensive surveys, which were to give it its notoriety: a long visit to the Dogon of Mali that would soon be followed by many others, and an art collecting spree in Gondar, Northern Ethiopia, that lasted the best of five months. It was mainly the collection of Gondarine objects that were to fuel accusations of heartless racist plundering thrown at the team and its leader.

Until the recent publication of *Les peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie*, a thorough inventory and analysis of the expedition's Ethiopian collection, though, most discussions on mission's objectives and results lacked objectivity in regard to the context and extent of this "plundering", and even less to the intrinsic characteristics and quality of the collected materials.

The authors, Anaïs Wion and Claire Bosc-Tiessé, two French historians specializing in Ethiopian Christian art, have achieved a fine balance between analysis of the historical and theological context of the collection, description of the anecdotic aspects of the collecting processes – including the controversial substitution of the Abba Antonios church 17th century wall-paintings for new ones produced by the team's painter, Gaston-Louis Roux -, and presentation of the collection's inventory.

Clearly, their goal isn't that of dealing with the whole of the expedition or of relating it with the Parisian intellectual environment of the thirties (see Jamin, 1984; Caltagirone, 1989). It is a work of specialists of the rather closed field of Ethiopian studies who have benefited from both an intimate knowledge of the collection and complementary documentation, and from intensive fieldwork experience in the Christian church and monasteries of the Ethiopian Amhara region.

Hitherto, their study is eminently inventorial, with a self-assumed divulging intention. The book is timely in that it is published just as the expedition's collection is set to be permanently displayed in a new space - the Musée du Quai de Branly, in Paris -, after being out of the public's view for some years.

The specialist reader may feel somewhat frustrated by the book's too synthetic presentation of controversies surrounding what has been frequently termed as an "act of plundering", to the little attention given to the political and cultural context that led to the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, or even to

the relevance of the mission for the later development of Ethiopian studies in France. The detailed bibliography and the referencing footnotes help the reader satisfy his/her curiosity and further explore the conundrums of this fascinating and polemic mission. Still, the book offers good clues as to why Marcel Griaule has subsequently abandoned the Ethiopian studies and dedicated himself to research the Dogon. Towards the end of their stay in Gondar, the ecclesiastical and political authorities' overmounting (and apparently justified) suspicion against the foreigners' art plundering and slave-freeing intentions made it practically unsustainable for them to work and collect, thus sealing Griaule's parting with Ethiopia (Bosc-Tiessé and Wion, 2005: 18).

One hopes that the publication of this volume motivates further serious researches of the expedition's collection, and that these will not be submerged by demagogical contentions regarding the devolution of the collection to Ethiopia, which are already being insinuated in the Ethiopian local press (see the recent inflammatory article of R. Pankhurst, a self-proclaimed defender of Abyssinian cultural heritage, in *The Ethiopian Herald*, 26 Feb., 2006).

Manuel João Ramos
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Manuel João Ramos
Departamento de Antropologia
Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e Empresa
Av. Forças Armadas
1649-026 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

Tel: +351217903011
Fax: +351217903012
E-mail: manuel.ramos@iscte.pt