

Ethnohistorical research in the ancient highlands of Tigray - methods and results

In many regions of the world societies maintain often detailed local memories of the past in many forms - we can even postulate that politically unified societies generally constitute themselves through reference systems built up on a historical past, be it very factual or mythological. This is true as much for very traditional, smaller ethnic groups which are partially isolated from the quick stream of modern information exchange as for modern societies. Historical memory is often misunderstood as inherently objective - some aspects of historical narrations may be subjective, we may admit, but this would rather be due to individual weaknesses and mistakes - while historical memory is always based on a choice of material and a choice of perspectives. Already what is judged important or not important has immense effects on the impact of a specific historical narrative. This again is not a failure of historical memories kept within societies but its typical and necessary character. The closer one is to the specific decisions of choice (e.g. in a modern "critical" setting of academic historiographers choosing new methods to finally come closer to what history should tell), the less evident it seems to which degree choices influence what we know about the past and how we use this knowledge to ascertain specific identities. Ethnohistory takes this mechanism for granted: History telling is the result of cultural and political choices by actors and groups of a given society. However, it does not stop there. Historical narrations and practices based on traditions of the past are not simply subjective. Due to their function as reference systems, starting from individual life experiences to the memories of founding fathers of a village or a larger society, societies have developed numerous mnemonic systems to assure precise transmission of a specific set of facts and their interpretation and checking mechanisms, which allow correction of mistakes in a narration. This works not only in societies which work with writing systems but is highly developed also in the oral sphere. This is also true for the ancient peasants' societies of Tigray in northern Ethiopia, which is marked by the existence of complex genealogical accounts, historical traditions on the foundation of settlements and migration movements, legends and cultural-spiritual practices linked with specific places or organising relations and traditional laws and customs. These narrations and practices do not have primarily an anecdotal or playful-performative character but are perceived as backbones of society, as they help to clarify legal questions, especially regarding land issues, define relations and help strengthening values which are often seen as more binding as any law proclaimed by the state or other superior bodies. These mechanisms of a "preservation" and "production" of history are discussed: They help understanding complex self-regulation and organisation systems of society, but due to their interest in specific facts, highly controlled by numerous members of the society acquainted with the detailed traditions, in some cases also contribute to the understanding of an ancient past. This includes insights in ancient belief systems and migration patterns.