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### **The Recording of the Local Cultural Context: Its Importance and Necessity**

by Denis NOSNITSIN<sup>1</sup>

Today, recording of the cultural context is not an issue in the most European or other (post-) industrial countries. In most of the European countries, the task of the thorough recording of the local cultural contexts had been completed many years ago. It happened in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century and mostly coincided with the formation of big European nations in the frames of national states, and with the emergence and quick maturing of the modern European intelligentsia and university scholarship. At one point,

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the intellectuals realized that industrialization will drastically change the life of the people, and most of the phenomena of what can be called “traditional cultural context”, if not properly recorded, will be lost forever. “Traditional culture” was understood not only as a set of different cultural traits, but also was equated to the “spirit of the nation” – the individuality of the people or peoples, their way of thinking, and last but not the least their dignity, sovereignty and independence. The subject of the studies aimed at recording traditional cultural contexts became much wider than what was considered to be the classical “cultural heritage” of the past, like masterpieces of religious art, architectural monuments, classical literature(s) etc. Much attention was paid to the detailed ethnographic description of everyday social and economic life, to the studies of folklores and oral literatures, local dialects, musical traditions etc. The results built up the fundament of the contemporary European studies in humanities.

Why is the recording of the local cultural context becoming urgent in the case of Ethiopia? It is easy to see a lot of similarities between the developments just mentioned and the situation emerging in contemporary Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a country of great history and culture, and of great cultural diversity. Today, the country is changing so quickly that many cultural phenomena transform and lose their originality; some others are disappearing or will disappear soon, and forever. While the common image of Ethiopia describes it as the country carefully keeping its cultural individuality, we cannot expect that what we call the “traditional way of life” will last. Gradually and irresistibly, the changes affect all fields of life. New roads break the traditional isolation of local cultural centers. Urban areas transform people with different cultural backgrounds into the “modern Ethiopians”. Electricity has changed the traditional way of domestic life and economic activities. Modern medicine will sooner or later substitute traditional healing. Modern education has effectively sidelined traditional church education. Mass media contribute to gradual disappearance of the local dialects. Being one of the most peculiar features of Ethiopia, the manuscript culture has been giving way to the printed books.

In a certain way, the importance of recording the local cultural context was seen by Ethiopian intellectuals long ago, at least after the establishment of the first University in Addis Ababa. First research attempts in the relevant field were initiated in 1950-60s: one should think of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*<sup>2</sup>, and even more of the *Bulletin of Ethnological Society, University College of Addis Ababa*<sup>3</sup>. For different reasons the attempts remained limited in scope, but the results have retained their importance until today.

Nowadays, thanks to the spread of university education in entire Ethiopia, it appears that the conditions are as favorable as never before to continue the recording of the cultural context on the local level, upon an improved

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<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff. In the 2000s the journal was issued only irregularly, and has nearly lost its original character.

<sup>3</sup> Some ten annual issues were printed in 1950s. The publication was shortly revived by Shiferaw Beqele in the 1990s but soon stopped; old issues were reprinted in 2002.

methodological basis, and with more sustainability and depth. In fact, the work is already being done. In this task, a special role is naturally assigned to the University of Mäqälä (Tigray), which is supposed to play the role of the main education and research center of North Ethiopia, and I expect that soon the new publication, ITYOPIS, will bring forth the first results of this work.

I feel that ITYOPIS can successfully fill the gap, presenting the records and research of the local cultural contexts of northern Ethiopia. From the editorial point of view, I think that contributions must not necessarily be long elaborated articles with large registers of quoted literature, which claim to solve important problems. One would expect from ITYOPIS less theoretical but more descriptive contributions, which indeed describe and record different cultural phenomena.

I think that journals of a scale like ITYOPIS can be successful only in case it has a constant stream of the materials coming from the local researchers. An international cooperation is very important, but it is more substantial to have a journal presenting studies carried out specifically by local students who may be inexperienced but have strong points in deeper acquaintance with the subject of the study, namely the local cultural context. I hope that a sufficient number of authors will be produced in the future by those institutions of Mäqälä University which deal, in different ways, with the social anthropology and history: the College of Social Sciences and Languages, the College of Business and Economics, and the Institute of Paleoenvironment and Heritage Conservation. Besides, there is a strong hope that also philology will sometime be added to anthropology and history. We can also expect that the journal will become an effective instrument in directing the research of young students, advising them and providing them with a valuable opportunity of getting experience in academic writing, or simply in summarizing their research in a comprehensive and clear way. I hope that the example of ITYOPIS, produced in the University of Mäqälä will be seriously considered by other Ethiopian universities and research institutions, and after some time we will see the results: sizable and ever growing records of the traditional cultures of Ethiopia, preserved for future generations and future studies.

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### **Use and Interest of the Notion of Territory in Horn of Africa Studies**

by Sabine PLANEL<sup>1</sup>

“Territorial studies” constitute a promising approach to renew analysis of space in the Horn of Africa and especially in Ethiopia. It allows us to go beyond an outdated perception of space, where spaces are defined according to their nature (i.e. rural vs. urban, agricultural or commercial), or according to their ethnic/regional belonging, and not according to their dynamic(s). The

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