

## **'Blue Skies Subjects' must be Maintained and Cultivated in Germany**

### The Role of Ethiopian Studies in Today's German Academic Landscape

ASFA-WOSSEN ASSERATE

In these days of spending cuts and the re-alignment of university structures, there seems to be one big loser on the German university scene – the so-called 'blue skies' subjects. In the eyes of many people 'blue skies' subjects are extremely beautiful and rare, but also dispensable. 'Blue skies' subjects are usually only studied by a small number of students and include: Mongol studies, Sorb studies, Onomastics, Christian archaeology, Celtic studies, Tibetan studies, Crystallography, but also Indian and African studies.

As a rule, a university has just one or two, or a maximum of three professors for these subjects. Often they are taught at just one single university. In Munich, for example, one professor at the Ludwig Maximilian University flies the flag for Albanian studies, the Christian Orient is only taught at the East German university of Halle-Wittenberg, while Jena is the last bastion of South-Eastern European Studies in Germany. Between Kiel and Passau you will find a whole series of these shimmering exotic subjects at universities. Subjects with just one to two professors in the whole country rank very high on the red list of threatened disciplines that has been compiled in recent years by a project at the universities in Potsdam and Mainz.<sup>1</sup>

The most important thing for the preservation of these 'small' subjects is the appointment of new professors. In subjects that have just one professor, the wrong appointment can have drastic results. It can even mean the demise of a whole subject, so high-quality appointments are a top priority. Other recommendations include the introduction of promotional programmes for up-and-coming academics, and the creation of networks between universities.

Many people regard 'blue skies' subjects as a luxury that universities afford themselves and that, given today's strained budgets, could certainly be done away with. But is that really the case? Are such special studies really useless? After all, it is these so-called 'blue skies' subjects that have made Germany world famous as an excellent country to study in. Please allow me to refer here to Ethiopian studies as my first example.

Germany is the motherland of Ethiopian studies. Hiob Ludolf established the subject as early as the seventeenth century, while in the service of the Dukes of Saxony-Gotha. Ethiopian studies existed in Germany even before German studies. The subject emerged out of Classical Oriental Studies, which were concerned with the Christian Orient and Semitic languages. The focal point of early research was the ancient Christian culture and literature of Ethiopia, which is mainly in Ge'ez, the country's only literary language until the early nineteenth century. Ge'ez is also the language of the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In the seventeenth century, Hiob Ludolf had already attempted to comprehensively describe all the cultures, peoples and the various political systems in the Ethiopian region. That comprehensive cultural science research programme was taken up again in Hamburg in the late twentieth century in the form of classical Ethiopian Studies.<sup>2</sup>

In his works, Ludolf repeatedly underlined how important it was to undertake research on the North-East African cultural region. Today, the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies in Hamburg is one of the world's few research institutions involved in scientific research on the Horn of Africa, its history, culture and art, its languages and lit-



Asfa-Wossen Assebate

eratures, its peoples and their social development. And the institute's members still feel greatly indebted to Ludolf and his legacy. The institute, which has organizational links with the Asia-Africa Institute of the University of Hamburg, was set up in 2002 with the aim of engaging in and coordinating international research in the field of Ethiopian Studies, building up a special library and creating work opportunities for students, graduates and visiting foreign scholars. It also publishes their research findings.

Hamburg is also the home of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, which has been compiled there since international specialists commissioned it in 1994.<sup>3</sup> This five-volume work in English, the last volume of which appeared in summer 2014, contains more than 4,500 articles on the most important themes relating to the history of ideas in North-East Africa. There are articles on the history, the peoples, the languages and literatures, the religions, the art and cultures and on influential personalities, business and trading and socio-political issues. So far, about 570 authors from 50 countries have collaborated on this lexicon. The *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* marks the current high-point in a long-standing, traditional interest in Ethiopia on the part of German scholars.

The lively on-going exchange of knowledge between Ethiopia and Germany has continued since its inception with Hiob Ludolf and his mentor Duke Ernest the Pious of Saxony-Gotha and Arnstadt. It was at the invitation of the Duke that Abba Gorgoryus, an Ethiopian priest and scholar, arrived in Gotha in 1652. Ludolf and Abba Gorgoryus worked together on first Ge'ez lexicon, as well as on a lexicon and a grammar of the Amharic language. The first natural scientists from Germany reached Ethiopia in the nineteenth century. The Frankfurt scientist Eduard Rüppell, for example, stayed in Ethiopia from 1831 to 1834 and studied not only the rich flora, fauna and geography of the country, but also its history and culture (Rüppell 1838–1840).

In the early twentieth century, Enno Littmann's work more than anyone else's decisively influenced Ethiopian Studies. In 1906 Littmann led the legendary German Aksum Expedition (Littmann 1913), financed by Emperor Wilhelm II, where he carried out the first archaeological excavations of the ancient Ethiopian imperial city in Aksum,

returning to Berlin with rich scientific findings. Littmann’s special area included the ancient and new Orient as a whole, and he is considered to be the last of ‘the great European Orientalists’. He had a great command of English, French, Italian, Latin and Greek, mastered Hebrew, New Persian, Turkish and Arabic (including several dialects) and excelled as well in the languages spoken in Ethiopia, namely, Tigre, Amharic, Ge’ez and Tegrēñña (Paret 1985). Fifty years after that Aksum expedition, Littmann was still so well remembered in Addis Ababa that on the occasion of his death in May 1958, Emperor Haylé Sillassé ordered the flags to be flown at half-mast.

The close connections and mutual empathy between Ethiopia and Germany have continued over centuries, and so it is a particular source of satisfaction that in Hamburg the comprehensive cultural-scientific research programme is being pursued further through classical Ethiopian Studies.

Generally speaking, all the so-called ‘small’ subjects dealing with foreign cultures and their languages play an enormously important role from a global viewpoint. They not only counteract the extinction of cultures in many regions in the world, often they also make the respective countries aware of their own history and culture again. Therefore, it is a great pity that the course ‘Introduction to Ethiopian History’ formerly given to all freshmen at the Addis Ababa University has currently been suspended. Hopefully, the university authorities will reconsider this decision.

Wilhelm von Humboldt,<sup>4</sup> co-founder of the university in Berlin that today bears his name, made the following statement 200 years ago: ‘Only he who knows the past has a future.’ In order to know one’s past and to study, interpret and evaluate it anew, it is of the utmost importance to preserve the witnesses of that past. These are the foundations on which a new future can grow. I believe that it is absolutely imperative for us to think outside the national box, as it were, and to the history of other cultures.

Although small in terms of staff, student numbers or the number of university locations, the ‘blue skies’ subjects are of inestimable importance for basic research and for the diversity of thought in our so-

cieties. In addition to their intrinsic subject-linked research tasks, they make orientational knowledge available, provide access to the world, to peoples and their different cultures, and they exercise our critical capacities. In an ever more networked society, responsibility increasingly rests with scientists not only to answer the old questions, but also to raise new ones. In our era of globalisation in particular, there is a growing need for well-grounded knowledge of one’s own tradition. On the one hand, scientific research contributes to creating a cultural memory, and on the other, it forms the basis on which to carry on a meaningful dialogue with non-European cultures.

In 2009, in a report by the Goethe Institute, Professor Dr Hans-Joachim Gehrke, President of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, highlighted<sup>5</sup> that, ‘we have a special responsibility. We are a civilized nation with knowledge of foreign nations, and it must be possible to engage with such topics in Germany.’ Gehrke is chairman of the commission of experts who compiled the evaluation report. He regards ‘blue skies’ subjects in Germany as being under threat: ‘At times when saving is necessary, the universities resort to image measures. Subjects that are not in the limelight have in some cases been discontinued.’ Yet Gehrke is convinced that, ‘the small subjects also have economic advantages’. In certain countries, and during certain discussions, what is required, for example, are not interpreters, but collaborators capable of speaking the respective language. In a globalized world, such subjects are basically essential.

The subjects that are currently suffering are ancient languages and cultures, which also have a long tradition and have often created a bridge between other human sciences. Semitic studies provide an example of this. Semitic Studies is a linguistic discipline whose linguistic competence is of importance for related disciplines, such as Arab, Islam, Egyptian and Iranian Studies. Semitic Studies includes the epigraphy of the old north-west Semitic and southern Semitic languages, as well as important areas of the science of the Christian Orient, especially in the context of the Syrian-Aramaic and the Ethiopian languages. Moreover, Semitic Studies also deals with minorities in the Near East, like the Arameans, Assyrians, Mandaean and Samaritans.<sup>6</sup> The Department of

Semitic Studies at the Free University of Berlin, which has the world's second largest Samaritan manuscript collection after St. Petersburg, is unique in Germany.

Semitic Studies were, and still are, important for exploring and publicizing otherwise inaccessible oriental literatures, which are vital for the identity of the minorities living in exile. Intensive contacts are cultivated with bishops of the Syrian Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox respective Eritrean Orthodox Church, as well as with other minorities from the Near East. With the help of Semitic Studies, it is possible at the Free University of Berlin to study the Near East in all its complexity and in a unique way. Thanks to the linguistic core competence involved, Semitic Studies forms a bridge between the different oriental subjects. That bridge gives access to the cultural context of numerous other subjects. By studying both current and also vanished cultures, it forges a link between Antiquity and the present and is crucial for the research area known as the 'Ancient World'. It also makes a special contribution to Koran research as it explores the cultural environment.

Semitic Studies as offered at the Free University in Berlin also encourages international understanding. Here, doctoral candidates from Islamic countries learn about Christianity and Judaism in their homeland. Later, as teachers at their home universities, they can then contribute towards an objective debate and thus toward a recognition of the Christian and Jewish components of their history. The subject also plays an important role as regards the presence and reputation of Germany in the Near East, and promotes collaboration with universities in oriental countries. Currently, up-and-coming academics from five oriental countries (Jordan, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Morocco and Ethiopia) are doing doctorates in Berlin. Several graduates in this subject have become university professors on returning home. They in turn not only send doctoral candidates of their own to Germany, but also convey a positive image of their guest country. This, too, is in Germany's interests. Generally it can be said that the Free University would lose much of its attractiveness if it were to discontinue its Semitic Studies

The case of Semitic Studies at the Free University highlights how small subjects can actually contribute to a high degree to the distin-

guishing features of a university. So, it is important not just to deal with the issue of the preservation of, or threat to, small subjects, but also to highlight their potential. The 'blue skies' subjects have in fact a number of strengths, which are partly the result of the one-professor situation: student services are outstanding, international networking is close, and collaboration across discipline borders are exemplary. Here, a piece of the old university ideal has been preserved – and these are trump cards in a modern academic world that 'talks constantly about quality teaching, internationality and interdisciplinarity, and often enough offers quite the opposite.' Professor Dr Jan Kusber, a historian in Eastern Europe at the University of Mainz, laments therefore that there are too few special subjects. After all, an increasingly complex world needs experts in niche areas.<sup>7</sup>

A study<sup>8</sup> commissioned in 2009 by the Minister of Innovation, Science, Research and Technology of the State of North-Rhine Westphalia also documents how important these subjects are for Germany as a land of scholarship:

The so-called 'blue skies subjects', in which the numbers of students lag far behind larger subjects such as economics or law, produce outstanding research results nevertheless, and are often leaders in their field. According to the group of experts, the subjects under evaluation have, in every respect, a significant importance for the way our society understands the world in the framework of their own culture, as well as for our knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures ... These subjects thus make an indispensable contribution to society ... Only an undistorted and authentic knowledge of one's own and of foreign cultures would enable an appropriate handling of fundamental values and concepts within one's own horizon ... What is more, this facilitates the perception of guiding ideas from more distant cultures, broadening our horizon and opening up whole new perspectives. The in-depth study and thorough knowledge of the respective languages and traditions also form the basis for comparative analyses of topical constellations and processes on a global scale.

It is very worrying that the small subjects are still being discontinued despite countless appeals. Professors and their colleagues struggling for their study areas explain that they are an integral component of a full university and that their research is the basis for understanding the world's cultures. The danger is, however, that when the holder of a chair retires the subject will be discontinued. The conference of German university rectors is alarmed and claims that, 'Extensive bodies of knowledge will disappear at lightning speed.'<sup>9</sup> A source of particular worry for the conference is the fact that each university reduces and even axes subjects without consulting other universities. One study asks: 'Will we have hundreds of biotech centres in the future, but not a single Africanist? Here, the autonomy which universities in the different German states wrested for themselves often turns out to have a boomerang effect. If a subject is abolished, politicians can now disclaim all responsibility.'

One problem with the small subjects is that they often require special knowledge, such as of ancient languages. This lengthens the duration of the studies, increases the drop-out rate and, in political terms, forces the university management to justify itself. What is more, graduates in these subjects often have fewer work opportunities.

Of course it can be more difficult for students of Coptic or Semitic Studies to find work in their field than it is for engineers or economists. As a result, they often strive for an academic career. Yet some of the exotic-sounding study courses are not as unprofitable as they might seem. Specialised experts are often in demand, and the definition of what a 'blue skies' subject is can also change quickly. This can be clearly shown by the example of Islamic Studies. Following the attacks on 11 September 2001, interest in the expertise of Islamic scholars increased significantly and the subject was expanded at German universities. Similarly, for a long time people doing Chinese Studies were regarded as exotic, something which changed radically with the economic ascent of China.

The on-going restructuring of universities under the aegis of the Bologna Process is particularly disadvantageous for the 'blue skies' sub-

jects. Small numbers of students are seen not in terms of an excellent staff/student ratio, but as an inefficiency. In the absence of teaching staff, it is also difficult to offer Bachelor degree courses in 'blue skies' subjects. And how is one to learn a non-European language in the new standard study period of just six semesters?

Here 'education' is understood as the communication of arbitrarily quantified objective knowledge sold by the service-providing university to the students. This does not take into consideration a self-determined process of reflection, to say nothing of a critical engagement with a subject. Consequently, this concept also does not require plural sciences – different approaches are levelled out by what is called 'the creation of focal points'. The concept of a universal comprehensive study loses its rationale. Often the Bachelor degree degrades study to a unified basic training, which under the banner of 'comparability' enables neither different approaches nor individual study routes.

When I left Ethiopia to study in Germany I was fascinated above all by German scholars such as Friedrich Rückert (Leupold 1988), one of the founders of Oriental Studies in Germany in the nineteenth century. Rückert scarcely even left his home town of Coburg, yet in the course of his translation, teaching and linguistic work, he engaged with forty-four languages: Afghan, Albanian, Old Church Slavonic, Arabic, Armenian, Ge'ez, Avestan, Azeri, Berber, Biblical Aramaic, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Gothic, Greek, Hawaiian, Hebrew, Hindustani, Italian, Kannada, Coptic, Kurdish, Latin, Lettish, Lithuanian, Malaian, Malayalam, Maltese, Neo-Greek, Persian, Pali, Portuguese, Prakrit, Russian, Samaritan, Sanskrit, Swedish, Spanish, Syrian, Tamil, Telugu, Chagatai and Turkish. To this very day, Rückert's translations of the Koran are relevant and his translation of the Hamasa anthologies of the oldest Arab folk songs gathered by Abu Tammam in the ninth century, as well as his volume of poetry called *Eastern Roses*, are considered to be unique.<sup>10</sup>

It was this kind of universally educated expert on which Germany's unique reputation as a country of scholars used to be based. We should at least try to preserve their heritage.

## References

LEUPOLD, Hermann

1988 'Friedrich Rückert. Ein Gedenkblatt zum 200. Geburtstag des Dichters und Gelehrten am 16. Mai 1988', *Einst und Jetzt* 33, pp. 105–132.

LITTMANN, Enno

1913 *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, Bd. 1, 3, 4, Berlin: Reimer.

PARET, Rudi

1985 'Littmann, Enno', *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 14, pp. 710f.

RÜPPELL, Eduard

1838–40 *Reise in Abyssinien*, Frankfurt: Schmerber.

## Endnotes

- 1 Homepage: <http://www.kleinefaecher.de/>.
- 2 Homepage: <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/>.
- 3 Homepage: <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ae.html>.
- 4 Wilhelm von Humboldt (\*1767–†1835).
- 5 Homepage: <http://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/de/tai/wis/fut/5264425.html>.
- 6 Conversation with Dr. Ulrike-Rebekka Nieten, Berlin, October 2014.
- 7 Homepage: [http://www.lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/wir\\_muessen\\_wieder\\_eine\\_staerkere\\_expertise\\_herانبilden?nav\\_id=4887](http://www.lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/wir_muessen_wieder_eine_staerkere_expertise_herانبilden?nav_id=4887).
- 8 Homepage: <http://www.nrw.de/presse/kleine-faecher-unverzichtbarer-be-standteil-unserer-universitaeten-7327/>.
- 9 Homepage: [http://www.hrk.de/uploads/tx\\_szconvention/Empfehlung\\_Kleine\\_Faecher.pdf](http://www.hrk.de/uploads/tx_szconvention/Empfehlung_Kleine_Faecher.pdf).
- 10 These poems were published in 1822 and allude to the great Persian poet Hafiz. They were Rückert's response to Goethe's West-Eastern Divan.