Ramos, M. J. (2018). *Of hairy kings and saintly slaves: An Ethiopian travelogue* (C. J. Tribe, Trans.). Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing. 214 pp. ISBN 978-1-907774-19-5

Of Hairy Kings and Saintly Slaves: An Ethiopian Travelogue is not what one would expect, even after attending a book launch[1] at which Manuel João Ramos presented an English rendition of his original Portuguese research[2]. It is certainly not the typical anthropological work that younger researchers are familiar with.

Ramos' most recent book is a 4-in-1 symphony, combining excerpts from his travel diary, letters to a Portuguese weekly, transcriptions of Ethiopian legends from the Gondar and Lake T'ana region and his very own sketch. The author is careful not to cause excitement. He adds pepper of self-critique for extra caution. Accordingly, his sketch is "irrelevant by-product", "fixer of what is seen" (p. 3), mere "ethnographic illustrations" that are "not intended to illustrate any particular passage of the text" (p. 6). Nonetheless, the resulting recipe gains new flavours despite its seemingly ordinary ingredients.

As such, readers immerse in Ramos' travelogue thinking that they are to revisit the so-called Portuguese heritage in Ethiopia and come out laughing quietly at their own ignorance. Whether the Portuguese did use eggs to build long-standing churches, palaces and bridges is secondary; what is fundamental is how royal stories continue to be told, in what manner, for what impact, by whom and for whom. These narratives are rich in affirmative sentimentalities in the context of a fragmented Ethiopian society (p. 167), contoured by symbolic appropriations (p. 170) amid religious rivalries (pp. 177-178, 196). Such is the pleasure of reading at ease an academic "text" in disguise.

There are several other characteristics that make *Of Hairy Kings and Saintly Slaves* stand out. To begin with, Ramos should be complimented on the ingenious title. Finding the "hairy kings" on the one hand and the "saintly slaves" on the other generates curiosity in someone new to Ethiopian motifs, who finds the solutions in the second half of the book (pp. 127, 176). All around the world, collections of oral traditions tend to be published in a similar fashion – thick, black and white volumes with little to no explanatory note. Ramos' book is different in that it contains different versions of several stories of major Ethiopian figures, reinterpreted and reinvented. For this reason, it is tremendously rewarding to compare the oral history of generations of kings as told by *Ato* Wale (p. 119), *Liqa* Hiruyan (p. 125), *Qes* Asmeche (p. 128), etc. More than just repeating and recycling old epics (pp. 180, 187), they reimagine and repower the lore of Ethiopia. The author suggests possible explanations for the paradoxes and inconsistencies, helping readers to understand Ethiopian oral tradition. Instead of simply transcribing what tradition keepers transmit, he compares, instigates and juxtaposes the information, and he explains the discrepancies and implications for Ethiopian studies. We aim to demystify the complex world of words and the complex words of the world, for "[w]hat is important is that we can remember (and then forget) that reality in Ethiopia is often merely a secondary function of fiction" (p. 49). Appreciation is needed for *sem-na werq*, meaning "wax and gold", or "poetry and metaphor" (p. 69). People recount their stories so as to understand and assign meaning to their heritage. It should also be mentioned that the book is well-translated, evidenced by the select vocabulary and brightness of tone. This is the result of the collaborative work of a group of language workers (p. 7). In the process of translating old epics, legends and folktales, a lot of the original expressions and local concepts are maintained[3]. Following normal editing practices, the pages containing drawings are not numbered because of their secondary,

illustrative nature. The drawings are inserted afterwards. In this case, though, it is felt that the sketches are an integral part, without which the book would be very different. Meanwhile, it is difficult to review visuals because, first, one is not taught to do so in graduate school and, secondly, it challenges some of the "scientific" and "positivist" assumptions held by academics. Through Ramos' sketch, people come to life, with radiant faces, accentuated expressions, agile movements and captivating mannerism. The depicted scenes are not only alluringly nostalgic, but also provocatively modern.

Despite the above-mentioned merits, this Ethiopian travelogue has some room for improvement. For starters, as Ramos himself readily admits, there is no direct connection between the sketch and the text. This may not be a problem for an expert reader; however, someone who reads in order to begin to learn about Ethiopia will enjoy the sketch but will not be able to understand the subtleties and, perhaps, humour and satire (pp. 58, 60, 72). Exceptionally, the illustrations could have been numbered and arranged in a way that is more reader-friendly, for example, by subject or theme, with adequate labels and titles. If there were more internal coherence and dialogue between the different parts of the book, the reading experience would be significantly enhanced. It should be pointed out that the textual-visual combination involves interlingual and intersemiotic translations simultaneously and compensates for some of the losses in translation. Considering the short conclusion, in the form of a final note (pp. 195-198), it is felt that more could be said about anthropology at a time when this discipline is facing serious identity crises. In the current competitive academic environment, be it cultural anthropology, social anthropology or visual anthropology, the concern is that anthropology faces competition from other disciplines, which recruit more young talents, publish more intensively and seem to respond to contemporary challenges more eloquently. *Of Hairy Kings and Saintly Slaves* swims between the social sciences, humanities and the arts. While today's

students are taught to view anthropology as a scientific pursuit, scholars used to work on broader humanistic bases. Agreeing that sketch forms part of anthropological work, Ramos demonstrates a more humanistic way of conducting research. Can some of these practices be recuperated, and what are the implications?[4] And if visual methods relate to our understandings of the place, people and interaction in fieldwork, can we be creative and participatory without forsaking the very essence of anthropological studies? Additionally, it would be interesting to know what audience Ramos had in mind when preparing his book for publication. He could have thought of his academic colleagues – especially in anthropology, history, oral tradition and religious studies – but neither the language nor the style is typically academic. The author could have considered urban/cosmopolitan Ethiopians and those in the diaspora who wish to learn about their heritage. Or did he mean to introduce Ethiopian studies to a wider international public with little prior knowledge but an eagerness to learn about Ethiopia?

By and large, Ramos' latest book strikes the right balance between scholarly quality and popular appeal. It is a welcome addition to the current corpus of literature.

1. This English version of the book was presented at *Leituras do Mundo*, on 10 December 2018, in the library of ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon (https://cei.iscte-iul.pt/eventos/evento/leituras-do-mundo-7/).
2. A Portuguese edition was published some years ago – Ramos, M. J., *Histórias Etíopes*, Lisboa, Edições Tinta-da-China, 2010.
3. For Christopher J. Tribe's own description of his translation strategy, read, for example, "Notes on the English Translation" (2011), in I. Boavida, H. Pennec, & M. J. Ramos (Eds.), *Pedro Páez's History of Ethiopia*, 1622, Vol. I (trans. C. J. Tribe), London, Hakluyt Society, pp. 53-55.

4. Ramos, M. J., & Azevedo, A. (2016), “Drawing close: On visual engagements in fieldwork, drawing workshops and the anthropological imagination,” *Visual Ethnography, 5*(1), 135-160.

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