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Book Review

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Title: *Mets'hafa Faws*

Language: *Amargna*

Author: Aman Belay

Year of publication: 2000 (Eth Cal)

Publisher & place of publication: AE; Addis Ababa (?)

Book specifications: 5 x 20 cm; 1-10 (*Amargna* numerals) + 392 pp; soft cover

The title of the book reminds this reviewer of a similar title of a manuscript archived in the British Library, London, and believed to have been written in Ethiopia in the 18th century. A different title would have been more appropriate for this book. Nevertheless, it is one of the few books that have been written in *Amargna* on Ethiopian traditional medicine. The literature on Ethiopian traditional medicine can be divided into two major categories. The first type concerns folkloric literature based on oral testimonies and old manuscripts that were written by local traditional medicine practitioners, who allegedly inherit such knowledge from forebears. This category therefore can strictly be described as traditional literature. The second category, modern literature, includes research reports, surveys and books that have been forthcoming from academic circles, and encompasses Ethiopian ethnobotany, ethnomedicine, phytochemical studies and biological evaluation of plants. The book under review here is an example of the former category.

The book is divided into several sections. On the cover and in the preface, the author claims that the intended readership are scholars and scientists who are involved in compounding plant medicinals. Scholars may find this assertion to be contentious. The first 24 pages are devoted to explaining *Amargna* letters, and how they are sounded. It appears that in these pages the author tries to introduce the reader to incantations and prayers that are uttered in the process of healing. However, they are written in *Ge'ez*, and the *Ge'ez*-illiterate reader will be at a loss in deciphering the meanings.

On pages 25 through 153, the author uses a disease-based approach to elaborate the medical uses of Ethiopian plants. Again, these uses are coupled with prayers and incantations to bring about cure. The conditions treated include asthma, cold, diabetes, impotence, stomach problems, *neqersa*, heart problems, as well as entries on how to acquire wealth, etc. The common or local names of the plants, compounding methods and medical uses are given. Surprisingly, the plant Ginseng (p 43) is mentioned as a treatment for diabetes. The reader is left with the impression that Ginseng is an Ethiopian plant, while the fact is it is typically a Chinese and Korean medicinal plant. Pages 154 through 168 list a number of medicinal products derived from animals such as fox, elephant, lion, mule, hyena, deer, cat, donkey, chameleon, bees, goat, elephant, camel, dog, monkey, hyena, birds, etc. The conditions treated with these products range from eye problems to arthritis, mental problems, vitiligo (*Lem'ts*), stomach problems, to enhancing memory. Pages 169 through 184 list spices, edible food products (cereals and vegetable) and their medicinal applications followed on pages 185 through 382 by alphabetically arranged medicinal plants, their compounding methods, and various uses. This sequence is interrupted by 15 pages (pp 300-315) which provide a listing of *Ge'ez* names of plants, along with their *Amargna* names, and the corresponding medicinal uses. All the *Ge'ez* names start with the prefix "*Itse*." It appears that the author chose to include the *Ge'ez* listing of all medicinal plants, since all of them started with the letter "I" in "*Iste*."

As in other systems of traditional medicine (especially the Chinese), Ethiopian herbal remedies are mostly compounded from multiple plants at a time. The use of many plants to compound a given remedy may be rationally explained. However, the explanation can be confounding when the number of plants incorporated in a given remedy runs high. For example, on page 90 the author lists an astounding number of

distinct plants (20 of them) to compound a single remedy for an alleged relief of frontal headache (*ras sinqe'n*). One wonders if all the ingredient plants are necessary to effect the intended relief.

The book seems to have been written from the personal experience of the author, and the claims may have been gathered from ecclesiastical sources, which the author does not explicitly acknowledge. The biggest shortcoming of this book is its lack of any published references. Scholars who are interested in conducting serious work using this source as a starting point will be left wondering about the source of the information, and as a result they will have to do extensive cross-checking to confirm the validity of the claims. The organization of the book could have benefited better from a clear division of the material into chapters. In spite of these shortcomings, the book is a welcome addition to Ethiopian medical folkloric literature.