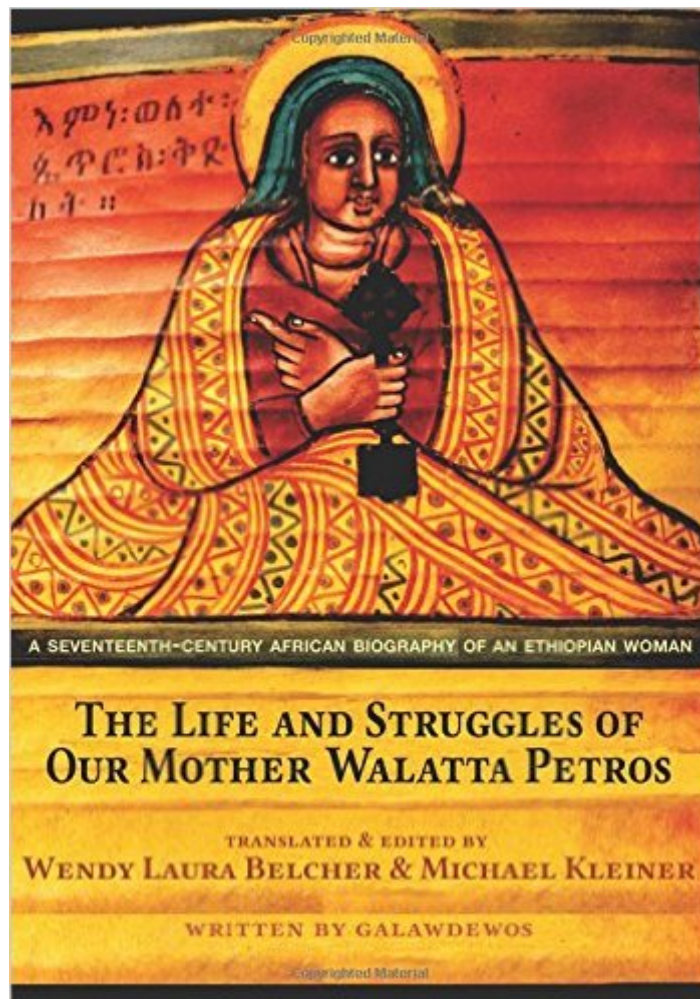


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The Life And Struggles Of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography Of An Ethiopian Woman



Synopsis

This is the first English translation of the earliest-known book-length biography of an African woman, and one of the few lives of an African woman written by Africans before the nineteenth century. As such, it provides an exceedingly rare and valuable picture of the experiences and thoughts of Africans, especially women, before the modern era. It is also an extraordinary account of a remarkable life--full of vivid dialogue, heartbreak, and triumph. *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros* (1672) tells the story of an Ethiopian saint who led a successful nonviolent movement to preserve African Christian beliefs in the face of European protocolonialism. When the Jesuits tried to convert the Ethiopians from their ancient form of Christianity, Walatta Petros (1592-1642), a noblewoman and the wife of one of the emperor's counselors, risked her life by leaving her husband, who supported the conversion effort, and leading the struggle against the Jesuits. After her death, her disciples wrote this book, praising her as a friend of women, a devoted reader, a skilled preacher, and a radical leader. One of the earliest stories of African resistance to European influence, this biography also provides a picture of domestic life, including Walatta Petros's celibate life-long relationship with a female companion. Richly illustrated with dozens of color illustrations from early manuscripts, this groundbreaking volume provides an authoritative and highly readable translation along with an extensive introduction. Other features include a chronology of Walatta Petros's life, maps, a comprehensive glossary, and detailed notes on textual variants.Â Readers can read the whole book or can leap right into the story of the saint's life, which runs from pages 77 to 272 (with lots of notes, so in effect about 100 pages of reading). Instructors may think about assigning the Preface (pp. xvii-xxxiv), to orient students, and the section titled "The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros" (pp. 77-272).

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Customer Reviews

A thoughtful and respectful translation. To be clear, Belcher is absolutely unambiguous that as a nun Walatta Petros was chaste. The panicked negative reviews appearing here have evidently not read the book.

This is a fascinating read - a new English translation of a seventeenth century hagiography of the Ethiopian female saint Walatta Petros, originally written in Ga'ez. The author (Belcher, working with translator Kleiner) has done previous work on the African influence on the Western intellectual tradition, and here gives us once again a meticulously researched book that broadens our horizons and challenges our preconceptions. I highly recommend people read it in its entirety to understand the nuances of both the original work and its translation. This is the story of a celibate nun who had complex emotions and deep relationships, and most amazingly (to most of us) led a successful resistance to the attempts of both Europeans and local male leadership to convert her people to Roman Catholicism from the indigenous (Tawahedo) Christian practice, and was moreover part of a long tradition of powerful noblewomen.

Excellent scholarship, well-crafted, superb images, and a wonderful read! Books on female historical figures are few and far between, especially from the 17th c. I will assign it to my class the next time I teach a course involving African literature.

This is a gem. It is one of the earliest biographies of a woman, let alone an African woman, let alone an early African Christian, let alone an early African female Christian, let alone an early African female Christian Saint, let alone a defender of early African Christian beliefs. The translation is fluid and clear, annotations comprehensive, plates from the manuscript are gorgeous. It is a stunning and beautiful book to open your eyes into a rarely seen world of a seventeenth century woman. It is a book to be cherished.

This thoughtful, careful, scholarly translation by a woman who learnt several Ethiopic languages as a child living in Ethiopia and with the copious input of native Ethiopian scholars is a treasure.

Framing the historical situation of Wāḥīdāṭ Ḥalīmā - ros for the unfamiliar, Belcher lucidly explains the socio-political, gender, and religious issues of the time and relating to the manuscripts for the Ḥalīmā Wāḥīdāṭ Ḥalīmā - ros (hagiography of W.P.). Her presentation of the actions of the saint show a sophisticated understanding of her gender expression, which is far from European ideals of Mother/Virgin. W.P. is a difficult, hard woman who does not comply with European notions of "appropriate womanhood" but rather with indigenous ideals of saintliness and piety. For example, the ḥalīmā does not expect her to do emotional work for others, and she does not. In reviews by outraged individuals here on , reviewers state clearly they did not read the book and shout about the evils of reading homosexuality into the text. To be clear, Belcher is specific in her analysis of the relationship between Wāḥīdāṭ Ḥalīmā - ros and ʿĀṣiyyat al-Karīmīyah, another famous female saint. She is explicit that the ḥalīmā of W.P. has the saint *decrying* illicit sexual activity, and on occasion specifically between nuns. She also notes the way the text rejects same-sex sexual activity while describing a passionate *emotional* relationship between the two women saints, who lived together for almost the entirety of their careers.

I find it interesting that the negative reviews for this book have little to do with the writing or the scholarship. The main objections seem to be about the possible homosexual relationship depicted, and/or the race of the author. After doing some research myself, and discovering Belcher's extensive background--both personal and professional--with her research area, I can only presume that prejudice is the cause of the vitriol shown here in the reader reviews. I believe the work should be judged on its own merit. That being said, I thought the book was intriguing, well-written, and beautifully researched. It asks the reader to question long-held beliefs about gender and religion, the questioning of which can only make us better scholars and more empathetic people. The color plates are wonderful (wish there were more! I want to know more about the artistic tradition here as well). As a book that highlights the earliest African female biography, Belcher's work is important and highly readable. It deserves better than a few small minds with a knee-jerk reaction.

This translation adds multiple layers of complexity, nuance, and rigor to the study of early African literature in the English language. It's immensely illuminating.

This book is an indispensable resource for scholars and lay readers alike interested in expanding our collective sense of African textual history.

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