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A BOOK REVIEW ON “CUSH AND CUSHITIC”

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Book Review: “ኩሽ እና ኩሻዊ፣ ቋንቋ፣ ታሪክ፣ ሀይማኖት እና ነገድ (Cush and Cushitic: Language, History, Religion and Race)” by Girma Awgichew Demeke.

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Girma Awgichew Demeke’s book, *ኩሽ እና ኩሻዊ፣ ቋንቋ፣ ታሪክ፣ ሀይማኖት እና ነገድ* (*Cush and Cushitic: Language, History, Religion and Race*), promises to be a major academic contribution to Cushitic studies, drawing on the author’s extensive background in linguistics. His previous contributions in the area have significantly shaped the current work. Especially, the two books written in Amharic (አማርኛ): *ቋንቋ እና ነገድ በኢትዮጵያ ቅጽ አንድ እና ቅጽ ሁለት* (*Language and Race in Ethiopia, Vol. 1 & 2*), are notable in this regard. Like some of his other works in the field, Demeke’s use of the local language Amharic (አማርኛ) has an invaluable contribution to the local community, where the local readers get access to books in their language. Demeke, who holds both an MA and PhD in Linguistics, skillfully combines linguistic analysis with historical and cultural research to explore the significance of Cush and Cushitic peoples in African history, particularly within the Ethiopian context. This in-depth study is published by The Red Sea Press, adding to an

expanding body of work that aims to illuminate the often-confused interpretation of the current usage of the term Cushitic in linguistics with the ancient Kush civilization and the usage of the similar word in religious texts. In his thorough discussion, Demeke clearly shows that the current usage of the term Cushitic has nothing to do with the ancient Kush Kingdom or the biblical Kush.

The author’s thesis, as clearly indicated in the preface and introduction, is to make a general analysis of Cush and Cushitic from linguistic and historical perspectives. The main objective reads as “ዋናው አላማችን ኩሽ ወይም የዚህ ዝርያ ቃል በሆኑት ስያሜዎች ስለሚጠቀሱት ህዝቦች እና ቋንቋዎች እንዲሁም ስለጥንታዊ የኩሽ ስርወመንግስት ጠቅላላ ያለ ግንዛቤ ማስጨበጥ ነው” (p. XVII). This literary means the book aims to create a general understanding of the people and languages named by the word Cush and its derivatives, and the ancient Cush Dynasty. The book does what is said; this thesis statement is met.

Structure and Content

The book is organized in three parts with seven chapters, each focusing on a key aspect of Cushitic civilization, from its origins and historical development to the linguistic and religious dimensions of Cushitic peoples. Part one deals with ancient Cush and history and holds three chapters from chapters 2 – 4, while part two discusses the modern usage of the term Cushitic in linguistics in chapter five, and the third part holds chapter six which discusses *Cush and Cushitic in the Ethiopian Context*.

Chapter one, *Cush and Its Origin*, introduces the reader to the origins of Cush, tracing its ancient roots in the Nile Valley and the broader Northeast African region. Here, Demeke critically engages with archaeological and textual evidence to reconstruct Cush’s early development, challenging longstanding narratives about the primacy of Egypt in the history of African civilizations. He emphasizes Cush’s independent rise and early influence on neighboring cultures.

In Chapter two, *Ancient Cush State*, Demeke offers a detailed historical analysis of Cush’s interactions with ancient Egypt. This

chapter spans the period both before and after the birth of Jesus, focusing especially on the 25th Dynasty, when Cushitic rulers controlled Egypt, on one side, and Egyptian rulers controlled Cush in the 15th century before the birth of Jesus, on the other. Demeke sheds light on the religious, cultural, and political exchanges between Cush and Egypt, and how these interactions influenced the broader region.

Chapter three, *Cush Race and Cush Language: This chapter explores Cush Race and Language in the ancient Cush Dynasty, the use of Cush in the Bible, and the interconnectedness of Cush, Ethiopia, and Blackness*. It explores Cush's linguistic and racial identity, with particular attention to how Cush and Cushitic peoples have been represented in various historical and religious texts, including the Bible. This chapter also tackles the enduring association of Cush with Ethiopia and blackness, offering new perspectives on the relationship between language, race, and identity. Demeke in his analysis shows that the term Cush does not mean the same in the Bible, in ancient places, and in the language speakers.

In *Punt and Da'amat Axum*, Chapter four, Demeke turns his attention to two other important ancient African civilizations—Punt and Da'amat Axum—and their interactions with Cush. This chapter delves into the debates surrounding the location and identity of Punt, comparing it with Arabia, Somalia, and other Northeast African regions. Demeke also examines the relationship between the Kingdoms of Punt, Da'amat, and Axum, and how they were influenced by Cushitic peoples, further cementing Cush's role in the region's historical development.

Chapter five, *Cushitic Language and Its Speakers*, is a cornerstone of Girma Awgichew Demeke's linguistic investigation into Cushitic languages. Demeke systematically addresses the long-standing problems in the classification of these languages and shows the current internal classification has many problems that seek further analysis. This chapter is particularly important for linguists and scholars focused on Afro-Asiatic languages, as Demeke not only shows the various classifications of the Cushitic languages proposed by different scholars at different times but also critiques existing classifications.

In section 5.2, *List of Cushitic Languages*, Demeke presents a comprehensive list of the languages, grouping them into Central, North, South, and East Cushitic. He stresses the fact that he followed such a classification does not mean to favor it but for the sake of ease of articulating his points. This classification is detailed and carefully structured, giving readers a clear picture of the breadth of the Cushitic family. This list serves as a reference point for the later discussions in the chapter, which delve into the relationships and distinctions between the languages.

Section 5.3, *Cushitic Languages and Speakers*, explores the geographical distribution and demographics of the Cushitic language speakers. Demeke draws attention to the social and cultural significance of language within these communities, highlighting how language functions as a marker of racial and regional identity. His discussion here is particularly illuminating as it ties linguistic diversity to the broader cultural landscape of Northeast Africa.

In section 5.4.1, *Interrelations Among Language Groups*, Demeke examines the internal classification of Cushitic languages, a subject that has long been debated among linguists. Through his analysis of phonological and syntactic features, Demeke demonstrates the complex relationships between these languages. By providing specific examples of shared phonological patterns and syntactic structures, he supports his arguments for how these languages evolved and diversified from common ancestors.

In the section on *Evaluation and Commentary on the Internal Classification of Cushitic Languages*, Demeke critically engages with existing classifications, particularly those proposed by earlier scholars. He provides a balanced evaluation, pointing out where previous classifications fall short, especially in terms of underestimating the linguistic diversity within the Cushitic family. His comments challenge some traditional views, advocating for a more nuanced and flexible approach to classifying these languages. In his concluding analysis of chapter five, Demeke addresses a longstanding question in Cushitic studies: whether Cushitic languages can be considered a distinct and

independent phylum within the Afro-Asiatic language family. Drawing on the internal classification issues he has explored throughout the chapter, Demeke argues that the linguistic diversity observed among Cushitic languages makes it difficult to establish clear, unifying features that would support such a conclusion. His analysis shows that the phonological and syntactic variations across the language groups are significant, and thus, there is no definitive linguistic evidence to classify Cushitic languages as an independent phylum at this point in time. Demeke's evaluation not only enriches our understanding of the Cushitic family but also calls for future research to refine linguistic models further.

In *Cush and Cushitic in Ethiopian Context*, Chapter six, Demeke ties Cushitic history and language more directly to Ethiopian history. He explores the influence of the Cushitic-speaking peoples on the formation of Ethiopian culture, particularly in terms of religion and language. Demeke revisits the historical connections between the Cushitic and Semitic-speaking peoples of Ethiopia, paying special attention to the interplay between Sabaeen influences and Cushitic traditions. This chapter provides an important reevaluation of Ethiopia's historical narrative, emphasizing the foundational role of Cush in the region's history.

The final chapter, *Conclusion*, synthesizes the book's key findings, reinforcing Demeke's argument for the centrality of Cushitic peoples in African history and civilization. The conclusion also suggests pathways for future research, particularly in interdisciplinary studies that combine linguistics, archaeology, and history.

Critical Analysis

Girma Awgichew Demeke's *ኩሽ እና ኩሽቲያ* is an essential scholarly work that seeks to elevate the study of Cushitic peoples and their contributions to African and world history. As a linguist, Demeke's approach is both rigorous and methodical, with much of the book's strength lying in its detailed linguistic and historical analysis. His discussions of the history of Cush, Cushitic languages, and surrounding

their historical spread are among the most comprehensive treatments of the subject to date. The interdisciplinary nature of the book—incorporating historical, linguistic, and religious perspectives—ensures a broad understanding of Cushitic civilization.

One of the book's key contributions is its reexamination of Cush's role in ancient Egyptian history, particularly during the 25th Dynasty. Demeke presents compelling arguments that challenge existing assumptions about Cush's subordination to Egypt, instead portraying Cush as a powerful, autonomous civilization that greatly influenced its neighbors. His discussions of Cush in biblical texts and the association of Cush with Ethiopia and blackness also add valuable nuance to modern understandings of race, identity, and historical memory.

Chapter five stands out for its depth and precision, reflecting Demeke's expertise in linguistics. His ability to clearly articulate the complexities of Cushitic classification issues and propose solutions demonstrates a mastery of both the theoretical and practical aspects of language classification. The chapter is rich with examples that support his arguments, from phonological patterns to syntactic structures, making it accessible to readers with a strong background in linguistics.

However, despite its strengths, there are a few areas that could benefit from further refinement. Firstly, there are some noticeable typographical errors throughout the text, which, though minor, detract from the professionalism and clarity of the work. Careful editing is required to address these issues and ensure that the book's arguments are communicated without distractions.

In addition to typographical concerns, Demeke's handling of some of the naming conventions for Cushitic languages presents some challenges. He often refers to languages using the names as used by foreign linguists, which are most likely mispronounced due to the unavailability of the sound in their mother tongue. The result of this might make the language names incomprehensible to the neighboring Amharic-speaking communities, or the speakers of those languages themselves. For instance, the languages Demeke lists as አውንሊ, ቅማንት-ነይ, and ኸምታንጋ should be corrected to አውኚ, ቅማንትኛ, and

ከምጥኛ, respectively, to align with their proper forms pronounced by the Amharic-speakers. This correction would enhance the accuracy of the work.

Moreover, Demeke misses the opportunity to incorporate the self-designations of language speakers, such as the Gedeo people, who refer to their language as Gede'uffa (ጌዴኡፋ). Furthermore, the spelling of the language name ጌዴኡፋ is another point that requires correction, as Demeke incorrectly spells it ጌዴኡኛ. It's also important to note that ጌዴኡፋ has been studied at a department level at Dilla University, a detail that could have been included to provide additional context and recognition of academic efforts to document the language.

These naming and spelling inconsistencies could potentially cause confusion for readers, especially those who are unfamiliar with the sociolinguistic landscape of the region. Standardizing the use of autonyms (names used by the language speakers themselves) and exonyms, while providing context for both, would enhance the clarity and overall quality of Demeke's linguistic analysis.

Despite these issues, Demeke's detailed examination of Cushitic languages, especially his critique of existing classifications remains a significant contribution. His use of phonological and syntactic examples to demonstrate interrelations among language groups is insightful, and his evaluation of previous classifications offers a fresh perspective on the complexities of Cushitic languages. This chapter is a valuable resource for scholars in linguistics and African studies, advancing the understanding of the Cushitic language family while also calling for more refined and accurate linguistic documentation.

Conclusion

ከሽ እና ከሻዊ by Girma Awgichew Demeke is an essential contribution to the study of Cushitic history, language, and culture. Through his meticulous research and interdisciplinary approach, Demeke highlights the significance of Cushitic peoples in shaping African and Ethiopian history. His thorough examination of Cushitic language classification in chapter five is particularly commendable, offering both a clear

framework for understanding the internal structure of these languages and a critical perspective on previous scholarly work.

This book is particularly valuable for scholars of linguistics, history, and African studies, offering new insights and opening up avenues for further research. While some sections may be dense for non-specialists, the work's overall scope and depth make it a critical resource for anyone interested in the ancient civilizations of Africa.

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