

Supplement to AETHIOPICA  
International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies  
7

# Oral Traditions in Ethiopian Studies

Edited by  
Alexander Meckelburg, Sophia Dege-Müller,  
and Dirk Bustorf



Harrassowitz Verlag

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*Hamburgische  
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On the front cover (left to right): blessing for peace (Abore, 2007; photo courtesy of E. C. Gabbert), Fasil Gəmb (drawing with pen and watercolour, Gondär, April 1999; courtesy of M. J. Ramos); note taking during interview with Opuo elders (Wanke, Itang *wäräda*, Gambella, October 2006; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg); peace workshop's ritual slaughtering and final blessings (Abore, 2007; photo courtesy of E. C. Gabbert).

On the spine: Bible students in Wəqro Maryam (Wəqro Maryam, Təgray, September 2005; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg).

On the back cover (left to right): Gwama men members of a work party drinking local beer (Lake *qäbälä*, Mao-Komo special *wäräda*, September 2011; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg); Kara elders debating the merits of irrigation (Dus, Hamär *wäräda*, SNNPR, October 2006; photo courtesy of F. Girke); the ethnographer immersed in the debates of the Nyinyankot age set (Dus, Hamär *wäräda*, November 2004; photo courtesy of F. Girke); *Sceriffa* 'Alawiyya among Muslim leaders (Piola Caselli private archive in Rome, around 1930; photo courtesy of S. Bruzzi).

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The editors, Hamburg–Nairobi–Sottrum, April 2018





## Introduction: Oral Traditions in Ethiopian Studies

DIRK BUSTORF–ALEXANDER MECKELBURG–SOPHIA DEGE-MÜLLER

The study of orality, in its many forms, be it oral traditions, oral history, oral literature, and other oral arts, or types of oral data, has contributed greatly to the development of the academic tradition of Ethiopian studies. Researching orality and oral sources is especially important in linguistics, social and cultural anthropology as well as in history, (ethnography-based) political science, and various other fields. Orality in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is a particularly fascinating field. Despite the fact that the countries of the Horn share some of the oldest literary traditions in sub-Saharan Africa, they are also home to a great number of living oral cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Although the development of the modern State apparatus, literacy campaigns, modern education, and the mass media have led to an ever-growing significance of the written word, orality today maintains its central role in daily life as well as in social, political, and cultural discourse. In many cases the languages in question have not yet been developed into fully-fledged literary languages. While the spread of literacy has been an ongoing process for centuries, conflicts over language and identity show an enormous resilience in the countries of the Horn.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the literacy rate even among youths is still very low. In 2008–2012 the literacy rate of males between 15 and 24 years in Ethiopia was 60 per cent while that of females of the same age was only 47 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

This supplement to *Aethiopica* began as a panel held at the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Dørre Dawa in September 2012. The organizers (the editors of the present volume) were interested in questioning the methods and styles used in the study of oral sources. During the panel, presentations were given by Chikage Oba-Smidt, Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł, Andreu Martinez d'Alòs-Moner, Helen Papworth, and Dirk

1 Carmichael 2006, 23.

2 Cf. Barnes and Carmichael 2006, 1.

3 UNICEF statistics for Ethiopia, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html) (last accessed 20 September 2017).

Bustorf. For this volume the editors have asked yet other colleagues to reflect on their experience with oral sources.

The panel asked to investigate the idea that, in the history of Ethiopian studies, reflection on the methodology of orality did not receive the attention it deserves given its highly important role for research. Therefore, the core matter of this supplement is to explore how Ethiopian studies deal with oral texts as historical and (in the widest sense of the word) ethnographic sources.

As a tool for the study of African histories, cultures, and societies the use of oral sources has developed significantly.<sup>4</sup> Yet, an overview of the different scholarly approaches to oral sources in the multidisciplinary field of Ethiopian studies is still missing. The methodologies of orality and oral sources developed in Africa as well as the contribution of African history to worldwide discourse and curricula are rather weakly reflected in the writings of scholars of Ethiopian studies. And, despite the interest this field provides for the discussion of the way orality turns into literacy and vice versa, few contributions have been made concerning this crucial question. Although oral sources play such an important role in the study of the histories, languages, and cultures of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopian studies did not receive much attention outside of its own academic field. With this supplement to *Aethiopica* we do not claim to fill the gaps identified here nor even to cover the topic in satisfactory breadth and depth. However, it aims at putting a finger on the issue and at contributing to the growing interest in the methodology and practice of orality research and oral sources.

### Terminology and Concepts

The problems, genres, and theoretical and methodological issues concerning orality and oral sources are numerous and there are still no fixed and generally accepted definitions of terms such as orality, oral literature, oral traditions, or folklore. It is not our aim here to resolve this terminological plurality. However, in order to give a preliminary orientation, some preparatory definitions could be helpful.

Orality is often contrasted with ‘the written’ or literacy. A useful understanding of the term is that orality includes all forms of oral information, from oral data, to oral tradition, oral literature, folklore, or the verbal arts. However, the usual juxtaposition of oral and written sources is an uneasy one. It is strongly based on a Western-centric understanding of literacy, or

4 Cf. McCall 1964; Miller 1980; Toyin Falola and Jennings 2003; Vansina 1980; Vansina 1985; White et al. 2001.

‘technological determinism’.<sup>5</sup> A simple dichotomy between orality and literacy does not work in the Horn of Africa where the mutual influences as well as direct or indirect references between the oral and the written prevail already to some degree since antiquity, forming common spaces of cultural memory. Within these spaces, however, a socio-political dichotomy can be identified, since, as Carmichael has pointed out, the dichotomy of orality and the written is related to the relations between society and government in Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note here that the oral and/or written uses of language are not separate means in the construction and maintenance of memory. Other cultural forms such as music, dance, visual arts, architecture, fashion, and so on form an integral part of cultures where all types of expression and communication are deeply interwoven. Therefore, research focusing on orality or literacy cannot be complete without cultural and historical recontextualizing embedded in a holistic perspective.

Other important concepts in the field of orality research are folklore and oral literature.<sup>7</sup> Since the distinction between them is due more to differing academic perspectives or interests than to the existence of substantially differing types of orality, they are not easily differentiated. This also defines the difference between the concepts *oral tradition* and *oral history*. A very broad understanding of folklore refers to all forms of ‘orally transmitted traditions’ encompassing ‘verbal forms such as stories, songs and proverbs’.<sup>8</sup> A dividing line between oral literature and oral tradition may be that folklore offers relatively little analysis and in no way implies an analysis of a cultural group per se. Speaking about American folklore, Fox states that folklore studies are a preliminary genre of literature studies, with a focus on the aesthetics rather than on the socio-political meaning.<sup>9</sup> Relating folklore research with its societal subtext is an interesting starting point; it may involve an attempt to describe or understand the circumstances under which folklore is produced or the way in which it is used to understand the socio-cultural or mental make-up, or mentality, of a group. Folklore, like literature studies, is closely related to the research perspective of oral literature or orature which is more a tool of cultural analysis. The concept of oral literature, which seems to be self-contradictory by its very name, again often encompasses the oral arts, folklore, and oral traditions. Oral literature may sometimes include the more performative aspects of orality and the genres

5 Finnegan 1992, 6.

6 Carmichael 2006, 25.

7 Cf. the important overview by Fekade Azeze 2001.

8 Finnegan 1992, 11.

9 Fox 1980, 1.

of the oral arts (i.e. folklore, proverbs, oral chronicles, prophetic texts, poetry, and songs).<sup>10</sup>

In this supplement oral texts and oral data are discussed as sources of historical and cultural research. Therefore, they are examined here mainly from the perspectives of oral tradition and oral history. According to Vansina's widely adopted methodological understanding, oral history can be differentiated from oral traditions in so far as oral history speaks of a closer past, something an informant has witnessed her/himself. In the case of traditions, the transmission of knowledge and information is kept intact over generations.<sup>11</sup>

As a historical source oral traditions have undergone significant changes in their appraisal, from being reckoned 'fragile, critical, problematic' to being appreciated as 'opening important inquiries into the very nature of African subjectivity'.<sup>12</sup> At the early stages of its academic recognition, oral history aimed at reconstructing events through life histories, eyewitness accounts, and narratives. Later on, issues arose concerning the reliability of oral traditions and the way they should be properly used by scholars.<sup>13</sup> Hence, according to our understanding, concerns about *historical truth*, *authenticity*, and such can lead to an incisive discussion analysed against the background of *orality as a historical method*.<sup>14</sup>

### Oral Sources in Ethiopian Studies

The use of orally transmitted knowledge on Ethiopia goes back to the first encounters between Europeans and Ethiopians. Early visits of Europeans to Ethiopia (Antonio Bartoli in the 1390s and Pietro Rombulo in 1407) as well as of Ethiopians to Europe (in 1402 a royal delegation from Ethiopia reached the Republic of Venice) provided first insights into each other's history.<sup>15</sup>

In regards to historiography, the seventeenth-century collaboration between the German scholar Hiob Ludolf and his 'oral informant', the Ethiopian monk *Abba* Gorgoryos, may well be seen to be the first explicit transfer of oral data into academic writing in Ethiopian studies.<sup>16</sup> However, the orality–literacy problem can already be identified in this initial event, since

10 'Oral literature', *EAE*, IV (2010), 38b–42a (G. Banti).

11 Vansina 1985, 13.

12 Cohen et al. 2001, 1.

13 e.g. Vansina 1985, 13. Moffa also critically discussed the methodological issues arising in oral history studies (Moffa 1993).

14 Following Vansina's terminology (Vansina 1966).

15 Krebs 2014, 35.

16 Cf. Smidt 2015.

*Abba* Gorgoryos was himself a scholar, with both oral and literary knowledge. Today, many oral informants in Ethiopia will be at least to some degree literate and their former readings, the mass media, and modern education will influence their oral performance.

In the Ethiopian context, the existence of a long written history, recorded in chronicles, especially in the northern Christian highlands, and to a lesser extent in the Islamic influenced areas, has traditionally outweighed any interest in orality on the part of the humanities and social sciences concerned with Ethiopia. This contrasts strongly with the interest in historiography, anthropology, or sociology of other sub-Saharan African countries. Scholars of Ethiopia built largely on a Semitistic Orientalist tradition. They were fascinated by Ethiopia's early statehood and Abrahamic religions. Moreover, many of them had a theological or missionary background. Due to this perspective, they put much more emphasis on written sources, using them for the reconstruction of the past as well as for theological, philological, or linguistic research. Thus, historical research often relied much more on written than the oral sources. However, as McCann shows by extending the methodology of oral tradition presented by Vansina in order to analyse written Ethiopic records, written sources such as the Ethiopian chronicles of the fourteenth to the nineteenth century may have the same fragility as oral sources. For McCann one of the main problems in Ethiopian historiography is the 'historians' failure to recognise the chronicle as an integrated body of literature only partially intended to report events objectively'.<sup>17</sup>

When oral sources were collected this was mainly done from the perspective of folklore or in order to use them as language data for linguistic analysis. Other oral data was randomly used to inform historical research but with no methodological consideration or proper reference.<sup>18</sup> While in other African countries colonialism favoured the expansion of social anthropology, Ethiopia was, for a long time, mainly the field of orientalists, theologians, and historians.<sup>19</sup> The oral civilizations of south and west Ethiopia were of much less interest to these scholars.

The above situation gradually changed as more and more knowledge of these societies reached Europe through explorers, travellers, and travelling scholars, drawing extensively on oral sources from oral cultures. However, to provide an overview of how these travellers used their oral sources would mean giving an account of the history of exploration, travellers, and re-

17 McCann 1979, 387–388.

18 Interesting and fairly rare works on oral traditions can be found in Andrzejewski 1974 or Goldenberg 1981. This intersection between linguistics and history/anthropology is also evident in Hayward and Lewis 1996.

19 James 1990.

search in Ethiopia. This is, of course, far beyond the scope of this Introduction, although Éloi Ficquet discusses an exceptional case, the nineteenth-century traveller Arnauld d'Abbadie, in the present volume. What can generally be noted is that most travellers used oral sources randomly and often without a clear methodology. Usually no evaluation of different sources is carried out in their writings. Oral informants are generally not mentioned by name or function and the circumstances are often not described. With the exception of individual legends retold in traveller's reports, most oral data seem to come from hearsay and informal conversation with the servants of authors or with feudal lords under whose protection they were travelling.

From the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, travellers and scholars exploring the western, southern and south-western parts of Ethiopia often contributed to the history of these regions by documenting oral sources. The protestant missionaries Krapf and Isenberg, for example, present some folk-tales in their diaries.<sup>20</sup> The travel report of Antonio Cecchi provides rich material and knowledge based on oral informants.<sup>21</sup>

Two fellow countrymen of Cecchi left us with further valuable material. Carlo Conti Rossini produced an impressive number of text editions. Moreover, his collection of songs and poems mainly of today's Eritrea should not be forgotten.<sup>22</sup> The other very important collector of oral traditions was the orientalist Enrico Cerulli. His perspective was mainly a linguistic and folkloristic one but he was also interested to some degree in local histories based on oral traditions. His *Folk-literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*, the travel notes of his expedition to western Ethiopia, his *Studi etiopici* and his collection of Islamic materials are an invaluable collection based mainly on oral sources.<sup>23</sup> However, just like the aforementioned authors, he showed little concern for methodology.

Within the traditional education of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church oral teachings take a pride of place. Included are the extensive memorizing of Biblical books, especially the psalter, which is fully learnt by heart by the end of the first stage of school (*nəbab bet*), the art of poetry (*qəne bet*), singing and dancing (*zema bet*), as well as commentaries of Biblical books (*māṣḥaf bet*), all transmitted also in oral form. In order to compose *qəne* poetry, or to master the exegesis of Scriptures, the students need to have acquired a high understanding of language. The complex state of language proficiency, as well as

<sup>20</sup> Isenberg and Krapf 1843.

<sup>21</sup> Cecchi 1886.

<sup>22</sup> Conti Rossini 1903; 1904–1905; 1906; 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. respectively Cerulli 1922; 1930; 1933; 1936a; 1936b; 1938; 1971. Cf. also Hylander 1969.

the fact that not all commentaries, and *qəne* only very rarely, were written down, might be an explanation why the study of these traditions is relatively small. Sylvia Pankhurst dedicated an entire chapter to the ‘Traditional Schools of the Church’, providing valuable insights into its structure, and quoting also a number of *qəne*, however without explicitly naming her informants.<sup>24</sup> This is in line with the Ethiopian tradition itself, ‘unlike the practice of rabbinic commentary material, the AC [*andəmta* commentary] only very infrequently cites the interpretations of named teachers’.<sup>25</sup> Networks of famous teachers are known, however, and most notable teachers or schools are provided in some studies.<sup>26</sup>

### Folklorist Perspectives

The collection of folklore and folk-tales has played an important role in the development of Ethiopian studies.<sup>27</sup> Largely linked to the work of linguists but also as an annex to ethnographic research, a rich body of folklore from various Ethiopian cultures has been collected. In line with the preceding definition we may describe the folklorist approach here as the collection of tales and myths without the intention of contributing to the analysis of society per se.<sup>28</sup> As Richard Pankhurst observes, the ‘collection of folk-tales, as opposed to the occasional mention of legends, began in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.’<sup>29</sup> Travellers and explorers collected the first folk-tales. Pankhurst mentions the Italian traveller Cecchi as an example.<sup>30</sup> Examples for the earliest systematic collection of folk-tales according to Pankhurst are among others Jules Schreiber,<sup>31</sup> who included a short section on fables and proverbs in his *Təgrəñña* grammar,<sup>32</sup> Ignazio Guidi’s collection of folk-tales,<sup>33</sup> or Enno Littmann’s collection of *Təgrəñña* folklore documented in the report of the Princeton Expedition 1905–1906.<sup>34</sup> One should also add Alberto Pollera’s collection of Gondarine tales.<sup>35</sup>

24 Pankhurst 1955, 232–283.

25 Cowley 1983, 31.

26 Ibid. See further Chaillot 2009 for an elaborate overview of studies on the traditional teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

27 e.g. Amanuel Sahle 1982; Pankhurst 1982; Pankhurst and Pankhurst 1982–1983.

28 Fox 1980, 1.

29 Pankhurst 1982, 38.

30 See also the contribution by D. Bustorf in this volume. We are of the opinion that the texts collected by Cecchi fall into the category of oral traditions, see below.

31 Pankhurst 1982, 38.

32 Schreiber 1887.

33 Guidi 1894.

34 Littmann 1913.

35 Pollera 1936.



Collecting folk-tales was widely practised by both folklorists and linguists, and, as in the case of Schreiber, much folklore, proverbs, riddles, and folk-tales were collected and published by linguists in the course of their work. Important examples are the many publications of Wolf Leslau on Ethiopian Semitic languages.<sup>36</sup> While most linguists used folklore mainly as material for the reconstruction of the lexicon and further linguistic analysis, others also showed an interest in the content itself.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from the linguistic perspective on folklore, oral traditions were also used as a source for understanding mentality and world views. Folklore and folk-tales were thought to open perspectives on the respective ‘character’ of the Ethiopian nationalities.<sup>38</sup> This approach mainly derived from the idea, originally introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder, that folklore could inform the analysis of ‘national character’. Thus, early German ethnological research in Ethiopia, as initiated by Leo Frobenius, analysed world views based on folklore research. However, as Ulrich Braukämper notes,

Frobenius’ categorization of African cultures on the base of certain *Weltbildern*, such as the Aethiopic and Hamitic concepts of the world, largely derived from folktales and myths, definitely failed to become an acceptable approach.<sup>39</sup>

While such substantialist ideas of national character embodied in folklore have been largely overcome by a cultural-constructivist perspective, the idea that folklore may give answers to questions on the socio-psychological mindset and behaviour of a people is still alive in Ethiopian studies. One example is John Hamer’s ‘Folktales as Ideology in the Production and Circulation of Wealth among Sadāma of Ethiopia’.<sup>40</sup> Abdurahman Mohamed Korram in his collection of Oromo proverbs suggested that verbal arts and folklore ‘would reveal much of the deeper philosophy at the heart of life in Ethiopia’.<sup>41</sup> Bayleyegn Tasew even employs the idea of a ‘folklore of conflict’ which may explain socio-cognitive factors of conflict.<sup>42</sup> Monika Sommer also sought an explanation of conflict in the narratives she collected

36 Leslau 1949; 1964; 1981; 1982; 1983; 1996 to name but a few.

37 See, for example, Abdulahi A. Shongolo and Schlee 2007; Crass and Meyer 2001; Lange 1979; Meyer 2000 and 2001; Fekade Azeze 2002. Also important is the work of Abbink et al. 2013. These studies give examples, linguistic analysis, and an introduction to the cultural understanding of the texts.

38 ‘Folktales in Amharic’, *EAE*, III (2007), 556b–558a (A. Molvaer).

39 Braukämper 2005, 296.

40 Hamer 1994.

41 Abdurahman Mohamed Korram 1972, 106.

42 Bayleyegn Tasaw 2009.

from the Nuer in Gambella.<sup>43</sup> And as Mezgebu Belay's contribution in this volume shows, it can be a valuable source in the analysis of gender relations.

In today's politically ethnicized discourses in Ethiopia, folklore plays its role as an 'intangible cultural heritage' and as a source of ethnic pride. Here again, a lack of reflection on methodology is widespread.

### Anthropological and Historical Perspectives

In Ethiopian studies a difference between southern and northern Ethiopia emerged which became almost standard, according to which social and cultural anthropologists studied the oral cultures of southern Ethiopia, while historians and philologists studied the literacy culture of the north. This statement is somewhat imprecise however, since important ethnographical and anthropological research was done in northern Ethiopia while historians and philologists evaluated their written sources as far as possible concerning the history of the south. Moreover, it seems unreasonable to treat historians and anthropologists in separate chapters here. In fact, it is typical of Ethiopian studies that social and cultural anthropologists may use written sources and write histories, while historians carry out ethnographic research and use oral tradition. Anthropologists have employed myths, folklore, and oral literature in order to understand the societies they are focusing on, while others have used oral histories to give voice to the often peripheral position of the societies they studied, and yet others have practised ethnohistory in search of an alternative bottom-up history of the shared Ethiopian state-building experience.

During the late nineteenth to early twentieth century work was often carried out in the course of colonialism, Western powers had a special interest in the regions which they newly got under control, this accounts especially for nowadays Eritrea and Somalia. Prominent figures such as Werner Munzinger, *Bāšā*, who served under British, French, and later Egyptian rule,<sup>44</sup> or Antonio Cecchi, who travelled Ethiopia extensively and in 1896 became governor in Italian Somalia,<sup>45</sup> combine scientific and political interests in one person. They left us with a large amount of historiographic-ethnographic descriptions, as well as language studies, which have not lost their importance even today. While it is not stated in their works explicitly, they relied on the information provided by their local informants.

In a series of research missions first led by Adolf E. Jensen, and later by Eike Haberland, members of the Frobenius Institut in Frankfurt am Main

43 Sommer 2008.

44 'Munzinger, Werner', *E Ae*, III (2007), 1070b–1073a (C. D. G. Müller and W. G. C. Smidt).

45 'Cecchi, Antonio', *E Ae*, I (2003), 704a (M. Lenci).

explored the ethnic and cultural landscapes of southern Ethiopia, collecting all kinds of ethnographic information about socio-political and religious systems as well as material culture and folklore.<sup>46</sup> The greatest part of their findings is entirely based on oral information, most of it oral tradition.<sup>47</sup> Haberland was interested in folklore which, according to him, revealed a certain type of thinking. Thus, in a short introduction to the folklore of the Maale, Haberland judged the Maale ‘*mythenfeindlich*’ and complained about the loss of mythical thinking among some groups he had studied.<sup>48</sup> Haberland also pioneered the attempt to reconstruct the history of non-Semitic groups on the basis of oral data. Jon Abbink concluded that, with regards to Haberland’s work on the Wälaytta,

Haberland tried to reconstruct Wolaitta ‘like it really was’, before the conquest. That is why he always put great value on older key informants (of elite groups) with a presumably purer and more complete knowledge of history. Perhaps the idea of such a reconstruction is now illusory.<sup>49</sup>

Historians and social and cultural anthropologists have nonetheless lavishly made use not only of oral traditions but also of other oral data.<sup>50</sup> Historical narratives and data usually subsumed under the term ‘oral history’ have become a vital part of historical reconstruction especially in cases where written accounts are not to be found. While there are many texts that make implicit use of oral histories, the methodological debate is often not well advanced. More often than not the reader gets no clear image of where, when, and how the data has been acquired. Thus, a much debated question and subtext to any discussion on oral traditions as a source of history is, of course, the historical authenticity of the evidence.<sup>51</sup>

Braukämper, trained in the Frankfurt research tradition of Jensen and Haberland, and aware of such questions, developed a method combining both oral and written sources by filling in the gaps between established historical facts or events, using cultural-historical data drawn from oral sources.<sup>52</sup> He used this approach in all of his work and was thus able to draw a detailed and

46 Jensen 1963; Haberland 1963; Straube 1963; and already preceded by an expedition by Jensen in 1934–1935, cf. Jensen 1936.

47 The use of oral informants by the members of the Frobenius expeditions is analysed in detail in Bustorf 2017.

48 Haberland in Jensen 1963, 297.

49 Abbink 2006, 11.

50 Noteworthy in this regard is Bahru Zewde’s ‘exercise in oral history’ (Bahru Zewde 2010).

51 McCall 1964, 1–28; Pankhurst and Ezekiel Gebissa 1987.

52 Braukämper 1973; 1976.

holistic image of the history of many southern Ethiopian ethnic groups.<sup>53</sup> While his style is mainly that of the classical habitus of the authoritative writer, he nevertheless makes his key informants visible. The commented collection of narrative songs of the Hadiyya by Braukämper and Tilahun Mishago,<sup>54</sup> together with the culturally contextualized collection of Gurage songs by William Shack and Habte-Mariam Marcos,<sup>55</sup> represent important examples of the oral literature of the Hadiyya-Gurage region and, at the same time, may be used as historical sources.<sup>56</sup>

Alessandro Triulzi, whose research focuses on the western Oromo, as well as on the oral history of the Berta, is another ethnohistorian of great importance.<sup>57</sup> In the same area the missionary ethnographer Lambert Bartels collected his outstanding collection of Oromo oral literature.<sup>58</sup> In general, orality research contributed much to the growth of Oromo studies so that they became a vital subfield of Ethiopian studies. Oromo studies have, to a large extent, used oral traditions in the reconstruction of Oromo history. A book edited by Paul Trevor Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi is of crucial importance.<sup>59</sup> Most of the essays collected there implicitly and explicitly use oral traditions to develop a framework in order to analyse the emergence of Oromo identity.<sup>60</sup> Such noteworthy studies as those of Tesema Ta'a, Mohammed Hassen, and Negaso Gidada take a similar approach.<sup>61</sup> Their works are a clear attempt to reclaim the history of the Oromo people by Oromo scholars, eventually confronting Ethiopian historiography with an emic perspective. Likewise, foreign anthropologists who, in many cases, study and learn the language of the people they study, have contributed to giving a voice to the people they live with. The anthropologist Hermann Amborn made explicit use of oral sources in order to present a 'history from below', a trend towards a history which is no longer dominated by the exclusive viewpoint of a literate elite.<sup>62</sup>

53 Especially in Braukämper 1980; 1983.

54 Braukämper and Tilahun Mishago 1999.

55 Shack and Habte-Mariam Marcos 1971.

56 For further treaties of Hadiyya folk-takles see also Braukämper 2014, 271–291 and Horstmann 2010.

57 Bernardi et al. 1978; Triulzi 1980; Triulzi 1981a; Triulzi 1981b; Triulzi 1990; Triulzi 1994; Triulzi and Tamene Bitima 1996.

58 Bartels 1983.

59 Baxter et al. 1996.

60 Explicitly discussed in the contribution by Gemetchu Megerssa 1996.

61 Mohammed Hassen 1990; Negaso Gidada 1984; Tesema Ta'a 2006.

62 Amborn 1988, 751.

An important example for a learned emic perspective is Gabreyesus Hailemariam's monograph on the Gurage.<sup>63</sup> It may well be one of the best publications of this type and includes rich oral data and folklore. Under the political conditions of 'ethnic federalism' many mono-ethnic historical theses and books have been produced in Ethiopia. Some of them may lack methodological reflection or transparency but nevertheless provide valuable insights into concepts of history and identity.

The great interest in oral traditions and discussions about orality has continued in the younger generation of social and cultural anthropologists. Drawing his theoretical base from Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as a structuring element, Alexander Kellner, in his thesis on the Burji, analyses myth as an expression of habitus.<sup>64</sup> His documentation of the original text and his linguistically well informed translation are exemplary for this genre. Dirk Bustorf's study of the Səlṭe combines synchronic and diachronic perspectives and shows how oral traditions can be examined at the same time as historical sources and as a source for the reconstruction of both contemporary as well as past historical consciousness and identity structures.<sup>65</sup> An important recent publication on the emic history of the Oromo, based entirely on oral sources and many years of intensive field research, is Chikage Oba-Smidt's study of the Boorana oral chronicles.<sup>66</sup> It documents a voluminous corpus of oral texts in the Oromo language with an English translation. One may thus expect the work to have a great impact on both the outsider's and the insider's perception of the Boorana.

An important network of orality researchers has formed around Ivo Strecker, Jean Lydall, and the South Omo Research Centre. While many anthropologists and historians dealing with oral sources in Ethiopia have tended to leave questions of their research methods in the background, the situation and interaction of the researcher in the field is central here. Coined 'rhetoric anthropology', Strecker, together with Stephen Tyler, have developed an approach to the study of culture which seeks the roots of culture in the language and especially in rhetoric.<sup>67</sup> Based on this approach, several extensive oral histories have appeared in Ethiopian anthropology.<sup>68</sup> Echi Gabbert and Felix Girke, authors in this supplement to *Aethiopica*, belong

63 Gabreyesus Hailemariam 1991.

64 Kellner 2007; 2010.

65 Bustorf 2011.

66 Oba-Smidt 2016.

67 Strecker and Tyler established the book series Culture and Rhetoric published by Berghahn Books.

68 Pioneered by the Hamär trilogy of Strecker and Lydall 1979a; 1979b; 1979c.

to the same group. The ‘rhetoric culture’ approach is further discussed by Felix Girke in this volume.

### Contributions and Themes of this Volume

In accordance with this supplement’s interest, most contributions presented here provide a discussion of the methodology, possibilities, and shortcomings of oral sources as a means of reconstructing historical or cultural realities.

Manuel João Ramos’ research focuses on the local memories of the Jesuit mission in northern Ethiopia and on how they are portrayed in written sources, both Portuguese and Ethiopian. His observation begins with the ‘feedback effect’—the reciprocal exertion of influence of the written sources and oral tradition. He points out how both forms of sources exist simultaneously, resulting in intermingled traditions.

In some of the interviews I conducted in Amhara and Təgray in recent years, it seemed clear that a few at least of the informants tended to enrich their stories with information directly or indirectly originating from the books of the late Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya. I was once even presented with a photocopy of an illustration from the first volume of his *Yä’ityopya tarik*, where Cristóvão da Gama is depicted tied to a tree and surrounded by Muslims torturing him.<sup>69</sup>

The author explores the continuing reinterpretation between oral accounts and written texts. Storytellers, ‘keepers of oral traditions’ in the words of the author, ‘switch between oral reinterpretation of written sources, oral reproduction of written transcriptions of oral legends, autonomous oral accounts, as well as outright separation between oral and written forms of legitimizing traditional narratives.’<sup>70</sup>

Ramos collected his information on foreign influences, ‘foreign topos’ as he calls it, in different areas in and around Gondär, parts of Amhara and Təgray, as well as around Lake Tana. As ‘history’ is usually written by the majority or victorious groups he challenges the written reports and confronts them with oral traditions, which offer alternative information.

Anäis Wion is also in search of historical imaginations, by confronting the written with the oral around Gong monastery in Goğgam. At the heart

69 Ramos in this volume (p. 28). Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya’s የኢትዮጵያ፡ ታሪክ (*Yä’ityopya tarik*) is also discussed in the contribution of Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł. While Ramos proves how (oral) memory was influenced by modern publications, Rubinkowska-Anioł shows how Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya actually included existing oral traditions in his book.

70 Ramos in this volume (p. 35).

of her analysis lies a religious political controversy: Gong, home to a community adhering to the *Qəbat* doctrine, was the victim of royal retribution when its abbot, Ṭābdān Dəngəl, openly rebelled against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who had declared *Qəbat* a heresy. ‘Nonetheless, a few decades later, Gong was richly endowed by the royal power and its violent and rebellious past seemed to be forgotten.’<sup>71</sup> Wion elaborates on the question, ‘[h]ow did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting the rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past?’<sup>72</sup> Wion collected the *afä tarik*—the oral history—of Gong as passed on by members of the local clergy and local community. For her analysis she compares, for example, a written document concerning the death of (the possibly invented *abunä*) Gərma Šəllus, with oral history about the same person. The oral reports lack a number of striking details kept in the written report. Wion argues that the details were dropped ‘perhaps because [they were] too specific and not directly comprehensible’<sup>73</sup> and the significance of these details has been lost. Thus in her reading, orality can only transport a certain degree of complexity or rather only focuses on the most important details. However, Wion adds that this perspective was ‘not at all clear to the scribe and/or historiographer who wrote the text’.<sup>74</sup>

The parallel development of oral and written tradition is also examined by Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł. The author explores a time when oral literature was still dynamic, retold by *azmaris* ‘and [also] as a medium of transferring historical knowledge, while at the same time written literature was developing very fast.’<sup>75</sup> The author bases her argument on the fact that the written eclipsed the oral. Grounded on the ideas of Havelock and Ong,<sup>76</sup> she describes how history turned from oral into written and was later co-opted by the leading elites. She sees striking similarities between Ethiopia and ancient Greece where orality died off and gave way to the written. However, both patterns existed simultaneously for several centuries and still do to some extent. The point of focus in Rubinkowska-Anioł’s contribution is, however, to analyse the intermingling of written and oral traditions and how they influenced official publications under Ḥaylä Šəllase I. Interestingly enough, at the time the majority of the population was still illiterate—thus oral culture played a substantial part in the worldview of the

71 Wion in this volume (p. 43).

72 Ibid. (p. 43 and 44).

73 Ibid. (p. 48).

74 Ibid. (p. 48).

75 Rubinkowska-Anioł in this volume (p. 66).

76 Havelock 1986; Ong 1988.



subjects of the emperor. Rubinkowska-Anioł's analysis shows how literature became a tool for legitimizing and constructing imperial power, and she describes the patterns by which orality was turned into writing in order to favour and create legitimizing narratives.

The production of texts from oral sources is also a feature of the work of Éloi Ficquet. His meticulous study gives us a direct glimpse of the oral history in the Amhara region in the mid-nineteenth century. Here the oral is turned into written by a foreign traveller and explorer. Arnauld d'Abbadie, who travelled Ethiopia from 1838 to 1848, left us a large number of field notes he recorded *in situ* with the help of his local informants.<sup>77</sup> The presented text edition gives us access for the first time to one fragment of this rich piece of oral history concerning the history of *Ras Wädaḡe* of Amhara in western Wällo. D'Abbadie had learned Amharic and was able to understand what was told. Nevertheless he relied on the information provided by the local people. About his most reliable informant, Ḥaylu Šämrü, d'Abbadie states that '[h]is education had been much neglected: he could just read and understand some prayers in the Gə'əz language. However, he knew the genealogy of everyone, the history of various provinces and he was accepted as an authority on the military and political events of the time'.<sup>78</sup>

The oral report delivers much more than a written text could do. '[T]he psychology of the historical actors [in] this indigenous oral narrative adds a new layer of information to the political and social history'.<sup>79</sup> Ficquet enriches the report on *Ras Wädaḡe* with careful notes, and analyses the information hidden between the lines. He turns the report, which is scanty in parts, into a fully-fledged historical source.

Silvia Bruzzi provides a classical approach to oral history. She looks at the merits of oral sources for the study of modern history.<sup>80</sup> The author discusses oral contributions as means of questioning the archival sources on Italian colonial policies in Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. The focus is on Italian propaganda materials, and their juxtaposition with oral sources collected by the author in Addis Abäba and Harär. In doing so, the study sheds light on a female Muslim leader, *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya, and on the question of how realistic the picture of this person is, of her role as a collaborator

77 'These heterogeneous notes were presumably recorded from different Amharic-speaking oral informants', Ficquet in this volume (p. 84).

78 Ficquet's translation of d'Abbadie's notes, in this volume (p. 84).

79 Ficquet in this volume (p. 110).

80 Due to the long editorial process of this supplement, the original version of the chapter was published in Bruzzi 2018. While in the earlier version the author takes a very empirical lead approach, in the present paper the author positions herself in the theoretical discussion on oral history and sheds more light on her methodology.



based on propagandistic materials, and of how it can actually be challenged or put into perspective by oral sources.

Like in Gabbert's contribution (see below) *silence* plays a major role in Bruzzi's analysis. Oral sources break the silence and fill the gap of written history. The 'silence of the colonized' and the paucity of indigenous sources lead historians to focus on oral sources, such as oral testimonies and individual memory. In Italian East Africa this enriches available documentation on the colonial experience. The contribution aims at reconstructing intermingled histories in a cross-cultural perspective: it describes the complexity of discourses concerning colonial Islamic policy, both in Ethiopia and in Italy, through the prism of *Sittī* 'Alawīyya's role.

In a wider sense Dirk Bustorf's study also presents the patterns by which historical knowledge and legitimizing narratives are created. At the intersection between cultural and historical studies, his paper explores the multi-ethnic and multireligious settings of various Gurage groups as reflected in their oral traditions. The text provides a critical reflection on the different socio-political influences that manifest themselves in the oral sources. According to the author, the heterogeneous historical landscape of the Gurage shapes 'a complex historical memory in which every socio-political segment, from the level of lineage and clans up to that of larger ethno-territorial units, maintains its own historical memory'.<sup>81</sup> Against this background the author explores how ethnicity, politics, and religious diversity affect the historical memory of the differing groups and subgroups. To account for the complexities, the author cites and analyses oral traditions from different Gurage groups and religious traditions with a markedly different *historical consciousness* (i.e. a heuristic concept, reflecting a given group's ever-changing world-view against the background of transmitted in-group historical narratives).<sup>82</sup> The author refers to this patchwork of different narratives as 'pockets of memory', which are 'bound to local communities below the official ethnic level, or related to inferior religious traditions, [being] too small and weak to survive over the next generation'.<sup>83</sup>

Like Bustorf, Fesseha Berhe tackles the methodological challenges of historical reconstruction as well. Fesseha Berhe, contrary to Bustorf, does not attempt to analyse the complex influences and fluidity of oral sources but emphasizes the use of oral data to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of history. While Bustorf offers the reader a view onto the ever-shifting interplay between oral traditions and the identity formation of a group, Fesseha Berhe uses historical knowledge shared with him in order to add additional

81 Bustorf in this volume (p. 140).

82 Bustorf in this volume.

83 Ibid. (p. 160).

facts about an ethnic group that no longer exists. His contribution explores the case of the Dob<sup>2</sup>a, probably an ancient Cushitic people of northern Ethiopia. The author clearly illuminates a feedback effect between the written and spoken word. He finds the written sources, mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are themselves largely based on oral accounts. Likewise, according to the author, the oral data gathered today cannot provide a definite historical appraisal of the group under study.

In an interesting twist, Chikage Oba-Smidt turns the oral into written. In her meticulous paper she transcribes and analyses the *Boorana Oral Chronicle* as a means of transferring historical knowledge in a non-literate society. Theoretically she engages in the discourse of Ong's 'primary oral culture' — a concept also taken up but criticized by Girke in this volume. In her contribution Oba-Smidt sees the performance of oral poems and chronicles by ritual specialists and indigenous historians as a means of constructing and preserving history. The paper gives interesting insights into the methodological complexities of her work. She compares the chronicles, finding fascinating historical accuracy, and, through statistical analysis of narratives, unravels reoccurring categories and patterns of oral traditions.<sup>84</sup>

Andreas Wetter's paper is another exercise in methodology. Being a trained linguist, he examines the oral traditions of the Argobba which he collected while doing linguistic fieldwork. His paper presents a preliminary documentation, description, and analysis of an oral tradition from an Argobba area in south-eastern Wällo. It contains the narrative of two holy men who are regarded as the mythical ancestors of the two oldest Argobba villages in that region: Šonke and Ṭollaḥa. Not only does Wetter transcribe and translate the narrative, he also sheds light on the 'raw data' of the oral historian, namely the speech and language patterns as well as the historical and cultural contexts under which memories can be collected and used for academic analysis.

Echi Christina Gabbert's work in the present volume is radical and perceptive. Her study provides the reader with a glimpse at both the process of learning a language and the methodological challenges of doing fieldwork. Gabbert presents her work on the Arbore, a Cushitic-speaking group in southern Ethiopia. She reflects on the process of learning the language and the subsequent immersion into the culture, articulating much of the experiences later described by Girke as the 'triangle of orality'.

Contrary to other reflections in this volume, Gabbert does not primarily use oral sources to countercheck historical facts or as alternative sources that add to historical processes, but instead she focuses on the social production of memory and the construction of identity: '[oral sources] offer a conceptual

84 Oba-Smidt in this volume.

narrativist view on social action through a combination of an innate historicity and the individual and collective understandings of self and others with other pertinent social actions.’<sup>85</sup> What follows is a precise and honest presentation of working in the field and the path from the interview to the interpretation of oral data. Silence looms large again, but, contrary to Bruzzi’s text, here it is not the oral that bridges the silence but the silence that is part of the oral. Another lesson learned was to question anew: ‘[t]he lesson learned required me to reconsider, who am I to judge what a person wants to convey or hide, to forget or to nourish?’<sup>86</sup>

Felix Girke provides further insight into the work of anthropologists in the South Omo zone. He portrays not only his own work with the Kara, but gives a more general view of the experiences of different South Omo scholars and their methodological underpinnings relating to a rhetoric-language based approach to culture and social life.

Girke approaches cultural immersion as a process which he refers to as the ‘triangle of orality’, linguistic competence, communication with the people, and, eventually, cultural knowledge. None of them is able to stand without the other and together they build the experience of the researcher who plunges into another culture. The author also gives space to other South Omo specialists, who briefly have reflected on their introduction to the culture they studied, as well as their experience with the triangle of orality. Girke provides an ethnographically grounded critique to the formalistic presentation of *primary oral culture*, the all too often deterministic transformation of an oral culture to a literacy culture as presented by Walter Ong.

Both Mezgebu Belay and Bayleyegn Tasew exemplify the folklorist tradition in Ethiopian studies. Mezgebu Belay gives an insight into how social construction can be analysed through the analysis of oral arts. His concern is the emotional and psychological reproduction of masculinity in the Amhara society displayed in proverbs and insults.

Bayleyegn Tasew’s contribution portrays the myth of origin of Maḡangir society. The author presents the myth as a basic pattern of environmental knowledge and of the cognitive perceptions the Maḡangir have of their environment, the forest, the animals, and the living space in general. In his analysis the author shows the indigenous concept of oral tradition as the ‘words of the ancestors’.

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# Castle Building in Seventeenth-Century Gondär (Ethiopia)

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## Abstract

Gondär's evolution to becoming the empire's capital went hand in hand with the construction of pompous castles by members of the Gondärine royal family, supported by foreign builders. However, foreign presence left its marks not only in the capital's architecture, but also in the Jesuit missionary reports of the time. As the history was written mostly from the Portuguese point of view—and was thus affected by their inability to make clear distinctions between nationalities—it is difficult to ascertain the dimension of foreign involvement in the empire's development. Furthermore, Ethiopian written sources also rather rarely mention the presence of *färänğ*, and still less often distinguish them according to their provenance. As 'history' is usually written by the majority or victorious group this contribution challenges the written reports, confronting them with oral traditions.

## Introduction: Between the Interstices of Hegemonic Discourse

In the late 1940s, Mr Armando Aguiar, a Portuguese journalist, toured Africa and Asia sending home reports testifying to extant memories of the real or imagined lusophone presence in those parts during the so-called Age of Discovery. These reports, dedicated to the architectural and cultural heritage that resulted from centuries' old interactions between Portuguese overseas merchants, military and ecclesiastical groupings, were regularly published in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, in the mid-1950s, catering to the official nationalistic discourse, enhancing the relevance of past deeds of the Portuguese in the world.

In 1949, Aguiar arrived in Addis Abäba, the capital of Ethiopia, and made contact with a small group of Indians—merchants, teachers, and medical professionals—who had recently migrated to that country from the Portuguese possessions of Goa and Diu, attracted by King Ḥaylä Šəllase's (rather feeble) modernizing and developing efforts. In an emotional speech at a dinner in honour of the Portuguese journalist, the Goan medical doctor José Alfredo Antão, in the name of the community, appealed for Mr Aguiar's help in publicizing the historical ties between the two countries and in interesting the Portuguese authorities in the prospect of further migration from the Estado da Índia to Ethiopia. Mr Antão argued that integra-

tion would be facilitated by the country's millennial adherence to the Christian faith.

Mr Aguiar duly accepted this task and went on to report on the ancient Luso–Ethiopian ties and on the good disposition of Ethiopians toward the Portuguese, in his column of the *Diário de Notícias* and later in a report on the Goan diaspora in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In this report, he pressed the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs to consider the possibility of inducing migration from the Portuguese-ruled Indian possessions to Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> This project found ready listeners in the Portuguese central administration, which, given the winds of independence in the post-war world, had begun to revisit its options on the state of the country's relations with its African colonies, and was searching for political alliances that could help sustain the survival of its 'overseas empire'.

At about the same period, the noted Ethiopian historian Tāklä Ṣadəq Māk<sup>w</sup>əriya, then holding a post in his country's embassy in Paris, published a book on Ethiopia's premodern history. In the section dedicated to the sixteenth century's political and religious tensions that imperilled the Abyssinian Christian sovereigns' rule, it enhanced the importance of the Portuguese military expedition headed by Cristóvão da Gama, Vasco da Gama's youngest son, which had landed in Ethiopia to fight the invading Ad<sup>c</sup>ali armies led by *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī, who, had declared a *ḡihād* against the Christian kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands.

This brief Portuguese–Ethiopian diplomatic relationship that lasted from 1954 to 1963 was ideologically framed—on the side of the Lisbon government at least—by an overly selective reading of historical evidence concerning the interactions between Portuguese, Indians, and Ethiopians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Goa vice-royalty had played a prominent role in controlling political, religious, and economic routes and territories in Asia and East Africa.

The rhetorical confusion between the sociological categories of the Portuguese and the Indians, and the latter's subordination to the former, featured prominently in Mr Antão's speech in 1949, where he identified the Goan community as 'Portuguese'. This is not surprising, given the consequences of Portuguese domination over a few tracts of Indian western coastal territory since the early sixteenth century, as well as the effect of the Portuguese dictatorial regime's propaganda that relied on the antiquity of the Portuguese overseas presence to legitimize the assimilation of its colonial subjects to the hegemonic category of 'the Portuguese'.

1 Lisbon, Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Arquivo Diplomático, documentos desclassificados, AAA.M.736 (1956).

Such hegemonic subordination echoes the authoritative writings of the Jesuit missionaries who landed in Ethiopia in 1550, in the wake of the Portuguese military intervention of the 1540s, with the project of converting the Ethiopian Orthodox rulers and population to Catholicism. Even if individual Indians or the collective category of ‘Banyans’ are sporadically mentioned in their letters and books, the diplomatic and religious affairs of the foreign presence in Ethiopia was basically seen as a Portuguese enterprise.

The fact that this persistent discursive framework is mostly based on Portuguese diplomatic and religious writings makes it very difficult to assess the nature and extension of a Goan or Gujarati presence in Ethiopia in that period—just as its revival in the 1950s hinders the evaluation of precisely who the members of the ‘Portuguese’ community in Ethiopia were.<sup>2</sup>

Ethiopian written documents are also of little help, since, for that period, either they vaguely mention the presence of *färäng* in the country,<sup>3</sup> and more rarely of Banyan (*vāṇiyān*, Gujarati Jains), or go on to name individual prominent figures such as the Portuguese Catholic patriarch Afonso Mendes. He is credited with having assisted the conversion of the Ethiopian king Susənyos (r 1606–1632) to the Catholic faith, though he was later expelled from the country by that ruler’s son, King Fasilädäs (r 1632–1667), who, it is believed, endeavoured to extirpate Catholic influence in the country and to promote the return to Orthodoxy.

Oral traditions from northern Ethiopia, the region where foreign Catholic missionaries and military men were active in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, are no more eloquent than the written documents on the presence of Indians. Almost no direct information is given that might otherwise encourage the investigation of clear material evidence of commercial interaction between Ethiopia and western India—namely, the presence of Indian textiles in church buildings and books, or a yet to be researched artistic influence on Ethiopian iconographic art.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it may be useful to investigate oral traditions in search of indirect and implicit indications regarding such ties.

What Ethiopian oral narrators mean when they refer to ‘the Portuguese’ is, at least today, rather dubious. They seem to have little or no knowledge of the origin of the foreigners and of the reasons for their arrival in Ethiopia beyond the clichéd notion that they, being Christian, were somehow sum-

2 The dispersion of the Goan migrants in Africa and the Arabic peninsula following the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 (and the abdication of Ḥaylā Śəllase) has not helped the authors’ tentative efforts at collecting oral testimonies on this community.

3 *Färäng* means both ‘foreign’ and ‘white’, and is used by Ethiopian storytellers to identify both ‘Europeans’ and ‘Turks’, within this regional legendary tradition.

4 See Chojnacki 2003; Gervers 2004; Henze 2004.

moned to help the Abyssinian kingship resist the Muslim invasions originating in the south-eastern lowlands. In some of the interviews I conducted in Amhara and Təgray in recent years, it seemed clear that at least a few of the informants tended to enrich their stories with information directly or indirectly originating from the books of the late Tāklä Şadəq Māk<sup>w</sup>əriya. I was once even presented with a photocopy of an illustration from the first volume of his *Yä'ityopya tarik*, where Cristóvão da Gama is depicted tied to a tree and surrounded by Muslims torturing him.<sup>5</sup> This image, which has even made its way into the naive popular paintings that reached Addis Abäba's tourist market in the 1960s and 1970s, was inspired by a reading of the narrative of the *Dos Feitos do Capitão Cristóvão da Gama*, by Captain Miguel de Castanhoso, one of the participants in the 1540s Portuguese expedition.

Furthermore, as Indo-American researcher Shaalini Ranasinghe has cleverly noted in her unpublished PhD thesis *The Castle of Emperor Fasilädäs: Missionaries, Muslims, and Architecture in Gondär, Ethiopia*,<sup>6</sup> present-day oral traditions in Gondär have most probably absorbed an interpretation initially put forward by mid-nineteenth-century travellers of Western origin, in referring to 'the Portuguese' as the builders of Fasilädäs' castle. As was then common, the notion that African civilizations had the technological and inventive ability to master the complex tasks of designing and building large monumental infrastructures was not accepted. It was then preferable to attribute such construction either to Middle Eastern or European hands.

This was certainly the case of the enigmatic ruins of the Great Zimbabwe. In Ethiopia, Jesuit missionaries have themselves actively forged a legendary view that stresses their own decisive intervention as architects and builders of stone and mortar Catholic churches—even though they refrained from extending their activity to the royal castles built during the period when they were most influential in the Abyssinian court.<sup>7</sup> As Ranasinghe reminds us, 'foreigners' easily became 'Portuguese' and any local oral memory specifying a different origin was lost forever.

Her subsidiary contention, which seems at times somewhat far-fetched, is that an Indian architect and mason known as Manuel Magro,<sup>8</sup> was no

5 Tāklä Şadəq Māk<sup>w</sup>əriya 1954/1955, 201.

6 Ranasinghe 2001, 179–181.

7 Boavida et al. 2008, 36–38.

8 Manuel Magro is mentioned in Jesuit writings as the introducer of mortar as a binding element in the church of Gännätä Iyäsus, in Azäzo, a royal camp established by Susənyos in the vicinity of Gondär, which preceded the construction of Fasilädäs' castle in Gondär by at least fifteen years.

other than <sup>c</sup>Abdalkarīm. This Gujarati is mentioned in the surviving copy of the *Chronicle of Susānyos*, and therein loosely identified as a Banyan, who is credited with having drawn up the king's residential buildings, along with an Egyptian charged with producing its woodwork.<sup>9</sup> Ranasinghe goes so far as to note that the Christianized, and Westernized, name of the Gujarati mason had probably been given by the Jesuit missionaries who contracted him to go to Ethiopia, and that, after their expulsion from the country, he stayed on and reassumed his Muslim identity.<sup>10</sup> She makes no mention, though, of the fact that it seems somewhat unlikely that a Banyan, a trader, would be charged with courtly architectural or building tasks. However, a surviving icon of the so-called first Gondärine period seems to portray a reference found in the *Chronicle of Susānyos* to Egyptian and Banyan builders: it shows two Middle Eastern and/or Oriental foreigners involved, not in the construction of churches for Susānyos, but in building his son Fasilädäs' castle. They wear Turkish-style turbans, tunics, vests, and *baggy pants* and are depicted in the same way as the Roman soldiers that hammer nails into Christ's head, in a well-known variation of the so-called *K<sup>w</sup>ər'atä rə'əsü* icon.<sup>11</sup>

Speculative as the Manuel Magro-<sup>c</sup>Abdalkarīm connection may be, it evolves around two independent pieces of information (Ethiopian and Jesuit) referring to the presence of Gujarati masons, accompanying the Jesuit mission to Ethiopia. We learn of this period when royal buildings of stone and mortar began to be erected in the north-western regions of Gondär and Goğgam mentioned the *Chronicle of Susānyos* and the writings of Father Manuel de Almeida.<sup>12</sup> The Portuguese-Indian style used in the construction of some of the Catholic churches around Lake Ṭana, and specially its decorative elements, may be a further material sign of a relevant Gujarati presence in northern Ethiopia at the time. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the noted similarities between the monumental church of Gorgora Nova, on the shores of Lake Ṭana, and the church of Saint Paul in Diu, western Gujarat. The rich Gujarati-style decorations on the walls and columns of the royal church of Märṭulä Maryam, in eastern Goğgam, and the structure of the royal leisure pavilions built on rectangular water basins in the royal compounds of Azäzo (Susānyos) and of Gondär (Fasilädäs) also evoke such

9 Pereira 1892, 224; Pereira 1900, 290.

10 Ranasinghe 2001, 235.

11 The *K<sup>w</sup>ər'atä rə'əsü* icon ('the striking of his head') is a local interpretation of the *Ecce Homo* motif that can be traced back to a painting of clear mannerist style that art historians generally accept was probably offered to the Ethiopian king by the Portuguese embassy of 1520. Cf. also Chojnacki 2003, 16–19.

12 Almeida 1907, 390; Pereira 1892, 224; Pereira 1900, 290.

comparisons. Although such material clues seem sufficient to establish a comparative architectural research programme, this is yet to be carried out.

Although they have not retained any specific information about the identity of ‘foreign’ builders of royal architectural structures, nevertheless oral narratives abound in details with respect to the goals and intentions of Ethiopian royalty concerning the construction of stone and mortar buildings. A practice that, having been recorded in Aksumite times some thirteen centuries previously, was subsequently abandoned, along with the implied knowledge of producing mortar from kaolin stone. What is proposed here is a brief glance at the ideological framework of these oral traditions, in order to find an interpretative window on narrative uses of the concept of ‘foreigner’ in northern Ethiopia. It will eventually help us define, even if the evidence is only circumstantial, what is implied in categories such as ‘the Portuguese’, ‘the Italians’, ‘the Banyans’, and so on.

### Foreigners and Other Marginal Figures in Northern Ethiopian Legends

The ancient *gäbbi* of Azäzo,<sup>13</sup> founded in the early seventeenth century, lies on the northern slope of a small hill a few miles from the city of Gondär, in the northern Amhara region of the Ethiopian highlands. The ruins of the king’s castle compound, the Catholic church of Gännätä Iyäsus (‘Paradise of Jesus’), and the royal pavilion built over a rectangular leisure basin are all that is left of these buildings today. The extensive destruction of these structures testifies to the eventful and sometimes tragic history of relations between the religious and secular powers in Christian Ethiopia. This *gäbbi*, which precedes the foundation of the capital city of Gondär, was established during an important turning point in the political, religious, and architectural history of the Abyssinian Christian kingdom. Built by order of King Susənyos in the early 1620s, it was, like the one of Dänqäz, 30 km to the south-east, the stage of dramatic events setting the sovereign and the newly empowered Catholics against the Orthodox monastic order of Däbrä Libanos. Echoing canonical historical views, local oral traditions vividly narrate episodes of a disastrous civil war that supposedly ended with the abdication of King Susənyos and the ascension to the throne of his son Fasilädäs, as well as the restoration of the Orthodox faith as the official creed of Christian Ethiopia. The oral sources contradict the written ones (though the latter are taken as canonical for the construction of modern Abyssinian political and religious history). Oral tradition, on the other hand, claims that the new king did not immediately end the great social upheaval caused by his father’s public declaration of obedience to the Ro-

13 i.e. the royal compound of the Abyssinian kings.



man pontiff and his acceptance of Catholic dogma brought to the country by a handful of Jesuit missionaries in 1624. Rather, these legendary tales underline the fact that the first years of Fasilädäs' reign were marked by the murder of 'thousands' of Däbrä Libanos' monks and priests. They had refused to sanction his marriage to an Italian princess named Zelyha who had been originally sent by the 'king of Rome' to marry Susənyos, who was by then deceased.

One of these oral versions was published in the 1930s by Alberto Pollera, and I have myself recorded a few other, both in the urban setting of Gondär/Azäzo and in rural villages, convents, and churches around the city and Lake Tana.<sup>14</sup> Stories about *Aše Fasil* (King Fasilädäs) are to this day told not only by Christian Amhara but also by the few Betä ʾƏsraʾel who did not migrate to Israel, by Gondärine Muslims (a community as old as the city's foundation) and by urban and rural Kəmant.<sup>15</sup> *Qəbat* believers in and around Mərṭulä Maryam and Däbrä Tabor, in eastern Goğgam, also mention Fasilädäs in their repertoire of *afä tarik* ('oral history').

Depending on the storyteller and the location, the number of killed monks is as high as 9,999 or as low as 7,777; the Roman princess travels to Ethiopia alone or with a sister (who is also made to marry the lustful King Fasilädäs, or Fasil); if the story is set in Gondär and not in Azäzo, the seven rivers that surround the city become red with the monks' blood, and this collective sacrifice marks the moment of the foundation of the royal capital.

The composite outline of the various stories told in Azäzo and in Gondär is as follows. After becoming king, Susənyos established his court in the region and ordered that a bath be built (a rectangular basin located in a valley between the hill of Gännätä Iyäsus and that of Täklä Haymanot's convent). Being both very lustful and very hairy, he would have frequent sexual intercourse with young women who he then killed so that his shameful bodily condition would not become publicly known (or, he resorted to shaving his whole body in that bath, including his bushy pubic hair). He renounced the Orthodox faith and submitted to the Roman pope, under the influence of *färäng* missionaries. Subsequently, he ordered the forceful conversion of his vassals to the Catholic faith. Thereafter, he suffered greatly: he became afflicted with a skin disease and his tongue swelled to the point where he could not speak. In this period, a slave girl who was known for being holy was living in the royal court. When her time came to sleep with

14 Pollera 1936, 76–78; Ramos 2000.

15 Kəmant are a group of Christianized Agäw, who are both linguistically and religiously related to the Betä ʾƏsraʾel. They constitute an Agäw farmer population, whose original theology is a mix of Jewish, Christian and pagan dogmas and Eucharistic practices.



Susānyos, she invoked her low birth as a reason not to see the king's naked body, for she guessed that the reason he killed his sexual partners was to keep his bodily condition secret. Susānyos agreed to keep his clothes on while having intercourse with her. When, afterwards, he was about to order her death, she said to him that there was no reason for him to kill her since he had not disclosed his secret. Not only did he spare her life but, bewildered by her ruse, he agreed to take her healing advice, which was to return to the Orthodox faith and resign in favour of his son Fasil. He died soon after having abdicated in favour of his son Fasilādās. His body was buried in the church of ʾTara Gädam Maryam, but kept resurfacing and poisoning the soil. Finally, the earth opened and his body was swallowed and pulled directly into hell. He had arranged to marry the daughter of the Roman king to seal his submission to the pope. But, when she arrived in Ethiopia (with her sister), he had already died and his son was now king. Since Fasilādās shared the same sexual appetites (and suffered the same hairy condition), he decided to marry her (and her sister). The monks and *däbtāras* (Church laymen) of the Orthodox monastic order of Däbrä Libanos opposed the king's marriage to the foreign princess and were slaughtered by the royal army. As his father, Fasilādās was cursed by God (the foreign builders of his castle could not erect it) and finally redeemed by a saintly slave woman who told him to repent and build either two churches or seven bridges. Once these were built, angels from heaven completed the castle themselves.

The story is reminiscent of a much older narrative, included in the thirteenth-century book known as the *Kabrä nägäšt* (or *Glory of Kings*), where a hyper-exogamous union between Makōdda, the 'Queen of Sheba', and Solomon, the biblical king of Israel, sets the scene for the foundation of early Abyssinian royalty.<sup>16</sup> Of particular interest to us here are, on the one hand, the reference to the *färänġ* missionaries and builders and, on the other, the riddle of the slave saint and the marriage of the Roman princess(es).

It is also worth noting that these pseudo-historical narratives told by Christian Amhara reveal as much as they conceal. In a metaphorical way, they contain memories both of the complex political, military or indeed cultural turmoil that the region—and the whole Abyssinian kingdom—experienced during the period of Susānyos and Fasilādās' reigns. These times were framed by the migration to, settlement in, and raiding of the highlands by hundreds of thousands of Oromo pastoralists, as well as by the international connections promoted by Ethiopian royalty. One such involved the intensive correspondence between the Portuguese kings and

<sup>16</sup> Boavida and Ramos 2005; Spencer 1979.

the Portuguese Indian viceroys; another was with the Emirate of Yemen that led to the arrival of a Yemenite embassy in Gondär in the 1650s.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Muslim and Kəmant versions that I have collected also make no note of this, nonetheless, they introduce interesting additional and divergent information about the Christian kingship of the time. As expected, they tend to emphasize (or even overemphasize) the role of the Kəmant in the foundation of Azäzo and/or Gondär, in the construction of the royal palaces and in the import of Asian textiles. Yet they also give important hints as to the need to revise the official Orthodox historiography that tends to overlook these communities' contribution to the birth and development of the city, and to silence the complexities of the theological rivalries between the adepts of different religious parties. The Tāwəhədo or 'Unionists', the Qəbat or 'Uctionists', the Šägga or 'Gracists', among others, were all vying for royal favour in the Gondärine court of seventeenth/eighteenth-century Ethiopia.

The stories regarding *Aše* Susənyos and *Aše* Fasilädäs in the region north of Gondär are complemented by a series of others—told in eastern Goğgam, in the southern part of the Amhara region—that give further details about the running conflict between royal power and Orthodox religious authorities. Both these oral stories and the surviving written documents of that time suggest Fasilädäs' (and subsequent kings') somewhat embarrassing association with the followers of the *Qəbat* creed. This hitherto heretical doctrine within Ethiopian Orthodoxy is almost extinct today, except in a few rural eastern Goğgam communities (namely in Ənəbse district).

Reminiscences of the improbable marriage between an Ethiopian ruler and the daughter(s) of the 'Roman king' and of their descendants seem to have been retained in popular oral narratives. They are hardly conform to the Orthodox historiographical canon that has long tended to suppress any documentary evidence of internal dissension within the Christian community and to overstress the foreign missionaries' responsibility in destabilizing the kingdom. Nor is the marriage confirmed by any documentary evidence. Still, it is widely accepted in this part of the country that Fasilädäs and 'Zelyha' conceived a daughter, whom they named Säblä Wängel, frequently associated with the construction of religious settlements in Goğgam and alluding to the promotion of the *Qəbat* sectarian movement.<sup>18</sup>

17 Donzel 1986, 149–151.

18 The *Qəbat* doctrine, developed in Goğgam among Ewostəatean convents (followers of the dictum of Saint Ewostəatewos), had been a rival force to that of the Order of Däbrä Libanos since the fifteenth century. There are some indications that *Qəbat* may be related to the presence of Western Catholicism in the Ethiopian highlands in

The stories regarding the slave girl and the Roman princess are but two small parts in an interwoven network of legendary stories dealing with royal legitimacy, religious identity, and dynastic change in seventeenth-century Christian Ethiopia, where the often tense relations between the kings and the Church are under scrutiny. Zelyha belongs to a gallery of complementary marginal figures (either foreign or indigenous) who occasionally get close to royal power; these include Portuguese, Indian and/or Egyptian castle builders, foreign ecclesiastics, giant snakes, slave women, and holy men (Christian and/or Muslim). The message that the episode of the marriage between Fasil and Zelyha seems to convey cannot be properly understood without comparison with stories concerning these other peculiar figures. These characters are largely of two kinds: marginal demonical figures that induce or express the 'fall from grace' of the king (stressing his evil side); and saintly characters whose presence and action are instrumental in the king's redemption (or its attempt).

From the early sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was directly confronted with European Catholicism. Western travellers, warriors, and missionaries entered the Christian Abyssinian royal court with a highly ideological project. We can trace this back to the crusading disposition of the Portuguese kingship,<sup>19</sup> and to the extraordinary attention this country received in Ignatius of Loyola's (the founder of the Society of Jesus) letters detailing the order's missionary plans.<sup>20</sup> This endeavour was rooted in a loose identification of the Ethiopian sovereign with the legendary priestly king known in medieval Europe as Prester John of the Indies.

The Portuguese accounts<sup>21</sup> offer us an alternative model which, when confronted with cultural and religious differences, includes both the disenchantment, and the effort to see Christian Ethiopian political administrative and religious structures as conforming to the 'lost' model of Prester John. This is especially visible in the second Jesuit mission which was the back-

the early years of the seventeenth century, see Bartnicki and Mantel-Niećko 1978; Getatchew Haile 1986; Getatchew Haile 1990; Wion 2004, 22–24. Most discussions (where the Jesuits confronted representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodoxy) centred around the Christological theme, and the definition of the relation between the Son's humanity and divinity. Dogmatic differences between Qəbat and Tāwəḥədo may be viewed as having been distilled from such discussions, since what opposed (and opposes) them was precisely the consideration of how Jesus' humanity and divinity came to be united.

19 Subrahmanyam 1997, 258.

20 Pennec 2003.

21 Rodrigo de Lima's embassy (1520–1526), Cristóvão da Gama's expedition (1540–1543), and the two Jesuit missions (1555–1590, 1603–1634).

ground to the conversion of Susənyos, the nomination of a Catholic patriarch for Ethiopia, and the Catholic influence on Ethiopian architecture, religious art, and on the political reforms of the kingdom attempted in the first decade of the seventeenth century. The final texts of the mission return, with a vengeance, to the disenchantment mode, where barbarism, heresy, and diabolism become the driving descriptors of the country (in particular, in Manuel de Almeida, Afonso Mendes, and Jerónimo Lobo).<sup>22</sup>

It is most interesting that the written Ethiopian documentation for this period has been either manipulated, suppressed, or is—when kept—very combative in defence of the Orthodox point of view. This is particularly so for the reign of King Fasilädäs, heir of the ‘Catholic’ king Susənyos, who is generally considered the restorer of the Orthodox faith and founder of the city of Gondär (that progressively became the royal residence, until the mid-nineteenth century); however an important written record is missing: the extended chronicle of the king.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, later kings’ chronicles present relevant data that help interpret Gondär’s early period, and a few versions of abridged chronicles are also known (based on *Sənkəssar*, i.e. calendars for the commemoration of saints); furthermore, contemporary texts such as the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* or the records of the *Qəbat* synod of 1658 in Aringo, Goğgam, promoted by Fasilädäs himself, are important aids to the study of Gondär’s foundation.

A number of oral versions of Fasilädäs’s life do exist, but they hardly conform to the historiographical versions taken as canonical for the construction of modern Abyssinian political and religious history. One was published in the 1930s by Alberto Pollera.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, I myself have recorded a few more both in the urban setting of Gondär/Azäzo and in rural villages, convents, and churches around the city and Lake Tana.<sup>25</sup>

The oral traditions collected in Gondär and its vicinity, in Goğgam and in northern Təgray, offer a number of examples of the construction of a ‘foreign’ topos, connected either with opposing Christian identities (Catholic vs Orthodox, *Təwəhədo* vs *Qəbat*) or with technological competence (military or architectural). It must be stressed that these oral traditions are not unconnected to the written. Often, the storytellers, keepers of oral traditions (especially priests and church laymen), switch between oral reinterpretation of written sources, oral reproduction of written transcriptions of oral legends, autonomous oral accounts, as well as outright separation between oral and written forms of legitimizing traditional narratives.

<sup>22</sup> See Ramos 2006, 125–127.

<sup>23</sup> Kropp 1984.

<sup>24</sup> Pollera 1936, 76–78.

<sup>25</sup> See Ramos 2000.

Examples of the foreign topos in northern Ethiopian legendary tradition are either relevant historical figures, found in more or less detailed written prosopographies (Cristóvão da Gama vs Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, Afonso Mendes with Susənyos vs Fasilädäs), or they are collective entities (the ‘Portuguese’ soldiers, the ‘Portuguese’ builders of the Gondärine castles). In such contexts, it is relevant to understand the use of the foreign topos in the oral narratives concerned with dynastic change and national identity. The *färäng* mentioned in northern Ethiopian legendary traditions are figures of symbolic marginality, be it the ‘Portuguese’, ‘Turkish’, or ‘Indian’ castle builders, the ‘Roman’ princesses or the ‘Armenian’ priests. They have a specific symbolic function on a narrative chessboard that includes figures such as the Muslim Ad‘ali, the Oromo pastoralists, the saintly female nuns, the southern slaves, the *däbtära* sages, the Muslim *šayḥ* and the *baḥtawi* (hermits). In this setting, ‘the Portuguese’, endowed with the power to support the royal Christian institution, but also harbingers of political and religious dissent, are seen as creditors of a mirrored Christian identity.

A homology between the ‘Portuguese’ castle builders (ineffective, in the case of Gondär’s Fasilädäs castle) and the Ethiopian royalty (Susənyos, Fasilädäs, and even the emir of Harär) who were involved in the promotion of problematic hyper-exogamic marriages (with ‘Roman’ or ‘Portuguese’ women) should be highlighted here. This feature is found in accounts relating to the establishment of royal compounds—the cycle of the so-called *Go* prophecy, a possibly *ex post facto* pseudo-prophetic account that points to a millenarian streak in Abyssinian royal ideology and that revolves around the triple key of the king, the saint, and the castle. It is also found in those stories referring to hyper-exogamic unions (rooted in the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* model, problematic sexual interactions between geographically and ethnically distant kingship figures) that led to bloody clashes between royalty and the Orthodox clergy. It also has a place in versions of stories relating to royal lust (the stories of the hairy kings who killed the slave women they slept with). Here the participation of the foreigner as mediator generally precedes the appearance of complementary key figures of symbolic and social marginality—the holy man, generally an ‘ascetic monk’ or *baḥtawi*, and the saintly slave woman or *barya*—who are able to reverse a negative situation (be it the problems in building the king’s castle, or his unholy sexual and exogamic appetites), and restore the due order, in which religious obedience to the Orthodox faith precedes and conditions royal power.<sup>26</sup>

The stress given to ephemeral but potent conjunctions between kingship and marginality (ethnic, religious, and social) in the context of dynastic

26 For a detailed reading of the Ethiopian oral accounts that develop these motifs, see Ramos 2010, 145–147.

change is essential to understanding the disparate flow of legendary accounts that make up many of the oral interpretations of historical events in northern Ethiopia. The foreign topos in Ethiopian oral tradition is then to be interpreted in its rhetorical functionality within a larger narrative framework, where marginal figures become key interlocutors of a number of kings that show marks of statutory ambiguity (holders of mystical and diabolical powers, abusive tyrants, etc.).

### Conclusion: Narrative Meaning and Selective Deletion

Oral traditions do not necessarily tell historical truths and, in this, they are very much like written accounts. They may offer hints to reinterpret and contextualize past events, and they should, like archaeological findings, be valued as relevant testimonies especially where written data tend to be either lacking, contested, or excessively stereotyped. But their most remarkable quality is the way in which they condition crucial moments in history, accommodating them to the general laws of collective representation which bridge the past, the present, and the future of societies and communities. In the case of northern Ethiopian oral histories, the implications they share with written literature only make them more, not less, important, in as much as they give us the possibility of transcending our own ideological limitations, so eager to impose dichotomous grids on the 'oral' and the 'written'. By recognizing the relevance of local *afä tarik*, we become more aware of the coda that underlies all historic discourse.

When referring to 'the Portuguese', Ethiopian storytellers are not preoccupied with identifying historical figures that may have had a life beyond the limited scope of their local historical knowledge. As a social category within a legendary framework, their meaning is to be found in the juxtaposition of a myriad of local characters. If indeed the castle builders were Indians and not Portuguese, the historical subtleties of their differentiation did not have an enduring impact on local memories.

What, then, about the Indian presence in Ethiopia? Scattered records stating that Banyan merchants were active in the Red Sea and in Eritrean coastal towns even before the Portuguese arrived in the region do exist.<sup>27</sup> The traders would reach the ports of Zayla<sup>c</sup> (in present-day Somaliland) and Massawa (in Eritrea) with textiles that they traded against goods brought from the Ethiopian highlands via the 'Afar caravan routes. Textiles of clear Gujarati style can still be found in sixteenth/seventeenth-century ecclesiastical book binding. They were also frequently used as covers for the iconostasis icon paintings that surround the cylindrical or cubic church *mäqdäs*

27 Alpers 2009; Keswani 1980; Pankhurst 1974.

encompassing the ‘holiest of holies’, as the central point of Ethiopian circular churches is known. The main evidence of the importance of this trade, though, is the one found in Ethiopian Orthodox iconographic art, which underwent great stylistic and conceptual changes in the wake of the ‘Jesuit period’ at court: both the robes of sacred figures (Mary, Jesus, the saints, etc.) and the geometrical and floral decorations in the background point to the great relevance of imported textiles as fashionable items praised by the Ethiopian kings and their courtiers. This trade did not stop with the expulsion of the Jesuits, but, as the presence of painted imitations of Dutch style ceramic tiles in many churches of the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries show, it found new competitors in the Dutch East India Company.<sup>28</sup>

During the one hundred or so years of direct contact between Portuguese India and the Ethiopian kingdom, the Gujarati merchant network was an important linking factor, as Banyans acted as transporters of people and goods, and as couriers of diplomatic and ecclesiastic correspondence to and from the Abyssinian highlands. Their privileged position in Diu derived from an agreement with the fortress commander allowing them free passage through Portuguese dominated waters to reach Muslim ports in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.<sup>29</sup> Hard as it was for Jesuit missionaries to make the dangerous journey from Goa or Diu to the Ethiopian highlands through the enduring Muslim blockade, they nevertheless made use of this network. Frequently escorted by Indian merchants or servicemen originating from the Goa province or from Gujarati coastal areas (especially from Diu), they would reach Ethiopia under disguise, masquerading as Armenian merchants in Gujarati vessels heading to the Red Sea ports. Through its mostly unrecorded activities, the Gujarati trading network soon became the logistical platform for the establishment of the fragile and overstretched Jesuit mission in Ethiopia, and it was through them that communications between the Ethiopian court and Portuguese authorities in India (and the Jesuit provincial) were enabled throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and the first thirty years of the next century, until the expulsion of the missionaries from that country in 1634.

One of the legends told in Gondär by elders of the Muslim community that is as old as the foundation of the city itself, refers to the presence of a *šayḥ* called Abdäl Bašik.<sup>30</sup> The story states that King Fasilädäs asked ‘the Portuguese’ to build his castle in Gondär. They agreed but confessed that they had not taken the necessary tools ‘from their country’. The king addressed three *däbtäras*, who respectively promised to bring the ‘Portuguese’

28 Bosc-Tiesse 2002.

29 Varadarajan 1989.

30 Ramos 2010, 214–215.



tools within a week, a day and an hour. The Muslim *šayḥ* happened to overhear the conversation and stepped in to summon the tools to the king's presence within the blinking of an eye. Subsequently, the king's castle could be built.

The narrative function of the holy *šayḥ* in this Muslim story is obviously akin to that of the holy slave woman in the Christian legends. But his origin is a source of controversy: some say that he was from Wällo, a region to the south-east of Gondär, others that he was a Yemeni. It would be too speculative to identify him with 'Abdalkarīm, and, in effect, such identification seems pointless. What matters is that Gondärine Muslims to this day stress the mediating capacity of a Muslim outsider in the building of the king's castle, in much the same way as the Christian Amhara invoke the redeeming powers of the saintly slave, either to redress the king's curse (in the case of Susənyos) or to build the castle (in the case of Fasilädäs). Fasilädäs, say the Christian versions, was guided by the saint to tackle the inefficacy of the 'Portuguese' builders who couldn't finish the castle, ultimately because of the king's impure marriage to the Roman princess. The Muslims, who never mention the slave saint in their versions, endow the 'foreign' *šayḥ* with an equivalent redeeming powers, redressing the failures of the 'Portuguese' builders.

Oral traditions from Gondär do not confirm that there was ever a (Muslim of Banyan) Gujarati mason, trader, or holy man active in northern Ethiopia at the time of the foundation of Gondär, in the wake of the expulsion of 'the Portuguese' (i.e. the Jesuit missionaries), as Ranasinghe proposes. But, when seen alongside the albeit solitary and somewhat incongruous reference to a 'Banyan mason' in Susənyos' chronicle and, together with the material remains (pictorial, architectural, and decorative), they offer indirect testimony that 'the Portuguese' (i.e. *färäng*, or Westerners) were not the only foreigners who had influence at the Ethiopian royal court in the first half of the seventeenth century. The fact that an Abdäl Bašik is remembered by the Muslim minority but not by the Orthodox Christian majority is a clear sign of the workings of deletion as a major factor in the construction of any hegemonic discourse (be it Ethiopian or Portuguese). In the present state of affairs, though, it would be too bold to assert with any certainty that a Gujarati did intervene in building Fasilädäs' imposing castle in Gondär. But this is a path worth treading in future research on the historic international connexions of Ethiopian royalty.



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# Memory and Oblivion in the History of Goṅṅ Monastery (1670–1750): The Paradoxes of *Qəbat* Historiography\*

ANAÏS WION

## Abstract

At the end of the seventeenth century, the history of Goṅṅ monastery, in Goṅṅam, was complex and traumatic because its abbot, Ṭābdān Dəngəl, head of the *Qəbat* movement during Yoḥannəs' reign (r 1667–1682), rebelled against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who favoured the Däbrä Libanos monastic network and declared *Qəbat* a heresy. The civil war lasted until Ṭābdān and his followers were excommunicated and banished, in 1687. Nonetheless, a few decades later, Goṅṅ was richly endowed by the royal power and its violent and rebellious past seemed to be forgotten. How did a rebellious institution come back to the foreground of the political and religious scene a few decades later? What had to be altered or forgotten in this violent history? How did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting the rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past? The memory has been lost of Ṭābdān Dəngəl, the abbot of Goṅṅ who sowed dissension within the *Qəbat* movement, opposed his own monks, and led an uprising against the king. New narratives, such as a dying bishop travelling miraculously to Goṅṅ and the 'late' invention of a neutral founding father, helped to attract the faithful and pilgrims, and recalled the institution's long history and close relationships with major political and religious authorities. In this case study, oral history will be shown to forge stories and portray characters in ways that obstruct access to the 'historical truth'.

## Introduction

Goṅṅ, a monastery in Goṅṅam, assumed leadership of the *Qəbat* movement as early as 1620, the very beginning of the theological and political controversy between *Qəbat* (Unctionism) and *Täwaḥədo* (Unionism). In another article,<sup>1</sup> I discuss the case of Ləbsä Krəstos, abbot of Goṅṅ during King Susənyos's reign (r 1607–1632). This powerful man is now remembered in Goṅṅ only through the presence of a giant sycamore bearing his name. This '*Abba* Ləbso' tree

\* I wish to thank Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie (Addis Ababa University) for his challenging comments during the preparation of this contribution, and Noal Mellott for revising the English.

1 Wion 2017.

stands where the first church in Gongǵ was supposedly founded, on the edge of the cliff, while the present-day church is located a few hundred meters below. Of the glorious, or inglorious, past of *Abba Ləbsä Krəstos*, nothing remains in the memory of the Gongǵ monastic community. That he was a fiery leader of the *Qəbat* movement at the first major council held in 1621, that the Jesuits called him their best Catholic convert, that the patriarch of Alexandria wrote to him after his return to the Alexandrian faith in 1632, that King Fasilädäs sentenced him to death, and that he died in jail years after the sentence was passed... Nothing of all this has been retained in Gongǵ's memory.

But this is not the only case of oblivion. At the end of the seventeenth century, Gongǵ's history was complex and traumatic, mainly because one of its abbots, Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, head of the *Qəbat* movement during Yoħannəs' reign (r 1667–1682), started a rebellion against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who favoured the Däbrä Libanos monastic network and declared *Qəbat* a heresy. This civil war lasted until Ṭäbdän and his followers were excommunicated and banished, in 1687.

The present study examines the political and religious history of Gongǵ monastery, in order to investigate the process whereby this community reinvented its history in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> At that time, King Iyasu II (r 1730–1755) co-opted the *Qəbat* movement, successfully carrying out the policy conducted by his predecessors since King Tewoflos (r 1708–1711). The court had richly endowed *Qəbat* and Ewostətan institutions. How did a rebellious institution—rebellious not for being *Qəbat* but for having led an uprising against the king—come back into the foreground of the political and religious scene a few decades later? What had to be altered or forgotten in this violent history? How did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past? Approaching chronology in retrospect, let us start by describing Gongǵ's mid-eighteenth-century 'heroes' to then take a look at how they were used to 'clean the past' of scandalous references.

### Inventing a Founding Father: A Necessity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

When asked about its history today, the Gongǵ community, lay and cleric, start by referring to Gərma Šəllus. The memory of this history, voiced through oral tradition, is very vivid.<sup>3</sup> Gərma Šəllus had a vision of the Vir-

2 For a general account of the history of Gongǵ, see 'Gongǵ Tewodros', *EAE*, II (2005), 848a–b (A. Wion).

3 My informants were *Afä mämbər* Bərhanu Šəfärraw, *Ato* Kasahun Mängəstu and *Märigeta* Haymanot, recorded in Gongǵ in 2004 by Anaïs Wion, Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie, and Claire Bosc-Tiessé.

gin Mary who asked him to move the church down from its location up on the cliff. He prayed for forty days (or forty years). A few boulders talked, saying ‘*qəddus, qəddus*’ (‘holy, holy’). He followed them to the place and built the church that still stands there, its *tabot* dedicated to the Pact of the Covenant. These huge, round boulders can still be seen at the site and at a nearby place called *dəmṣä dəngay* (‘the sound of stones’) in remembrance of this story. The lower part of a nineteenth-century banner dedicated to Saint Tewodros depicts *Abunä* Ewostatewos preaching to his disciples and *Abunä* Gərma Šəllus with one of these stones. A nearby source of water with healing powers is named *qəddusan* (‘holy men’) because Gərma Šəllus and his disciples are said to have stopped and prayed there, making the water holy. It is still used as *šəbäl* (holy water). The landscape thus serves as evidence and a reminder of the history of the church’s refoundation.

Oral tradition, which has not erased the past, definitely places the first church on top of the cliff, where the giant sycamore called ‘*Abba Ləbso*’ now stands. As shown in my previous article, this church was linked with *Abba* Ləbsä Krəstos, the powerful abbot of Goṅṅ sentenced to death by King Fasilädäs, whose *damnatio memoriae* has left nothing but this tree in Goṅṅ’s collective memory. The present-day church below the cliff is the one founded by *Abunä* Gərma Šəllus, who is identified as the ‘first’ founder of Goṅṅ. How to resolve this apparent contradiction? The *afä məmbəḥ* told us that the first church was built during the era of the Old Testament, at the time of *Liqä kahənat* Azaryas,<sup>4</sup> whereas the new church was built during the era of the New Testament, under the reign of Yəkunno Amlak, the founder of the so-called Solomonid dynasty in 1270. This clever usage of the ‘double alliance’, a fundamental theological tenet of the Ethiopian Church,<sup>5</sup> can convince only those who are already persuaded.<sup>6</sup>

4 According to the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, *Liqä kahənat* Azaryas was the high priest of the Temple in Jerusalem who came to Ethiopia with the son of the Queen Makədda and King Solomon, along with the Ark of the Covenant.

5 On the ‘double alliance’, see Rodinson 1964; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001; Fritsch 2014.

6 A list written in the last blank folia of a psalter in Goṅṅ (Goṅṅam, Goṅṅ Tewodros, Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (= ARCCCH), G-IV-330) might have inspired this oral tradition, or the reverse, since feedback passes in both directions. This chronology lists Ethiopian kings from Arwe, the mythical serpent-king, up to Minas (r 1559–1563). It is a type A list of kings according to Conti Rossini’s classification (Conti Rossini 1909). The palaeography is modern (very likely from the twentieth century), even though the psalter is a beautiful early Gondarine work. The peculiarity of this copy is that Ellä Abrəha is credited with the construction of both Aksum and ‘Galila Däbrä Ṭəbāb which is in the land (*mədr*) of Qolala’. Galila Däbrä Ṭəbāb is one of the names of Goṅṅ monastery. Further down



Fig. 1 ‘How the stone followed *Abunä Gərma Šəllus*, *māmhar* of faith’ (banner, reference number ARCCCH G-III-39). Photo Anaïs Wion (2004).

Should we simply accept the fact that *Abunä Gərma Šəllus* is considered to be the founding father of the monastery since time immemorial? No. Not even the clergy and scholars in Gongǝ are persuaded of this. There is clear evidence that the ‘construction’ of the memory of this *abunä* is of rather recent date.

### Gəʿəz Literacy Meets Amharic Orality: The Commemoration of Gərma Šəllus in the *Sənkəssar*

A commemoration of the death of Gərma Šəllus on 10 Mäskäräm is found in the *Sənkəssar*.<sup>7</sup> In the upper margin of this seventeenth- or eighteenth-century manuscript, we read

ወበዛቲ ፡ ዕለት ፡ አዕረፈ ፡ አቡነ ፡ ግርማ ፡ ሥሉስ ፡ መምህረ ፡ አንቱ [sic] ፡ ም  
ኔት ፡ ዘውእቱ ፡ ጎንጅ ፡ ወስርወ ፡ ልደቱሂ ፡ ናይድእክሙ ፡ ወሀሎ ፡ ፩ ፡ ብእ  
ሲ ፡ ሥዩመ ፡ ወለቃ ፡ ዘስሙ ፡ አብራክ ፡ ድንግል ፡ ወወለደ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ወስመ

the list, where King Yəkunno Amlak is mentioned, the scribe added ‘and this when Däbrä Təbāb became a monastery (*gädam*)’.

7 Collegeville, MN, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (= EMLL), 8523; ARCCCH G-IV-334, fols 15v–16r.



ዮ : ነገደ : ኢየሱስ : ወሠናይ : አርአያሁ : ወኩሉ : ዘርእዮ : ያፈቅሮ : ወአስ  
 ተዋደይዎ : ሰብእ : ቀናዕያን : ኀበ : ንጉሥ : ሰይፈ : አርአድ : እንዘ : ይብ  
 ሉ : ናሁ : ተፍህሮ [sic] : መንግሥት : ለነገደ : ኢየሱስ : ወውእቱኒ : የኃሥ  
 ሳ : ወበእንተዝ : ጸልአ : ንጉሥ : ወአጥፍአ : ክልኤሆን : አዕይንቲሁ : ወአሜ  
 ሃ : ጸልመ : ዓለም : ፪ዕለታተ : ወጠየቀ : ንጉሥ : ምክንያቶ : ለጽልመት : ወ  
 ይቤልዎ : ሰብእ : ማእምራን : በእንተ : ዘአጥፋዕከ : አዕይንቲሁ : ለነገደ : ኢ  
 የሱስ : ወጸውአ : ንጉሥ : ወይቤሎ : ኀድግ : ሊተ : አበሳየ : አነሂ : ወሀብኩ  
 ከ : ወለተየ : ዘስማ : ትኩና : ለጽዮን : ወአውሰባ : ወሠመያ : ተኩልኝ : በእ  
 ንተ : ጥፍአተ : አዕይንቲሁ : ወወለደሙ : እምኔሃ : ለአቡነ : ግርማ : ሥሉ  
 ስ : ወአስበ : ክርስቶስ : ወለጽጌ : ማርያም : ወለማዕዶት : ወቦ : ካልአን : ወ  
 አመ : ተወልደ : ሕጻን : ግርማ : ሥሉስ : ኮነ : ግዙረ : ወመስቀል : ውስተ :  
 እዴሁ : ወማዕተብ : ውስተ : ክሳዴ : ወልህቀ : በጥበብ : ወምክር : ወተምህ  
 ረ : ሕገ : ቤተ : ክርስቲያን : ወተሠይመ : መምህረ : እንዘ : ሀሎ : ጐንጅ :  
 በምድረ : ቅንክት :<sup>8</sup> ፲ዓመተ : ወእምድኅረዝ : ኮነ : ስደት : ወመጽአ : ምስ  
 ለ : ሀዘቡ : ወካህናቲሁ : ወሐነጸ : ለዛቲ : ደብረ : ሰማዕት : በጸም : ወበጸሎ  
 ት : ወሐነጸ : ብዙኀን : አብያተ : ክርስቲያናት : ወነበረ : ፳ዓመተ : በዛቲ :  
 ምኔት : ወአቀቦሙ : ለአባግአ : መርዔቱ : በፍቅር : ወበሰላም : ወአዕረፈ : በ  
 ከመ : ዛቲ : ዕለት : ጸሎቱ : ወበረከቱ : የሃሎ : ምስለ : ፍቁሩ : ኪዳነ : ማርያ  
 ም : ወምስለ : ፍቅርቱ : ወለተ : ኢየሱስ : ወምስለ : ኩሎ : ውሉዱ : ለዓለ  
 መ : ዓለም : አሜን ።<sup>9</sup>

(And on this day [10 Mäskäräm] died *Abunä Gərma Šəllus*, *māmḥər* of this monastery (*mānet*) [in] Gong. And we shall let you know the origin of his birth. There was a man, *šəyyum* of Wäläqa, whose name was Abrakä Dəngəl. He had a son named Nägädä Iyäsus of handsome appearance. All those who saw him loved him. But some jealous people accused him in front of King Sayfä Arʿad, saying: ‘This Nägädä Iyäsus is a threat to the kingdom. He must be interrogated because of his hatred of the king.’ His two eyes were removed, and the world was dark for 100 days. The king asked for the reason for this darkness. And the learned ones answered him that it was because Nägädä Iyäsus had had his eyes removed. So the king made him come and said ‘Forgive my crime, and I will give you my daughter whose name is Təkunna lä-Šəyon.’ He married her and called her Tākullä nñä [‘compensate me’] because of the loss of his eyes. And thereafter they had children: *Abunä Gərma Šəllus*, *Asbä Krəstos* and Šəge Maryam and Maʿədot, and others. And when *Gərma Šəllus* was born, he was [already] circumcised and had a cross in his hand and a baptismal

8 The original word was erased and ‘*qənəkət*’ added in the margin.

9 The text is followed by a poem with five verses praising Mary and *Gərma Šəllus*, and perhaps alluding to *Ləbsä Krəstos*.



lace around his neck. And he grew in wisdom, the spirit of deliberation and the teaching of Church law. He was appointed *māmhər* when G<sup>w</sup>āṅṅ was in the land of Qənkət [for] ten years and then he was exiled. He arrived with his people and his clergy, and he built this church of the martyrs fasting and praying. And he built several churches. And he stayed twenty years in this monastery and was the keeper of his flock with love and peace. He died this day. May his prayer and benediction be with his beloved Kidanä Maryam and his beloved Wälättä Iyäsus and with their children,<sup>10</sup> forever and ever, amen.)<sup>11</sup>

The local community is familiar with this text since it is read every year during the commemoration for Gərma Šəllus. It is written in Gəʿəz, a liturgical language not mastered by those who have not attended a religious school. The oral tradition has retained only the most marvellous events. In common with the text, it mentions the birth with miraculous signs: the newborn child, already circumcised, with a baptismal lace around his neck and a cross in his hand. But the oral tradition has kept none of the information about Gərma Šəllus's regional and social background, perhaps because it is too specific and not directly comprehensible. As we shall see, the significance of these details was not at all clear to the scribe and/or historiographer who wrote the text.

This text was intended to provide information on Gərma Šəllus's family origins. He came from an aristocratic family, being the son of the 'šəyyum of Wäläqä, whose name was Abrakä Dəngəl'. Abrakä Dəngəl, known from other sources, ruled over Wäläqä (an area bordering Goğğam on the southeastern shore of the Abbay) during the seventeenth century. The *Chronicle of Iyasu II* mentions him for his loyalty to Fasilädäs (r 1632–1667),<sup>12</sup> and numerous genealogies of Wäläqä cite him.<sup>13</sup> Upon comparing these genealogies with the small text in the Gongṣ *Sənkəssar*, several contradictions and chronological aberrations appear. Firstly, Nägädä Iyäsus, the famous 'əqqabə sāʿat at the start of the sixteenth century, was probably a forefather of Abrakä Dəngəl but not his son. He had, indeed, links with Wäläqä since one of his sons was *nägaš* there.<sup>14</sup> Another anomaly: none of the persons

10 They were not the initial sponsors of the manuscript. Their names were copied over erasures everywhere in the main part of the manuscript, which very likely dates back to the early Gondarine period.

11 Translation my own.

12 Guidi 1910, 76; Guidi 1912, 81.

13 See Kropp 1989 and Wion 2012.

14 According to the autobiography of *Ras Səməʿon*, his brother and himself were sons of Nägädä Iyäsus, see Getatchew Haile 2005.

mentioned in the text were contemporaneous with the fourteenth-century king, Säyfä Arʿad. The genealogy of Wäläqä mentions that the daughter of *Wäläqä nägaš* Abrako gave birth to a girl named Takula, whereas another daughter of Abrako gave birth to Ṭānayto who gave birth to *Abeto* Gərma Iyäsus.<sup>15</sup> This Gərma Iyäsus would have lived at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The commemoration of Gərma Šəllus is based on a vague knowledge of the Wäläqä genealogies. What was probably important for Gonḡ monastery was not the accuracy of the text but the writing of a hagiography, wherein the monk recalls the proximity to royal and regional power-holders. This short commemorative text is a case of what we might describe as ‘name-dropping’—mentioning important persons in order to legitimate what is being said.

This text contains an interesting piece of information: Gonḡ church was first founded in a place named Qənkət, which might be in Wäläqä, and then migrated toward the present-day location in Goḡḡam. The name Qənkət crops up in other accounts too.

### **Gərma Šəllus’s Place in an Ewoṣṭatean Monastic Genealogy: An Invention in a Formalistic Tradition**

Extended genealogies of the Ewoṣṭatean monastic house trace the spiritual filiation from Saint Antonios to Ewoṣṭatewos and his disciples, and then on to their disciples. The two main lines run from Absadi and from Gäbrä Iyäsus, whose spiritual sons extended the house and/or evangelized, mainly in Wäläqä, Šäwa, Dämbəya and Goḡḡam. Minor lines run through Märqorewos and Bākimos, whose disciples stayed in northern areas (Təgray and Eritrea). G. Lusini has edited and translated three of these extended genealogies.<sup>16</sup> Similarities between these different versions prove that these documents are highly formalistic. Since all known genealogies stop with seventeenth-century monks at the latest, we can guess that they might have been written as early as the second half of the seventeenth century, but more probably that they accompany the return to favour of the *Qəbat* party after 1708.

As an important Ewoṣṭatean church, Gonḡ has such a genealogy.<sup>17</sup> Despite its lacunae, what remains is similar to the genealogy published by Lusini and preserved in manuscript Conti Rossini 88.<sup>18</sup> But there is a strik-

15 Kropp 1989, 194.

16 Lusini 2004.

17 This folium is now bound in *Gädlä Ewoṣṭatewos* (EMML 8577, ARCCCH G-IV-364), fol. 121rv. The palaeography of the genealogy is rough and hard to date.

18 Ms Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 88.

ing difference. After the genealogical line of Absadi, and before that of Gäbrä Iyäsus, an independent line has been added: ‘*Abba* Täklä Šəllase of Däbäb is the spiritual father (literally *wälädo*) of Sənä Dəngəl of Qənk<sup>w</sup>at; and Sənä Dəngəl is the spiritual father of Gərma Šəllus’. Given the lacunae in this genealogy (in particular the beginning is missing), we cannot know whether Täklä Šəllase might also have been added as one of Ewostatewos’ first disciples. It would have been a bold act to ‘invent’ an unknown disciple, but it would also be the only way to attach this orphan line to the main father. What is striking is that this anomalous ‘invention’ also crops up in a different form in a genealogy from *Abba* ‘Aśrat’s monastery, another important Ewostatean center in Goğgam. This genealogy also adds a line for *Abba* Täklä Šəllase, in between the end of the Absadi line and the beginning of the Gäbrä Iyäsus one: ‘*Abba* Täklä Šəllase gave birth to *Abba* Näftalem of Qəng<sup>w</sup>at where Goğ [*sic*] is’. This addition is followed by seven other unknown disciples of Täklä Šəllase.<sup>19</sup> There are no other developments of this genealogical line. Although the names differ, we recognize a common pattern with the addenda in Gong’s genealogy, but the narrative links with this pattern might have differed slightly. What is important is that it confirms that a place named Qəng<sup>w</sup>at (Qənk<sup>w</sup>at) was associated with Gong at some point.

The mention of Qənk<sup>w</sup>at as the monastery of Gərma Šəllus’ spiritual father brings to mind that of Qənkət in the *Sənkəssar* as the place from which Gərma Šəllus came. Since Qənkət was added over an erasure with a different spelling, we cannot be sure that Qənkət and Qənk<sup>w</sup>at come from independent sources. One might be the source of the other, the genealogy probably being the source of the *Sənkəssar* note. Whatever the case, Däbäb and Qənk<sup>w</sup>at have not yet been identified.<sup>20</sup>

### Gərma Šəllus as the Grantor of Land to Gong: A Retrospective Account in a Late Amharic Document

An Amharic land document starts with the following words: ‘Here is the letter (*däbdäbe*) of *Abunä* Gərma Šəllus by which he gave to Däbrä Tewodros of Gong the *säbäka* of Wäläqe Giyorgis, Abälä Maryam Abbo and the *tabot* of Šəllase.’<sup>21</sup> The document lists the taxes to be contributed by

19 I wish to thank Margaux Herman for sharing this unpublished, very original genealogy with me.

20 As I observed during a recent field-trip to Wäläqa, the Christian community has forgotten about these two places. I have conducted systematic enquiries in order to locate these places in the area of Wägäde but informants could not recall them.

21 In the *Senodos*, MS EMMI 8537, accessed through the D. Crummey collection, photos no. 89.V.12–13. This collection is accessible at the University Library of the Uni-

each of these parishes to Gong. It should be mentioned that the main tributary church of Gong is called Wäläqe, after the province of Wäläqa—yet another reminder of the link between the church and that province. Since Gong was dedicated to Saint Tewodros after King Tewodros (r 1855–1868) looted the monastery, this document obviously dates from the second half of the nineteenth century at the earliest. It provides evidence of the abiding importance of this tradition to the monastery. Since Gərma Šəllus is identified as the founding father, he must have granted land to the monastery.

None of the three sources mentioned is very old. Since *Abunä Gərma Šəllus* is unattested in Ethiopian sources in general and in Ewostëatan sources in particular, when was this tradition created or, at least, set down in writing? And why? What were the reasons for ‘inventing’ an ancient and obscure—if not imaginary—founding father?

### A First Clue: Gərma Šəllus, a Protective Aura after 1730 for the Real Abbot of Gong

Gərma Šəllus is associated with *Abba Šewa Dəngəl* in two other sources created by and for Gong. The two men are depicted together inside the church, on the beautiful painting on the western wall of the *māqdäs* (Fig. 2). Furthermore, a long series of poems (two distinct collections each with twenty-seven *sälam*) is dedicated to both of them.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, Šewa Dəngəl, abbot of Gong during or just before the reign of Iyasu II, wanted to be associated with the memory of Gərma Šəllus, and was willing to invest in playing up this association. He was very likely a principal sponsor of the paintings that, in pure Second Gondarine style, adorned the *māqdäs*, of which only those on the western wall have survived.<sup>23</sup> Šewa Dəngəl and Gərma Šəllus are depicted together on the left part of the wall, under a depiction of Saint Tewodros riding a horse, armed with the divine *dextra* and slaying enemies. The name of the lay do-

versity of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (see Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Archives, DCC Masters 2006–, Sub-Series 3: Ethiopian Land Records (Prof. Don Crummey), 2009) and at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abäba.

22 Ms ARCCH G-IV-346. These poems contain no historical information.

23 The upper part of the western wall depicts the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Passion. The middle part depicts, on the left side, Saints Tewodros and George riding horses and, on the right side of the door, the Virgin with Child (to whom Yaʿaqob Trəngo is praying) and the Crucifixion. The lower part portrays *Blatta Wäsän*, Šewa Dəngəl, Gərma Šəllus and a male donor, the Pact of the Covenant with a female donor, and a monk. On the right are seven figures, among them *Mämbər Gäbrä Yoħannäs*, *Fitawrari Gäbrä Mikaʿel*, and *Abunä Ewostätewos* teaching his disciples while in exile. The door-frame is adorned with small figurative scenes in white and dark blue in imitation of the Dutch tiles decorating the royal foundations of Narga and Qʷəsqʷam (see Bosc-Tiessé and Wion 2005, 101–105).

nor prostrate at their feet is not easily deciphered (Gäbrä Giyorgis?). Despite the white stroke separating the scene, Gərma Šəllus and Šewa Dəngəl are part of the iconographic narrative of the Pact of the Covenant. They face the Virgin Mary and Jesus. The woman prostrate at the feet of Mother and Child was probably the wife of the high-ranking person prostrate before Šewa Dəngəl. Another figure, *Blatta Wäsän*, is depicted on the left of the wall, above Gərma Šəllus and Šewa Dəngəl.



Fig. 2 Wall-painting portraying *Abba Gərma Šəllus* and *Abba Šewa Dəngəl*, abbot of Gong c.1730 (western wall, church of Gong Tewodros, Goğgam). Photo Anaïs Wion (2004).

Šewa Dəngəl is not unknown. He is mentioned at the beginning of the *Chronicle of Iyasu II*, in the genealogy of eminent *Qəbat* scholars and monastic leaders. This chronicle clearly indicates that the reign of the new king and of his mother, Məntəwwabb, was placed under the patronage of the Ewostətean monastic house and the *Qəbat* movement.

The people of Goğgam and Q<sup>w</sup>ara take part in this faith, because they were taught by the sons of *Abunä Ewostətewos*. [...] *Abba Təṭəmqa Mədhən* from the convent of Gašola, Gažege and Wagada;<sup>24</sup> *Abba*

24 Təṭəmqa Mədhən was a major monastic leader during Yoḥannəs' reign. Taddesse Tamrat, while working on the Agāw, discovered a hagiography of Təṭəmqa Mədhən in Mātəkkāl. According to this still unpublished *gədl*, Təṭəmqa Mədhən was sent by

Yohannəs of Däbrä Šəlalo,<sup>25</sup> *Abba* Šewa Dəngəl, abbot of Däbrä Goṅṅ. These are the persons who taught this Orthodox faith to the inhabitants of Goṅṅam and Q<sup>w</sup>ara.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of Məntəwwab's regency, Šewa Dəngəl of Goṅṅ was considered to be a major *Qəbat* leader. It is hard to establish the exact dates of his activities, but we might assume that he was in charge of the monastery during the reign of Iyasu II. During the reign of Məntəwwab and Iyasu II, Goṅṅ was, once again, closely associated with royal power, and profited from the royal family's endowments. When Məntəwwab founded Narga Šəllase, Goṅṅ was the monastery that benefitted the most from the newly opened positions and lands: eighteen of its clergy received tenure from Narga,<sup>27</sup> followed by Šəlalo with eight. Nor should we forget to mention the outstanding career of *Abba* Tewodros of Šəlalo, sent in 1744 to Egypt to ask the Alexandrian patriarch for a new metropolitan. Tewodros was, in 1745, *šəḥafe tə'əzaz* (royal chronicler) and *aläqa* of the Gondarine church of Ҳamärä Noḥ.<sup>28</sup> As chronicler, he might have been the person who added the reference to the abbots of Šəlalo and Goṅṅ! In 1750, he was appointed to head a newly founded church in Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am, a very significant position.<sup>29</sup>

Given all this, we can formulate the hypothesis that the creation of the 'history' or 'commemoration' of *Abunä* Gərma Šəllus as founding father of Goṅṅ could date back to the time of Šewa Dəngəl. A new historiographical

the king to areas west of Goṅṅam and Үana to evangelize the Gumuz and the Agäw, and he died in 1678 (Tadesse Tamrat 1988, 14–17). He was also mentioned, but indirectly, in the *Chronicle of Yohannəs* as '*Abba* Təṭəmṗo mənēt of Gaṣige māmḥər of numerous brothers' (Guidi 1903a, 37; Guidi 1903b, 38). Entrusted by the king to promote the Orthodox faith, he was sent to evangelize a region where the king fought several battles. According to one genealogy of the Ewošatean house, he was the spiritual son of Arsanyos of Qoma. Arsanyos was the father confessor of Queen Wäld Šä'ala, the wife of King Susənyos who founded the monastery of Qoma Fasilädäs in Bägəmdər (Lusini 2004, 267; Wion 2012). Even if associated with Qoma in the genealogies, Arsanyos was not the first abbot of this monastery, since Fəre Mäsṗäl is clearly identified as the first.

25 Šəlalo and Goṅṅ have been closely associated, sometimes even considered to be a single institution. *Abba* Yohannəs is depicted along with Ləbsä Krəstos on a visual spiritual genealogy of the Ewošatean monastic house (cf. Wion 2017). The icon is posted on the website of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns it: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.98> (consulted on 19 June 2014). *Abba* Yohannəs of Šəlalo would have had his own *gädl* written, according to the list established by Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke 1975, 98.

26 Guidi 1910, 17; Guidi 1912, 16.

27 Bosc-Tiessé 2008, 242–243.

28 Guidi 1910, 117; Guidi 1912, 127.

29 Bosc-Tiessé 2008, 242–243.



moment in the life of Gongǵ monastery was contrived during the first half of the eighteenth century.

But does this imply that Gərma Šəllus was not, even earlier, considered to be Gongǵ's founding father? The *forma vulgata* of Ewostətan genealogies only mentions Aron, a disciple in the Absadi line, as abbot of Gongǵ six or seven generations after Ewostəwos.<sup>30</sup> Each monastery is mentioned once in association with the man who must have been the founder, or the first abbot. Accordingly, Aron would have founded Gongǵ in the mid-fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In this *forma vulgata*, as previously pointed out, a line has been added in Gongǵ for Gərma Šəllus,<sup>31</sup> not originally associated with Gongǵ. In other words, it was, at some point, necessary to invent a new past for Gongǵ monastery but without erasing the old. Did something have to be hidden or forgotten? What happened prior to this period? Let us examine the previous generation of leaders in Gongǵ.

### ***Abba Țəbdān Dəngəl (1680s): From Failure to Oblivion***

Though no longer remembered in Gongǵ, the name of a very famous abbot crops up in several official written sources. *Abba Țəbdān Dəngəl* was a leader of the *Qəbat* party at the end of King Yohannəs's reign (r 1667–1682),<sup>32</sup> a king who tried, at least until the last year of his rule, to maintain a balance between *Qəbat* and *Təwəhədo*. A synod was held in 1679 with the people of Lasta, a third party to this religious, political, and regional game of power, as shown by Kindeneh Endeg's interpretation of a new source (*Gädlä Estənfəsä Krəstos*) and his fresh analysis of the *Royal Chronicles* and of the *Gädlä Iyasu*.<sup>33</sup> Striking a balance of power between the pro-Ewostətan and pro-Däbrä Libanos monastic movements has been considered to be typical of politics during the Gondärine period. Kindeneh Endeg's research tends to prove that such was not the case: a third party challenged this balance of power; and persecutions, oppression and violence were rife. The Däbrä Libanos house defended the unionist interpretation, in line with the *yəšägga ləgğ* doctrine, while the Lasta and Təgray people adhered to the *karra* doctrine.

The account of the 1679 synod in the *Royal Chronicles* starts with the credo of the clergy of Lasta, who sent a letter to King Yoḥannəs stating, 'If

30 Six generations reported in MS Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 125 in Lusini 2004; and MS EMMML 8577 of Gongǵ. Seven generations reported in MS Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 88, in Lusini 2004.

31 MS EMMML 8577 of Gongǵ.

32 Guidi 1903a, 41–42; Guidi 1903b, 41–43.

33 Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013.

you reject the people of your kingdom who say that Christ was glorified by the Holy Spirit, be our king; and we will be your slaves and servants.’<sup>34</sup> The clergy, both *Qəbat* and *Təwəhədo*, opposed this call, replying, ‘The Father glorified the Son, Christ, by the glory of his essence though the anointment with the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.’<sup>35</sup> The main speaker at this council was ‘*Aqqabe sä‘at*’ Q<sup>w</sup>äştāntinos. Monks were allowed to speak only at the end of the synod. The ones who took the floor were ‘*Abba Təbdän, məmhər*’ of Gong, *Abba* Atnatewos who brought the metropolitan from Egypt, and *Abba* Ədä Krəstos, *liqä mänəkəsat zä-əččäge*’.<sup>36</sup> There was strong agreement at the court among prominent prelates, whether from the Ewəştəwənos or the Dəbrä Libanos houses, about what constituted the Orthodox faith. They all stood together against the *karra* doctrine.

One year later, the unionist question was debated under the spiritual and theological control of *Qəbat* clerics such as Qozmos, Giyorgis (the spiritual son of Yoħannəs from Dəbrä Şəmmuna), and Akalä Məsqäl from Gong. A dispute between *Abba Təbdä Krəstos (sic)*, *məmhər* of Gong, and *Əččäge Şägga Krəstos* would have turned into a fight had the king not risen from his throne to separate the two. Zä‘iyəsus, another *Qəbat* leader, tried to relieve tension by quoting from the Gospel (Matt. 18:16). This synod was the last one in Yoħannəs’ reign that demonstrated the power, if not supremacy, of the *Qəbat* party. The next synod, in 1682, seems to have concluded in favour of Dəbrä Libanos, but the *Chronicle of Yoħannəs* ends abruptly. Meanwhile, the kingdom was endangered by the hostility between Yoħannəs and his son, the future King Iyasu. The end of the *Chronicle of Yoħannəs* was probably written under the control of the scriptorium of Iyasu after the latter had taken the throne.<sup>37</sup>

Once on the throne, Iyasu conducted a policy favourable to the Dəbrä Libanos party and against the two other religious factions. The *Qəbat* party was losing its pre-eminence. One of its leaders, Zä‘iyəsus, was imprisoned. Whenever a synod was convened, *Qəbat* monks were excommunicated: in 1682, immediately after Iyasu took the throne, as well as in 1684, when monks from Gažge, the community founded by Təṭəmqa Mədhən, called for the release of Zä‘iyəsus.<sup>38</sup> The *Chronicle of Iyasu I* goes on to describe

34 ዝሂለ ፡ አንቴታ ፡ እመ ፡ አንደኛው ፡ ለሕዝበ ፡ መንግሥትከ ፡ ብሂሎቶሙ ፡ ከብረ ፡ በመንፈስ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ ክርስቶስ ፡ ኩነነ ፡ አንተ ፡ ንጉሠ ፡ ወንሕኒ ፡ ንከውነከ ፡ አግብርተ ፡ ወንትቀነይ ፡ ለከ ።  
(Guidi 1903a, 40, Guidi 1903b, 41.)

35 Guidi 1903a, 40, Guidi 1903b, 41.

36 Guidi 1903a, 40–41; Guidi 1903b, 41–42.

37 From 1680 to 1700, Ḥawarya Krəstos was the *ṣəḥafe tə‘əzaz*. Hence there was continuity in the person of the historiographer even if the religious policies conducted by the two kings were radically different. See Toubkis 2005, 137.

38 Guidi 1910, 81; Guidi 1912, 81.



the synods during which monks from the house of Ewostatewos were excluded. There is a certain irony in the fact that, at the beginning of the synod in Gondär in 1685, the king swore upon ‘the book of *Abunä Tāklä Haymanot*’ that he would remain impartial when judging matters of faith.<sup>39</sup> The issue was clearly put: anybody refusing the unionist doctrine of Däbrä Libanos and refusing to submit to the king’s authority would be punished.<sup>40</sup>

At this time, *Däğğazmač* Wäle and *Ṭäbdän Dəngəl* rose up against the king. Wäle, old at the time but probably rich, was a *Mäčča Oromo*.<sup>41</sup> His companions in revolt were the abbots of Gong and of Enäčelalo, whom we can identify as *Ṭäbdän* and *Qozmos*. Six months later, *Ṭäbdän*, Wäle, and their followers were accused of having proclaimed another king and of having appointed all major dignitaries: *əččäge*, *‘aqqabe sä’at*, *bitwäddäd*, *blatten geta*, *grazmač* and *qāññazmač*, *fitawrari*, *šəḥafe tə’əzaz*, *nəgaš* of Goğğam, *šəḥafe lam* of Damot, and so on. Whether true or not, this accusation—one of the most serious under the pen of the official historiographer—exposes the political dimension of this crisis. They were also accused of invading and taking over Goğğam.<sup>42</sup> In the month of *Ḥədar* 1686, the southern part of Goğğam was a battleground where *Ṭäbdän* and Wäle were allied with the powerful *G<sup>w</sup>udru* and *Ġawi*. According to the *Chronicle of Iyasu I*, the royal armies were victorious. Nonetheless, the king stayed in south Goğğam until the month of *Ḥamle* during the rainy season. After his departure, he left behind forces to keep the country under control.<sup>43</sup>

In *Mäggabit*, *Ṭäbdän*, along with his followers and, somewhat later, Wäle, were summoned to the royal camp by envoys bearing the seals of the king and the metropolitan. The king’s strategy was to negotiate. The *G<sup>w</sup>udru* and *Ġawi* were awarded their original possessions so that they returned in peace to their lands.<sup>44</sup> *Ṭäbdän*, *Qozmos*, and their followers were summoned to surrender to Orthodoxy, and their goods remained confiscated.<sup>45</sup> They were asked to come back from the land of the Oromo, on the other side of the Ab-

39 Guidi 1910, 90; Guidi 1912, 91.

40 Guidi 1912, 98.

41 ‘Wale of the race of the *Mäčča* revolted and entered the land of the Galla, in his old age abandoning his Christian name, since pride had excited him because of the many fiefs (*g<sup>w</sup>əlt*) he owned’ (Guidi 1912, 99).

42 Guidi 1910, 101; Guidi 1912, 104.

43 Guidi added twice ‘in Gondär’ (Guidi 1912, 105, 108) to make it clear that the king was in Gondär. He translated ‘*kätäma*’ as ‘town’, but *kätäma* could also refer to the royal camp. I tend to think that the king was in his camp in southern Goğğam.

44 ወሜጠ፡ ሎሙ፡ ኩሎ፡ ዘነበረ፡ ውስተ፡ እዴሆሙ፡ ወአሰርገወ፡ ኩሎ፡ ነገደ፡ ጉድጉ፡ ወጃዊ፡ እለ፡ መጽኡ፡ ምስሌሆሙ፡ ወአስተፋነዎሙ፡ በሰላም፡ ብሔሮሙ። (Guidi 1910, 104; Guidi 1912, 107).

45 Guidi 1910, 107; Guidi 1912, 110.

bay. After Easter, the king went to Däbrä Şəmmuna, a nearby *Qəbat* monastery. This visit, though secret, created a stir in the royal camp and among the people of Goṅṅam.

What the *Chronicle of Iyasu I* describes is more than a religious quarrel: it is a civil war. Several conflicts set the various factions against each other. The main issue might have been the redistribution of charges, benefices, and land rights under Iyasu's new policy in favour of the Däbrä Libanos house. The chronicle clearly states that the Däbrä Libanos clergy refused to share land rights with 'their brothers'.<sup>46</sup> The 'house of *Abba* Ewostəwos'—represented by *Abba* Ṭəbdän, *Abba* Şəltənə Krəstos, Sawriros (*sic*) and *Abba* Atnəwos—claimed that nothing other than theological dogma and the faith were reasons for the conflict. The *Qəbat* party was reacting against the scale of their spoliation.

At the beginning of 1687, Ṭəbdän and his followers appear before the king in Gondär. The accusation against them was odd: they were charged with the excommunication of Akalä Krəstos of Goṅṅ and Zä'iyəsus (the revered *Qəbat* leader) during the last synod in Yoḥannəs' reign, in 1682. This tricky paragraph is not easy to understand.<sup>47</sup> Does it mean that, in 1682, when the Däbrä Libanos unionist views won over the synod, Ṭəbdän and Qozmos chose to ally with their former adversaries rather than support Zä'iyəsus and Akalä Krəstos? The 1682 synod would thus have led to a schism within the *Qəbat* movement. Indeed, during a synod in 1684 and contrary to other monks, the monks from Gaṣge requested the liberation of Zä'iyəsus. In 1687, Ṭəbdän and Qozmos declared that they had not attended the 1682 synod, as if they wanted to deny their implication in an internal quarrel. A few months later, at the end of Gənbət 1687, the last synod on this issue was held. Once again, a schism was reported between Ṭəbdän, Qozmos and their followers. A few days later, the highest authorities of the Däbrä Libanos network judged the *Qəbat* monks in Gondär. They excommunicated and banished them.<sup>48</sup> The royal chronicles provide no further explanation about these disputes.

Given the lengthy treatment of this event in the *Chronicle of Iyasu I*, we can conclude that this rebellion represented a serious threat to king and kingdom. Ṭəbdän from Goṅṅ was targeted as the arch-enemy during the first five years of the reign of Iyasu I. After his excommunication and banishment, the surviving monastic community had to come to terms with his inglorious fate. If the accusation were true that Ṭəbdän was responsible for

46 Guidi 1910, 82; Guidi 1912, 82.

47 Guidi 1910, 111–112; Guidi 1912, 115.

48 Guidi 1910, 122; Guidi 1912, 126.

the excommunication of Akalä Krəstos of Gongǧ, it would mean that there was strong dissension inside Gongǧ monastery.

Soon after the tragic death of Iyasu I in 1706, most probably at the hands of the Lasta-Təgray *karra* sect,<sup>49</sup> the *Qəbat* movement and the house of Ewostəwos were in favour with King Tewoflos (r 1708–1711). Monks from Gongǧ received their share of lands and charges in Ḥamärä Noh, a newly founded royal church.<sup>50</sup> Gongǧ monastery did not vanish after the turmoil of 1687; it was still part of the Ewostətean network. But never again would it assume leadership of the *Qəbat* movement, at least not during synods. The *Qəbat* party was no longer headed by monks from Gongǧ: it would be led henceforth by Däbrä Şəmmuna.

Gongǧ lost its leadership of the *Qəbat* movement and eradicated the memory of Ṭəbdän. Nothing remains today of this man whom history has labelled as a rebel.<sup>51</sup> Nothing? Perhaps not. Let us take a second step back in time.

### Claiming the Body of *Abunä* Krəstodolu (d.1676/1677): A Warranty of Orthodoxy since the Time of Ṭəbdän

*Abunä* Krəstodolu's grave is located in Gongǧ church, in the northern part of the *qəddəst*. It is said to perform miracles and have healing power.<sup>52</sup> To the best of our knowledge, it is very unusual for a church in Ethiopia to venerate the grave of a Coptic bishop. According to the oral tradition, when Krəstodolu felt his death approaching, he asked to be carried to Gongǧ to be buried there, 'where praising God will not cease until the coming of Christ'.<sup>53</sup> Night was falling when he made his request; dawn paused between day and night, suspending time, and he travelled from Sarka to Gongǧ where he died.

In a short note, *Ato* Kasahun, a lay scholar from Gongǧ, wrote an interesting presentation of the oral account:

**ከ309 ጀምሮ እስከ 1943 ዓ ፡ም በዚቁጥር 73 ከ110 ወጳጳሣት [sic] ውሥጥ ክርስቶስደሉ 1ኛ ጀንበርን ገዛተው ከሚጫ ሣርካ ግንብ እሥክ ምፅዕት መጨረሻ ድረሥ ሥብሀተ እግዚአብሔር የማይቋረጥበት ጐንጅ ወሥዳችሁ ቅበሩኝ ብለ**

49 Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013.

50 Guidi 1906.

51 In Däbrä Wäraq, Ṭəbdän was celebrated as a martyr, according to Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie. However, I do not have access to the text reconstructing the history of Ṭəbdän as a martyr. It is far too late at this stage of writing to introduce a new source.

52 See the list of the miraculous objects of Gongǧ in its *Fəṭha nəgäšt*. According to this list, Krəstodolu's grave was marked with a golden cross; it is marked nowadays by a step.

53 Interviews in 2004 with the clergy of Gongǧ.

ው ተቀበረው [sic] መቃብራቸው የሚገኝ ሲሆንና መቃብራቸውም ታደረ ህፃናት በሚያማቸውና በሚያለቅሡ ጊዜ ከመቃብራቸው ላይ ቁሡ /ዲያቆኑ/ ወስዶ ሲያንከባልላቸው መፈውሥ ሆኖ ማዳኑን የሚያረጋግጥ ይሆናል ፡

(Among the 110 bishops [appointed] between 309 and 1943 of the Era of Mercy, the 73<sup>rd</sup> [was] Krastodolu the First. ‘The sun [will stop]’.<sup>54</sup> He uttered this excommunication from Mečča Sarka *gamb*. The celebration of God will be done in Gong without interruption until the coming of Christ, and he said that he should be buried there. Therefore, his grave is here. If children are sick or do not stop crying, priests and deacons take them to the grave; and when they touch it, they are cured.)

The Coptic bishop *Abunä* Krastodolu arrived in Ethiopia in the thirty-second year of the reign of *Aṣe* Fasilädäs.<sup>55</sup> As a bishop, he took part in three synods: in 1666/1667, during the last year of Fasilädäs’s reign; in 1669 during the reign of King Yoḥannäs, when the decision was made to expel the last Portuguese Catholics; and in 1670. Soon afterwards, *Aṣe* Yoḥannäs put him in jail in an attempt to have him replaced, as is clearly stated in the *forma vulgata* of the *Short Chronicles*.<sup>56</sup> The *Chronicle of Yoḥannäs* prudently presents this event without mentioning the imprisonment: on 15 October 1671, a letter from Patriarch Matewos was read to announce the consecration of a new metropolitan, Sinoda, just before his arrival in Gondär two days later. In the same letter however, the patriarch confirmed Krastodolu as metropolitan.<sup>57</sup> A version of the *Short Chronicles* derived from notes states that Krastodolu died in 1676/77.<sup>58</sup> The reasons for the imprisonment are unknown. Did the Ethiopian clergy and/or the metropolitan disapprove of the king’s marriage with Säblä Wängel? In any case, the first decision put to Krastodolu’s successor, *Abunä* Sinoda, was to recognize this marriage.

Gong’s oral tradition has retained the information that Krastodolu died in Sarka, without explaining why he would have been there. Sarka had been built during the Jesuit period, in 1624–1625, on order of *Ras* Sə‘älä Krastos, governor of the province and brother of the king. A church and a big residence were built of stone and mortar.<sup>59</sup> The building had a large under-

54 Very likely an allusion to Josh. 10:12, when Joshua asked God to make the sun and moon stand still.

55 Basset 1882, 291; Béguinot 1901, 3; Dombrowski 1983, 204.

56 Basset 1882, 292; Perruchon 1899, 173; Béguinot 1901, 54; Dombrowski 1983, 207.

57 Guidi 1903a, 14; Guidi 1903b, 13.

58 Ms Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (= BnF), Éthiopien d’Abbadie 136 in Kropp 1990, 107. Born in 1688, the author of these notes was writing one generation after the events.

59 See the photos in Anfray 1980–1981.

ground basement, which served as a prison.<sup>60</sup> *Abunä* Yoḥannēs, a Coptic bishop called to Ethiopia in 1649 by *Abeto* Gälawdewos, the brother of King Fasilädäs, was imprisoned there.<sup>61</sup> Sarka was the main prison for religious opponents till the first part of the eighteenth century. Zä'iyäsus was jailed there during the reign of Iyasu I.<sup>62</sup> Since the written sources do not state that Krästodolu was detained in Sarka, the oral tradition apparently draws on sources other than the official ones we know of. Since most of the king's religious opponents were imprisoned in Sarka, this mention in the oral tradition is significant.

How long has Krästodolu's grave been said to be in Gongǵ? In 1686, ten years after Krästodolu's death and at the peak of Ṭäbdän's rebellion, the inhabitants of Däbrä Wärq, another powerful *Qəbat* town and church in Goḡḡam, threw stones at the metropolitan Sinoda, who, willingly or not, was backing King Iyasu's religious policy. Even after Ṭäbdän's excommunication, *Qəbat* supporters and the people of Goḡḡam were resisting royal authority. In 1692, they asked to be judged by the king instead of Sinoda, a clear manifestation of their denial of the authority of the Coptic bishop.<sup>63</sup> Laying claim to the body and religious authority of the dead metropolitan, Krästodolu (who had been arbitrarily dismissed and replaced with Sinoda), amounted to an attempt to legitimate Gongǵ and the *Qəbat* movement during this period of controversy. Recognizing the legitimacy of the previous metropolitan would have served to deny the legitimacy of the new one; and it could have signalled an attempt to create an autonomous 'state', the *Chronicle of Iyasu I's* accusation against Ṭäbdän and Wäle. Laying claim to *Abunä* Krästodolu's grave could have been part of the strategy of Ṭäbdän and Wäle to legitimate an autonomous, Orthodox power. And that is all that has been passed down in Gongǵ's memory of this historical moment.

## Conclusion

Oral history forges stories and portrays characters in ways that obstruct the exposal of the 'historical truth'. What has been lost is the memory of Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, the abbot of Gongǵ who sowed dissension within the *Qəbat* movement, opposed his own monks, and led an uprising against the king. Since new narrative strands are often sewn into familiar mythological or biblical patterns, they cannot be accepted outright as history, not even by their narrators. They are symbolically sealed, however, owing to their social function.

60 See Fernández 2013.

61 Basset 1882, 288; Béguinot 1901, 51; Perruchon 1898, 88. For an analysis of this other act of rebellion against royal authority, see Wion 2012, 234–235.

62 Guidi 1903a, 82; Guidi 1903b, 82.

63 Guidi 1903a, 155; Guidi 1903b, 163.

Might oral history not be the only way to preserve the memory of violent events that were not allowed to be narrated as such? The 'late' invention of Gərma Šəllus as founding father of Gong is clear evidence that the story has been contrived. This story is still told today; everyone knows that there used to be a church up on the cliff where the tree named after *Abba* Ləbsä Krəstos now stands. This local memory of past events is not afflicted with total amnesia. The story of Gərma Šəllus, a secondary character, fails to cover a hole in the history of the monastery, a past that could not be put into words and had to be forgotten.

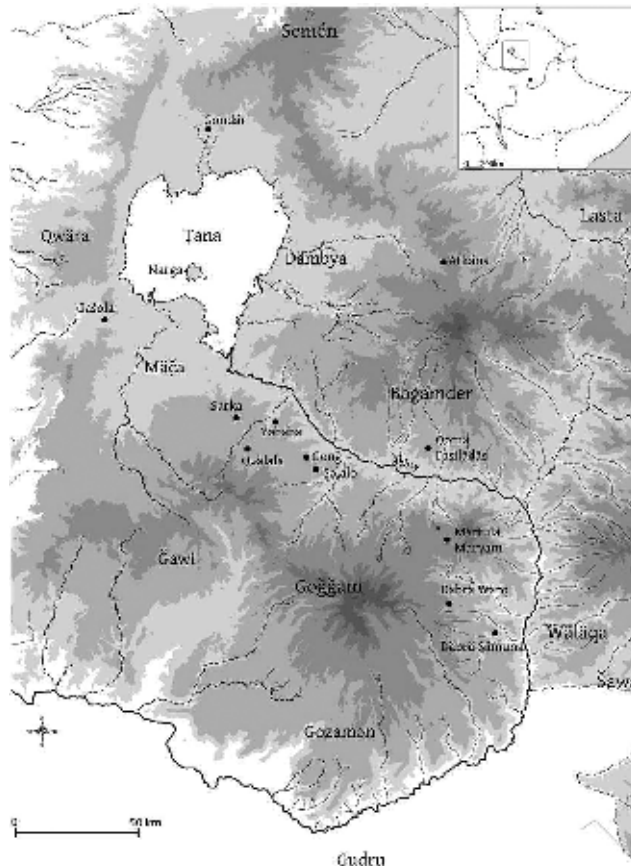


Fig. 3 Some elements of the Ewostatean network during the Gondärrine period. Base maps: 1/250,000 maps of the Ethiopian Mapping Agency. Conception and realization: Anne Bolay and Anaïs Wion.

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# Between Oral and Written Tradition: A Vision of the State during the Times of Ḥaylā Šəllase I\*

HANNA RUBINKOWSKA-ANIOŁ

## Abstract

Over the centuries, Ethiopians in the Christian highlands have lived in a setting in which the transfer of information had a dual basis: oral and written. As in Europe, the introduction of print and the subsequent growth of publications (which in Ethiopia took place primarily in the 1920s and 1930s) elevated the importance and the cultural impact of the written word. Such changes can be traced in such significant publications as *Zəkrä nəgär*, in which oral sources were transcribed and edited, hence turning oral into written material. The aim of this paper is to analyse the impact of this dual tradition on the representation of the Ethiopian state, its history, and its ruler, Ḥaylā Šəllase I, in selected official publications between 1942 and 1974. The books which constitute the source material include the works of Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl, Kəbbädä Təsämma, Täklä Šadəq Māk<sup>w</sup>əriya, as well as some propaganda booklets edited by the office of the *šəḥafe təʾəzaz* (the minister of the pen, i.e. the ministry of information).

## Introduction

Three categories of Ethiopian literature from the period of Ḥaylā Šəllase can be identified: written Ethiopian tradition, oral Ethiopian tradition, and modern (in other words, European or Western) influences. Over the centuries, the parallel development of the first two of these elements, namely written and oral Ethiopian tradition, has made it difficult to separate the two elements in any given source.<sup>1</sup>

\* I would like to thank Dr. Ewa Wołk-Sore for her views on this topic and for her help in translating Ethiopian texts.

1 This is true not only in the case of attempts to discern oral influences within a written source. Oral tradition is strongly influenced by what has already been written down. The most important written texts which influence oral tradition would be the Bible, the lives of the saints (*Sənkəssar*), the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* (the legend of Queen of Sheba, Solomon and their son, Mənilək I) or the royal chronicles. Over the centuries, biblical, mythological as well as historical stories written down in the above mentioned literature were retold on different occasions and in different forms. For instance, the

Ethiopian Judeo-Christian culture is in many aspects unique. It developed under the influences of many—often distant—cultures and civilizations. This general feature applies also to questions of orality and writing in Ethiopia. The works of such renowned scholars as Ruth Finnegan or Jan Vansina, which concentrate on other African—entirely oral—cultures, do not fully apply to Christian Ethiopian culture, where a well-developed native written tradition was, and still is, of equal importance. Therefore, in the case of Ethiopia, the issue discussed here applies to the reception of both oral and written culture. This problem—with regards to different cultures—has attracted the attention of many scholars. Walter Ong and Eric A. Havelock are among the most renowned,<sup>2</sup> and even though their works and thoughts do not relate to African cultures, much of their output can be applied to this study's main subject. All the more so as the Christian Ethiopian pattern resembles the situation in ancient Greece, as analysed by Eric A. Havelock. In the case of Greece, orality died out, giving ground to written culture. However, the two coexisted over the course of several centuries and this constitutes the common base for the Greek and Ethiopian patterns. In Ethiopia during the time of Ḥaylā Šəllase, oral literature was very much alive, be it retold by *azmaris* on an everyday basis, or present in the art of *qəne* poetry. At that time its role was still important for Ethiopian culture and as a medium of transferring historical knowledge, while at the same time written literature was developing very fast.<sup>3</sup>

Another pattern, which seems closer to the Ethiopian situation, is that of medieval Japan, which Judith Fröhlich discusses, noting the inherent blending of orality and literacy.<sup>4</sup> She claims that in Japan 'the dissemination and reception of written texts occurred primarily through speaking and hearing'.<sup>5</sup> This feature can, to a large extent, still be applied to Ethiopia. The issue of the intermingling of oral and written culture seems to be fairly straightforward when discussing the dissemination of religious works and the diffusion of knowledge in church circles, but the more pertinent question seems to be how it functioned in secular twentieth-century literature dealing with the state.

In the Ethiopian highlands, culture was, and still is, based on the interplay of endemic oral and written forms. This has functioned for many cen-

*azmari*'s production mentioned historical stories, while *qəne* oral poetry used biblical subjects and other such texts for 'wax and gold' constructions.

2 Ong 1982; Havelock 1963; Havelock 1986.

3 On the development of Amharic literature see Kane 1975.

4 Fröhlich 2007.

5 Fröhlich 2007, 15.

turies and continues to do so. Contrary to the Greek or Japanese patterns, oral literature continues to play an enormously important role. From the scholarly perspective, this has resulted in a lack of a readily applicable methodology, while it also raises many questions that have so far remained unanswered.

The aim of this contribution is to analyse how, between 1942 and 1974, official publications presented the Ethiopian state, its history, and its ruler, Ḥaylā Šəllase I, and to what extent such representation reflects the dual tradition both of oral and written forms. This will be examined within the context of power and of the part which literature played in the political system. Particularly, the focus will be on determining literature as a tool of power, and the patterns of orality and writing in it. The purpose is to raise certain questions with the hope that they will prove helpful for further investigations into oral culture within the long and well-established written tradition of Christian Ethiopia.

The sources researched for the purpose of this study, which are a fair representation of literature dealing with the Ethiopian state and its history during Ḥaylā Šəllase's reign are the following: Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqaḷ, **ዝክረ ፡ ነገር** (*Zəkrä nāgär*); Kābbädä Täsämma, **የታሪክ ፡ ማስታወሻ** (*Yätarik mastawäša*); Täklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya, **የኢትዮጵያ ፡ ታሪክ** (*Yä'ityopya tarik*), Volume IV;<sup>6</sup> as well as some propaganda booklets edited by the office of *šəḥafe tə'əzaz* and texts by Yared Gäbrä Mika'el. The books of Maḥtämä Šəllase and Kābbädä Täsämma were written with the primary aim of saving those aspects of Ethiopian culture which were most valued by the authors, but also which were vanishing in the processes of change in the contemporary world. Both *Zəkrä nāgär* and *Yätarik mastawäša* are the authors' recollections as well as an attempt (in the case of Maḥtämä Šəllase) to collect information about different forms of Ethiopian culture, including oral literature.<sup>7</sup>

Täklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya was a historian who took on the enormous task of writing Ethiopian history from the Aksumite period to contemporary times. To do so, he also collected and wrote down oral tradition and oral literature which he treated as source material. The works of Yared Gäbrä Mika'el fit into the tradition of Ethiopian chronicles as Yared registered events from lives of the royal family. Along with other authors of propaganda booklets, Wäldä Giyorgis Wäldä Yoḥannəs among them, Yared glori-

6 Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqaḷ 1949/1950; Kābbädä Täsämma 1969/1970; Täklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya 1954/1955.

7 On the status of *Zəkrä nāgär* and other works as collections of Ethiopian oral literature by Ethiopian authors in the period under discussion, see Getie Gelaye 2005.

fied the Emperor and his work,<sup>8</sup> using the Ethiopian traditional praise songs and poems.<sup>9</sup>

The material can be analysed on two levels: (1) the construction of the publications, and (2) the language used to convey the message. In this contribution, I will concentrate on the construction of the publications without conducting an analysis of the language used by the authors, though it should be noted that such a linguistic analysis should follow as the next stage of research.<sup>10</sup> Havelock, who develops Marshall McLuhan's idea 'the medium is the message',<sup>11</sup> suggests that the means of expressing one's thoughts (whether in oral, written, or printed form) influence the thought itself.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the reasons why it is important to conduct a very thorough analysis of the technical manner through which Ethiopian historians introduced their ideas. It is not only the written form, rather, the fact that a text was printed as well as the way in which the information, thoughts and ideas were conveyed, are of equal importance. Therefore, it is obvious that the design of the book and the methods of incorporating photographs or sketches convey information which should not be neglected.

Among the questions which arise, three seem to be of the highest importance for this contribution: (1) the first asks whether the literature of the period can be understood as having been created on the border between oral and written culture; (2) the second concerns the possibility of tracing the signs of oral literature within the written material of chosen publications; (3) and finally, there is the question of whether this feature of blending both oral and written forms has been used as a tool of power.

### Literature on the Border between Oral and Written Culture

The introduction of print during the time of Ḥaylā Šəllase (including his regency, i.e. 1916–1974) undoubtedly changed Ethiopian literature and—in a broader context—Ethiopian culture. The fifty-eight years of the direct impact of *Ras Täfäri/Ḥaylā Šəllase* on social life, culture, and literature, pushed Ethiopia towards literacy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, written culture in Ethiopia was already well-established and could pride itself on a tradition which was over two thousand years old, though it was

8 Yared Gäbrä Mikaʿel 1957/1958.

9 On the praise songs or 'royal songs' see Mantel-Niećko 1985, 304–306.

10 While preparing this contribution, the outcome of further research in this direction has been published as Rubinkowska-Anioł and Wołk-Sore 2014.

11 McLuhan 1964, 2–18.

12 Havelock 1986.

not without its limitations. The introduction of new types of literature (e.g. new genres such as novels and dramas) played a major role in establishing modern Ethiopian culture based to a larger extent on the written word.

For the sake of this study, I assume that Ethiopian culture during Ḥaylā Šəllase's time was (and still is today) to a large extent oral. The traditional system of education performed in the *qəne bet* (a stage in traditional church education in which the oral performance of hymns and religious recitation is practised and learned), memorizing (not analysing), as well as the limited access to the written word, all seem to justify such an assumption.

Taking the above into consideration, Ethiopian culture seems to straddle the border between the oral and the written. It can be argued that this feature may be perceived as a consequence of Ethiopian cultural history in the *longue durée*, but that it may also be studied as an innovation introduced by the development of print and Western-style education; hence the growing number of books circulating among Ethiopians and the changes in how information was transferred. The reign of Ḥaylā Šəllase was also marked by another change. During his time, the use of the written word attained a much wider range and was no longer the preserve of church scholars and the aristocracy. The new elite, sometimes called the 'Young Ethiopians',<sup>13</sup> was meant to serve as the foundation for a new modern society, as designed and shaped by Ḥaylā Šəllase.<sup>14</sup> The literature of the period was created by people who originated from this new segment of society, and it was this same group which constituted the target of this literature. In relation to the issue of orality and writing, it should be noted that most of these people were educated within two parallel systems: (1) the traditional Ethiopian church education based on oral idioms and repetition, and (2) the Western-style modern education based on writing. This essential feature of the group obviously resulted in a specific attitude towards literature: the written material they created was marked by orality, and, simultaneously, the message which the group was to receive was influenced by orality so as to be better understood, bring better results, or be more effective.

In the following, we look at some features to support the premise that the literature of the period was based on both oral and written components.

Vansina suggests that 'the expression "oral tradition" applies both to a process and to its products. The products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old'.<sup>15</sup> In the case of a number of

13 An intellectual movement recalling the 'Young Turks' or the 'Young Egyptians', some decades earlier.

14 On the first Ethiopian intellectuals in the Western sense and different aspects of the development of modern education and literature, cf. Bahru Zewde 2005.

15 Vansina 1997, 3.

books from Ḥaylā Šəllase's period, we are undoubtedly dealing with products of such processes—they are directly mentioned in some of the books: *Zəkrä nägär* by Maḥtämä Šəllase or *Yätarik mastawäša* by Käbbädä Täsämma among others. As mentioned earlier, the authors wrote with the idea of retaining the memory of a vanishing Ethiopia. They realised that knowledge about history, which used to be transferred orally, needs new media so that information reaches future generations. In the case of *Zəkrä nägär*, as well as in some other works of Maḥtämä Šəllase, different kinds of oral tradition were collected. Examples of *qəne* poetry in Amharic were published as *Amarəñña qəne*,<sup>16</sup> and the study of horse-names or 'noms de guerre' was published in the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* as '፳ : በለው : (Če bäläw; A Study of the Ethiopian Culture of Horse-Names)'.<sup>17</sup> In *Zəkrä nägär* and Təklä Šadəq's *Yä'ityopya tarik* one can find poems of a different kind. But these examples of oral literature, collected and written down by the authors discussed here, constitute only a part of the written–oral relation in the publications mentioned. Another aspect of the relation between the two is that the topics they discussed and the stories (and history) they wrote down were transferred from the oral to the written form. Their works were submerged in orality, both because of the content (often transferred orally through more than one generation, as Vansina argues)<sup>18</sup> and because of the manner of expressing thoughts and providing information.

Both Käbbädä Täsämma and Maḥtämä Šəllase offered reasons for taking on the task of writing the books. Maḥtämä Šəllase writes, 'If [...] what has been gone is forgotten, not gathered and arranged, and if we proceed basing on contemporary things only, then, with no common ground which explains, we would face disintegrality and dispersion.'<sup>19</sup> Käbbädä Täsämma explains in his book,

[w]hen I began to write this history, I did not think to share the secrets of the court and the court administration, but to pass on the lessons that can be derived from them. All the guarded secrets with the passage of time become history. In writing this book, I had in mind giving expression to the difficulties power meets upon its path.<sup>20</sup>

16 Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqał 1955/1956.

17 Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqał 1969.

18 Vansina 1997, 13.

19 Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqał 1949/1950, 7.

20 Käbbädä Täsämma 1969/1970, 11–12.



Both excerpts show that the authors were fully conscious of the meaning of historical testimonies and of the processes the documents (oral or written) undergo.

The authors wrote about what they experienced during their lives,<sup>21</sup> but they also referred to traditions older than one generation and here they met Vansina's postulate. Vansina states that the process continues 'until the disappearance of the message',<sup>22</sup> and, as explained above, this is exactly where the oral message and the message found in the books under discussion meet: the books were written (among other aims) so that the message would not disappear but, instead, be conveyed further in the (modern and more solid) form of writing. Hence, we are dealing with literary works based on oral tradition.

From another perspective, certain details also indicate that traces of orality are to be found in the sources in question. Following Malinowski's suggestion,<sup>23</sup> Ong developed the idea that 'among "primitive" (oral) peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought'. Ong goes on to state that 'oral peoples [...] consider words to have great power'.<sup>24</sup> This belief in the power of words is represented in the sources taken into consideration here. Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl's point of view can serve as an example. He writes in *Zəkrä nəgär*, 'I am quoting here different kinds of poems for the reader, filled with patriotism; hence they served as a weapon in the times of war. This is the reason why I am presenting them here, in the chapter about war.'<sup>25</sup>

Maḥtämä Šəllase's attitude illustrates the author's perception of poems and the words they contain, by presenting them as a 'weapon'. This lets us assume that Maḥtämä Šəllase believed words to be tools enabling action if not the act itself.

Another question connected to the chosen sources, which may help to set certain boundaries, is concerned with the issue of whether these literary works can function without their relation to orality. Can they be fully understood if the readers limit themselves to the script itself? A very important hint which may help to answer this question is found within the texts themselves, namely the use of photographs, sketches, and tables. Thus, a reader is not left to decipher the message only on the basis of the written

21 The obvious exception would be the work of Təklä Šadəq; nevertheless the personal experience and memories also partially apply to this part of the book in which the author presents the events of the time he witnessed.

22 Vansina 1997, 3.

23 Malinowski 1923, 451, 470–81.

24 Ong 1982, 32.

25 Translation by the author from Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1949/1950, 293.

text, but instead is assisted by a set of means that convey a message alongside the written word. Writing about medieval Japan, Fröhlich claims that ‘the increased use of illustrations [...] is testimony to the importance of signs rather than words within cultures of performance’.<sup>26</sup>

In relation to Ethiopian culture, it is difficult to imagine material which could better refer to the message transmitted through means other than the written text itself (i.e. the books and booklets analysed here). Indeed, there is a huge amount of iconography illustrating Ethiopian books, and it carries a very special message. This is yet another indication that we should seek signs of an orally-oriented culture within these publications. Also the manner of arranging information is in accordance with what is more easily perceivable by a society which is not yet fully literate. Tables and columns make it easier to follow the information, while also reducing the necessity of reading the script. As in the case of iconography, the material is very rich in such forms of presenting information. In *Zəkrä nägär*, we find a vast amount of different information collected in the form of tables. The reason why this specific form was used might well be explained by the special subject of this particular book: it constitutes a collection of sources, hence it was convenient to introduce relevant information in this manner, for example information concerning the different kinds of taxes, the rules regarding land tenure, royal banquets (*gəbər*), or lists such as the one of the telephone lines in Ethiopia, and so on. However, such an approach to the presentation of information can also be connected to the issue of its reception in a society strongly influenced by oral culture. An argument which would support this last assumption is the existence of many other examples of this same manner of arranging information. Täklä Şadəq often uses lists and points when describing an event, for instance a list of soldiers or a list of those who died in a particular battle.<sup>27</sup> The subtitle ‘Läməsale’ (‘for example’) marks parts of the text where arguments are listed, one after the other, arranged by bullet points.<sup>28</sup>

A further feature sees orality and writing in the service of historiography. By the twentieth century, Ethiopian historiography had experienced centuries of development. However, the changes which occurred were huge and can be compared to the transformation experienced by the Greeks as reflected in the works of Herodotus. His input to European historiography and his attempt to write down history by making use of information transferred orally can be seen as having a strong resemblance to the situation in twentieth-century

26 Fröhlich 2007, 36.

27 See Täklä Şadəq Mäkwəriya 1954/1955, 307–309 and *ibid.*, 273–275 respectively.

28 *Ibid.*, 203–204.

Ethiopia. Among Ethiopian works, *Zəkrä nägär* by Maḥtämä Šəllase seems to be the best comparison to Herodotus' works. There are a number of features common to the works of Herodotus and Maḥtämä Šəllase (e.g. the aims of their writings and formal features), but their similar attitude towards sources should be underlined. Both Maḥtämä Šəllase and Herodotus used oral texts alongside written documents and took various testimonies of the past into consideration, among which monuments serve as a good example. Both authors appreciated their value and included them in the body of sources they used of in their writing.<sup>29</sup>

Here, we must also consider those features which suggest the impact of literacy rather than that of orality. One such feature is the attribution of authorship to the works. Ruth Finnegan discusses the idea that oral tradition, as often suggested, is anonymous, and remains so even after being written down. Finnegan also stresses the fact that there is an element of anonymity in oral poetry.

In one sense it is an attractive possibility that there are elements of anonymity and communal participation in oral poetry. [...] the process of variability in oral poetry and the influence of the traditional conventions from which a poet selects means that in one sense many poets play a part in the composition of a piece of poetry, and not just one original composer on the model of written literature.<sup>30</sup>

This feature of anonymity can be applied to most traditional Ethiopian literature. However, in the case of the books published during Ḥaylä Šəllase's times, we observe a strong tendency towards literacy, and the 'communal' authorship discussed by Finnegan is turned into the words of a specific author. Not only did the authors of the books discussed here sign their works with their names, but they were important, influential, and respected personalities in Ethiopian society during Ḥaylä Šəllase's reign.

### Tracing Orality within Written Texts

The question of how to trace signs of oral literature within written material, and whether it is possible at all, was asked by Havelock in his analysis of Greek literature.<sup>31</sup> There, Havelock made an attempt to establish texts which 'speak', namely to find the first transcription of a previously oral form. Vansina proposes a chain of transmission in which 'the final informant communicates the final testimony in the chain to someone who records

29 Grabski 2006, 16.

30 Finnegan 1979, 201.

31 Havelock 1986.

it in writing'.<sup>32</sup> Taking Vansina's proposition into consideration, Havelock's approach should be understood as the last chapter in a chain of oral tradition, which ends in recording or writing down of oral tradition; thus the authors of the texts under analysis can be seen at the same time as 'the final informants' and 'the persons who record it in writing'. In the examples of the literature being researched here, there is little doubt that oral tradition was incorporated into the texts. In accordance with Vansina's understanding, rumours, myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, proverbs, and folk-songs may constitute oral tradition.<sup>33</sup> Havelock, on the other hand, suggests that poetry is an idiom used in oral communication to preserve meaning and produce 'storage language'.<sup>34</sup> A representative selection of such genres is to be found in the source material taken into consideration here. Within these examples, the most obvious are poems. There are some publications edited by the office of *ṣāḥafe tə'əzaz* which include poems praising Ḥaylā Šəllase. The book entitled *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, published at least twice, can serve as an example of this kind of publication.<sup>35</sup> Introducing poetry into publications of another type was a frequent practice. Täklä Šadəq incorporates pieces of poetry describing the times of Ḥaylā Šəllase, namely the time of the Italian invasion, and he supplements his prose with quotations of poems in a section devoted to Emperor Tewodros.<sup>36</sup> *Kəbrä lədāt* by Yared Gäbrä Mika'el is a further example of a whole text written in praise of the emperor and composed in the form of a poem.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most important differences between oral and written texts is the construction of the text. With regards to ancient Greek literature, Havelock suggests that oral idioms—created with oral performance in mind and mostly using the poetic form—cannot be fully reproduced in the written form. He argues that poetry itself had a different meaning in times of the prevalence of oral culture and remarks on the use of poetry in non-literate societies.

In the Greek situation, during the non-literate epoch, [...] the gulf between poetic and prosaic could not subsist to the degree it does with us. The whole memory of a people was poetized, and this exercised a

32 Vansina 2009, 21.

33 Ibid., 3–5.

34 Havelock 1986, 59.

35 Wäldä Giyorgis Wäldä Yoḥannəs 1945/1946.

36 Täklä Šadəq Mäkä'əriya 1954/1955, 28–29, 33–34, 39–40, 239, 252.

37 Yared Gäbrä Mika'el 1950/1951.

constant control over the ways in which they expressed themselves in casual speech.<sup>38</sup>

Judging from this statement, a society and culture consisting of both oral and written elements has a specific idiom of communication, which should not be difficult to trace. The assumption, that, during the period of Ḥaylā Šəllase, Ethiopian society was blending two types of communication, brings us to the core idea of oral expression in Ethiopia and thus to its idiomatic construction. One possibility would be to focus on analysing the term *sāmənna wärq* ('wax and gold'), rhetoric used traditionally in *qəne* poetry, which can be applied both to the way of thinking as well as to the means of expression within a text. The relevant question here is, should this be understood as the central idea of Ethiopian oral idiom preserved in both oral and written literature, and—consequently—as the common element found in both kinds of expression? If so, we should perhaps treat *sāmənna wärq* as a feature which suggests orality even when found in a written text, in other words, as a transcribed relic of orality.

The Ethiopian transformation from oral to written forms can be traced in the history of *‘awaḡ*, which were proclamations, edicts, or announcements, or, as Bairu Tafla puts it, they were a 'means of communication'.<sup>39</sup> He also introduces some important ideas concerning the way in which this institution developed from its oral form into written documents, as well as on the question of how much orality was preserved in the *‘awaḡ* created in the twentieth century and of how many features of the written form were introduced during that same period. When limiting ourselves to the examples of *‘awaḡ*, which were preserved by publishing them in printed form in twentieth-century literature, we encounter material which 'speaks', meaning the spoken word which has been written down. The widest range of *‘awaḡ* is to be found in *Zəkrä näḡär*, but there are numerous other examples of literature which quote such proclamations.<sup>40</sup> Täklä Šadəq, on the other hand, quotes the speeches delivered by Täfäri Mäkwännən on the occasion of the return of Emperor Tewodros's crown to Ethiopia from England in 1925.<sup>41</sup>

Other pieces of orality which seem to have been preserved in the books are short greetings reserved for the emperor published on the first pages of some of the books. They start with the exclamation '*Gərmawī hoy*', 'Your Imperial Majesty', which is a verbal manner of expression. They are found

38 Havelock 1963, 43.

39 Bairu Tafla 1984, 365.

40 Kābbädä Täsämma 1969/1970, 210.

41 Täklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya 1954/1955, 173–175.

in a significant number of texts,<sup>42</sup> and can be compared to another pattern of paying tribute to the emperor, namely the more ‘Western-like’ and more appropriate form for written texts—i.e. dedications, for example the one commemorating his speech delivered to the League of Nations in 1936.<sup>43</sup> Mənilək II’s chronicle by Gäbrä Šəllase (= Guèbrè Sellasié) can be regarded as a special case among the publications from the Ḥaylā Šəllase period.<sup>44</sup> The author of the chronicle had passed away over fifty years before the book came out in printed form in 1967/1968.<sup>45</sup> It was written in the period prior to the widespread use of print in Ethiopia, and not aiming at a wide readership.

Thus, it is all the more exemplary of a text constructed according to the literary rules from the pre-print period which was later edited and printed in the final years of Ḥaylā Šəllase’s reign, thus becoming accessible for the Emperor’s subjects. Gäbrä Šəllase’s text represents the phase prior to Ḥaylā Šəllase’s times, both in terms of the development of historiography, as well as in terms of the impact of orality on a written text. The early part of the text presents the history of Ethiopian monarchs, starting from the legend describing the journey made by the Queen of Sheba, Makədda, to visit King Solomon, and the life of their son, the first king of Ethiopia, Mənilək I. The history of the Ethiopian monarchs finishes with Mənilək II’s reign. The legend of the Queen of Sheba, an example of a traditional prelude to historical writing in Ethiopia, was transferred using both—orally but also written material—for long enough to be perceived as a traditional part of Ethiopian literature. To stress the importance of this legend for oral tradition, one should remember the popularity of the distribution of this story in iconographic form. Over the centuries, cartoon-like presentations of the legend have been traditionally copied, serving the function of ‘talking’ or ‘speaking pictures’, as described by Marek Prejs.<sup>46</sup> It seems that the traditional incorporation of the power-related legend, used over the centuries for legitimizing subsequent emperors’ rights to hold power, functions as a perfect example of both written and oral forms of Ethiopian Judeo-Christian culture.

42 Among others Kəbbädä Mika’el 1953/1954, 5; Yared Gäbrä Mika’el 1954/1955, [III].

43 Dawit Dägəfu 1945/1946, 2.

44 Guèbrè Sellasié 1930; 1931.

45 Gäbrä Šəllase 1967/1968.

46 Prejs 2009.

### Conclusion: The Conscious Use of Oral and Written Forms for Political Aims

The books published during Ḥaylā Śəllase's time were very strongly influenced by the Emperor. This was in part a consequence of his charisma and of his interest in the propagation of education, and in part due to the direct control he held over publications in Ethiopia. There is no doubt that the literature dealing with the state, its ruler, and its history created during Ḥaylā Śəllase's reign, and in fact any other kind of literature published in Ethiopia at that time, were controlled by the Emperor.<sup>47</sup> Thus, we may treat this literature as representing the imperial vision and conveying the very special message which Ḥaylā Śəllase sought to spread. As a consequence, the applied idioms of expressing this message were those which had been pre-approved by Ḥaylā Śəllase. The question remains as to the extent to which this was a natural consequence of a certain stage in the development of Ethiopian culture and/or the extent to which it was due to both the Emperor's and the authors' deliberate decisions.

It is obvious that, for Ḥaylā Śəllase, books and the written word were of huge importance. Over the centuries, written tradition in Ethiopia had been used by the two main powers in the country: by the Church and by secular power (if any power in imperial Ethiopia can be perceived as being fully secular). This fact is open to the interpretation that written texts—in fact the form itself—implied that information conveyed in this manner was of more significance. Simply because it had been written down, it was evocative of power. On the other hand, taking the example of *ʿawaḡ* into consideration, we cannot claim that orality did not have its own influence on issues of power and authority. Information transferred orally also played a certain role in the context of power. However, as has already been discussed, in the twentieth century the role of written communication increased, as did the role of words transmitted in printed form. Since the beginning of Ḥaylā Śəllase's participation in ruling the state, he had been interested in the publishing of books—for example, one can mention the first editorial and printing house he created in 1921, when he was still heir to the throne. The results of the growing influence of written culture in the twentieth century are easily observable: the number of books and newspapers published during Ḥaylā Śəllase's reign is proof enough of this fact. The growing number of schools which introduced the European model of education, as well as the increasing percentage of the population taking advantage of this model of education, are both the reason for and the result of this evolution. However, Ḥaylā Śəllase was also aware that a large percentage of his subjects were illiterate. Furthermore, among those who could read, oral culture remained

47 Bahru Zewde 2005, 193.

very influential and had an impact on their perception of the world. For this reason—in order to be effective—the Emperor was forced to deliver his message of power using the idioms of both oral and written culture.

The fact that the partially oral political culture of the Ethiopian empire and its tradition (as in *Zəkrä nägär* and *Yätarik mastawäša*) was written down suggests that the movement towards propagating power through the written word was strong. Nevertheless, the written word was not left to stand completely alone. It was supplemented with photographs; furthermore the manner in which the books were edited (as mentioned earlier in this paper) was intended to be user-friendly for readers who needed help. As a result, the message was more easily accessible to those who could not read fluently.

Another angle, from which we may analyse the issue, is the idea of the preservation of oral culture. Most of the literature discussed was written to preserve the history and culture of Ethiopia. Questions relating to the choice of what should and should not be preserved open the way to such discussion. The most obvious example of a piece of literature serving the purpose of the preservation of oral material is *Zəkrä nägär*, but this is not the only such case. *Yätarik mastawäša* or the chronicle-like works of Yared Gäbrä Mika'el, to name but a few examples, also serve to preserve selected information and ideas. The question which arises is whether one of the aims of the literature of Ḥaylā Šəllase's period could have been the preservation of selected material with a specific purpose: to preserve the image of the state, its history and its ruler according to how the Emperor wanted it to be remembered by his subjects and their heirs. This idea is in line with one of Havelock's reflections on any given society moving between orality and literacy and influenced by its rulers. He suggests that if some information, thoughts or ideas are written down, it is no longer possible to change or correct them, as it is possible in the case of oral tradition transmitted by witnesses.<sup>48</sup> Hence, such preservation of material, apart from its fundamental aim, helps to construct partial memory and vision of history.

Both a historical analysis of the situation in Ethiopia during the reign of Ḥaylā Šəllase I and a study of the literary sources from the period suggest that the authors of the discussed books made use of different means of delivering information. This was in accordance with the aim of the Emperor who wanted to create and propagate a very special message and deliver it to his subjects. The message aimed to prove his glory, power, as well as his undeniable right to rule over Ethiopia. Due to his readiness to go as far as

48 Havelock 1986.



he possibly could to achieve the highest effectiveness, the methods used were based on oral as well as written means of communication. Both the authors and the Emperor were of the opinion that both the oral and written components of Ethiopian culture were equally important; nevertheless this was probably more a result of intuition than a carefully constructed plan. Thus, it became an important component of the system of ruling the empire in the twentieth century.

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# The Life and Deeds of *Ras Wädaḡe*, Lord of Amhara from c.1720 to 1760: Edition of an Oral Account Recorded by Arnauld d'Abbadie in the 1840s

ÉLOI FICQUET

## Abstract

The text presented and edited in this contribution is a sample from the unedited field notes of the French traveller Arnauld d'Abbadie who was in Ethiopia from 1838 to 1848. As a high officer of the army of Goḡgam, he was immersed in the Ethiopian Christian society, and collected a significant amount of information on local history and legal issues from his own observations and from oral informants he interviewed. The ten pages of notes published here concern the life and deeds of *Ras Wädaḡe* of Amhara, presumably from the mouth of one of his descendants.

## Introduction

The collection and critical assessment of oral traditions have become essential methods in the study of Ethiopian history either to research unwritten local histories or to fill the gaps in, and to query the grey areas of, written accounts. There is considerable evidence that oral data were used both by indigenous chroniclers and foreign scholars before they were recorded and analysed systematically; however, only very few sources actually quote the original words of their oral informants to any great extent.

One of the earliest attempts, if not the first, to gather genuine Ethiopian oral traditions is found in the Amharic verses transcribed by the French explorer Antoine d'Abbadie in the 1840s. These texts, later edited by Berhanou Abbebe,<sup>1</sup> offer a glimpse into the popular narratives of history in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the same years, the German linguist Karl Tutschek recorded poems and folktales from Oromo freed slaves in *afaan Oromo* that were posthumously published.<sup>2</sup> Beside printed items, the recent publication by Francis Falceto of *azmari* songs recorded on disc by Täsämma Ǝṣäte in Berlin in 1910 is another invaluable testimony as to how folk songs

1 Berhanou Abbebe 1970; 1985; 1987.

2 Cf. 'Oromo oral literature', *E Ae*, IV (2010), 65b–69a (G. Banti); 'Tutschek, Karl', *E Ae*, IV (2010), 1008a–1009a (W. Smidt).

dealing with contemporary politics were performed musically in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

This potential list of early recorded Ethiopian oral traditions should also include the material collected by Arnauld Michel d'Abbadie, Antoine's brother, who also wrote down a considerable amount of information that was told to him in Amharic. The text presented and edited in this study is a sample of these field notes. It recounts the life and deeds of *Ras Wädaḡe*.<sup>4</sup> The latter started his political career in the last years of *Aṣe Bäkaffa* (r 1721–1730), then became the chief adviser to *Aṣe Iyasu II* (r 1730–1755) and his mother, the regent queen *Mäntəwwab*. Having held the highest offices in various regions, his power gradually declined under *Aṣe Iyo'as* (r 1755–1769) until his death in 1760. The fact that the events and figures recorded in this document date back to the mid-eighteenth century means that the time-depth of this text is exceptional among the records of African oral literature. Moreover, the pieces of information it provides can be compared with the royal chronicles of the kings *Iyasu II* and *Iyo'as* which were composed a hundred years earlier. This will allow us to consider the degree of accuracy of information preserved by oral transmission and highlighting the unique details that it carries concerning the ways of acting and thinking of historical figures.

### Arnauld d'Abbadie's Fieldwork Material

During the ten years of their stay in Ethiopia from 1838 to 1848, Antoine d'Abbadie (1810–1897) and his younger brother Arnauld Michel d'Abbadie (1815–1893) worked at collecting as much scholarly information as possible on the country and its peoples in all fields of knowledge, particularly geography, languages and history. While they undertook some explorations into areas unknown to Europeans, both preferred a research strategy of immersion into local societies, each according to his skills and interests. Most of the time, Arnauld did not accompany his brother as he stayed in the close circle of the great regional lords, who appreciated his capacities as a soldier and horseman. From a distance he contributed to the completion of his brother's research by providing information and manuscripts, and by making use of his relations with the authorities to secure Antoine's wanderings in the hazardous environment of the interregional conflicts of the late *Zämäna mäsaḡant* period. However, Arnauld was not only an adventurer, looking for the epic life of a mercenary soldier, as he is usually depicted. His travel accounts give an insight

3 Täsämma ፳፭፻፲፬ 2010.

4 Izarn described it as an 'historical text dealing with the reigns of Fasil and Susənyos until the reign of Iyasu, successor of Bäkaffa' (Izarn 1969, 158; my translation).

into his deep knowledge of highland Christian Ethiopian (Ḥabäša) society, particularly on political, military, and legal issues.

Arnauld published the first volume of his travel account in 1868, the year of the British expedition to Mäqdäla that caught the interest of the public in Ethiopian matters.<sup>5</sup> The following volumes had already been dictated to a secretary and proofread, but were abandoned by the author for lack of funds or lack of will. Meanwhile, Antoine d'Abbadie, with whom Arnauld had quarrelled over familial matters, published several works based on the material he had collected in Ethiopia and thereby became a leading scholarly figure of his time. The draft versions of the unpublished volumes of Arnauld's travel account were found in his papers,<sup>6</sup> most of which had been deposited at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in Rome, while a few were deposited in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. After their identification and the publication of some 'fragments' by Joseph Tubiana,<sup>7</sup> the first overview of these documents was presented by Roger Izarn at the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abäba in 1966.<sup>8</sup> Jeanne-Marie Allier completed the edition of the remaining volumes of the travel account that were published in the collection *Studi e Testi* of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, a considerable amount of raw field notes which contains important ethno-historical information remains in the Vatican collection.<sup>10</sup> The fact that these notes are written in a rough hand mixed with Amharic sentences in a personal Latin transcription has probably been a major hindrance in undertaking a thorough study.<sup>11</sup> This is the challenge this paper wants to address by editing an extract from one of the notebooks of Arnauld, in anticipation of the complete edition of his papers.

### An Oral Source, Probably from a Family Narrative

The handwritten text edited here covers ten pages of a notebook with a total of 151 pages. In his report on Arnauld's papers, Izarn described this document as 'One of the most modest apparently, but one of the richest of all this collec-

5 D'Abbadie 1868. This first volume was reprinted in 1980, with a preface by J. Tubiana.

6 Five additional handwritten volumes were published in three volumes, making a total of four printed volumes.

7 Tubiana 1961, 27–85.

8 Izarn 1969, 155–168.

9 D'Abbadie 1980b; 1983; 1999.

10 I have already made use of the information found in one of these field records that deals with the story of the Mammädočč *imāms* of Wärrä Himäno in Wällo, see Ficquet 2014. I am working on the edition of this text with Shiferaw Bekele.

11 The same can be said about the field notes of Antoine d'Abbadie, of which only a few extracts have ever been published. See Tubiana 1959 and the above-mentioned papers by Berhanou Abbebe (Berhanou Abbebe 1970; 1985; 1987).

tion, for the amount of information it contains on law, history and literature'. These heterogeneous notes were presumably recorded from different Amharic-speaking oral informants. This assumption is based on several facts:

- For some of the recorded texts, the name of the informant is given, for example: 'Zemzem singing' (fol. 185v to fol. 187r) or 'History of Leiceng Durusso' (fol. 177v to fol. 180r, which is the life story of a soldier called Lāsañ Därräsāw). However, the date and place of the record are never mentioned in any text.
- Some notes consist of records in Latin script of Amharic oral literature (short rhyming texts or longer folk tales). Most of the texts, however, are written in French, including the one studied here. It is very likely that these notes in French also proceed from oral Amharic information, being the translation on the spot of long narratives and non-literary texts. This hypothesis is confirmed by the many inclusions of words and full sentences in Amharic.
- For the whole document, the handwriting is hard to read. The texts are dense, with few line breaks (except for verse texts), and there are very few punctuation marks. It seems very likely that the note-taker had to follow the pace of the recorded speech. Other documents in the same collection show that a more controlled hand is used for writing down general observations and analytical statements.

The evidence of the oral nature of the sources leads one to ask who the informant might have been. As already mentioned, Arnould recorded in his notes only few of the names of his informants. In his published account, the only obvious indication he provides regarding indigenous historical knowledge through oral tradition is about Ḥaylu Šāmru, his most faithful companion, whom he describes in these terms:

His curiosity was relentless, his memory infallible, and his eye was so fast that in a fight, he could recognize through the ranks of the enemy a horse or rider he had seen once. He was deemed to be without rival in relating the movements of an army or the episodes of a battle. His education had been much neglected: he could just read and understand some prayers in the Gəʿəz language. However, he knew the genealogy of everyone, the history of various provinces and he was accepted as an authority on the military and political events of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Such a testimony can be read as an indication of Ḥaylu's role as a key informant for Arnould. This hypothesis is supported by other clues. Within the above-mentioned notebook, the longest record deals with the history of the Mammādočč rulers of Wällo (from fol. 137r to fol. 161v). In this text, there is a marginal note pointing out that 'Haylo was one of them' (fol. 147v), meaning

12 D'Abbadie 1980b, 83–84 (my translation).

that he was among the witnesses of the death of *Imām* Libān Amāde. This is a strong indication that the information was probably told to Arnould by Ḥaylu. If so, it is also probable that the same Ḥaylu was the informant behind the notes on *Ras Wädaḡe*, as he was his direct descendant, being the son of *Däḡḡazmač Šämrü* of Amhara Sayənt, who was ‘the son of *Däḡḡazmač* Dori, son of *Ras G<sup>w</sup>äššu*’,<sup>13</sup> the grandson and political heir of Wädaḡe.<sup>14</sup> We can therefore consider that this account of the life and deeds of one of the major Ethiopian political figures of the eighteenth century proceeds from a familial narrative transmitted through four generations of rulers of the territory of Amhara in western Wällo.

### Method of the Edition

This edition stays as closely as possible to the original.<sup>15</sup> The punctuation marks are kept as scarce as they are in the original manuscript. However, for the sake of readability, vertical bars (|) indicate where the sentences presumably end. Likewise, initials are not capitalized, following the author’s writing. Unlike the careful transliteration system of the Amharic traditions collected by his brother Antoine, Arnould used his own way of rendering Ethiopian words and it is not consistent. The critical apparatus of the edited text provides the correct or presumed spellings of Ethiopian proper names and Amharic words and sentences. When the syntax seems to be odd, possible alternatives are given in brackets. The pagination of the original manuscript is given by following the numbering of folia as found in the Vatican library; the page numbers written by the hand of the author are given in square brackets.

The historical annotations refer to other sources on this period, mainly the royal chronicles of Kings Bākaffa, Iyasu II, and Iyo’as, and the version of the annals of Ethiopia given by James Bruce in Book IV (Volume II) of his travel account, based on the knowledge he had of the written chronicles (through the copies he brought with him) mixed with oral information that he collected from informants at the royal court in Gondär in the 1770s, some ten years after Wädaḡe’s death.

Some conclusions will be drawn at the end of this paper on the gaps and silence of the historiography revealed by this exceptional fragment of an old oral tradition recorded more than 150 years ago.

13 Weld Blundell 1922, 192 (ed.; my translation).

14 *Ras Wädaḡe* was also the ancestor, through matrilineal descent, of *Däḡḡazmač* Ḥaylä Mika’el Äšäte who commissioned the compilation of the royal chronicle of the late Gondärine period or *Zämänä mäsaḴənt*. Cf. Weld Blundell 1922, 304–305 (tr.); Kropp 1989, 73.

15 I am grateful to Shiferaw Bekele, Delombera Negga, Samson Bezabeh, and Manfred Kropp for their generous comments and advice.

### Edition of the Original Field Notes in French (with some Amharic Inclusions)\*

[fol. 181r] [p. 123] Etiegué Amelmal enfanta 7 enfants | 6 d'entre eux furent T'oa (nobles). | Atié Socinios le 7<sup>ème</sup> eut l'Atié Fasil pour Père et fut Atié  
 5 lui-même. | un gouverna le Begemedr | 1 l'Amhara son nom était ras Imanaxos, | 1 Tigré | 1 Godjam | 1 Semen | 1 Lasta. | le ras Imanaxos enfanta Lebasi Muscul qui ne gouverna pas | celui-ci Guosho Bowossen qui ne gouverna pas, qui enfanta ras Wodadje. | les Borena firent incursion en Amhara et l'abimèrent | il était à Tedwa Mariam avec sa  
 10 mère qui le nourrissait, il réunissait les enfants et volait des moutons pour manger | un taureau de sa mère Bistikis se battant contre celui d'un voisin le tua | le propriétaire le mangea et vint demander justice | [...]  
 [fol. 181v] [p. 124] il fit tuer le taureau de sa mère mais s'en adjugea la viande pour lui | 1<sup>er</sup> acte de justice. | il fut ensuite servir chez un choum de

\* The text edited here is preceded by other notes on place names in Damot followed by six verses in Amharic on Dägač G<sup>w</sup>äššu when he was captive in Yäggü. A separation is marked by a line.

3 Etiegué Amelmal : *Ītege* Hamälmal    4 T'oa : *čäwa* | Atié Socinios : *Aše* Susənyos  
 5 Begemedr : *Bägeməder*    6 ras Imanaxos : *Ras* Yämanä Krəstos    7 Lebasi Muscul : *Läbasi Mäsqäl* | Guosho Bowossen : *G<sup>w</sup>äššu Bəwäsän*    8 ras Wodadje : *Ras* Wädağə  
 Borena : *Boräna*    9 Tedwa Mariam : *Tädbabä Maryam*    11 Bistikis : *Ṗəstəqis*    14 choum : *šum*



## Translation and Comments

[fol. 181r] *Itege* Hamälmal<sup>1</sup> gave birth to seven children. Six of them were nobles [*čäwa*]. *Aše* Susənyos was the seventh. His father was *Aše* Fasil,<sup>2</sup> and he became *aše* himself. One [of Susənyos' brothers] governed Bāgemədər; another one [governed] Amhara, his name was *Ras* Yāmanā Krəstos.<sup>3</sup> [The other brothers governed] Təgre, Goğğam, Sämen, and Lasta. *Ras* Yāmanā Krəstos begot a child named Lābasi Mäsqäl<sup>4</sup> who did not govern. The latter [begot] G<sup>w</sup>äššu Bāwäsän who did not govern [and] who was the father of *Ras* Wädağē.

The Boorana<sup>5</sup> [Oromo] made an incursion into [the territory of] Amhara and damaged it. He [Wädağē] was at Tādbabä Maryam<sup>6</sup> with his mother who fed him. He gathered the children [of the area] and [with them] stole sheep to eat. A bull belonging to his mother, Pəstəqis,<sup>7</sup> fought against the bull of a neighbour and killed him. The owner ate his dead bull and then asked for justice. [fol. 181v] Wädağē had the bull of his mother slaughtered, but he took the meat for himself. [This was his] first act of justice. He then went

- 1 The mother of *Aše* Susənyos was *Wäyzäro* Hamälmal Wärq. The title of *ite* is given to her as the king's mother, cf. Pereira 1900, 120.
- 2 The name of the father of Susənyos was Fasilädäs. He was not *aše* but *abeto* or *abetahun*, royal prince, the son of *Abeto* Ya<sup>c</sup>əqob, the son of *Aše* Ləbnä Dəngəl, cf. Pereira 1900, 266.
- 3 *Ras* Yāmanā Krəstos was the half-brother of Susənyos. His power base was Amhara, cf. Pereira 1900, 105, 131.
- 4 A *Blattenočč geta* Lābasi is mentioned in the chronicle of Susənyos (Pereira 1900, 105) as part of a group of supporters of the King, led by Sə'älä Krəstos and Hafä Krəstos, two brothers of Yāmanā Krəstos, who were sent to Amhara to curb the latter's rebellion.
- 5 'Boräna' is the transcription of the Amharic spelling (used by d'Abbadie's informant) for 'Boorana' in Oromo language. The Boorana, established in the south-western parts of ancient Amhara (nowadays corresponding to South Wällo), a region formerly known as Wäläqa (see below n. 13), are a subgroup of the Tuulama branch of the Boorana moiety of the Oromo, while the other Oromo groups of Wällo belonged to the Baarentuu moiety.
- 6 Tādbabä Maryam is a major royal church of Amhara Sayənt, which was founded in the sixteenth century by *Aše* Gälawdewos.
- 7 The identity of Wädağē's mother is confirmed by the genealogy of the house of Wäläqa published by Kropp (Kropp 1989, 184–198). This document suggests that *Əmmäbet* Pəstəqis was the granddaughter of *Wäläqa nägaš* Abrako, who is mentioned in the royal chronicle of Iyasu II (Guidi 1912, 81) as the 'father' (i.e. forefather) of Wädağē (see below n. 13).

Kolo; | en descendant une colline pour un Koualla un vieillard chef bala negarit s'appuya sur son épaule qui était très brûlante, | es-tu malade? | non | eh bien cet enfant sera grand | 1ère prévision. | il lui dit alors | si je te donne ton pays, feras-tu bien? | oui | eh bien je te donne l'awadj | pour  
 5 Tedwa Mariam le Betrarigue-ennete | pour Atronos Mariam Mekubub-ennete te donne, | il revint dire et lole iababelal djemeré, | il avait 12 ans | il apprit qu'un Woreña était dans le Woleka | il fit des cadeaux de hindeki et de tokous aux Gallas qui sous prétexte de le faire régner emmenèrent le Woreña à Wod. | celui-ci envoya le Messerach à  
 10 son maître qui lui dit de le lui amener vite. | Wod envoya dire à l'Atsié | j'ai pris un Woreña mais mon maître le veut prendre de force (mensonge) | l'atsié lui fit dire de le porter à Gondar lui-même. | son maître lui dit de le porter de suite et suivit son ordre avec toute sa

1 Kolo : Kolo rather than Kollo, Qolo or Qollo | Koualla : *qwälla* | vieillard : word 'vieillard' stroken out in the original | bala negarit : *balā nāgarit* 4 l'awadj : *awağ*  
 5 Betrarigue-ennete : *baträyarkənnät* | Atronos Mariam : Atronsä Maryam  
 6 Mekubub-ennete : *mäkbəbənnät* | lole iababelal djemeré, : *lole yababälal ġämmärä*  
 7 Woreña : *wäräñña* | Woleka : Wäläqa 8 hindeki : *həndäke* | tokous : *təkəwəs*  
 9 Messerach : *məssərač*

to serve a chief [*šum*] of Kolo.<sup>8</sup> He was walking down a hill to a *qwälä* [lowland] when a chief [*balä nägarit*]<sup>9</sup> leant on his shoulder which was very hot. ‘Are you sick?’, ‘No.’, ‘Well, this kid will become an important person.’ [This was the] first prediction [about him]. The chief then told him, ‘If I give you your country, would you do good?’, ‘Yes’, ‘Well, I will give you the appointment [*arwaḡ*] for Tädbabä Maryam, [I give you] the *Baträyarkännät*,<sup>10</sup> for Atronsä-Maryam,<sup>11</sup> I give you the *Mäkbəbännät*.’<sup>12</sup> He came back to tell [about his appointment] and he started to coax the servants [to get them on his side]. He was twelve.

He heard that a *wärännä* [rebellious pretender] was in Wäläqa.<sup>13</sup> He gave presents of *həndäke* [garments]<sup>14</sup> and *təkʷəs* [shawls]<sup>15</sup> to the Galla [Oromo],<sup>16</sup> who, under the pretext of making him rule, brought the rebel to Wädaḡe. The latter sent the good news [*mässərač*] to his master who told him to bring [the prisoner] to him quickly. Wädaḡe sent a messenger to the Aše [king of kings]: ‘I’ve captured the rebel but my master wants to seize him by force’ ([this was a] liar). The Aše sent word that he should himself bring [the prisoner] to Gondär. His master told him to do it immediately. He followed his order with all his cavalry (6,000 horses), Wädaḡe, with the

8 For Arnould, Kolo was the old name of the territory known as Wällo since the nineteenth century (cf. d’Abbadie 1980b, 199). Nowadays Kolo is a small district in the south of Wärrä Himäno.

9 *Balä nägarit*, i.e. high official who has the right to own and beat a large kettledrum.

10 i.e. the title of *baträyark* (i.e. ‘patriarch’), specifically designates the head of this church.

11 Atronsä Maryam is another important historical royal church of Amhara Sayənt, founded in the fifteenth century by Aše Bə’ədä Maryam. The short text published by Getatchew Haile 1988 states that *Däḡḡazmač* Wädaḡe brought significant support to this church, when, in 1728 CE, he retrieved the *tabot* that was taken by Oromo plunderers. Thereafter he made important donations to the church.

12 i.e. the title of *mäkbəb* specifically designates the head of this church.

13 Wäläqa is an important historical territory in the south-west of Amhara Sayənt, from which it was separated by a river of the same name, a tributary of the Abbay that probably corresponds to today’s Bāto river. It is significant that this name is remembered here, because it gradually disappeared from the sources after the settlement of the Oromo Tuulama groups who gave the name Čaqāta to the region. Cf. ‘Wäläqa’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 1081a–1082a (A. Wion and M.-L. Derat); Nosnitsin 2006, 42.

14 *Həndäke*, namely a kind of toga characterized by its red strips (Kane 1990, I, 16).

15 *Təkʷəs*, i.e. a kind of *nätala* shawl (Kane 1990, I, 990).

16 In his published account, Arnould prefers to use the name of ‘Ilmorma’ which is a self-designation rather than ‘Galla’, which is a name used by outsiders (d’Abbadie 1980a, 93).

- cavalerie 6000 chev. | Wod avec le messager de l'atsié et 40 chevaux guttumé avec l'avant-garde et avait donné ordre [...]
- [fol. 182r] [p. 125] d'abandonner ses chevaux et de fuir dans le Koualla. | c'est ce qu'il fit avec son Woreña iouliñ auKal Atsié. | en arrivant à Goula
- 5 en Dembea il trouva 500 esclaves chellemés et occupés à labourer pour l'Atsié | Negous tētümmüdé [blank line] ambassa t-abbedé men iechaloal bulo | il fit égorger les taureaux et partit pour Gondar. | les esclaves, les fouets TemTemo l'y précédèrent, | l'Atsié furieux lui demanda pourquoi | addis né men no. be addis enneté dedj tenate T'al djemerem men honal
- 10 futta negust i T'ai | il fut acquitté par le proverbe. | L'Atsié Makaffa ye tetukule gend ye te fatilé guemed eso na bulo | il fit pendre le maître de Wod. | Saente enna Keta (amhara) goulte le Negarit de Kolo Makaffa les donna à Wod. | Kolo près du Choa Legambo, Wor-e-ilo, Leguégora, Werebet'o, Worekallo, Wore Haimanot, Legué-Hida, Djamma, Guefersa
- 15 (awato yayanna, T'akata, Lami, ce qui est Borena) du Shoa Mürra Beti qui était Amhara ce qui est le pays Amhara Kolo. | après 3 ans de ce gouvernement il fut nommé ras fit Wodded. | puis mourut Makaffa | son

- 2 guttumé : French simple past form derived from the Amharic verbal root *gättäma*
- 4 iouliñ auKal Atsié : *yəwəlləñ əwəq[əw]al Aše* | Goula : Dula 5 Dembea : Dämbiya chellemés : Probably the French past participle form derived from the Amharic verb *šälläma* 6 Negous tētümmüdé : *nəgus tātämmädä* | ambassa t-abbedé men iechaloal bulo : *anbässa tabbädä* [= *kabbädä*] *mən yəššäläwal bəlo* 8 TemTemo : presumably *tämtəmo* rather than *tämtəmo* 9 addis né men no : *addis näw mən näw?* | be addis enneté dedj tenate T'al djemerem men honal futta negust i T'ai : *bä addisənnäte däğ tenat salğämmərəm mən [yə]honal Fəṭṭa nəgäst yəttay* 10 L'Atsié Makaffa : *Aše Bäkaffa* | ye tetukule gend ye te fatilé guemed eso na bulo : *yä-tätäkkälä gənd yä-täfättälä gämäd ərsəwo nə[wo] bəlo* 12 Saente enna Keta : *Sayənt-ənna Käta* 13 Choa Legambo, Wor-e-ilo, Leguégora, Werebet'o, Worekallo, Wore Haimanot, Legué-Hida, Djamma, Guefersa awato yayanna, T'akata, Lami, ce qui est Borena du Shoa Mürra Beti : This long list of toponyms given after Kolo is transcribed as follows: Säwa, Lägambo, Wärrä Ilu, Lägägora, Wärrä Bäčo, Wärrä Qallu, Wärrä Himäno, Lägä Hidda, Ğamma, Gäfärsa, Awato Yayanna, Ğaqäta, Lami, Boräna, Märrabete 17 ras fit Wodded : *Ras birwäddäd*

messenger of the *Aṣe* and forty horses, joined the vanguard and gave the order <sup>[fol. 182r]</sup> to abandon his [master's?] cavalry and to flee to the lowland. This is what he did with the rebel, 'Let God help me to inform the *Aṣe*'. When he arrived at Gula in Dämbiya, he found 500 decorated<sup>17</sup> slaves busy ploughing for the *Aṣe*. He said, 'The king was persecuted/when the king has persecuted [...] when the lion gets mad, what can be done about it?'<sup>18</sup> He slew the bulls<sup>19</sup> and went to Gondär. The slaves, the whips around their necks preceded him there. Furious, the *Aṣe* asked why, 'You are new, what is that?'. Wädaḡe replied, 'Before I start my new way of courting, let us see the *Fəṭṭa nägäšt* [the supreme law]'. He was acquitted by the proverb. *Aṣe Bäkaffa* said, 'You should come to the erected log [and] the twisted rope'. [In this way] the King ordered the master of Wädaḡe to be hung. Bäkaffa [then] gave to Wädaḡe *g<sup>w</sup>alt* land in Sayənt and Kāta (in Amhara) and the *nägarit* drum [rulership] of Kolo. [The territories of] Kolo near Šäwa [are] Lägambo, Wärrä Illu, Lägägora, Wärrä Bäčo, Wärrä Qallu, Wärrä Himāno, Lägä Hidda, Ġamma, Gäfärsa (Awato Yayanna, Čaqāta, Lāmi, which is Borāna);<sup>20</sup> in Šäwa [it includes] Märrabete which was Amhara and which is [now] the country [called] Amhara Kolo.<sup>21</sup> After three years of this government he was appointed *Ras bitwäddäd*.<sup>22</sup> Then Bäkaffa died. His son,

17 We propose this translation for '*chellemés*' French passive form for the Amharic verbal root *šällāma*, meaning 'to award', 'to give a decoration'. This leads to the question as to whether the slaves who worked for the king had a distinctive attribute.

18 This sentence seems to be incomplete. It recalls the famous Amharic proverb '*yə-näbər ġərat ayəzum; täyazum aylläqum*', meaning 'Do not hold the leopard's tail; if you hold it, do not let it go'.

19 There is no clue as to the meaning of this act. Was it aimed at feeding the slaves or for ritual purposes?

20 'Awato Yayanna': according to the context, this place name refers to a district in the area of Borāna in the south-west of Wällo, but the name could not be identified in the available sources on the historical geography of this region.

21 This compound name of 'Amhara Kolo' to designate the eastern areas of the historical territory of Amhara (corresponding to present-day South Wällo) may be the 'missing link' to understand why the other compound name of 'Amhara Sayənt' has been commonly used for the western areas.

22 The first occurrence of Wädaḡe in the royal chronicle of Bäkaffa is on December 1726 CE, when he comes from Amhara bringing to the king a load of genital trophies (Guidi 1903, 342–343). His appointment by Bäkaffa is also asserted by Bruce: 'Woodage had been long governor of Amhara. He had succeeded Palambaras Duré in Bacuffa's time, when he had been promoted to the dignity of Ras' (Bruce 1790, II, 667). See also n. 10 that confirms he was the headman of Amhara in the last years of Bäkaffa. In the royal chronicle of Iyasu II, he is mentioned as early as October 1730, still with the title

fils Yasous de Etiégué Mentowab régna (Kouaraña) | il lui donna en échange du [...]

[fol. 182v] [p. 126] Begemder le Godjam. lui était Twahadou et se brouilla de religion avec les Godjamites après 1 an ½ de gouvernement. les

- 5 Godjamites se levèrent le poursuivirent jusqu'à amba Markorios en Sar Meder | là il les attendit et s'y battit 8 jours. | il s'échappa de nuit et fut passer l'hiver en amhara. | puis il rassembla du monde et xodar Mikail il

1 Yasous : Yäsus or Iyasu | Etiégué Mentowab : *Ītege Məntəwwab* | Kouaraña : *Q̣waräñña* 3 Twahadou : *Täwəḥədo* 5 amba Markorios : *amba* Märqorewos | Sar Meder : *Sar Mədər* 7 xodar Mikail : *Ḥədar Mikaʿel*

Iyasu, whom he had with *Ītege* Məntəwwab (of the Q<sup>w</sup>arāñña family),<sup>23</sup> reigned. He [Iyasu II] gave him [to Wädaǧe] <sup>[fol. 182v]</sup> Goǧǧam in exchange of Bägəmdər.<sup>24</sup>

As Wädaǧe was [a follower of the] *Täwəhədo* [creed],<sup>25</sup> he quarrelled on religion with [the people of Goǧǧam] after one year and a half of rule.<sup>26</sup> The [people of Goǧǧam] rose up and pursued him all the way to *amba* Märqorewos in Sar Mədər.<sup>27</sup> There he waited for them, then he fought for eight days.<sup>28</sup> He escaped at night and went to Amhara to spend the winter. Then he gathered people and on [the day of] Hədar Mikaʿel<sup>29</sup> he crossed the

of *däǧǧazmač*, bringing a captured rebel to Gondär (Guidi 1912, 37). He is given the title of *ras* starting from 1733 (ibid., 81).

- 23 The Q<sup>w</sup>arāñña are the noble family from the province of Q<sup>w</sup>ara, a border territory to the west of Lake Ṭana. After her marriage to *Aše* Bäkaffa, *Ītege* Bərhan Mogäsa, alias Məntəwwab, secured high appointments for her relatives. They took control of the kingdom, when Məntəwwab became the regent queen for her son *Aše* Iyasu II and her grandson *Aše* Iyoʿas. See ‘Bərhan Mogäsa’, *EAE*, I (2003), 534a–535a (L.V. B. Berry); ‘Iyasu II’, *EAE*, III (2007), 251a–252b (S. Chernetsov and D. Nosnitsin).
- 24 According to the royal chronicle, Wädaǧe had been appointed to Bägəmdər in July 1740 (Guidi 1912, 117) after the disgrace of Ayyo, his rival (cf. below n. 58). He was then appointed as ruler of Goǧǧam in July 1743 (ibid., 121), after Ayyo’s return to grace in August 1742 (ibid., 120). Before these promotions, the royal chronicle describes at length the victory won by Wädaǧe against a rebellion in Wägära in 1733 (ibid., 81–86). In the present account this episode may have been transposed into the stories of later fights (see below nn. 43 and 45). ‘Wädaǧge’, *EAE*, V (2014), 549a–550a (E. Sokolinskaia).
- 25 The dominant religious party of the time was the Qəbat that was defended as the official doctrine by the Q<sup>w</sup>arāñña family who held the major positions at the royal court (Məntəwwab and her brothers) (see Guidi 1912, 110–111). This doctrine was widely spread in Goǧǧam.
- 26 In the chronicle (Guidi 1912, 122), this clash happened in January 1744, hence only six months after Wädaǧe’s appointment in Goǧǧam. The chronicler is unsure of the reasons: ‘What could be the cause of enmity between Wädaǧe and the people of Goǧǧam—frequent abuse of power, or matters of faith—I do not know, God only knows’ (ibid., my translation).
- 27 The same place is mentioned by the chronicle: ‘*Ras* Wädaǧe left the seat of his government and climbed on the great *amba* of Ənnäbəse, which is named Märqorewos’ (ibid., my translation).
- 28 The royal chronicle (ibid.) states that Wädaǧe waited for reinforcements from Amhara. It also reports that the fighting lasted for eight days after which Wädaǧe and his supporters were victorious by massacring the contenders from Goǧǧam. Hereafter Wädaǧe left the place and returned to his country of Amhara. The chronicle does not mention any further clash between the two parties.
- 29 The annual celebration of Mikaʿel is on the 12 Hədar (21 November).

passa le fleuve et battit les Godjamites à [in margin: ‘Enufsé’] | set tut,  
 wond cola, en haut de Mertola Mariam une rivière était tout le monde y  
 lava ses chotels du sang d’où jusqu’à aujourd’hui chotel matebia tebalé. |  
 puis il gouverna 1 an ½. | les Godjamites se levèrent encore et le battirent  
 5 à Aly muska Abao | ils firent carnage des Amarés. | Wod s’enfuit arriva à  
 Ibaba dont le chef (azaj) le conduisit à Gondar. | il avait dit aux  
 Godjamites | eseke be Kebatenette le kourreb ounkouan me koureb T’an  
 sindié bi fidje a annamenem | l’Atsié Yasous aimait Wod qui pour  
 exterminer ses ennemis lui conseilla de faire campagne contre Belo du  
 10 Sennar | les Godjamites y restèrent presque tous | l’Atsié en fuite y laissa

1 ‘Enufsé’ : *ʔnnābāse* | set tut, : *set tuṭ* 2 wond cola, : *wänd qwāla* | Mertola Mariam :  
 Märṭulā Maryam 3 chotels : *šotāl* | chotel matebia tebalé : *Šotāl Maṭābya tābalā* 5 Aly  
 muska Abao : Ali Mäskā Abaw | Amarés : Amare(wočč) 6 Ibaba : Yəbaba | azaj : *Azaž*  
 7 eseke be Kebatenette le kourreb ounkouan me koureb T’an sindié bi fidje a  
 annamenem : *əskä be qəbatənnät laqwäräb ənkəwan mäqwäräb čan sənde bifəğ*  
*annamənəm* 9 Belo : Bälāw 10 Sennar : Sinnār



river and defeated [the people of] Goḡḡam at Ānnābāse, [making trophies of] female breasts and male genitals, at the top of Märtulä Maryam [where there is] a river in which everyone cleaned blood from their *šotāl* [curved swords], hence the name of Šotāl Maṭäbya [literally: ‘washing-place for the sword’] given to this place until today. Then he ruled for one year and a half.<sup>30</sup> Goḡḡam rose up once again and defeated him at Ali Mäskä Abāw.<sup>31</sup> They massacred the [troops of] Amhara.<sup>32</sup> Wädaḡe fled and reached Yəbaba whose ruler ([who bore the title of] *azaḡ*) took him to Gondär. He told [the people of] Goḡḡam, ‘As for taking the Communion in the *Qabat* creed, even if this Communion costs one *čan*<sup>33</sup> of wheat, we will not believe [in this creed]’.<sup>34</sup> Aṣe Iyasu was fond of Wädaḡe. The latter, in order to exterminate his [Goḡḡam] rivals,<sup>35</sup> advised the king to campaign [with them] against the Bälāw<sup>36</sup> of Sinnār.<sup>37/38</sup> Almost all [the warriors] of Goḡḡam

30 This lapse of time is also confirmed by the royal chronicle: Wädaḡe was reappointed to Amhara in August 1745 (on the 24 Nāḡase) (Guidi 1912, 127), which is one year and a half after the fight in Goḡḡam.

31 This place name means ‘Ali’s forefather’s meadow’.

32 This second round of revenge by Goḡḡam against Wädaḡe is not reported in the royal chronicle.

33 Measure of grain. According to Kane, 1 *čan* is 30 *qunna* which equals 140 liters (Kane 1990, II, 2228). It is twice as much for Antoine d’Abbadie: ‘10 *madagga* ou 280 litres environ’ (d’Abbadie 1881, 960).

34 The Communion bread is made from wheat.

35 The royal chronicle does not make this causal relationship between Wädaḡe’s enmity against Goḡḡam and the war against Sinnār, but we can point out that the involvement of the troops of Goḡḡam in the war against the Bälāw immediately follows the episode of the massacre of Wädaḡe’s rivals in Goḡḡam by his followers from Amhara (see nn. 26 and 28).

36 The Bälāw are a group of mixed Beḡa and Arab origins from the region of Sawākin. They migrated to different regions where they mixed with the local populations and, in some cases, held positions of power. In Ethiopian sources, this term became a generic designation of the different Muslim populations of the western lowlands (cf. ‘Balaw’, *EAE*, I (2003), 455a–456a (D. Morin)). In his notes, Arnauld d’Abbadie has mistakenly understood this name as the proper name of the chief of Sinnār.

37 The territory of the kingdom of Sinnār corresponded to the north-eastern part of present-days Sudan. It was led by the Funḡ dynasty since the sixteenth century (‘Funḡ’, *EAE*, II (2005), 591b–592a (J. L. Spaulding); ‘Sinnār’, *EAE* IV (2010), 665b–667a (W. Smidt)). The *Sultān* or *Makk* Bādī IV Abū Šulūḡ was its ruler from 1724 to 1762 (‘Bādī’, *EAE*, I (2003), 430a (J. Spaulding)). In his detailed account of this war Bruce describes him in the following terms: ‘Baady, son of L’Oul, who succeeded his father in the year 1733, had been distinguished by no exploits worthy of a king, but every day had been stained with acts of treachery and cruelty unworthy of a man’ (Bruce 1790, II, 636). Later after this conflict, the same Bādī was deposed in

son zoud et son loul | il revint et hiverna puis il demanda conseil à Wod  
 qui dit | dites à Dedjaj Wosedek du Godjam, | à Dadj Aio du Lasta [...]  
 [fol. 183r] [p. 127] [superscript: ‘Negous zoud sewatta negous zoud ba  
 adeladel imussulal Tesfa atta imussulal ete beddal’] au Begemder de  
 5 vennir | ils refusèrent d’être d’avant-garde, | tous les conseillers opinèrent

1 zoud : *zäwd* | loul : *lul* or *lɛˈul* 2 Dedjaj Wosedek : *Däğğaç* Yosedeq (rather than  
 Wäsedeq) | Dadj Aio : *Däğğaç* Ayyo 3 ‘Negous zoud sewatta negous zoud ba adeladel  
 imussulal Tesfa atta imussulal ete beddal’ : *nəgus zäwd siwätta nəgus zäwd baydäläddəl*  
 (?) *yəməssälal täsfa* [y]aṭṭa *yəməssälal yätäbäddal*

remained there.<sup>39</sup> While he was running away, the *Aše* left his crown [*zäwd*] and his pearl [*lul*].<sup>40</sup> He returned [to Gondär] and spent the winter. He then asked advice from Wädağē who said, ‘Tell to *Däğğac* Yosedeq of Goğğam, to *Däğğac* Ayyo of Lasta, <sup>[fol. 183r]</sup> and to [the troops of] Bägemdär to come’. [superscript: ‘when the king withdraws the crown; if the king does not arrange the crown; it seems he has lost hope; it seems he is afflicted.’]<sup>41</sup> They refused to be in the vanguard. All counsellors were in favour of peace,

1762. After having sought refuge at the court of *Ras Mika’el Səḥul*, he went to Gondär to pay tribute to the Ethiopian king and he was appointed to the governorship of Gallabat with the perspective of reconquering his throne (Guidi 1912, 212; Bruce 1790, II, 669–670). He was murdered by his challengers after two years. See Kropp 1996 for a detailed discussion on the war waged by Iyasu II against Sinnär.

- 38 This campaign was launched in March–April 1744 CE (Guidi 1912, 122–123). Before that, Iyasu II had already campaigned against the so-called ‘Bälāw’ western lowlands in April 1741, February 1742, and February 1743 (*ibid.*, 118–120). Through these demonstrations of force the young king, who was mocked as weak compared to his grandfather Iyasu I, wanted to display his capacities as a warrior and to liberate himself from the regency of his mother, Məntəwwab.
- 39 The troops of Goğğam (Ġawi, Baso, Mäčča) were under the leadership of *Ras Wäldä Lə’ul*. The defeat was severe. For Bruce ‘Ras Welled de l’Oul [*Wäldä Lə’ul*] army, consisting of 18,000 of their fellow-citizens, was lying dead upon the Dender’ (Bruce 1790, II, 642).
- 40 The loss of the royal paraphernalia is a key event in the history of this period that was seen by contemporaries as a sign of the decline of the monarchy. The chronicle reports that the relic of the holy Cross and the *Kʷəʾatā rə’əsu* (a painting of Christ crowned with thorns) were taken by the Bälāw/Funğ army. It also mentions the display of the crown before the fight but not its loss (Guidi 1912, 124). The same information is given by Bruce, who adds a ‘speaking crucifix’ to the treasure (Bruce 1790, II, 640). These treasures were recovered after one year (Guidi 1912, 126). Bruce adds that this implied the payment of a heavy ransom (Bruce 1790, II, 642). The fact that the royal crown and its pearl were still in the hands of the enemy was presumably the underlying meaning of the message sent by the *Sulṭān* of Sinnär to the Ethiopian King, begging for peace and stipulating that the prisoners of war and the lost ‘baggage’ (i.e. the crown?) would stay under his control as long as the Ethiopian armies did not stop their raids (Guidi 1912, 132). See below n. 49 on the eventual restitution of the crown after Iyasu’s death.
- 41 The syntax of this sentence in Amharic seems to be irregular.

à la paix | Wod seul opina pour la guerre. [superscript: ‘sefan azazé atié  
 semeker ene and Wod’] | l’atié dit un ban que tous les Amharés de son  
 royaume eurent à se mettre sous la conduite de Wod qui prit  
 l’avant-garde campant 1 jour avant le camp du roi. | ils arrivèrent en vue  
 5 de l’avant-garde de Belo, | les Amharés furusat’ou iankabalal | les arabes  
 pensèrent qu’ils allaient camper et se défirent de leurs armures | Wod à  
 l’abri d’une colline faras assübo leur tomba dessus les massacra | le chef  
 tua 6 hommes de son seif et allait tuer Wodaje quand un amharé de côté  
 le perça de son javelot | il lui fit couper la tête. Des Godjamites  
 10 prisonniers de l’année d’avant lui dirent que Belo se trouvait avec peu de  
 monde près de là et de lui tomber dessus avant qu’il ne se préparat ce que

1 ‘sefan azazé atié semeker ene and Wod’ : *säffañ* (?) *azažé aše səmäkər əñe and Wäd*[ağə]  
 5 furusat’ou iankabalal : *färäsaččäw yankäbälal*[lu] 7 faras assübo : *färäs asəbo* 8 seif :  
*sayf*

Wädaḡe only was for war.<sup>42</sup> [line added: ‘I the chief-commander; when I advise the *Aṣe*; I am the one beloved/I am the unique Wädaḡe’].<sup>43</sup>

The *Aṣe* proclaimed that all Amares of his kingdom should follow the leadership of Wädaḡe who took the vanguard camping at one day of distance before the royal camp. They were in view of the vanguard of the Bälāw army. The [soldiers of] Amhara formed a circle (?) with their horses. The Arabs thought their enemies were going to settle down [for the night] in their camp and they removed their armour. Wädaḡe, sheltered by a hill, launched a cavalry charge<sup>44</sup> (?), fell on them and massacred them. The chief killed six men with his sword [*sayf*] and he was about to kill Wädaḡe when an [soldier of] Amhara who was to one side pierced him with his spear.<sup>45</sup> He cut off his head. [Those from] Goḡḡam who had been prisoners since the year before told him that the [chief of the] Bälāw was with few people around there and [they advised] to fall on him before he was prepared. This is what Wädaḡe did, putting his horses into a gallop. The chief was caught by surprise, but he escaped owing to [the intervention of] a famous

42 The royal chronicle confirms that *Ras Wäldä Ləʿul*, the uncle of the King, advocated a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Guidi 1912, 133). The King agreed to forgive and to negotiate with the envoys of the *Sultān*, probably for the restitution of the crown. However, two months later he embarked upon a campaign of retaliation with a large army in which Wädaḡe took part (ibid.).

43 This saying plays on the meaning of *wädaḡ* ‘friend’ to emphasize the influence that he gained as a favourite of the King. In another context, the crushing of a revolt in Wägära, in February 1733, the royal chronicle reports that Wädaḡe advocated for war rather than negotiation: ‘Do you know that speech does not divert from war? Speech is a remedy only for itself, isn’t it? While speech diverts from speech, only war diverts from war.’ (Guidi 1912, 82, my translation).

44 The Amharic sentence *färäs asəbo* can be interpreted, given the context, as a maneuver of cavalry that consists in dragging the horses to hide from the enemy, before riding to launch the assault.

45 This narrative detail also recalls the description by the royal chronicle of the fight in Wägära that was won heroically by Wädaḡe in 1732, the third year of the reign of Iyasu II. Just as the leader of the rebellion, Nabute, was about to kill Wädaḡe, the latter was saved by one of his soldiers who pierced the chief rebel with a spear (Guidi 1912, 84). It seems very likely that the oral account recorded by d’Abbadie mixed the stories of the two battles into one. This may explain some discrepancies in the account of the events that first describes the death of the enemy leader and then tells how he escaped.

- Wod fit au galop de ses chevaux il le surprit mais il s'échappa à la faveur  
d'un fameux Doungoula | tout son camp et ses trésors | les zoud et le  
Loul et sa femme et son fils lui tombèrent entre les mains. | Il tua le fils. |  
Il envoya 500 chevaux pour le messeratch à l'Atié en disant | allez avec  
5 vos solabas 100 par 100 en 3 hordes et puis une horde de 200 qui disant  
comme les 1<sup>ère</sup> bandes | ye encoutatat' wori endahon ras inegueroal dira  
imoutou ilal. | il prit un zèng et reçut en senafit' le roi dans la tente [...]  
[fol. 183v] [p. 128] du général mort [subscript: 'sa tête coupée était à la porte  
de la tente'] et fit donner un gardien à son camp aux canons | fusils |  
10 trésors | tentes | etc | puis il mena le roi à la tente et au camp de Belo lui  
présenta le loul | le zoud | les trésors | la tête du fils et sa femme qui ne se  
leva pas pour le roi disant | ce vilain là est l'homme et non toi. le roi salua  
l'orient prit la couronne et donna le camp et les trésors du général mort à  
Wod. puis pensa au retour. personne ne voulut être d'arrière garde | Wod

2 Doungoula : *Dungula*[wi] 4 messeratch : *məssəraç* 5 solabas : *säläba* 6 ye encoutatat'  
wori endahon ras inegueroal dira imoutou ilal : *yä-ənqutaʃ wär əndähon ras*  
*yənägräwal* [dira] *yəmʃu yəlal* 7 zèng : *zäng* | senafit' : *sänafəçç*

Dungulawi.<sup>46</sup> The whole camp of the Bälāw, his treasures, the crown and the pearl, his wife and son fell into Wädaǧe's hands. He killed the son. He sent 500 horses to [tell] the good news [*mässərač*] of the victory to the *Aše*, by saying [to his soldiers], 'Go with your genital trophies [*säläba*]<sup>47</sup> 100 by 100 in three bands and then another contingent of 200 which, as well as the first bands, should say, 'As it is the month of *Ṭnquṭašaš* [the New Year] the *Ras* says that he [the King] should come'.

He [Wädaǧe] took a rod [*zäng*] and received the King with mustard [*sänaḫəčč*]<sup>48</sup> in the tent <sup>[fol. 183v]</sup> of the dead general (whose severed head was at the door of the tent). He assigned guards to [protect] the camp, the cannons, guns, treasures, tents, and so on. Then he took the King to the tent and camp of the Bälāw, showed him the pearl, the crown,<sup>49</sup> the treasures, the head of the son [of the general], and his wife. She did not stand up for the King saying, 'This evil one [i.e. Wädaǧe] is the man, not you'. The King saluted the east, he took the crown, and gave the camp and the treasures of the dead general to Wädaǧe. Then he thought about the return. Nobody wanted to take the rearguard. Wädaǧe consented and walked a day behind the King, and he brought him back to Gondär.

46 Dungulawi, meaning Nubian from Dongola in Sudan. This may be related to the episode narrated by Bruce about the prince of Darfur, called Hamis, who made a maneuver that routed the Ethiopian army (Bruce 1790, II, 637–38). His presence on the battlefield, as the *däggazmač* of the king of Sinnär is pointed out in the royal chronicle, without any further detail on his role in the fight (Guidi 1912, 124). According to the Sudanese chronicle quoted by Kropp, his full name was Ḥamis Walad Ġanqal and he was the *sultān* of Fūr (Kropp 1996, 119).

47 This kind of scene is described by the royal chronicle about a later expedition against the Bälāw in February 1753 CE: '*Ras* Wädaǧe too, with his troop killed a lot. All those who killed enemies brought their sexual parts and offered them to the king' (Guidi 1912, 171, my translation).

48 This statement is not clear. It may indicate the medical use of a mustard plaster as a treatment of wounds. Cf. Strelcyn 1973, 215.

49 The chronicle of Iyasu II does not make any statement on the recovery of the crown after the retaliatory expedition against Sinnär. The royal crown only reappeared in 1765–1766, the eleventh year of the reign of Iyo'as. It was in the possession of G'wang'wəl of Yäggü, who got it through Lantbäye, lord of Ambassäl (Guidi 1912, 214). This suggests a possible link with Wädaǧe as it seems Lantbäye acted as a substitute for Wädaǧe in Amhara when the latter was appointed to Bägemdär then Goǧgam (see above n. 22). *Ras* Mika'el Saḫul led an expedition to Yäggü and offered many presents to G'wang'wəl to convince him to surrender the pearl (ibid., 219). The jewel was brought to Iyo'as in December 1767, it was set in the crown and, one month later, Iyo'as was crowned for a second time (ibid., 235–236). Cf. the comments by Kropp 1989, 267–269.

- accepta et marcha un jour après le roi qu'il amena ainsi à Gondar. Yasous mourut à Gondar | Atié Joas son fils régna. les Kouareña craignirent l'influence croissante de Wod et proposèrent une alliance avec Wod. 12 ans après le mariage de Guoscho Wod se rendit à Work Lēbo dans
- 5 l'Armat'o pour y présider au labour de terres incultes | fut pris de maladie | se fit porter à Gondar et mourut en chemin | fut enterré à Koskouam. | il était ventré | laid | grandes oreilles | grosse tête | conseiller très fin, gourmand, rattame, leggasse, ignorant, cavalier mais tewaqui adellem, daro awwaqui, juge impartial et sévère, c'était l'homme le plus
- 10 puissant en goul't qui sont presque tous dans les mains de ses successeurs aujourd'hui. Dedjaj Aio Dedjadj du Waro près du Lasta était l'ennemi jaloux de Wod | il était très gourmand (7 chiens de blé) et très brave. [...]
- [fol. 184r] [p. 129] Wod étant à Gondar fit partir à Kolo 1000 chevaux avec ordre de ravager son pays et sachant à coup sûr qu'il se battrait il espérait
- 15 le faire tuer, | Aio avec 3 cavaliers seulement leur tua 7 hommes 13 chevaux et les mit en fuite | les poursuivant ils arrivèrent au Bechelo rivière entre le Begemder et l'Amhara; | là Dedjaj Douri fils de la sœur de Wod tourna et blessa à mort le cheval de Aio et passa l'eau; | Aio de ce côté ci lui dit | ce diable de Wod ne me laissera pas tranquille | il n'y a

2 Atié Joas : *Aṣe Iyoʿas*    4 Work Lēbo : *Wärq Ləbo*    5 l'Armat'o : *Armačəho*  
 7 Koskouam : *Qʷəsɣʷam*    8 rattame, : probably *rabtām* | leggasse, : *läggas* | tewaqui adellem, : *tawaqi ayəḍälläm* (rather than *täwaqi*)    9 daro awwaqui, : *daru awaqi* (rather than *awwaqi*)    12 chiens : *čan*    16 Bechelo : *Bäšəlo*    17 Dedjaj Douri : *Däğğəč Duri*



Iyasu died in Gondär.<sup>50</sup> *Aṣe Iyoʿas*, his son, reigned. The Q<sup>w</sup>arāñña [family] feared the growing influence of Wädaḡe and proposed an alliance with him.<sup>51</sup> Twelve years after the wedding of G<sup>w</sup>äššu,<sup>52</sup> Wädaḡe went to Wärq Ləbo in Armačəho<sup>53</sup> to supervise the ploughing of wasteland. He fell sick. He had himself carried to Gondär and died on the way. He was buried at Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am.<sup>54</sup> He was potbellied, ugly, big ears, big head, very shrewd adviser, greedy, fond of food,<sup>55</sup> generous, ignorant, good rider but not renowned, nevertheless [he was] wise, an impartial and severe judge, he was the most powerful man in [possessing] areas of *g<sup>w</sup>əlt* land that are almost all in the hands of his successors today.

*Däḡḡač* Ayyo, who was the *däḡḡač* of Waro near Lasta was the jealous enemy of Wädaḡe. He was very greedy (7 *čan* of wheat)<sup>56</sup> and very brave. [fol. 184r] Wädaḡe sent 1,000 horses [i.e. horsemen] from Gondär to Kolo with orders to ravage his [Ayyo's] country.<sup>57</sup> Knowing for sure that he [Ayyo] would fight, he [Wädaḡe] hoped to kill him. Ayyo, with only 3 riders, killed 7 men and 13 horses and put them to flight. They [Ayyo and his men] pursued them and reached the Bäsəlo, the river between Bägemdär and Amhara.<sup>58</sup> There *Däḡḡač* Duri, the son of the sister of Wädaḡe, turned and mortally wounded the horse of Ayyo and crossed the river. Ayyo, from the

50 *Aṣe* Iyasu II died on the 26 June 1755 CE.

51 Under Iyoʿas Wädaḡe's situation gradually weakened due to the rise to power of the Oromo maternal uncles of the young king, who came from Wällo aiming to take over the control of Amhara. See Ficquet 2000; Toubkis 2010.

52 The wedding of G<sup>w</sup>äššu, the grandson of Wädaḡe, with Princess Wällätä Əsraʿel is described below.

53 Region to the north-west of Gondär.

54 According to the royal chronicle of Iyoʿas, Wädaḡe died on the 4 November 1760 CE: 'On the 26 Təqəmt, *Ras* Wädaḡe died and he was buried at Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am' (Guidi 1912, 203). Two weeks earlier, on the 12 Təqəmt, he had been named *azaž* of Yəbaba.

55 The form *rattam* or *raṭṭam* is not found in the dictionaries consulted. It seems to be derived from *rat* 'dinner'.

56 This quantity (1,000 to 2,000 liters) may refer to an amount of tax or to the quantity of bread consumed each day at Ayyo's camp.

57 There is an ambiguity in this statement. Kolo, as stated above and confirmed below, is Wädaḡe's country. Obviously he sent a troop of cavalry to destroy Ayyo's country, which was in Bägemdär.

58 The royal chronicle reports the disgrace of Ayyo and how he was hunted, and that Wädaḡe took part. The disgrace began when the King gave Wädaḡe a horse and a mule, which had been offered to him by Ayyo. The latter was offended and left Gondär to seek refuge in his country in eastern Bägemdär. He was immediately replaced by *Däḡḡazmač* Geta, one of Məntəwwab's brothers. Geta and Wädaḡe joined their troops to pursue Ayyo (cf. Guidi 1912, 115–116, 251–252).

- qu'un seul homme qui puisse nous rapatrier | c'est ce brave Douri | Je te  
 donne ma fille si tu veux, | oui dit l'autre si Wod consent | ce fut fait | là  
 finirent leurs querelles | Ceci fut bien avant la bataille du Godjam, |  
 l'affaire de la panthère au palais de l'empereur eut lieu aussi avant. [line  
 5 break]  
 ras Wod avait enfanté Woreña Lent'a et Aderou | ce dernier reçut le droit  
 d'ainesse comme fils de sa femme principale; | à Lent'a qu'il aimait  
 beaucoup il donna le misilenéennete du Kolo | la manie de Wod était  
 d'acquérir des terres | il y avait dans le Worai Haimanot une famille  
 10 nommé ammist Sihigotot' composée de 4 frères et une sœur | ils étaient  
 de puissants propriétaires | Wod crut en reconnaissant la sœur si elle  
 enfantait d'attirer ses terres dans sa famille; | ce qu'il fit sans qu'elle  
 enfanta, | il la fit garder de près dans le Kolo et partit pour ses affaires à  
 Gondar. [...]  
 15 [fol. 184v] [p. 130] ato Lent'a était très généreux, un jour une pauvre parente  
 vint lui demander l'aumône en faisant un cadeau de deux dabbo | Lent'a  
 lui fit dire d'attendre à l'eka bet, il l'oublia et le guebre gabba sans qu'il la  
 fit appeler. elle le sachant très généreux pour tout le monde présuma par  
 cet oubli qu'elle lui était désagréable, de dépit elle fit dire à Wod son père  
 20 que Lent'a couchait avec sa femme (cobat) du Worai Haimanot. Wod  
 furieux le déposséda du Kolo. [superscript: 'le fit seleber et l'attacha; puis  
 le relacha'] | Lent'a s'enfuit chez les Gallas avec lesquels il fit alliance et  
 vint détruire le Kolo (en envahisseur) | il fut pris dans un combat, | son  
 père le fit pendre. il avait enfanté 2 fils l'un Wondé Wossen l'autre  
 25 Guoscho. ces deux enfants furent dérobés par leurs parents à l'attention  
 de Wod et grandirent en secret | on leur apprit David | la nage |  
 l'équitation | le guebeta | buguna etc | puis on décida que feront-ils si leur

6 Lent'a : Länça | Aderou : Adäru 8 misilenéennete : *mäslänennät* 10 ammist  
 Sihigotot' : *ammäst Šäggwətoč* 17 l'eka bet, : *əqa bet* | guebre gabba : *gəbr gäbba*  
 20 cobat : *qubat* 21 seleber : French infinitive form from the verbal root *sälläbä*  
 24 Wondé Wossen : Wändä Wäsän 27 guebeta : *gäbäta* | buguna : *bägäna*

other bank, said to him, ‘That devil of Wädaḡe will not leave me alone, there is only one man who can help us to return, this is the brave Duri. I give you my daughter if you want’; ‘Yes’, said the other, ‘if Wädaḡe consents to it’. It was done, and there ended their quarrels. This happened well before the battle of Goḡgam. The case of the panther in the palace of the emperor also took place earlier.<sup>59</sup> [line break]

*Ras Wädaḡe* gave birth to *Wäräñña* Lenča and Adäru. The latter received the birthright as the son of his senior wife. To Lenča, whom he loved, he gave the *mäslänennät* [office of district commissioner] of Kolo. Wädaḡe had an obsession with acquiring land. In Wärrä Himäno there was a family of 4 brothers and one sister named Amməst Šəggwətoč [the Hidden Five]. They were powerful landowners. Wädaḡe thought that, by recognizing the sister if she gave birth, he could procure her land for his family, which he did without her giving birth. He had her watched closely in Kolo and went to Gondär for his business. [fol. 184v] *Ato* Lenča was very generous. One day a poor female relative came to beg for alms by making a gift of two loaves. Lenča sent word to her that she should wait by the storehouse. He forgot and the banquet was served without summoning her. Since she knew he was very generous to everyone, she presumed by this omission that she was disagreeable to him. Because of this vexation she sent word to his father Wädaḡe that Lenča was sleeping with his wife (concubine) from Wärrä Himäno. Wädaḡe was furious. He dispossessed his son of Kolo, he had him emasculated, enchained him, then released him. Lenča fled to the Galla [Oromo] with whom he made an alliance and came back to destroy Kolo (as an invader). He was caught in battle. His father had him hung.<sup>60</sup>

Lenča had fathered two sons, Wändä Wäsän and G<sup>w</sup>äššu. These two children were kidnapped by their relatives to keep them out of sight of Wädaḡe and they grew in secret. They were taught [the Psalms of] David, swimming, riding, the *gäbäta* [mancala board game], harp [*bägäna*], etc. Then their relatives had to decide what the boys would become if their birth

59 There is no mention of such a panther in the royal chronicle.

60 Bruce relates a similar story: Wädaḡe had a concubine who was a war prisoner from an expedition to Sinnär. She fell in love with his eldest son. After having gathered his family members for a trial, thus avoiding public justice, he ‘condemned his son to death; and not only so, but caused his sentence to be put in execution by hanging the young man over a beam in his own house’ (Bruce 1790, II, 668). Bruce goes on to tell how the king (that he anachronistically calls Bäkaffa) ‘took it so ill that he deprived Woodage of his office and banished him to Amhara’ (ibid.). In 1751, Wädaḡe was appointed to his original province Amhara with the hierarchically lower title of *däḡḡazmač* (Guidi 1912, 164) which may be an indication of his demotion.

naissance est cachée, quand il les tuerait il vaut mieux que Wod les  
 connaisse | les parents réunis les présentèrent à Wod qui en les voyant dit  
 à Wondé | qui a tué ton père, il dit je ne sçais | à Guoscho il demanda id.  
 qui lui répondit c'est toi | Sois béni Guoscho qui n'entretient pas la  
 5 vengeance dans ton sein contre ton grand-père, et toi homme dissimulé  
 sois maudit toi et ta race. la malédiction a porté car sa postérité tombée et  
 éteinte en malheur | depuis la mort de Lent'a Wod avait appris d'une [...] <sup>[fol. 185r]</sup>  
 [p. 131] manière certaine l'innocence de Lent'a; il avait été rongé  
 de remords. il fit entrer Guoscho au service de l'empereur qui en un jour  
 10 lui donna 7 kemises différentes (choumets, promotions) [superscript: 'il  
 était le plus beau de l'Éthiopie'] | quand Wod projetta une alliance avec  
 les Kouareña il demanda Ozoro hollette Israel fille de Mentowab (qui  
 après la mort de Atié Makaffa jura de ne plus voir d'hommes; elle en eut  
 la galle | ses frères lui dirent alors que cela provenait de ce qu'elle ne  
 15 voyait plus d'hommes et dirent si bien qu'elle admit en son lit Graazmat'  
 Yasous parent de l'empereur par les femmes | elle en enfanta Holette  
 Israel, Asther et Altach tout cela à l'insu de son fils qu'elle craignait | un  
 jour Yasous fut voir sa mère qu'il trouva embrassant une jolie petite fille,  
 qui est-elle dit l'empereur | la fille d'une servante | qu'elle est jolie | il  
 20 l'embrassa et la fit emporter au palais ou on lui dit que c'était sa sœur |  
 allez dit-il dire à ma mère que je le sçais.) elle lui fut accordé pour aito  
 Aderou. Guoscho reçut l'ordre de faire des préparatifs pour le mariage  
 de son oncle, il le fit. Wod, Aderou et tous les grands se rassemblèrent au  
 palais; Aderou assis sur une chamma faisait jeter la lance à ses soldats en  
 25 bas des fenêtres du palais | Guoscho qui adorait Mariam à Koskouam fut  
 envoyé chercher en tout hâte pour assister au mariage | il galopa et en  
 arrivant vit les lanceurs; bonjour Aderou dit-il, donne moi ma lance | il  
 jetta et frappa le but | la lance fortement piquée | le fer y resta, il prit le  
 bois et lanca et frappa dans le gororo, | Holette Israel [...]

10 kemises : *qāmis* | choumets, : *šumät* 12 Ozoro hollette Israel : *Wäyzäro Wälättä*  
 Esra'el 15 Graazmat' Yasous : *Grazmač* Iyasu 17 Asther : *Astär* | Altach : *Altaş*  
 21 aito : *Ato* 24 chamma : *šamma* 25 Koskouam : *Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am* 29 gororo, : *guroro*

was kept hidden. [They came to the conclusion that] even if he would kill them, it is better that Wädağē knows them. Together, the relatives brought the two boys to Wädağē who saw them. He told Wändä, ‘Who killed your father?’ The latter said, ‘I do not know’. To G<sup>w</sup>äššu he asked the same question. He replied, ‘It was you’. [Wädağē said,] ‘Be blessed G<sup>w</sup>äššu for not keeping vengeance in your bosom against your grandfather, and you [Wändä] hidden man, be cursed, you and your breed.’ The curse struck because his posterity waned and died out in misfortune. After the death of Lenča, Wädağē had learned <sup>[fol. 185r]</sup> with certainty of Lenča’s innocence. He was consumed with remorse. He helped G<sup>w</sup>äššu to enter the service of the emperor, who one day gave him seven different *qämis* [*šumät*, i.e. ‘promotions’] [superscript: ‘he was the most handsome man of Ethiopia’]. When Wädağē was considering an alliance with the Q<sup>w</sup>aräñña, he asked [to make it through] Wäyzäro Wälättä ʾƏsraʾel, Məntəwwab’s daughter.

(After the death of Aše Bäkaffa, Məntəwwab vowed never more to see men. She caught scabies. Her brothers then told her that this disease came from the fact that she could no longer see men. They convinced her so well that she admitted *Grazmač* Iyasu to her bed, a relative of the Emperor by women.<sup>61</sup> She gave birth to Wälättä ʾƏsraʾel, Astär, and Alṭaš, all unbeknownst to her son, whom she feared. One day Iyasu went to see his mother, whom he found kissing a pretty girl. ‘Who is she?’ said the Emperor. [Məntəwwab,] ‘The daughter of a servant’; [the Emperor,] ‘She’s pretty’. He kissed her and had her taken to the palace, where he was told that she was his sister. ‘Go’, he said, ‘tell my mother that I know’.)

[Following Wädağē’s plans], Wälättä ʾƏsraʾel was given to Ato Adäru. G<sup>w</sup>äššu was ordered to make the preparations for the wedding of his uncle. He did so. Wädağē and all the great lords gathered at the palace. Adäru was sitting on a *šamma* [toga], making his soldiers throw spears below the windows of the palace. G<sup>w</sup>äššu was at Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am to worship Mary. Somebody was sent to find him in haste so that he could attend the wedding. He came at a gallop and when he arrived he saw the spearmen. ‘Hello Adäru’, he said, ‘give me my spear’. He threw it and hit the target. As the spear was heavily pitted, the iron stayed in. He took the stick, threw it again, and struck right into the *guroro* [spear socket].

61 *Grazmač* Iyasu was indeed the grandson of Iyasu I, through the latter’s daughter Wälättä ʾƏsraʾel (Guidi 1912, 10). See ‘Wälättä ʾƏsraʾel’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 1085a–b (D. Crummey).

[fol. 185v] [p. 132] qui avait été femme de Dedjaj Wosedek et lui avait enfanté ras Haylo puis elle se brouilla et était très minzir | elle était à la fenêtre et voyait les lanceurs | elle demanda qui était ce bel homme | c'est Guoscho lui dit-on | il arrangea ensuite sa toile et montait les degrés  
 5 quand elle lui lança sa bague d'or il salua et entra. Wod se leva et commençait à füttüm quand un page de Holet Israel vint dire à l'empereur qu'elle ne voulait pas de ce gros vilain ventru Aderou mais bien de son neveu Guoscho. de même à sa mère; | l'empereur dit quoi y kebedé neger honé | elle a dit ainsi et c'est une diablesse; Wod dit ene le  
 10 Aderou Exiabeher le Guoscho esché. On fit retirer Guoscho et le mariage eut lieu, tous les préparatifs qu'il avait fait pour son oncle furent pour lui.

2 ras Haylo : *Ras Ḥaylu* | minzir : *mənzər* 6 füttüm : French past participle form from the verbal root *fäṭṭämä* 8 y kebedé neger honé : *yä-käbbädä nägär honä* 9 ene le Aderou Exiabeher le Guoscho esché : *əne lä Adäru, Əgziabəher lä Gwäšü, əšši*

[fol. 185v] Wälättä Əsra<sup>2</sup>el had been the wife of *Däğğac* Yosedeq and had borne him *Ras Həylu*.<sup>62</sup> She then quarrelled [with him]. She was an insatiable seductress [*mənzər*]. She was at the window, watching the spearmen. She asked who that handsome man was. ‘This is G<sup>w</sup>äššu’, she was told. He then arranged his cloth and climbed the steps, when she threw him her gold ring. He bowed and entered [into the castle]. Wädağə stood up and began to swear when a page of Wälättä Əsra<sup>2</sup>el came to tell the Emperor that she did not want this big ugly potbellied Adäru but his nephew, G<sup>w</sup>äššu. [She did] the same with her mother. The Emperor said, ‘What! This is a complicated thing! She said thus, and she is a devil’. Wädağə said, ‘I am for Adäru, God is for G<sup>w</sup>äššu, let it be’. G<sup>w</sup>äššu was asked to withdraw, and the marriage took place. All the preparations he had made for his uncle were for him.

62 *Ras Həylu* Yosedeq became the ruler of Goğğam in the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

## Conclusion

More than eighty years after the death of the main character of the story and a hundred years after most of the events it relates, this presumably oral account jotted down by Arnauld d'Abbadie, with its hasty but precise and extensive translation into French, provides vivid insights into historical figures, as they were remembered and understood in the collective memory of Ethiopian Christians in the mid-nineteenth century. The oral source of this text and the accuracy of the record are revealed by some Amharic fragments of the original speech, randomly distributed without interrupting the flow of the narrative.

With its many details reflecting the local interpretations of events, and its understanding of the psychology of the historical actors, this indigenous oral narrative adds a new layer of information to the political and social history of Christian Ethiopia in the eighteenth century. The edited version provided in this paper should be helpful for further studies on the decline of the royal government in Gondär and the evolution of struggles and alliances between the regional powers that led to the so-called 'Era of the Princes'. Such a historical analysis cannot be undertaken here, but some conclusions can be drawn about the oral 'backstage', hardly visible behind the 'scene' of the official written historiography.

A comparison of each piece of information given by d'Abbadie's informant with the available sources on this period, particularly the royal chronicles, shows few divergences and discrepancies. The chronological structure of the oral account corresponds to the division of time by reigns used in the historiography as cardinal chronological markers. The lifetime of *Ras Wädaḡe* and the major deeds and steps of his career fit well with the references to him in the historiography, in particular the chronicle of the reign of Iyasu II, in which he appears several times as a major actor.

To some extent, however, there may be some 'confusion' in the micro-chronology of the oral story between events that are clearly differentiated in the royal historiography. For instance, some factual details found in the chronicle on the first battles fought by Wädaḡe against a rebel Wägära are also mentioned in the oral biography, but as part of the description of the campaign against the Muslim populations of the western lowlands, which, if we follow the chronicle, happened twelve years later (see n. 45 of the translation). It also appears that the oral story merges the several expeditions in the western borderlands (see n. 47) into a single battle. The chronicle being based on yearly records, it can be considered more accurate on the chronological succession of events, whereas the oral account skips over the exact counting of years.



Two different kinds of narrative structure can be differentiated. The official written one is like a large band of cloth, wide, continuous, and made on the basis of a straight chronological ‘weft’, but broadly meshed, not retaining too many anecdotes. However, the oral one is like a smaller piece of loose fabric—discursive in the literal sense—but tight enough to retain fine elements.

Despite its looseness, the oral account carries hard ‘cells of information’ like physical and personality traits, statements, or anecdotes. The fact that some of the details provided by d’Abbadie’s informant are confirmed by sources other than those indicated in the chronicle (see nn. 7, 11, 46, 60) strengthens the likelihood of the correctness, and shows that the oral transmission considered here was independent of the written record.

The contrast is also moral. If the historiography constantly refers to biblical figures as models of fair and efficient government and warfare, the oral account describes unscrupulous and petty behaviour that corresponds to the understanding of power from the point of view of the rank and file. The intrigues of a careerist politician and the brave deeds of a military leader are placed on an equal footing as required qualities to climb up the social ladder.

These indications on morally or politically ‘unreportable’ facts, known to the public but concealed in the writing of history, may serve as clues as to how to read chronicles ‘between the lines’. Their silences, indeed, can be significant. For instance, the decision made by *Ras Wädağə* to send the troops of Goğğam to war against the western borderlands is explicitly presented by the oral account as an act of revenge (see n. 35 of the translation) after the rebellion of the people of this region against his nomination as governor. The chronicle has the two pieces of information one after another (the clash between Wädağə and his competitors in Goğğam/the war against the borderlands), but no causal relationship is stated. It can be inferred from the oral version of this episode that the author of the chronicle was probably aware of the full story and that, by juxtaposing the two events, he indicated a hidden link that could be meaningful both to the readers of his time and to following generations. More generally, breaks in the flow of the text or elliptic statements can be considered as hints, ‘leaving the floor open’ to interpretation and information drawn from oral knowledge. This hypothesis is confirmed by another sentence of the same passage of the chronicle in which the writer understands the reasons for the disagreement between *Ras Wädağə* and the people of Goğğam (see n. 26), invoking God, whereas the oral account is explicit on the religious issues.

Another ‘meaningful silence’ of the chronicle is disclosed by d’Abbadie’s record when he describes Wädağə’s cruelty towards his son Lenča whom he had sentenced to death for having had an affair with his concubine. The

same story is found, with some variation, in the ‘translation’ of the Ethiopian royal chronicles published by James Bruce (see n. 60). Neither this story nor any fragments of it are found in the chronicle of Iyasu II. It can be argued that this kind of information on private matters had no place in the official history of the kingdom. But we learn from Bruce that this abuse of authority may have been the cause of Wādaḡe’s disgrace and demotion. Apparently, this case caused such a scandal that it was remembered for at least four generations (for d’Abbadie’s informant was Wādaḡe’s descendant in the fourth degree; see n. 14 of the introduction).

Though dense and stiffly structured, the ‘narrative canvas’ of the Ethiopian royal chronicles is also full of holes, like lacework, through which the background of the local oral traditions can appear and be activated, as long as the memory of relevant figures and events is preserved.

This enrichment and amplification of the written text by the oral was probably part of James Bruce’s experience when he collected the information he would later publish under the title *Annals of Abyssinia, translated from the original* as Book IV of his travel account. The explorer does not specify how he collected the manuscripts of the royal chronicles, nor how he worked on their translation.<sup>16</sup> This reflections on Ethiopian history have frequently been downgraded by historians as too personal or even fake, to be used as a reliable source. In the light of d’Abbadie’s records, however, some descriptions found in the Scottsman’s memoirs can be reassessed as fairly accurate notes taken from indigenous Ethiopian narratives. Oral information was an indispensable material for all travellers, but before the methodological framework of fieldwork enquiry was established, no information concerning the informants or other contextual data was required. Further research into the unpublished papers of travellers and a more careful reading of published sources, even those which are presumed to have nothing more to reveal once they have been edited, might lead to significant revisions of Ethiopian history by deflecting the focus away from the central institutions, and giving more weight to the complex interplay between local actors, and offering more precision.

16 Alexander Murray, the curator of Bruce’s papers and the editor of a corrected and enlarged version of the Travels provides a detailed description of the twenty-four volumes of Ethiopian manuscripts collected by James Bruce, later donated to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, including the five volumes of Ethiopian royal chronicles (Murray 1808, 297–300, 342–361).

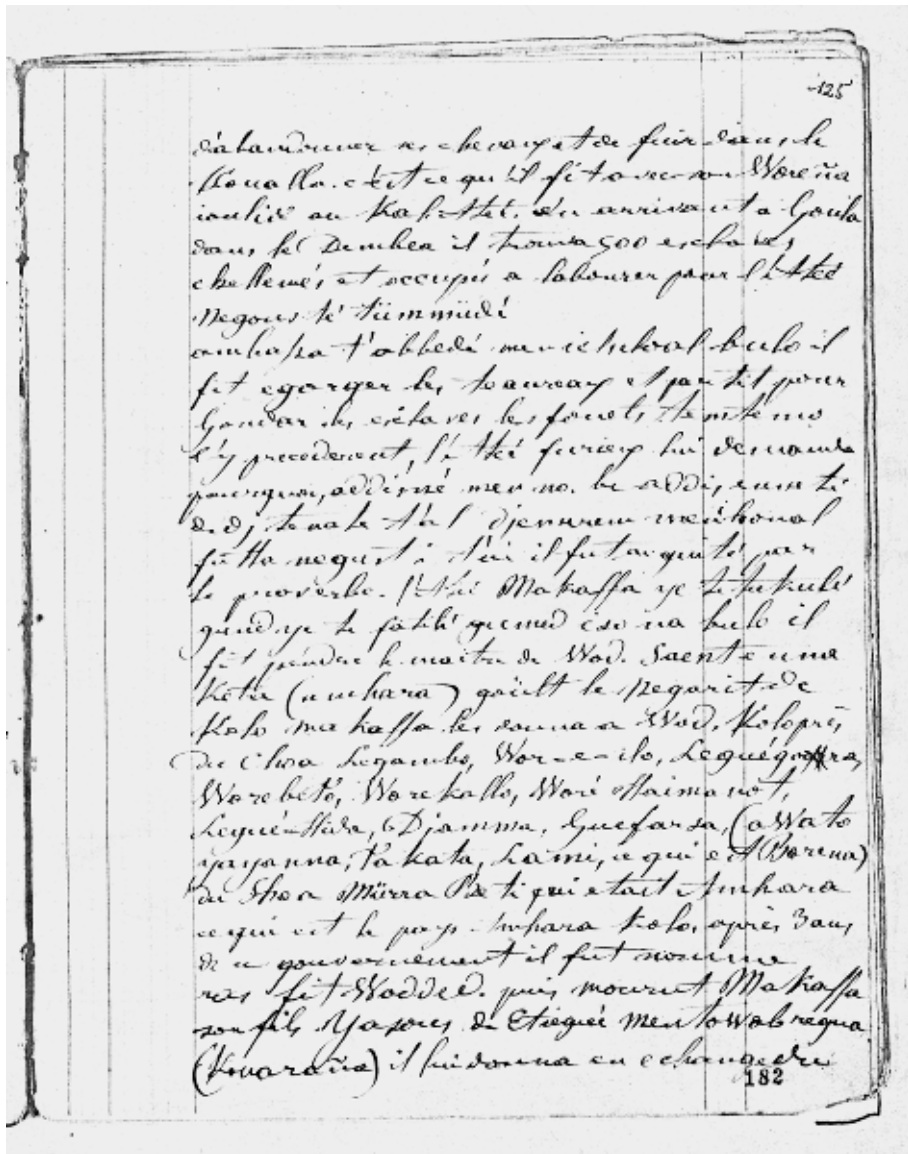


Fig. 1 Extract from the manuscript field notes of Arnould d'Abbadie (MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Carte d'Abbadie, 18, fol. 182r © 2018 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana).

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# Gendering Italian Pro-Islamic Policy in Ethiopia (1936–1941) through the Prism of Oral and Visual Sources

SILVIA BRUZZI

## Abstract

This paper explores the complex interplay of oral, written, and visual media on the Islamic policy the Italian authorities claimed to pursue during the Ethiopian occupation (1936–1941). Adopting a gender perspective, it discusses the role of *Sitti* ʿAlawīyya, a leading Eritrean Muslim spokeswoman during the occupation. Special attention is paid to the controversial relationship she established with the Fascist regime. Her memory is still alive in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, where she was viewed as a ‘queen without a crown’. In Harari oral tradition, her travels in Ethiopia were associated with the construction of mosques in her honour, such as those founded in the Harär region and in Addis Abäba. Through an analysis of oral, visual, and written evidence, this paper will shed light on local memories of a Muslim woman leader, her competence, and her public visibility in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation.

## Introduction

An essential resource for ‘history from below’ from the 1960s on, oral history shifted the focus and opened up new areas of enquiry ‘by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored’.<sup>1</sup> Feminist scholars and historians looked at this field with particular interest, and very soon began to collect and write histories of women and other subaltern groups that had been kept silent in the archives. In addition, from the earliest historiographical debate on oral sources, historians such as Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini made the main positivist critiques of the ‘unreliability’ of memory its real strength: oral sources allowed historians to explore the subjectivity of a social group.<sup>2</sup> They also recognized the dimen-

1 Thomson 2007, 49.

2 Subjectivity, as Portelli argued, ‘is as much the business of history as the more visible “facts”’. What the informant believes is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that he or she believes it) just as much as “what really happened” (Portelli 1981, 100; emphasis in the original).

sion of intersubjectivity in the interviewer–interviewee relationship. In her pioneer work on the Turin working class’s acceptance of Fascism, Luisa Passerini approached the complex attitude of people under Fascism through the prism of subjectivity. Working from this perspective, she was able to explore how silences, discrepancies, and idiosyncrasies might reveal the influence of public culture and ideology on individual memory.<sup>3</sup>

Oral historians have observed that orality and textuality are not disparate elements: on the contrary, they overlap extensively in historical writings. For example, the colonial reports collected and kept in archives may be the result of a transcription of oral communications. Visuality—which is becoming more and more dominant in communication—is profoundly intermingled with orality.<sup>4</sup> Oral interviews, for example, can make reference to and shed light on an informant’s images and imaginaries. Since these considerations were first raised, oral historians have also resorted to visual materials to supplement, integrate, and question their interviewees. Visuality can also be intertwined with textuality: indeed, visual sources can be related and analysed in relation to a text such as a caption or an audiotape, as in the case of audio-visual films. In this paper, I have used an experimental methodology that takes this interweaving of orality, textuality, and visibility as historical evidence into account by comparing different clues, and by cross-checking visual evidence with textual and oral proof.

Since the time of these early debates on how orality can be structured with written, visual, and audio-visual sources, concerns over the transcription and recording of oral and visual sources have merited special attention. Historians such as Portelli have noted that a transcript ‘inevitably implies reduction and manipulation’.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the process of recording and preserving both oral testimony and visual materials has technical, ethical, and epistemological implications. Today, as Thomson has observed, a new paradigm and challenge for oral history emerges through the digital revolution.<sup>6</sup>

The distortions that result from the transcription and editing process are assumed in this contribution, and I have chosen to write down the interviews in my personal archive. They are partly recorded in Arabic, then translated by myself in English (as in the case of the interviews with Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī and Šarīfa ʿAlawīyya in Cairo and *al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmīl Šarīf in Addis Abāba) or were transcribed in my field notes (as in the case of the interviews carried out in English with Ay Rawda Qallu, *Ḥāḡḡi* Aḥmad Kebiro, and *Kabīr* ʿAbdu in

3 Passerini 1987; Thomson 2007, 54.

4 Passerini 2014, 6.

5 Portelli 1981, 98.

6 Thomson 2007, 69–70.



Harär, and in Italian with Carlo Piola Caselli in Rome and Ḥasan Muḥammad ʿAlī in Ḥəṭumlo). In this study, I have also used digitalized photographic and audio-visual material from the Istituto Luce—the Fascists’ main propaganda tool—in order to shed light on the Islamic consensus that the Italian government showed through the mass media during the second Italo–Ethiopian war (1935–1936) and in the years that followed, in the context of the occupation of the country (1936–1941). Fascist travel literature, press reports, newsreels, and photography gave special visibility to this powerful, unconditional consensus.

This contribution seeks to reconstruct the intermingled histories from a cross-cultural perspective: it describes the complexity of the discourses circulating around colonial Islamic policy, both in Ethiopia and in Italy, through the prism of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya’s role. In particular, it questions the colonial viewpoint, and integrates it into multiple narratives in order to offer a polyphonic account. Materials from colonial and private archives are cross-checked with information from the interviews carried out during my fieldwork in 2009 with Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī and his mother *Šarīfa* ʿAlawīyya (the namesake of her great-aunt) in Cairo, a Qādirī *šayḥa* in Harär (*Ay* Rawda Qallu, niece of *Sayyīd* ʿAbdullāhi Šādiq), Ethiopian teachers in Addis Abäba (*al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf, director of the madrasa Abādir) and Harär (*Ḥāḡḡi* Aḥmad Kebiro and *Kabīr* ʿAbdu) and with Carlo Piola Caselli, nephew of the commissioner of ʿAqordāt, Vittorio Piola Caselli, in Rome (in September 2017).<sup>7</sup>

By cross-checking the visual, material, textual, and oral evidence I collected in Rome, Cairo, Harär, and Addis Abäba, a broader, and more complex, historical framework of the so-called Islamic policy implemented in Ethiopia by Italy during its occupation (1936–1941) emerged. In fact, the interplay of these highly heterogeneous materials allows us to explore the complexity of the interests at stake. The ambivalence of the narratives helps transcend apparently well-established dichotomies such as colonizer/colonized, Islam/Christianity, Ethiopian history/Eritrean history, and Colonial history/African history. In particular, by focusing on Muslim actors and intermediaries, we are able to look beyond Italian propaganda on Muslim loyalty to the Fascist regime. Finally, the use of oral traditions and personal memories casts light on crucial issues such as the dimension of

7 The archives I considered include the Archivio Eritrea at the Ministero degli Affari Esteri in Rome; colonial journals and the online archive of the Luce Institute (available at <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/>); the Mīrḡanī family private collection (the Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī private collection) in Cairo; the Piola Caselli private archive in Rome. A full list of the archives used to prepare this contribution is included at the end of the paper.

intersubjectivity in history-making. A focus on orality allows us to consider pivotal elements that would otherwise be omitted from our historical narratives, such as the complex relationship between the past and the present; the relationship between memory, imagination, and history; the intersubjectivity relations between a researcher and his or her informant; and the transcription or translation of 'lived experiences' into writing.

In order to examine the so-called Islamic policy the Fascists put into effect in Ethiopia during the second Italo–Ethiopian war and the Italian occupation of the country, I juxtapose the propagandist discourse of the Italian press, photographs, and audio-visual material belonging to the Luce Institute with the private archives and oral sources I collected in Rome, Addis Abāba, Harār, and Cairo. In particular, I focus on descriptions, representations, and individual memories relating to a female religious leader who enjoyed great visibility at the time both in Italy and in Ethiopia. Firstly, I offer an overview of how the Italian media represented this woman as a symbol of Muslim fidelity to Italy's imperial policy. Secondly, I analyse oral sources I collected in Ethiopia that call the simplified image of a collaborator with the Fascist regime into question. Finally, I point out the complex relationship between the past and the present, which inevitably emerges when we employ oral sources. Memory and material remnants of the past, such as the mosques built by the Italian authorities during the occupation, help shed light on past and present conflicts.

### Gendering the Emancipation of Ethiopia's Muslims

In 1938, a select group of notables and dignitaries from East Africa and Libya was invited to Rome to celebrate the second anniversary of the foundation of the *impero italiano*. On this occasion, Mussolini welcomed them with a ceremony at Palazzo Venezia. The national press was particularly active in reporting the event, which provided an opportunity to demonstrate the consensus for Italy's imperial policy in East Africa and the Mediterranean region.<sup>8</sup> Official discourse stressed the 'emancipation' policy the Fascist government had put in place during the war in favour of the

8 In 1937, during a visit to Tripoli, Mussolini presented himself to the Libyan people as the 'founder of the empire' and 'defender of the prestige of Rome, the common mother of all Mediterranean people'. His visit reached its apex when, during a ceremony, the *Duce* appointed himself as the 'sword of Islam'. In a symbolic gesture, during the propagandist ceremony, two Libyan soldiers who had participated in the Ethiopian campaign offered him the Islamic sword. By this theatrical act, Fascist Italy sought to convince the international community of its favourable attitude towards Muslim peoples in its Mediterranean policy (see Wright 2005).

‘oppressed’ Ethiopian Muslims during the occupation of Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> This discourse was also mobilized on an international scale to gain Muslim support in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Recent studies have criticized the prior approaches and the paradigms that emphasized the Arab and Muslim leaders’ sympathy for and collaboration with Nazism and Fascism in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>11</sup> In Ethiopia, too, Hussein Ahmed has questioned this historiographical approach, and has noted that the existing literature places greater emphasis on Ethiopian Muslims’ collaboration with the Italians than on their resistance.<sup>12</sup> He also observes that the pro-Italian attitude and consensus of indigenous Muslims ‘was justified by their perception of the Fascists as instruments for ending their religious oppression rather than by a belief in the inherent virtues of, and preference for, colonial rule’.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, I am going to explore the issue of Muslim approval of the Italian occupation through the prism of the agency and subjectivities of indigenous Muslims. The memories, images, and imaginaries relating to a female Muslim leader attending the celebration held in Rome for the anniversary of the foundation of the Italian empire in 1938 clearly express the silences, discrepancies, and ambivalences in the discourse on Muslim collaboration.

Among the African colonial dignitaries received by Mussolini at Palazzo Venezia, the Fascist press and newsreels emphasized the presence of a woman, the representative of Eritrean Muslims: ‘*Sceriffa* Alauia el Morgani’. The meeting between Mussolini and the African dignitaries was immortalized in a photograph by the Luce Institute which shows this woman in the foreground beside the *Duce*.<sup>14</sup> Her presence was meant to attest to Mussolini’s high regard for Muslims in the process of imperial construction.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1939, just one year after the *Sceriffa*’s visit, the regime organized a large parade of women in Rome.<sup>16</sup> Drawing from a documentary by the Istituto Luce entitled *L’adunata delle donne fasciste* (‘The parade of the fascist women’), Eugenia Paulicelli has observed the ambivalent position of

9 Sbacchi 1985, 163; Alvisini 2000, 517; Borruso 2001a, 57; Borruso 2001b.

10 De Felice 1988; Wright 2005; Arielli 2010.

11 Freitag and Gershoni 2011.

12 Hussein Ahmed 2007, 109; Ahmed Hassen Omer 2000.

13 Hussein Ahmed 2007, 101.

14 Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Giornale Luce B1307, *50 capi e notabili della Libia ricevuti da Mussolini* (18 May 1938); *Corriere della Sera* 1938a. The photograph is published in Goglia 1989, 272; in Borruso 1997, image no. 57; and in Bruzzi 2018, 132. See also the ‘interview’ with *Sceriffa* Alauia el Morgani, *Corriere della Sera* 1938a; *Corriere della Sera* 1938b; and Bruzzi 2018, 187–200.

15 Borruso 1997, 41.

16 Paulicelli 2002. For a work on this topic see De Grazia 1992.

the regime towards the roles and images of Italian women. The film shows a rally organized by Mussolini himself that took place on 28 May 1939. During this parade, thousands of Fascist women, presented as an army, were said to have expressed ‘the absolute devotion and fidelity of all Italian women’ to the *Duce*.<sup>17</sup>

Since the outbreak of the Italo–Ethiopian war in October 1935, Fascist propaganda had celebrated the increasing duties of women as collaborators and propagandists for the regime. ‘*La giornata della fede*’ (‘the day of the wedding ring’) in 1935 indicates the momentum of the propaganda. On this day, Italian couples, and women in particular, were asked to offer their wedding rings in support of the Italian military effort and to help the nation rise above the economic difficulties it had suffered in consequence of international sanctions.<sup>18</sup> In the context of the gold collecting campaign, the press stressed the active role that *Sceriffa* Alauia el Morgani played in the empire’s territories, namely in the Eritrean seaport of Massawa. Two articles in *Corriere della Sera* and *il Resto del Carlino* reported that she had encouraged Muslims in Eritrea to collect their gold possessions to support the Italian military effort.<sup>19</sup> The propagandist intent behind this news is obvious, and its veracity would need to be compared with indigenous written sources, which are unfortunately unavailable today. Nevertheless, the exotic portraits of the *Sceriffa* proposed by the colonial press seem to be more indicative of Italian policy and discourse than of her own agency.<sup>20</sup>

First of all, her name itself was Italianized: the use of the Italian term *Sceriffa* (which corresponds to the feminine version of the English word ‘sheriff’) recalls the idea of a legal official with responsibility for a county and with political and administrative duties. This was an inappropriate translation that was adopted by the Italian press (as well as in colonial reports) of her Arabic title *šarīfa*. Muslim notables who claim to be descended from the Prophet use this term to evoke the prestige of their family genealogy. In fact, *Šarīfa* ‘Alawīyya (1892/1893–1940) was a member of the wealthy Mīrḡanī family. She was also the niece of *Sayyīd* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī, founder of the *Ḥatmīya* Sufi brotherhood (*ṭarīqa*), which was well established in Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, and Ḥiḡāz. In Eritrea, the representative of the *ṭarīqa* was *Sayyīd* Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī (Massawa, 1849/1850–1901).<sup>21</sup> Son

17 Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, D005602, *L’adunata delle donne fasciste* (1939).

18 Terhoeven 2006.

19 Perbellini 1936, 1; Barzini 1936, 1.

20 Bruzzi 2018, 192.

21 On *Sayyīd* Hāšim, see Grandin 1988; Miran 2009; ‘Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 342b–343b (J. Miran); O’Fahey 1994.

of *Sayyid* Muḥammad ʿUṭmān al-Mīrḡanī. In around 1860, he was sent from Ḥiḡāz to Massawa, where he exercised authority over *Ḥatmīya* followers such as the Beni ʿAmər, ʿAd Tākles, Asaorta, and Ḥabab. After living in western Eritrea, he married a woman from the Beni ʿAmər. It was from this marriage that *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya was born. *Sayyid* Hāšim’s passing left two orphan daughters, *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya and *Sittī* Maryam, but no male heirs. At the time, the Italian authorities thought that the death of the only male representative of the Mīrḡanī holy family would lead to a vacuum in the religious leadership of the colony.<sup>22</sup> After 1910, however, *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya emerged as an important intermediary between Eritrean Muslims and the Italian government, but, even though she played a leading role throughout the colonial period in Eritrea, she gained particular visibility in the political arena in the context of the second Italo–Ethiopian war.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding her exceptional visibility in the Fascist media, the colonial archives report only fragmentary information on her activities, and to my knowledge no Arabic sources on her are available.<sup>24</sup> The Italian officers’ reports provide an example of the hegemonic narratives preserved in colonial archives. The Fascist press, the mass media, and travel literature illustrate how oral statements can be manipulated, more or less consciously, and interpreted in colonial writings. Her voice is silenced in the colonial archives, and her declarations are always reported as an Italian translation (without the original version), through the filter of the colonial gaze.

The silence on women, on the colonized, and on other subaltern groups and the paucity of textual sources led historians to focus on oral, material, and visual evidence. In Italian East Africa, this research supplements the available documentation on the colonial experience.<sup>25</sup> As a leading agent of the Islamic renewal in north-eastern Africa, *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya enjoyed consid-

22 Consequently, they actively began to seek another Mīrḡanī who was willing to reside in Kārān, in Eritrean territory. The choice fell upon *Sayyid* Ġaʿfar al-Mīrḡanī (1871–1943), who had lived in Kassala, in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, until then. See Bruzzi 2006; Bruzzi 2018; ‘Ġaʿfar al-Mīrḡanī’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 333a–b (J. Miran); O’Fahey 1994.

23 Bruzzi forthcoming.

24 Every hagiography about her and the many letters written by her are available in the Mīrḡanī family private collection, to which I had access in Cairo (the Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī private collection), and among the *Ḥatmīya* Arabic manuscripts stored in Rome (Rome, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Eritrea, 1042–1047). The only exceptions are two articles from Arabic journals that are kept in the Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī private collection, which I was able to duplicate in Cairo in 2009.

25 Taddia 1996; 2005.

erable visibility in Italian colonial propaganda, as well as in local memories in the context of the Fascist occupation.

### Cross-checking Oral and Visual Evidence of the Italian Mosques Built in Honour of *Sittī* °Alawīyya

In the Italian media, *Sceriffa* Alauia el Morgani is portrayed as an exceptional female representative of Muslims and as testimony to their unconditional support for the Italian empire's construction project in northeastern Africa.<sup>26</sup> However, apart from a few colonial reports and media propaganda materials focusing on her cooperation with Italian authorities, no hagiographies or other Arabic writings by or about *Sittī* °Alawīyya are available, especially about her personally. For example, the original paper copies of the diplomatic letters she sent to Muslim dignitaries across north-eastern Africa, from Alexandria in Egypt to Bale in Ethiopia, between the Italo-Turkish war in Libya (1911–1912) and the second Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–1936) are currently lost. However, textual and oral traces of these letters represent precious evidence of her agency in the context of both the Islamic renewal movement and international relations during the Italian occupation.<sup>27</sup> This silence in the archives, which casts doubt on the colonial viewpoint, led me to focus on how she was commemorated: oral testimony can supplement, question, and enrich the available literature. In addition, there is visual evidence that offers additional traces for our investigation. For example, two photographs taken around 1939 belonging to the commissioner of °Aqordāt, Vittorio Piola Caselli, (see Figs. 1 and 2) might shed more light on the role of other actors who, like the *Sceriffa*, played a controversial role during the occupation. Among them, we see Ḥaylā Šəllase Gugsä (1900–1974), who secretly met the Italians in Asmāra on 27 May 1934 and suggested that he would open up the road from Mäqälä down to Däse after the outbreak of the war.<sup>28</sup> When he visited Mussolini in Rome in 1938 with the *Sceriffa* and other dignitaries from north-eastern Africa, the Italian media referred to him as 'Dejjiä Kailé Salassié Gustà, the representa-

26 See *Il Giornale Italiano* 1938: the article reports the *Sceriffa*'s words expressing the devotion of all Muslim people to the Italian king and 'emperor of Ethiopia'.

27 Regarding her letters to Alexandria in Egypt in the context of the Italo-Turkish war in Libya, see Rome, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, vol. 2, Libia, Guerra italo-turca 1911–1912, Posiz. 104/1 1911–1912, fasc. 12 'Guerra italo-turca', Commissariato di Cheren, 21 dicembre 1911, Lettere della *sceriffa* Alania al Morgani. On *Sittī* °Alawīyya's diplomatic letters to Muslim dignitaries in Ethiopia during the second Italo-Ethiopian war, see Sartu Shemsuddin 2013, 93 and Bruzzi 2018, 160–161.

28 See 'Ḥaylā Šəllase Gugsä', EAe, II (2007), 1066b–1067a (H. Erlich).

tive of Tigray people'.<sup>29</sup> In effect, the Italians had appointed him as governor of Təgray on 16 October 1935, and then promoted him to *ras* in 1938, even though they had little confidence in his abilities.<sup>30</sup>

Although attitudes towards Italy regarding collaboration, negotiation, and resistance crossed religious identities, the existing literature tends to make the point that the antagonism between Christians and Muslims was instrumental in the conquest of the country.<sup>31</sup> During the Italian occupation, as Sbacchi has pointed out, Ethiopian Muslims were granted religious freedom, *qādis* replaced Amhara judges, Arabic was taught in Muslim schools, and several newspapers began to print sections in Arabic.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the regime rewarded the Ethiopian Muslim military and all its political support with land grants and funding to build mosques and Qurʾānic schools in Harär and Ğimma.<sup>33</sup> The Italian government had also been building and renovating mosques in Eritrea since the early days of colonial occupation. It financed *Sayyīd* Hāšim al-Mirġanī's shrine in Həṭumlo in 1902 and the Ğāmiʿ al-Ḥulafāʾ ar-Rāšidīn in Asmära in 1900 (renovating it in 1937), funded the Friday mosque in Kärän in 1896 and another after *Sayyīd* Hašim's death. The Italians also built other Friday mosques in ʿAsäb in 1892, in Tīʿo in 1907, in ʿAddi Qäyyəḥ in 1909, in ʿAqordät in 1911, in Mändäfära in 1912, in Gindaʿ in 1933, in ʿAlī Gidir in 1935, in Naqfa in 1935, in Täsänäy in 1937, in Säġänäyti in 1938, and in Barentu in 1938.<sup>34</sup> The Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO) photographic archives provide rich documentation of the mosques built all around the country in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> In 1936, the Press and Propaganda Ministry collected not only these photographs of Italian mosques built or renovated in Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia, but also photos of new schools, hospitals, and avenues that had been built throughout the Italian empire and disseminated them across the Middle East, for instance Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq in a publication entitled *What*

29 Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Giornale Luce B1307, *50 capi e notabili della Libia ricevuti da Mussolini* (18 May 1938). See 'Ḥaylā Šəllase Gugsä', *EAE*, II (2007), 1066b–1067a (H. Erlich).

30 Ibid.

31 Sbacchi 1985, 163.

32 Sbacchi 1985, 162.

33 Photographic evidence of Italian endeavours to build or renovate mosques in the 1930s is available in Asmära, Massawa, Kärän, ʿAsäb, ʿAqordät, and Barentu; see Rome, Fototeca IsIAO, Sezione 1 (Ex Armadi)—Eritrea—E 6 B Culto musulmano. The archives are currently closed. A precious inventory of them is available in Palma 2005.

34 Trimingham 1965, 137; 'Mosques', *EAE*, III (2007), 1027b–1032a (Hussein Ahmed and J. Miran).

35 Bruzzi 2018, 195.



*Italy is doing for Islam in Africa*.<sup>36</sup> For predominantly propaganda purposes in the Middle East, Italian colonial photography carefully documented this activity of mosque building and restoration in Eritrean cities, where support from the Muslim community was considered to be particularly important. In a way, the Eritrean Muslim policy was an example of the fair religious policy Italy had wanted to display from the Mediterranean to Middle East since at least the World War I. In effect, this pro-Muslim policy was reasonably effective in Eritrea, and it seems that the favourable attitudes expressed by a section of Muslim notables in Eritrea were related to it. The *Sceriffa* showed particular deference to Vittorio Piola Caselli, the commissioner of ʿAqordāt, because he was responsible for the construction of mosques as a part of his development plan for the Eritrean lowlands.<sup>37</sup> In Ethiopia, Italian activities included the restoration of sixteen mosques, the building of fifty stone mosques (including the one in Addis Abāba) and of other straw-roofed mosques right across the country, in Säqoṭa, Čəlgə, Däbarq, Dangəla, Hayq, Däse, Mätämma, Harär, Dərre Dawa, Ġiġiga, Miʿeeso, Asbä Täfäri, and Gubba.<sup>38</sup> Before the occupation, very few mosques had been built in Ethiopia because the Christian emperors had banned their construction. The first mosque built in Addis Abāba, an-Nur mosque, was the result of a request for a land grant a Turkish officer submitted to Emperor Mənilək II in 1904 through the mediation of a Swiss advisor.<sup>39</sup> During the Italian occupation, permission was granted for the construction of the largest (as expressed by its Arabic superlative) mosque to date, the al-Anwar mosque. According to the oral traditions of the Mīrġanī family,<sup>40</sup> the name ‘Anwar’ for the mosque in Addis Abāba was associated with the mosque of Sitti ʿAlawīyya’s grandfather, Sayyid Muḥammad ʿUṭmān al-Mīrġanī, the founder of the *Ḥatmīya* Sufi brotherhood (*ṭarīqa*) in Khartoum. Construction of the mosque, which is the largest central and third oldest mosque in Addis Abāba, was started during the Italian occupation and resumed in the 1950s.<sup>41</sup> Located in the heart of Märkato area (named after the largest market in Ethiopia which was originally created by the Italians during the occupation), it was intended to represent a reward for all Muslims who had

36 Arielli 2010, 96.

37 Rome, Piola Caselli private archive, Vittorio Piola Caselli section, *Schedario dei capi tribù*. These files are currently studied by Gianni Dore (personal communication with Dore on his forthcoming work).

38 Trimmingham 1965, 137; ‘Mosques’, *EAE*, III (2007), 1027b–1032a (Hussein Ahmed and J. Mīran); Hussein Ahmed 2007, 104; Sbacchi 1985, 162–163.

39 Hussein Ahmed 1999.

40 Interview with Aḥmad al-Mīrġanī and Šarīfa ʿAlawīyya (Cairo, May 2009).

41 Hussein Ahmed 1999, 262–263; ‘Ġāmiʿ al-Anwar’, *EAE*, II (2005), 673b–675a (Hussein Ahmed).



participated in the war to conquer Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> In all the oral accounts I collected, Italian mosque construction during the occupation, as in the case of the al-Anwar mosque, appears to be associated with *Sittī* °Alawīyya's role. The interviewees agreed that she was the one who negotiated with the Italian authorities on the subject of mosque building, and that she did so on behalf of the Ethiopian Muslim communities, which until then had had too few places of worship in the city.<sup>43</sup> During the second Italo–Ethiopian war, the *Šarīfa* accepted an invitation from the Italian authorities, and led a party of Eritrean leaders and notables to visit Ethiopia.<sup>44</sup> This was an important occasion for her and other Eritrean notables such as Ḥasan °Alī and Ḥasan Idrīs Kurdi to meet and network.<sup>45</sup>

*Al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf, the current director of the madrasa Abādir in Addis Abāba, has observed that *Sittī* °Alawīyya's arrival and stay in Ethiopia was aimed at showing Ethiopian Muslims that the Italian government was pro-Muslim by granting them certain rights to practise their religion and attend the mosque. These rights had not been granted previously, as Muslims were considered to be 'second-class citizens': they were not allowed to be soldiers or hold bureaucratic positions. *Sittī* °Alawīyya supported this policy, and asked the Italian government to show its good will towards Muslims by building a mosque in Addis Abāba: this was the al-Anwar mosque.<sup>46</sup>

Italy's mosque-building policy was implemented not only by the construction of the al-Anwar mosque in Addis Abāba, but also in the Harār area, where special emphasis was placed on creating a powerful alliance with the Muslim elites. Here, the government granted funds to religious leaders and Islamic schools. The project included the creation of an Islamic university for Qur'ānic studies in Harār.<sup>47</sup> *Sittī* °Alawīyya also asked the Italian government to grant permission for the construction of mosques in Ġimma and Harār. In Harār, a mosque was built in the market centre, and other mosques were built along the road next to the railway line from Addis Abāba to Dərre Dawa.<sup>48</sup>

42 Sbacchi 1985, 163.

43 Interviews with Aḥmad al-Mirḡanī and *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya (Cairo, May 2009); *al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf (Addis Abāba, November 2009); *Ay Rawda Qallu*, *Ḥāḡḡi* Aḥmad Kebiro and *Kabīr* °Abdu (Harār, November 2009).

44 Bruzzi 2018, 196.

45 Puglisi 1952, 162.

46 Interview with *al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf (Addis Abāba, November 2009).

47 Sbacchi 1985, 163.

48 Interview with *al-Ḥāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf (Addis Abāba, November 2009).

Photographs of the mosque being built during the occupation in Dərre Dawa are available at the Archivio Luce.<sup>49</sup> Also, a newsreel video was made in Massawa in 1937, when Governor Admiral De Feo attended the inauguration of the mosque that had recently been renovated in honour of *Sittī* °Alawīyya's mother.<sup>50</sup>

Oral narratives insist on the charismatic power *Sittī* °Alawīyya exerted over Italian officials.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that textual evidence such as telegrams testifies to how the Italian military officer Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, who was a key figure in the consolidation and expansion of Italy's empire during the 1920s and 1930s in both Libya and Ethiopia, looked at her with special reverence. When he returned to Italy from Ethiopia in February 1938, he wrote a telegram to Vittorio Piola Caselli, the commissioner of °Aqordāt, expressing his regret at not having been able to see her again and say goodbye to her before he left. He therefore asked Vittorio Piola Caselli to tell her that he sent 'many good wishes to his [*sic*] family and all Muslims in the Empire, and that he hoped to have the opportunity to see her again soon'.<sup>52</sup>

Oral testimonies from both Eritrea and Ethiopia confirm the statements from colonial sources regarding the highly-respected position the *Šarīfa* enjoyed among Muslim and Christian communities alike. Among these, one particular narrative celebrates her role in promoting religious freedom in Ethiopia. This story was related to me in both Massawa and Cairo.<sup>53</sup> Interviewees reported that her visit to Harär was a turning point for the treatment of Muslims in the area. Despite being a Christian, the city's religious leader is said to have allowed the construction of a mosque in her honour. The mosque of *Sittī* °Alawīyya, also known as the 'Italian mosque', is locat-

49 Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Reparto A.O.I., Serie H.A., AO00008954, *Moschea in costruzione a Dire Dawa* (February 1938); and Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Reparto A.O.I., Serie H.A., AO00009027, *Moschea [a Dire Dawa]* (1938).

50 Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Cinegiornale B1215, *Un ricevimento offerto dalla comunità musulmana in onore del Governatore Ammiraglio De Feo* (Massawa, 8 December 1937).

51 Interview with *al-Hāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf (Addis Abāba, November 2009).

52 Rome, Piola Caselli private archive, Vittorio Piola Caselli section, *Telegramma: Graziani–Piola Caselli. Oggetto: Sceriffa. Agordat 10 February 1938* (10 February 1938). His wish was granted, in fact, as she travelled to Rome to meet Mussolini at Palazzo Venezia just a few months later.

53 Interviews with Ḥasan Muḥammad °Alī (Həṭumlo, August 2004) and with Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī and *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya (Cairo, May 2009).

ed in the market square in Harär. According to some Haräri traditions, it was built in 1937 and inaugurated by the *Šarīfa*.<sup>54</sup>

The guardian of the mosque, who allowed me to visit the interior of the building, suggested that the building plans included an interesting innovation: for the first time, part of the space was reserved for Muslim women. This requires further investigation, notably through more fieldwork and by collecting other oral and material data. If this new development is validated, it would support the theory that in the process of the Islamic renewal of the region, Muslim women acquired more visibility in masculine religious spaces, including mosques. In fact, it would represent an innovation with regard to historiographical assumptions of Muslim women's visibility in religious spaces, which is customarily associated mainly with shrines and sanctuaries. In Harär, the relatively high percentage of shrines devoted to female saints is considered to be quite remarkable: of the 356 shrines, 10 per cent are devoted to women.<sup>55</sup> Sanctuaries are generally considered to be mixed-gender religious spaces, a supplement to the traditionally masculine space of the mosque. During the colonial period, from Sudan to Ethiopia, the process of encouraging the building of mosques was pursued on the initiative of female Sufi leaders, such as *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya in Eritrea and Ethiopia and *Sittī* Maryam al-Mīrḡanī (d.1952) in Sudan. *Sittī* Maryam al-Mīrḡanī lived in Sudan under the British protectorate, and was a political and religious mediator between the colonial authorities and indigenous Muslims.<sup>56</sup> In Sudan, she promoted both Muslim women's religious education and mosque-building activities in the country, which the British administrator described as 'models of what small village mosques should look like'.<sup>57</sup> This mosque construction project was pursued in accordance with colonial policy as a part of the development plan for the Eritrean lowlands.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in Ethiopia, the construction of a large number of village mosques all over the country was promoted.<sup>59</sup> In this context, in 1937 a mosque was inaugurated in Massawa, in honour of the mother of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya followed by another in Harär, in the 'city of the saints', in her own honour.<sup>60</sup>

54 See Bruzzi 2018, 198. I would like to thank Alessandro Gori for his advice on the evidence on *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya's mosque in Harär.

55 Gibb 2000, 25.

56 On *Sittī* Maryam al-Mīrḡanī, see Grandin 1988.

57 Voll 1969, 573.

58 Rome, Piola Caselli private archive, Vittorio Piola Caselli section, *Schedario dei capi tribù*.

59 Hussein Ahmed 2007, 104; Sbacchi 1985, 162–163.

60 The inauguration of the mosque in honour of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya's mother in Massawa is recorded in the newsreel Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Ci-

Throughout the colonial occupation, both the British in Sudan and the Italian government in Eritrea and Ethiopia promoted a re-Islamization process through a development plan that included the establishment and restoration of mosques. In the context of this urban planning, in around 1930, female Sufi leaders appeared as active proselytizing agents and religious mentors. From their traditional role as guardians of shrines, they acquired more visibility in this particular area of the colonial occupation in religious spaces that were traditionally exclusively masculine. Although in the past their memory had been associated almost exclusively with shrines, they acquired a more institutional role in both religious and socio-political public spaces during the occupation. On the one hand, they promoted the construction of mosques in the region, while on the other, new or renovated mosques were dedicated to their memories.

### The 'Female Saint' and the Sacralization of Politics

Since the publication of Emilio Gentile's works on the sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy, a great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to the rituals, myths, symbols, and spectacles the Fascist regime employed to legitimize its political agenda and attract the masses.<sup>61</sup> Both the visual and oral sources on the mosque-building policy pursued in Eritrea and Ethiopia during the occupation report a series of ritualization and spectacles that accompanied the religious agenda pursued by the Fascist regime in the region. These rituals, which in some cases were also immortalized in photographs or filmed recordings by the Luce Institute,<sup>62</sup> gave a leading religious leader as *Sittī* °Alawīyya a charismatic aura. The *Hāḡḡi* Aḥmad Kebiro, a Harāri teacher who was a child when *Sittī* °Alawīyya visited Harār argued that

When *Sittī* °Alawīyya arrived in Harār, the Italians organized a welcome ceremony so that people would greet her on the occasion of the inauguration of the mosque [...]. In that period, people didn't go into

negiornale B1215, *Un ricevimento offerto dalla comunità musulmana in onore del Governatore Ammiraglio De Feo* (Massawa, 8 December 1937).

61 Gentile 1993.

62 This was the case of the above-mentioned inauguration of the mosque in Massawa: Rome, Istituto Luce Cinecittà, Archivio Storico Luce, Cinegiornale B1215, *Un ricevimento offerto dalla comunità musulmana in onore del Governatore Ammiraglio De Feo* (Massawa, 8 December 1937). But this was also the case with the solemn celebration of the inauguration of the Tāsānāy dam in 1928 and the inauguration of the Orthodox church in Massawa in 1936, which saw the participation of religious, civil, and military authorities. See De Carli 2016 and Bruzzi 2018, 144–158.

the offices of the government. They feared them, whereas she was able to enter whenever she wanted to with a dozen people.<sup>63</sup>

Her access to colonial political spaces, which were inaccessible to common people, was viewed by indigenous Muslims as particularly impressive. In a way, this was a ‘proof’ of her charismatic power over the occupying powers. According to Ay Rawda Qallo,

She built mosques in Harär and Dərre Dawa [...]. She belonged to a rich family [...]. She had great *karāma*, she built mosques in Gälämsö, Bäddesa, and Kombolča [...]. When the Italians entered a city, she arrived and inaugurated the mosque. Haräri people built the mosque in Addis Abäba [...].<sup>64</sup> Haräri people, especially religious and learned people, respected and knew *Sittī* °Alawīyya. There was, and still is, a network that links Sufis and erudite Muslims from different areas.<sup>65</sup>

According to my interviewees, *Šarīfa* °Alawīyya was recognized as a religious authority by Ethiopian Sufis and erudites such as the Qādiriyya *šayḥs* and other Muslim notables in Harär, such as the relatives of Ay Rawda Qallu.<sup>66</sup> Her influential role also appears to be related to the promotion of a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1939 that was supported by the Italians.<sup>67</sup> On this issue, *al-Hāğğ* Kāmil Šarīf reported that

Thanks to her influence, around 500 people were taken on a pilgrimage. From Ğimma, Däse, Dərre Dawa, Harär [...]. Some selected *šayḥs* were taken by car to Mogadishu and from there crossed the sea to Jeddah to reach Mecca. Then they returned [...]. I had the opportunity to be in Harär when they came back; my father was in prison in Addis Abäba at that time. My father had asked my aunt to bring us

63 Interview with *Hāğğ* Aḥmad Kebiro (Harär, November 2009).

64 The credit she gave the Haräri people for building the al-Anwar mosque should be considered in the context of a number of logistical and financial problems that arose throughout the mosque-building project. As Hussein Ahmed has pointed out, the mosque has a long history characterized by financial constraints and administrative obstacles (Hussein Ahmed 1999; ‘Ĝāmi° al-Anwar’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 673b–675a (Hussein Ahmed)). Indeed, the Haräri community had already embarked upon the project to build an Islamic court and schools in Addis Abäba before the Italian occupation (Ibrahim Mulushewa 2009, 22). After the Italians departed, the funds to expand the al-Anwar mosque were raised thanks to voluntary contributions (Hussein Ahmed 1999; ‘Ĝāmi° al-Anwar’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 673b–675a (Hussein Ahmed)).

65 According to this testimony she was granted *karāma* (saintly charisma), which allowed her to build mosques; interview with Ay Rawda Qallu (Harär, November 2009).

66 Ibid.

67 On the funding of pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, see Sbacchi 1985, 163.

to Harär, where we could go to an Islamic school to study the Qurʾān [...].<sup>68</sup> My mother and sister stayed in Addis to look after my father. Therefore [in Harär], we had the opportunity to see the pilgrims [returning from Mecca] arriving from the mountains at the entrance to Harär; their cars paraded in front of us, and the people shouted, ‘Welcome, welcome, welcome’. The streets were crowded with people, all celebrating, happy [...]. And she herself was with this group of pilgrims, she entered the *commissariato*, and then she went back to Addis and then to Massawa. Thanks to her, 500 people had the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, to do the *ḥāḡḡ*, and come back safe and happy. *Sittī* ‘Alawīyya was important for Muslims’ good spirits because previously they had been oppressed. When she was there nobody was afraid, and everybody was very happy. She did positive things for Muslims.<sup>69</sup>

*Al-Hāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf’s narrative makes implicit reference to the ambivalent position of Muslim communities during the occupation. After the attempt on Graziani’s life in 1937, the Italians arrested a number of people, including Muslims. As Ibrahim Mulushewa has noted, there were also Muslim leaders among these prisoners, including teachers from the madrasa al-Nadil Itifaq, *al-Šayḥ* Khatima, and *al-Šayḥ* Muḥammad Sayyīd Šadāq. Other Egyptian teachers from the same madrasa were expelled, and the founder of the school was only released after an intervention by an influential Eritrean trader, Saleh Aḥmad Kekiya from Arkiko.<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, Muslims benefitted from greater freedom to worship during the Italian occupation, but on the other, they were also submitted to political repression by the regime. In this sense, the *Šarīfa*’s support for this pro-Islamic policy was not perceived as an unconditional political collaboration with the Italian government. According to a Haräri oral tradition, ‘[p]eople said that she was a person who could see [...]. She saw that the Italians had cut down the

68 During the occupation, Harär was promoted as an Islamic centre of learning. The Qurʾānic school, which had had sixty students under Ethiopian rule, became more popular, and reached 450 students in 1937/1938 (Sbacchi 1985, 163).

69 Interview with *al-Hāḡḡ* Kāmil Šarīf (Addis Abāba, November 2009).

70 Ibrahim Mulushewa 2009, 25. As Venosa points out, in 1944, Saleh Aḥmad Kekiya ‘used the revenue he had received from property investments in Addis Abāba to fund the construction of an Islamic school in Hirghigo that enrolled more than five hundred students’ (Venosa 2014, 42). On Saleh Aḥmad Kekiya, see Venosa 2014, 42, 49, 83, 92, 112, and 207.

coffee plants and *qāt* belonging to *awliyā'* to build roads and she saw the end of the Italian occupation.<sup>71</sup>

*Kabīr* °Abdu, a Harāri historian and teacher, grandson and student of Ay Rawda Qallu, related the same story.

*Sittī* °Alawīyya saw the end of the Italian occupation and the arrival of the British. She went to Ethiopia because the Italians had invited her, but when she arrived, she saw what would happen. In the last period of her life something broke down in her relations with the Italians. We thought they wanted to imprison or kill her, we don't know very well. But finally she died of natural causes.<sup>72</sup>

And in Ay Rawda Qallo's account,<sup>73</sup>

*Sittī* °Alawīyya could see [...] she foretold that, after five years, the Italians would leave and the British would arrive, and after the British, the Amhara would arrive [...]. She had *karāma* and foretold this. She died with *ṣahāda* [...]. She went to Ethiopia at the Italians' invitation, but when she arrived and saw that they had cut down trees, *qāt*, and coffee belonging to the *awliyā'* to build roads, she predicted that after five years the British would arrive. She was not afraid to speak the truth. After she said that, the Italians wanted to kill her but they didn't. She died a natural death shortly thereafter. Where the Italians went with her, they were warmly welcomed because she had *karāma*.<sup>74</sup>

These memories focus on her charisma ('she had *karāma*', 'she was a person that could see', etc.) and her ability to influence the occupier's policy (her influence on the Italian government and Italian authorities was very strong and everything she requested was generally granted). They also insist on her awareness of the hypocrisy of Italian policy and the Italians' lack of respect for Harāri religiosity ('[she] saw that they had cut down trees, *qāt*, and coffee belonging to the *awliyā'* to build roads').

71 Interview with *al-Hāḡḡ* Aḥmad Kebiro (Harār, November 2009). *Qāt* plants are considered to have *karāma*; for a study on the past and present significance of *qāt* in Ethiopia, see Ezekiel Gebissa 2004. 'Awliyā' is the plural form of *wālī*, he who is close to God, a saint.

72 Interview with *Kabīr* °Abdu (Harār, November 2009).

73 Ay Rawda Qallu, Harāri and Qādirī *ṣayḥa*, granddaughter of *Sayyīd* °Abdullāhi Ṣādiq (Harār, November 2009).

74 Interview with Ay Rawda Qallu (Harār, November 2009).



## Conclusion

The oral narratives presented above contrast with the official discourse in Italian propaganda on *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya’s unconditional support for and loyalty to the Fascist regime. Instead, they draw attention to *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya’s awareness of (and eventually her support for) local unrest caused by the Italian government’s policy, and more specifically its land policy. According to these Harāri stories, *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya ‘was not afraid to speak the truth’. My interpretation here is that this statement is a reference to one particular *ḥadiṭ* that argues that it is a great *ḡihād* to tell the truth to an oppressor. The same expression is employed with reference to *al-Šayḥ* ʿAbdulwahāb ibn Šayḥ Yūnus (1839–1942), one of the greatest ʿulamāʾ of nineteenth-century Bale, who was a peacekeeper and a political and religious mediator with the Ethiopian government, in particular with Empress Zāwditu and later with Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase. During the Italian occupation, he negotiated with the Italian authorities after *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya had sent him a diplomatic letter. This letter, and other informal contacts between *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya and Muslim notables, helped the Italian government to be accepted by the people of Bale.<sup>75</sup>

Her political agenda was to spread Islam in Ethiopia, and to support the ‘emancipation’ of Muslims, and in particular their religious, political, and civil rights. The religious rights Muslims acquired during the Italian occupation had important consequences for their self-awareness in the years that followed in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. As Venosa has pointed out, during the federation period, the activists of the Muslim League—which was established in 1946 in Kārān under the aegis of *Sayyīd* Bakrī al-Mīrḡanī—wrote to the Ethiopian ministries to object to the fact that under the Ethiopian (federal) government, Muslims in Eritrea were being ‘deprived of their civil and religious rights in much the same way as Ethiopian Muslims had historically been marginalized by the imperial government’.<sup>76</sup> From this perspective, Muslim identity in both Ethiopia and Eritrea was marked by the Italian occupation, which was a parenthesis in their acquisition of religious rights. Finally, the memory of this period has significant implications for their relationship with the new political setting in the region.

This same awareness, which is both Islamic and Eritrean, was already being formed with some consistency at a practical level and among actors during the colonial period in the context of the interactive dynamics between a Muslim mercantile and intellectual class and the actors, practices, and poli-

<sup>75</sup> Sartu Shemsuddin 2013, 28–30 and 93.

<sup>76</sup> Venosa 2014, 164. On *Sayyīd* Bakrī al-Mīrḡanī see also my contribution ‘Bakrī b. Ġaʿfar b. Bakrī b. Ġaʿfar aṣ-Šādiq b. Muḥammad ʿUṭmān al-Mīrḡanī’, *EAE*, V (2014), 269b–270a (S. Bruzzi).



cies of the liberal Italian government, and also—and possibly above all—during the occupation of Ethiopia.

### Appendix: Selected Images of *Sittī* ʿAlawīyya



Fig. 1 'Sceriffa Alauia among Muslim leaders' (around 1930). Photo by Vittorio Piola Caselli. Rome, Piola Caselli private archive.



Fig. 2 'Sceriffa Alauia', 'Ras Guessa', 'A leader of the Coptic Church' (around 1930). Photo by Vittorio Piola Caselli. Rome, Piola Caselli private archive.

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# Religious Identity Claims and Historical Consciousness in Myths of Origin among the Gurage, Ethiopia

DIRK BUSTORF

## Abstract

Orally narrated history as a social practice, and oral historical traditions as a type of source provide a resource and a space of reflection in an ongoing discursive process of religious and ethnic identity construction. Religious and ethnic affiliations reshape both historical consciousness and traditions which again retroact on religious and ethnic identities. This interplay is analysed here based on selected narratives collected from different subgroups of the Gurage and Səlṭe of southern-central Ethiopia.

In this region, religious affiliation to Islam, to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, or to the autochthonous religion of the Gurage cross-cuts ethnic and territorial boundaries. Examining how this multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting affects orally narrated history and historical consciousness, this paper focuses on legends or myths of origin representing the three religious traditions and their contradictory views of history.

This study starts with a general conceptual consideration of oral tradition, historical consciousness, and religious identity to provide an analytical framework. The first group of narratives discussed deals with the introduction of the three different religions into Gurageland. The second group of narratives are ancestral legends of a Gurage subgroup, the G'āta. In a third step, two interpretations of the origins of the cult of the pan-Gurage thunder spirit B'āžžä are examined. All three groups of legends are interrelated by implicitly referring to and borrowing from each other. Compelling indications of the influences of key narratives associated with the traditions of dominant lineages can be identified. This is especially the case with the Islamic tradition of the *šayḥs* of Abret in central Gurage.

## Introduction

This paper discusses the interplay between orally narrated history, historical consciousness, and religious identity. Orally narrated history is a social practice as well as an indispensable source. Historical consciousness and religious identity both play differing roles in the construction of group identity. Such construction again relies to a considerable extent on oral historical traditions as a symbolic resource and a space of reflection. Thus, an important part of the present discussion is an examination of how religious affiliation and historical consciousness shape historical traditions, and how historical traditions may influence concepts of religious identity.

This study is based on selected oral historical traditions collected during a series of ethnographic field-trips in southern-central Ethiopia between 2000 and 2013 among different subgroups of the Gurage and the historically and linguistically closely related Səlṭe. The multi-ethnic setting in the Gurage region shapes a complex historical memory in which every socio-political segment, from the level of lineage and clan up to that of larger ethno-territorial units, maintains its own historical memory.<sup>1</sup> The processes of oral transmission among these specific groups, however, did not develop in an isolated fashion. Rather, they implicitly or sometimes explicitly refer to each other. Thus, they constitute an oral historical discourse which defines and redefines ethnic and sub-ethnic group boundaries, and keeps alive memories of historical experience as well as alternative views of history. Moreover, it legitimizes social hierarchies and cultural values, and acknowledges mutual stereotypes of ‘the Other’.

Alongside ethnic identity, religious identity plays an important role in the discourse of history. In this region, religious affiliation to Islam, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and the practice of local manifestations of the *Gurage* autochthonous religion cross-cut ‘ethnic’ and territorial boundaries, and add to the diversity of narrative arrangements and views of history.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the cases discussed in this study were chosen from oral traditions related to these three religious traditions: firstly, the diverging Christian, Muslim and *Gurage* narratives about the coming of the three religions to Gurageland; secondly, the Muslim and non-Muslim variants of ancestral legends of the Gʿäta Gurage; and thirdly, the Muslim and non-Muslim interpretations of the origins of the cult of the thunder spirit Bʷäžžä. Before examining the oral traditions themselves, however, in the following paragraphs my conceptual framework of the interaction of historical consciousness, memory, and identity is laid out.

### Oral Historical Traditions and Historical Consciousness

‘Historical consciousness’ is not to be understood as a collective thought that substantially exists in a given group. It is a heuristic concept that may help us to understand or systematize the different ideas and discourses that

- 1 On a historically relatively shallow but politically strongly articulated base these narratives are integrated into the framework of the common historical consciousness of the Gurage. Among second-, third- or fourth-generation Gurage migrants living outside Gurageland there might exist a ‘detribalized’ pan-Gurage identity. However, according to my observations, in Gurageland itself, being Gurage, above all else, means being a member of one specific subgroup.
- 2 Throughout this text the name Gurage is written in italics whenever it refers to the old socio-religious system or folk-religion.

exist at a defined historical moment (i.e. the ‘ethnographic present’) in a group about its past. Another concept related to that of historical consciousness is ‘cultural memory’. In both concepts history is understood as the discursive process of constructing cultural meanings which supports the constant construction of the present and the future.<sup>3</sup> As such, history is one of the basic resources of the ideological configuration of the group. The primary function of historical consciousness is to establish and maintain the identity of a group which perceives itself as a collective subject of history – or as a community of shared historical fate. Legitimizing social institutions and norms, as well as reflecting on general questions of humanity, or interpreting recent circumstances, are further important functions.<sup>4</sup>

Constructing identity by means of history is done by ethnocentric ‘We–Other’ dichotomies historically defined by certain ‘figures of memory’ which may serve as *identity statements*.<sup>5</sup> The narrative arrangements and combinations of figures of memory follow mythical plots. At the same time, collective memory maintains traces of real historical experiences and possible hints at earlier stages of historical consciousness and at inferior interpretations of history. This extended concept of historical consciousness integrates myth as well as history. It is constituted by the collective memory of the We-group as well as by communicative negotiation processes and practices of transmission by which the interpretation of the past is constantly updated or modified.<sup>6</sup>

Oral historical traditions are the manifestation of and the basis for historical consciousness. They are the intermediary result of trans-generational as well as synchronic discursive processes expressing cultural creativity and resilience. For a society producing oral historical traditions they sustain a collective memory of historical experiences and facts. At the same time, however, they provide the motives and elements with which identity statements and ideological claims are constructed. Thus, oral historical traditions may be analysed from different perspectives which cannot (or should not) be treated as being isolated from each other. They are an important historical source for conventional historiography but also a source for the examination of both the current and the former historical consciousness of the group.<sup>7</sup>

3 In the context of those religions discussed in this paper, Talal Asad’s notion of Islam as ‘discursive tradition’ was a real inspiration (cf. Talal Asad 1986).

4 Bustorf 2011, 20–31.

5 In my understanding, ‘figures of memory’ are relatively stable structural elements of historical narratives and cultural memory. They serve as micro-plots or *topoi* constituting historical consciousness (cf. Assmann 1992, 37; Bustorf 2011, 30–31).

6 Bustorf 2011, 30–31.

7 Ibid.



## Religious Identity and Historical Memory

While history provides an ideological frame which helps to shape a sense of historical continuity and distinctiveness based on real/imagined experiences, religion defines and explains the character, place, and role of the group (or individual) within the socio-cosmic order, and further legitimizes and determines social practices. Religious identity encompasses those structures in the identity system of a group or individual which define affiliation, and religious concepts and practices as markers of social distinctiveness. Therefore, an analysis of religious identity as reflected in orally narrated history, must carefully identify hidden or overt religious motives, connotations, and the related symbolic value of narrative elements. It should take into account the regional history of religion and the discursive field in which a tradition is transmitted as well as the specific religious affiliation of the narrator and his/her audience. The relation between ethnic (or other) identity and religious identity or the degrees to which they may overlap or interact in different circumstances are crucial here. Thus, one and the same element of a narrative may carry a wide range of potential meanings, religious/religion-related meanings as well as non-religious meanings at one and the same time.

In the case of the Gurage, it is difficult to separate the religious corpus of *Gurage* oral historical tradition from the general historical memory of the different subgroups. If and to what extent, for example, the legendary figure of the *Gurage* ancestor *Azmač Səbḥat* (see below) expresses an ethno-political or a religious claim, or both, cannot be said for all times and circumstances but only in relation to the specific historical, intertextual, and situational context of oral transmission. Certainly, local traditions on the history of specific churches or shrines and lineages of holy men or women do exist. In many cases, they seem to be detached from, or only weakly linked with, the rest of the subgroups' orally narrated history. Moreover, due to their trans-ethnic character, Christian and Muslim communities combine such local traditions as part of their common religious historical consciousness integrated into their respective local groups' memory. They have different foci, however. While in areas clearly dominated by one religion, the general and the religious historical narratives tend largely to overlap, in multi-religious areas, however, they are split into parallel and conflicting threads of narration.

In the case of the orally narrated history of the Səlṭe, an analysis of structures and narrative elements shows that the central topos of their historical consciousness is a strong claim to Arabic and Islamic descent. This central topos serves as the mnemonic anchor of collective memory (or primary figure of memory) around which the many narratives and the secondary figures of memory are organized. Among the Səlṭe (and the Wälāne and



Gädäbano, their nearest linguistic relatives) there is a high degree of congruence of religious historical consciousness and ethno-political identity.<sup>8</sup> Among the Gurage, however, the ethnic and religious constellations are much more complex. There is a common historical narrative officially shared by most. Research on the local level, however, reveals traditions differing from or even contradicting this chief narrative. Thus, we may find a wide range of varying degrees of congruence of religious and ethnic historical consciousness as well as a rather diversified historical tradition. This becomes obvious when informants with differing religious affiliations tell diverging versions of one and the same tradition. In some cases, parallel chains of oral transmission of the same basic plot have developed, each referring to a different religious background.

### Religious Claims in the Orally Narrated History of the Gurage

The Gurage are a cluster of ethno-territorial groups (Amh./Gur. *bet*, 'house') and subgroups (Gur. *ṭəb*, 'clan') with various heterogeneous origins and local histories. Moreover, and contrary to the outdated identification of Gurage with Orthodox Christianity alone, the Gurage are a multi-religious society with Muslims and Christians often living together in mixed settlements.<sup>9</sup> Besides these two Abrahamic religions, features of the old Gurage socio-religious system are still practised, if somewhat reduced and decontextualized. After the conquest of Gurageland by Mənilək's troops and the defeat of the *ḡihād* of the Gurage Muslims under Ḥasān ʿŅḡamo in 1889, the followers of this complex of religious customs and beliefs gradually embraced Orthodox Christianity. Many of them continued to observe the cults of the various local as well as of the pan-Gurage protector spirits which were now reinterpreted as 'angels'. Thus, these cults became an unofficial but integral part of Orthodox Christian folk-religion in the Gurage countryside.<sup>10</sup> These spirits were to some degree also esteemed by Muslims, especially for their healing powers. Since about the time of the Ethiopian revolution, this folk-religious parallelism (rather than syncretism) came under strong pressure from Christian Orthodox and Muslim purists as well

8 Cf. Bustorf 2011, 315–361. This congruence may have been less accentuated some centuries ago. Under the emerging ethnicity debates and the politics of 'ethnic federalism' in the early 1990s, the Səlṭe, however, revised their memory and claimed their ethnic identity to be completely separate from that of the Gurage. Furthermore, Muslim identity could be articulated more openly under the new regime, and indeed, recently, its importance has considerably increased; cf. Abbink 1992; 1999.

9 Cf. also Bustorf 2014.

10 Therefore, local Orthodox Christians (especially in retrospect) are often identified with followers of the old *Gurage* religion and vice versa.

as from the state administration. Today, the *Gurage* cults are officially understood as ‘culture’ (Amh. *babäl*) but not as ‘religion’ (Amh. *haymanot*). Followers are often discriminated against as being ‘backward’ or as ‘non-believers’ practising so-called harmful practices.

All three religious traditions claim to have reached the Gurage country in ancient times. Their coming is associated with the coming of certain ethnic formations which later intermingled with others. Some of them are still recognizable in certain clan genealogies.

### Christian Origins

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has deep historical roots in Gurageland. The earliest written references to Christianity in the region go back to the fourteenth century, particularly to the reign of Aṣe ʿAmdä Šəyon I (r 1314–1344). His *Chronicle* describes locations in the Gurage region governed by his representatives.<sup>11</sup> These written sources are confirmed by oral traditions. Perhaps the most common historical topos about the Gurage is that a certain *Azmač Səbḥat* migrated with his troops from northern Abyssinia to the area of Aymälläl in today’s northern Gurageland.<sup>12</sup> Most versions of this legend claim that he was a general in the army of the Solomonic king, and, moreover, that he himself could be traced back to the biblical Solomon. *Azmač Səbḥat* is said to have established military colonies in the region in order to secure the southern boundaries of the Christian kingdom. As will be discussed below, a questionable oral tradition collected by Chiarini dates *Azmač Səbḥat* much later, in the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup>

General historical consciousness among the *Säbat bet* Gurage styles *Azmač Səbḥat* as the ‘father of the Gurage’. However, only a few of those descent groups which are today considered to be part of the *Säbat bet* Gurage actually present him as an integral element of their oral genealogical

11 Perruchon 1889.

12 There are several explanations for the name of the Gurage referring to their origin. One of them claims that they migrated from the area of Gura<sup>ᶜ</sup>, Akkälä Guzay, in today’s Eritrea. *Gura-ge* then would mean ‘land of [the people from] Gura’. An even more popular folk etymology derives the name from *gra-ge*, the ‘land to the left’, because ‘for a person in Gondär facing the West, “left” lies to the south’. However, this explanation seems to be a bit odd. To me it makes more sense to understand ‘left’ here as the left flank of the Abyssinian army which camped on the left side of the royal camp as seen from the entrance to the king’s tent (in today’s Gondär there is an area adjacent to the royal enclosure still known by older inhabitants as ‘*Gra Gondär*’, personal communication by Sisay Sahile, Gondär, May 2014). Gurage, then, could be rendered as ‘the land conquered or allotted to the left flank [of the army]’. In any case, strictly speaking, the name indicates an area or land (-ge) and not a people.

13 Cecchi 1888, 114–115.

lists. It seems that genealogical reference to him simply became a central genealogical feature of oral tradition. This is the case especially among lineages of chiefs, in order to claim prestigious Solomonic ancestry as well as a link to the imperial lineage of Christian Ethiopia. Less prestigious lineages tend to adopt central parts of the oral traditions of the chiefly lineages they have been allied to for longer periods of time (but without completely forgetting their own alternative genealogies). Through this process of adoption and genealogical telescoping a chiefly narrative may spread far beyond its origins obfuscating other traditions.

Another feature used to underline legitimacy by reference to Christian Ethiopia, is the use of one of the central insignia of local Gurage kingship, the *gondär* (or *g<sup>w</sup>ondär*). Such symbolically precious metal bracelets can be found in the possession of chiefs who are endowed with titles such as *azmač* (Gur. *azma*, ‘chief’), *nəg<sup>w</sup>əs* (Gur. ‘king’) or *dam<sup>w</sup>ä/damo* (Gur. ‘master’). Some claim that they were inherited through the local royal/chiefly lineages ‘since the times of *Azmač Səbhāt*’, or that they were passed down ‘from the kings in Gondär’.<sup>14</sup>

The territorial expansion of *Aše ʿAmdä Šəyon I* and the establishment of military settlers at the southern boundaries was followed by a migration of Orthodox monks and missionaries to the south.<sup>15</sup> The most prominent of them was *Abunä Zena Marqos* whom oral as well as written traditions equivocally depict as the saint who brought Christianity to the Gurage region. He allegedly founded ‘150’ churches in Aymälläl, northern Gurageland, including the monastery of *Muḥər Iyäsus*.<sup>16</sup> Followers of the old *Gurage* religion arguing for their deep historical link with early Christianity also identify *Muḥər* with the place of origin of some of the *Gurage* protector spirits and their cults (see below). Moreover, the ‘secret language’ uttered by Gurage spirit mediums during their altered state of consciousness is frequently identified by informants as being the language of *Muḥər*; although they also may concede that they are not personally familiar with this tongue.

Apart from Aymälläl, the Gurage groups of *Əndägañ* and *Enär* (not to be confused with *Ənor/Ənnämor*) lay claim to the honour of having a very early Christian history. Indeed, *Əndägañ* oral traditions claim that their oldest *tabot*, the *Maryam tabot* of *Bušurro*, was brought into the region from the north by *Azmač Səbhāt*’s ‘son’, a certain *Bäğərond Täkle*. They maintain that it survived the *ğihād* of *Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm* hidden in a cave at

14 See Bustorf 2005.

15 Perruchon 1889.

16 *Muḥər* has been identified with the ‘Mugän’ of *ʿAmdä Šəyon I*’s chronicle; cf. ‘*Muḥər* ethnography’, *E Ae*, III (2007), 1064a–1065a (A. Kruczinsky).

Bušurro which is considered the earliest place of ʿĒndāgañ settlement.<sup>17</sup> Priests from the church of Enär Amanuʿel told LeBel that the Enär retained their original Christianity until today despite having been isolated from Muḥər for a long period of time.<sup>18</sup> However, as my own research among ʿĒndāgañ and Enär has shown, before the Ethiopian conquest, these groups practised their own local forms of the *Gurage* autochthonous folk-religion which were probably not more Christian in substance than those of other Gurage subgroups. Moreover, the *Gurage* high priest of the ʿĒndāgañ even is accorded a central symbolic authority in the pan-Gurage cult of the thunder spirit B<sup>w</sup>äžžä. This is justified by the seniority of his lineage but not by Christian tradition.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian immigrants of the times of *Azmač Səbḥat* and *Abunä Zena Marqos* represent the earliest traceable wave of migration into the northern Gurage region. Hints concerning the religion of the population inhabiting the area before are scarce. However, the written legend of Zena Marqos claims that the saint defiled the shrines of a local religion venerating spirits such as ‘Gärdan and Makos’.<sup>20</sup> Oral tradition adds to this the information that certain clans are to be traced back to the ‘original population’. However, such traces in the oral record should be treated with care. Oral narrators have a perspective which is largely limited to their local community’s tradition and are often not aware of chronological constraints. Notwithstanding (or, indeed, because of) the fact that the question of ‘who came when?’ is of greatest importance for legitimizing socio-political hierarchies, the different stories of waves of immigration into their lands tend to mingle. Moreover, those who have modern historical knowledge may try to harmonize their story with what they learned in school or from books by leaving out traditional elements contradicting a learned view of history.

The second identifiable wave of immigration mentioned in oral sources consisted of Christian migrants probably entering Gurageland during the reign of Aše Zär’a Ya’əqob (r 1434–1486). As I have discussed in detail elsewhere, a considerable portion of today’s Gurage and Səlṭe claim to descend from ancestors who immigrated as part of Zär’a Ya’əqob’s troops.<sup>21</sup> They may even claim to be descendants of the King himself who is said to have camped at different sites in the region. Clans of this category are des-

17 Bustorf 2002, 49; Bustorf 2005, 43, n. 88.

18 LeBel 1974, 103.

19 Bustorf 2002, 49; Bustorf 2005; ‘Božžä’, *EAE*, I (2003), 619b–620a (D. Bustorf); Worku Nida 2002.

20 ‘Muḥər Iyäsus’, *EAE*, III (2007), 1065a–b (Mersha Alehegne); ‘Zena Marqos’, *EAE*, V (2014), 178a–179a (O. Rainieri).

21 Bustorf 2006.

ignated as *žāra*. Often the clan name itself has the ending *-žāra* rather than *-ṭəb*. The designation *žāra* was employed as a general term for ‘original or earlier inhabitants’ by the Muslim immigrants who entered the region in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

The question ‘who came when?’ compels us to take a very close look at chronology, and this brings us back to *Azmač Səbḥat*. Chiarini collected an oral tradition holding that Səbḥat, a chief from Təgre (i.e. Təgray), came by the order of Aše Susənyos (r 1604–1632) to protect some ancestral groups who were dispersed in the course of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm’s *ḡihād* and the Oromo expansion that followed.<sup>22</sup> After he had lost part of his troops, Səbḥat did not return to the north but established a royal dynasty on one of the islands of Lake Z<sup>w</sup>ay which was ended by *Nəḡus Šahlä Šəllase* of Šāwa (r 1839–1847) who coined himself ‘king of the Gurage’. Chiarini’s legend is not affirmed by the chronicles which report a campaign of Susənyos against the *aḡam[o]*.<sup>23</sup> They make no mention of *Azmač Səbḥat* controlling the area, but do mention a vice-regent (*qaṭ*) of the province of Wāḡ by the name of Dama Krəstos.<sup>24</sup>

The version of the Səbḥat narrative collected by Chiarini is not attested in any other recorded oral tradition and does not fit into the overall emic periodization of Gurage history. However, it formulates a clear identity statement which was very welcome in Chiarini’s day. Mənilək tried to legitimize his conquest as a reconquest of an allegedly original Christian region, and as a reintegration of a surviving south Ethiopian Christianity into the kingdom. The ancient Christian history of the Z<sup>w</sup>ay islands and other areas in the south was part of this claim.<sup>25</sup> When Chiarini visited Gurage it was a time of growing (and justified) fear among the non-Muslim Gurage that they might be overwhelmed by the military power of Muslim revivalists led by Ḥasən Əḡamo of Qabeena. In encounters with Gurage leaders the Italian was asked for military support for the Gurage ‘Christians’.<sup>26</sup> This indicates that, not only from Mənilək’s but also from the local perspective, such

22 Cecchi 1888, 114–115. Cf. Basset 1897.

23 *Aḡam[o]* (or *aḡam<sup>w</sup>ä* and other variants) is used here not for Arabized people but for descendants of immigrants of claimed Arab ancestry, such as some of the ancestors of the Səlṭe (cf. Bustorf 2006, 25, n. 7; Bustorf 2011, *passim*). In this sense, the *aḡam* are mentioned in Ašmə Giyorgis’s chronicle as a group in Gurageland during the time of Aše Susənyos (Bairu Tafla 1987, 210 (ed.), 211(tr.)).

24 Dama is most probably derived from Gurage *dam<sup>w</sup>ä*, ‘master’. Bairu Tafla 1987, 211–213, 241, 251, 970; cf. Pereira 1900, 25–31.

25 ‘Bərbər Maryam’, *EAE*, I (2003), 531a–b (D. Bustorf).

26 Most of them seem to have been ‘Christians by the [butcher’s] knife’, i.e. nominal Christians who distinguished themselves from others by slaughtering animals in the name of the Trinity; cf. Chiarini in Cecchi 1888, 113–114.

an identity statement was opportune. Moreover, it may be supposed that during this time the memory of *Azmač Səbhat* as the Gurage ancestor per se might have increased in importance in the framework of a pan-Gurage historical consciousness developing parallel to the establishment or strengthening of pan-Gurage institutions (e.g. the *Yāgoka* assembly) and military alliances (*Gur. gogot*) in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

After the Ethiopian conquest of the country, great parts of Gurageland were actually Christianized through the establishment of military settlements, churches, and the influx of Christian settlers. Many Gurage leaders did not show strong resistance to formal conversion since it increased their chance of becoming officially approved leaders (*balabbat*) of their people, and, therefore, part of the new elite. In the old *Gurage* socio-religious system political and spiritual leadership were based on separate institutions, yet interdependent through mutual approval.<sup>28</sup> Thus, political leaders could partially detach from the *Gurage* cultic complex without weakening their authority too much.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the oral traditions of many of the local *Gurage* cults claim that they originated in the ancient Christianity of Muḥər and Aymälläl. Sometimes the lineages of the spirit mediums are traced back to the families of Christian priests. Such claims seem to be relatively ancient since they form part of very local and specific oral traditions to be found all over Gurageland.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, structural similarities between Christian and *Gurage* folk practices, which are often underlined by oral tradition, must have been convincing indicators, in the view of the people, that this claim was true. On the other hand, we should consider the possibility that such historical interpretations might have been additionally enforced by the

27 We should not underestimate the possible influence the Christian Ethiopian empire might have had on the direction that the development of Gurage historical consciousness has taken since the nineteenth century. European travellers, missionaries, and researchers (e.g. Krapf, Cecchi/Chiarini) who, certainly since the time of *Nəgus Šahlä Šəllase* of Šäwa, showed some interest in the Christian historical traces of southern peoples may have had a larger or smaller indirect role in the Christian interpretation of the Gurage identity. This can be deduced from the fact that they all had close contact with the Ethiopian rulers and policy makers who were trying to establish the legitimacy of conquest.

28 Cf. Shack 1979.

29 Nevertheless, Gurage spiritual leaders normally approved the authority of political leaders, as it was their traditional role, however, the spiritual leaders were no longer the only source of legitimacy alongside ancestry and inheritance.

30 The age of such claims probably correlates with the wide dissemination of motives to be found in the deeper fabric of the lesser known local clan traditions. Later motives often only stay on the surface of the most famous traditions of politically more important groups. For example, the pre-Islamic core of the Muslim version of the legend of origin of the *Gʿāta* (see below) remains almost untouched.

need to establish a better standing of the *Gurage* cultic complex towards the Church. Moreover, it gave adherents a justification for their way of life which transcended religious boundaries.

Although several incidents of hostility of the Church and Christian administrators towards the *Gurage* religious culture are remembered, local Christian priests seem not to have opposed strongly the development of religious institutional parallelism and spiritual syncretism. In following generations this resulted in *Gurage* practices becoming an integral part of Christian folk-religion. It is only since the anti-feudalist and anti-superstition campaigns following the Ethiopian revolution and, more recently, the emergence of Orthodox Christian fundamentalism, Evangelical missions,<sup>31</sup> scientism, and political developmentalism, that this religious culture has been genuinely threatened or reduced to a few decontextualized folkloristic elements. Oral traditions representing the phase of actual Christianization are many. However, there seem to be no important narratives which offer general identity statements. Historical memory is mainly based on very local traditions about the establishment of churches and monasteries in relation to the baptism of leaders or the foundation of 'Amhara' (i.e. northern Christian Ethiopian) settlements.

In summary, Christian historical consciousness as expressed by the orally narrated history of the non-Muslim *Gurage* is based on (1) different waves of early immigration of Christians, (2) the Solomonic identity of key ancestral figures as well as leaders of the immigrant groups (*Azmač Səbḥat* and *Aṣe Zār'a Ya'əqob*), (3) the early establishment of churches in northern Gurageland by a saint (*Abunä Zena Marqos*) and the conversion of original inhabitants, (4) the origin and long-established prestige of certain *tabotat*, (5) the allegedly Christian origin of *Gurage* cults and the continuity of originally Christian spiritual lineages, (6) and the foundation narratives of churches from the time of modern Christianization.

In this context it is important to consider that Christianity was introduced not only before waves of Muslim immigration but even before the establishment of *Gurage* religious traditions. It was mainly this statement that substantiated the fame of the *Gurage*, or more precisely the *Säbat bet Gurage*, to be a genuinely Christian people.

31 The role of the Catholic mission established during Ḥaylā Šəllase I's reign in Əndəbər (central Gurageland) in this regard is unclear to me. Recently, however, a Catholic church was established on the western periphery of the forest of the protector spirit of Zara. I have no information as to whether this was done to weaken the cult, and/or to partake in the symbolic prestige of the place.



## Islamic Origins

Oral historical traditions of the Muslim Gurage about their origins and the coming of Islam into the Gurage region are very heterogeneous in their details but share a general plot. They include (1) narratives about Arab origins and early immigration and (2) narratives about Islamic revival and Islamization in the nineteenth century.

(1) The first narrative expressed in the oral traditions is of major importance for the foundation of religious (and sometimes also ethnic) identity and the legitimacy of the Islamic presence. The general idea seems to be that Ethiopian Islam and several Ethiopian Muslim groups can be traced back to the immigration of Muslims from Arabia to the African shore. Oral traditions relate the story of how they came to Ethiopia and then describe the various routes the Muslim ancestors took, how they intermarried with local women, and how they, or their descendants, finally reached their present-day territories.

Like all Ethiopian Muslims the Gurage Muslims refer to localized versions of the ‘foundation myth of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa’,<sup>32</sup> the legend about the ‘First Hiġra’, meaning the exile of a group of early followers of the Prophet Muḥammad in *al-Ḥabaša* (Abyssinia). The First Hiġra narrative relates only very weakly to local Muslim historical memory in Gurageland (see the legend on the origin of the G<sup>y</sup>äta below). Nevertheless, it is, with its Quranic basis, highly important as an identity statement to which they explicitly, or more often implicitly, refer. While these narratives form part of the general framework of Muslim historical consciousness to which narrators may or may not relate their stories, the actual narrative of local history starts with later immigrations from Arabia. The most accentuated narratives explaining the early presence of Islam in and around Gurageland are to be found among the Eastern Gurage-speaking groups (Səlṭe, Wäläne, and Gädäbano).<sup>33</sup> They all claim to be composed to a considerable extent of descendants of Arabs, often of *šarīfīc* or *sayyīdic* ancestry, who had crossed the Red Sea. Unlike the historical narrative in northern Ethiopia, where Muslim ancestors are often related to a migration to the Eritrean coast or to the shrine of Nägaš in Ĕndārta, the Islamic ancestors of the Gurage region are said to have landed mainly on the Somali coast, and then settled in Harär or Harärge to mix with the autochthonous population. The

32 ‘Hiġra’, *EAE*, III (2007), 30b–32a (E. van Donzel and G. Schoeler).

33 These groups can be also categorized as part of the ‘Hadiyya in the broader sense’ because they all show historical relations to the Hadiyya sultanate (flourished thirteenth to sixteenth century) in the area between the western Harär plateau up to the eastern escarpments of the Rift Valley (Braukämper 1980; 2002, 55–68; cf. also ‘Hadiyya history’, *EAE*, II (2005), 963b–965a (U. Braukämper)).



routes of their migrations from there, as related by oral tradition, will not be considered here in their wider chronological, spatial, and genealogical complexity. In general, it can be stated that they were part of the dynamics of the ‘Hadiyya migrations’. These were part of a large-scale movement of populations, during the sixteenth century, from the eastern Ethiopian highlands via Bale and the Rift Valley into the Arsi lakes area and further to various locations of the southern-central Ethiopian highlands. Processes of ethnic fusion and fission among the migrant groups and with different local populations shape the ethno-linguistic landscape and historical memory until today.<sup>34</sup>

Oral traditions of the Eastern Gurage-speaking groups claim that their ancestors, who were led by descendants of the Prophet, fought in the *ḡihād* of *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (r 1525–1543) and *Amīr* Nūr b. Muḡāḥid (r 1551/1552–1567). After the war, they migrated in different waves and through diverse routes to the southern-central Ethiopian highlands to settle and marry local women of the *žāra* (see above).<sup>35</sup> Descendants of these migrants, and specifically those who claim a portion of Arab blood in their veins, in the Gurage-Səlṭe region are often referred to as *aḡam[o]*.<sup>36</sup> While historical memory about individual women is generally scarce, the names and origins of the indigenous wives of the immigrants are remembered well. This might not be so much because they became the female ancestors of a new group but because marriage made their sons legitimate holders of the land, and embedded them into the local system of inter-group relations.

Furthermore, the ‘*ḡihād*-and-migration’ traditions add a reference to the Islamic civilization of Harār, and sometimes to the Hadiyya sultanate which strengthens the identity statement of Arab or *šarīfīc/sayyīdic* descent. Moreover, the migrants enjoy the recognition of being righteous warriors against the infidels. In traditions of clans of important religious leaders this may be further enriched by links to the Muslim saint and legendary founder of the city of Harār, *Šayḥ* Abādir ‘Umar ar-Riḏā, and/or to great mystics, such as the Baghdadi Sufi master ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī or the thir-

34 For details see Braukämper 1980 and Bustorf 2011.

35 A few women of Arab descent are also remembered; these women accompanied them and married local leaders. Among the Səlṭe, the graves of the so-called five queens/ladies (Sl. *güist*) are still held in high esteem (Bustorf 2011, 138, n. 56 and *passim*).

36 It seems odd that the Arab word for non-Arab, *aḡam*, is used to designate people who claim Arab descent. One could speculate, however, that Arab Muslims considered their Abyssinian ‘brothers’ not pure enough because they were products of intermarriage with indigenous people. From the Abyssinian perspective, however, they seem to have been considered as ‘Arabian enough’ to claim a special status.

teenth-century saint *Šayḥ* Ḥusayn of Bale, whose names feature—well integrated or not—in several genealogies.

As with the Səlṭe, Wäläne, and Gädäbano, several Muslim Western Gurage trace themselves back to ancestors who entered the region during the *ḡihād*. Some Muslim clans additionally claim *šarific* or *sayyidic* descent. Their historical memory regarding the period prior to their arrival in the region seems to be almost identical with that of the Səlṭe. This may sometimes have its roots in untraceable early ethnic fusion and fission. In many cases, however, this is to be explained by the fact that these clans originate among the Eastern Gurage-speakers. Their ancestors were at some point integrated into the local Gurage framework of group, often functioning as Islamic missionaries. However, even among those Gurage families who converted only in the nineteenth century, typical original Gurage genealogies are sometimes telescoped by Muslim names from the fifth or seventh ancestor upwards. Therefore, it may eventually occur that, according to their different religious affiliations, members of the same clan cite different ancestors in earlier generations.

(2) The second category of oral traditions includes all legends referring to the spread of Islam after the early immigration related to the *ḡihād*. Most of them seem not to predate the beginning of the Islamic revival and Islamization. The Islamic revival in Gurageland which took place around the end of the eighteenth century was part of a broad historical process among Muslims in Ethiopia and all over Africa and the Near East. Its influence reached the country through Islamic merchants and preachers. It was magnified by the response of groups with an Islamic historical background who were already present in the region, such as the Eastern Gurage-speakers and the Hadiyya-speaking Qabeena (and a few Allaaba) who entered into Gurageland after 1815. They gathered Islamic converts and revivalists from different Gurage groups, such as Ali Dänäbo of Čäha, one of the first known converts of his group.<sup>37</sup>

The geopolitical background of Islamic revivalism in the region was the growth of European imperialism and colonialism in the Islamic sphere in combination with the decadence of the Ottoman Empire and its weakness in face of strong centrifugal forces. Since the second half of the eighteenth-century Wahhābism in Arabia inspired various revivalist movements, especially among mystic brotherhoods. In Ethiopia, the activities of the brotherhoods accelerated peaceful diffusion of Islam in areas along the main trade routes. Islam now spread, for instance among the Oromo of Wällo, Yäḡḡu, Rayyaa, the Təgre-speaking nomads of Eritrea and even to some

37 Bustorf 2011.

extent in the Christian highlands.<sup>38</sup> During the reign of *Ḥidiw* Muḥammad ʿAli, *Bāṣā*, mainly as a reaction to British-Egyptian colonial rule, the millennialist Mahdiyya movement emerged in the Egyptian Sudan. Its leader Muḥammad Aḥmad could defeat the Anglo-Egyptian troops in 1885 and took over power in Sudan.<sup>39</sup> The Mahdiyya searched for allies in Ethiopia sending messengers to Abbaa Ġifaar II of Ġimma and to other Muslim leaders such as Ḥasān ʿŋḡamo of Qabeena. The latter initiated a *ḡihād* that affected the whole Gurage region and interrupted *Aṣe Mənilək* II's expansion between 1886 and 1889. During this *ḡihād* almost all Gurageland was subdued by Qabeena warriors and converted to Islam. However, in most cases this conversion only prevailed as long as Ḥasān ʿŋḡamo's troops were nearby. When those troops had withdrawn, Islam could prevail only in a few formerly non-Muslim groups.<sup>40</sup>

Orally narrated history about Islamic revival and Islamization during the nineteenth century, however, is not only related to political and military turmoil but also tells stories of peaceful conversion. Naturally, Muslims who explain their being Muslim with a forceful conversion of their forefathers are hard to find. As in the case of *Abägaz* Hamdəno Adro, the leader of *Gʿäta*, they claim that they had converted on their own accord shortly before Ḥasān ʿŋḡamo had arrived. In fact, the *ḡihād* does not seem to have been more than a catalyst for processes of conversion that were already strong. They were promoted by the influx of Islamic missionaries from outside the region who were first hosted by the *Wäläne*, *Gädäbano*, *Səlṭe*, and *Qabeena*. Following this example, Muslims among other groups invited Islamic preachers to settle among them and intermarry with local women. These preachers established many local Islamic centres which, together with already existing structures, constituted spiritual and social networks that constantly increased in both geographical density and reach with every generation of learned men they produced.

### Myths of Origins of the *Gurage*

The origin of the old *Gurage* socio-religious system and several of its features are explained in orally narrated history in contradictory ways. Thus, we find a clear example of competing religiously biased historical consciousness.

38 Cf. Trimmingham 1965, 110–113; Hussein Ahmed 2001, 73–74.

39 Trimmingham 1949, 94–95, 111–112, 97; Trimmingham 1965, 114; Bustorf 2011, 217–218.

40 'Ḥasān ʿŋḡamo', *EAE*, II (2005), 1041b–1043a (*Worku Nida*); Abdulfetah Abdällah 2005/2006; Bustorf 2011, 225.

One historical narrative claims that, as a result of the *ḡihād* of *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm and the following Oromo migrations (since 1570), Christianity in Gurage lost its direct connection to the Christian kingdom though the religious identity of its followers remained intact. However, Christianity degenerated and was contaminated by local beliefs. Places where there had formerly been churches changed into ‘pagan’ shrines, the descendants of Christian priests became priests of the *Gurage* spirits. As explained above, Muḥər, the cradle of early Christianity in Gurageland is also considered to be the place of the origin of *Gurage* religion. The narrative of the substantially Christian nature of *Gurage* religion seems to be only a few generations old. It cannot be completely excluded that it may reflect what in some local cases really may have been the case. However, it cannot be taken as a historical explanation in the academic sense. Some features and ideas may have survived from pre-*ḡihād* Christianity in northern Gurage. It is more likely however, that northern Ethiopian Christianity had provided some direct or indirect cultural inspiration throughout history. However, although some structural similarities of Orthodox Christianity and *Gurage* religion seem to be striking at first gaze, the more one learns about the old religion the more one realizes the differences.

Another historical narrative explains the origin of *Gurage* religion by referring to southern Ethiopia. Many Gurage clans and every greater territorial unit or ‘house’ have their own protector spirits or *waqs* with their own peculiar cults. Every *waq* is represented by a hereditary high priest in whose lineage the oral cult tradition is kept. The high priest is assisted by members of the local *maga* clan. Besides the *waqs* of the clans and houses, three major protector spirits could gain a pan-Gurage importance: Og<sup>v</sup>āt, the *waq* of Cāha; B<sup>w</sup>āzzā, the guardian of thunder and of social order; and the female spirit Dām<sup>w</sup>am<sup>w</sup>it, the protector of the women. Each of the local and pan-Gurage spirit cults has its own historical traditions and legends of origin. Although in many cases they are interwoven and seem to resemble each other they are not identical and in some points even contradictory. Some may refer to Muḥər as their place of origin but several say that their *waq* came from ‘Sidamo’<sup>41</sup> or even ‘Ġanḡäro’ (i.e. Yām), ‘Kullo’ (i.e. Dawro) or just from ‘the south’.

There is also an important Islamic thread of tradition which claims Arab or Muslim origins of, or influences on, the *Gurage* spirit cults as well as genealogical and marriage relations of important high priests to Islamic ancestors. This interpretation of history was in great part influenced by the ‘Abret tradition’ of Gurage Islam and provides fascinating examples of religious identity claims through orally narrated history. In order to provide a

41 This probably refers to the Sidamo province and not to Sidaamaland, in particular.

better base for the readers' understanding of the following paragraphs, a brief explanation is necessary here: Abret is the most important centre of Sufi Islam in the Gurage region and beyond. Its tradition was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century by *Sayyīd* Ibrāhīm (also called Yāqubba Abba) who was the son of the high priest of the B<sup>w</sup>āzzā cult, the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayä* (Gur. 'master of the spirit intermediaries'). According to oral tradition he converted to Islam after having met Muslim merchants and scholars at the market of Čäha. Subsequently Ibrāhīm renounced succession to his father's office of *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayä* in favour of his younger brother. As a consequence of this, his Ĥntežära clan was divided into a *Gurage* and a Muslim branch. Later, during the time of *Sayyīd* Ibrāhīm's son *Sayyīd* Bušrā (vulgo Bušura), the Muslim branch had to leave Ĥnangära on account of apostasy and founded Abret as a centre of the *qādirī* brotherhood. While his father was a holy man (*wāliyye*) without much formal education, his son *Sayyīd* Bušrā and his grandson *Sayyīd* Budallā studied in Dana in Wällo. Both copied and commented Islamic books and wrote their own texts as well.<sup>42</sup> Especially *Sayyīd* Budallā, who is also known under the honorific name Abretiye, was a collector of Islamic books, copyist, and productive author.<sup>43</sup> Abretiye was in Mecca twice and met knowledgeable Muslims from all over the Horn of Africa. Not only did he have great knowledge of oral historical traditions. Moreover, he was inspired enough to modify them with a strong Islamic bias and to apply them in his preaching and books.

### The Origins of the G<sup>y</sup>äta Gurage

The G<sup>y</sup>äta (also known as Geta, Geto, Yäčärät) are one of the smaller subgroups of the *Säbat bet* Gurage and, as such, typical highland *ənsät* cultivators. They are traditionally organized in a patrilineal segmentary system of clans and lineages of multiple genealogical origins. The historically dominant clan in the G<sup>y</sup>äta district are the Bäräsəye. The subunits of the G<sup>y</sup>äta were led by hereditary chiefs who ruled together with the clan council. The highest-ranking chiefs held the royal title of *nəg<sup>w</sup>əs* or, after the Ethiopian conquest, *azmač* (locally *azma*). Like other Gurage chiefs they possessed a *gondär* bracelet (see above). The segmentary structure of the old G<sup>y</sup>äta socio-political order had a sacred dimension in that each clan had its own male protector spirit or *waq*. At the same time, however, the whole of G<sup>y</sup>äta also had a common supreme *waq* by the name of Māndo (also Mānduwä) who was (and is) represented by the *yāzara dāmam* ('master of Zara'). During the annual feasts, he and the minor *waq* priests serve as spirit mediums,

42 'Abret', *E Ae*, V (2014), 213a–215b (D. Bustorf).

43 Cf. Nureddin Delil 2007.

uttering prophecies in a strange tongue identified with the Muḥər language. Since about the second half of the nineteenth century the majority of the G<sup>y</sup>äta follow Islam. After the defeat of the Qabeena Muslim *ḡihād* and their subsequent integration into the Ethiopian feudal system, however, a strong minority of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians was established. The cult of Māndo and the other *waqs* is in decline but still practised to some extent.

There are Muslim and non-Muslim versions of the ancestral traditions of the G<sup>y</sup>äta. As with many Muslim ethnic groups in Africa and elsewhere, the Muslims of G<sup>y</sup>äta trace their origin directly to Arabia and the golden age of the Prophet Muḥammad. In this way, they anchor their cultural memory in the sacred sphere. According to the Muslim version of the oral tradition of the Bäräsəye clan of G<sup>y</sup>äta, for instance, their ancestor *Šayḥ* Bašīr came from Mecca with the First Hiḡra. He migrated to an area called *Əgər* G<sup>y</sup>äta, namely the lower part of G<sup>y</sup>äta country to the west and north-west of the Māndo shrine of Zara. There, *Šayḥ* Bašīr met the servant of the local king Mārawədāñe who was trying to prepare *koččo* (*ənsāt* bread) with a blunt knife. *Šayḥ* Bašīr carried a grindstone with him and thus helped her and sharpened her knife. Afterwards the servant told him how to win King Mārawədāñe's trust by claiming to come from the 'land of the left'.<sup>44</sup> When Mārawədāñe came home he interrogated the newcomer who answered properly and was therefore allowed to settle in *Əgər* G<sup>y</sup>äta and to marry the servant. *Šayḥ* Bašīr's son was Bäräsəye. The clan of Bäräsəye in the following generations gained a dominant position among the G<sup>y</sup>äta while the Mārawədāñe clan lost much of its importance (also demographically). Another version of the legend about Bašīr (here *Haḡḡi* Bašīr) elaborates on the First Hiḡra and then states that the first Muslims spread all over the region after having received the concession by the Abyssinian king, and that 'some reached Oše in Muḥər, the Aḡamo went to Səlṭe, and the Idik went to G<sup>y</sup>äta'.<sup>45</sup>

The second part of the non-Muslim legend of origin of the G<sup>y</sup>äta is so similar to the Muslim version that it is not necessary to repeat it here. Its first part, however, differs considerably. The name of the ancestor in the

44 See footnote on the name *gura-ge/gra-ge* above. The Mārawədāñe are usually designated as *žāra*, namely people who came before the arrival of the Muslim immigrants. In contrary to the *žāra* known from Səlṭeland (see Bustorf 2006), the Mārawədāñe (similar to the Sāga clan mentioned by Braukämper 1980) do not necessarily have a northern origin but originate rather in areas south of Gurage. 'Gimma' was mentioned as area of origin only by this one narrator. More often they are said to have come from 'Sidaama' or 'the south'.

45 The narrator explained to me that 'Idik means Aḡamo in the G<sup>y</sup>äta language'. Clans of the Idik genealogical cluster dominate the Muslims of G<sup>y</sup>äta. However, I now believe that Idik is not just the G<sup>y</sup>äta word for *aḡamo* but it designates a category of Gurage immigrant clans not necessarily associated with Islam or with an Arab origin.

non-Muslim version is not *Šayḥ* Bašīr but Bašahiyye, a Gurage name. Bašahiyye did not come from Mecca but, as the legend explains, he came from Čāha to Gʿāta avoiding a war that was waged there. Here he is not styled as an Islamic ancestor but as a descendant of the Solomonic *Azmač* Səbḥat. Therefore, when asked if he came from the ‘land of the left’ he did not have to lie like *Šayḥ* Bašīr in the second part of the Muslim version of the legend.

Christian informants argue that the Muslim version of this legend of origin was an invention of the *šayḥ* of Abret who interpreted the name Bašahiyye as a Gurage form of the Islamic name Bašīr. It seems very likely that my Christian informants are right with their assumption that the Muslim version of the legend is an invention. Given the fact that an Arab ancestor of that name already existed in the oral traditions of some of the clans in the region, the Bāräsəye clan could easily be connected to the general Muslim foundation myth by identifying Bašīr with Bašahiyye. The structure of the legend does not at all fit into the usual pattern found in legends about ancestors of Arab origin settling in the region. I collected numerous such legends among the Səlṭe and Muslim Gurage. Their common pattern depicts the ancestors as victorious warriors and leaders who are superior to the locals. The Bašīr/Bašahiyye legend tells of an Arab with a grindstone helping a female servant—a situation which is hardly to be found in the Muslim oral tradition of the area. Furthermore, Islam was only introduced among the Gʿāta in the mid-nineteenth century. Apart from the strong Islamic identity statement made by the legend of *Šayḥ* Bašīr, hardly any traces of a Muslim past of the Gʿāta can be identified. But since the majority of today’s Gʿāta are Muslims their claim to be linked to the general Muslim foundation myth has a considerable impact on their historical consciousness.

### Origins of the cult of B<sup>w</sup>āžžä

The cult of B<sup>w</sup>āžžä, the *Gurage* spirit of thunder and social order, was allegedly founded by a woman who became its first high priestess or *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə*. Tradition tells us that, after having lived in chastity for some time at B<sup>w</sup>āžžä Bär lake, she married Abärrä from Mäsmäs. They had several sons who settled at different places all over the region and established local cult traditions linked to B<sup>w</sup>āžžä and other protector spirits (*waqs*). Her eldest son became the high priest of Saʿamar, the *waq* of the Əndägañ (later syncretized as the Archangel Gabriel). The first high priestess is known by two different names, Žum<sup>w</sup>äd, a Gurage name (Əndägañ variant, Ğumo) and Ğamila, an Arabic name.<sup>46</sup> As in the case of Bašahiyye and *Šayḥ* Bašīr, the

46 Cf. Bustorf 2005.



*Gurage* and the Islamic names represent contradicting claims of religiously biased historical consciousness.

According to a genealogical list I collected from a Muslim member of the family of the recent *G<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə* Mulu in Ənangära, fifteen generations of *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə* are remembered.<sup>47</sup> The non-Islamic thread of tradition states that Žum<sup>w</sup>äd originally came from Muḥər, the symbol of early Christianity in Gurageland, while the genealogical list of the Islamic Abret tradition is telescoped from Ğamila's father in the sixteenth generation upwards by twelve generations of Muslim ancestors, including prominent figures such as Šayḥ Ḥusayn of Bale and Aḥmad an-Nağāši, up to Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī and the Prophet Muḥammad himself.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to this oral genealogical claim, there is a story in a manuscript written by *Sayyīd* Budallā of Abret, the *Kibr̥t al-Aḥmar*,<sup>49</sup> which claims a connection of the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə* tradition to the famous Šayḥ Ḥusayn of Bale. Its content became part of orally narrated history. According to the story, Šayḥ Ḥusayn of Bale once served the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə*, for instance by instructing the *ğinn* to fetch firewood. Eventually, the Muslim saint fell in love with the daughter of the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə*. He then taught her to recite the *šahāda* and to practise *dikr*. For three consecutive days, she practised *dikr* until her high priest father tried to stop her. Subsequently, a leopard and a lion came to his compound. They had saddles on their backs. Šayḥ Ḥusayn of Bale seated himself on the lion while the daughter of the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə* seated herself on the leopard. The two beasts carried them to Arsiland and to Šayḥ Ḥusayn's later sanctuary, whereupon, the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>əyə* ordered all those who wanted to recite the *šahāda* to leave Gurageland and to follow them.

Furthermore, certain aspects of the B<sup>w</sup>äzzä cult are interpreted by the 'Abret tradition' as ethnographic 'survivals' of its allegedly Islamic past. One example is a ritual carried out during the yearly feast of *nup<sup>w</sup> a'ar*. On that occasion, young men compete in a race in honour of B<sup>w</sup>äzzä at his shrine in Ənangära. At the end of the race, stones would be thrown at a certain place in front of the shrine. According to one of his sons, *Sayyīd* Budallā explained that this ritual resembles the stoning of the devil during

47 But cf. Prunet and Berhanu Chamora 1995.

48 Among the non-Muslim Əndägañ, I collected legends supporting both ideas, that the first high priestess Ğumo originally lived near B<sup>w</sup>äzzä Bär and that she came from the other side of the sea (i.e. outside Ethiopia or from Arabia) to Gurageland (cf. also Bustorf 2005). The idea that she came from Arabia is probably an Islamic contamination of the original non-Islamic tradition.

49 The text was read to me and translated from Arabic in the Gurage countryside near Čänčän by the keeper of the manuscript. Unfortunately, I was only able to photograph its cover before the battery of my camera died.



the *ḥāḡḡ*. Thus, he took it as an auxiliary proof of an Islamic origin of the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayä* tradition.

Obviously, the intention of the ‘Abret tradition’ is to define the relation between the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayä* and Islam in a way which legitimizes the *ṣayḥs* of Abret. On the one hand, the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayäs* are genealogically styled as descendants of noble ‘Arabs’, and the Islamic origin of some ritual practices is emphasized, while on the other hand the un-Islamic character of the cult is made clear. By claiming Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī as ancestor of the *g<sup>w</sup>etak<sup>w</sup>ayäs* the *ṣayḥs* of Abret, Ibrāhīm, Bušura and Budallā, could justify their claim to the title *sayyid*. This endowed them with a rank and legitimacy equal to that of the old-established noble lineages in the region. The explanation of rituals as survivals of an Islamic past further relativizes the ‘pagan’ background of the *ṣayḥ* lineage of Abret. It also provides the B<sup>w</sup>āžžā cult with some rudimentary kind of legitimacy which enables the Muslim branch of the ʿEntäzära clan to coexist peacefully with the *Gurage* branch.

## Conclusion

Interethnic and interreligious, as well as diachronic and synchronic approaches to history have to be combined when making sense of oral traditions. Mono-ethnic ethnography or historiography cannot reveal how historical consciousness is constructed in the discourse of such traditions. This is especially true in the case of societies historically based on small, interdependent local groups. In such environments, the narrators of history in each group explicitly or implicitly refer to what their ‘colleagues’ in other groups tell their audiences. Moreover, due to continuous interaction between groups, their audiences might overlap. Often the narrators of history of the various groups might even know each other personally, and on different social occasions, exchange their views of history. The interethnic and interreligious process of narrating oral history has been going on for generations and the narrators of history consciously or unconsciously take this into account. They articulate very clear identity statements concerning their specific group in relation to other groups. As one can easily observe in the field, their audience is historically/politically very sensitive and will understand such statements quasi intuitively. The Christian, Muslim, and non-Abrahamic legends of Gurage origin, the Bašahiyye-Bašir controversy and the mutually contradictory explanations of the origin of the B<sup>w</sup>āžžā tradition show how religious statements of identity are made in different narratives of oral history. The various legends discussed here show possible traces of manipulation for purpose of identity. They also reveal enduring historical motives which survive over time in changing ideological contexts. The impact of the Abret tradition on the historical memory of the region is a striking example of both.

Analysing the oral historical traditions of the Gurage and Səlṭe sometimes resembles an attempt to cross a dense thicket in one of the river valleys in the country of Ēndāgañ. You stumble and are repeatedly forced to step back. There are too many roots, stems, branches, twigs, leaves, and thorns to be able to find a safe way. Similarly, there are the numberless segments and subsegments in the different historical layers. They may still be effective in historical memory or even in recent socio-political or symbolic structures. There are central and formerly central, inferior and formerly inferior social groups and religious traditions. There are claims of historical legitimacy wherever you look. What earlier generations of historical narrators carefully divided may have later been merged. What was once a common memory may have been split by more recent historical discourse into separate fields of historical consciousness. The many influences, changing relevance, the rhetoric, eloquence and creativity, the open and hidden agendas of narrators and their audiences, all contribute to this shadowy thicket which, from above, may look like a continuous green. However, to further exploit the metaphor, at other times there is just the open land of historical forgetfulness; or small pockets of forest without any connection. In today's socio-economic and political environment many such pockets of memory, bound to local communities below the official ethnic level, or related to inferior religious traditions, are too small and weak to survive over the next generation. Moreover, professional and unprofessional written historiography and ethnography unwillingly contributes to new images of history.

### Oral Sources

Most interviews were carried out in the Səlṭe language, sometimes Amharic and rarely Gurage (G<sup>y</sup>äta) with the help of my field assistants and translators (into English) in the Səlṭe and Gurage areas: Tajuddin Shkuri from Čänčän (Səlṭe/G<sup>y</sup>äta Gurage) and Addis Abäba, Abdella Oumer from Dar-eemo (Səlṭe) and Addis Abäba, and Tofik *Ḥāḡḡi* Detamo from Čänčän and Addis Abäba. I express my deepest gratitude for their friendship and the great job they did. The following list includes only my G<sup>y</sup>äta informants who contributed enormously to the sources of this study. The many names of my earlier relevant informants are already listed elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

Abdulhani *Šeeh* Muḥammad Sabir, *šeeh*, Wərča, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 27 November 2010.

Arab Mahammad, *ḥāḡḡi*, 85, Färäzze, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 25 November 2010.

Badru Isaaq, Arbo, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 24 November 2010.

50 Esp. Bustorf 2011.

- Bärädä Mäč'u<sup>w</sup>e, *azma*, Irša, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 17 December 2010 (group discussion).  
 Dämsis *azma* Sərtaga, *azma*, Zara, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 17 December 2010 (group discussion).  
 Däwi Gäbrä Maryam, *woma*, 79, Eniñānay, Agäta, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 30 November 2010.  
 Hasān Märaži, *šeeh*, Arbo, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 25 November 2010.  
 Kəfle Gäbrä Šəllase, *abägaz*, c.60, Arbo, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 24 November 2010.  
 Kidane Wälde, *abägaz*, Q<sup>w</sup>ante, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 17 December 2010 (group discussion).  
 Mulugeta Gäbrämaryam, Q<sup>w</sup>ante, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 17 December 2010 (group discussion).  
 Šifa Yesuf, Qäbul, G<sup>y</sup>äta, 19 November 2010.

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# The Dob'a in Light of Oral Traditions from Eastern and Southern Təgray

FESSEHA BERHE

## Abstract

The Dob'a are one of the ancient peoples of Ethiopia whose history still remains obscure. Paucity of written sources might have prevented scholars from doing research on this people. The scant written sources (from travellers' accounts, hagiographies, chronicles, and writings of various scholars) are generally only sketches, hardly illuminating the history of the Dob'a. This paper shows how oral sources can play an indispensable role in the study of local history, filling in the gaps in the written material at our disposal. By using oral sources along with the available written material, particularly local secondary sources, this study will throw some light on some of the open questions surrounding the Dob'a, such as their origin, linguistic affinity, or their settlement history.

## Introduction

The Dob'a are one of the ancient peoples of Ethiopia whose history remains obscure. With the exception of a few written sources that offer some general hints, no significant studies on the history of the Dob'a have been written. There are written sources such as traveller accounts,<sup>1</sup> chronicles,<sup>2</sup> hagiographies,<sup>3</sup> and scholarly works that mention or discuss the Dob'a to a limited extent.<sup>4</sup> There are also a few local secondary sources.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Such as Alvarez 1881, 55, 103–115; Bruce 1790, II, 84–86, 146, 211, 647–648; Bruce 1790, III, 4–6, 147, 261; d'Abbadie 1890, 238; Munzinger 1869, 208–216; Salt 1816, 215–216, 378–379.
- 2 Such as Guidi 1910. 141–142. 159–160; Guidi 1903. 25–34; Perruchon 1893. 132–151, 177–179; Stenhouse 2003, 126, 144; Pereira 1888, 33–34; Pereira 1900, 350–352, 549.
- 3 Conti Rossini 1904, 18; Kur 1972, 53–59, 74.
- 4 Such as Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006, 44, 121; Beckingham and Huntingford 1954, 10–18, 234; Budge 1928, 315–321; Conti Rossini 1910, 877–879; Crawford 1958, 8, 49, 72–75, 93; Huntingford 1989, 90–91, 97, 106, 117, 125, 138, 234; Hussein Ahmed 2001, 8; Ludolf 1682, 17; Merid Wolde Aregay 1971, 29–30, 45; Merid Wolde Aregay 1974a, 619, 625; Merid Wolde Aregay 1974b, 274, 280; Morin 2004, 143; Pankhurst 1997, 106–117, 110–112, 161–162, 189–190, 223–224, 267, 362–63; 'Doba'a', *EAE*, II (2005), 185b (R. Pankhurst); Pollera 1935, 255–257, 262–263; Tadesse Tamrat 1972, 81–82;

It seems that the name Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> has been used to designate a people or non-semitic group, and an area usually situated on the ‘north-eastern borders of Təgray’.<sup>6</sup> Most materials place the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> in southern Təgray (south of Əndärtä or Wägğärat and north of Angot). Ludolf wrote that the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> was one of the ‘prefectures belonging to Təgre [Təgray]’ and is found ‘near Angora (Angot), inhabited by pagans’.<sup>7</sup> Tellez on the other hand mentions Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> as one of the ‘lesser provinces’ of the Abyssinian emperor which ‘formerly belonged to him [the Abyssinian emperor], but now taken from him’.<sup>8</sup> Salt considered the plain and uncultivated land found next to Wägğärat (south of Əndärtä) to be the territory inhabited by the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> people.<sup>9</sup>

For reasons which we could not determine so far (it could be partly because of the existing ambiguity on the origin and linguistic background of the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup>), the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> are mentioned in association with different areas and with different peoples or groups in the sources. Some associate them with the ʿAfar,<sup>10</sup> while others connect them with the Argobba of south-eastern Wällo and north-eastern Šäwa.<sup>11</sup> Some writers try to relate them with the Oromo and some even with the historical Ifat.<sup>12</sup> The Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> are also mentioned as being among the inhabitants of Däwäro during the wars of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī.<sup>13</sup> As will be shown later, there are also oral traditions on the Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> in different parts of ʿAfar, Təgray, Wällo, in some parts of today’s Eritrea, and so on. So, the question is, are we talking about the same people or offshoots of the same group, or of different peoples/groups with similar names?

‘Rayyaa’, *E Ae*, IV (2010), 341b–343a (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular p. 341b; Tellez 1710, 10; Trimmingham 1965, 81, 148, 193–194; Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006, 374–375.

5 Such as Bärəhā Zəḡta 2007/2008, 23–26; Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis ‘Abiyä Əgzi’ 2000/2001, 35–36; Kəbrom Asāfa 2012/2013, 23–49; Täsfay Mādhən 2002/2003, 15–33; Tayyā Gäbrä Maryam 1987, 77, 89; Zäwäld 1899/1900, 10–11.

6 ‘Doba<sup>ʿa</sup>’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 185b (R. Pankhurst).

7 Ludolf 1682, 17.

8 Tellez 1710, 10.

9 Salt 1816, 379.

10 Hussein Ahmed 2001, 8; Morin 2004, 143, Trimmingham 1965, 81–82; ‘Yägğū’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 12b–15a (É. Ficquet), in particular 13a.

11 Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006, 44, 121.

12 ‘Rayyaa’, *E Ae*, IV (2010), 341b–343a (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular p. 341b; Tayyā Gäbrä Maryam 1987, 77; ‘Ifat’, *E Ae*, III (2007), 118a–120a (Ahmed Hasen Omer and D. Nosnitsin).

13 Stenhouse 2003, 126, 144.

Some writers mention the Dob'a as 'black moors' (black Muslims),<sup>14</sup> or depict them as 'pagans' or as 'Islamized pagans'.<sup>15</sup> The sources state that the Dob'a were pastoralists or semi-pastoralist,<sup>16</sup> but they also hint that they might have been commercially active and that they may have played a significant role in long distance trade (though their allegedly disruptive role is emphasized or exaggerated in these materials).<sup>17</sup> Some writers such as Alvarez reported their rich stocks of cattle: '[i]n this country [Dob'a territory] there are very beautiful cows, which cannot be numbered or reckoned, and of the largest that can be found in the world'.<sup>18</sup>

Also interesting is the fact that the written sources portray them as belligerent people who were in constant confrontation not only with the central government/emperors and regional lords but also with their neighbours such as the 'Afar,<sup>19</sup> Wäggärat,<sup>20</sup> Angot, Qädda, at least in the period between the reigns of King Lalibäla (r 1186–1225) and King Iyasu II (r 1730–1755). The notion that the Dob'a were the enemies of both Christians and Muslims clearly illustrates this point.<sup>21</sup> Alvarez documented conflict between the central government of the Christian highland of Ethiopia and the Dob'a. He also reported clashes between the Dob'a and Christians in the area that he called 'Farso'.<sup>22</sup> Bruce wrote that the Dob'a were in constant confrontation with Abyssinian emperors such as Bā'ädä Maryam, Ləbnä Dəngəl, Minas, and Iyasu II.<sup>23</sup> Bā'ädä Maryam's campaign against the Dob'a is also reported by others.<sup>24</sup>

Despite all these various bits of information on the Dob'a many questions still need to be answered. What was the origin of the Dob'a? What

14 Bruce 1790, II, 146–147; Alvarez 1881, 104.

15 Ludolf 1682, 17; Trimmingham 1965, 193. Interestingly enough, Alvarez (Alvarez 1881, 103–105) and 'Arab Faqih (Stenhouse 2003, 125–126) witnessed the presence of Christian Dob'a in southern Təgray (in the towns of Mandel and Farso) and Däwaro respectively. Whether this was the result of the presence of huge garrisons in these areas, as some writers such as Merid Wolde Aregay claim (Merid Wolde Aregay 1971, 45), or the outcome of other factors, needs thorough research.

16 Bruce 1790, III, 4; Hussein Ahmed 2001, 8; Merid Wolde Aregay 1971, 31; Trimmingham 1965, 81–82; 'Yäggü', *E Ae*, V (2014), 12b–15a (É. Ficquet), in particular 13a.

17 Alvarez 1881, 103–11; Trimmingham 1965, 81.

18 Alvarez 1881, 104.

19 Trimmingham 1965, 81–82.

20 Salt had reported that the Wäggärat were continuously attacking the Dob'a (Salt 1816, 379).

21 Bruce 1790, II, 146–147.

22 Alvarez 1881, 103–115.

23 Bruce 1790, II, 84–86, 146–147, 211, 647–648.

24 Perruchon 1893, 132–179; Trimmingham 1965, 81–82.



was their linguistic affinity? How and when did they end up in southern Təgray (Dob'a territory according to most writers) and what eventually happened to them?<sup>25</sup> The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct some facts about the history of this people as well as to answer some of the perplexing questions that scholars have been asking for decades about the Dob'a. To this end, 'new' sources, particularly oral materials, most of them never discussed by scholars of Ethiopian studies, will be introduced here.

## Sources and Methodology

During ethno-historical research concerned with Muslim Sāho communities of Təgray, I encountered oral traditions in eastern Təgray dealing with the Dob'a. In the course of further investigation, I learned that rich oral accounts, dealing directly or indirectly with this people also exist in other parts of Təgray, as well as in some parts of Eritrea. Considering our lack of knowledge about this people, I became convinced that these oral traditions could play an important role in filling in some of the gaps in our knowledge of the history of the Dob'a. Thus, I began systematic documentation of oral traditions and genealogies relating to the history and culture of the Dob'a, first in eastern Təgray, in Irob, and then in southern Təgray in May Čäw and Ҳašəngä areas. I managed to collect some oral traditions on the Dob'a from Irob and 'Rayyaa' elders.<sup>26</sup> This paper is the outcome of this research endeavour undertaken between 2013 and 2014.

In presenting these oral traditions I attempt to give a coherent picture of the history of the Dob'a. I will illustrate how these scattered oral sources narrated in culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse communities of Təgray could be used to explain the origin, settlement, and linguistic affinity of the Dob'a, and perhaps just who this 'inexplicable' group was.<sup>27</sup>

25 Trimingham and to some extent Merid Wolde Aregay seem to be the exceptions in this case (Trimingham 1965; Merid Wolde Aregay 1971; Merid Wolde Aregay 1974b). Both discuss the linguistic background of the people, though they take different views. The former also discusses what finally happened to this people.

26 Part of the results of this research was presented under the title 'Towards 'Reconstructing' a History of a 'Vanished' People: Introducing New Sources on the History of the Dob'a People' in the 4th International Enno Littmann Conference held in Tübingen, Germany on 1–4 April 2014. I thank the organizers for their invitation to participate in the conference.

27 There are oral traditions dealing with the Dob'a in parts of Təgray such as Irob, ʿƏdäga Ҳamus, and Aşbi Wämbärta areas in eastern Təgray and Gəğgät, Alagä, May Čäw, Ҳašəngä, Mohoni, and Čärčär areas in southern Təgray. I also know that there are similar oral traditions in some parts of Eritrea including in Dəbarwa (personal communication with Wolbert Smidt on 23 April 2012, Wälqayt) and among the Təgre in Sämhar in Massawa and its environs, Saḥəl (mainly in Naqfa area), Ginda<sup>c</sup>



Eastern Təgray (Irob) and southern Təgray (May Čäw and Ҳаšəngä) contrast in an interesting way. The oral traditions in the latter are more elaborate than in the former, yet, one also finds some informants with knowledge of some aspects of the Dob'a in Irob. Analysis of the data results in a new picture of Dob'a history.

### The Dob'a in Irob Oral Traditions

The Irob live in the north-eastern parts of Təgray. They speak Sāho but the majority of them are bilingual in Təgrəñña as well.<sup>28</sup> Oral traditions in Irob maintain that the Dob'a were one of the pre-Irob peoples who had once settled in the area. The oral traditions recount that there were various peoples living in Irob area before the coming of Sumä, the ancestor of the Irob people. The list of the pre-Irob peoples varies from tradition to tradition.<sup>29</sup> A local secondary source which was written mainly based on the oral traditions of the area, gives the longest list. According to this text, the Irob is the twelfth group to settle in Irobländ. As predecessors of the Irob are mentioned the following: (1) Noba, (2) Soba, (3) Bäläw, (4) Käläw, (5) Asäḥab,

and Ḥamasen mainly in ʿAd Tākälezan (Salih Mäḥmäd, personal communication on 4 April 2014, Tübingen, Germany). According to Salih, in these areas there are Təgre groups who call themselves Dob'a (singular) and Doba't (plural). The origin of these Təgre groups is, I think, another interesting area of research. Some of the data I used here was collected as part of the joint research project (Excavations at Mifas Bahri, Tigray Province, A Study of Ethiopian Heritage) of Mekelle University and Heidelberg University, in which I am a member of their research team. Thus, I thank Steffen Wenig (Freie Universität Berlin), Paul Yule (Universität Heidelberg) and Mekelle University for making me part of the research team. Note-taking and recording were interchangeably used based on the different circumstances of the interview sessions. The oral data were transcribed and systematically analysed. An attempt was also made to crosscheck the oral information with each other and with relevant written sources.

28 Though they speak the Sāho language they do not consider themselves as part of the Sāho group. For detailed discussion on this and on the oral traditions related to the origin of the Irob people see Bärähä Zəgta 2007/2008; Täsfay Mädhən 2002/2003; Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006; 'Irob', *EÄe*, III (2007), 187a–188b (R. Voigt).

29 In the course of collecting local accounts on the Dob'a from Irob area, I interviewed five informants (*Ato* Dästa Səbhat, age 46, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 12 April 2013; *Ato* Gäbrä Ḥagos, age 79, interviewed in Wārəta'elä, Irob on 11 April 2013; *Ato* Ḥadgu Kaḥsay, age 77, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 12 April 2013; *Ato* Bāyänä Kaḥsay, age 78, interviewed in Wārəta'elä, Irob on 2 May 2014; *Ato* Bärähä Ḥadgu, age 65, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 22 May 2014) who gave me different lists of the pre-Irob peoples ranging between five and ten. Thus, in order to avoid redundancy, I stick to the list of Täsfay Mädhən which encompasses all the lists given by my informants.

(6) ʿIdda-Kulus, (7) ʿAsyəndaytit, (8) Ḥamādo, (9) Dobʿa, (10) Gad, and (11) Kayyayəta.<sup>30</sup> Based on this list the text argues that it is difficult to determine the exact order of the settlement of these peoples, but takes the Kayyayəta as those who were living in the land when the Irob appeared.<sup>31</sup> Apart from the Kayyayəta, who were there when the Irob settled, other groups like the Dobʿa were also there, as the text itself (in other pages of his book) hints and as the oral traditions narrate,

The Dobʿa who were in the area, when Gayəšola was born,<sup>32</sup> killed the latter's father and brothers and threw him into a deep cliff. Gayəšola survives and grows up in Murä, a place above Worətaʿälä by drinking antelop's milk. When he becomes adult, he asks Əndärtay, his father's friend to assist him in approaching the king for assistance. Then he wipes out the Dobʿa by using the 'weapons' he got from the king.<sup>33</sup>

Here we should note two points. Firstly, according to Tsegay Berhe,<sup>34</sup> it is twenty-four generations since Wārädä Məhrät (Gayəšola's great grandfather) moved from Kələttä Awləʿalo to ʿAgamä area. By calculating the number of generations starting from Wārädä Məhrät, Tsegay Berhe thus notes that '[f]rom the number of generations, the last part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century seems to be the most likely period to which this migration story refers'.<sup>35</sup> This means the Dobʿa were living in Irobländ before the coming of the Irob around the early part of the fourteenth century. Secondly, conflicts between the newcomers (the Irob) and the earlier settlers (at least the Dobʿa) started later, that is, after two generations. It happened, according to the oral traditions, in the time of Gayəšola. This indicates that, initially, the earlier settlers had welcomed the newcomers but conflict erupted later for reasons

30 Təsfay Mädhən 2002/2003, 25. Another local secondary source Bärəhā Zəgta 2007/2008, 24 also gives the same list in similar order. Tsegay Berhe on the other hand lists ten pre-Irob peoples: Aydolä, ʿAsyəndaytit, Asäḥab, Bälāw, Kälāw, Dobʿa, Edoklus, Ḥamādo, Kayyayəta, and Noba (Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006, 374). Note that unlike *Abba* Təsfay, he includes Aydolä but omits Gad.

31 Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006, 374; I clearly understand his problem as I myself witnessed a similar problem. Not only do the informants not give you the complete list but they are also not in a position to establish chronological order of their list either.

32 Gayəšola is the grandson of Sumä, who is considered to be the apical ancestor of the Irob as he was the first to settle in Irobländ. Sumä was the son of Wārädä Məhrät, who was the 'founding father' of the Irob and Əggäla people (Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006, 374).

33 Conti Rossini 1910, 877–879; Təsfay Mädhən 2002/2003, 16.

34 Tsegay Berhe Gebre Libanos 2006, 374–375.

35 *Ibid.*, 375.

difficult to establish at this point. This could be an indication that conflict with the newcomers might have been an additional factor that forced the Dob'a to abandon Irob.

The question which then arises is what happened next to the Dob'a? According to Tsegay Berhe, '[w]hile most of them were either assimilated by the predominant Irob or displaced, traces of Aydolä, Dob'a and Kayyayəta are still available in Irobland'.<sup>36</sup> Although it is difficult to rule out the possibility of assimilation as proposed by Tsegay Berhe, nevertheless oral traditions only mention the displacement of the Dob'a from the area, as Tsegay himself also hints. But we can only speculate about the direction of the movement of the Dob'a, as the oral traditions of the area are silent on this issue.

Oral traditions of the area also mention a period locally known as *zämänä Dob'a* ('Dob'a's era') which is characterized by desolation/misery and migration/displacement.<sup>37</sup> According to different oral traditions, there was a severe drought in the area that seems to have continued for some years. The Dob'a hung robes in trees in mountainous areas to forecast the coming of rain. As no rain came, they left Irob, burying their belongings in pits. As a marker they put *karahansa* (the Sāho word literally means 'whitish markers') or heaped stones where they had buried their belongings. Tāsfay Mādḥən offers similar information when he mentions *emäba* (*amba*) Saragumbä as the particular mountain where the Dob'a had tied their robes.<sup>38</sup> He further indicates that, the *karahansa* were probably those of the Gad. According to his informants, it was the Gad not the Dob'a who had buried their belongings hoping that they would still be there on their return. But whether it was Gad or Dob'a material culture has yet to be established.<sup>39</sup>

I think the available oral traditions also suggest that the Dob'a built the *karahansa*, and like the Gad (if we take the oral traditions as they are) Dob'a might have buried their belongings in wells.

36 Ibid., 374.

37 Tāsfay Mādḥən 2002/2003, 25–27. Zāwäld and Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis 'Abiyä Əgzi' also mention a period with the same name (Zāwäld 1899/1900, 11; Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis 'Abiyä Əgzi' 2000/2001, 35–36). At this point, it is difficult to establish whether the texts are referring to the same period. It should also be noted that, according to Hailu Habtu the text of Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis 'Abiyä Əgzi' (published in 1899/1890) 'has *Aläqa* Zāwäld for author. After textual comparison of the Təgrəñña and Amharic texts, Professors Lanfranco Ricci and Yaqob Beyene maintain that *Aläqa* Zāwäld was only a pen name for *Däbtära* Fesseha Giyorgis' (Hailu Habtu 2000, 362).

38 Tāsfay Mādḥən 2002/2003, 25–26.

39 Ibid., 27.

Another indicator of the presence of the Dob'a in the area before the coming of the Irob, is the existence of ancient terraces, which the locals call *Dob'a dälädil* (a Sāho phrase meaning 'terraces of the Dob'a'). It is common to see ancient terraces in Irobland particularly in areas in and around Asimba mountain, which, according to informants, were made by the Dob'a.<sup>40</sup>

### Oral Traditions on the Dob'a from Southern Təgray (May Čäw and Həsəngä Areas)

Rayyaa, which is also called Rayyaa-Rayyumma includes Rayyaa °Azäbo (a predominantly Təgrəñña-speaking territory) and Rayyaa Qobbo (a mainly Amharic-speaking area).<sup>41</sup> There are rich oral traditions in southern Təgray which offer clues about some of the facts concerning Dob'a history including their possible origin, language, and early migration. Oral traditions in southern Təgray tell us that the Dob'a were of Arab origin. According to these local accounts, the Dob'a came from Yemen and reached southern Təgray after crossing the °Afar lowlands.<sup>42</sup> In these local narratives, there seem to be three views regarding the migration and subsequent settlement of the Dob'a in southern Təgray. All narratives agree on the Yemeni origin of the Dob'a but differ in the time and process of their settlement.

The first view has it that the place of origin of the Dob'a was Dob'äñ in Yemen thus the name Dob'a.<sup>43</sup> Similar place names (e.g. Həzban in Hədrāmawt vs Həzba in May Čäw, Mäka vs Mäkan near May Čäw, etc.) are also offered as evidence for their Arab origin. According to this view, they migrated from Yemen, the Dob'a settled in Gamora, a place in the °Afar lowlands and later moved to the Šäw'attä Embas.<sup>44</sup> This migration

40 Informants: *Ato Dästa Səbhat*; *Ato Gäbrä Həgos*; *Ato Bāyänä Kaḥsay*.

41 'Rayyaa', *EAE*, IV (2010), 341b–343a (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular 341b.

42 Informants: *Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bāyan* (age 68, interviewed in Həsəngä on 19 March 2013), *Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd* (age 81, interviewed in Həzba, May Čäw on 21 March 2013), *Šayḥ Nəru Yasin* (age 62, lives in *ṭabiya* Həsəngä, *qušāt* °Addi Abo Musa, but was interviewed in Korām on 1 March 2014), *Šayḥ Ibrahim Yasin Abrəha* (age 67, interviewed in May Čäw on 21 March 2013).

43 There is an alternative view of the origin of the name Dob'a. According to this view, the name is derived from *dog'a* (a Təgrəñña word for 'highland'). They were given this name, as they were living in the highlands (informants: *Šayḥ Nəru Yasin*; *Ato Arbəsä Marəyā*, age 80, interviewed in Allamaṭa on 5 March 2014). This view accords with the description of Munzinger (Munzinger 1869, 206–223). Thus, the Dob'a are also referred to as *dog'atay* (a 'highlander'), as they inhabit the highlands.

44 Literally means 'seven mountains'. It is a local name used to refer to the seven traditional administrative 'districts' of the Dob'a. The Šäw'attä Embas are also called

happened during the reign of King Fasil (Fasilädäs), before the coming of the Oromo. It was during the reign of Fasilädäs that the migrants divided up the Šaw'attä Embas.<sup>45</sup> One informant refutes the idea by suggesting that those who came from Yemen were not the first settlers but rather that they came in the second phase following the wars of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī.<sup>46</sup>

The second view is similar to the first but differs in timing and personnel. Here the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl is indicated as the period of settlement and Mähmmäd Loli (also referred to by the locals as *ədon*) and his group were the first to settle in the Šaw'attä Embas. The area was uninhabited before they settled. Mähmmäd Loli and his followers initially settled in Sälä, Taḥətay Haya near the Maryam church in May Čäw area. Other groups such as Wärabä'ala, Däməsaši, and Umär Čägar (Həzba) came to the area after Mähmmäd Loli's settlement.<sup>47</sup>

The third view seems to contradict the first two, as it proposes different stages of the Dob'a migration. According to the third view there were at least three phases of Dob'a settlement or migration: first in the time of the *nağāšī* (namely seventh century); second in the time of 'Gäbrä Dəngəl',<sup>48</sup> or possibly after the wars of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī; and thirdly later in the eighteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

These narratives show that the oral traditions differ as to when and how the migration(s) of the Dob'a happened. This implies that there might have been a series of migrations into the area. It seems that there were different phases of migrations into the area possibly involving different groups with diverse 'ethnic' or linguistic backgrounds. It also seems that migration into the area might have continued until at least the eighteenth century.

Even though it is difficult to take the third view as it is, it seems more plausible than the other two views. The idea that the Dob'a first settled in the area during the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl, then later during the time of Fasilädäs, seems less probable as there is mention in the local narratives of early clashes between the Dob'a and the troops of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī; this seems to indicate the settlement of the Dob'a before the six-

Gamora, after the 'Afar area from which the group is believed to have migrated to the region that was later called highland Rayyaa.

45 Informant: Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd.

46 Informant: Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan.

47 Informant: Šayḥ Ibrahim Yasin Abrəha.

48 Some informants use this name in reference to Ləbnä Dəngəl. According to Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan this migration (the second migration) is the migration that is mentioned by Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd, the pioneering migration of the group, meaning the migration from Yemen.

49 Informant: Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan.

teenth century. Moreover, the hint that regional nobilities under Lalibäla (r 1186–1225) sent a campaign against the Dobʿa in southern Təgray in the early thirteenth century is another indicator of their settlement there before the time of Fasil or Ləbnä Dəngəl.<sup>50</sup> The argument of Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba which suggests that settlement of the Dobʿa in southern Təgray (Ḥašəngä area) took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seems to contradict the local narratives, and thus needs further verification.<sup>51</sup>

The content of these local narratives on the migration of the Dobʿa from the ʿAfar lowlands seems to be supplemented by some local secondary sources. Although difficult to determine given its remoteness, these written sources claim that there were series of migrations from the Buri to the Sabaʿ.<sup>52</sup> The people who migrated, according to Zäwäld, were (1) ʿIdda, (2) Gim-ʿIdda, (3) Assäla-ʿIdda, (4) ʿIdda-Kulus,<sup>53</sup> (5) Ḥamädo,<sup>54</sup> and (6) Dobʿa. The first four spoke Sāho while the latter two spoke Təgräñña.<sup>55</sup> The last two groups (i.e. the Ḥamädo and the Dobʿa) migrated in huge number, were very aggressive, and possibly caused great destruction.<sup>56</sup> This migration probably happened after the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia.<sup>57</sup> In the *zämänä Dobʿa*, there were wars and drought that continued for seven consecutive years and consequently there was great destruction, misery, and displacement in Ethiopia. At this time, Ethiopia (Abyssinia) had been completely destroyed.<sup>58</sup> In his writings Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis shows that there is the possibility that this might have happened in the period before the rise of Queen Yodit (Ḥsato).

There are people in southern Təgray who refer to themselves as Dobʿa or sometimes as descendants of the Dobʿa. They are mainly found in the area between Korām and Alagä in the area that is referred to as Šäwʿattä Ḥmbas.

50 Trimmingham 1965, 81–82.

51 ‘Rayyaa’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 341b–343a (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular 341b.

52 Zäwäld 1899/1900, 10; Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis ‘Abiyä Ḥgzi’ 2000/2001, 36.

53 One of the pre-Irob peoples, as discussed above and narrated in Irob oral traditions.

54 Note that the same group is mentioned as part of the Dobʿa in the oral traditions in southern Təgray. Ḥamädo may have been one part of the Dobʿa or a separate group who later incorporated into the Dobʿa, as against Fəśśəḥa’s claim.

55 Zäwäld 1899/1900, 10. The claim by Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis ‘Abiyä Ḥgzi’ that the Ḥamädo and the Dobʿa spoke Təgräñña seems to contradict other sources—both written and local sources. Even though Zäwäld claims the Dobʿa spoke Təgräñña, Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis refers to the Dobʿa as *baʿdi* (‘alien people’ or ‘foreigners’, Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis ‘Abiyä Ḥgzi’ 2000/2001, 36); it is strange to categorize a Təgräñña speaking group as an alien people.

56 Zäwäld 1899/1900, 10.

57 Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis ‘Abiyä Ḥgzi’ 2000/2001, 36.

58 Ibid.

The Šaw<sup>c</sup>attä Embas include Ofəla, Mänəkärä, Һašəngä, Һaya (Šuka Mağo), Mäkan, Һəzba, and Qəran Gorəba.

The Šaw<sup>c</sup>attä Embas are inhabited by different <sup>c</sup>*aləyät*.<sup>59</sup> The Šaw<sup>c</sup>attä Embas people had a traditional administrative system/traditional or customary legal institution called *wäg<sup>c</sup>ä Dob'a*, which continued until the coming to power of the Provisional Military Administrative Council.<sup>60</sup> There is no evidence in the oral traditions as to when this traditional administration system was established, but the tentative conclusion of Šəfərraw Täfäri, that the Dob'a might have exercised self-rule since the thirteenth century, could be correct.<sup>61</sup>

The Dob'a territory encompasses both the highland (*dog<sup>c</sup>a*) and lowland (*qolla*) Rayyaa. It includes Aära Məllaš (Həntəlo) in the north, Alwəha Məllaš in the south, <sup>c</sup>Afar in the east, and Təkəzä Məllaš up to Šäləmti in the west.<sup>62</sup> According to other informants, the Dob'a territory in the highlands includes Ofəla, Mänəkärä, Һašəngä, Һaya, Mäkan, Һəzba, and Qəran Gorəba. In the lowlands (into which the Dob'a later spread, according to my informants) it includes Qobbo, Wağğa, Allamaṭa, Gabatie, Wərəbayä, Quləwo, Mäḵoni, Əbo (bordering the Wägğərat), Mäčärä, Čärčär (on the <sup>c</sup>Afar border).<sup>63</sup> This means, the Dob'a not only occupied the whole territory that is now called Rayyaa but also areas to the north of Rayyaa such as parts of Həntəlo and further west of Həntəlo. This is possible (even though it needs cross-checking with further oral information and maps prepared by travellers) as there are oral traditions mentioning the presence of the Dob'a in the lowlands and highlands of Rayyaa, Alagä, and parts of Həntəlo including Gəğgät.

59 Informants: Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan, Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd, Šayḥ Nəru Yasin, Šayḥ Ibrahim Yasin Abrəha. <sup>c</sup>*Aləyät* here does not mean clan in its strict sense. But it could mean a wider lineage group or perhaps moiety. The informants use <sup>c</sup>*aləyät* or sometimes <sup>c</sup>*addi* to refer to such groups. According to the informants each <sup>c</sup>*addi* is inhabited by different <sup>c</sup>*aləyät* (lineage) and sub-lineage. The number of lineages or sub-lineages varies from informant to informant. I will not list all the groups and subgroups of the Dob'a as mentioned by informants for lack of space and not to confuse the reader with the long list of names. On this, though not a complete list, see Kəbrom Asäfa 2012/2013, 36.

60 Informants: Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan, Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd, Šayḥ Nəru Yasin, Šayḥ Ibrahim Yasin Abrəha. Although, I have collected detailed data on this traditional administration system, I refrain from discussing it here for lack of space, and as I believe it deserves separate treatment.

61 Šəfərraw Täfäri 2001, 22; Molla Һəluf 2006, 22.

62 Informant: Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd.

63 Informants: Šayḥ Nəru Yasin; Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan.



The Dob<sup>ʾa</sup>, according to the local narratives, were the pioneering settlers in the *dog<sup>ʿa</sup>* Rayyaa or the Šāw<sup>ʿ</sup>attä Īmbas.<sup>64</sup> The Oromo expansion finally ended the dominance of the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup> in these areas, according to these local traditions. Those in the lowlands of Rayyaa including Čärčär are dominated by those who came later including the Oromo. The oral traditions recount several conflicts between the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup> and the Oromo that finally ended with the ‘victory’ of the latter. They say that complete domination by the Oromo and subsequent assimilation to the ‘Rayyaa’ (Oromo) culture, including intermarriage, further destroyed the few remaining traces of the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup> culture in southern Təgray.<sup>65</sup>

According to my informants, the area was vacant before the settlement of the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup> in the highlands and lowlands of Rayyaa. Christians began to settle in the area mainly after the time of Aše Yoħannəs IV.<sup>66</sup> The research of Molla Həluf seems to contradict this idea. According to him, before the Oromo movement into the highland, (*dog<sup>ʿa</sup>*) Rayyaa and particularly areas west of the main road from Mäqälä to Addis Abäba were inhabited by Christians, while areas east of the main road were partly bush and partly occupied by the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup>.<sup>67</sup> In order to support his idea he quotes Täklä Haymanot Gäbrä Šadəq who argues that ‘[t]he former Dob<sup>ʿa</sup> and the present Raya was inhabited by Amharic and Təgrəñña speaking Christians, it was after the “invasion” of Ahmed Gagn [Aħmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī] that Muslims had settled in the area’.<sup>68</sup>

The accounts of other informants seem to support this argument and challenge the information of informants who argue that the area was vacant before the Dob<sup>ʾa</sup> and the Christians came. The presence of a ruin of an ancient church in Məfsas Baħri, Ĥašəngä may provide evidence for the ancient presence of Christians. According to local tradition, this church is believed to have been built by King Lalibäla and destroyed by Aħmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī.<sup>69</sup> Preliminary archaeological excavations made on the site estimate

64 Informants: Šayḥ NəruYasin; Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan.

65 Informants: Šayḥ NəruYasin; Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan.

66 Informants: Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bäyan; Ato Mulät Kəhsay (a Muslim farmer aged 45, in *ṭabiya* Ĥašəngä, *qušät* Šäka, interviewed on 20 March 2013).

67 Molla Həluf 2006, 7.

68 Täklä Haymanot Gäbrä Šadəq 1996, 2, in Molla Həluf 2006, 11.

69 Informants: *Mälakä gəmmät* Yərga Kābädä (age 50, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Ĥašəngä, *qušät* Dätäri on 18 March 2013); Ato Hağäğä Tasäw (age 65, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Ĥašəngä, *qušät* Dätäri, on 18 March 2013); *Käshi* Täräfa Wäsäk (age 47, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Ĥašəngä, *qušät* Šäka on 20 March 2013). The latter two informants attribute the destruction of the church to the legendary Yodit (Ἰsato). This claim opposes their own view that the church was constructed by King Lalibäla who reigned some centuries after Queen Yodit.



the construction of the church to have been between the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>70</sup> Molla Həluf has also collected oral traditions from Rayyaa elders who state that in ʿAwdi Kullu, a cave ten to thirteen kilometres west of Allamaṭa, angels had started constructing a rock-hewn church inside the cave until they were disrupted by a loud prayer chant of a Muslim from the top of the mountain, which left them to abandon the construction. It was after this incident that the angels went to Lalibāla and constructed the famous Lalibāla rock-hewn churches.<sup>71</sup>

What do these oral traditions indicate concerning the first settlers in the Rayyaa area? If we take these oral traditions at face value they may lead us to conclude that there was an earlier Christian presence in the area. But they may also be interpreted otherwise: as churches and monasteries were often built in remote/inaccessible areas, this could be related to such a tradition, since, according to my informants, the area was wild bush or uninhabited before the coming of the Dob'a. Thus, two things are possible:

- 1) There might have been Christian communities in southern Təgray (both in the highlands and lowlands) who migrated either to the Təgray highlands or to Säqota area by the wars of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, following migration of the Dob'a which happened earlier; it may have been a combination of the two. The later (re)settlement of Christians in the area mainly follows the expeditions of Aše Yoḥannəs IV in the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup>
- 2) There is the possibility that the area might have been uninhabited forest (and, therefore, suitable for establishing churches and monasteries; this is what the two sources discussed above indicate) before the coming of the Dob'a, as my informants narrate, and the Christians followed later, particularly during and after the reign of Aše Yoḥannəs IV.

70 Wenig and Yule 2013, 3.

71 Molla Həluf 2006, 12–13.

72 The mention by Alvarez that he witnessed Christians in some parts of the Dob'a territory in southern Təgray could show the presence of Christians in the area long before the time of Aše Yoḥannəs IV (Alvarez 1881, 103–105). But this does not mean that Christians were living in the area before the coming of the Dob'a as this could be the result of the forceful conversion of the Dob'a to Christianity by the emperors of the Christian highlands of Ethiopia (a case in point is the mass conversion of the Dob'a following Bā'ədä Maryam's campaign) or it could be the outcome of the presence of huge garrisons in these areas as proposed by Merid Wolde Aregay 1971, 45. Or they could be a minority group, though less probably, living in a Muslim dominated Dob'a territory.

### Some Preliminary Observations

There are oral traditions on the Dob'a in parts of Eritrea and Ethiopia, such as Təgray, 'Afar and parts of Wällo and Šäwa. Some of them have been systematically and thoroughly documented and used in this paper; others still await scientific evaluation.

It is interesting that, in most cases, the written sources (local secondary sources and travellers' accounts, among others) support the oral traditions. It is possible that most of the written sources (some of them written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) were based on these local accounts. So, what does the existence of the many oral traditions on the Dob'a from Eritrea to Təgray, to 'Afar, to Wällo, and Šäwa indicate?

Based on these oral traditions, only preliminary statements can be made about the origin, settlement, linguistic affinity, and identity of this people. The Yemeni origin of the Dob'a, as claimed by the locals, should be taken with caution. The claim that Dob'a were in southern Təgray starting from the seventh century may not hold water, but we could assume that they lived there long before the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. As discussed above, some local secondary sources support the local narratives regarding the origin of the Dob'a. There are also traditions in Šarayä (Eritrea), Irob and other parts of eastern Təgray that illustrate the presence of the Dob'a in the northern highlands until their disappearance from these areas in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries presumably because they were subdued by newcomers and/or because they were affected by serious droughts or conflicts that lasted for years. According to the oral traditions in some areas of Šarayä, the Dob'a inhabited parts of Šarayä until the coming of Adkämä Məlga' and Däqi Märoni.<sup>73</sup> It is also said that the name Dəbarwa (capital of the *baḥər nägaš* in the medieval period) is derived from two Təgräñña words *dob'a* and *ruḃa* which literally means 'river of the Dob'a'. The following quote from Bruce illustrates this point: 'Dobarwa [...] supposed from its name to have been formerly the capital of the Dobas'.<sup>74</sup>

The oral tradition in Irob also seems to confirm that the Dob'a were in Irobland before the coming of the Irob in the early part of the fourteenth century. Thus, based on the oral traditions and the local secondary sources, it is possible to tentatively propose that the Dob'a might have penetrated the highlands of northern Ethiopia (concentrating on the border between today's Eritrea and Təgray) from the Buri area possibly between the sixth

73 The migration of the Adkämä Məlga' to Šarayä at the end of the thirteenth or in early part of the fourteenth century is well documented by scholars; for instance see 'Šäraye', *EAE*, IV (2010), 537a–539a (A. Bausi), in particular 538a.

74 Bruce 1790, III, 6–7.

and eighth centuries. With time the Dob'a may have expanded to other areas in the highlands.

The existence of oral narratives on the Dob'a in large parts of Eritrea and Təgray are plausible indicators of a Dob'a presence in areas stretching at least from south-eastern Eritrea to southern Təgray. Two tentative perspectives could be provided about the extent of the territory inhabited by the Dob'a. The first possibility is that the Dob'a might have been living in the south-eastern part of today's Eritrea (particularly in parts of Sārayä and Sämhar, possibly in parts of Akkälä Guzay) and in the north-eastern parts of Təgray bordering the ʿAfar (in Irob and ʿĪdäga Ḥamus-Aṣbi-Wämbärta areas) until they were forced to abandon these areas (or chased out) by a new wave of migrants from central Təgray and Bägemdär and due to other possible factors including migration, conflict, and drought. In some cases, they may have been assimilated into another group. Some may have settled in southern Təgray until they were overrun by the Oromo.

The fact that some Təgray groups currently living in parts of Sämhar, Saḥəl, and Ḥamasen call themselves Dobaʿt may show the assimilation of some Dob'a group by the more numerous Təgre.

Another possibility is that the Dob'a might have continuously inhabited the highlands (stretching from south-eastern parts of Eritrea including some areas of the eastern lowlands of Eritrea, to eastern Təgray and deep into southern Təgray) bordering the eastern lowlands adjoining the ʿAfar. We might surmise that the area occupied by the Dob'a extended even further south, to Ifat and beyond.<sup>75</sup>

What do the oral sources tell us about the language of the Dob'a? Asking informants in southern Təgray about the language of the Dob'a gave little information but some would say that the Dob'a spoke the language that we speak today, namely Təgrəñña. Such suggestions are widespread and support the claims of some writers that the Dob'a spoke Təgrəñña.<sup>76</sup> But there are strong indications that this was not the case. Most of the names of the Dob'a groups or subgroups mentioned in the oral traditions of southern Təgray sound like Sāho or probably ʿAfar, but not Təgrəñña. Groups or subgroups such as ʿAlla, Šeka (Šeko), ʿAsawərta (Asaorta), Kädär, and Ḥamədo (Ḥamädo) are part of the larger Sāho group, while others do not seem to be common names among Təgrəñña speakers.<sup>77</sup> This seems to chal-

75 Tayyä Gäbrä Maryam 1987, 77; 'Ifat', *E Ae*, III (2007), 118a–120a (Ahmed Hassen Omer and D. Nosnitsin), in particular 118a–b.

76 Such as Merid Wolde Aregay 1994b; Zäwäld 1899/1900.

77 To mention a few, Mäʿənda, ʿĪrban, Wädäḡənät, Dätälä, Wäsäka, Yəhāmi, Ḥäyənät, Dārär, Endārär, ʿAnəḡalala, Turəkäsa, Kābir, Garədäḡäla, Lamäʿənəda, Wārābäʿala, Gumäläga, Däbarä, Däräʿayəta, Awəliʿagära, Säkita, Dänäba, Səbaḥəlā.

lenge the claim by some informants that the Dob'a spoke Təgrāñña. Even though Zäwäld claims the Dob'a spoke Təgrāñña he also refers to the Dob'a as *ba'adi* (alien people or foreigners).<sup>78</sup> The reference by Salt to the fact that Pearce (who spoke Təgrāñña) faced communication problems when reaching Dob'a territory could also be another indicator that, originally, they did not speak Təgrāñña.<sup>79</sup> The description of the Dob'a as 'blacks' (the same way travellers describe the 'Afar and the Sāho) may be another indicator.

If not Təgrāñña, what was their original language? It seems clear that the Dob'a spoke a Cushitic language or (possibly) languages. The local narratives show that there is the possibility that the Dob'a were not one homogeneous group, but rather composed of different lineages or subgroups possibly of different origins. This said, the Dob'a (or better, the large part of the subgroups/lineages within the Dob'a) might have been Sāho or in some way related to the Sāho. What is the evidence?

- 1) The nature of the Dob'a groups or subgroups discussed above.
- 2) The fact that the Dob'a were mentioned by Bruce along with known Sāho clans such as the Tor'a and 'Asaworta living in Sāmhar is a strong indicator that they might have been originally Sāho.<sup>80</sup>
- 3) The Ḥamādo may have been one part of the Dob'a or a separate group who later incorporated into the Dob'a, unlike Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis' or Zäwäld's claim.<sup>81</sup>
- 4) The Irob, according to the oral traditions, initially spoke Təgrāñña but adopted the Sāho language from previous settlers, indicating that they may have adopted Sāho possibly from the Dob'a or from other groups or from both.

If we consider the Dob'a to be a Təgrāñña-speaking group, it means that they were chased out by another Təgrāñña-speaking group, the Irob, a possibility that is hard to imagine.

What about the claim by Trimingham that '[t]hey were probably of 'Afar stock'?<sup>82</sup>

There is a strong possibility that some of the lineages or subgroups of the Dob'a were of 'Afar origin. One informant claims that the Dob'a are related to the 'Afar.<sup>83</sup> After all, according to some scholars, both the 'Afar and the Sāho might have shared the same geographical origin. Besides, the two lan-

78 Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis 'Abiyä Ḑgzi' 2000/2001, 36.

79 Salt 1816, 211.

80 Bruce 1790, III, 4.

81 Fəśśəḥa Giyorgis 'Abiyä Ḑgzi' 2000/2001, 36; Zäwäld 1899/1900, 10.

82 Trimingham 1965, 81–82. As indicated in this paper, this view is also shared by other scholars such as Hussein Ahmed 2000, 8; Morin 2004, 143; 'Yäḡḡu', *EAE*, V (2014), 12b–15a (É. Ficquet), in particular 13a.

83 Informant: Šayḥ Mahdi Yasin Aḥmäd.

guages have much in common, having more than 70% similarity, which is a possible indicator of common origin.<sup>84</sup>

But some oral and written sources argue otherwise. Most informants say that they do not have °Afar origin.<sup>85</sup> From the way they talk one may even assume that they look down upon the °Afar. There is no information about intermarriage between the °Afar and the Dob'a.<sup>86</sup> They would also tell of their regular *gaz* campaigns against the °Afar.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly enough, Munzinger treated the °Afar, the Dob'a, and the Təgrəñña-speaking Christians separately in his accounts. In other words, he considered the 'Doga' (Dob'a) to be neither °Afar nor Təgrəñña-speaking Christians. Furthermore, he mentions that the °Afar resemble the Agāw and the Doga resemble the Oromo.<sup>88</sup> Some writers such as Belay argue that the fact that °Afar supported Bā'ədā Maryam in his campaign against the Dob'a could also be another indicator for the non-°Afariness of the Dob'a.<sup>89</sup> But all the information given by these authors does not allow us to categorically establish the non-°Afariness of the Dob'a.

There are some secondary written sources that try to relate the Dob'a with the Oromo.<sup>90</sup> But this attempt seems to be against what local narratives and different primary and secondary sources show concerning the origin of the Dob'a. Informants do not associate the Dob'a with the Oromo; rather to them it was the expansion of the Oromo to the area that ended the dominance of the Dob'a in the region. The oral traditions recount a series of conflicts between the Dob'a and the Oromo which finally ended with the 'victory' of the latter. They say that the complete domination of

84 Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad 2013, 90.

85 It is too early to accept this claim or other claims showing °Afar origin because the oral information hitherto collected from informants is not enough to categorically conclude the origin and linguistic background of the group as the informants are relatively few and do not represent the whole area claimed as being Dob'a territory (the interviews were mainly done in parts of May Čāw and Həsəngä areas). Nor does it represent all the lineages or subgroups within the Dob'a. Comprehensive empirical data should be collected from all areas and include all the subgroups within the Dob'a before drawing a categorical conclusion about the origin and linguistic background of the group.

86 Informants: Šayḥ NəruYasin; Šayḥ Mähmmäd Bāyan.

87 '[Gaz]' was a traditional system of raiding that mainly occurred on the border regions between northern Amhara, Təgrəñña-speaking areas and °Afar lowlands, especially in southern Təgray and northern Wällo' ('Gaz', EAe, II (2005), 717b–718b (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular 717b).

88 Munzinger 1869, 211–216.

89 Belay Dessalegn 2014, 16.

90 Such as 'Rayyaa', EAe, IV (2010), 341b–343a (Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba), in particular 341b; Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau 2003/2004, 288.

the Oromo and subsequent assimilation to the 'Rayyaa (Oromo) culture' including intermarriage 'diluted' Dob'a markers in southern Təgray. Some authors support these local narratives.<sup>91</sup>

What happened to the Dob'a? According to Trimingham, '[t]he Muslim population just north of Quoram are still shown on some maps as Doba, but it is doubtful if this represents more than the name of the district'.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, there are still groups in May Čäw and Həsəngä area who claim to be Dob'a or descendants of the Dob'a. Thus, Trimingham's claim that the Dob'a had 'disappeared completely [...] they were finally displaced by the [...] [Oromo] and disappear from history'<sup>93</sup> is difficult to accept. Those in the lowlands of Rayyaa including Čärčär are dominated by later migrants including the Oromo and have gone through a process of assimilation and contributed to the 'Rayyaa culture'. Some might have escaped to 'Afar and Argobba areas and possibly to Ifat and later assimilated to the cultures there.

### Some Preliminary Conclusions

Given the sources (both oral and written) at our disposal, it seems quite possible that the Dob'a may have been an important people in Ethiopia and the Horn, or at least in northern Ethiopia, who possibly had a strong influence on the politics of the region and on long distance trade (particularly in the salt trade) but whose traces can hardly be found today.

Based on the data discussed above, it is plausible to conclude that the Dob'a (probably along other Sāho groups) might have moved to the highlands of northern Ethiopia between the sixth and eighth centuries. Consequently, they had most likely occupied wider areas in Eritrea and Təgray and beyond. It seems that they lived mostly in the escarpments facing the eastern lowlands particularly the 'Afar plains. But gradually they may have concentrated in southern Təgray as, over time, they probably had to abandon their settlements in the other parts of the northern highlands due to war and/or drought and the influx of newcomers.

It seems probable that the Dob'a were made up of diverse lineages/subgroups possibly having diverse origins. Thus, it is difficult to speak of one common linguistic background when it comes to the Dob'a (except for the fact that they had a Cushitic background) as they were probably not one homogeneous group. But it is possible to draw some tentative conclusion about the linguistic background of the Dob'a. The most plausible con-

91 Trimingham 1965, 81–82; Hussein Ahmed 2001, 8, 19.

92 Trimingham 1965, 81–82.

93 Ibid.

clusion is that the Dob'a were part of the larger Sāho-ʿAfar group or of groups related to the Sāho and the ʿAfar. In other words, there is a high probability that they were the result of continuous interaction between various groups, most notably the Sāho and the ʿAfar.

There are still groups who claim to be Dob'a or at least descendants of the Dob'a. Persecution, displacement and assimilation seem to explain the history of the Dob'a. It seems that the Dob'a went through partial assimilation (as those in Šaw'attä Ĕmbas)<sup>94</sup> to complete assimilation as those in the Rayyaa lowlands and dispersal and subsequent assimilation to the culture of the host societies such as ʿAfar and the Argobba.<sup>95</sup> However, they have not 'completely vanished', as some writers put it. Empirical data from parts of southern Təgray show that elements with Dob'a identity still exists, having reorganized under different territorial and lineage names.

Studying the history of people like the Dob'a seems unthinkable without oral sources as they 'provide information otherwise entirely lost from the historical record, and they provide a view from inside a particular society'.<sup>96</sup> Viewing written sources as more 'accurate' than oral sources, which are considered as less credible, limits our access to such important additional knowledge. This study has shown that, in most cases, there is a certain congruence between the oral and written sources. Thus, it is wise to amalgamate data coming from all directions as this will lead us to a comprehensive and objective treatment of the history of less studied societies such as the Dob'a.

## Oral Sources

In the course of collecting local accounts on the Dob'a, I interviewed fourteen informants:

*Ato Arbəsä Marəyā*, age 80, interviewed in Allamaṭa on 5 March 2014.

*Ato Bärəhā Ḥadgu*, age 65, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 22 May 2014.

*Ato Bāyänä Kaḥsay*, age 78, interviewed in Wārəta'elä, Irob on 2 May 2014.

*Ato Dästa Səbhat*, age 46, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 12 April 2013.

*Ato Gäbrä Ḥagos*, age 79, interviewed in Wārəta'elä, Irob on 11 April 2013.

*Ato Ḥadgu Kaḥsay*, age 77, interviewed in Däwhan, Irob on 12 April 2013.

94 This is to say that the Dob'a in the highland Rayyaa are by and large absorbed into the Rayyaa culture but some elements of the identity of the Dob'a still exist locally.

The fact that they had a distinct administration system until 1974 is one indicator that they were not totally absorbed into the culture of the late comers, that is, the Oromo.

95 In the lowland Rayyaa those who claim Dob'a descent are completely integrated with those who claim Oromo origin.

96 Quirin 1993, 306.



- Ato Haḡäḡä Tasäw, age 65, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Hašəngä, *qušät* Dätäri on 18 March 2013.
- Ato Mulät Kaḡsay, age 45, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Hašəngä, *qušät* Šäka on 20 March 2013.
- Käšhi Täräfa Wäsäk, age 47, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Hašəngä, *qušät* Šäka on 20 March 2013.
- Mäl'akä gännät Yərga Käbädä, age 50, interviewed in *ṭabiya* Hašəngä, *qušät* Dätäri on 18 March 2013.
- Šayḡ Ibrahim Yasin Abrəha, age 67, interviewed in May Čäw on 21 March 2013.
- Šayḡ Mahdi Yasin Aḡmäd, age 81, interviewed in Həzba, May Čäw on 21 March 2013.
- Šayḡ Mähmmäd Bäyan, age 68, interviewed in Hašəngä on 19 March 2013.
- Šayḡ Nəru Yasin, age 62, live in *ṭabiya* Hašəngä, *qušät* 'Addi Abo Musa but interviewed in Koräm on 1 March 2014.

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# Poetry and Oral Historiography: An Analysis of the *Boorana Oral Chronicle* in Southern Ethiopia\*

CHIKAGE OBA-SMIDT

## Abstract

In this paper, through analysing oral traditions of the Boorana in southern Ethiopia, I describe how people without a writing tradition construct and preserve history. I compare an oral text, the *Boorana Oral Chronicle*, which I collected from Boorana informants living in different regions, and present a statistical analysis of narrative categories and patterns of the chronicle. Firstly, I will show that reference to poems is one of the narrative patterns of the oral chronicles. Secondly, I show the interaction between historical narratives and poems by analysing one oral historiography about conflicts which happened between c.1788 and c.1796. I describe the kinds of poems to be found as elements of historical narratives, and how such poems relate to historical knowledge and help to construct and preserve historical memories. In conclusion I suggest that poems are a stable medium for perpetuating information in oral cultures. Informants often construct historiography through interpreting a poem and/or creating a context for a poem. Thus, narrators' interpretations of poems have preserved oral chronicles from generation to generation in Boorana society.

## Introduction

How do people without a writing tradition construct and preserve history? In this paper, I would like to discuss this issue by analysing the patterns of one particular oral historical narrative among the Boorana of southern Ethiopia.

Ong discusses how people in an oral culture preserve their oral traditions, as compared to those with a writing culture. He suggests that people in an 'oral culture think memorable thoughts'.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ong 1982, 34.

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to think in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings, in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I suggest that the epic poems of the Boorana are a case of 'thinking memorable thoughts in an oral culture'. Several scholars have already discussed the role of poems in local history. Negaso Gidada observes that narrators usually recite old songs, poems, and proverbs in order to reinforce their claim to historical correctness. He points out how important oral traditions are for writing an Oromo history.<sup>3</sup> Morin considers interconnections between 'Afar society and their poems.<sup>4</sup> For example, he argues that the 'Afar construct their common identity by way of poetry. He also suggests that poems preserve historical knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

In analysing the oral chronicle of the Boorana, I will describe the kind of poems people narrate and how poems relate to historical knowledge and help to construct and preserve historical memories.

### Narrative Categories of Oral Traditions

Although they have not had writing traditions like other societies in sub-Saharan Africa, the Boorana have been able to preserve oral chronicles through their political social system called *gadaa*.<sup>6</sup>

2 Ibid.

3 Negaso Gidada 1982.

4 Categories of poems among the 'Afar include: (1) improvised poems, (2) poems praising heroes and livestock, (3) poems praying to God, (4) poems prophesying conflict, (5) poems of spirit possession, (6) poems of self-praise, (7) poems which are full of creativity but based on a form of traditional poetry, and (8) new types of poems (Morin 1997).

5 Morin 1997.

6 Categories of oral traditions among the Boorana are (1) proverbs (*mammaasaa*, see Abdullahi Shongolo and Schlee 2007), (2) folk-tales (*duri-durii*, see Sahlu Kidane 2002), (3) riddles (*hiibboyyaa*), (4) poems (*gobaa*, *aachaboo*, *geerarsaa*, *jeemuu*, *kaar-rilee*, *weedduu*, *addaraa*, etc.), and (5) knowledge about history and customs (*argaa-dhageettii*, 'knowledge which has been witnessed and heard'). The *Boorana Oral Chronicle* is part of the fifth category.

All males have to participate in this system. It is based on eight generation sets.<sup>7</sup> The sixth group is called *gadaa*. The Boorana choose their leader from among members of the *gadaa* generation set. A chosen leader is called *abbaa gadaa*. His main responsibility is for politics and religious ceremonies over a period of eight years. The Boorana name each eight-year period according to the name of its leader. Their oral chronicle is based on the genealogy of the *abbaa gadaa*. When the Boorana narrate their history, they refer to a particular historical period by mentioning the name of the relevant *abbaa gadaa*. As today's *abbaa gadaa* became the seventy-first in 2016, the *Boorana Oral Chronicle* can be said to cover a period of c.560 years (Table 1).

I have been involved in collecting the oral chronicle according to the genealogies of *abbaa gadaa* among the Boorana since 2007. I interviewed forty-six people living in different regions (see Fig. 1). Then I transcribed the oral data of twenty-six narrators in the Oromo language, and translated the collected texts.<sup>8</sup> I compared several versions of the chronicle and did a statistical analysis of narrative categories and patterns of oral traditions.

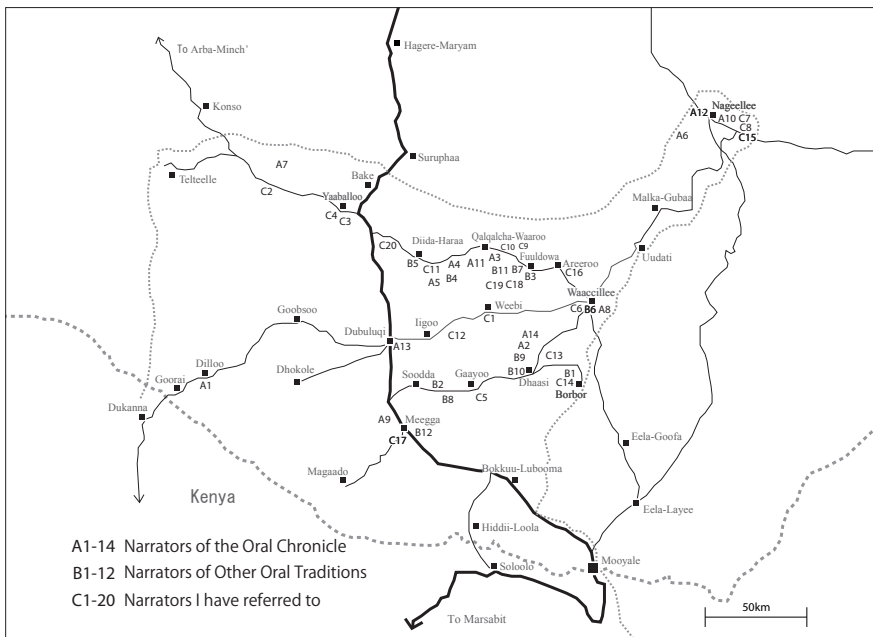


Fig. 1 Map of locations where the informants are living or lived.

7 Depending on their generation set, men practise different social roles and rituals (Asmarom Legesse 1973; Baxter 1977; Tagawa 2000).

8 Oba-Smidt 2016.

Table 1 Chronological List of Leaders of the *Gadaa*

|    | Year        | Names of <i>gadaa</i> leaders | <i>Maq-baasa</i> | Event                |
|----|-------------|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| 1  | c.1456–1464 | Gadayoo Galgaloo Yaayyaa      | <i>fullaasa</i>  |                      |
| 2  | c.1464–1472 | Yaayyaa Fulleelee Yaayyaa     | <i>mardiida</i>  |                      |
| 3  | c.1472–1480 | Jaarsoo Baabboo Ganoo         | <i>daraara</i>   |                      |
| 4  | c.1480–1488 | Daawwee Borbor Daawwee        | <i>libaasa</i>   |                      |
| 5  | c.1488–1496 | Diida Nam-Durii Annaa         | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  |                      |
| 6  | c.1496–1504 | Areeroo Boruu Bakkalchaa      | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 7  | c.1504–1512 | Tittilee Dullachaa Yaayyaa    | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |
| 8  | c.1512–1520 | Lukkuu Jaarsoo Baabboo        | <i>fullaasa</i>  |                      |
| 9  | c.1520–1528 | Daadoo Iddoo Daadaa           | <i>mardiida</i>  |                      |
| 10 | c.1528–1536 | Kuraa Dhaalaa                 | <i>daraara</i>   |                      |
| 11 | c.1536–1544 | Dagalee Yaayyaa Diidaa        | <i>libaasa</i>   |                      |
| 12 | c.1544–1552 | Osoosoo Tiittilee Dullachaa   | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  |                      |
| 13 | c.1552–1560 | Booroo Lukkuu Jaarsoo         | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 14 | c.1560–1568 | Abbayi Horoo Dullachaa        | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |
| 15 | c.1568–1576 | Biduu Dhoqqee Rasoo           | <i>fullaasa</i>  | heavy rain           |
| 16 | c.1576–1584 | Horroo Dullachaa Guyyoo       | <i>mardiida</i>  |                      |
| 17 | c.1584–1592 | Yaayyaa Oolee Bonayyaa        | <i>daraara</i>   |                      |
| 18 | c.1592–1600 | Dooyyoo Booroo Lukkuu         | <i>libaasa</i>   | conflict             |
| 19 | c.1600–1608 | Bachoo Nadhoo Acuu            | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  |                      |
| 20 | c.1608–1616 | Urgumeessa Igguu Beerree      | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 21 | c.1616–1624 | Baabboo Horroo Dullachaa      | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |
| 22 | c.1624–1632 | Baabboo Sibuu Beerree         | <i>fullaasa</i>  |                      |
| 23 | c.1632–1640 | Indhaalee Dooyyoo Boroo       | <i>mardiida</i>  |                      |
| 24 | c.1640–1648 | Acuu Abbiyyuu Bachoo          | <i>daraara</i>   |                      |
| 25 | c.1648–1656 | Aabbuu Lakuu Mormaa           | <i>libaasa</i>   | conflict             |
| 26 | c.1656–1664 | Abbayi Baabboo Oroo           | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  | migration            |
| 27 | c.1664–1672 | Aallee Kuraa Yaayyaa          | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 28 | c.1672–1680 | Waayyuu Uruu Malleellee       | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |
| 29 | c.1680–1688 | Morowwaa Abbayi Aansii        | <i>fullaasa</i>  |                      |
| 30 | c.1688–1696 | Gobbaa Allaa Nuuraa           | <i>mardiida</i>  | conflict             |
| 31 | c.1696–1704 | Daawwee Gobboo Yaayyaa        | <i>daraara</i>   | establishment of law |
| 32 | c.1704–1712 | Jaarsoo Iddoo Yaayyaa         | <i>libaasa</i>   | conflict             |
| 33 | c.1712–1720 | Walee Waaccuu Roqaa           | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  | conflict             |
| 34 | c.1720–1728 | Soraa Dhaddachaa Iluu         | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 35 | c.1728–1736 | Dhaddacha Rooblee Guyyoo      | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |
| 36 | c.1736–1744 | Halakee Dooyyoo Harreelee     | <i>fullaasa</i>  | conflict             |
| 37 | c.1744–1752 | Guyyoo Geedoo Walee           | <i>mardiida</i>  |                      |
| 38 | c.1752–1760 | Madha Boruu Daadayi           | <i>daraara</i>   | conflict             |
| 39 | c.1760–1768 | Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa           | <i>libaasa</i>   | conflict             |
| 40 | c.1768–1776 | Bulee Dhaddacha Rooblee       | <i>sabbaaqa</i>  | drought              |
| 41 | c.1776–1784 | Liiban Waataa Nafuri          | <i>moggisa</i>   |                      |
| 42 | c.1784–1792 | Waayyuu Raallee Canaa         | <i>maakula</i>   |                      |

|    |             |                             |                 |                           |
|----|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| 43 | c.1792–1800 | Boruu Madhaa Boruu          | <i>fullaasa</i> |                           |
| 44 | c.1800–1808 | Ungulee Halakee Sadee       | <i>mardiida</i> | heavy rain                |
| 45 | c.1808–1816 | Saaqqoo Dhaddacha Gaama-duu | <i>daraara</i>  | drought                   |
| 46 | c.1816–1824 | Jiloo Nyeencoo Soraa        | <i>libaasa</i>  | conflict                  |
| 47 | c.1824–1832 | Sokoree Annaa Borbor        | <i>sabbaaqa</i> |                           |
| 48 | c.1832–1840 | Madha Boruu Madha           | <i>moggisa</i>  |                           |
| 49 | c.1840–1848 | Liiban Jiloo Hadhaawaa      | <i>maakula</i>  | conflict                  |
| 50 | c.1848–1856 | Jaldeessa Guyyoo Dabbasaa   | <i>fullaasa</i> | conflict                  |
| 51 | c.1856–1864 | Dooyyoo Jiloo Nyeencoo      | <i>mardiida</i> | conflict                  |
| 52 | c.1864–1872 | Haroo Adii Liiban           | <i>daraara</i>  | cholera spread            |
| 53 | c.1872–1880 | Diida Bittaataa Maammoo     | <i>libaasa</i>  | conflict                  |
| 54 | c.1880–1888 | Guyyoo Boruu Ungulee        | <i>sabbaaqa</i> |                           |
| 55 | c.1888–1896 | Liiban Jaldeessa Guyyoo     | <i>moggisa</i>  | invasion /disaster        |
| 56 | c.1896–1904 | Adii Dooyyoo Jiloo          | <i>maakula</i>  |                           |
| 57 | c.1904–1912 | Boruu Galmaa Dooyyoo        | <i>fullaasa</i> | disease of live-stock     |
| 58 | c.1912–1920 | Liiban Kusee Liiban         | <i>mardiida</i> | conflict                  |
| 59 | c.1920–1928 | Areeroo Geedoo Liiban       | <i>daraara</i>  |                           |
| 60 | c.1928–1936 | Bulee Dabbasaa Bulee        | <i>libaasa</i>  | invasion by Italy         |
| 61 | c.1936–1944 | Aagaa Adii Dooyyoo          | <i>sabbaaqa</i> | conflict                  |
| 62 | c.1944–1952 | Guyyoo Boruu Galmaa         | <i>moggisa</i>  | drought                   |
| 63 | c.1952–1960 | Madha Galmaa Toree          | <i>maakula</i>  |                           |
| 64 | c.1960–1968 | Jaldeessa Liiban Guyyoo     | <i>fullaasa</i> | conflict                  |
| 65 | c.1968–1976 | Gobbaa Bulee Dabbasaa       | <i>mardiida</i> | drought                   |
| 66 | c.1976–1984 | Jiloo Aagaa Adii            | <i>daraara</i>  | conflict                  |
| 67 | c.1984–1992 | Boruu Guyyoo Boruu          | <i>libaasa</i>  | <i>abbaa gadaa</i> killed |
| 68 | c.1992–2000 | Boruu Madha Galmaa          | <i>sabbaaqa</i> | conflict/drought          |
| 69 | c.2000–2008 | Liiban Jaldeessa Liiban     | <i>moggisa</i>  | conflict                  |
| 70 | c.2008–2016 | Guyyoo Gobbaa Bulee         | <i>maakula</i>  |                           |
| 71 | c.2016–2024 | Guyyoo Murquu               | <i>fullaasa</i> |                           |

The narrators tend to give oral historiographies about (1) conflicts with neighbouring ethnic groups (27 per cent), (2) disasters (19 per cent), (3) *abbaa gadaa*, heroes and wise men (17 per cent), and (4) political conflicts within the Boorana (15 per cent).<sup>9</sup> These four categories are generally well memorized for the period of the seventy-first *abbaa gadaa* (see Table 1).

9 Other categories of oral chronicles, concern the following topics: (5) customs (7 per cent), (6) peace (6 per cent), (7) social changes (5 per cent), (8) immigration (2 per cent), (9) events happening outside of Boorana (2 per cent). In all, we can observe nine narrative categories under the heading ‘oral chronicle of the Boorana’ (conflicts, disasters, episodes of persons, internal conflicts, customs, peace, society, immigration, and societies outside Boorana).

According to the oral chronicle, the conflicts with the neighbouring ethnic groups started during the time of the eighteenth *abbaa gadaa* (c.1592–1600). In his time the Oromo split into several subgroups like the Boorana, the Arsi, and the Gujii. From this point on, and throughout the narration in the oral chronicle, the Boorana continued fighting with neighbouring pastoralists living in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya: the Arsi, the Gabra, the Gujii, the Garri, the Somali, the Samburu, and the Rendille. When the Boorana narrate such ethnic conflicts, they explain the causes of the conflicts, how they fought each other, who the heroes were in battle, and what happened after the battles.

The oral chronicles also memorize disasters, for example droughts, excessive rains, and diseases for humans and livestock. Such natural disasters also provide explanations about causes.

The narrators often talk about life histories of persons. For example, they often talk about the history of the *abbaa gadaa*. In particular, they speak about their lineages and clans, how the *abbaa gadaa* got the position, and whether his descendent became *abbaa gadaa* or not.<sup>10</sup> Political conflicts among the Boorana are also often narrated. The Boorana choose six leaders called *adulaa*, including the *abbaa gadaa*, from the *gadaa* generation set. They form a kind of parliament. They live in the same homestead, which is called *yaa'a*.<sup>11</sup> *Yaa'a* members are responsible for observing and moderating meetings about water resources, helping poor people, and resolving conflicts among the Boorana. *Yaa'a* can also adjudicate conflict relations with other ethnic groups. However, members of *yaa'a* sometimes quarrel with each other. These conflicts were big affairs among the Boorana. People explain why such political conflicts started, and what happened subsequently.

It is possible to reconstruct Boorana history by using such oral data. But here, I will focus more on the cultural contexts of the oral chronicle.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we not only reconstruct history, but also understand how people create and preserve history without having a written tradition.

10 Such historical memories become important when people discuss the position of *abbaa gadaa* in meetings (Oba-Smidt 2014; 2016).

11 In *yaa'a*, there are also *hayyuu* who are clan leaders, *wayyuu* who are responsible for rituals, *makkala* who are protectors of leaders, and other members of the *gadaa* generation set.

12 For example, there are long periods of hidden political struggle between important lineages which provide the socio-political context for the oral chronicle of Boorana (Oba-Smidt 2014; 2016).



## Narrative Patterns of the Oral Traditions

I found several narrative patterns within the oral chronicle which I documented. I identified four narrative patterns: (1) reference to cultural concepts which explain causes of historical events (28 per cent), for example, '*maq-baasa*',<sup>13</sup> '*dhaaccii*',<sup>14</sup> '*raaga*',<sup>15</sup> and so on; (2) reference to poems, patterned expressions, poetic quotations<sup>16</sup> (23 per cent); (3) reference to *abbaa gadaa*'s lineages, clans, and the justice or injustice of their successions to political positions (23 per cent); and (4) reference to patterned plots (6 per cent).

When they talked about an event happening in a particular historical period, several narrators told me the same story. Others, however, talked about the same event, but told a different story. On the other hand, some narrators spoke about different events. In any case, we can observe that the narrators followed one of the four narrative patterns, which I propose. Those who follow the same narrative pattern, also narrate the same history. On the other hand, those who follow a different narrative pattern may narrate the same event, but tell a different story, or talk of a different event.

We can observe that there are similarities between several versions of the oral chronicle, especially those about events dating from periods before the twentieth century. Although different events have happened in the past, the narrator tends to talk as if there were only one event.

- 13 *Maq-baasa* is a sort of destiny, which is given to the *abbaa gadaa*. There are seven *maq-baasa*: (1) *fullaasa*, (2) *mardiida*, (3) *daraara*, (4) *libaasa*, (5) *sabbaaqa*, (6) *moggisa*, and (7) *maakula*. Each *abbaa gadaa* is given one of the seven possible *maq-baasa* according to a cyclical order (see Table 1). Boorana believe that *fullaasa* and *libaasa* cause conflicts, *sabbaaqa* causes droughts and conflicts, *moggisa* causes continual small scale conflicts, *maakula* causes peace. Boorana think that events happen according to the destinies of the *maq-baasa* cycle (cf. Asmarom Legesse 1973; Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam 2005; Oba-Smidt 2014; Oba-Smidt 2016).
- 14 *Dhaaccii* means similar phenomena repeatedly happen among members of patrilineal lineages. Boorana use this concept especially when they explain personal history (Asmarom Legesse 1973; Miyawaki 2006; Oba-Smidt 2014; Oba-Smidt 2016).
- 15 *Raaga* are persons who can prophesy conflicts and disasters, advise how to overcome such problems, and practise magic. One of the prophecies told by a *raaga* was documented by Bassi and Boku Tache (Bassi and Boku Tache 2005). Through the oral chronicle, *raaga* appear in major historical events and take important roles for the Boorana society (Oba-Smidt 2014; 2016).
- 16 The narrators often refer to sayings of heroes and *abbaa gadaa*. Such sayings tend to have pattern, metaphor, and rhythm like a poem. The Boorana call such patterned sayings *jechi* (Oba-Smidt 2014; 2016).

### Poems as a Mnemonic and Creative Device of History

There are main actors in oral historiographies. For example, main actors may include *abbaa gadaa*, *raaga*, heroes, or wise men. Descriptions of their actions and sayings in historical events have been narrated, memorized and ordered according to the genealogy of the *abbaa gadaa*. These oral activities construct an oral chronicle.

Heroes appear especially in histories of conflicts. People narrate stories of conflict, by explaining how heroes acted, and what they said on the battle field. They narrate heroes' stories through epic poems, which describe each hero's strength and death.

When listening to the historical narratives related by the various narrators, the first point I noticed was the sudden change from an oral narrative to a literary narrative and then finally a return back to the oral narrative. I continued to record the narratives as they were told to me although I was continuously puzzled by this narrative style. Later, in the process of translating the historical narratives I had already recorded, I began to understand that the literary portions of those narratives were epic verses about the heroes appearing in narratives.

The narrators conjured up images of wars and reconstructed exactly how the events which led up to them and followed them may have occurred; these images and events were based on epic poetry about heroes which were woven into the narrative.

I will show the interaction between historical narrations and poems by analysing one oral historical narrative about conflicts which happened during the time of the thirty-ninth *abbaa gadaa* (between c.1788 and c.1796, see Table 1).

I collected the historical narratives from seven people living in different areas. I will compare the narrations of Gurraacha Godaanaa and Jaarsoo Waariyoo, first giving the transcribed texts of oral data, followed by my translations.

#### Narration of Gurraacha Godaanaa<sup>17</sup>

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa maq-baasi isaa Libaasaa, guyyaa Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa sun ka guyya suni gaafa Ejjiin warri Saffarra akka malee Boorana hadhee Boorana balleessee raabi isaa cufa hin dhumate. 'Abboo Boorana la nyaaphi

17 Gurraacha Godaanaa Halakee Abtanoo Guyyoo Samataa Diidoo Jaarsoo Liiban Annaa Siyoo Booyaa Jaarsoo Halakee Jaarraa Gurraacha Alii Raage. He lives in Dilloo (see Fig. 1, informant A1). He is 65 years old, and a member of the Karrayuu clan. He is one of my key informants. His great grandfather (Abtanoo) was a clan leader.

balleessee Boorana reebi!', jedhani, reebi jennaan. 'Abboo ka nu Olka sirbinuu mataa kiyya keessaa fuudhee qilleensi mataa Dhaddacha Odaa Morowwaa keessa baalguda dhaabee falfalaa hin faladhaa. Dhaga'ii!', jedhan.

A) 'Boruu Madhan bitan, Madha Boruun bitan, Boboorran raabaa Luqumee lafa baddeen bitani',

'Yoo lafati jirtuu falattaa gali faladhuu', jedhan. Hin galeeyyuu hin du'ee.

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa du'ee Dhaddachi Odaa Morowwaa dhaale. Dhad-dachi Odaa Morowwaalleen du'ee, Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa dhaale. Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa amma, gadaa isaa nami jabaan hafeeyyuu Soraa Guyyoo Barqaatii fi Jaarsoo Burraati. Jaarsoo Burraa hin dheebotuu, hin dadhabuu, hin muguu, yoo biyyiti hori fuudhani nami oofaa duuba galuu isa. Halkani hin rafuu, yoo dooyaa dhaqan innii farda waliin utaala, utaalee hin dadhabuu, Soraa kanaan wal dhabani jennaani, tolcha warra Goolicha Guyyoo Alii Boddee, warra Boddee Okokkuu fudhatee falfala kanaan fudhatee qabate.

'Isii nami jabaan luba keennaa ka wanni kun waan waaccoleeti duuluun eennuu?' 'Dhaga'aa!', jedhee, 'Wanni waan waaccoleeniti waan ani du'uuni dhawaa isan moo'ee, dhibaasa isan moo'ee, raaboma isan moo'ee, ga-doomatti mootummaa luba keennaa du'aan hin bitadhuu natti duulaani kenna', jedhee irraa fudhate.

Deeman Taabdoon ba'ani Sussukiin ba'an dooyaa ergatani, nyaapha kaan argani hadhani gadi deebiyani, dannaba Taabdootti dhaaban. Adoo dannaba Taabdootti hin dhaabin nyaapha kaan itti lakkisan biraa yaa'an. Nyaaphi isuma callaa argatee, 'Ardhi! Badaa jaal Soraa akka innii waraanu laalaa, akka innii badaa gama tokko gulatti akka innii warra fixuu laalaa, akka eboon itti caacoftuu laalaa, la adoo jiruu akka muka qaa'ee laala', la gama tokko gulatti duufee lafa dha'ee du'e.

Amma deemani nyaapilleen hin jiruu dannaba kaan oofatan Taabdootti dhaabani qalatan. Dannabi dannaba gannaatii qalatanii, elmatanii rafani. Durii Jaarsoo Burraa hin rafuu, nami cufi hin rafee yoo nami cufii rafee kaani maan ta'ani? Yoo barraaqa lafaa ka'ani dhoqqeelleen ardhaa kalee bonbiin gara hin galchini maan jedhan geeraran,

B) 'Sussukii dooyaa fardaa, Jaarsoo dooyaa sussukaa, Sussukaan Bur-raa badee, Taabdoon yaa'ee dannabi bade',

jedhan. Guyyaa suni waan kaani akki galaninuu geerarsaan himani kana nadheen lafa kaatee, 'Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa sussukaa Burraa la nyaattee? Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa Jaarsoo Burraa la nyaattee?' Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa sussukaa Burraa la nyaattee? Wanni jedhan biyyiti fardaan dooyaa dhaxxee innii miilaan sussukaa.

Amma galani ammallee warra Boddeetti deebi'ee 'Aaloon Jaarsoo Burraa baatii?', jedhe. 'Karaan moo'aa nyaatee nama hin lakkisuu cubbuun moo'aa nama hin lakkiftuu tokkochi keessani hin galtanii, aaloon Jaarsoo Burraa hin baati.'

Deemanitti amma la hadhani, hadhani nyaaphi kaani ittuma ka'ee obbaasee Soraa Guyyoo Barqaatii fi nami tokko hafe. Guyyaa suni Soraalleen 'Ani hin galuu waan itti galuu hin qabuu', jedhe deebi'ee du'e. Namichi tokkochi geerare maan?

C) 'Soraan badee, sorooroon subbaan baddee, Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa wa dagaa Diiree dagaa, daga hamtuu hadhee Taabdoo cituu arreessi didee',

guyyaa jedhan. Guyyaa sun gogeessi sun cufi obba'ee gaafa 'Kutaa Har-Baalaa', jedhan gogeessa cufa keessaa, gosa Booranaa cufaa keessaa nama itti qoodani gogeessa sunitti deebisan. Maq-baasi isaa ammaan tana Moggisaa Liiban Jaldeessa ilmaan isaatti marti dhaaccii suni.<sup>18</sup>

### Translation of the Narration of Gurraacha Godaanaa

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa's *maq-baasa* was *libaasa*. In the time of this *gadaa*, the *saffarra* attacked the Boorana,<sup>19</sup> and many Boorana died. The *raaba* set was wiped out.<sup>20</sup> When the enemy attacked them, the Boorana said, 'Let us take to the field of battle.' During the ritual performed before going out to battle, when the people were singing the *olka* song, an ostrich feather attached to Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa's head was blown away by the wind and landed on the head of Dhaddacha Odaa Morowwaa.<sup>21</sup> Soraa spoke, 'This may be some kind of magic, so we should perform an enchantment to counter it. Listen!'

A) 'Boruu bought Madha. Madha bought Boruu. The young *raaba* may buy the lost land in exchange for their lives in the land of Luqumee.'<sup>22</sup>

18 Recorded by Oba-Smidt 2009.

19 *Saffarra* means a long-distance journey, but the Boorana use it as both a noun and adjective to mean 'Muslim'. Specifically, it refers to pastoral people who have converted to Islam, such as the Somali, Arsi, and Garri.

20 *Raaba* fourth generation set. Men who belong to this generation set have several social obligations. One of the obligations is to defend the territories of the Boorana against enemies.

21 *Baalguda* is part of the outfit worn when going into battle.

22 It is said that this is an area in southern Somalia.

Then the people said that if he can protect the Boorana lands from the enemy, he could perform an enchantment or do whatever he wanted. In the end, he was sent away to battle and he died.

Soraa Diidoo died, and Dhaddacha Odaa Morowwaa became the new leader of the *gadaa*, but he too died and Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa was chosen as the next leader of the *gadaa*. The only strong men surviving in his generation set were he and Jaarsoo Burraa. Even when Jaarsoo Burraa went into battle, he would never get thirsty, never get tired, and never get sleepy. If the Boorana captured cattle, he was the only one who could always bring them back safely to Boorana lands. When he went away to fight he would not sleep at night. When he went out on reconnaissance, he would run as fast as his horse. Even though he ran so fast, he would be never tired. This Jaarsoo Burraa and Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa had a falling out. Soraa went to the family of Boddee Okokkuu,<sup>23</sup> the family of Goollicha Guyyoo Alii Boddee, and received an amulet to defeat Jaarsoo.

Soraa spoke to the people, 'To the strongest person in this *luba*,<sup>24</sup> I will give my amulet that brings victory in battle. Who will take this and go into battle?' Jaarsoo spoke, 'Listen! This is not an incantation to bring victory in battle. I will surely die because of this. However, in the *dhawaa* ritual, in the *dhibaasa* ritual, in the *raaba* ritual, and even in the *gadaa* ritual I was first.<sup>25</sup> I will accept death and go! I will lead the warriors!' And saying this he led the band of warriors away.

They went through the land of Taabdoo, they went through the land of Sussukii, and then he sent out a scouting party; they found the enemy and fought them, captured cattle and headed back, then they decided to camp overnight in Taabdoo. But the enemy fell upon them before they reached Taabdoo. The people fled, but Jaarsoo alone stood to face the enemy. The people just stood and watched Jaarsoo fight with the enemy. 'Soraa, look at Jaarsoo strike at the enemy! Look! He is stabbed by the enemy and is about to fall! Look! He kills so many of them! Look! The enemy's spears pierce his body! Look! The spears go right through his body! Look! He is about to fall!' The people said this while they just looked on. Thus Jaarsoo fell and died.

Jaarsoo Burraa died, but the enemy was also wiped out, so the people took the cattle they had captured and stayed in Taabdoo. The people ate some of the cows they had captured and drank their milk, then they slept. Before, Jaarsoo had not slept even though the other people went to sleep.

23 A family of well-known *raaga*, who had the power of prophecy and magic.

24 People belonging to the same generation set are collectively called a *luba*. Each *luba* is named after the leader of the *gadaa* who belongs to that particular set.

25 During the ritual the initiates have a chance to test their strength against each other.

What would happen if all the people slept? When dawn began to break, the *bonbii* [dung beetles] were turning over all the dung.<sup>26</sup> What was going through the people's minds as they sang the *geerarsaa*?<sup>27</sup> It was at this time that the people sang,

B) 'The horse gallops on reconnaissance in the land of Sussukii, Jaarsoo runs on reconnaissance, Jaarsoo who runs like a horse dies. And the plundered cattle escaped from the lands of Taabdoo.'

Seeing the band of warriors come home while chanting the *geerarsaa*, a woman said, 'Did Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa beat Burraa who runs? Did Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa beat Jaarsoo Burraa? Did Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa beat Burraa who runs?'<sup>28</sup>

Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa went once more to the family of Boddee. Soraa asked him, 'Will the war to avenge Jaarsoo Burraa be a success?' The *raaga* spoke. 'When a strong person dies, others will also surely die. Someone who does bad things gets killed. People do not always return. The war to avenge Jaarsoo Burraa will succeed, but probably no one will return from it.'

Then another conflict occurred. The enemy drove the Boorana forces to near annihilation. Only Soraa and one other survived, but Soraa said that he could not return home alone without shame, so he went back to where the enemy was and died. How did the lone survivor sing the *geerarsaa*?

C) 'Soraa died, and lost the bag containing the *sorooroo*.<sup>29</sup> Soraa was fat and his mother's name was Diiree Dagaa.<sup>30</sup> He fought a very powerful enemy and the cries of war continued without end in Taabdoo.'

At this time, one of the *gogeessa* was wiped out.<sup>31</sup> Called 'Kutaa Har Baalaa' ['the day the *gogeessa* that died out in the land of Har-Baalaa was

26 This means that little time had passed since the cows had gone away.

27 For details, refer to the section 'Annotations and Analysis of the Texts.'

28 In other words, they were singing that Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa caused the death of Jaarsoo Burraa.

29 *Sorooroo* is a red powder with which the Boorana paint their face after they have killed an enemy.

30 For details, refer to the section 'Annotations and Analysis of the Texts'.

31 The *gogeessa* is the ideal genealogical line of the leader of *gadaa*. There is a fundamental rule by which, when all the males are organized into the particular sets, they must always belong to the set five below that in which their fathers are (in other words, ideally when the father is in the sixth stage, his son should be in the first stage). Members of each of the sets that are separated this way are regarded as being in a parent-child relationship regardless of any actual blood ties. If the successive

restored’], the Boorana divided up the people from all the other *gogeessa* across the clans and restored the *gogeessa* that had been wiped out. This *maq-baasa* will befall the son of Liiban Jaldeessa,<sup>32</sup> whose own *maq-baasa* is *moggisa*. It is *dhaaccii*.<sup>33</sup>

### Narration of Jaarsoo Waariyoo<sup>34</sup>

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa, Libaasa, kanatti wa qabaa, walaannaan isaa Madha Boruu Daadayi. Madha Boruu Daadayi kanatti, ‘Nyaaphi Luqumeen dhufee, nyaapha sun nami dhowwu sii, luba kori nyaapha sun dhowwu dhaqii’, jedheen. Gaafa kana Soraa Diido Qarsaa kun, raaba kalaalaati gara Booranaatti amma kanatti ‘Ani ka Olka sirbu bubbleen baalguda narraa fuutee, hin faladhaa, dhowwu hin danda’uu’, jedhe. ‘Nyaaphi sun yoo dhufee, Boorana miidha, yoo nyaaphi Boorana sun miidhee ani si hadhaa, yoo ati nyaapha sun hadhu baatte, ani raabaa gadaa sitti kaasee, si hadha beeki.’ Jari walitti aanu lama, ‘Fulaa Boorani nu hadhuu, ka nyaaphaan cinnuutii kootti’, jedheetiini, duula baasee dhaqe.

Duuba yoo duula baasee kana, jari lachuu gadaa ufii taani nama dhibii kenne. Jari duula Luqumee kaan hin dhaqee, nyaapha kaani hin dhowwee, offalee gale. ‘Nu kalee abbaa gadaatii, gadaa teenna cufaa biyyaa kenninee duulle, nyaapha dhowwaa jedhan kaan la dhoorre, warri kaan amma uulmaa jiraa, sangaa qalatee, amma makkala jara suni taana moo? Yoo galle adulaa teenna nuu kenna jennee guurranna moo? Maan taanaa?’, jedhee, galuu dide.

Aga yaa’aniin haa yaa’ani, aga yaa’aniin haa yaa’ani, aga fardoo tan cufaa qabanii yaa’aniin haa yaa’ani, amma la warratti gabaabatan jedhani gadi dhiisani, halkanuma badeetiin nyaapha Luqumeetti hadhe galuu dhowwee kaani, nyaapha sunitti gale.

Artumaan cite, kunini Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa, adulaa ufi Dhaddacha Morowwaatii kenne Libaasa, Luqumeen tunini fuula Taabdoo. Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa, ka ufiyyuu hin galin, duuba innii gaafas ‘Atin hin galtuu hin jenne, Booranaa irra jirti hin jennee’ akkanaa kaase warri walaanna isaa ka innii baalli fuudhe. ‘Ani hin duula, baalguda bubbleen fudhatte kaani, Dhaddacha Odaa irra buuftee’, jedhani, bubblee tanaan ‘Abboo narraa fuudhani badaa sii kennani, ati gadaa ta’ii, ani hin galuu’, jedhetiin, duula kaan baasee dabre.

leaders of the *gadaa* fit into the father–son relationship following this principle, the ‘five ideal genealogical lines’ of the leaders of the *gadaa* (*gogeessa-shani*) are formed.

32 The sixty-ninth leader of the *gadaa* (see Table 1).

33 Oba-Smidt 2016.

34 Jaarsoo Waariyoo Daawwaa Jaldeessaa Daddachaa Jirmaa Guyyoo Barrichaa Oro. He lived in Dhakaa-Qallaa (see Fig. 1, informant A6). He died in 2010 at the age of 81. He was a member of Warra-Jiddaa clan. He lived in *yaa’a*.

Duuli kan hin galee, nyaapaan hin done, onana ka'eetiin deemee, amma fulaan reefu ati dagaggamte sunini,

A') 'Boruu Madhan bitani, Madha Boorreen bitani, jijjigaa guyyaa gala, lubbuu ufiitiin bitan',

jedhan, yo geeraran. Jannaa jabaan Booranaa kun maqaan isaa, Jaarsoo Burraa, Jaarsoo Burraa kuni dannaba fuudhee, Taabdotti lolee, lafa maqaan Taabdoo, Taabdoo tanatti lolee, dannaba fuudhe. Duula Jaarsoo Burraa kun keessa jiruu, dannabi fuudhan takka hin gallee jedhan, isatti deebi'uu dhowwaa, hirmaana dannaba fuudhani kana isatti deebii dhowwaa, takka hin gallee jedhan. Jaarsoo Burraa kaanti, cabsaa warraa ka lolaa kaani du'ee, dannaba kaan fudhan. Dannaba kaan ka galuutti jirutti bulee. Bulee jennaan elmatee, qalatee, duuli gad deebi'ee rafe. Duula gad deebi'ee rafee kaan, dannabi kaan amma hirmaani kaan irraa deebi'e. Amma onatti gala ona fuudhaniif kaanti gala, irraa deebi'e. Hirmaana irraa deebi'e kaanti bu'aa faana loon kanaa dhuftee kanatti amma loon kana dhaqqabdee bultee, ka warra loon kana irraa fuudhani dannabi kaan irraa deebi'e, duuba amma dannabi ufuma hirmaanaa, ufuma kotteen dhufatii, Qa! Qa! Qaa! jechaa dhufte.

Yo innii itti gadi ba'ee dannabi loon isaanii ka duuli fuudhee kaan. Duuli loon isaani kana fuudhee kaani amma la rafee, quufee aanan dhugee, loon elmatee, qalatee gadi deebi'ee rafe. Boorani waraanaa wantee qabaa, waraanaa wantee mata saabatee, hidhaa baafatee, mata saabatee, gadi deebi'ee rafe. Loon nami itti bu'ee irraa hin buumnee, loon ka deebi'ee kanaa, loon bu'aan itti hin bu'in la nurra galani duuli kun edalle ufuma ciisee dhuqqisaa, ufuma yaammatee elmataa, ufuma yaamee wal haasa'a, waan innii keessa jiruu hin beennuu 'Me beenaa duuluma kanaa hin laallaa', jedhan. Kaan loon dannaba ka fuula keessa dhufe galfatee, kaan gama dannaba kaani yoo innii ka'ee, duuli kaan ufuma uurse rafa. Asi hadhani ka irriibatti ijjeesani ijjeesani, ka ba'e ba'ee, warratti gale. Amma warra kanatti geerare duuba warri duulaa galee kun, Jaarsoo Burraa la du'ee amma nama nyaapha ijjeesee geerara kaanti ka galuu, duuli hin rafaa? duula kana asi hadhani fixanii, ka gale hin galee, amma nama kanaa geeraree,

B') 'Sussukii maqa Saraa, Sukii maqa ganamaa, Sussukii maqa Maccaa, Sukii maqa ganamaa, macci farda, fardi hin sussukaa, sukii maqa ganamaa' [jechaan] Sussukii maqa Maccaa, Sukii maqa ganamaa, Sussuka Burraa jaal Jaarsoo badee, galuu didee yaa'e dannabi badee',

jedhani geeraran. Nama kanatti 'Duula rafuu takka gartee?', jedhani wal gaafatan. 'Hin garree', jedhan. 'Duuli hidhaa baafate rafuu, duuli wantee mata saabate rafuu, ka waraana mata saabate rafuu, ka qullaa rafuu, ka dannaba fuudhee galu', jedhe jedhan. Raagi kaan, 'Nama hidhaa baafatee intala



dubraa alatti yakketti jira, duula sun keessa barbaadaa', jedhan jedhan. Nama kaan barbaadani argan jedhan.

Yo kana amma duuba nami tokkochi Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa jedhani nama yaamee, 'Jaarsoo Burraa la nu keessaa du'ee, nu fula oollee bullu hin qabnu sangaa natti hidhaa, duula gudina koottii', jedhe jedhan, 'Jaal Malle! duula gudina kootti', jedhe jedhan. 'Karaa Jaarsoo Burraa itti du'ee omaa itti hin tolchinee, ka omaa itti hin tolchini hin duulu, Taabdoo lafa ormaati, Buuna-Bataluu lafa ormaati, lafa sun Boorani keessa hin jiruu nyaapha callaa, orma calla itti hin duullu', jedhee, nami kaan irratti dide.

Amma nama kaanti Boddee Tunee dhaqee duuba, nama kana maqaan isaa Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa, ka amma innii aaloo isaa duulu kun, Jaarsoo Burraa ka Sussukaa Burraa jaal Jaarso badee, galuu yaa'ee dannabi badee jedhan kaan. Ka irratti didee kun, ka 'Hin duulu', jedhee kun, Malleetti didee, jennaan Boddee Tunee dhaqee Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa, 'Aaloo Jaarsoo Burraa duula jedhee sangaa hidhee, Malle lafti moggaa, Boorani achi hin jiruu, ka karaa sun wa itti hin tolchin hin duulu jedhe narratti didee, tanaaf sitti dhufee dubbadhu', jedhee jedhan, Boddee Tuneetiin. 'Ado lukkuu itti gorra'uu baatanii duuli ardhaa Waaccollee, waan tokko hin sodaatanii waaccollee duulaa, waaccollee galaa, tiyyaa lamatti duulaa, ilmaan ani dhalee tana lama duulchisaa, Gorsa Boddee duulchisaa, Samuu Boddee duulchisaa duula. Waaccollee galaa ado waan tokko itti qalu baatanii.' Bada! Boddee Tunee akkana jedhee, wanni Waaccollee, akkana jedhani, 'Sangaan kiyyaa haa duulu ka'aa!', jedhee, buqqisee duulaan ka'e.

Warri lafaa kaan cufa fuula wal beekaa, cufa maqa wal beekaa, Boorani Jaarsoo Burraa keessaa du'ee faana isaa duuli dhufuun hin oolu, duula kana eegannaa jedhee warri Jaarsoo Burraa ijeese ka nyaaphaa, ka kuunoo Taabdoo, fula Wajeera kaan cibrannaa, eeganna jedhee, wal duraa duuba taa'ee cibraa eegate. Duuli Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa kaan, abbaan duulaa Soraa Guyyoo Barqaati, kaan Malle, ka didee kune yoo warri dhufe cibraan dura teetti. Cibraa tana hadhee, duuba yoo cibraa taan hadhee duulii kaan mirgichi (irra caalaan) fardaa, fardaan mirgaa bitaa yaa'eetiin madhaa maatiitti dabre. Fardi miili lamatti wal wa guutaa? Duuli la warratti dabree, duuli la warratti dabree, dhowwa taanuu hin taane, dura deebiye. Amma duuli kaan warra kana gata, gata, galee faan ufii duuba, kaan akka waan dheetee dura deebi'e. Warri madha maatii reeba, duuli la maatiitti dabree jedhetti cibraan taani warra reebaa dabree, isaa dheetaa dudda duubaan gataa, fixaa warraan ba'e. Dannaba kaan fuudhee keessa deebi'ee, yo dannaba kaan fuudhe keessa deebi'u, la chocho'uu dhowwee, warri dura dhufe kaan. Arreessii la fulaa cufa dhufee, cibraan fulaa cufa teettu taan cuftummaan itti baaafattee, cibraa tana cufatti duula kana dabsate.

Amma yo nyaaphi dabsatu kana amma Malleen kun jannaa, Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa kulleen akkasuma jannaa, jannoomaaf warri kun aaloo Jaarsoo Burraa faan duulee, yo kana amma nyaaphi la nama dabsatee, 'Jaal Mal-

le! mali maan?', jedhee jedhan, Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa. 'Mali warratti hanqatee Taabdotti mala hin ta'uu, an hin beekuu', jedhee, farda ufii duudhateetiini ittiin dhaabate hin baqataa.

Layee jaarsi Boorana jiraa, Layee tanatti jaarsi eege, duuba jaarsi biyyaa hin dhabe. 'Ar ar ar! Duuli kun ka ardhalle hin galin, ka gaafa armaa duulee arti buluu, ka gaafa ba'uu arti buluu, ka gaafa arti ba'uu dooyatuu, ka gaafa akkasi loluu, yo dannaba fuudhee galuu jidduu agana bulee ardha armaan ba'uu, duuli kun qulqullo hin jiruu', jedhan. Amma duuba, 'Muka koraa awwaara caqasaa', jedhaniin.

Farda tokkocha Mallee, bittaa mali warratti hanqatee Taabdotti mala hin ta'uu jedhee kaan, kanatti gale. Amma duuba kun fiigaa amma galee, duuba fardini aga harka ufi duraa fudhachu danda'uu miila gula fudhachuu hin danda'uu, fardi kun yo yaabattan aga harki dura hin fudhatuu, yo wayiin reeban, yo Sattawwaallee haata'uu, aga harka dura fudhatuu, miila gula akkasi fudhachu hin danda'uu. Amma la dheeboteyyuu, luka taan miila lamaan lafa irra butaa awwaara qalloo tana lafti dhaka hin qabduu, qaa'a hin qabduu, biyyeen adiin urufaa, wayaami urufaa, fulaan tun cuftii fulaa biyyeen kaatuufi, 'Awwaara calla eegaa', jedhan. Muka irra gaardiin ykn eeddoon ciiftii, 'Awwaarra qallo takkatti dhufaa, awwaara qallo takkatti dhufaa', jedhan.

Dheebuu hin jiruu, beelaa hin jiruu, farda kaan lafa irra hirkisa dhufe. Gumiin taan Surichoo ciiftii, Surichoo jechaan muka jala ta'ani Layee, Suri-choo-Layee jedhan, gumi taanti hin gorree farda kaan irraa gorsee eelatti dabarse. Naannigi bisaan qabaa, farda kaan luugamaan naannigatti gadi dhiise duuba. Amma liqimsee, abbuuqee liqimsuu hin danda'uu, dheebuu hin jiruu, lakkisu hin danda'uu, luugama kaan bisaan kaan gororaan liqimsa. Amma luugama afaani fuudhee, ufilllee dhugee, gangalatee, bisaan keessa gangalatee, dhugee dheebu ba'ee, ka'ee farda ufi kaan luugama afaanitti fuudhee bisaanti gadi dhiise. Bisaan kaan dhugee innii dheebuu ba'ee jennaan, 'Armaan hin gallee dheebu qabaa, haa dhugee dheebu ba'uutii itti hin yaayinaa', jedhani, surichuma taan ciisani gaaddisuma kaan ciisan. Ammaa la dheebuu ba'ee, fardi la dheebuu ba'ee, amma farda kaan faatee yaabbaatee, kora taa'u kaanti dhufee jedhan, duuba awooch! Awooch! Awooch! geeraraa,

C') 'Soraan ka Guyyoo Barqaa darabii Diiree Dagaa, daga hamtuu haanee, Taabdoo cituu arreessi didee' [jedhe jedhan]. Soraan badee, Sorooroon subbaan baddee, buxheen baalgudaan baddee, Gorsii Boddee badee, gorsa dhabee Taabdoo galuu dannabi didee, [jedhe jedhan.] Samuu Boddee bade, misaan samee abbummaan awaalatee',

jedhe, farda micciirate jedhan, amma hin gala. 'Oo! Duuli hin gallee gartee?' Duuli hin gallee innii gala ufii itti dhaabatee, xilleessaan galaa, gaala fani bisaaniin fuula keessa deeman, horii oofani fuula keessa deeman, xin-

niiqqee gala taan waan gaggabee, ka itti gadi ba'ani bisaan kaaniin dheebuu baasan, loon kaan qalani waaban, waaba kanatti eegani xinniiqqee galtuu, duuba abbaan du'e du'ee asi dheebuu baasee, Boorani warratti galfate jedhan.<sup>35</sup>

### Translation of the Narration of Jaarsoo Waariyoo

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa's *maq-baasa* was *libaasa*, and bad things happened. Madha Boruu Daadayi said to him,<sup>36</sup> 'The enemy has come from Luqumee lands. You must defend us.' Madha Boruu gathered the *luba* and told them to protect the Boorana from the enemy. That was when Soraa Diidoo became a *raaba*. Soraa said this, 'As I was singing the *olka* song, a *baalguda* blew by. This was the work of magic, so I have to purify myself. That is why I cannot go to fight.' However, Madha said, 'If the enemy comes, they will kill the Boorana. If the enemy kills any Boorana, I will attack you. If you do not protect the Boorana, I will send all the young *raaba* warriors to attack you'. Soraa Diidoo spoke with another *adulaa*,<sup>37</sup> and said, 'If we do not go to fight, the Boorana will attack us, so let's go and defeat the enemy.'

They gathered their force, and both gave up their positions as *adulaa* to others before leaving for Luqumee. They drove back the enemy and returned safely. Soraa was thinking about not returning when he said, 'I was the leader of the *gadaa*, but I gave up my position to someone else before going to war. I aimed to defeat the enemy and I did. The person I gave my *adulaa* position to has already sacrificed a bull and is in an *uulmaa*.<sup>38</sup> Should I become a *makkala*?<sup>39</sup> Or should I tell the person to give me my position back? What should I do?'

The people who went to war with him pulled his horse home with them, saying, 'Come home, come home' as they went. When they got close to the Boorana lands, they let go of Soraa and he ran away in the night. They had fought in the Taabdoo Luqumee lands, and in the end Soraa went to the enemy.

Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa passed on his position as leader of the *gadaa* to Dhaddacha Oda Morowwaa. Soraa Diidoo's *maq-baasa* was *libaasa*. Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa did not return. When he left to fight, the *raaga* said, 'You

35 Recorded by Oba-Smidt 2009.

36 Madha Boruu Daadayi was the thirty-eighth leader of the *gadaa* (see Table 1).

37 In the third generation set of *kuusa*, six officials called *adulaa* are chosen by the Boorana who will in future have responsibility for the politics and rituals of the whole Boorana society. When the six *adulaa* reach the *gadaa* set, they will take on this responsibility.

38 This means he is resting in bed for three days.

39 Assistants to the *gadaa* and clan officials.

won't come back. If you die, the Boorana will be able to beat the enemy.' Soraa gave up his position as leader of the *gadaa* to someone else and left to fight. Soraa said to Dhaddacha, 'I will go to battle. The ostrich feather blew over and touched you, and I give you the position of leader of the *gadaa*. You will become leader of the *gadaa*, and I will not return.' He said this then gathered his forces. In the end, he didn't return, but neither did he die. He ran away to the place where he had fought the enemy. It is sung of in this way,

A') 'Boruu bought Madha. Madha bought Boruu. He returned exhausted and bought his own life.'

There is a Boorana hero who went to war, captured cattle, and died. His name is Jaarsoo Burraa, and he went to fight in the land of Taabdoo, and captured some livestock. With the group of warriors that Jaarsoo Burraa was in, even when the enemy came to take back their livestock, they were unable to win it back. He defended the livestock from the enemy. He was even able to prevent female cows that had fled in search of their newborn calves from going back to the enemy. Jaarsoo Burraa died while tearing down the enclosure around an enemy village. His squad captured livestock, and made camp on the way home. The people milked the cows, and slaughtered some of them. Then they slept. Among the cows they had captured, the female cows which had just given birth to calves went back to the enemy. The livestock they had captured went back to the enemy's enclosures. The cows that had given birth to calves went back, and the enemy followed the tracks of the cows that the Boorana had captured, and came to get their cattle back. The enemy caught up with the Boorana and quickly took back the herd of cows that had given birth to calves. Those cows stamped their hooves and returned home [to the enemy] by themselves.

When the enemy came to where the Boorana were, the Boorana were already sleeping. They had drunk their fill of milk, slaughtered and eaten the livestock, then gone to sleep. They used their spears and shields as pillows, and took off their trousers and used them as pillows. The enemy didn't come and take back the livestock, but rather the livestock went back of its own accord. While the Boorana were lying down for the night, they were being noisy, milking the cows, and talking. The enemy said, 'Let's see what the Boorana are up to', and drew close. Then the enemy took hold of some cows that had fled from the Boorana and took them back home, and as the Boorana were snoring away, they killed many of the sleeping Boorana. There were some Boorana who escaped. Those who escaped and returned home sang a *geerarsaa*. Jaarsoo Burraa died. Among the Boorana, we sing a song for people who have killed the enemy. Some died, and some returned home. The people sang about it like this,

B') 'Sussukii is the name of a horse. Sukii is the name of the dawn. Sussukii is the name of a horse. Sukii is the name of the dawn. A fast horse gallops. Sukii is the name of the dawn. Sussukii is the name of a horse. Sukii is the name of the dawn. Jaarsoo Burraa, who was a fast runner, died, and the cattle he captured refused to go back with the Boorana and fled from the marauding band.'

Have you ever seen that people sleep when they go to battle? People asked each other such a question. Someone answered, 'I have never seen people who go to battle take their trousers off and sleep. I have never seen people sleep using their shields as pillows. I have never seen people sleep using their spears as pillows. I have never seen people who sleep naked, capture cattle, and return home.' When the people asked the *raaga* why this had happened, the *raaga* said, 'Among the people who went to fight, there was a man among you who took off his trousers and had sexual relations with a girl before she was married.' They searched for that man and found him.

A man called Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa called the people and said, 'Jaarsoo Burraa has died, so we cannot rest without going into battle for revenge. I will sacrifice a bull, then let's go and avenge him in battle. Malle, my friend, we shall all avenge him!'

Then his friend Malle said, 'The place where Jaarsoo Burraa died was Taabdo, which is enemy territory. Buuna-Bataluu is also enemy land. There are no Boorana in that land, only the enemy. So I will not go to fight before we have made an incantation', and he refused to go.

Then Soraa went to the place of Boddee Tune. He wanted to fight to get revenge for Jaarsoo Burraa. This is Jaarsoo Burraa, about whom it is sung, 'Jaarsoo Burraa, who was a fast runner, died, and the cattle he captured refused to go back with the Boorana and fled from the band of marauding warriors.' Soraa went to Boddee Tune because Malle refused to go to a battle of revenge. 'I want to sacrifice a cow and fight a battle to avenge for Jaarsoo Burraa, but Malle says that it is in enemy land so he won't go to fight without first making an incantation, so I have come to ask you', said Soraa.

Boddee Tune said, 'There is no need to make an incantation. There is no need to sacrifice even a chicken. The fortune of war is with you in this battle. There is nothing to fear. Send out the warriors and they will return safely. Let my two sons go to battle. Let Gorsa Boddee and Samuu Boddee go. Good fortune is with you in this fight for vengeance, so there is no need to make a sacrifice.' So Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa told the people to gather because he was going to slaughter a cow, and after calling many people together they went to fight for vengeance.

The enemy also anticipated that the Boorana would come for revenge. Jaarsoo Burraa was famous as a strong man, and known even among the enemy, so they were saying, 'As Jaarsoo Burraa is dead, the Boorana will come for revenge; we should get ready to fight.' In the land of Taabdoo too, the enemy that had killed Jaarsoo Burraa were getting ready for war. Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa was the commander for the battle. By the time the Boorana came, the enemy had already fortified their defences. The Boorana attacked the defending warriors, and most of the Boorana were on horseback and passed through the left and right flanks of the enemy, and the fight was not contained in one place but spread to where the enemy's women and children were. The Boorana killed the enemy, killed them and pressed forward. The enemy seemed to be afraid. The enemy returned to the village where the women and children were. The Boorana warriors reached the place where the enemy's women and children were. Then the enemy cut off the way forward for the Boorana who had captured cattle and were about to return home. The enemy cried out and called on their comrades, and more of them came from various places. All of them then attacked. The enemy defenders destroyed the Boorana warriors. The enemy wiped out the Boorana.

Malle was a strong man. Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa was also a strong man. These strong men went to battle to avenge Jaarsoo Burraa, but the enemy annihilated the Boorana force. 'Malle, what should we do?' Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa asked him. Malle said, 'I knew from the beginning that this plan would not go well. It was not here in Taabdoo where the plan went wrong. I don't know what we can do', and he got on his horse and fled.

There was an old man in the land of Layee. The old man said that the people who had gone to fight would not come back, and cried out in a loud voice. The old man cried, 'Why is it that the warriors do not return today either? The band of warriors has a fixed routine of moving, encamping, moving, encamping, going on reconnaissance, and then fighting; when they go to capture cattle, it is mostly already planned how many days they will camp and when they will come back. The return of this band of warriors is very late, so it appears that the battle did not go well', and he told the people, 'Go climb a tree and look for dust!'

When they looked, they could see Malle galloping towards them alone on horseback. Only the horse's front legs were moving, and the hind legs did not move with them. Normally when you ride a horse, the front legs do not move that much. This is true either if you are chasing a giraffe, or going to war. However, Malle's horse was tired and it was only moving its front legs. It was not moving its back legs. It was thirsty. It came dragging its legs. There were no stones in that area, and it was flat. There was a small cloud of dust rising up. It was a place called Wayaama that had soft white sand.

When you gallop across that sort of terrain on a horse, it will kick up dust, so the old man had told them to look for a dust cloud. The person who had climbed a tree said that he could see a small cloud of dust in the air.

As he approached, Malle was very thirsty and hungry, and his horse was exhausted. The Boorana waited for him under the tree at Surichoo. This tree is in the land of Layee, and it is called Surichoo-Layee. Malle turned away from where the people were and went to a watering hole [*eela*]. There was water in the watering hole, and the horse drank without letting go of the bit, so it could not drink a lot of water. It was very thirsty and continued to drink feverishly. It swallowed the water with the froth around its mouth. Then Malle removed the horse's bit, and he jumped into the water and drank. His thirst was quenched. He got up, put the bit in the horse's mouth, and led it away from the watering hole. He drank water and his thirst was quenched. Malle had told the people to wait for him even if they were thirsty until he and his horse had quenched their thirsts, so the people waited under the tree.

His horse's thirst now quenched, Malle led it over and took his seat at the council. Then Malle sang the *geerarsaa*,

C') 'Sora Guyyoo Barqaa was fat. His mother was Diiree Dagaa. In the land of Taabdoo he fought with a strong enemy and there was no end to the cries of battle. Sora died, the bag of *sorooroon* was lost, the *buxxee* [a cylindrical container] holding ostrich feathers was lost, Gorsa Boddee died; the advice of the *raaga* was wrong. We were unable to capture cattle and return home from the land of Taabdoo. Samuu Boddee died, and his penis was cut off by the enemy and thrown away.'

Malle said this then got on his horse and rode away. 'Ah!', said the people, 'Those who went to fight will never return. Only he came back. Only one person escaped and came home.' The people loaded their camels with water, took their livestock and went to look for any other people who might have fled and come back. They found some people who had escaped and returned home; they found some people who had fallen, and gave them water, quenching their thirst, then they killed some cows and made some *waaba* [a temporary shade], and laid the weakened warriors in them. This is how they gave water to the people who had escaped alive.<sup>40</sup>

40 Oba-Smidt 2016.



### Annotations and Analysis of the Texts

Gurraacha and Jaarsoo spoke of three conflicts in their narrations. They referred to poems in each conflict history. The poems are not only part of the narrations, but also recall memories and construct oral historiographies.

The first conflict occurred during the battle to which Soraa Diidoo went. Gurraacha and Jaarsoo told the same event. But they narrated different consequences of this event. Gurraacha said Soraa died in the battle. On the other hand, Jaarsoo accounts for Soraa's survival and flight. Why did they narrate different endings?

Let me focus on the similar poems that Gurraacha and Jaarsoo mention in their narrations of the first conflict (see poems A and A'). Although they spoke about similar conflict histories while relating similar poems, a difference between the two poems produced different outcomes. In the poems A and A', Gurraacha and Jaarsoo said, '*Boruu Madhan bitan, Madha Boruu bitan*'. The name 'Boruu' refers to Boruu Madha, the forty-third leader of the *gadaa*, whereas the name 'Madha' refers to Madha Boruu, the thirty-eighth leader of the *gadaa* (see Table 1). These two men were father and son. There is an oral historical narrative as a context of this line. Madha Boruu clashed with a hero Diidoo Gaawwalee. Diidoo was killed by an Arsi hero, and his death set the people against Madha. These events made it more difficult for Madha to arrange to have his son selected as a *gadaa* official, but it is said that he was able to have his son Boruu placed in the position by force through exerting his authority as leader of the *gadaa*. This passage of events is implied in that first part of the poem, and it serves as a criticism of Madha for passing down the position of leader of the *gadaa* to his son, an act that ran contrary to public opinion.

Following this line, Gurraacha said, '*Boboorran raabaa Luqumee lafa baddeen bitani*' ('The young *raaba* may buy the lost land in exchange for their lives in the land of Luqumee'). In other words, the people who went to battle protected the land, but died. On the other hand, Jaarsoo said, '*Jijigaa guyyaa gala, lubbuu ufiitiin bitan*' ('He returned exhausted and bought his own life'). This means that Soraa protected the land from the enemies and survived. I suggest that the difference between these lines constructs different histories.

The second conflict was during the battle on which the hero, Jaarsoo Burraa, died. Gurraacha and Jaarsoo related similar poems in their narrations (see the poems B and B'). They recited the poems about Jaarsoo Burraa and his death in battle. In both poems there is a description of Jaarsoo running like a horse. Both narrators referred to the poems when telling how Jaarsoo was strong, and how his death caused unsuccessful raiding of livestock. They both explained that, as nobody took care of the raided livestock



in the camp as Jaarsoo had done before, the Boorana did not succeed in their raid. In each case, the poems produced the same historical narrative.

Gurraacha explained that this historical event was caused by magic prophesied by a *raaga* to Jaarsoo Burraa. According to Gurraacha, Jaarsoo died because of the magic. However, in the case of Jaarsoo, he did not explain the cause. Gurraacha added the different story of magic, putting it into the context of poem B.

The third conflict was during the battle on which Soraa Guyyoo died and one of the generation sets was annihilated. In their narrations, Gurraacha and Jaarsoo also related similar poems and recounted the same consequence of the event (see the poems C and C').

The poems C and C' describe the situations of the battle field. Soraa, in the poem C and C', refers to *abbaa gadaa* Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa. '*Soraan ka Guyyoo Barqaa darabii Diiree Dagaa*' ('Soraa Guyyoo Barqaa was fat. His mother was Diiree Dagaa'): this sentence is typical of patterned poems called *gobaa*. They are of the admired hero types. The patterned poetic expressions always contain the hero's name, his physical/mental character, and his mother's name. The poems show that the group of fighters, which included Soraa Guyyoo, was annihilated by the enemies. We can observe that historical narrations correspond to the poems.

However, the narrators give different explanations about the cause of this historical event. Gurraacha explained it as being foreseen by a prophet. As poem C did not describe anything about the prophecy, he added the story to contextualize poem C. On the other hand, Jaarsoo recounted that the event was caused by the wrong prediction of a prophet. Poem C' is longer than poem C. In the poem C', the wrong prediction is mentioned. Jaarsoo reinterpreted poem C' in order to construct his historical narrative.

One of common themes of the oral chronicle is the tragic death of heroes in battle. Through the stories of the tragic death, we get to know about internal and external conflicts of the Boorana in the past. One of the narrative patterns of the oral chronicle was produced by epic poems that praised heroes and their death. Interpretations of the poems based on historical knowledge have constructed historical narratives.<sup>41</sup>

41 The Boorana started to use guns during the period of the fifty-ninth *abbaa gadaa* (c.1920–1928). Since then, heroes who use spears and have fighting abilities have started to disappear. Hero poems have also stopped being created and sung. These phenomena changed the historiography of the Boorana. Historical memories which have been constructed by interpreting and memorizing hero poems have also started to disappear.

### Poems as a Productive Device of Histories

There are many kinds of poem in Boorana, like *gobaa*, *aachaboo*, *geerarsaa*, *jeemuu*, *kaarrilee*, *weedduu*, *faaluu*, *olka*, and *addaraa*.<sup>42</sup> When people narrate an oral chronicle they often quote (1) *gobaa*, (2) *geerarsaa*, and (3) *jeemuu*.

(1) *Gobaa* is a patterned poetic list of heroes' names, their physical/mental characteristics and their mothers' names, as I explained above. People sing *gobaa*, when they go to battle. (2) *Geerarsaa* describes the death of heroes and tactical situations in battles. People sing *geerarsaa*, when they come back from a battle. (3) *Jeemuu* is a poetic requiem for a hero who died on the battle field. People sing *jeemuu* at religious ceremonies. These three categories of poems concern ethnic conflicts. The poems use rhymes, metaphors, and rhetoric. It is easy to repeat and remember the lines. People memorize such poems while singing on special occasions like ceremonies. But people do not always understand the meanings of the poems, because they are full of metaphors and old vocabularies which they sometimes cannot understand. People need to know the historical contexts of the poems in order to understand what they mean. We can observe that narrators interpreted the poems in the light of their historical knowledge, thereby creating Boorana history.

Oral historiographies in Boorana that do not contain poems tend to be fragmentary and to lack information or details. On the other hand, oral historiographies related by many narrators usually contain poems. Therefore, I suggest that poems are stable mnemonic devices for perpetuating information. The poems are an important way of constructing and preserving history in societies without a writing system.

However, although the poems are a sort of mnemonic device, different interpretations of poems can lead to different histories. For example, there were two different endings to the story of Soraa Diidoo Qarsaa: one where Soraa died and the other where he survived the battle. In their narrations of this battle, many informants quoted this poem,

Boruu Madhan bitan, Madha Boruun bitan,  
Boboorran raabaa Luqumee lafa baddeen bitani.

Even if people give different meanings to a word, historical narrations can be changed. In the case of this poem, the narrators gave different inter-

<sup>42</sup> *Aachaboo* are poems abusing enemies. People sing these in battles. *Kaarrilee* are poems praising and abusing men. Women sing these in ceremonies. *Weedduu/faaluu* are poems praising cattle. People sing them in ceremonies. *Olka* are war songs. People sing these in ceremonies. *Addaraa* are poems praising spirits. People sing them in a ceremony which is especially for the spirit possession cult.

pretations of the word ‘*Luqumee*’. In this way, different historical narratives were constructed. Gurraacha interpreted the word ‘*Luqumee*’ as a place name in south Somalia. He interpreted the poem to mean that the *raaba* generation set protected the land called ‘*Luqumee*’, and they died doing so. In contrast, the other narrator, Barraaqoo, interpreted ‘*Luqumee*’ as a group name belonging to the *raaba* generation set. Barraaqoo interpreted ‘*Boboorran raabaa Luqumee lafa baddeen bitani*’ as ‘the group called “*Luqumee*” protected the land which was attacked by enemies’. According to Barraaqoo, in the period of Soraa Diidoo, people changed their *gadaa* leaders, because the Boorana were losing battles. The leaders who lost their political position were called ‘*Luqumee*’. They had attacked the Arsi and raided livestock. They came back from battle and recited this poem in praise of themselves. As can be seen in the above examples, differences in the interpretations of a single word can potentially generate numerous ‘histories’.

## Conclusion

There are many historical studies based on oral traditions. However, there are only a few studies that focus on the cultural contexts of oral traditions.

In this paper, by looking at several examples of oral historiography from the Boorana, I focused on the question of how poems have an important role for constructing and preserving local historical memories in a systematic way. One of the observations resulting from this study is that poems are a highly stable medium for keeping information in an oral culture. Informants often construct and reconstruct historical narratives through interpreting a poem and/or creating a context for a poem. Thus, from generation to generation, narrators’ interpretations of poems have preserved a complete oral chronicle of the Boorana, covering more than five centuries, which is otherwise rare in sub-Saharan African societies.

I suggest that, in future research, it will be fruitful and useful for the understanding of a society to adopt a more anthropological approach to oral traditions.

Oral traditions are to be seen as a key instrument in the formation and reformation of society and the stabilization of its values, rules, and socio-political institutions. Oral tradition is an instrument for preserving historical memories, but not in the sense of an objective historical narrative or even as a sort of exact oral archive of facts, rather as an instrument to stabilize culture and its narratives.

As I demonstrated in this paper, oral traditions are built upon a mechanism which is used to keep information. On the other hand, the same mechanism again creates new information. Oral traditions have been transferred over generations involving an ambivalent mix of conservatism and creativity, namely keeping and (re)constructing history with the help of the same

mechanism. When studying these dynamic phenomena which are found in the oral traditions of many societies, we can then expect more new interesting findings coming out of this field.

Table 2 Examples of Patterned Expressions

| <i>Abbaa gadaa</i> | Patterned expression                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 18th               | ' <i>Nyaapha Dooyyoo Booroo Lukkuu</i> ' ('Dooyyoo Booroo Lukkuu who made enemies')                                                                                                                                            |
| 31th               | ' <i>Seera Daawwee</i> ' ('Laws of Daawwee Goobboo')                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 37th               | ' <i>Ofofii gadaa Guyyoo Geedoo</i> ' ('Everyone lied at the period of Guyyoo Geedoo')                                                                                                                                         |
| 38th               | ' <i>Albaatii gadaa Madha</i> ' ('Epidemic spread at the period of Madha Boruu')                                                                                                                                               |
| 42th               | ' <i>Waaccollee Waayyuu</i> ' ('Unbeaten troops of Waayyuu Raallee')                                                                                                                                                           |
| 44th               | ' <i>Ganni Soogaa roobe</i> ' ('Rain of Soogaa')                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 46th               | ' <i>Teerisoo Gabraa</i> ' ('People made the Gabra to belong to clans of the Boorana')                                                                                                                                         |
| 47th               | ' <i>Sabdii gadaa Sokoree</i> ' ('People became greedy at the period of Sokoree Annaa')                                                                                                                                        |
| 48th               | ' <i>Agarii gadaa Madhaa</i> ' ('People became greedy at the period of Madhaa Boruu')                                                                                                                                          |
| 52th               | ' <i>Albaatii gadaa Haroo</i> ' ('Epidemic spread at the period of Haroo Adii')<br>' <i>Dhuqqeessa gadaa Haroo</i> ' ('Earthquake happened at the period of Haroo Adii')                                                       |
| 53th               | ' <i>Xiloo gadaa Diida</i> ' ('Conflict called Xilloo happened at the period of Diida Bittaata')                                                                                                                               |
| 55th               | ' <i>Cinna gadaa Liibaana Jaldeessa</i> ' ('Crisis at the period of Liibaana Jaldeessa')<br>' <i>Cinna tiittee gurraachaa</i> ' ('Crisis of black flies')                                                                      |
| 56th               | ' <i>Jireenna gadaa Adii Dooyyoo</i> ' ('Everyone was satisfied with foods at the period of Adii Dooyyoo')                                                                                                                     |
| 57th               | ' <i>Hooyyalee gadaa Boruu Galmaa</i> ' ('A disease of livestock called Hooyyalee spread at the period of Boruu Galmaa')<br>' <i>Tiittee gurraacha gadaa Boruu Galmaa</i> ' ('Black flies came at the period of Boruu Galmaa') |
| 60th               | ' <i>Oolaa gadaa Bulee, bona odaa Bulee</i> ' ('Bulee Dabbasaa did a ritual called <i>odaa</i> during droughts')<br>' <i>Cinni gadaa Bulee Dabbassa</i> ' ('Crisis at the period of <i>gadaa</i> Bulee Dabbassa')              |
| 61th               | ' <i>Sabdii Wakoora Malluu</i> ' ('A age group, Wakoora Malluu became greedy')                                                                                                                                                 |
| 62th               | ' <i>Hoolaa qollajjii</i> ' ('Droughts of cattle skins')                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 65th               | ' <i>Agarii gadaa Gobbaa</i> ' ('People became greedy at the period of Gobbaa Bulee')<br>' <i>Oolaa gadaa Gobbaa</i> ' ('Droughts at the period of <i>gadaa</i> Gobbaa Bulee')                                                 |
| 66th               | ' <i>Oolaa gadaa Jiloo Aagaa</i> ' ('Droughts at the period of <i>gadaa</i> Jiloo Aagaa')                                                                                                                                      |

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# The Origin of Two Argobba Villages in South-Eastern Wällo: The Tradition of *Abbayye* Kulubas and *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd

ANDREAS WETTER

## Abstract

There are two villages in south-eastern Wällo where the Argobba language is still spoken. An oral tradition about *Abbayye* Kulubas and *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd provides a narrative of the origin of these villages. This paper presents the tradition as a text together with a linguistic and textual analysis. While the tradition seems to be used to explain local peculiarities in terms of specific topographic features as well as social relations, it can also be related to traditions from neighbouring regions. The paper therefore shows how the combined research of different local traditions has the potential to increase the knowledge of regional (or local) history.

## Introduction

This paper presents a preliminary documentation, description, and analysis of an oral tradition from an Argobba area in south-eastern Wällo. It contains the narrative of two holy men who are regarded as the mythical ancestors of the two oldest Argobba villages in that region: Šonke and Ṭollaḥa. This oral tradition originates from a rather understudied area in Ethiopia and was narrated to the author in Argobba, an endangered Ethiopian language. Since the presentation of this original data is the main objective of this paper, theoretical considerations, mostly based on Vansina,<sup>1</sup> remain rather in the background.

The central content of this paper is the transcribed and glossed text of the tradition with a translation. A twofold analysis of the text is provided in which its content and linguistic features are discussed. This is embedded in a description of the geographical and historical context of the Argobba of south-eastern Wällo, the two Argobba villages, Šonke and Ṭollaḥa, in particular, and the state of research on the two protagonists, *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd and *Abbayye* Kulubas.

1 Vansina 1973.

The text was recorded on 29 January 2002 during field research in Kämise,<sup>2</sup> south-eastern Wällo. The equipment used in the recording was a digital DAT recorder in combination with an external microphone. After the recording session the audio recording was transferred to the computer. The recorded text was then transcribed with the assistance of my language consultant *Šeh* Aräbu. During that same session the text was translated into Amharic. The handwritten transcript and translation were then typed into the computer using a FileMaker database. In FileMaker the text was segmented in morphemes and supplemented with grammatical glosses. The last step was the translation into English.

Recording an oral tradition was not the major aim of that fieldwork. My primary objective was to collect as much naturally spoken text as possible, which I would later use for the grammatical analysis of the language.<sup>3</sup> The recording was therefore elicited, meaning that the production or the oral performance was initiated and did not take place in the normal ‘setting of storytelling’, where a speaker would narrate the tradition for a local audience. Furthermore, *Šeh* Aräbu had summarized the content of the tradition for me in Amharic prior to the recording, so that the narration in Argobba was a kind of repetition.

## 1 The Argobba

The tradition discussed here primarily concerns historical aspects of the Argobba. The Argobba are one of four ethnic groups who inhabit south-eastern Wällo. The others are ‘Afar, Amharic-speaking Muslims, and Oromo. Argobba, Oromo, and the Amharic-speaking population share a common geographical space, meaning they live in the eastern highlands and in the intermediate areas which lie between the main highlands of central and western Wällo and the arid lowland of the Rift Valley in the east. While the economic activity of all three groups is mixed farming, the pastoral ‘Afar in the lowland practise exclusively livestock breeding. Thus, the Argobba share the same economic activities as most of their neighbours. They also share a common religion since all groups in eastern Wällo are Muslims. In fact, Argobba settlements and villages are in many places located in direct proximity to villages of other ethnic groups like in areas such as Harṭumma, Däwwe, Qallu, and Gärfä. Although the Argobba seem to represent the oldest layer of population in the region—the Oromo migrated to eastern Wällo in the seventeenth century—the intimate contact between the various

2 Kämise is the capital of Oromia zone in the Amhara Regional State and serves as urban centre of the rural population of different ethnic background like Argobba, Oromo, and Muslim Amhara.

3 Wetter 2010.



groups over the centuries has led to a common cultural complex, which is defined economically by farming and culturally by adherence to Islam, meaning that all groups except the ‘Afar share common customs and cultural practices.

### 1.1 Sociolinguistic Situation of the Argobba Language in South-Eastern Wällo

On the linguistic level the contact between Argobba and neighbouring groups has led to language shift among most Argobba communities. Today, almost all Argobba in the northern part of eastern Wällo (from Wärra Babbo north of Bati up to Qallu and parts of Gärfä, in the south-east of Kombolča) speak Amharic. The Argobba in Däwwe and Harṭumma further south have shifted to Oromo as their mother tongue. The exception is the area of the Essoyye-Gula highlands, just south of Däwwe, where the Argobba language is still spoken by the inhabitants of the two ancient villages of Šonke and Tollaḥa.

Interestingly, among the Argobba, linguistic affiliation is not congruent with ethnic identity. The Oromo-speaking Argobba in Däwwe clearly express their different ethnic identity as Argobba vis-à-vis the neighbouring Oromo with whom they share the same language. Marriage relations are often created over language barriers, meaning that Oromo-speaking Argobba from Däwwe intermarry with Amharic-speaking Argobba from Qallu.

### 1.2 Literature on Argobba and South-Eastern Wällo

Here, I will try to present a review of literature on the Argobba, namely on the ethnic group as well as the language. Ethnic Argobba live in two geographically distinct areas. One is the area directly south-east of Harär, where a number of Argobba villages are located. While Waldron provides some ethnographic data on the Argobba of that region, Cohen contains a short grammatical sketch of the, now extinct, variety that had been spoken in that area until the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of Argobba live in a string of homelands that stretches from north to south between Məṅgar in eastern Šäwa and Wärra Babbo in south-eastern Wällo. Leslau, who studied the Argobba variety spoken in north-eastern Šäwa, mentions some villages.<sup>5</sup> But Stitz gives the first detailed account of Argobba settlements in eastern Šäwa, as well as, for the first time, in south-eastern Wällo.<sup>6</sup> Abbebe Kifleyesus provides the names

4 Waldron 1984; Cohen 1939.

5 Leslau 1959; 1997.

6 Stitz 1974; 1975.

of numerous homelands in south-eastern Wällo, north-eastern and eastern Šäwa.<sup>7</sup> Homelands in his sense are conglomerations of Argobba villages in certain confined areas, which are usually neighboured by settlements of other ethnic groups, Amhara and °Afar in eastern Šäwa and the northern part of south-eastern Wällo, or by Oromo in north-eastern Šäwa and south-eastern Wällo, namely Däwwe and Ḑsoyye-Gula in particular.

The history of south-eastern Wällo has only partially been studied. Particularly the works by the late Hussein Ahmed provide considerable insight into the history of nineteenth-century Wällo. South-eastern Wällo is fairly well-treated in his book *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia. Revival, Reform and Reaction*, where a whole chapter is dedicated to the role of Däwwe as major commercial centre in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> But neither the ethno-linguistic composition of the region nor the oral traditions or the history of the different ethnic groups are touched upon in his works. And since the focus of his monograph is the period of the nineteenth century, the earlier history is only vaguely summarized.

There are also a number of publications dedicated specifically to the Argobba and their history, especially by Abbebe Kifleyesus,<sup>9</sup> and Aklilu Asfaw.<sup>10</sup> But since those works treat the Argobba of Šäwa and Wällo as a whole, they do not contain detailed information about the history of specific areas. Since the homelands of the Argobba are stretched over an area of some several hundred kilometres, a more or less exhaustive treatment of the history of the Argobba people would have to concentrate on several subregions. In order to grasp the complete history of the Argobba it would be necessary to conduct research in all homelands or settlement areas.

Although the Argobba know a lot about the geographic distribution and extension of Argobba settlements as a whole, closer social relationships between individual settlements or homelands seem to exist only between those homelands which are situated in immediate proximity. My own experience among the Argobba of Däwwe and Ḑsoyye-Gula indicates that the Argobba of Wällo do not have a lot of connections or any relevant relationship with the Argobba in Ifat further to the south. On the other hand, the Argobba of Doddota in Däwwe have marriage relationships with the Argobba of the Wata-Argobba homelands in Qallu north of Däwwe.

In general, the ethnic history of the different areas and subregions that constitute the area between the highlands inhabited by Amharic-speaking Christians in the west and the °Afar lowland in the east still remains to be

7 Abbebe Kifleyesus 1992; 2006.

8 Hussein Ahmed 2001.

9 Abbebe Kifleyesus 1992, 2006.

10 Aklilu Asfaw 2000.

studied in detail. The combination of findings from oral traditions, archaeology, and linguistics seem to be a promising approach. The presentation of the oral tradition discussed in this paper can be regarded as a contribution to this kind of effort.

## 2 The Two Villages of Šonke and Țollaḥa: Geographic Setting and Comments on the History

The two Argobba villages of Šonke and Țollaḥa are located in the district of Əssoyye-Gula, which is immediately south of Däwwe, an area that has been historically important for a number of reasons. Əssoyye-Gula as well as parts of Däwwe are home to a number of other Argobba villages.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 1 The village of Šonke.

Being located at the end-point of the caravan route that connected the ancient Red Sea port of Taḡūra through Awsa in the ʿAfar desert with the Ethiopian highlands, Däwwe was an important commercial centre that connected many parts of central Ethiopia with the external trade until the end

11 Like Šonke and Țollaḥa, the villages of Ğirota, Mägariči, Färäḡa, and Qunni are also located in Əssoyye-Gula. Argobba villages in Däwwe are Ğäddo, Balʾa, Qorasma, and Doddota.

of the nineteenth century when its commercial importance declined because of the construction of the railway between Addis Abäba and Djibouti.

However, Däwwe was, and to a certain extent still is, a major destination for Muslims from all over Ethiopia seeking a religious education. The area has been home to several important centres of Islamic scholarship since the late eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> People used to come from Muslim regions as far away as Ğimma and Bale to study in the centres of Däwwe.

The two villages of Šonke and Țollaḥa are the largest Argobba settlements in Ešsoyye-Gula in terms of housing and population.<sup>13</sup> All villages are situated on top of mountain ridges. Some of them sit directly on steep summits above the valley of the Borkänna river, such as Ğirota, Mägariči, Färäḡa, and Šonke. Others, such as the smaller village Qunni and Țollaḥa, are each located on smaller crests in the middle of a valley.



Fig. 2 The village of Țollaḥa.

A further unique feature is the architecture. All villages are composed of flat-roofed stone buildings, which are built very close to each other. This provides these villages an almost urban character, compared to neighbour-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hussein Ahmed 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Šonke is the larger village and both villages together have approximately 3,000 inhabitants. The number was given to me by inhabitants of the villages in January 2002 in Țollaḥa.

ing villages in the same area which are built in the usual construction type with a round shape, wood-mud walls, and grass-covered roofs. Hence, while other Argobba villages in Däwwe are also situated on the hilltops, they differ with regard to their architecture.

According to oral traditions the two villages of Šonke and Țollaḥa seem to be the oldest Argobba settlements in this region.<sup>14</sup> Oral traditions connect this Argobba settlement area with the region of Ifat in the south, and there is a vague memory of an Ifatian origin.<sup>15</sup>

Šonke and Țollaḥa are the last villages where the population still speaks Argobba as their first language. The inhabitants of neighbouring villages such as Ġirota, Färäḡa, Mägariči, or Qunni have recently shifted to Oromo. While the younger generations speak Oromo, elderly people are still able to speak Argobba.

But Šonke is also known among the wider Muslim population of Wällo because of a highly venerated *šayḥ*, Gawhar Haydar, better known as *Abbayye* Šonke, who had made the village his centre of teaching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Today his shrine in Boqāqe, very close to Šonke village proper, is the destination of a yearly pilgrimage during *mawlid*.

## 2.1 Šonke and Țollaḥa in the Literature

The first author who mentions and describes the village of Šonke is Stitz in an article dedicated specifically to the Argobba.

Shonke is quite remarkable because of its unique architecture. It occupies the southernmost outcrop of the mountain chain of Rik<sup>3</sup>e. Thus, it is accessible only from the north. The other sides are formed by very steep slopes down toward the Borkenna River. The construction of the houses (rectangular stone buildings with flat roofs) resembles that of the Harar houses and the houses of the Harar Argobba.<sup>17</sup>

In his monograph on the cultural geography of central Ethiopia Stitz had also referred to Țollaḥa on a map where he uses the name Täläčä.<sup>18</sup> In 1994 Zelealem Leyew and Siebert identified Šonke in a sociolinguistic survey on Argobba as one of the places where the Argobba language is still spoken.

14 In 2002 an inhabitant of Țollaḥa stated that his village's age was 919 years. He explained the nineteen years with the fact that he had heard about the age of 900 years nineteen years earlier.

15 Personal communication from Šeb Nuru, 2002 in Țollaḥa.

16 Hussein Ahmed 2005.

17 Stitz 1975, 187, but Stitz 1974, 184.

18 Stitz 1974, 67.

As I mentioned, earlier, all Argobba people of Shewa-Robit and the surrounding rural villages always recommend Shonke, a settlement nearly 150 kms NW from Shewa-Robit (60 or 70 kms by car, the rest on foot). Shonke in southern Wollo is said to be inhabited by ‘original’ Argobbas who speak a ‘pure’ Argobba.<sup>19</sup>

Šonke is mentioned repeatedly as one of the bigger Argobba villages by Abbebe Kifleyesus.<sup>20</sup> He carried out extensive ethnographic field studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and dedicated several pages of his monograph *Tradition and Transformation: The Argobba of Ethiopia* to the shrine of *Abbayye Šonke* (see above).<sup>21</sup>

### 3 The Tradition of *Abbayye Kulubas* and *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd*

The oral tradition presented and discussed in this paper is an instance of ‘verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past’.<sup>22</sup> Since the tradition is located in a comparably remote past (probably sometimes between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century), it ‘consists of hearsay accounts, that is, testimonies that narrate an event which has not been witnessed and remembered by the informant himself, but which he has learnt about through hearsay’.<sup>23</sup>

The tradition has two main protagonists: Fäqi Aḥmäd (locally referred to *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd*) and *Abbayye Kulubas*.<sup>24</sup> A review of the sparse literature about south-eastern Wällo and north-eastern Šäwa reveals a number of mentions of these names, for instance ‘Faqi Ahmed’ is cited by Abbebe Kifleyesus as a designation for ‘Sunday’.<sup>25</sup> But the author does not indicate the exact place of this usage. I could not confirm this usage in Šonke and Tollaḥa. Furthermore, there is a shrine dedicated to Fäqi Aḥmäd at Abdurassul with an annual celebration.<sup>26</sup>

Aklilu Asfaw, who tried to compile a short summary of the history of the Argobba, seems to have recorded a similar tradition in Šonke or Tollaḥa which also refers to Kulubas:

19 Zelealem Leyew and Siebert 2001, 5.

20 Abbebe Kifleyesus 1992; Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006, 23.

21 Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006, 173–177.

22 Vansina 1973, 19.

23 Vansina 1973, 20.

24 Another version of his name is Kumlibas.

25 Abbebe Kifleyesus 2006, 168.

26 Ibid., 179; Abdurassul is a town near Aləyyu Amba in Ifat. On the annual celebration, cf. *ibid.*, 230.

An informant from the Argobba villages of Tolha and Shenke states as follows: Those who first settled here are Kulu Base. They are the ones who made all Ethiopia fit for settlement; they came from Tigrai. After they came, they declared in Argobba ‘Listen! Behagim. I am Kulu Base; I am Aksumawi!’ It is possible that ‘Kulu Base’ is ‘Nigus Kaleb’.<sup>27</sup>

Although the appearance of the name *Kulu Base* is a very interesting fact, Aklilu Asfaw remains very vague about the context and interpretation of this tradition.

A very interesting tradition recorded by Poissonnier (et al.) offers convincing hints for a connection between the tradition of Šonke and Tollaḥa and another tradition from Ifat.<sup>28</sup> According to that tradition Fäqī Aḥmād and Kulubas were among eleven *šayḥs* who founded religious centres in Ifat (and probably beyond). In particular, the two were immediate successors of Fäqī Abbas,<sup>29</sup> the founder of the famous Goze mosque, and founded their centre ‘near Tolihat’.

Faqi Abas aurait été responsable, et même directement impliqué dans l’établissement de deux grands centres d’écoles coraniques de l’Ifat, Goze (dont l’importance se trouve confirmée ici) et Abba Bekri. En outre, Faqi Abas aurait permis l’avènement de onze chefs religieux influents qui ouvrirent leurs propres centres ou écoles coraniques dans tout l’Ifat. Voici leurs noms et les lieux de leur implantation: Faqi Ahmed et Kulbasi, successeurs immédiats et proches de Faqi Abas, près de Tolihat.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the detailed tradition recorded by Poissonnier (et al.) certainly seems to support the very vague knowledge of an Ifatian origin among the Argobba of Šonke and Tollaḥa, namely a southern origin of the Argobba of south-eastern Wällo.

#### 4 The Text of the Tradition from Šonke and Tollaḥa

The text is presented as follows: it is organized in numbered line-groups. Every line-group consists of three lines. The first line contains the transcribed text in Argobba segmented as clearly as possible into grammatical and content morphemes. The second line contains a gloss, which I hope, is

27 Aklilu Asfaw 2000, 177.

28 Poissonnier et al. 2011.

29 According to my consultant Šeb Aräbu, Fäqī Abbas was the brother of Fäqī Aḥmād’s mother (personal communication, Kāmise, 2014).

30 Poissonnier et al. 2011, 119.



readable and understandable for non-linguists. The few grammatical abbreviations used are explained in 6.1. The third line provides a translation in English, which tries to be as close to the original text as possible.

The text is given as recorded, and represents spoken language which is usually characterized by incomplete sentences and abrupt switches. It is therefore not a consciously composed text. And, as I mentioned before, the recording of language material and not of an oral tradition was my primary aim at that time.<sup>31</sup>

- (01) *mafačäha i-mäṭṭäy*,<sup>32</sup> *s-imäṭu* *bä-qäy bəḥər b-Asmara*<sup>33</sup> *mäddi näy*  
Beginning REL-he.came when-he.came at-Red Sea by-Asmara side it.is  
*i-mäṭṭäy əbbehalall*  
rel-he.came it.is.said  
'It is said that, when he came, he came first from the direction of the Red Sea, by the way of Asmara.'
- (02) *b-Asmara näy i-mäṭṭäy*  
by-Asmara it.is REL-he.came  
'He came by the way of Asmara.'
- (03) *b-Asmara mäṭṭäy-ənna əlläm*<sup>34</sup> *i-mäṭṭäy əmbəḥəččämən näy*  
by-Asmara he.came-and he REL-he.came he.alone it.is  
'He came by the way of Asmara and he came alone.'
- (04) *mäṭṭäy-ənna ten Ṭollaḥa säffäräy*  
he.came-and here Ṭollaḥa he.settled.down  
'He came and settled here in Ṭollaḥa.'
- (05) *Ṭällaḥa säfərräm s-iqqemmäṭu*<sup>35</sup> *əmbəḥəččämən mäṭṭäy*  
Ṭollaḥa having.settled.down when-he.lived he.alone he.came  
'He settled in Ṭollaḥa and while he was living [there]... He came alone.'
- (06) *tenu am-iqqemmäṭäy ḥälwa addayyäy*  
here as-he.had.settled.down ḥälwa he.built  
'As soon as he settled here, he built a *ḥälwa*.'
- (07) *tenu tä-ḥälwa täqäməččäməlläy*  
here in-ḥälwa he lived  
'He had settled down here in the *ḥälwa*.'

31 Abbreviations: ACC (accusative marker), AUX (auxiliary), DEF (definitive marker), HON (honorific), PL (plural marker) REL (relative marker).

32 The verb form *mäṭṭ-äy* is inflected for the third person plural, which is also used as the honorific form for third person. Accordingly, most third person plural agreement markers and pronouns that appear in the text refer to the third person honorific.

33 It is obvious that the narrator uses a modern reference point (Asmara) when he indicates the northern origin of the two protagonists.

34 The third person plural pronoun *əlläm* is here used as the third person honorific form (cf. discussion in 6.1 below).

35 After this temporal clause the speaker begins a new sentence without ending the preceding one (cf. discussion in 6.2 below).



- (08) *tä-ḥälwa aqqemmätäy-ənna Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd ammatäyṃ əmbär o wäqt-əčči*  
 in-hälwa he.lived-and Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd he.didn't.come AUX that.time-the  
 'He lived in the *ḥälwa* and Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd hadn't come at that time.'
- (09) *tä-wanša<sup>36</sup> nəyem<sup>37</sup>*  
 in-cave he.is  
 'He was in the cave.'
- (10) *əntä wanša i-tte-bo säbäb-u čäffa<sup>38</sup> əḥ<sup>w</sup>a mäls<sup>o</sup><sup>39</sup>*  
 from cave REL-he.came.out-from.it cause-its čäffa water having.got.full  
 'The reason why he came out of the cave [was that] Čäffa was filled with water.'
- (11) *wäre näy mäčem bā-Sərṭ l-imät əmbär aläy*  
 talk it.is anyway by-Sirṭ about.to-come it.was they.said  
 'After all, it is a rumour, [but] they said that it was about to come by the way of Sirṭ.'<sup>40</sup>
- (12) *bā-Sərṭ l-imät i-därräs wäqat ḥədaččäm Borkänna-n ḥema*  
 by-Sirṭ about.to-com REL-it.reached time he.going Borkänna-ACC way  
*i-hawäyy Abbayye Kulubas nəyem əbbehal*  
 REL-he.gave Abbayye Kulubas he.is it.is.said  
 'It is said that it was Abbayye Kulubas who went [to the river] and made a way for Borkänna [river]<sup>41</sup> when it [the water] was about to come through Sirṭ.'
- (13) *ənt-ə'o əḥu-čči i-fänaddä'-əga<sup>42</sup> Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd əntä wanša*  
 from-that water-the REL-it.exploded-when Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd from cave  
*mədər əsebbär biyyäm dängəččäm əttäy*  
 earth it.broke he.saying he.being.scared he.came.out  
 'When the water broke through, Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd came out of the cave because he was afraid that the earth would break.'

36 This cave is located near Tollaḥa below a steep escarpment.

37 Here, and in several other instances, the speaker used a verb form in the present (*nəyem*, 'he is', HON) although he refers to an event that took place in the past (cf. also discussion in 6.1 below).

38 Čäffa is the swampy river valley of the Borkänna in the west of the Əssoyye-Gula. That valley is flooded every year during the rainy season between the months June and September. Today the main road between Addis Abäba and Däse runs alongside the swamps, which are in close proximity to the town of Kämise.

39 As the text is based on recorded spoken speech, many clauses do not form grammatically complete sentences, for instance sentences or clauses may end with a verb in the converb form. This is clearly a feature of the spoken character of the text. As the speaker has new ideas or remembers additional information he introduces new sentences without (grammatically) finishing preceding sentences (cf. also 6 below).

40 Sirṭ is a narrow passage on the footpath between the valley of the Borkänna river and the Əssoyye-Gula highlands.

41 He created the way for the Borkänna, meaning the narrow Borkänna valley, by hitting the mountains with his stick.

42 This refers to the yearly flood, which fills the Borkänna valley. At that time, namely prior to the events narrated in the tradition, the water was about to fill the whole valley and spill over into the area where the cave of Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd was located.

- (14) *dängəçčäm*    *əttäy-ənna*    *Ayye mäsgid*    *əmma-təbbehal*    *halläčč*<sup>43</sup>    *tä-gäyye*  
 he.being.scared he.came.out-and Ayye mosque REL-she.is.called she.exists from-land  
*wäräda*    *tə'o*    *säffäräy*  
 down there he.settled  
 'He came out being afraid and —there is a mosque called Ayye mosque below the village—he settled there.'
- (15) *tə'o*    *i-säffäräy*    *wäqəṭ*    *ama-hagis*    *həmsliḥəmsəm*    *ətəḥtəttäläy-ənna*<sup>44</sup>  
 there REL-he.settled.down time like-new each.other search.for.each.other-and  
*bä-hand*    *əssäbassäbäy*  
 at-one they.came.together  
 'When he settled there, they searched, they looked for each other and came together at one place.'
- (16) *əmbəḥəčč*    *ḥälwa*    *gä'are-ll-äm*    *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd*  
 only ḥalwa he.made-for-him Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd  
 'He only made the *ḥälwa* for him, Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd.'
- (17) *əmbəḥəčč ḥälwa*    *gä'aräy-ənna*    *ənnä'en*<sup>45</sup>    *tä-ḥälwa*    *bəčča*    *əmbär*    *i-qqemmätäy*  
 only ḥalwa he.made-and this.one in-ḥalwa alone it.was REL-he.lived  
 'He just made the *ḥälwa* and he, he stayed alone in the *ḥälwa*.'
- (18) *ḥälwa*    *gä'aräy-ənna*    *ama-hagis*    *mäsgid*    *addayyäy*  
 ḥalwa he.made-and like-new mosque he.built  
 'He made the *ḥälwa* and built the mosque as a new [one].'
- (19) *əni*    *a-mäsgid*    *arḥ-əčči*    *əḥ<sup>w</sup>a*    *əmbär*    *əbbehaläll*  
 this of-mosque place-the water there.was it.is.said  
 'At the place of this mosque it is said that there was a water [hole].'
- (20) *läḥam*    *əḥ<sup>w</sup>a*    *əmbär*    *əbbehaläll*  
 Big water there.was it.is.said  
 'It is said that there was a big water [hole].'
- (21) *əwwat-on*    *adərəqqäm*    *mäsgid*    *addayyäy*  
 it-ACC draining.it mosque he.built  
 'He drained it and built a mosque [on that place].'
- (22) *bä'en*    *s-iqqemmätu*    *əlläm*    *räwwäḥay*  
 with-this when-he.lives he he.had.many.children  
 'While he was living there he begot [many] children.'

43 This is one of the inserted sentences, which serves to provide necessary background information.

44 While the form of the preceding verb in this sentence is ambiguous, as the third person plural forms can refer to both *šayḥs* (plural reading) or only to one (honorific reading), the reciprocal pronoun and the two reciprocal verbs have unambiguously a plural reference.

45 The word *ənnä'en* is a plural demonstrative pronoun which has a singular honorific reading in this sentence.

- (23) *ənnä'en-əm*<sup>46</sup> *ləḡ* *halläyem*<sup>47</sup>  
 that.one-also child he.has  
 'And the other one has also a child [or 'children'].'
- (24) *mäččem* *ərgəttəččin* *ənke<sup>w</sup>an* *annəhaqəm*  
 anyway for.sure even we.don't.know  
 'After all, we really don't know it for sure.'
- (25) *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* *wärbar ləḡ* *yatäbbeməm* *əbbehaläll*  
*Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* male child he.doesn't.have it.is.said  
 'It is said that Fäqi Aḥmäd didn't have a son.'
- (26) *wärbar ləḡ* *Abbayye Kulubas* *näyem* *i-halläyem*  
 male child *Abbayye Kulubas* he.is REL-he.has  
 'It was *Abbayye Kulubas* who had a son.'
- (27) *nəšča* *ləḡ-äm-ən* *Abbayye Kulubas* *nəšča* *ləḡ-äm-ən* *lä-ləḡ-äm*<sup>48</sup>  
 female child-his-ACC *Abbayye Kulubas* female child-his-ACC for-child-his  
 'For his [Fäqi Aḥmäd's] daughter, *Abbayye Kulubas*, [asked] his [Fäqi Aḥmäd's] daughter for his son.'
- (28) *Din Ombära* *əmma-təbbehal* *əmbäräčč*  
*Din Ombära* REL-she.is.called she.was  
 'She was called *Din Ombära*.'
- (29) *nəšča* *ləḡ* *əmbäräččäyem*<sup>49</sup>  
 female child he.had  
 'He had a daughter.'
- (30) *əyyat-on* *Abbayye Kulubas* *lä-ləḡ-äm* *zungi* *zänagge-yya*  
 she-ACC *Abbayye Kulubas* for-child-his fiancée he.affianced-her  
 '*Abbayye Kulubas* affianced her as fiancée to his son.'
- (31) *zungi* *lä-ləḡ-äm* *gä'aräy-lo*  
 fiancée for-child-his he.made-for.him  
 'He made her fiancée for his son.'

46 In this sentence the speaker switches from an account about one of the *šayhs* to the other one. Due to the extensive use of pronouns it is not absolutely clear to which of the *šayhs* he is referring.

47 This is another example of the use of present forms for events and situations that happened in the past.

48 This line is another illustration of the use of grammatically incomplete sentences, meaning that this sentence lacks a verb.

49 In contrast to the use of present form for possessive construction in the preceding sentences (23) and (26) in this example a past form of the possessive construction is used. The lack of proper names in the sentence makes it quite ambiguous. Only from the context, namely the above-mentioned fact that *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* did not have male children, can it be inferred that he is referred to in (29).

- (32) *ənna t-iḃ<sup>w</sup>a ɸema lā-mələkkət<sup>50</sup> ənkwən ənt-iḃ<sup>w</sup>a ɸema<sup>51</sup> ənt-iḃ<sup>w</sup>a*  
 and on-water way for-message even from-water way from-water  
*s-ətə<sup>2</sup>at*  
 when-she.returned.home  
 ‘And, on the way to the water, for a message, even when she returned from the way to the water, from the water [i.e. the river]...’
- (33) *ənnā<sup>2</sup>en a-Abbayye Kulubas ləḡ wārāda b-iḃ<sup>w</sup>a bā-zärr mäddi s-iḃedu*  
 that.one of-Abbayye Kulubas son down at-water at-river side when-he-went  
 ‘When the other one, the son of Abbayye Kulubas went down to the water, in the direction of the river...’
- (34) *Faṭumayye gəṅḡälā<sup>52</sup> əmm-ibbehal gəṅḡälā hall unḡure-wu*  
 Faṭumayye stone REL-it.is.called stone there.is now-DEF  
 ‘There is a stone called “Faṭumayye Stone”, [even] now.’
- (35) *tə<sup>3</sup>o tā-gəṅḡäl-əčči zungī i-mättä-wa wäqəṭ*  
 there at-stone-the fiancé REL-he.came-towards.her time  
*tā-gəṅḡäl-əčči tāččäḡə<sup>3</sup>a<sup>53</sup>*  
 at-stone-the she.approaching  
 ‘At the time when the [her] fiancé reached the stone she approached the stone and...’
- (36) *unḡurewu gəṅḡäl-əčči amenu läḥam i-<sup>3</sup>omm hall*  
 now stone-the like.this big REL-it.stands there.is  
 ‘Even now the stone stands big like this.’
- (37) *t-iwwat tāččäḡə<sup>3</sup>a-bbo tu-wa gəṅḡäl-əčči-n torbuššo-y*  
 at-it she.approaching-it breast-her stone-the-ACC he.denting-it  
*unḡure-wu hall*  
 now-DEF there.is  
 ‘Now the stone is there as it was being pierced from her breast that came near to it.’
- (38) *o gəṅḡäl-əčči nare-wum hall*  
 that stone-the today-DEF-also there.is  
 ‘And today that stone is still there.’

50 This part is a good example of a change of thought in the middle of the sentence. First the speaker wants to say that the child was sent for a message, and then he switches the theme and talks directly about the way back from the water.

51 The inhabitants of Țollaḥa fetch their water from a river, which flows in a narrow valley directly below the village. Usually the women and especially young girls descend through a narrow path towards the river.

52 This refers to a specific landmark.

53 In order to understand this sentence one needs to know the local customs related to marriage and engagement. Prior to the marriage an engaged girl tries everything to avoid any encounter with members of the future family-in-law in general and her fiancé in particular.

- (39) *ungure manum s-i aḡ* *Gallačč-əm*<sup>54</sup> *i-ḥon* *‘Argobba-m* *i-ḥon*  
 now who.ever when-he.passes Oromo-and REL-he.is Argobba-and REL-he.is  
*aḥāle maššā-y* *bəyyena annəḥaqəm*  
 so.and.so he.buttered-it us.saying we.don’t.know  
 ‘Now, anyone who passes it [the stone], be it an Oromo, be it an Argobba, we never said so-and-so buttered it...’
- (40) *qu* *gāñəččo* *iḥaqəm*  
 butter it-lacking it.doesn’t.know  
 ‘It never lacks butter [It has never been without butter].’
- (41) *qu* *əmmaššäll*  
 butter it.is.buttered  
 ‘It is smeared with butter.’
- (42) *gəṅgäl-əčči* *tu-wa-n* *amenu* *am-išäšš* *yəḥoqäll*  
 stone-the breast-her-ACC like.this that-it.fled it.shows  
 ‘The stone shows that he retracted from her breast like this.’
- (43) *ungurəččinu* *all*  
 now there.is  
 ‘It is still there.’
- (44) *bä-ləbb-a* *iččegä’ aččä-wo* *məsi* *bä-’en* *näy* *əmm-ili-nna*  
 with-breast-her she.approached-it kind.of with-this it.is REL-they.tell-us  
 ‘They tell us that she approached it with her breast like this.’
- (45) *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* *s-iqqemmātu* *bä-hand-u* *s-iqqemmātu*  
*Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* when-he.lived with-one-DEF when-he.lived  
*bä-handu* *i-qqemmātu* *əmbäräy*<sup>55</sup>  
 with-one REL-they.lived they.were  
 ‘When *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* was living there, when they were living there together, they used to live together.’
- (46) *bä-hand* *s-iqqemmātu* *Abbayye Kulubas-ən* *əndəg* *ənt-iqqemmätäy*  
 with-one when-he.lived *Abbayye Kulubas-ACC* much after-he.lived  
*ənt-irawwəḥay* *amoče* *tä-ḡinah* *raššo*  
 after-he.had.many.children after on-roof.stone upside  
 ‘When they were living together, after he had lived a long time and after he had many children, on the roof stone...’

54 The speaker uses here the term *Galla*, which has a pejorative connotation in other regions of Ethiopia. In personal conversation I was told that among the Argobba of *Əssoyye-Gula* it was in fact the term *Oromo*, which had a negative connotation during former periods. The comprehension of the complex ethno-linguistic setting of *Əssoyye-Gula* and the greater area of *Däwwe* is further complicated by the fact that the majority of the local Argobba population now speaks Oromo as its mother tongue.

55 Line (45) contains another change of thought during the utterance of a sentence, namely the temporal clause is repeated as a finite sentence.

- (47) *o zāñe t-i-qqemmätenä-wo*<sup>56</sup> *gəŋgäl-əčči tāqämäččäm s-ibəlläy*  
 that day on-REL-we.sat-on.it stone-the he.sitting when-he.was  
 ‘While he was sitting on that stone, which we had been sitting on the other day...’
- (48) *Ġäba əmm-ibbehal gora hall*  
 Ġäba REL-it.is.called mountain there.is  
 ‘There is a mountain called Ġäba.’
- (49) *əntä məˈdo Šonkor Amara əmbär*  
 from the.other.side Šonkor Amara there.was  
 ‘On the other side there was Šonkor Amara.’
- (50) *əntä Šonkor Amara nəy i-gäddäle-yyäm əbbehaläll*  
 from Šonkor Amara it.is REL-they.killed-him it.is.said  
 ‘It is said that it was from [the direction of] Šonkor Amara that they killed him.’<sup>57</sup>
- (51) *bäˈen səbāb a-Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd gosa-nna*  
 with-this cause of-Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd clan-and  
*a-Abbayye Kulubas gosa iwəwaddädəm*  
 of-Abbayye Kulubas clan they.don’t.like.each.other  
 ‘It is because of this reason that the clan of *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd and the clan of *Abbayye* Kulubas don’t like each other.’
- (52) *ungure-m ibbaddäd*  
 now-and they.don’t.like.each.other  
 ‘And today they [still] don’t like each other.’
- (53) *a-asgeddäle-yyäm əlläm nəyem*  
 REL-they.had.let.killed-him they they.are  
 ‘They [the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd] are the ones who had him killed.’
- (54) *a-Fäqi Aḥmäd gosa nəy a-asgeddäle-yyäm biyyäm*  
 of-Fäqi Aḥmäd clan it.is REL-the.had.let.killed-him they.saying  
*a-Kulubas gosa a-Fäqi Aḥmäd-ən gosa təliˈ əmbär*  
 of-Kulubas clan of-Fäqi Aḥmäd-ACC clan they.hate AUX  
 ‘The clan of Kulubas used to hate the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd because they say that it were them [the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd] who had him killed.’
- (55) *yawm əntä məsgid s-iˈatu bə-gəŋgäla məttäˈe-yyäm biyyäm*  
 well from mosque when-he.returned.home with-stone they.hit-him<sup>58</sup> they.saying  
 ‘Well, they say that they [members of the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd] hit him with a stone when he left the mosque [in order to go home].’
- (56) *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd-ən dəmaḥ-am-ən fərəˈc am-əyyäm*  
 Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd-ACC head-his-ACC they.injuring.head-him  
 ‘They injured *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd on his head.’

56 This sentence is an intersection in which *Šeh* Aräbu refers to a place where he and I had once been staying prior to the recording and which was related to his account.

57 This refers to the killing of *Abbayye* Kulubas.

58 This refers to another murder, that of *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd, who was killed after the murder of *Abbayye* Kulubas.

- (57) *təl<sup>c</sup>-am-ən allām*      *lā-betsäb*      *s-ayare'u*      *tässə'ennam*  
wound-his-ACC he      to-family      when-he.doesn't.show      he.being.sick  
*tä-bet qäräččäm*  
at-house      he.staying  
'He stayed ill at home without showing the wound to his family...'
- (58) *i-motäy*      *zəñe*      *ğänaza*      *s-ibatwu*      *təmṭam-äm-ən*      *b-anäs'u*  
REL-he.died      day      corpse      when-they.wash      turban-his-ACC      at-they.raised  
*tä-dəmaḥ-am*      *raššo*      *tələ<sup>c</sup>*      *re'e-bbām*  
on-head-his      upside      wound      they.saw-on.it  
'When they washed the corpse on the day he had died and removed his turban they saw the wound on his head.'
- (59) *b-o*      *bä-təl<sup>c</sup>ə-čči*      *säbäb*      *ästä-nare*      *dräs qim*      *tättaḥəzzo*  
with-this      with-wound-the      cause      until-today      until      mistrust      they.being.mutally.caught.in  
'Because of this wound they are caught in a grudge against each other until today.'
- (60) *Abba Mäḥammäd*      *əmm-ili-yyäm*      *Bər'ensa Qore*      *wäliy*      *əmbäräy*  
Abba Mäḥammäd      REL-they.call-him      Bər'ensa Qore      saint      there.was  
'There was a *wäliy* [Muslim saint] called *Abba Mäḥammäd* in Bər'ensa Qore.'<sup>59</sup>
- (61) *allām*      *mäčə<sup>c</sup>am*      'gobessi      *wälətti*      *qaba*'<sup>60</sup>      *biyyäm*  
he      he.coming      'bamboo      together      take'      he.saying  
'He came and said, "Hold the bamboo together!"'
- (62) *ungure-wu-m*      *dräs*      *tä-mäsgid*      *i-säqqäläy*      *qoş-əčči*  
now-DEF-and      until      in-mosque      REL-he-hung      bamboo-the  
*ungure-m*      *dräs*      *hall*      *tä-mäsgid*  
now-and      until      there.is      in-mosque  
'Until now, the bamboo, which he hung in the mosque [of Tollaḥa] is still there, in the mosque.'
- (63) *ungure-wu-m hall*      *tä-mäsgid*  
now-DEF-and there.is      in-mosque  
'It is still there in the mosque.'
- (64) *qoşe*      'assäräy      *attə'ağğäy-ənna*      *fägara-wu-n*      *attə'ağğäy-ənna*      'assäräy-y  
bamboo      he.tied      he.let.it.pass-and      end-its-ACC      he.let.it.pass-and      he.tied-it  
'He tied the bamboo [sticks]. He let their ends pass [each other] and tied them together.'
- (65) *bä-färäs-əčči*      *lək*      'assäräy-y  
on-beam-the      length      he.tied-it  
'He tied it in the length of the beam.'
- (66) *ənt-o*      *laläget*      *aman*      *ḥon*  
from-that      after      peace      it.became  
'After this it [the situation] became peaceful.'
- (67) *mulum*      *əssəmemmä'ay-ənna*      *dəmma*      *ḥonäy*  
all      they.agreed-and      good      they.became  
'They all agreed and it [the situation between the two clans] became peaceful.'

59 Bər'ensa Qore is a village in Däwwe.

60 This line reflects the multilingual situation in which the Argobba of Əsoyye-Gula live. The citation of *Abba Mäḥammäd* is given in Oromo.

- (68) *ənği* *ənt-ə'o* *mārbo* *lä-gəddəyya* *ətəhtettälu* *əmbäräy*  
 but from-that before for-killing they.search.each.other AUX  
 'But before that they were looking for each other in order to kill [each other].'
- (69) *l-iggaddäl* *a-Fäqi Aḥmäd* *gosa-mna* *a-Kulubas* *gosa* *l-iggaddäl*  
 to-kill of-Fäqi Aḥmäd clan-and of-Kulubas clan to-kill  
*lä-gəddəyya* *ətəhtettäl* *əmbär*  
 for-killing they.search.each.other AUX  
 'In order to kill [each other], the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd and the clan of Kulubas were trying to kill each other.'
- (70) *lä-mäggadäl* *mätəhtettäl-əčč-in* *te'ay* *ənği* *wäfçe-wun*  
 for-killing.each.other searching.each.other-the-ACC they.stopped but inside-DEF  
*ungure-m* *ibbaddädum*  
 now-also they.don't.like.each.other  
 'The stopped trying to kill each other but internally they don't like each other even now.'
- (71) *ungure-m* *ibbaddädum*  
 now-and they.don't.like.each.other  
 'And [still] now they don't like each other.'
- (72) *ənnəḥaqulläy*  
 they.malign.each.other  
 'They malign each other.'
- (73) *a-Fäqi Aḥmäd* *gosa* *a-Kulubas-ən* *gosa* *nəḥqäll*  
 of-Fäqi Aḥmäd clan of-Kulubas-ACC clan he.maligns  
 'The clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd maligns the clan of Kulubas.'
- (74) *a-Kulubas* *gosa* *unguru-m* *a-Fäqi Aḥmäd-ən* *gosa* *nəḥqäll*  
 of-Kulubas clan in.return-and of-Aḥmäd-ACC clan he.maligns  
 'And the clan of Kulubas maligns in return the clan of Fäqi Aḥmäd.'
- (75) *ənnəḥaqulläy*  
 they.malign.each.other  
 'They malign each other.'
- (76) *əlläm* *ḥä'et-ačč-äm-əm* *ḥand* *näyem*  
 they two-PL-their-and one they.are  
 'And the two of them are the one [i.e. the same].'
- (77) *əlläm* *i-mättäy* *əntä-ḥand-gi* *yəḥun* *əmbäḥəčč* *gäyye*  
 they REL-they.came from-one-place it.may.be alone country  
*əmbäḥəčč* *yəḥun* *itəḥewwäqəm*  
 alone it.may.be it.is.not.known  
 'No one knows if they came from one country or each from a different country.'



- (78) *Abbayye Kulubas-ən*    *am-enu*    *abbagar*<sup>61</sup>    *qis<sup>w</sup>a*    *näy*    *ənği*  
*Abbayye Kulubas-ACC*    like-this    abbagar    story    it.is    but  
*Abbayye Kulubas-ən*    *a-Fatuma*    *ləğ*    *əli-yyām-əlläy*  
*Abbayye Kulubas-ACC*    of-Fatuma    child    they.call-him-AUX  
‘[About]<sup>62</sup> *Abbayye Kulubas*, well, it’s [only] an *abbagar* story, but they say that *Abbayye Kulubas* is a descendant of Fatuma.’
- (79) *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd-ən*    *a-Ḥalima*    *ləğ*    *əli-yyām-əlläy*  
*Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd-ACC*    of-Ḥalima    child    they.call-him-AUX  
‘And they say that *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* is a descendant of Ḥalima.’
- (80) *ittəḥewwäqəm*    *ənt-en-əgi*    *mättäy*    *biyyām*    *ittəḥewwäqəm*  
it.is.not.known    fom-this-place    they.came    they.saying    it.is.not.known  
*gən*    *‘əmra-wam*    *gärr*    *näy*  
but    age-their    far    it.is  
‘It is not known. It is not known from where he came but his age is long [i.e. far in the past].’
- (81) *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd*    *Imam-u-n*    *Näwawi-kkul*  
*Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd*    Imam-DEF-ACC    Näwawi-with  
*šärika*    *əmbäräy*    *əbbehaläll*  
companion    he.was    it.is.said  
‘It is said that *Abbayye Fäqi Aḥmäd* was a companion of *Imām Nawāwi*.’
- (82) *‘arāb*    *qār’u*    *əmbäräy*    *əbbehaläll*  
Arab    he.studies    AUX    it.is.said  
‘It is said that he studied in an Arab country.’
- (83) *‘arāb*    *näyem*  
Arab    he.is  
‘He was Arab.’
- (84) *ittəḥewwäqəm*    *ənt-en-əgi*    *mättäy*    *malät*    *ittəḥewwäqəm*  
it.is.not.known    from-this-place    he.came    saying    it.is.not.known  
‘It isn’t known. It isn’t known from where he came.’
- (85) *‘arāb*    *näym*    *bəčča*    *əbbehaläll*    *ənnəḥaqəm*    *wällabu*    *‘alām*<sup>63</sup>  
Arab    he.is    only    it.is.said    we.don’t.know    God    he.knows  
‘At least, it is said that they were Arab. But only God knows it.’
- (86) *am-‘en*    *näy*    *mm-ənnəḥaq*    *malät-əyye*    *näy*  
like-this    it.is    REL-we.know    saying-my    it.is  
‘I want to say that it is like this, what we know.’

## 5 Discussion of the Content of the Text

One noticeable feature of the text is its explanatory function for the understanding of the peculiar topographic and geographic character of the area where the two villages are located. A second, and probably more important,

61 *Abbagar* is a kind of informal ceremonial office that is connected to peacekeeping and blessing ceremonies.

62 The word ‘about’ has been added to represent the meaning of the accusative marker *-n* in the translation.

63 This clause is in Arabic.

function of the tradition is the presentation of a narrative that describes the founding of the two villages and the explanation of the relations between the two communities of Šonke and Tollaha.

The paragraph narrating *Abbayye* Kulubas' arrival and opening the way for the water of the Borkänna flood (12) serves as an explanatory account for a topographic landmark, namely the narrow valley of Borkänna river, which separates the Argobba highlands of Əssoyye-Gula from the Harṭumma region in the south (cf. Fig. 3). This narrow valley connects the swampy Čäffa plains in the west with the ʿAfar lowlands in the east, where Borkänna finally leads to the Awaš river. In fact, in another conversation about that tradition, I learned that *Abbayye* Kulubas created the valley by hitting the mountains with his *bəttər* ('stick').

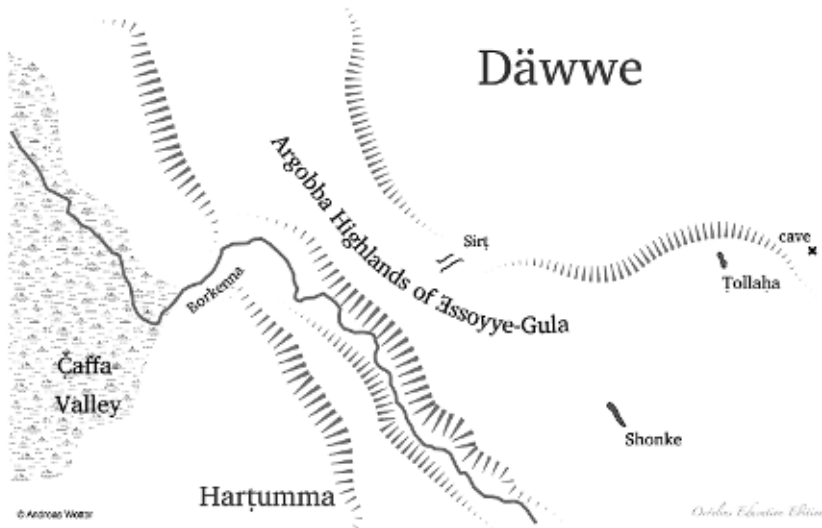


Fig. 3 Map of the area.

In (13) the supposed situation prior to the creation of the Borkänna valley is described such that the Borkänna river had no outlet, and the Čäffa plain and its valley were about to fill up until the water level almost reached the height of Əssoyye-Gula, and its pressure was so strong that it would break through the passage in Sirt (see Fig. 4).

The first part of the text up to (15) is a description of the topographic setting, and provides an account of the arrival and meeting of the two protagonists of the tradition, *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd and *Abbayye* Kulubas, in Əssoyye-Gula.



Fig. 4 The narrow gap Sirṭ.

Beginning with line (22), the origin of the two clans is told. Both *šayḥs* had at least one child, *Abbayye* Kulubas a son, and *Abbayye* Fäqī Aḥmäd a daughter. Later on these children are wed to each other.

Sentence (32) refers to another topographic feature of the immediate area around the village of Ṭollaḥa. The village is situated on a narrow summit in the middle of a wide basin. A steep path connects the village with a river on the bottom of the valley. It is precisely in this way that the speaker refers to it in this part.

The next lines fulfil two purposes. On the one hand they explain the existence of a particular topographic landmark, namely a single stone, which even has a name: ‘Faṭumayye Stone’ (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 The Faṭumayye Stone.

While the origin of the name of the stone is not revealed in the present version of the tradition, it provides an explanation of its peculiar feature and form. The second function of this part is the description of the virtuous character of the girl Din Ombära, *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd's daughter. In sentence (35) it is narrated how the young woman tried to get as close to the stone as possible when she met her future husband on the narrow path. On both sides of the path dense thickets and rocks prevent anyone from leaving it. Usually, a girl who is engaged tries to hide herself in cases like this, when she is accidentally in danger of meeting a member of her future in-laws; however it is not possible to hide on that path, a fact which is known to all local people. Thus, Din Ombära tries to follow an alternative strategy and turns her face towards the stone and presses herself as far as is possible into the stone. In sentence (36) it is revealed that the stone now carries the marks

of Din Ombära's breasts. In conversations I was told that the stone has additional marks, namely from her hands, feet, and forehead. And in sentences (41) and (42) the great virtue and chastity of the girl are expressed by the reaction of the stone which, in an attempt not to have contact with the body (the breast) of the girl, draws its surface back, an action the results of which are visible until the present day.

Sentence (39) anticipates a present day phenomenon that is explained in the subsequent sentences, the fact that the stone is always smeared with butter. The mentioning of Oromo besides Argobba illustrates the multi-ethnic and multilingual situation of that area.

Sentence (46) functions as a transition to the next part in which the cause of the enmity between the two descendants of *Abbayye* Kulubas and *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd is narrated: this was caused by the consecutive murders of both *šayḥs*. *Abbayye* Kulubas had been killed while sitting on the roof of a specific house in Ṭollaḥa (47). *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd was fatally wounded when he was hit with a stone while leaving the mosque (55).

Important here is, besides the description of the actual events, that the topography and the locations of the two villages are identified, although they are not mentioned by name, Ṭollaḥa and Šonke. The reference to the roof where *Šeh* Aräbu and I had been sitting (47) is in Ṭollaḥa, and Šonke is referred to with its former name Šonkor Amara, as being situated on the other side of the valley near a mountain called Ġäba. So, the perspective that is taken is that from Ṭollaḥa, and in consequence *Abbayye* Kulubas is the ancestor of the inhabitants of that village.

Regarding the murder of *Abbayye* Kulubas, no motive is mentioned in this variant of the tradition, but it is presented as the source of enmity between the two clans, and respectively between the two villages (51), and shows that mistrust exists until today (52). The text remains somewhat ambiguous in the description of succeeding events and, in particular, regarding the subsequent murder of *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd. While it is not related how *Abbayye* Kulubas was killed, the details of the attack on *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd and his subsequent death, including his hiding of the lethal injury until his death, is described in lines (55–58).

An important development in the conflict is related in the following lines, which contain the report of a successful mediation by a third person, a locally known *walīy* (or Muslim saint) *Abba* Mäḥammäd from Bər'ensa Qore (60–68).<sup>64</sup> He effectively managed to reduce the level of open hostility between the members of the two clans who were prepared to kill each other (68–69). Nevertheless mistrust between them continues to exist until present. He was able to mediate between the two clans with the help of a sym-

64 A place in Däwwē.

bolic act when he tied pieces of bamboo, which represented the two clans, together. A really interesting detail in the narration is the fact that the words of *Abba* Mähmäd are retold in Oromo (61). This leads to the interpretation that this mediation must or could have taken place in a rather near past, at a time when Oromo was already an established language in the area, meaning after the sixteenth century. But in the following lines it is revealed that the internal mistrust exists until today (71–75).

The succeeding part (76–85) contains a break in content, because the narration switches to the question of the origins of *Abbayye* Kulubas and *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd. It is related that they actually had the same background, namely that they had come from outside of Ethiopia, from the Arab countries across the Red Sea. Although exact information is obviously not available to the narrator, at least an approximate period is identified in the statement that *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd was a contemporary of *Imām* Nawāwi (thirteenth century). The reference to Arab countries as their origin must not be taken as an absolute truth, since the connection of one's own genealogy to an Arab source is quite common among Muslim people all over Africa. This is further underlined by the genealogical connection of both ancestors to relatives of the Prophet Muḥammad. *Abbayye* Kulubas is identified as a descendant of Fatuma, one of the daughters of the Prophet, and *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd is identified as a descendant of Halima, most probably the Prophet's foster-mother (although it still has to be clarified which Halima is actually meant). The validity of these claims is somehow relativized by *Šeh* Aräbu when he calls them 'abbagar stories' (cf. discussion in 6.3).

## 5.1 Text Parts

The content of the text can roughly be structured in the following five parts:

- 1) The arrival of the two protagonists and explanation of the present state of topographic features of the area (lines 1–23).
- 2) The origin of the two lineages (lines 24–31).
- 3) The event that reveals the piousness and virtue of the daughter of *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmäd (lines 32–45).
- 4) The explanation of the historical cause of the hostility between the two clans and the subsequent mediation (lines 46–75).
- 5) The discussion of the origins of the two protagonists (lines 76–86).

## 6 Discussion of Some Linguistic Features

In this part I discuss some linguistic features which are directly related to the specific content of the text, to its spoken character, and to the particular type of text.



### 6.1 The Use of Certain Grammatical Markers

The reading of a number of grammatical markers is related to the content of the text. Like other Ethiopian languages, Argobba uses the third person plural to express special respect. This is particularly implemented in grammatical markers, which refer to participants of events and situations, such as agreement markers on verbs or possessive markers and pronouns. In Argobba the markers, which are usually used to refer to third person plural are used for this purpose. The forms appearing in the text are, in detail, the following:

- the subject marker *-äy*, used in the perfective, for instance *mätt-äy* ‘they came’ or ‘he (HON) came’;
- the combination of the subject markers *y-* and *-u* used in the imperfective, such as *s-y-mät-u* ‘[when] they came’ or ‘[when] he (HON) came’;
- the subject marker *-äm* used in the perfect and converb, for example *ḥəḍäčč-äm* ‘they going’ or ‘he (HON) going’, *täqäməčč-äm-all-äy* ‘they sat down’ or ‘he (HON) sat down’;
- the copula *näyem* ‘they are’ or ‘he (HON) is’;
- the possessive verb *ḥällä-yem* ‘they have’ or ‘he (HON) has’, *əmbäräččä-yem* ‘they had’ or ‘he (HON) had’;
- the possessive suffix *-äm*, for instance *läğ-äm* ‘their child’ or ‘his (HON) child’.
- the pronoun *älläm* ‘they’ or ‘he (HON)’.

So the interpretation of these forms is not always unequivocally clear because they potentially have two readings: a plural and an honorific one. The text is in many instances quite ambiguous and the individual reading provided in the glossing and English translation is based on discussions I had with Šeh Aräbu while we transcribed and translated the text into Amharic.

### 6.2 Features Related to the Spoken Character of the Text

Several features of the text are related to its spoken character, meaning the spontaneous production of the text by the speaker. The first feature is the presence of a high number of incomplete sentences, namely cases where the speaker begins a new sentence without finishing the preceding one, like in (27), (32), (33), (44), (46), (64), and (69).

A particular type of incomplete sentence is the kind that does not end with a finite verb but with a verb in the converb form like *täččäga<sup>cc</sup>a* ‘she approaching’ (35) and (37), *biyyäm* ‘they saying’ or ‘he saying’ (HON) (55) and (61), *färä<sup>cc</sup>am* ‘they breaking head’ (55), *qäräččäm* ‘he staying’ (HON)

(57) or *tättaḥəzzo* ‘they being mutually caught in’<sup>65</sup> (59). This phenomenon is simply a grammatical feature of the text, and can be explained by the spoken and spontaneous production of the text.

Another feature which is definitely related to this particular production process is the occasional use of verb forms which are inflected in a present form although they refer to events and situations, which happened in a remote past. Examples of this type contain the present tense forms of the copula as in (09), (12), (76), or (83), and of the existential verb and possessive constructions in (23), (24) and (26).

A further feature related to the spontaneous narration is the occurrence of insertions, namely clauses or sentences containing information which is not directly part of the narration of the tradition. These are parenthetical sentences and insertions containing additional information which the speaker believed to be necessary for the correct understanding of the text. In most cases these parenthetical insertions are short statements about topographic or other local phenomena like the reference to a mosque in (14); the introduction and description of the Faṭumayye Stone in (32), (36), and (43); the description of the stone and a specific current custom connected to it in lines (38–40); the reference to a roof stone in (47) on which the narrator and myself had been sitting some time prior to the recording; the introduction of a specific mountain in (48); the reference to the present relationship between the two clans in (52) and (71–75) and the reference to the bamboo sticks in (61–63).

### 6.3 The Expression of the Speaker’s Attitude towards the Truth-Value and Reliability of Testimony

The speaker expresses his personal attitude towards the truth-value or the reliability of his testimony with a number of different linguistic means. These are either expressions where the source of information is shifted towards undefined third persons, for instance in (11) *äläy* ‘they said’ or in (44) *əmmilinna* ‘they tell us’; or where an impersonal authorship is claimed through the use of passive verb forms, such as in (12) and (25) *əbbehal* ‘it was said’, or in (25), (50), (81), (82), and (85) *əbbehaläll* ‘it is said’.

Other rhetorical means are parenthetical utterances which explicitly express doubt like the sentences *wäre näy mäčəm* ‘After all, it is a rumour’ in (11) and *abbagar qis<sup>w</sup>a näy* ‘it’s [only] an *abbagar* story’ in (78).

The third means is the explicit statement by the speaker of his own lack of knowledge regarding the truth-value of particular details like sentences

65 This particular verb is inflected for the third person singular, but the reading must be as plural.



*mäččem argəttəččīn ank<sup>w</sup>an annəḥaqəm* ‘After all, we really don’t know it for sure’ in (24), or the concession *annəḥaqəm* ‘We don’t know’ in (85), or the final statement *am<sup>7</sup>en näy mmənnəḥaq malätəyye näy* ‘I want to say that it is like this, what we know’ in (86).

## Conclusion

The form of the text described and analysed in this paper is undoubtedly influenced by the context of the recording (see ‘Introduction’). A ‘normal’ setting or circumstances would most likely be quite different because (1) the normal audience would know the language (I used Amharic in my questions), (2) the audience would share a common cultural knowledge/background with the narrator, and (3) it would probably ask different questions in a different way. Thus, the production circumstances and consequently the product itself, namely the text, should not be considered as a typical example of the genre of oral tradition in its own sense.

Regarding the content of the tradition as narrated in this particular text, there are certainly several lacks and shortcomings. The reason for this lies in the fact that the primary purpose of the recording was the collection of longer pieces of spoken language, which I planned to use for grammatical analysis. And consequently the content was only of secondary interest to me.

The text described and discussed in this paper constitutes, in Vansina’s terminology, one testimony of one specific tradition that relates an alternative version of *Abbaye* Kulubas and *Abbaye* Fäqī Aḥmäd’s lives and legacy in the history of the two Argobba villages of Šonke and Tollaḥa.<sup>66</sup> It is an orally reported statement of events in the past.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the dating of the events, a historically known person, *Imān* al-Nawāwī (Abu Zakaryā Yaḥyā bin Šaraf al-Nawāwī) a highly influential Šāfi‘ī jurist who lived from 1233 to 1277 in Syria,<sup>68</sup> is cited as a time reference. The tradition reported by Poissonnier (et al.)<sup>69</sup> is a completely different tradition. It can nonetheless be connected to the one discussed here because both traditions seem to refer to the same protagonists. But in terms of chronology there seems to be a time gap of more than three centuries because the tradition from Goze suggests the second part of the sixteenth century as the period when *Abbaye* Fäqī Aḥmäd was active. However, the two traditions share an additional, and in my view crucial, similarity in their content. The Goze tradition explicitly connects

66 Vansina 1973, 22.

67 Cf. *ibid.*, 19.

68 Heffening 1993, 1041.

69 Poissonnier et al 2011.

*Abbayye* Faqi Aḥmād and *Abbayye* Kulubas(i) with the founding of Ṭollaḥa (‘Tolihat’)<sup>70</sup> and consequently with Šonke.

Thus, with regard to the tradition recorded in the Argobba language and discussed in this paper, two preliminary conclusions can be drawn. The first relates most probably to historical events, namely the founding, or the beginning of Argobba settlements, or at least religious centres, in the immediate area of present-day villages Šonke and Ṭollaḥa with the two protagonists *Abbayye* Fäqi Aḥmād and *Abbayye* Kulubas. The appearance of these names and the connection with Ṭollaḥa (and Šonke) in traditions from two areas, which are separated by a distance of more than 150 km, is enough evidence to argue for a possible connection between the two traditions. The different narrative details related to local events in the two traditions and the large spatial distance between them leads to the assumption that it is possible that more traditions could be found in the areas between north-central Ifat (i.e. the area around Goze) and south-eastern Wällo, and probably beyond those two areas. Thus, more detailed research on oral traditions in this region would enrich our knowledge of a more remote period in its history.

The second conclusion relates to the more local functions of the tradition in Šonke and Ṭollaḥa, meaning the explanation of certain topographic features of the immediate environment of the two villages and the explanation of the relations between the two clans inhabiting the two villages. While the accounts describing the marvellous actions of *Abbayye* Kulubas, that resulted in the current shape of the local topography, are clearly totally mythical, the story about the two protagonists’ children and later about the hostility between the two clans must refer, at least in part, to real historical events, since both clans are social realities and the mentioned *walīy Abba* Māḥammād has been confirmed as a local historical figure by independent sources.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the oral tradition presented and discussed in this paper can serve as an exemplary illustration of the role that oral traditions may play in local historiography. Combined with research and findings in other fields such as archaeology, linguistics, and ethnology, the analysis of this kind of tradition may add to our knowledge of historical processes in areas and regions of Ethiopia such as south-eastern Wällo. Moreover, a lot of additional research in terms of oral traditions in different areas of south-eastern Wällo and

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Mohammed Bashir, a local consultant from Medine/Däwwe, mentioned *Abba* Māḥammād from Bər’ensa Qore as an author of Oromo ‘*aḡām*’ texts (October 2012 in Kāmise).

north-eastern Šäwa needs to be undertaken in order to reach a more complete image of this region and its subregion's past.

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# **Journey in Translation or Translating Silences: Reflections on the Documentation and Interpretation of Oral Sources\***

ECHI CHRISTINA GABBERT

## **Abstract**

Documentation, translation, and the interpretation of oral sources are major tools in the social sciences, while the process of moving from the spoken to the written word is rarely explained in detail. In this contribution the use of oral sources as an anthropological tool is described, starting with language acquisition, and moving through recording, transcription, and translation of different speech genres to the analysis of complex interview situations. Special attention is given to the challenges posed by ambiguities, irritations, and silences in the making and interpretation of oral sources. Examples from the field are embedded in the circumstances of a peace process that the author has accompanied for over two decades among the Arbore of southern Ethiopia.

## **From Silence to Sound—Orientations**

The one without knowledge should not talk.

(Ginno Ballo, 2009)

This above quote is both consoling and realistic, and can be as humbling as it is helpful when reflecting on twenty years of research in Arbore in southern Ethiopia. The first part of the essay is a description of the first steps in learning the Arbore language before I used various oral sources for in-depth analysis in my ethnographic work. I describe my general approach to the use and interpretation of oral sources and explain how words, both sung and spoken, were recorded and transcribed to inform the analysis. In the second part of the essay I provide an example of a ‘journey in translation’ from the field.

\* I wish to thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany, and the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany, for their continuous financial and academic support of my ethnographic research.

The Arbore are a group of around 9,000 people living as agro-pastoralists in southern Ethiopia, close to the Kenyan border in the area of Čäw Baḥər (previously known as lake Stephanie). The Arbore have been known as one of the many societies in southern Ethiopia in which warfare and hunting formed an important part of their cultural identity. Within the last two decades the Arbore, in cooperation with their neighbours, have gradually worked on a successful transformation into a group with a peaceful identity. On the basis of their traditional institutions, they have developed concepts to abandon interethnic warfare, homicide, and revenge attacks. As of 2015, the Arbore's peaceful identity has been a lived reality for more than a decade within their cultural neighbourhood and beyond.<sup>1</sup> To analyse and reconstruct the Arbore peace process in a historical perspective I made ample use of oral sources that were recorded throughout my fieldwork in Arbore since 1993.

The Arbore language is an unwritten East Cushitic language.<sup>2</sup> The Arbore do not have a written archive of oral sources. There were also no 'early' missionaries working in Arbore. The first to record oral sources and write them down were anthropologists who have worked in the area since the end of the twentieth century.

Since the beginning of my fieldwork, when I could hardly speak the language, until I conducted discussions with elders of several ethnic groups via the Arbore language, much has happened. The forms of my data collection reflect the different stages of research and the increasing complexity of a set of roles ascribed to me throughout the years. During the initial years my data were based on the more pragmatic and visual observations about everyday life and material culture. In those times my main technical device was the camera. Interviews at that time were basic and limited to orientation knowledge. In the next phase I gathered much sonic material and the voice recorder became my most important tool to get a better grip on the language and to record a repertoire of Arbore songs and fables, which I transcribed meticulously with the help of my assistant and partner Ginno Ballo, who in 2005 critically reflected on my journey of acquiring Arbore language skills.

Ginno: 'First we could not communicate well. While transcribing [song lyrics] I started to teach you the language. During those times we really suffered. We talked about every little word. How we suf-

1 The challenges and fragilities of this peace process, which resulted in conflicts in 2016, will not be discussed here.

2 See Hayward 1984.

ferred, and you were always looking for the meaning behind things. I had come to Germany twice and after that you went to Arbore. People then said, “Now she can talk”, and I told people, “This time you cannot talk behind her back anymore, now she will understand what you are saying.””

Echi: ‘After that I started to express myself. In one workshop I insisted on some issues. Did people then say, “Well, she is not silent anymore”? How did people perceive the speaking me?’

Ginno: ‘As long as your talking is grounded on knowledge people will accept it. Only children and evil people shall stay silent.’

Echi: ‘So I had been like a child for many years.’

Ginno: ‘Yes, you did not know how to talk. The one without knowledge should not talk.’

When leaving these more silent years behind, increasing language skills were accompanied by my increasing access to rituals but interviews at that time were still more factual than analytical. With more fluency in the language, I entered a stage of research where I questioned and refined the existing material through reflective narrative interviews and conversations.<sup>3</sup> This also enabled me to analyse oral history, like myths, riddles, song lyrics, sayings, life stories, and to categorize different speech genres. In retrospect I spent much time to find a good orientation within Arbore before turning to more complex issues in my fieldwork. All this was inextricably connected to my role in, and degree of, integration into Arbore society from daughter and student to mother, researcher and wife.<sup>4</sup>

Good language skills were a prerequisite for my data collection because, as I had observed, information via translators runs a higher risk of becoming distorted and may even be intentionally false. At an early stage of my fieldwork I observed an instructive interview situation: an Arbore girl and friend of mine provided a visiting researcher and his translator with false information. I asked her why she did so and she answered that, above all, she did not like the translator and therefore decided to get rid of both of them quickly. She argued that telling the complicated truth would take much longer than telling lies. She said, ‘Did you not see how fast they left, all content?’<sup>5</sup>

3 I consider speech acts such as interviews or conversations to be ‘forms of narrativity’.

4 For reflections on my fieldwork through the years and the Arbore’s perception on the work of anthropologists, see Gabbert 2013.

5 Conversation with an Arbore girl, December 1993.

I find it very important that most conversations and interviews take place in a private setting, without translators. Daily conversations in Arbore happen inside the house in the presence of several people, with visitors dropping by and offering their opinions. There are also more formal speech settings at gatherings, rituals, and meetings, and of course there are very private moments for the exchange of intimate or even secret information.<sup>6</sup> Although I am at ease in daily conversation, I am far from reaching the heights of Arbore symbolic speech, which is the mastery of the elders.

Throughout my research, the language of communication was Arbore. When I spoke with people from neighbouring groups such as Hamär and Boorana, my Arbore informants, who are fluent in these languages, acted as interpreters. A few translations from Konso and Šamakko were made with the help of speakers of these languages who live in Arbore and also speak Arbore. When, under certain circumstances (e.g. at interethnic meetings), other local languages had to be translated into Arbore, I subsequently verified these primary translations, during the transcription phase, if this seemed necessary—for example, if an informant had obviously added much to the translation. Most of my earlier interviews (2000–2005) were transcribed in Arbore before being translated into English. Later, I also translated Arbore directly into English or German while transcribing the interviews. My early translations were quite literal; but, for better readability, I began, from case to case, to decide about whether or not to depart from strictly literal translation (see examples below).

The most important interpreter for my work, not only of language, but also of speech rules, emic terms, and concepts, is Ginno. We transcribed many of the interviews, discussions, and narratives while he was visiting Germany. Ginno also attended interviews in Arbore, when I needed assistance. When using oral sources for ethnographic analysis I rely on an extensive archive of recorded material from everyday conversations, public and private meetings, rituals, songs and dances, workshops and interviews. This includes casual talk, private talk, interviews, blessings, public speeches, riddles, fables, and proverbs. Song lyrics cover a distinct part of oral history, as in Arbore, things that cannot be talked about can often be worded only within songs.<sup>7</sup> On a number of occasions, when I was not able to travel to Arbore, I sent tapes from Germany with questions that were then discussed in Arbore. These discussions were recorded and sent back to me. Such ‘dis-

6 An ‘oral history of secrets’, as the term indicates, remains unpublished while still influencing the interpretation of oral sources.

7 I have described the special role of song lyrics as an oral source in Gabbert 2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2014.



tant conversations' form a specific part of my recordings (which I refer to as 'messages') and underline the fact that the circumstances of each recording need to be part of the quest for understanding. The multilayered archive of Arbore oral sources, plays an important part in my interpretation of events, built on participant observation and historical descriptions.

### Oral Sources—Founding Acts of Identification

In my ethnographic work, oral sources are not used as 'alternative sources of information or as a slightly different vantage point from which to describe processes'.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I regard them as a means for understanding the 'social production of memory, self and subjectivity';<sup>9</sup> this relates to their power to generate identification processes, 'as [a] critical emancipatory instrument'<sup>10</sup> and as a means of persuasion and legitimization. The legitimating or 'foundational'<sup>11</sup> character of oral sources is of special interest for the analysis when approaching narratives not as representational forms but 'as concepts of social epistemology and social ontology'.<sup>12</sup> Relevant to the construction of identity, they offer a conceptual narrativist view on social action through a combination of an innate historicity and the individual and collective understandings of self and others with other pertinent social actions.<sup>13</sup> Speech acts are among the most flexible tools for persuasion, justification, and identification. When understanding speech acts, for instance narratives or interviews as founding acts,<sup>14</sup> they become stories that people use to unfold their identities, often tailoring history to fit the stories,<sup>15</sup> and they pursue certain actions on this basis. This tailoring of stories, as is often the case in origin myths that do not always fit the historical facts, is not a problem but an 'analytical gift' according to Malinowski, who asserts that myths are not 'idle tales' but 'hard-worked active forces'.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Burke celebrates points of ambiguity as strategic spots that raise questions of importance,<sup>17</sup> and Portelli elaborates on how inconsistencies between narration and historical facts are not weaknesses but strengths because errors carry their

8 Cooper 2005, 207.

9 Ibid.

10 Hinchman and Hinchman 2001, xxiii.

11 De Certeau 1984, 123–125.

12 Somers and Gibson 1993, 27–29.

13 Somers and Gibson 1993, 32–33.

14 De Certeau 1984, 123–125.

15 Somers 1992, 617–619.

16 Malinowski 2002, 177.

17 Burke 1950, xviii.

own significance and hidden meanings.<sup>18</sup> Vansina, in a similar vein, links memory to emotion to explain the seemingly distorted outcome of eyewitness accounts,<sup>19</sup> and Cooper calls for a ‘sense of humility and a commitment for openness’<sup>20</sup> by the researcher in approaching oral history to be able to trace at least some of these points of distortion. In these cases, as described in the example below, the challenge for interpretation lies first in the identification of the distortion (historical fact versus narrative) and secondly in the interpretation of its meaning.

As instructive as points of contradiction may be, ‘varieties and shadings’ of agreement require equal attention.<sup>21</sup> Agreements are not always reached on the same grounds; they can have points of convergence and yet aim towards different goals. In the context of the Arbore peace process it becomes apparent that the conception of peace changes when considered in different frames of spatial, social, and political reference. I might add that agreement and ambiguity can also appear as combined phenomena when analysing oral sources. When historically doubtful statements appear to be reaffirmed, especially in group interviews, the challenge is to determine the reasons for this overly emphasized unity and understanding.<sup>22</sup>

Seeking to understand apparent and intended meanings of speech—i.e. what is said, what is not said, what is meant, and what is made of it by the audience—brings us into the study of rhetoric.<sup>23</sup> The larger enterprise of the International Rhetoric Culture Project that originated in the works of Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler,<sup>24</sup> offers several ideas which are helpful for the interpretations of oral sources, because in the *rhetoric culture* approach, practices of discourse are viewed as significant in the performance, contestation, and reproduction of culture. With all its direct, hidden and unspoken meanings and performative value, it is the speech act, and not only the speech, which is important. Considering elements such as evocation, invocation and persuasion, and especially metaphor and synecdoche is helpful when asking how people introduced peace, persuaded others of this enterprise, and, through persuasion, managed to reach consent.

18 Portelli 1991.

19 Vansina 1985, 4–5.

20 Cooper 2005, 208.

21 Bakhtin 1986, 125.

22 See Gabbert 2010.

23 Vansina 1985, 83–85.

24 [www.rhetoricculture.org](http://www.rhetoricculture.org) (last accessed on 9 November 2016). See Strecker 1988; Tyler 1978.

When analysing oral sources, '[o]ne cannot deny either the past or the present in them'.<sup>25</sup> In communicative acts '[h]istory turns into *memory*' through its 'transformation into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation'.<sup>26</sup> The modification of a society's conventions is directly linked to collective memory work, to what is remembered at all and to how it is remembered at certain points in time.<sup>27</sup> Narratives aiming at persuasion or justification are based on historical events that are used to interpret and re-evaluate the common opinion in order to modify and actualize emerging norms and values.<sup>28</sup> They provide a pool of memory and identification that can be used to move between the individual, private, and public, depending on moods and politics.<sup>29</sup> In a polyvalent mix, many micro-stories merge into meaning for the groups in which they circulate.<sup>30</sup> Stories are told by persons who belong to a group; the group 'in turn crystallizes around a stock of common memories revived in stories'.<sup>31</sup> These stories are thus the foundation which 'opens a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*'.<sup>32</sup> The quality and implementation of the possibilities for identity construction thus opened by speech acts depend on skilled and visionary men and women with a good historical knowledge.<sup>33</sup> I call these actors *innovators* who put forth their ideas for debate.<sup>34</sup> Once founded by innovators, the polyvalent contributions of less powerful speakers become equally important and identity construction becomes a collective enterprise.

### Truth, Memory, and Oblivion: How to Interpret Interviews

Memory and oblivion stand together, both are necessary for the full use of time.

(Augé 2004, 89)

In his precious little book *Oblivion* Augé makes several important points concerning the use of narratives in anthropology. One such point echoes a basic premise for non-written languages, which we find in various ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia. When using the oral sources of a non-written

25 Vansina 1985, xii.

26 Assmann 2006, 216, emphasis in the original.

27 Halbwachs 1992, 172–173.

28 See also Forst and Günther 2010.

29 Vansina 1985, 8.

30 De Certeau 1984, 125.

31 Hinchman and Hinchman 2001, xxiv.

32 De Certeau 1984, 125, emphasis in the original.

33 Schlee 2008, 53.

34 Bailey 1973.

language such as Arbore, one should be aware that '[t]he first and in my opinion incontestable, teaching of ethnology is that intimate narratives with which individual and personal lives are identified play the same role in this regard as do literary tales that fall under specific genres.'<sup>35</sup>

Yet, especially when compared to the expertise about literary traditions existing in other parts of Ethiopia,<sup>36</sup> the collection and analysis of oral sources of unwritten languages and the processes of oral testimonies becoming texts often remain inaccessible procedures for the reader.<sup>37</sup> My general approach, as described above, covers many of the points to be taken into consideration in each and every interview situation, transcription, translation, and interpretation. Yet, the processes to use certain sources with their situational background usually remain unknown in their particularities including the choices that we as authors make. Therefore, in the following, I describe a specific journey in translation that grew out of a single interview situation during my fieldwork.

### **The Journey begins: the Interview Setting, the Recording**

In 2007 I called together elders from Arbore and five neighbouring groups to reflect on the Arbore peace process that had already become well-known also in the wider region of southern Ethiopia. Together with my informants we had invited elders from different clans and settlements for the meeting. All of them had experienced raiding and interethnic battles and most of them were 'honoured killers' of big game or of enemies.<sup>38</sup> Some were known to be thoughtful speakers, and masters of calm and considerate talk. Others were speakers with 'hot tongues', witty, quick, and a bit provocative. The elders arrived for a two day workshop to my Arbore house, where they were hosted with food and drink. The number of elders varied between eleven and thirteen. Those who had to travel longer distances stayed overnight with friends in Arbore. During our discussions all participants sat in a circle on comfortable cowhides and, for the Konso and Samakko participants, we had invited young local men as translators. Together with my two closest informants, an age mate and an elder, I posed the questions. Our main questions touched the history of war in the region, the quest for peace,

35 Augé 2004, 48.

36 See the contributions of Ramos, Rubinkowska-Anioł, and Wion in this volume.

37 Two different and important contributions to the use of oral sources are found in the works of Ivo Strecker (Strecker 1988) and Günther Schlee (Schlee and Karaba Sahado 2002).

38 For a detailed discussion of the 'killer ideal' see Gabbert 2012, 54–56.

practices of peacemaking, and the perception of the Arbore among neighbouring groups as successful peacemakers in southern Ethiopia.

At the South Omo Research Center,<sup>39</sup> our research group around Ivo Strecker had organized interethnic workshops on a regular basis and I had ample experience with the special setting and challenges which have to be taken into consideration when evaluating group interviews. One possible danger of group interviews is that, due to their public character, they become reaffirmative or even distortive or redundant. Aware of these possible flaws, I nevertheless cherished the higher level of concentration provided in these settings for tackling specific subjects, and used the workshops to complement data from the field. In the ‘war and peace’ discussion rounds in Arbore, I synthesized the experiences from the workshops with ‘culture immanent narrative forms’<sup>40</sup> and invited elders, in the tradition of customary meetings under the shade of trees, to the shade of my house in Arbore.

A good preparation for group interviews is to gain a basic knowledge of the participants’ biographies before the meeting. Since my informants and I had intense discussions before choosing the participants, I knew bits and pieces of people’s life stories, such as their clan affiliation, family status, the number of children they had, which battles they had fought in, or which big game they had successfully hunted. The workshop started with coffee drinking and blessings in the morning and, on the first day, after a short welcome and introduction, we started the discussion. As one focus I wanted to reflect on the abandonment of war-supporting practices that I had been studying. One of the war-supporting practices I was most familiar with, due to my research with women, was *koor*, the insulting mockery that women and girls applied in daily and ritually important situations, and before battles to instigate a man’s aggressiveness and fighting capacity.<sup>41</sup> Several people had told me how powerful *koor* had been, especially when men courted women. To support peace, in the 1990s Arbore women had reflectively discarded the practice of *koor*. In 2007 in the workshop described above, I asked the elders about the discontinuation of *koor*.

39 The South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) in Ġinka, southern Ethiopia, was designed and built by Ivo Strecker to provide a forum for transcultural debate and understanding. It comprises an exhibition and conference hall, a library and media room, offices and guest houses for researchers and their guests from all scientific disciplines. For the researchers it provides a basis for research planning, the first of its kind when telecommunication and internet were not available in the field.

40 See Elwert 1994.

41 For a thorough description of *koor* see Gabbert 2012, 67–69.

Echi: ‘So now after peace has been decided what about things that enhance war, like *koor* [insult]. Is that now left behind?’

Most answers of the workshop participants confirmed what I had also heard from women, until one elder spoke.

Elder A: ‘What you asked about *koor* in Arbore. This does not exist in Arbore. In Arbore women do not instigate men.’

Echi: ‘That is not true.’

At this point I broke the rules of politeness for the first time. The elder seemed to deny the existence of *koor*, but when I transcribed the passage I realized, not without embarrassment, that in my first reaction I did not take his use of the present tense into account. In fact his earlier contributions to the discussion had made me quite vigilant; he had repeatedly denied the existence of any former war-supporting practices and the meaning of killer emblems, such as the adornment of killers. When I said that his words were not true I actually blamed an elder for telling lies, an inappropriate behaviour in my position as a junior, and unacceptable in its rhetorical phrasing.<sup>42</sup> The elder serenely continued while trying to ignore my comment.

Elder A: ‘I mean in former times. The ones who used the *koor* are the Boorana. The Waata Wando who are sitting here. The *koor* of women, this came up in our generation only. There was only one girl who applied *koor*. When somebody courted her she rejected. She only rejected and the boy decided to go out killing because of this. She did not even insult him. This was in our age set *gidama*.’

Echi: ‘So tell me how have you been insulted? So you have heard it.’

Here I broke the rules of politeness a second time. I found the elder’s remark was hypocritical because we were sitting among a group of elders of whom several had killed both big game and enemies after they had been instigated by women’s insult (*koor*). To my right for example sat an elder with a heartbreaking experience of his first love for whom he had killed a giraffe and two enemies—without marrying the girl in the end. As the speaker denied the Arbore history of *koor*, I had decided to ignore the content of his speech. Instead I asked about the way in which he had been insulted in spite of him telling me that *koor* never existed. At this point two other workshop participants entered the discussion to help me out of my dilemma, of which I was quite ignorant.

42 In Arbore, one possible way to better phrase disagreement without directly accusing the counterpart is saying, ‘Are we not talking the truth here?’

Young man: 'Let everybody contribute his opinion and finish his talk. We can judge later.'

Elder B: 'The one who talks incorrectly, do not stop him. Let everybody finish his talk. The one who speaks correctly, let him finish his talk. Do not interrupt anybody to finish his talk. Let everybody express his craziness [thoughts]. Why we are now silent. Let our granddaughter [Echi] understand well. When two people walk together, when one cuts the path, he will be called back and we will say, "Turn around. You cut the path, this is the right way." When two or three people walk together and do not lose the path. What do you say then?'

Several: 'What do you say?'

Elder B: 'So if people walk one way and do not get lost, we stay silent. This is why we do not say anything. Nothing here we have to specify.'

These words, spoken by an elder who was known for his cool temper, are a lesson, a rescue, and a kind offer to the anthropologist on the verge of losing face. He reminded me to let everyone express his opinion without interruption but he also invited the humiliated elder to give me a chance to understand by instructing me instead of judging my misbehaviour. While I tried to take a shortcut to what I believed was right, the elder explains why no other participant opposed the speaker: no one needs to confront or judge a speaker, as most conversations (paths) will finally be completed with others adding their opinion. As everyone can speak, everyone can walk the path to help answer the question. With this passage the speaker enabled all of us to continue the workshop smoothly. Whereas I sensed unease among the workshop participants at that moment, the full extent of my offence only became clear when I transcribed the passage. The elder with the cool tongue continued.

Elder B: 'So about *koor*. You asked about *koor*, 'You were insulted by women and went killing. You kill[ed] a person who was fine before, you kill[ed] a lion who was fine before, you kill[ed] a leopard who was fine before. So why was that?''

Elder C: 'So why did people not stop it?'

Elder B: "'Has this now been abandoned?', you asked. Well, this does not exist anymore. What caused its disappearance? Listen to something I have thought about. So, if I talk like the one before me or like myself I do not know.'

In the passage above the speaker taught me how to oppose an opinion. Then he carefully prepared his next words, which indeed contradicted the words of the first elder and confirmed that *koor* had existed.

Elder B: 'So, why has it disappeared? Craziness, craziness, when a child is born it is so small, one person strokes him, a person massages him, massages them, like this he is brought up, brought up, brought up. Children grow up, groooooooooooooooooooooooooow up and start to understand. What is forbidden and bad he will understand. What is good he understands. What was practiced in former times, girls how they insulted you, how you went out into the wilderness, how you got wounded, how you would kill somebody for good, all this is insanity.'

Elder C: 'You might also die.'

Elder B: 'You might also die.'

Elder C: 'Lions might eat you.'

Elder B: 'Lions might eat you. This is insanity. This we looked at and left it. This we looked at, how this was senseless, insane and we stopped it. Not only we, also the women stopped it. I do not say the man before me did not speak the truth. I did not voice something else but I would also not stay silent if that speaker would speak lies.'

Young man: 'Everybody has something to say.'

In this passage, the elder, as did others who later added to his speech, confirmed both the practice and the abandonment of *koor*, not without stressing that he had not accused the first speaker of having lied. The last speaker underlined this by asserting everyone's right to express his view on the matter.

During the interview the rhetorical rescue by the two other speakers had rehabilitated my weakened position as someone who had broken basic rules of respect. They did not scorn me and provided me with mild yet clear instructions instead. But during the workshop I was still far away from scrutinizing my interview style. On the contrary, the irritation by the elder's 'false statement' lingered in my mind and during a pause in the workshop, to release my anger and when no one could hear us, I turned to an age mate and said, 'This elder with his white trousers is really distorting the facts. Who on earth is wearing such useless white trousers anyhow?' This unqualified question was triggered by my grudge about the elder's denial of 'facts'. My way of speaking though is an accepted style among Arbore age mates: frank, harsh, undiplomatic, and confrontational. The remark itself was based on Arbore values: white is an unpractical colour for cloth in Arbore which is avoided altogether. It could also stand for poverty and death. Therefore new cloth that is too white should quickly be 'blackened' with the help of butter. Butter in Arbore stands for abundance, for wealth of milk and cattle, and is part of ritual blessings; to keep leather clothes and cowhides smooth, they are buttered: this attracts dust, ashes, and soil, which are not regarded as dirt but as completing the maturing process of an object.



Then my age mate answered. He explained to me that white trousers together with white caps had been distributed to elders that were chosen by NGOs to speak about peace in interethnic peace meetings throughout southern Ethiopia and this elder was especially known for his effective peace talk. I did not know this before and immediately the rhetoric of the elder became clearer. In the peace meetings his role was to present the successful stage of the peaceful Arbore as a role model (and our meeting very much resembled a peace meeting). To analyse and scrutinize war in order to understand the peace process was *my* agenda. *His* agenda and expertise was to speak peace while avoiding talk about war.

This interview situation is a good example of the ‘gift of discrepancy’ and the ‘challenge of ambiguity’ that I have described above which makes the interpretation of oral sources such a fascinating exercise. I had been angered by a speaker who I found ‘romanticized’ or ‘falsified’ facets of Arbore’s warlike past. Had the speaker not irritated me, I would not have been tempted to mock his white trousers. He had been proposed by my informants as a person with much war experience and I knew parts of his biography, all of which he seemed to deny. When finally transcribing the whole conversation at home, I could reflect again on the interview dynamics, the course of the interview, and the roles of the participants including my own.<sup>43</sup> And as each new piece of the puzzle is resolved, the challenge of oral source analysis is still only beginning.

### Transcribing is Reflecting is Translating

Translation as Augé contends is comparable to an ‘exercise in cartography’.<sup>44</sup> The details of the ‘geography’ of the interview setting decide the quality of the ‘orientation map’ as the basis for every speech act, and then add fine detail to the contours of speaking and meaning.<sup>45</sup> This requires having a good command of the language and a stable knowledge of the place and people in order to become as precise and mindful as possible, from the moment of recording oral sources until translating them, and then adding substantial depth to the translation. The grounds for a good translation are already laid in the transcription process and this requires attention to more than the spoken word. The example above shows that embarrassment about oneself belongs to the common experiences of transcription processes and is

43 For this reason transcribing in the field has many advantages, although was not possible during this setting.

44 Augé 2004, 9.

45 Ibid.

actually a good tool for reflection on one's methods and behaviour in the field as a necessary step in the translation and interpretation of oral sources. The reflective dimension of the process of transcribing provides us with more clues about the interview dynamics. As I will explain below, it is important during the practice of transcription, to retain as many clues as possible about the communication process itself, namely the nonverbal communication: pauses, silences, laughter, sighs, and so on also need to be noted down in order not to be lost when interpreting the text at a later stage.

But to return to the example, the elder with the 'cool tongue' had instructed me that 'people have different opinions while following the same path'. Although on the one hand he meant the interview dynamics, on the other hand he was referring to ways of talking about peace in general. One path under discussion was to achieve peace between the neighbouring groups, whereas the means and rhetoric to do so differed. Richmond remarks that it is inexcusable to claim to know what peace is.<sup>46</sup> While transcribing the argument of the elder with the white trousers, I realized that, if we claim to know *how* to talk about peace, we also make a mistake. Indeed one way to achieve peace is to reflect on the reasons and practices of war in order to abolish them as a possible path in peacemaking, which is also known as 'negative peace'.<sup>47</sup> Another way to achieve peace is to avoid 'war talk' altogether in order to create and live peace only. In Arbore there were people who combined these alternatives, while others preferred the latter path. In spite of understanding both positions, my position as a German citizen was based on a personal awareness and opinion about historical responsibility for the Holocaust under the Nazi regime that asks us never to forget in order to prevent the repetition of unimaginable atrocities in human history. To realize that this background had prompted my reactions at the peace workshop was one insight on the way to decipher the oral source, including my intervention.

## Silences

The lesson learned required me to reconsider, who am I to judge what a person wants to convey or hide, to forget or to nourish? I am an anthropologist who, with her father being a child of war, had grown up with upsetting stories of World War II in Germany, and also with the understanding that I should never claim to know what this meant for the people who lived through wartime. The elder I had accused of lying had killed several people

<sup>46</sup> Richmond 2007, 230.

<sup>47</sup> See Galtung 1985.

in a gruesome battle and—here I take a shortcut for a much longer argument—he dealt with it by engaging in peace talk as he saw fit. Obviously my epistemological approach needed to be revised and, among many things that could be improved in the translation process, obviously the unsaid needed to be given a more serious place in my interpretation of oral sources. This requires transcription techniques, and the time it takes to do that, which mark silences, pauses, and laughter to catch a glimpse of the lost sentiments, or, as Vansina calls it, the ‘impoverishment’ we produce when turning the spoken word into written texts.<sup>48</sup> In the following example I transcribed a narrative in which an elder described an attack on an Arbore village:

All the women as they ran were killed [whispers] *suuuuch* [long pause].

Apart from the whisper and pause, we encounter an ideophone (*suuuuch*) in this sentence. Ideophones, onomatopoeic words, and imitations of natural sounds ‘do the work of representation by phonetic means’.<sup>49</sup> They are vividly used in Arbore, especially in narratives. The ideophone *suuuuch* as a wordless sound is followed by a silence in the interview—both indications of the heart-wrenching soundlessness and hollowness that must have followed the massacre of the women.<sup>50</sup>

Generally in my translations, I have retained stylistic features of the Arbore language in an effort to capture certain qualities of speech acts that are significant for later analysis. These stylistic features include echoing, directly quoted speech, ideophones, giving one’s word, repetition, rhetorical questions,<sup>51</sup> and the exaggeration of phonemes.<sup>52</sup> In the passage cited above we find at least four of these features.

So, why has it disappeared? Craziness, craziness, when a child is born it is so small, one person strokes him, a person massages him, massages them, like this he is brought up, brought up, brought up. Children grow up, groooooooooooooooooow up and start to understand.

48 Vansina 1985, 83.

49 Tedlock 2001, 113.

50 For a rich description of ideophones among the Hamär of southern Ethiopia, see Lydall 2000.

51 Strecker provides a detailed description of these and other features for the Hamär language with reference to Brown and Levinson’s work on politeness strategies (Strecker 1988; Brown and Levinson 1987).

52 Strecker 1988.

The passage starts with a rhetorical question, which lends to monologues a dialogic quality and invites the listener to engage. We also find the exaggeration of a phoneme and repetition of words, to emphasize the message (craziness of war) and indicate the passing of time (groooooooooooooooooow). The passage also contains ‘echoing’ with its affirmative quality that expresses consent, concentration, support, and empathy between speakers and listeners in this passage.

Elder A: ‘You might also die.’

Elder B: ‘You might also die.’

Elder A: ‘Lions might eat you.’

Elder B: ‘Lions might eat you. This is insanity.’

After positioning oral sources within dialogic frame as well as indicating nonverbal dimensions, the next exercise is to decide on the literal translation. To find the wording that best conveys the message is a time-consuming task.

To give an idea of my translation methods from Arbore into English, I provide another example from a discussion about the practice of *koor* (women’s insult). Here, a woman explained to me how women in the court-ing processes insulted men.

*Taka meh beete ayehe kub michirta?*

Once what got up (2nd pers. sing.) me wrist twist (2nd pers. sing.)

1st translation: ‘Where did you ever go to now twist my wrist?’

2nd translation: ‘What have you ever achieved to now dare to twist my wrist?’

In the first translation, I stay close to the original but cannot make the inherent meaning obvious to the reader. The rhetorical question ‘Where did you ever go?’ means ‘You have never gone!’ The speaker reproaches a man who has not gone to dangerous places, implying that he has not gained merit through hunting, killing or raiding and, therefore, has no right to treat her in a certain way. I chose the second translation, because it can convey the basis of the reproach.

When translating, I have tried to grasp the meanings inherent in words as best as I can. This is easier in some cases than in others. Some ‘words’, such as *koor* and many others, revealed their meaning as social and emotional concepts only with repeated use in varying contexts over time. In particular, the years of working on transcriptions of song lyrics helped me to discover many of the meanings of words that had originally escaped my understanding or attention. Yet this also taught me that even more meanings remain hidden from me as a non-native speaker. This makes translation a work in progress, rather than a finished product.

To reach accuracy in translation, beyond these details of translation work, means to integrate circumstances that might add to the understanding of what is said and what is unsaid, what is distorted or not. Finding a speaker's reasons for his choices of words and content, his rhetoric, goes beyond cartography. It is rather comparable to archaeology in which much that could help our understanding remains hidden or lost forever. In this sense, in the example above, the white trousers the elder wore were the 'analytical gift'<sup>53</sup> which illuminated my ignorance about the speaker and about my way of speaking. Although the elder who then instructed me proved my so-called facts to be 'right', the situation served me well to realize just how insufficient my understanding of 'truth' really was.

### End of the Interview, End of the Journey?

The story does not end here. After I had transcribed hundreds of recordings about the Arbore peace process, the workshop discussions sketched above just being a small part of it, certain patterns and genres of narrative became evident. In the course of analysing narratives about war and peace the most prominent genre of narrative was what I named 'war-peace narratives'. In war-peace narratives, the benefits of peace in contrast to the hardships of war are omnipresent and are combined with instructions for peaceful behaviour and neighbourly cooperation. In war-peace narratives the means of achieving peace are moulded out of history—a warlike history from which a peaceful 'culture is reproduced by remembrance put into word and deeds'.<sup>54</sup> Such narratives are important rhetorical elements of collective memory, peacemaking, and persuasion. A typical war-peace narrative goes like this:

About war. What good has it? It has no milk, it has no water. What good has it? Me, as I am sitting here, I had a brother. Who took him away? War took him away. It has no good grass, it has no good water. Let's think about it. The age set walking there nowadays, they have age mates. My father's age set, as well as my age set, we were all depleted. Why I hate war is because it takes away your brother, your milk, one does not have good coffee, nor good water. All this I tell my child. Since we have peace, the children of Arbore do not go to other places to kill. This is why I left war.<sup>55</sup>

53 Malinowski 2002, 177.

54 Vansina 1985, xi.

55 Male Arbore elder in 2007.

War-peace narratives argue for peace in a clear pattern and moderate tone, and so they are well suited for public meetings and the education of children. They were the most numerous narratives I collected. Thus they are good examples of collective memory in the making. Yet, peace rhetoric understandably leaves out much of what people must have seen and felt so they can reason with greater coherence and thus create an oral foundation for peacemaking.<sup>56</sup> The incident at the workshop had taught me a lesson about the dignity and usefulness of silences and about illuminating ‘distortion of facts’, namely when the reason for the distortion becomes the more interesting information. Yet, still, something irritated me. I had reached a researcher’s strategic point of ambiguity where I had to reflect anew. Augé contends that we need other people’s thoughts ‘to make our thoughts angry’,<sup>57</sup> in this sense the words of the elders and my faux pas still made my thoughts restless.

I realized that in the many interviews I had conducted about war and killing, I had never dared to ask a person what the killing or death of another person meant to him or her. In other words, the stories of war simply sounded a bit too serene, almost ‘too beautiful’ and we had talked about killing without talking about killing. I had heard, and respected the silences, but there were certain incidents and parts of interviews that irritated me still. This irritation reminded me that the causes of silences lie in the depth of the experiences, and that I had missed out an important part of the peace puzzle. Finally, two years after the workshop, in 2009, I decided to travel to Arbore to face up to the questions I was pondering back at home at my desk, and to find out if I could ask questions about this blind spot in the interviews.

When I decided to explore ‘behind the silences’, I found myself in an ethical quandary. Was it appropriate to drag the unspoken from its hiding place, and even if it could be proven worthwhile and done in a respectful manner, how should I go about choosing possible interlocutors? As Nordstrom reminds us, ‘[t]reating a person’s experience of violence with dignity is arguably the most important part of studying and writing about violence, and it is certainly the most complicated.’<sup>58</sup>

Yet I also remembered Ginno assuring me earlier that my Arbore counterparts knew very well what they wanted to disclose or not.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See Halbwachs 1992, 183.

<sup>57</sup> Augé 2004, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Nordstrom 1997, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Gabbert 2013, 114.

Back in Arbore and relying again on my closest informants, we invited people who were able and willing to talk about their very personal war experiences. The interviews took place in a private setting, and I invited people separately to provide them with as much privacy as possible. However, people's schedules often overlapped, and I realized that they often preferred to talk in the presence of others with similar experiences. The interviews did not prove as difficult as I had expected, and the interviewees did not observe any problems after I had left the field.<sup>60</sup>

My interview partners were open to my questions, yet they confirmed that I was the first person, Arbore included, to ever ask such personal questions about killing acts beyond the normative and ritual framework of the killer ideal. Most interviews began with the usual war-peace narratives, which I was familiar with. Then, I started asking personal questions, with the effect that people disclosed intimate experiences (which I later categorized as 'war stories') with astonishing ease. To provide examples from these narratives would exceed the capacity of this paper. They were very different from the rather easily digestible war-peace narratives and most of them hard to digest and full of despair. Finally through these war stories, the extraordinary determination of the Arbore well-orchestrated enterprise of peace gained meaning beyond the spoken word. While providing unique insights into war experiences, these war stories deepen our understanding of the personal motivations that lie behind collective efforts to achieve peace, and of the particular, painful, and individual memories of war, that fed into collective narratives which later formed the legitimizing grounds for deciding, making, and living peace. With the knowledge gained through these 'war stories' I regard the silences and the particular phases of trauma that all killers and witnesses of killings I interviewed experienced not as pathologies but as phenomena that invite a closer look at the patterns of the cultivation of war and of the change in favour of peace that I tried to describe. I found that in Arbore, war experiences, rather than being buried in the subconscious have been given a mostly silent, yet prominent place in the memory and that some people have come to terms with the trauma involved. As the Arbore say, 'there are things you just do not spread out in talk for everybody to see'. The sessions in which people shared their war stories, in my house in Arbore, are unforgettable glimpses into hitherto nearly silent histories and I am glad that I returned to Arbore to face these questions. More than that I am thankful that people were willing to tell of their experiences and feelings, to help me realize that the implementation of the Arbore peace

60 I was especially concerned about possible 'emotional fallout' induced by the interviews after I had left the field (Parr 2007, 62–64; Thompson 2006, 246).

is grounded in part on the potential of traumatic experiences to induce change, be it as cure, relief or acknowledgement of ‘the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experiences bear witness’.<sup>61</sup>

And here ended that part of my journey that had started when I accused the elder in the white trousers of telling me lies.

## Conclusion

[I]f oral sources had given us ‘accurate’, ‘reliable’, factual reconstructions [of an incident] we would know much less about it.

(Portelli 1991, 26)

It is not only the founding character, the factual and historical richness, the persuasive qualities, ambiguous points, and the shadings of agreement that make speech acts such rich and challenging oral sources; it is, as Abu-Lughod describes,<sup>62</sup> the vivid and sensual quality in silences, whispers and outcries and their colours which should be included in the use of oral sources.

In my research and especially in the context of war memories, the power of silences bore distinctive qualities.<sup>63</sup> Silences (pauses as well as the ‘un-said’)<sup>64</sup> include all participants in the communication, and the researcher, in her or his quest for understanding, often becomes what Bakthin calls the ‘third party’ in the dialogue.<sup>65</sup> To scrutinize the meaning of silences, moving from respect to rage, resistance to fear, peace of mind to misery, contentment to horror, humbleness to arrogance, ignorance to pain is part of the analysis.<sup>66</sup> This is valid in the field and when interpreting oral sources elsewhere. The researchers’ and speakers’ biographies and backgrounds, the specific performative settings of the speech acts, and the surroundings, both near and far, must be taken into consideration when trying to understand the intentions and reception of oral sources. This must include the reflection on the effect of the researcher’s presence, his or her role and history, the research topic and the questions which recognize ‘the adjustments [people] make to their tales on account of their listeners’ pasts’<sup>67</sup> because all parties together create arenas of action for persuasion and identity construction.

61 Caruth 1995, ix.

62 Abu-Lughod 1993, 2.

63 Cohen 1994, 248; Cooper 2005, 206; Schoenbrun 1998, 6–7.

64 Tyler 1978.

65 Bakthin 1986, 126–127.

66 See also Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010, 1.

67 Tonkin 1995, 3.



With much effort to understand, decipher, and contextualize oral sources, I approach their interpretation in the sense of Arbore speech ethics, with a certain humility,<sup>68</sup> aware of the Arbore saying that ‘the moment one claims to know the truth, one speaks untrue’. My example above touches some of the various paths between truth and untruth, silences and ambiguity, remembrance and oblivion, distortion and humility. Thus it serves as a reminder that speaking, recording, translating, transcribing, and analysing, in short using of oral sources, is ‘a journey in translation’ with a constant need for adjustment, orientation, and correction and is always a work in progress.

When finding silences or ambiguities in oral sources we must not forget that ‘[we] must forget in order to remain present, forget in order not to die, forget in order to remain faithful’<sup>69</sup> and respect different ways of forgetting and remembering in order to find peace after times of war, loss, and irritation.



Fig. 1 Peace workshop at Arbore 2007, ritual slaughtering and final blessings.

68 See also Philips 2005, 37.

69 Augé 2004, 89.

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# The Triangle of Orality: On Language, Culture, and Fieldwork in South Omo

FELIX GIRKE

## Abstract

The South Omo zone of south-western Ethiopia is proverbial for its mosaic of cultures, and, since the 1970s, it has been intensely studied by socio-cultural anthropologists. Working in almost exclusively oral contexts has had a strong impact on the theoretical and methodological contributions of these scholars, and some of this work has had ramifications far beyond South Omo or even Ethiopian studies, influencing linguistic anthropology and the ethnography of speaking. The writings (and the films) of Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall, David Turton, Serge Tornay, and others not only provide rich ethnographic accounts of oral practices, but also constitute visual and textual experiments and make strong theoretical statements stimulated by the deep immersion in oral research contexts. While the currently most visible manifestation of this epistemic stance is Rhetoric Culture Theory, spearheaded by Ivo Strecker, a much broader cohort of more junior South Omo-based researchers continues to give orality and its ramifications a central place in their academic work, as they continue to work in languages which even today are neither written nor standardized. This 'triumph of talk' derives not just from the sheer necessity of engaging with orality in South Omo. More importantly, engaging in long-term 'classical' anthropological fieldwork, while learning a local language from scratch, has a persuasive and enchanting component that encourages a celebration of verbal art and demands strict fidelity when dealing with oral data.

## Introduction

Orality, as a term applied to human life-worlds, immediately and inevitably evokes its supposed opposite: if something is oral, it is simultaneously non-literate. On second thought however, this dualism is clearly not a strict dichotomy. To emphasize orality is simply to emphasize the absence or at least reduced relevance of writing, the written word, its media, and its study, in a given context.

One could thus imagine degrees of orality, as when there are gradable differences in how exclusively oral certain life-worlds are, or one could approach the matter through metaphors such as 'spheres' or 'fields': are there certain sectors of social life that are more oral than others?

The chosen focus area of this paper is the anthropological study in and of South Omo, where orality is of fundamental and broad relevance, and is one

of the defining aspects of the entire research situation. None of the languages of South Omo, Hamär, Kara, Ďáasanač, Mursi, Arbore, ŇaŇatom, to name just a few, are written languages. Many of them still await a proper linguistic survey, let alone a grammar, a working dictionary, or a teaching aide. In the following, I suggest that to look at such oral environments mainly through the prism of non-literacy might not be the most fruitful approach. Instead, by focusing on the actual experience of doing research in the societies of the Lower Omo, a better appreciation of the benefits (and occasional risks) of engaging these sites on their own terms can be achieved.

Drawing on my own experience from research in Kara (mostly between 2003 and 2008), as well as snippets from the rich corpus of South Omo studies, I want to reflect on orality. I make no claims that research in other places is not marked by somewhat similar features; but the case of South Omo is so radical in regards to orality that it serves particularly well as an illustration.

### The Triangle of Orality

To do field research in South Omo has meant that the researchers had to learn the local language—or, in fact, languages—from scratch. Neither for the first generation of modern anthropologists nor for their current acolytes was it ever quite feasible to acquire the language necessary for research before actually entering the field. Even those of us who managed to acquire word lists before entering the field found that they helped but little—vocabulary, it turned out, is the smallest challenge in this complex task. Amharic, which as far as I could tell only few South Omo scholars have a working knowledge of, is nevertheless woefully inadequate for any serious fieldwork there, as it is the language of the State, of official discourse, of the administration, of control, and of trade—from the perspective of the indigenous communities, the language of the Other. Consequently, many potential informants neither spoke Amharic (let alone English) nor would they willingly use it for the discussion of matters pertinent to their culture and sociality, or their personal views. Everyday conversations between people, the bread and butter of ethnographic study, are held exclusively in local languages, even if the occasional Amharic loanword finds its way into the vocabulary. That said, I would go as far as to say that working on local communities in South Omo with a translator is unprofessional except for the most narrow and particular research plans, and that it will be very difficult to generate broad and significant insights with such an approach. As an aside, there are individuals all over South Omo who have an intriguing smattering of language skills—I met some Kara men who had learned bits of Italian from a crocodile hunter who had set up shop on the Omo decades ago, and of course more and more (male) youths speak good English. Still,

to again draw on my own example, at a later stage of my research, I found out that these young men had been actively discouraged to speak English with me while we were in Kara together, not to stultify me, but to leave me no choice but to learn *kar'appa*.

For research in other places, it might be possible to find a halfway house where one can prepare for the actual ethnographic encounter in a safe and not too distant location, a place where one can study the language before being immersed in the field. South Omo does not, at this point, offer this. Orality here is local, not only in the sense that hardly anybody outside a local polity's settlement area speaks the respective language with total competence, but also that, in these localities, the oral is a holistic feature of the social: in Kara, all social relations and interactions are orally mediated. This becomes clear when we look at a researcher's process of language acquisition.

Learning a language in this context is—as has often been stated—a process of enculturation. Without a safe authority from which to conveniently confirm understanding or authorize translations, the researcher is constantly engaged with an entire world of meaning. I remember that in Kara, I was constantly correcting preliminary translations of words or expressions in my notebooks. As my experience grew, along with my general competence in living in Kara, I realized that, initially, one often uses words as approximations, and I needed to test my understanding of what a word might signify through repeated trial and error: through actual experiments in talk. In effect, this led to intense and unceasing examination of language, of my own and others, until I had made some sort of Kara language my own. In this way, there was—and this is a relevant point for the orality-dominated environments that I am discussing here—a very small gap between active and passive speech competence, and equally so between my language skills and my cultural knowledge: learning other languages from books, I had a much greater capacity to understand before actually being able to speak at such a level. Learning vocabulary in a natural context, and not abstracted from practical life (as found in textbooks), enables a researcher to get to know a cultural world in step with the language. Even more, learning a language in this manner requires enthusiastic teachers, people who delight in the progress of the researcher, people who want their guest to become a competent member of their life-world as quickly as possible. So there is a third competence that grows at the same pace: sociality, or communal competence. My term for the inevitable and necessary connection of these three competences is the 'triangle of orality'. There is a similar schema mapping 'cultural competence' by Saville-Troike, who lists the three elements of communication as follows:

- 1) Linguistic knowledge (including verbal and nonverbal elements);



- 2) Interaction skills (perception of the communicative situation, selection of relevant relationships, norms, strategies, and goals);
- 3) Cultural knowledge (values, social structure, cognitive maps/schemata, transmission of knowledge).<sup>1</sup>

This corresponds to a degree with what I propose. At first glance, the clearest difference would seem to be between her ‘interaction skills’ and my ‘sociality’ or ‘communal competence’, as I would emphasize not merely skills, but the actual process of growing personally closer, making friends of informants. But there is a more crucial divergence: the author gives no indication that she sees those three as intrinsically connected, whereas I do. Each of the three competences limits the other two. I can only speak about what I have understood with people who are willing to engage with me; they are only willing to engage with me if they sense that I am committed to understanding their lives and that I enter speech situations to demonstrate this; and I can only grasp the larger cultural (and social) frame if I am offered access, and actually understand what people want to tell me. In brief, the analytical separation of linguistic, cultural and social competence is hardly tenable in exclusively oral research settings. Additionally, without the readiness to undergo the proverbial phase of the ‘anthropologist as a child’,<sup>2</sup> the necessary development of the triangle with its three points, language skill, cultural knowledge, and social competence, will be slow. The embodied experience of this language–sociality–culture triangle is intense. Certain schools of sociology characterize conversational practice as a time of ‘no time out’,<sup>3</sup> unless the researcher physically withdraws from the field or at least retreats into their proverbial or quite real tent.<sup>4</sup> And there is no

1 Saville-Troike 1999, 24.

2 There have been debates about whether the term ‘second socialization’ should be applied to fieldworkers. I would argue that, for the research context of South Omo, the analogy is helpful. Even as one brings personal habits, transcultural understanding and informed background knowledge into the field, arriving as a competent adult, I did in fact regularly feel out of my depth even regarding such simple matters as orientation, proper behaviour, and routine tasks (such as washing my body in total darkness). But such helplessness regularly earned me additional explanations and demonstrations, so even if one is not entirely socialized a second time, to actively engage rather than deny one’s incompetence can be an asset to the study. After all, as Crick puts it, ‘[a]t the end of his research, if only for lack of linguistic skills, an anthropologist is likely on a number of subjects to know far less than a small child from that culture’ (Crick 1982, 19, also 22–23). In addition, many researchers have founded their more general social acceptance on prior interaction with children.

3 Mondada 2013, 42.

4 In the specific case of South Omo, the retreat chosen by many researchers has been the South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) in Ginka, the zonal capital, founded by Ivo Strecker. It is worth adding that the opportunity to leave the field



choice but to learn what is relevant for one's hosts. Evans-Pritchard put it most evocatively:

One cannot live in intimate association with a people who live by and for their cattle, spending all day, and sometimes all night, with them and their herds, watching them tend their beasts and singing and dancing to their beloved oxen, and hearing them talk about little else, without getting to know what cattle mean to them. Communication would be impossible and it would be impossible to establish any close bond with them.<sup>5</sup>

Linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and close relationships are intrinsically entangled. Jean Lydall's reflections on her work in Hamär illustrate this triangle of orality well.<sup>6</sup>

Jean Lydall: 'Learning the language this way was a liberation for me—if I had had a book and dictionary I would possibly have been more inhibited and less engagingly motivated. Learning a language which had never been written and discovering the grammar was the highlight of my fieldwork. To learn the language was one thing—something that continues endlessly—and the next thing was to understand what people meant or wanted to convey with their speech was the next thing. My ambition became to reach a stage where I could listen in to other people's conversations and comprehend what was being said and what might be meant. Methodologically this meant keeping my ears and eyes alert at all times, taking down notes as soon as possible during or after an event, and asking questions of individuals subsequently to try and gain better understanding.'

proper but take some informants along for some distance to the daily routines and spend some days in Ġinka was often used to great effect, not only to recover from the intensity of fieldwork (or ailments) and to resupply, but also to deepen personal connections, work on translations, or run small, often interethnic workshops (see Gabbert 2010 for an account).

5 Evans-Pritchard 1973, 4.

6 All quotations inserted without further reference were solicited by me from the cited scholars for the purposes of this paper in 2014. I personally translated certain passages from French; this is indicated. I asked a number of South Omo scholars the following questions via email: (1) Your field research took place in a nearly exclusively oral context. Could you characterize how this aspect influenced your life in the field, and your methodology during fieldwork? (2) Having been immersed in a foreign-language oral environment for months and years, what sort of impact have these experiences had on your later theorizing, and more generally your academic interests and your approach to anthropology? (3) Your field research took you to Ethiopia: how would you characterize your scholarly relationship to 'Ethiopian studies'?

Lydall's emphasis on the challenge inherent in acquiring linguistic competence should not be overlooked. Accordingly, the intense satisfaction of proceeding from zero to the ability to listen to, participate in, and eventually steer a conversation is a shared experience. Not accidentally does she connect her increasing competence with a desire to understand people, their wants and motives—this is a necessity in the triangle of orality: without the will to engage with people, accepting their mode of social relations, little progress will be made.

Her characterization of being-in-the-field, always alert, and wanting to progress further is echoed in Serge Tornay's memories of his earliest days in the field, which align well with mine from Kara.

Serge Tornay: 'During my first stay among the Nyangatom, in July and August 1970, I decided to open my ears together with my eyes. Basic things were elements of daily experience; pointing at things with fingers was a way of questioning about its name: fire? *akim*; water? *ngakipi*; sorghum? *nguumwa*; to drink? *akimat*; to eat? *akimuj*; to sleep? *akiper*; earth/soil? *ngalup*; the sun? *akolong*; the moon? *elap*; the rain? *akuru*; the zebu? *aiteng/ngaatuk*; and so on. With *ngaatuk*, you discover a plural form. But why is the water, *ngakipi*, a plural form? And so forth, day after day, night after night.'

Interestingly and relevantly, he also emphasizes 'ears and eyes', just as Jean Lydall does: the oral environment challenges both the active seeing (and pointing), and the passive listening, most of all. His reference to 'day after day, night after night' indicates that for Tornay as well, there was no time out. Clearly, he considers this to have been a benefit rather than a handicap. He continues:

Serge Tornay: 'I believe by restricting myself to only communicate orally with Nyangatom, I created, between the people and myself, a certain style: a communication, never perfect, but direct, and my friends got used to this style from the beginning.<sup>7</sup> They rejoiced seeing me progress, sometimes on a daily basis, in the comprehension of their language and their life. They realized that I could learn, and that is why men and women, boys and girls became my teachers... It also became a game: when I understood well, they were content, and when I would understand badly, they broke out in laughter! The eth-

7 Consider Evans-Pritchard's take on this: 'A final hint: get away from servants and regular informants from time to time, and meet people who do not know you; then you will know how badly you are speaking their tongue!' (Evans-Pritchard 1973, 12).

nographer was always an object of mockery, but this was, I am sure of it, born of affection.'

Ivo Strecker has already published numerous texts on just these sorts of reflections, which form the basis of his ethnographic and theoretical *œuvre*,<sup>8</sup> and which can be easily accessed. They provide a plethora of facts, not only for reflection, but also a number of carefully transcribed speech situations.<sup>9</sup> While such matters are difficult to assess, my impression is that even his first sustained treatment of rhetorical action in Hamär (*The Social Practice of Symbolization*, 1988)<sup>10</sup> has been primarily read by an anthropological audience rather than within 'Ethiopian studies'. I return to this theme later, but it is worth mentioning this suspicion already at this point, for it touches directly upon the topic of this special issue in relating anthropological work done in South Omo to 'Greater Ethiopia'.

### Walter Ong's 'Primary Orality'

The experiences so emphatically expressed by Jean Lydall and Serge Tornyay, along with the published testimony of Ivo Strecker, make it clear that there is something about the oral environment that is specific: specific in how it structures research, specific regarding the role of speaking and listening, specific in how the body and the senses are continually and inextricably involved in interaction or just observation. It is obvious that the invention of the portable tape recorder positively influenced the practice of fieldwork, especially in regard to orality.<sup>11</sup> But while it is clear that, at times, the tape recorder stimulates people's verbal engagement rather than stifling it, this technical innovation (in today's guise of an app-studded smartphone) has clearly facilitated in-depth engagement with orality.

There has been little explicit attention paid to such environments within anthropology,<sup>12</sup> surprisingly so, since it is not so long ago that many more field sites in the world had the distinct characteristics of South Omo as described above. One attempt to render such a setting comprehensively is Walter Ong's approach to 'primary orality'.

8 See [rhetoricculture.org](http://rhetoricculture.org), and the series Studies in Rhetoric and Culture (currently seven volumes) by Berghahn Books ([http://www.berghahnbooks.com/series.php?pg=rhet\\_cult](http://www.berghahnbooks.com/series.php?pg=rhet_cult)). A book on rhetoric and culture in Ethiopia is in planning. Ivo Strecker shared a draft paper with me, entitled 'From ethnography to rhetoric culture theory', that explores this particular trajectory more explicitly.

9 Central documents are Strecker and Lydall 1979 and Strecker 1979; 1988; 2010.

10 Strecker 1988.

11 Cf. Brady 1999.

12 Rumsey 2001.

I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, 'primary orality'. [...] Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects.<sup>13</sup>

His interest lies first and foremost in working out the differences between more and less literate cultural settings, and he recognizes that 'primary orality' as defined here is about as common as a non-imagined community.

My aim is simpler. Far from dealing with evolutionary or developmental schemes, I do not aspire to discuss the contrast between more literate settings and more oral ones. Instead, the purpose of this section is to discuss some features Ong identified for 'primary orality', and assess their fit, relevance, and merit for the case of South Omo research.<sup>14</sup> Ong labels his list as 'the psychodynamics of orality'.<sup>15</sup> While his text is largely abstract with the occasional historical or ethnographic snippet, he does at one point offer a fantasy of what it would be like (for his literate readers) to live in an 'oral culture'.

Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. [...] They are occurrences, events.<sup>16</sup>

This is a fair point, but would this really dominate our experience in the field, that the words 'look something up' are meaningless? Ong is extrapolating, not speaking from experience; yet he still attempts to get into the minds of 'oral peoples'. Consider this next conjecture, as he argues why words and sound in general are of special, even magical importance to these *others* he is writing about.

Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is

13 Ong 2002, 11.

14 Lourens de Vries has already emphatically challenged Ong's suggested features of primary orality, which he says are 'representative of still widespread ideas and assumptions about primary oral discourse' (De Vries 2003, 397). Rather than inductive and empirical, they are 'universalistic projections'. De Vries' text takes a similar approach to mine, measuring Ong's claims versus data from Papua New Guinea, and finds them distinctly lacking.

15 Ong 2002, 31.

16 Ibid., 31.

completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on.<sup>17</sup>

Hunters, beware! Clearly, as an anthropologist, it is a bit saddening to read Ong's *Orality and Literacy* and realize that he could have used some of his scholarly colleagues as informants to avoid such gaffes—but still, again as an anthropologist, could we not maybe learn something about the oral environment from his outsider's perspective?

### Formulaic Style

The basic premise of Ong's approach rests in the issue of memory and recollection. Since paper cannot serve as the repository of knowledge, all particularly complex pieces of information must be stored in mere words, and the only way one of our 'hunters' could manage this successfully is this:

Think memorable thoughts. [...] you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions and antitheses, in alliterations or assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings [...], in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or other mnemonic form.<sup>18</sup>

There is some plausibility to this for everybody who has heard speeches given by competent elders in South Omo, who are able to hold forth on various topics with little notice, with a control over their words deeply envied by any anxious graduate student and many a professor. But surely one should turn the chain of argument around, and make similarly eloquent statements about how writing things down has crippled the minds of 'literate cultures', as we lack a comparable capacity to think memorable thoughts.<sup>19</sup>

This first entry introduces Ong's somewhat evolutionary approach: formulaic style, that is, having large sets of idiomatic phrases or patterns of argument, aids in memorizing information and mapping information—

17 Ibid., 32.

18 Ibid., 34.

19 I, for one, have often felt cognitively inadequate in Kara. One incident which stuck to my mind was when I inquired about a word somebody had just used: 'What does that mean?', I asked, 'I haven't written it down before.' 'But you have', came the reply, 'in that little black notebook of yours, I'll show you where.' And then my illiterate Kara friend, unable to read (let alone my notebook shorthand), pointed me to the place where I had in fact written down the word in question months ago.

‘retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought’, as he puts it.<sup>20</sup> That this is a dominant phenomenon in an oral environment is without question: people do speak a lot in recognizably idiomatic ways. Rhythm and standard phrases play an important role, often supported by gesture—from my own experience in Kara, even to the point where a gesture can encapsulate a mode or a certain argument. Anthropologically, his suggestion that this is done to enhance memory is problematic, for such an assumption basically denies any conscious motivation for speaking formulaically, for aesthetic, poetic, or rhetorical purposes. This is functionalist, and begs the question of people’s emic views on their speech practices. It is also doubtful whether Ong needs to adduce examples from ‘ancient Aramaic and Hellenic’, along with ‘ancient Hebrews’ and ‘ancient Greeks’.<sup>21</sup> De Vries clearly states the obvious: ‘[h]owever, to study primary orality there is a much directer way: we can study the discursive practices and the languages of really primary oral cultures such as still to be found in some more isolated parts of New Guinea.’<sup>22</sup>

Despite this criticism, the sheer systematicity of Ong’s list refuses easy dismissal. Ruth Finnegan, who has studied oral literature, says of such projects:

It is obvious that this crude picture of non-literate peoples is in many ways an over-simplified one, and one that has been contested for many years. [...] it is also obvious that there is some glimmer of truth behind this crude representation, or, rather, that certain significant questions are being raised by such views.<sup>23</sup>

20 Ong 2002, 34.

21 Ibid., 34.

22 De Vries 2003, 400; more broadly, he identifies three main strands feeding into Ong’s approach: ‘the additive parataxis from the linguistic debate, the context-bound concreteness from the anthropological debate, and the formulaicity from the philological debate’ (De Vries 2003, 399), the latter largely based on analysis of Homer’s epics. Considering that the second one harkens back to Lévi-Strauss, Lévy-Bruhl, and others who investigated ‘savage minds’ and ‘primitive mentalities’, positing dichotomies and discontinuities between the oral old and the (coeval) literate new is problematic. De Vries has no patience with this at all, as this is not borne out by more recent findings in linguistics and cognitive studies. Especially the impact of writing has been shown to be variable and context-dependent, so that any ‘universal cognitive dichotomies’ are ‘a thing of the past now’ (De Vries 2003, 398). To be fair, Ong does at times make reference to material from contemporary oral cultures, but these instances seem like added afterthoughts rather than an empirical basis.

23 Finnegan 1988, 44.

Taking up this cue, I want to discuss some of his other points on the list, solely regarding their resonance with field experience, namely the questions they raise, and their possible impact on the triangle of orality.

### Additive rather than Subordinative

This refers to syntax. Ong finds that in primary oral environments, subordinate clauses are mostly linked up by the mainstay ‘and’ or ‘and then’, rather than more complex connectors (such as ‘notwithstanding’, I guess). This claim is difficult to conclusively assess without a large corpus, but anecdotal evidence indicates that he has a point. I have already written about how other people in South Omo view the Arbore.<sup>24</sup> An important aspect of this is that few of the Arbore’s neighbours learn this complex West-Cushitic language, but nevertheless observe, appreciate, and sometimes mimic the Arbore way of speaking—which includes the inevitable word *anaka*, used as ‘and then’. If this is an essential aspect of primary orality, it is one which might actually help researchers trying to learn a language; after all, conjunctions are certainly complex, and if ‘and then’ dominated the speech world, it would be rather simple to tell a story. It is noticeable, that for this item, there is no functionalist-evolutionary explanation given by Ong. But there is more. The additive way of narration can also co-opt a hearer to contribute to the speech act. Here, I am most strongly reminded of the response-prompting in conversation. A speaker might hold forth, and the hearer is expected to repeat single words from the end of phrases, mostly verbs. A fictional example illustrates this:

A: ‘When we came to the river, it was swollen [pause].’

B: ‘Swollen.’

A: ‘We then looked for a place to cross [pause].’

B: ‘To cross [etc.].’

Now, I do not want to follow Ong to insinuate that this is done to buy the speaker time to think about what to say next, especially since this is not how a researcher in Hamär or Kara experiences it. The effect is one of attention management: it is intensely involving to be addressed like this, and helps the hearer to focus, especially when the prompting becomes explicit.

A: ‘We then began to swim. Say “swim.”’

B: ‘Swim.’

This feature of orality, where it is in fact found, is accessible and engaging, signalling relevance and safeguarding the connection between speakers,

24 Girke 2009.

even if the autonomy of B does seem curtailed. A researcher regularly drawn into conversations like this might feel controlled, and rightly so, urged to echo the speaker and affirm each step of a tale. In Kara, there is another speech element, in the shape of a suffix, which can be even more controlling: *-ni*. This particle can either be attached to a word where a phrase is paused, or appear in its very own exclamation *onini*. Either way, the addressee has no alternative but to answer with a '*Ni!*' himself. I had many conversations like the one below, where I am B and A is some young boy or girl.

A: '*Onini...*'

B: '*Ni!*'

A: 'When you next go to town-*ni...*'

B: '*Ni!*'

A: '... and have attended to your affairs-*ni...*'

B: '*Ni!*'

A: '... and you come back from there to here-*ni...*'

B: '*Ni!*'

A: '... you better bring me something nice as well, do you understand?'

B: '...'

The most regular use of this, I assume, is to hold a child's attention when giving them a task involving several steps; the *-ni* and its echo is evidence that the recipient has heard and must have understood. It is most uncomfortable to forget *ni!* in reply, when so prompted; the speaker will either simply wait for the formal acknowledgement, or repeat the phrase until the *ni!* is finally produced. That children used this on me can be read in several ways; most relevant is probably that they were comfortable playing with this speech situation, inverting hierarchies of age (and gender), and using their linguistic superiority over me to rhetorically put me in a spot where I could hardly say 'No' anymore.<sup>25</sup>

25 So many further examples of such speech practice could be adduced that it might warrant a paper of its own. From the work journal of Ivo Strecker and Jean Lydall, 'Men always accompany the activities of the women with a command. A command which is seemingly unnecessary, yet part of the system of thought and action' (Strecker and Lydall 1979, 65). Again, this is familiar from Kara, and again, it was first a young girl who reversed the practice and provided the proper command for every action I was doing just as I was about to do them: 'Now put the sandal on. The left one first. Now the other one. Now stand up. Watch out that you do not bump your head. Pick up your stool. Say "I go now".' It will be clear how these demonstrations by mere children enlighten the researcher.



### Aggregative rather than Analytic<sup>26</sup>

This distinction highlights the fact that certain words are more likely to follow on certain other words. Speakers aggregate words in familiar sequences, and certain terms might only be found before or after one or very few others.

‘Analytic’ would mean that words can stand on their own, and be used with liberty with any other. Again, this is a suggestion that is hard to verify or falsify, especially regarding the notion that this is more strongly so in ‘more oral’ environments. But one can imagine how this might affect researchers trying to learn an aggregative language: while many of us transcribe as many entire sentences as possible, the attempt to create an analytic list of distinct terms would directly violate this principle, and lead to confusion in practice, as when the fieldworker attempts to build their own connections without awareness that some words are, in fact, less analytic than others. For practical purposes, this calls for an adaptation of notation practices, and a sensitization to idiomatic expression rather than discrete words.

### Redundant or ‘Copious’

Another item is Ong’s distinction between the ‘linear’ style afforded by literacy, where one can always go back to re-read a section, and the ‘back-looping’ redundancy of oral delivery. The reason given for this ‘copious’ oral style is again efficiency—while thinking about what to say next, the speaker can simply rephrase or repeat an earlier point rather than hesitate or pause overly long. This is a rather positioned diagnosis, and Ong is not shy in calling texts retaining elements of this earlier practice ‘bloated with “amplification”, annoyingly redundant by modern standards’.<sup>27</sup> The phenomenon itself is utterly familiar from field research, and probably rather common throughout the world. Pierre Maranda once reported a comment by his informants from Oceania, who told him that ‘You speak our language well, but you don’t speak it good: You don’t repeat enough’.<sup>28</sup> The fine distinction between ‘well’ and ‘good’ points us back to the triangle, as it indicates that Maranda’s informants were not only reflective about language and speaking, but took the time to point out to him that his language use was competent but alienated from their daily usage.

26 Ong’s next item is ‘conservative or traditionalist’, which adds little to the understanding of the communicative situation, event, or act (compare Saville-Troike 1999, 26–28), and is therefore not considered here.

27 Ong 2002, 41.

28 2001, via email.

### Close to the Human Lifeworld

This point is again largely formulated in terms of deficiency. According to Ong, oral cultures lack ‘analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience’,<sup>29</sup> they know ‘few statistics or facts divorced from human or quasi-human activity’, and ‘nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals’.<sup>30</sup> Thus, knowledge (and knowledge transmission as in an apprenticeship) is always linked to action contexts. From this, we can learn (somewhat substantiated by my own experience) that attempts to elicit abstract formulations of fields of knowledge might rarely succeed—but this is too negative as well: in the triangle of orality, it is clear that speech comes from situated people and is often enough about situated people, and that the life-world is the main preoccupation of our informants and, accordingly, of ourselves. Why would we want to ask anything from beyond this scope? I once again turn to Evans-Pritchard’s experience.

Another tip I venture to give is not to start trying to make inquiries, into social matters—family, kin, chieftainship, religion or whatever it may be before the language has to some extent been mastered and personal relationships have been established, otherwise misunderstandings and confusions may result.<sup>31</sup>

Again, cultural knowledge can only grow when language and social contacts proceed together.

### Agonistically Toned

Negotiation and struggle between people is certainly a strong aspect of South Omo sociality. Clearly impressed by this during fieldwork, I penned the following a few years ago, maybe overly dramatic but very much in keeping with my experience:

I found that in Kara, hardly a day went without some public argument, some fight, some scandal of varying levels of drama and physicality. Verbal provocations, reneged deals, petty thefts from individuals and from the community, all this was part and parcel of social life. Some of the behaviour I observed seemed to follow certain cultural templates, most evident in the commonplaces of insult, some certain-

<sup>29</sup> Ong 2002, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>31</sup> Evans-Pritchard 1973, 11.

ly involved ritualistic elements even; but much of it came across as committed, affective, and sincere.<sup>32</sup>

Proceeding from this, I would leave Ong's fascination with the graphic violence found in the ancient epics to one side, and rather pick up his veiled suggestion that oral cultures are 'agonistically programmed'.<sup>33</sup> I eventually concluded that this feature of my experience in Kara was less due to orality, and more to the sheer closeness of the setting, where people lived and worked in constant proximity, and shared many multiplex relationships—Kara has only about 1,500 inhabitants living in three major villages. Everybody literally knows everybody else. Categorical separation (such as kinship or ethnicity) was always tempered by cross-cutting ties of various sorts (residence or age-set membership), and the constant sense of *agon* reflected people's attempts to negotiate the contradictory demands of distance and intimacy. Be this as it may, the effect of the agonistic tone is that most conversations are about actual people, and are incomprehensible if the researcher does not know who is married to whom, who went hunting with whom, and whose herd is grazing nearby and might have trampled a field.<sup>34</sup>

### Homeostatic

Ong is quite concise here: 'oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.'<sup>35</sup>

Today, such a reference conjures up James Scott's characterization of escape populations who have mastered the 'art of not being governed',<sup>36</sup> partly by intentionally disregarding an inconvenient past, as well as Kopytoff's tales from the 'African frontier',<sup>37</sup> told by newcomers to legitimate both their having left metropolis and their occupation of what usually was not quite terra nullius. More generally, though, this also affects genealogies, which in Kara end conveniently about three generations in the past. In Ong's terms again, '[t]he integrity of the past was subordinate to the integrity of the present'.<sup>38</sup> This is certainly valid for South Omo, and its methodological impact can hardly be overstated. The future is made in the present by talking about the past, and with no history enshrined in writing, the past

32 Girke 2009, 57.

33 Ong 2002, 44.

34 I again omit an item for the sake of relative brevity: 'empathetic and participatory', which contributes less to the debate of the experience of orality.

35 Ong 2002, 46.

36 Scott 2009; see Girke 2016.

37 Kopytoff 1989.

38 Ong 2002, 48.

remains a resource for all sorts of rhetorical operations. This has surely bugged many ethnographers trying to triangulate narratives, hoping to match up divergent oral histories or ground myths in ‘factual’ events; and when I say that the first written records we have of—say—the Kara are from the 1880s, it is clear that there is much that we would like to know but cannot. For my research this was a major factor, and I felt that the best way of dealing with the historical uncertainty of narratives was to accept this state of affairs and focus on what was actually going on in the speech situation: somebody was trying to make a point about the here and now. Any ‘history’ was always a ‘story’ first. Embracing the triangle of orality in such instances meant surrendering the aspiration to get at ‘how it really was’, and instead deal with the rhetorical efforts of my interlocutors to educate me and others about ‘how we should think about it’.

### **Situational rather than Abstract**

This item is closely linked to the lessons from ‘Homeostatic’. Ong’s examples and discussion are quite extensive, so I proceed to his executive summary: ‘an oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorizations, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought.’<sup>39</sup>

This provides a methodological challenge, for example in regard to the biographical interview, or certain cognitive methods, but it also provides a direction and focus to avoid programming the research agenda to the point where one might run into problems by asking questions to which there might be simply no answer in a given speech-community. Embracing the triangle of orality avoids this pitfall. When we learn a language by immersion, we also learn the relevance of topics, about which people actually speak, without getting ahead of ourselves. Hence, there is little motivation to ask questions derived from abstraction, and in the process distancing ourselves from our hosts and teachers.

One lesson to take away from Ong’s conditions of ‘primary orality’: the differences between our (literate) approach to concepts and speech and local practices, inasmuch as they actually exist, can be mitigated (or actually used for heuristic profit) when one accepts that the three competences growing in a co-emergent manner is a benefit rather than a liability.<sup>40</sup> But what do

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54–55.

<sup>40</sup> Ever blunt Jack Goody lays all the worries about incommensurability and discontinuity between human populations to rest: ‘In the course of several years living among people of ‘other cultures’, I have never experienced the kind of hiatus in

the alleged features of primary orality do for our anthropological understanding?

### The Benefits of the Triangle of Orality

The field context is one involving a considerable range of social skills. Understanding is generated from and in a host of relationships.  
(Crick 1982, 17)

What seems to be the one true benefit of immersion into a primary oral community is that the Malinowskian dictum that ‘words are actions’, a basis for praxeology and fundamental to approaches such as Rhetoric Culture Theory, inevitably comes alive. Be it the formulaic style, the additive narration that virtually binds the hearer, the relevance so clearly conveyed in the strict reference to the life-world, the agonistic aspect, the rhetorical making of history through the homeostatic tendency, the situational focus, and so on, all these elements are experienced in interaction, and stimulate an engagement with the conscious use of words: ‘[l]anguage, in its primitive function, to be regarded as a mode of action, rather than as a countersign of thought’.<sup>41</sup> In oral company, all speech is situated, directed, purposive, persuasive, and creative—but, of course, so it is elsewhere. But in oral company, in an unknown environment, initially among strangers, learning a language from scratch, it is there that this basic principle is so intensely real that it changes the anthropological outlook of those who step inside the triangle of orality. Everything else follows from this.

Serge Tornay: ‘It’s impossible to say what would have been my *œuvre* if I had worked with interpreters. Without doubt... it would have been different. I believe that the entirety of my publications, books and articles, are all evidence of some kind of improvisation. If one looks at one of the grand “theoretical” topics, the generation system, one does not find a fixed version, a monolithic version: each essay derives its originality from the situations in which I have gathered the information which provided it with an existence. That essay demonstrates that the Nyangatom do not have a single and codified view of their major institution, the affiliation with the social generations.<sup>42</sup> The word “system” does not exist in Nyangatom, and despite of that, anthropology felt obliged to call it “the generational system”.

communication that would be the case if I and they were approaching the same physical world from opposite ends. [...] The boy brought up as bricoleur becomes an engineer’ (Goody 1977, 8).

41 Malinowski 1923, 451, see Robins 1971, 35.

42 Tornay 1981.

The people talk about generations, about age sets within generation sets. But the conception of these, provided by experience, depends on the personal situation of the informant in regard to the generations and age sets, etc. Sociology and anthropology have widely theorized this topic: but it is one thing to theorize, and it's another to demonstrate, based on first-hand data, that social life truly works like that. The field experience inspires in its practitioner a cognitive orientation in regard to anthropology.'

Serge Tornay provides this example of how immersion in the oral context acts to 'keep the anthropologist honest', so to speak: prepared by his readings to study age 'systems', he found that when in the field, both age sets and generation sets are largely artefacts of talk, given life by people in concrete situations. This, then, is a significant advantage of the triangle of orality: by tying the researcher to the concreteness of situations and the people acting in them, it has inbuilt safeguards against both conjecture and abstraction, and focuses on practice (praxis) above all. To reiterate, this is not something that is much in doubt today ('[t]he ethnography of communication takes language first and foremost as a socially situated cultural form')<sup>43</sup> but, by its immediacy, the primary oral environment never lets the researcher forget this.

Echi Gabbert's recent publication of 'To Work with Ginno: Reflections on Fieldwork in Arbore'<sup>44</sup> throws some more light on how her process of competence acquisition was the defining feature of fieldwork. Ginno Ballo, her partner and main informant in recent years, provides some answers to her question of how he now recalls her early days in the field. The Arbore, it turns out, were cautious in their dealings with other anthropologists.

G[inno]: When the first anthropologists came, they were told many lies. How is it done in Arbore? People watch whether the visitors are true or false. People watch their character and how they integrate. Whether they act in an honest way or only pretend to be interested.<sup>45</sup>

How did Gabbert overcome this obstacle? Ginno says that in Arbore, knowledge is 'bought', not given for free, even to other Arbore. Coming repeatedly, over years, finding some renowned people to speak for her, and finally organising an aid project proved her integrity to the Arbore. That she went cattle-herding showed people 'that you are really interested in our culture'.<sup>46</sup> For our discussion, Gabbert's acquisition of language skills is

43 Saville-Troike 1999, 3.

44 Gabbert 2013.

45 Ibid., 108.

46 Ibid., 109.

most relevant. According to her informants, she was ‘silent’ a lot in her early days, listening, observing, but not speaking much herself. But eventually, when she began to be more assertive in conversation, it was accepted, because ‘[a]s long as your talking is grounded on knowledge people will accept it. Only children and evil people shall stay silent’.<sup>47</sup> For years, Ginno confirms, she had been like a child, because ‘you did not know how to talk. The one without knowledge should not talk’.<sup>48</sup> This, in a way, shows a reversed approach to the triangle of orality from the side of the Arbore: as long as you are not trusted, and as long as you do not know our life-world, what are you doing talking? Nothing good can come out of it. But once her integrity was proven, and she showed understanding of what mattered in Arbore, speaking, even public speaking, was encouraged and accepted.

Shauna LaTosky’s recollections and quotes from her Mursi friends and informants all go to show the same thing: ‘We can teach you all of these things, but it will take time. First, you have to stay here with us and listen carefully so you can learn to speak like Lusi Golonyi [David Turton].’<sup>49</sup>

Stay with us and listen to us, learn to talk, and then you will be able to understand your larger questions. LaTosky also felt that she was taught her first Mursi expressions in a helpful but rather relentless manner, as ‘a way to welcome me as a guest and to convince me that I should return to their homestead in the future’.<sup>50</sup> Linguistic skill here even appears as a function of successful hospitality. Her (and most other researchers’) hosts were rightly proud for teaching their guest, and eventually turning us into socially competent people who would not only do no harm, but actually enrich the community.

But all this takes time, and time spent on research requires funds to be spent; being able to engage in full immersion and to learn a language from interaction is a luxury today. It is doubtful that grant applications or PhD proposals are strengthened by statements to the effect that one has not yet acquired language skills, and plans to invest (valuable) research time to acquire this necessary capability. On the other hand, the evidence from South Omo shows the depths of understanding eventually reached, as well as the formidable relationships engendered by this sort of research. Even looking beyond David Turton, Serge Tornay, Jean Lydall, Ivo Strecker, and their decades-long commitment to their field sites, the publications by the more recent generation of South Omo ethnographers (including Gabbert and

47 Ibid., 114.

48 Ibid. For more insights into Gabbert’s work with orality see also her contribution in this volume.

49 LaTosky 2013, 42.

50 Ibid., 35.

LaTosky) provide evidence of the fruitfulness of this approach. But is that a luxury of the past? Even if the institutional support for this kind of anthropological fieldwork might be flagging, the real challenge probably lies in personal adaptation in the field.

For my friends in Kara, one of the key terms in regard to my research was the verb *chala*, ‘to endure, to persevere (in the face of privation)’. What gave them confidence that our partnership would be fruitful and satisfactory for everybody was their sense that I would indeed *chala*: that despite my visible deficiencies and physical and mental difficulties, I would eventually stick it out and become a worthwhile member of society. This is of course a tough standard, with its simple do-or-die premise, but it made all the sense in the world for the Kara to apply it: most *färäng* and *habäša* who come to the Lower Omo stay briefly, exhort (and sometimes extort), lecture rather than listen, and depart as soon as their self-serving objective has been achieved. This is not to say that the anthropologist does not have self-serving objectives just as well; only that the Kara (and surely most other groups in the region) appreciate when visitors actually attend to all three points of the triangle of orality, take their time, and visibly engage in social, not egoistic, behaviour in the course of their stay.

## Conclusion

Orality is of course the twin of ethnography. And orality is supposed to be experienced in the language of the people studied.

(Serge Tornay)

By proposing the model of the triangle of orality I offer a methodological consideration for field research in general. The example of South Omo, with its radical or indeed primary orality, is illustrative for the benefits of full and unhesitating immersion into an ethnographic context, or rather, a life-world. Granted that even South Omo is changing, and that few and fewer field sites are so exclusively orality-reliant as Jean Lydall, Serge Tornay, and some of the more recent cohort of South Omo scholars experienced, one can nevertheless see the benefits of simultaneity: language acquisition, sociality, and cultural understanding are all bundled up, to the point where each acts both as a limit on, and an enabler of, the other two. Being integrated better facilitates access to significant events and facilitates language acquisition (especially since people will be more interested in teaching their visitor); getting to know the life-world grounds lexical and other language skills into practice and helps the researcher gain the respect and acceptance of their local community; and obstinately learning the local language shows one’s commitment to and enduring interest in people and their customs, and is entirely necessary for gaining a sense of interconnection and mastering the semantic fields that structure one’s environment.



The testimonies collected here for the benefit of holistic research in an oral environment, including the heightened attention to the non-verbal, or the strangely specific (as Lydall's work on Hamär ideophones),<sup>51</sup> speak for themselves, and provide a counterpoint to Ong's formulaic scheme. As argued above, that Ivo Strecker's pioneering work in Rhetoric Culture Theory arose in such an environment is certainly not coincidental—much other work in the ethnography of speaking and linguistic anthropology comes from Melanesia and Papua New Guinea, also places where orality is favoured. It is difficult to measure whether people in non-literate societies speak 'better', but they probably speak more, even when measured in absolute terms.

At the same time, the focus of working in small places has an academically isolating effect. In response to my question about her relation to 'Ethiopian studies', Jean Lydall pithily replied, 'My scholarly relationship to "Ethiopian Studies" involves a strong inclination towards the still predominantly non-literate societies of southern Ethiopia.' And of course, from the Lower Omo, what really does matter beyond—say—Arba Mənč? All proclamations of the grand narratives of 'Greater Ethiopia' ring hollow, and many of the important topics from the 'highlands' hardly resonate. Just one example: the people of South Omo as a matter of course conflate Amhara, Təgray, and Oromo as *habäša*, aware that there are differences, but none that matters in the lowlands. Christian Orthodoxy is virtually absent, and so is Islam. Personally, in terms of comparison, I found that data from Kenya and southern Sudan was as important to my work as data from the Ethiopia beyond South Omo.

While nobody would claim that South Omo as a region was isolated today, it pays to look more closely. Much has been said about the cultural neighbourhood, the intense familiarity, connectedness, and mutuality that mark the relations between Hamär, Kara, Mursi, Ďáasanač, Nañatom, Arbore, Ari, and so on.<sup>52</sup> Some have even begun to discuss how the people of South Omo are setting themselves up in the global neighbourhood,<sup>53</sup> through travel, contact with tourists, cooperation with researchers, access to the Internet, and negotiations with investors and other international stakeholders.<sup>54</sup> Still, what about the national neighbourhood? The integration of the South Omo populations into the modern Ethiopian State has been largely unsatisfying for both sides, and current developments indicate that more

51 Lydall 2000.

52 Gabbert and Thubauville 2010.

53 Gabbert 2014; Girke 2014.

54 LaTosky 2010.

coercion and even brutality can be expected before it gets ‘better’. At the academic level, Serge Tornay felt that the integration was similarly loose.

Serge Tornay: ‘As everybody knows, the lower valley of the Omo is not representative for either the Christian or the Muslim Ethiopia. The people who hosted us were called Shankilla by the ‘civilised Ethiopians’. Therefore, ‘our Ethiopian Studies’ (that of the ethnographers to whom this questionnaire was sent, including the one who sent it) cannot be compared to those of the scholars who began by studying Ge’ez and Amharic, and who did this by means of books, dictionaries etc. Our Ethiopian Studies cannot lean on any corpus of knowledge, historical, religious, political. That is why the true sages, the true scholars regard us, during conferences, as somewhat eccentric, so as not to say the Shankilla of anthropology. But they regard us with a friendly curiosity: how do you manage to understand their dialects? Because it is obvious that at this level of civilisation, one cannot have a language, but only dialects.’

This experience likely derives from an earlier attitude in the field of Ethiopian studies, which Tornay hardly found accommodating. He inadvertently echoes Ong, who mentions how a ‘simply oral *dialect* will commonly have resources of only a few thousand words’.<sup>55</sup> I do not adduce this as a generalized complaint, but as indicating a tendency for South Omo anthropology to be better integrated into international social/cultural anthropology than into Ethiopian studies, even as I seek to demonstrate that the results as well as the methods of research could provide much worthwhile stimulation for empirical research anywhere.

In summary, I suggest that the triangle of orality provides both a model of and a model for anthropological fieldwork in a ‘primary oral’ setting (if one wants to keep Ong’s terms despite the shortcomings of his approach). It is a ‘model of’ inasmuch it renders the growth of the three linked (or, rather, intertwined) competences that naturally occurs if a researcher begins to learn the language orally in a field site from scratch. Communicative competence, cultural competence and communal competence all act as limits on each other, so that overall progress can only truly be made when all grow in proportion to each other. If this is seen to be expedient, the triangle of orality is also a ‘model for’ research practice, a charter even: the fieldworker should strive to embrace orality, be it through spontaneous attempts to speak at every turn, or through careful listening.<sup>56</sup> Active acceptance of all three points of the triangle will facilitate research, provided

55 Ong 2002, 8, emphasis added.

56 As in Gabbert’s case, cf. Meyer and Schareika 2009.

one can deal with (*chala*) the ‘no-time-out’ immersion not only in a language, but also in a mess of culture, and a maze of relationships.

I am advocating a specific type of fieldwork here, but the triangle of orality (that I derived from the facts of fieldwork in South Omo) has the chance to work even beyond one of the few remaining primary oral settings. If the effect is that the researcher is sometimes said by well-meaning colleagues to have ‘gone native’, that old colonialist bugbear, it might in turn not be unreasonable to diagnose some ‘intimacy envy’ or ‘competence envy’: for I argue that it is hardly possible to reach great heights in all three competences that characterize the triangle of orality without some surrender of the self to the aura of the field.<sup>57</sup> In summary, a Malinowskian ignition of linguistic curiosity out of necessity, and the subsequent commitment to the triangle of orality, is an asset to the field of anthropology.<sup>58</sup> The situation on the ground in South Omo has thus provided and continues to provide a great many challenges for research, but the already extant and the forthcoming academic output, with its measurable impact on social/cultural anthropology in general, and, despite its more ambivalent role, particularly within Ethiopian studies, is a triumph of talk, as are the deep and abiding friendships and partnerships between anthropologists and the people of South Omo.

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57 Cf. Streck 2011.

58 Malinowski 1965.

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# Feuding and the ‘Myth of Masculinity’ as Expressed through the Traditional Verbal Arts in Eastern Goğgam, Amhara Region\*

MEZGEBU BELAY

## Abstract

People in northern and north-western Ethiopia traditionally associate ‘masculinity’ with the determination not to surrender to enemies, to hardships, or to other challenges that demand physical strength. It is likewise related to the readiness to swear vengeance and the ability to take revenge. Based on ethnographic research carried out among Goğgame Amhara peasants, this paper discusses how the emic concepts of masculinity (or the ‘myth of masculinity’) are reflected in the traditional oral discourse and how this discourse may fuel feuding. It documents a genuine collection of masculine names, proverbs and sayings, war chants and songs, and idiomatic expressions through which aggressive ‘masculinity’ is encouraged, and defensive, peaceful, or faint-hearted behaviour is discouraged. The study sheds light on the verbal dimensions of male gender socialization and feuding.

## Introduction

Amhara people traditionally associate ‘masculinity’ with the determination not to surrender to enemies, to hardships, or to other challenges demanding physical strength. It is likewise related with the readiness to swear vengeance and with the ability to take revenge. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper discusses the emic concepts of masculinity (stereotypes, ideals, role expectations, etc.), which I here call the ‘myth of masculinity’ in order to give an idea of their age as well as their constructedness. They are reflected in oral discourse and are strongly related to feuding and gender socialization. Part of the oral discourse manifests through the verbal arts including proverbs and sayings, war chants and songs.<sup>1</sup> Idiomatic expressions, insults, and masculine

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1 Here, I use the definition by Bascom, that the verbal arts encompass folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other ‘literary forms’ (Bascom 1955, 45–247).

names belong to the same context. All these verbal genres help to define the same symbolic and metaphorical space. The principles of creating such verbal expressions are handed down through the traditional patterns of songs, poetry, folklore, ‘wax and gold’ rhetoric, and irony.<sup>2</sup> Such traditional patterns are intricate variations of the oral traditions directly transmitted from one generation to the next.

Among the Amhara, the traditional verbal arts are vehicles for constructing and maintaining concepts of masculinity. These are expressed at various occasions not only between disputants or competing males but also by other members of the community who may cheer on an aggressor or mock the victim of an aggression. The latter may be pressured into long-lasting feuds in order to restore his honour. Parents transmit this attitude to their sons and inculcate the myth of masculinity in their minds.

From an early age, Amhara males and females are socialized according to gender stereotypes which associate certain activities and tasks with a certain gender. Tasks associated with men are highly valued because they demand strength and courage, whereas women’s tasks are valued less because they are considered as to be ‘harmless’ and to demand ‘less energy and strength’. Males are socialized to be brave and courageous, while females are socialized to be shy and submissive. For instance, women in Amhara society are traditionally supposed to carry out tasks such as childcare, pounding and grinding grain, and fetching water. Kitchen duties, spinning, or fetching fuel are left to young girls. Tasks, however, which are not bound to a fixed daily routine, are usually male occupations.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, women are considered as ‘beings of sexuality’, mainly responsible for child-bearing and seen as sexual objects for men. This further leads to the domination of men and the subordination of women. Therefore, a man who is insulted as ‘woman’ immediately feels that he is addressed as a sexual object for men and a house worker. Now, since tolerating such insults exposes him to verbal punishment by the community, he quickly has to revenge against the slanderer.

In the community under study, feuds may be caused by injuries, murder, theft, quarrels over pasture, boundary disputes, and insults. Revenge is often stimulated by the myth of masculinity inherent in the culture. If men fail to take at least an equivalent response to the offence committed against them or their relatives, they may be considered cowardly or as a ‘woman’.

2 ‘Wax and gold’ rhetoric is understood as the ‘co-existence of two semantic levels within a unit of poetic speech: one level has the literal meaning (“gold”); the other has a figurative meaning (“wax”)’ (‘Sāmənna wärq’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 507a–509a (D. Nosnitsin), here 507 a–b.

3 Messing 1957, 176–182. Cf. further Jeylan Wolyie 2009 and Jejaw Ambie 2011.



Characterizing a man as feminine devalues his dignity and will motivate him to show his bravery and to test his masculinity. However, it is not only men who are involved in maintaining the myth of masculinity and feuding. As will be shown below women play a role in triggering aggressive behaviour.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted in two phases among the Däğəba peasant community,<sup>4</sup> located in Däbrä Elias *wäräda* of East Goğğam administrative zone in Amhara National Regional State. Däğəba is one of the fifteen *qäbäle* of this *wäräda*. It has thirteen sub-*qäbäles* and is located about 8 km from Däbrä Elias town, the administrative centre of the *wäräda*. The total population of Däğəba is about 6,465.<sup>5</sup> The inhabitants are chiefly engaged in mixed agriculture including livestock and beekeeping.

Research methods included semi-structured and narrative interviews as well as focus group discussions. Key informants were identified through informal conversations with locals and by the help of community elders. The participants of the focus group discussions were selected based on age, sex, and social status. Additionally, participant observation and general observation were used. Aggressive behaviour between disputing individuals and groups as well as fight trainings of youths and children were the most important practices observed.

### Gender Socialization

Parents teach boys to behave in a masculine way and girls to behave according to feminine role expectations; they do this by acting out their own roles and by verbal reward and punishment.<sup>6</sup> The 'myths of masculinity' are transmitted orally through proverbs and sayings during the socialization process. There are many common Amharic sayings which verbally punish or reward children. For instance, boys are expected not to cry. If they do cry, parents will verbally punish them by saying, 'እንደሴት ፡ ታለቅሳለህ ፡ እንዴ!' ('How come you cry like a woman?'). From an early age boys are told to defend themselves, 'ተግተህ ፡ እንጅ ፡ ተመተህ ፡ እንዳትገባ!' ('Don't come home being beaten but rather you beat!'). However, those who come home having beaten somebody else are verbally rewarded by phrases such

4 The first phase was from January to February 2012, the second phase was from 20 March 2012 to 25 April 2012, for a similar research approach cf. Getie Gelaye 2000.

5 Central Statistics Authority 2010.

6 For a detailed description of socialization processes among the Amhara see Molvaer 1995, 115–122, *passim*.

as ‘አይ፡ ወንድ፡ ፤ ፈንክቶ፡ ፤ መጣ!’ (‘What a man! He struck him on the head and came!’), or ‘አንበላ!’ (‘Lion!’)<sup>7</sup>.

### Masculine Naming

In Amhara society personal names are often chosen in association with events that happened some time before or just after the birth of the child. As mentioned also by Reminick for the Mänz Amhara, names may also express concepts of masculinity in order to inspire boys to behave accordingly.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, among the Däğəba peasants, such names may be given to boys because they are expected to take revenge or perform brave deeds when grown up, or in order to remember the brave deed of another family member. Thus, such names seem to express a disposition for feuding. In the Däğəba community common names of this type are the following:

|          |                                     |        |                    |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--------|--------------------|
| ደምመላሽ    | ‘Let him be the blood retaliation!’ | ዳምጠው   | ‘Crush him!’       |
| ጸጥአርጋቸው  | ‘Make them silent!’                 | ደምስ    | ‘Destroy!’         |
| አንድአርጋቸው | ‘Make them one!’                    | ደምሳቸው  | ‘Destroy them!’    |
| ጋሻሁነኝ    | ‘Let you be my shield!’             | በለው    | ‘Strike him!’      |
| መከት      | ‘Be the defender!’                  | በላቸው   | ‘Strike them!’     |
| መከታ      | ‘Defender, protector!’              | ያዛቸው!  | ‘Catch them!’      |
| አድማው     | ‘Make him bleed!’                   | ጥላሁን!  | ‘Be the umbrella!’ |
| አድማቸው    | ‘Make them bleed!’                  | አሳምነው! | ‘Convince him!’    |
| መከራያሁነኝ! | ‘Be my pride!’                      | አሸብር!  | ‘Terrorize!’       |
| ዳምጣቸው!   | ‘Crush them!’                       |        |                    |

Another type of name serves as a positive motivation to the boy and as a warning to others:

|        |                                 |       |                   |
|--------|---------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| ማንደፍሮህ | ‘Who can challenge you?’        | ከራባቸው | ‘Be their pride!’ |
| ሽፈራው   | ‘Thousands feared him’          | ተፈራ   | ‘He is feared’    |
| ማንያዝዋል | ‘Who will dare to command him?’ | ተፈሪ   | ‘Feared’          |
| በሃይሉ   | ‘Through his power’             | መከተ   | ‘He defended’     |
| አሸናፊ   | ‘Winner’                        |       |                   |

7 The lion is *the* symbol of masculinity, bravery, strength, and fearlessness. He is daring, heroic, adventurous, gallant, and bold.

8 Reminick 1973, 110.

In addition to naming, cursing is a very important way for some fathers to request their sons and/or brothers to take revenge. For instance, when a father has been injured by his enemies in a way so severe that he cannot take revenge himself he would put a curse on his son(s) and/or brother(s). Fearing this curse they are forced to take action.

**ደሜን ፡ ካልመለስህ ፡ አጥንቲ ፡ ይውጋህ! ደሜ ፡ ይከርፋህ!**

(Unless you take revenge against my enemies, let my bone pierce you! Let my blood stink you!)

### Proverbs and Sayings

Proverbs motivate boys and men to prove their masculinity. They explain (1) what men should do to be considered men, (2) that men who fail to take revenge are to be mocked, and (3) that men taking revenge are to be praised.

### What Men Should Do to Be Considered Men

First of all, masculinity according to the Amhara myth of masculinity is not a matter of biological sex alone.

**ያንጠለጠለ ፡ ሁሉ ፡ ወንድ ፡ አይባልም!**

(Not all men who have a penis hanging are worth being called man!)

Manhood here is a quality which has to be achieved by accepting challenges and hardships or acquiring honours through vengeance. To be considered a man (i.e. brave) one has to be successful in violent fights.

**ወንድ ፡ የሚባሉት  
በዱላ ፡ ሽመለኛ ፡ የሆኑ  
በጦር ፡ ጦር ፡ ሰባቂ ፡ የሆኑና  
በጠመንጃ ፡ ዘሀ ፡ በጣሽ ፡ የሆኑ ፡ ናቸው**

(Those who are called men are  
Able to fight well with a staff,  
Able to fight well with a spear, and  
Able to break a thread with a rifle.)

The same idea is elaborated in the following saying:

**ወንድ ፡ ማለት  
ተደባድሶ ፡ የሚያሸንፍ  
ታግሎ ፡ የሚጥል  
ሮጦ ፡ የሚይዝ  
ተኩሶ ፡ የሚገድልና  
ጠላቱን ፡ የሚያሸንፍ ፡ ነው**

(A man means  
 One who wins in fighting,  
 One who knocks down in wrestling,  
 One who runs fast when he chases and catches,  
 One who shoots and kills and  
 One who prevails upon his enemies.)

The brave and the cowards can be easily distinguished from each other. For instance, they can be identified by examining their fighting sticks or staffs. While a coward's staff looks shiny because it was never used, the brave man's staff shows traces of usage as a result of its service in frequent fights.

**የጀግና ፡ ሽመል ፡ ታስታውቃለች!  
 እንደ ፡ አዘንተኛ ፡ ፊቷን ፡ ፈጅታለች!  
 የፈሪ ፡ ሽመል ፡ ታስታውቃለች!  
 እንደ ፡ ሸርሙጣ ፡ ተወልውላለች!**

(The staff of the brave can be recognized!  
 She has worn out her face like a mourning woman!  
 The staff of a coward can be recognized!  
 She is wearing make-up like a whore!)

Thus, according to the stereotypic assumption, men are active, alert, aggressive and strong while cowards face no challenges or hardships. Therefore, cowards may live longer but without honour.

**ፈሪ ፡ ተራራ ፡ ነው ፡ ዘላለም ፡ ይኖራል  
 ጀግና ፡ ብርሌ ፡ ነው ፡ ቶሎ ፡ ይሰበራል ።**

(A craven man is a mountain, he lives forever,  
 A brave man is a glass flask, he gets broken soon.)

The brave will find an 'honourable' death.

**ሰው ፡ ታሞ ፡ እንጅ ፡ ፈርቶ ፡ አይሞትም!**

(A man dies not from fear but from illness!)

### **Men who Failed to Take Revenge Are to Be Mocked**

A man who does not defend his honour will be exposed to mockery such as

**እገሌ ፡ ደሞ ፡ ልጁን ፡ ወልዶት ፡ ነው ፡ ? እበትም ፡ ትል ፡ ይወልዳል!**

(Is it true that he fathered a son? Even dung delivers a worm!)

If a son fails to take revenge against his father’s enemies or kills the community will despise him. Similarly, those who do not take revenge against their enemies are not considered manly.

**ደሙን ፡ ያልመለሰ ፡ ወንድ ፡ ወንድ ፡ አይባልም! መቀነት ፡ አስታጥቁትና ፡ ወደ ፡ ማጀት ፡ ይግባ!**

(A man who did not avenge the blood of his dead ones is not considered a man. Make him wear a waistband and let his place be the kitchen!)

The following proverb is of a similar character, but appends the exclusion of the coward from various social events:

**ተስቦ ፡ ተስቦ ፡ ቀኑን ፡ በዳመና ፡ ሌቱን ፡ በጨለማ ፡ ደሙን ፡ ካልመለሰ ፡ አብሮን ፡ እንዳይበላ!**

(If he crawls through day in clouds and through night in darkness and did not retaliate his blood, let him not eat with us!)

Moreover, a man who has not taken revenge may even lose the opportunity to marry the girl he (or rather his father) wishes, as stated in the following four expressions by the father of a marriageable daughter:

|                                       |                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ደሙን ፡ ካልመለሰ ፡ ልጄን ፡ አያገባትም!</b>    | ‘Unless he takes revenge against his enemies, he cannot marry my daughter!’ |
| <b>ለጅል ፡ ወንድ ፡ ልጄን ፡ አልድራትም!</b>      | ‘I will not marry off my daughter to a fool!’                               |
| <b>ለሴታ ፡ ሴት ፡ ልጄን ፡ አልድርም!</b>        | ‘I will not give my daughter’s hand to a womanish man!’                     |
| <b>ሁለት ፡ ሴት ፡ ባንድ ፡ ቤት ምን ፡ ያደርጋል</b> | ‘What’s the good of two women in one house?’                                |

A moral similar to the latter expression can also be found elsewhere.

**ወንድ ፡ ልጅ ፡ ተወልዶ ፡ ካልሆነ ፡ እንደ ፡ አባቱ ስጡት ፡ አመልማሎ ፡ ይፍተል ፡ እንደ ፡ እናቱ ።**

(If a boy is born and does not become like his father, Give him a spindle and let him spin like his mother!)

Those who hide themselves instead of seeking open conflict are addressed in the following saying:

**ፈሪ ፡ ፈራና ፡ ከማጀት ፡ ተኛ! ጆሮውን ፡ በላው ፡ የዓይኑ ፡ ቀበኛ!**

(The coward was scared and slept in the kitchen! A voracious mouse ate his ear!)

### Taking Revenge Is to Be Praised

Men who took revenge are praised through idiomatic exclamations such as

**ወንድ! ወንድ ፡ የወለደው!**

(A [real] man! Born to a [real] man!)

If somebody is behaving according to his father's best qualities it is said,

**ያባቱ ፡ ምትክ!**

(He is his father's successor!)

Additionally men who show bravery are appreciated with the exclamations such as **‘ወንድ!’** (‘Man!/Brave!’), **‘ጀግና!’** (‘Hero!’), **‘ደፋር!’** (‘Darling!/Audacious!’), **‘ነበዝ!’** (‘Courageous!/Fearless!’), and **‘ሀይለኛ!’** (‘Powerful!/Strong!’).

Taking revenge and showing courage are most popular themes in all genres of the verbal arts as well as in oral historical traditions. War chants and songs (see below) are probably the central genres in this regard.

### War Chants and Songs

In Amhara special boasting chants (**ፉክራ**) and war songs (**ቀረርቶ/ሽላላ**) are declaimed to incite the brave and to humiliate the coward.<sup>9</sup> Such songs are improvised based on principles handed down from the past. Other songs are direct oral traditions praising the heroes of the past. Most of the songs in the study community express ideals of masculinity. Like the war chants these songs are sung during festive times such as weddings, feasts in voluntary fraternal associations, feasts on the occasion of house construction, and annual religious festivals or other social gatherings. War chants stimulate violence and masculine behaviour because they are performed in front of a group of people who will embarrass those who hesitate to take revenge. When such songs are sung, men will show their masculinity, superiority, and strength by performing the local dance styles which include puffing up their chests, jumping high, and producing powerful sounds such as the ‘roaring of a lion’. Performing with staffs as if they were rifles, the most valued instrument killing of an enemy, may be part of such dances. Many songs sung during such dances have refrains such as

9 ‘Fukkära’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 584–585 (Getie Gelaye); Reminick 1973, 90.

**ገዳዩ ፡ ገዳዩ**

**ሆይ ፡ በለው ፡ ሆይ ፡ በለው**

**አያ ፡ በለው ፡ በለው**

(The killer! The killer!

Drive him away! Drive him away!

Beat him! Beat him!)

The following war chant again formulates expectations towards men. Unless men are tested in hardship and in challenges, they are considered weak and do not contribute to the community.

**አባይ ፡ ቤት ፡ ላይሰራ ፡ ይጎትታል ፡ ግንድ**

**አሁን ፡ ምን ፡ ያደርጋል ፡ ጭንቅ ፡ ያላየ ፡ ወንድ**

(Even though the Abbay [Blue Nile] does not build a house, it carries logs,

Now, what is the use of a man who has not seen any hardships?)

And again the coward is warned.

**አረ ፡ ለምንድን ፡ ነው ፡ ፈሪ ፡ ማጠንጠኑ?**

**ቅጠል ፡ አይበጠስ ፡ ካልደረሰ ፡ ቀኑ**

(Ärä, what is the coward's hesitation for?

Even a leaf is not plucked unless its day has come.)

Somebody who gives priority to his family life instead of taking revenge over his enemies is considered as ‘a big eater like the pig or the warthog’.

**እኛስ ፡ ባገራችን ፡ አሳማ ፡ ነው ፡ ከርከሮ ፡ ነው ፡ ሆዳም**

**ሆዱን ፡ የወደደ ፡ ጠላቱን ፡ አይጎዳም ።**

(In our country it is the pig and the warthog which are voracious,

One who is a glutton will not harm his enemy.)

This is because a man should not tolerate being slandered.

**አረ ፡ ምን ፡ ጅሉ ፡ ነው**

**አረ ፡ ምን ፡ ሞኙ ፡ ነው**

**ሲሰድቡት ፡ ዝም ፡ ያለ ፡ ሲመቱትም ፡ ያው ፡ ነው**

(Ärä, what a child he is!

Ärä, what a fool he is!

If one does not react when he is insulted, he does the same when he is beaten.)

It is even better to leave the annual harvest, to become an outlaw in the forest like a lion, and to come out at night to take revenge.

**ይቅር : ምናባቱ : የአንድ : ዓመት : አዝመራ  
ቤት : ስለሌለው : ነው : አንበሳ : የሚፈራ**

(What the hell? Let a year's crop be wasted,  
The lion is feared because it has no home.)

Likewise, a man who wants to avoid being ridiculed should leave his family to take revenge.

**ቅራብኝ : ቅራብኝ : ጎጆዬ : ቅራብኝ  
ቅዘናሙ : ሁሉ : ከሚያላግጥብኝ ።**

(Better I leave my house/family,  
Than I live with cowards who mock me.)

Such a brave man would sell his properties including his ox and calf to buy a rifle and bullet and take revenge.

**ታየኝ : መላ : ታየኝ : ብልሀት  
በሬውን : ጠመንጃ : ወይፈኑን : ጥይት ።**

(An idea came to me, a trick came to me,  
The ox as a rifle and the calf as a bullet.)

He will not fear death saying,

**አረ : ተወኝ : ልቤ : ደርሶ : መደንገጡን  
ሞት : አይቀርም : ብዬ : ነግሬ ህ : የል : ቁርጡን**

(Oh, stop my heart! Don't be terrified for any reason,  
I have told you that death is inevitable.)

## Bragging

Like proverbs and war chants, bragging prompts men to prove their masculinity by killing and spilling their enemies' blood.

**በለው : በክላሽ : ባፈ : ድምድሙ!  
ይዘቅዘቅና : ይንጠፍጠፍ : ደሙ!  
ይታወቅለት : የጀግናው : ስሙ!**

(Shoot him with a *klaš* [Kalashnikov]!  
Let him turn upside down and be drained of blood!  
Let the name of a hero be known!)

It is easier for unmarried men to take revenge because nobody is harmed by their absence assuming they would have to move to another area after their violent deeds.



**እጥፍጥፍ ፡ ያለው ፡ እንደ ፡ ወረቀት!**  
**ሰው ፡ ገድሎ ፡ ቢሄድ ፡ ጸጸት ፡ የለበት!**

(He is pliable like paper!  
 If he goes to kill a man, he has no regrets!)

In such bragging, violence is described in drastic words related to heroism.

**እዩት ፡ ዕወቁት ፡ እገሌ ፡ ማለት ፡ ይሄ ፡ ነው!**  
**ሰው ፡ እንደ ፡ በሬ ፡ አንጋሎ ፡ እሚያርደው!**

(Get to know him, So-and-so is this one!  
 He knocks down a man and slaughters him like an ox!)

### Insults as Cause and Trigger of Feuding

Insults are a means of destroying someone’s honour and of showing disrespect. In the community under study, some insults are considered worse than injuries. Sometimes they may also be viewed as more severe than death, as it is said, **‘ከመናቅ ሞት ይሻላል!’** (‘Death is better than being despised!’).

Moreover, there are some occupations (inherited through the family line) which are locally considered as ‘unclean’. The designations for such occupations are used as insults and may result in feuding. They include **ፋቂ** (‘tanner’), **ሸማኔ** (‘weaver’), and **ቀጥቃጭ** (‘charcoal maker’). Additionally, there are other stereotypic insults that are used to insult individuals and groups. These include **ቡዳ** (‘evil eye’, ‘bearer of the evil eye’) and **ባርያ** (‘slave’).

Furthermore, besides their function as a pretext of feuding, insults are a means of verbal sanction used against men who do not take revenge.

|              |                                                      |                           |                                                                      |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ፈሳም!</b>  | ‘Craven!’ (lit. ‘someone who farts a lot from fear’) | <b>የናቱን ፡ ቀሚስ ፡ የለበሰ!</b> | ‘He is wearing his mother’s dress!’                                  |
| <b>ቅዝናም!</b> | ‘Great coward!’ (lit. ‘someone who has diarrhoea’)   | <b>ሊጥ ፡ ዋጭ!</b>           | ‘One who swallows dough!’ (stressing the weak and passive character) |
| <b>ቦቅቧቃ!</b> | ‘Great coward!’ (lit. ‘very fearful’)                | <b>ሴት! ሴት ፡ የወለደው!</b>    | ‘Mummy’s boy!’ (lit. ‘woman/born from a woman’)                      |
| <b>ፈሪ!</b>   | ‘Coward!’ (very colloquial, lit. ‘chicken’)          | <b>የሴትልጅ!</b>             | ‘Woman’s child!’                                                     |
| <b>ሸንታም!</b> | ‘Incontinent!’ (lit. ‘someone who wets his pants’)   |                           |                                                                      |

### Women's Role in Maintaining the Myth of Masculinity and Feuding

Women also may trigger blood enmity. This is why it is said ‘ሴት ፡ ሰይጣን ፡ ናት!’ (‘A woman is a devil!’) and ‘ሴት ፡ ውሻ ፡ እና ፡ ሴት ፡ አንድ ፡ ናቸው!’ (‘Bitches [female dogs] and women are the same!’). As explained by informants, the latter saying implies that, like female dogs which stimulate male dogs to chase thieves and wild animals, women encourage their husbands, sons, and/or brothers to take revenge against her enemies. This explanation seems to be an anthropomorphic interpretation of animal behaviour according to gender stereotypes rather than vice versa.

A woman whose husband does not restore his honour and the honour of his family would say,

**ደምህን ፡ ሳትመልስ ፡ ቀረህ ፡ አይደል? አይ ፡ ወንድ!**

(You have not taken the revenge, have you? What a man you are?!)

Alternatively she may say,

**አንተማ ፡ መች ፡ ከእኔ ፡ ትሻላለህ! ሁለት ፡ ሴት ፡ በዓንድ ፡ ቤት!**

(Well, you are not better than me (i.e. a woman)! So there are two women in one house!)

In case a child is murdered the father cannot be considered a man until he kills the murderer. His wife would say,

**የልጅህን ፡ ደም ፡ ሳትመልስ ፡ አብረኸኝ ፡ አትተኛም ፡! ግደለው ፡ እና ፡ የመጠው ፡ ይምጣ!**

(Unless you avenge your child's murderer, you will not sleep with me! Kill your child's murderer and what will be, will be!)

A woman may also motivate her son(s) to take revenge against his/their father's or brother's enemies or to avenge insults against members of the family or close relatives. If the husband was killed by his enemies and has no son who could take blood revenge the wife of the deceased would ask her brother(s) to do it for her. She may use phrases such as

**የአባትህን ፡ ደም ፡ ሳትመልስ ፡ ቀረህ ፡ አይደል?!**

‘You have not taken revenge for your father's blood?!’

**እኔ ፡ ደሞ ፡ ወንድ ፡ ወልጃለሁ?!**

‘Do I really have a son?!’

**የወንድምህን/አችሁን ፡ ደም ፡ ሳትመልስ/ሱ ፡ ቀረህ/አችሁ ፡ አይደል?!**

‘You have not avenged your brother's murderer, have you?!’

## Reconciliation

Amhara society has developed a wide range of mechanisms for conflict resolution among families in which community elders still play a crucial role. However, while, today, blood feud is decreasing, the myth of masculinity and the mechanisms of feuding in former times often prevent an easy reconciliation within a short time. The following saying refers to an old custom of blood feud according to which conciliators will only be asked for mediation after the number of killed members is equal on both sides (a situation called 'ቂም'). Instead of 'sitting at home eating and letting the grudge be resolved by conciliators' it is therefore said that

**ከመቀደም ፡ ይኸላል ፡ ማስቀደም  
ገላጋይ ፡ አያጣም ፡ ከኋላ ፡ ያለደም ።**

(It is better to strike than to be struck,<sup>10</sup>  
[Only] the blood which comes later has a conciliator.)

On the one hand, thus, brave men preferred the feud to last as long as necessary to reach an equal number of dead. On the other hand, the expectation of local reconciliation mechanisms gave people the courage to deal with the consequences of their violence. An avenger would, for instance, say,

**እንበለውና ፡ የመጣው ፡ ይምጣ!  
ከሽማግሌ ፡ ከእርቅም ፡ አይወጣ!**

(Let's kill him and see what will happen!  
For sure the matter will not go beyond the elders' reconciliation!)

## Conclusion

The myth of masculinity among Däğəba peasants is socially constructed and learned through socialization. Cultural learning of gender roles is based on role models and concepts partially conveyed through oral traditions and verbal arts. Proverbs and sayings, among others, define gender identities, demand adequate behaviour, and condemn deviant behaviour. They motivate the acceptance of hardships, challenges, and dangers including taking vengeance which may lead to long-lasting feuds. The brave are rewarded by praise and the weak are sanctioned by mockery. Thus, the myth of masculinity expressed in oral traditions and verbal arts closely correlates with feuding. The analysis of the oral material shows that masculinity is an

<sup>10</sup> Lit. 'it is better to be first than second'.

achieved status, which is usually acquired by boys—and rarely by girls—through male behaviour which implies violence and the power of endurance. In general, one can lose status if one cannot maintain the values related to masculinity. In severe cases the loss of manly honour may result in the exclusion from the social life of the community, from marriage, or in a breach with close family members. It may even result in the wish not to live anymore. The worst insult for a man is not to be considered a man. This shows the extremely uncompromising cultural gender dichotomy present in Amhara society until today.

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# The Mythically Modelled Human–Environment Tradition of the Maḡangir Society, South-Western Ethiopia

BAYLEYEGN TASEW

## Abstract

There exists a unique human–environment tradition among the Maḡangir society of Gambella national regional state, Ethiopia. The relatedness between humans and nature is conceived as mythically ordered. The main objective of this paper is to identify and describe the mythically modelled concepts and forms of the human–environment tradition of the Maḡangir, who believe in and deeply respect the forests as sacred places. With its rich biodiversity their land stands out as one of the most remarkable high natural forests. This paper builds chiefly upon folklore and ethnographic data collected from the Maḡangir. The myth of Lér—the Maḡangir myth of origin—is placed at the centre of the analysis. The paper argues that local concepts embodied in the narrative structure of the myth of Lér are the key to understanding the emic views of the human–environment relationship among the Maḡangir. Understanding this view will help to reconcile local knowledge and development aims, for which the paper gives some modest recommendations at the end.

## Introduction

The main purpose of the paper is to identify and interpret the mythically ordered concepts, forms, and practices, manifesting the relation between humans and the environment among the Maḡangir.<sup>1</sup> A brief note on the cultural and ecological settings of Maḡangir society is presented as a starting point to understanding their situation.

The total population of Maḡangir is estimated at 40,000.<sup>2</sup> They are speakers of a Surmic language of the Nilo-Saharan language family.<sup>3</sup> Culturally, they have had long contact with the Añwaa, Šeko, Benč, Surma, Oromo as well as other settlers from different parts of Ethiopia, like the Amhara. The culture of the Maḡangir could be described as ‘purely oral’. According to

1 Their neighbours and government functionaries call them ‘Mesengo’ (‘Masango’) the meaning of which is unknown.

2 Central Statistical Authority 2008.

3 Greenberg 1972.

Botkin, ‘in a purely oral culture, everything is folklore’.<sup>4</sup> Everything the Maḡangir know about themselves, about others, and about their surrounding world is transmitted orally and ritually.<sup>5</sup>

Oral tradition is locally termed as *toni-bha-maḡangiro*. *Toni* means ‘speeches’, ‘words’ among others, and *bha* ‘ancestors’, ‘forefathers’. The terms together imply speeches, words, knowledge, wisdom, history, myths, legends, tales, stories, sayings, proverbs, and so on that were spoken in the past by and received from the ancestors and forefathers of the present-day Maḡangir. Tradition/culture as a whole is known as *danbi-maḡangiro* including *toni-bha*, which implies, among others, ‘lore’, ‘knowledge’, ‘wisdom’, ‘history’, ‘customs’, ‘beliefs’, ‘values’, ‘laws’, and ‘rituals’. It also encompasses a way of life as well as peacemaking methods and the solving of problems, among others. All of which is perceived as being transmitted from the past to the present generation. Most interestingly, the Maḡangir perceive the myth of Lér as the principle of the companionship between the human and the natural environment.<sup>6</sup>

C.63 per cent of Maḡangir land (most of which lies between 800 and 2,100 m a.s.l.) is covered with high natural rainforests characterized by long rainy seasons. The rainforest is a tropical to subtropical ecosystem with high levels of biodiversity and productivity.<sup>7</sup> Endowed with Ethiopia’s only lowland tropical rainforest vegetation, the complex ecosystem represents one of the fifty-eight National Forest Priority Areas designated as forest biodiversity conservation sites, as well as one of the thirty-four globally important hotspots for biodiversity conservation.<sup>8</sup>

The forests are immensely important resources for the livelihood and well-being of the Maḡangir. Unfortunately, the unique natural environment is becoming ‘the most threatened due to human activities’.<sup>9</sup> Two major problems can be identified: one is the incompatible government development policies and their implementation since the early 1970s; the other is the encroachment of Christian religious sects on traditional beliefs for about five decades.

4 Botkin 1996, 256.

5 Bayleyegn Tasew 2009.

6 Lér is the name of the mythical ancestor of the Maḡangir. The myth embodies the beliefs about the origin of the people and structures the relationship of the Maḡangir with their natural environment.

7 Reusing 2000, 1253–1256; Zelalem Temesgen 2009, 135; Friis 1992; Stauder 1971.

8 Reusing 2000; Zelalem Temesgen 2009.

9 Zelalem Temesgen 2009, 141; Nəguśu Aklilu 2011, 20–21, 54; also Obang Metho 2011.

In Tepi in 1972 the government established a large-scale coffee plantation project, and factories for wood-processing and further coffee plantation schemes at Kabo in Mağangir in 1980. These projects encouraged the inflow of day labourers and small traders from different parts of the country. Their establishment involved road construction, clearing vegetation for coffee plantations, also targeting huge forest trees for industrial wood productions. As a result, the activities degraded the environment, pushing the Mağangir out of the Tepi, Meti, and Kabo forest areas. The programmes became a real threat to the environment and indigenous culture as they required clearing trees for crops, grazing areas, domestic spaces for farmers and their families, social services, and so on. All this led to the displacement of the Mağangir, and brought about environmental degradation by introducing new farming systems. Moreover, in the 1980s the government-led resettlement programmes resulted in the influx of settlers from all over the country into this region. The programmes brought drastic demographic changes. The total population living on Mağangir land in 2006 was estimated at about 84,660, out of which only 32 per cent were indigenous people.<sup>10</sup>

Today new large-scale projects for palm oil, tea, and spice plantations are introduced into the area by foreign investors. In 2007, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development leased 10,000 ha of prime natural forest in Godäre district, the heartland of Mağangir, to a foreign company for palm oil plantations.<sup>11</sup> In 2009 the ministry leased 5,500 ha of the high forest areas of Gomäre and Bakko in Godäre to an Indian company called Verdanta Harvests for fifty years for tea and spice plantations. These plantations required the destruction of the natural forests and displacement of the indigenous people.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the influence of Christian missionary Churches has been growing since 1967. Evangelical missionary sects stigmatize indigenous beliefs and practices as *ahzab* ('pagan') or 'backward' practices. Hence, the beliefs, values, and practices linked to the environment are replaced by Christian beliefs. In general, an often oversimplified juxtaposition of tradition and modernity has had a huge impact on indigenous ecological knowledge.

Today the Mağangir are very concerned about their environment, livelihood, and survival. Indigenous peoples 'possess in their ecological knowledge an asset of incalculable value: a map to the biological diversity of the earth on which all life depends'.<sup>13</sup> Loss of biological diversity leads to

10 Information from Mağangir Zonal Planning and Economic Development Office.

11 Zelalem Temesgen 2009, 135.

12 Nəguşu Aklilu 2011, 20–21, 54; Obang Metho 2011, 1–5.

13 Durning 1992, 7.

loss of cultural diversity. Loss of indigenous culture leads to a loss of the vitally important knowledge of ways of living which are in balance with the natural environment and the value systems associated with it.<sup>14</sup>

### Conceptual and Methodological Orientation

The use of key concepts such as ‘indigenous knowledge’, ‘human–nature’ or ‘human–environment’, ‘kincentric ecology’, ‘genius loci’, and ‘cosmological/cosmogonic myths’ is important for an understanding of the nature and function of the myth of Lér, especially as related to the tradition of companionship developed over time and structured within the speakers’ natural world. Firstly, indigenous knowledge of the human–environment relationship and of the forms of practice involved seems to align with the definition of the concept ‘kincentric ecology’ suggested by Salmón. In his views, kincentric ecology refers to an ‘indigenous perception of ecology’;<sup>15</sup> as such, the term refers to ‘the manners in which indigenous people view themselves as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins.’<sup>16</sup> So conceived, the term ‘kincentric’ means that humans view the environment around them as kin or family, including all the natural elements of an ecosystem. And the use of ‘kincentric relatedness’ refers to the interdependence between humans and the environment: ‘the human–nature relationship intertwines both the land and cultural histories. No person is truly connected to the natural world or to his/her culture if he/she does not maintain physical, social, spiritual, and mental health; together, they form the breath of life.’<sup>17</sup>

Theories say that traditional (indigenous) ecological knowledge originates as a reflection of ‘human–nature’ interactions, fostering a reciprocal relationship. The knowledge develops with the realization that humans affect nature and nature affects humans. Salmón states that ‘[t]his awareness influences indigenous interactions with the environment. It is these interactions, these cultural practices, of living with a place that are manifestations of kincentric ecology.’<sup>18</sup> To which Pierotti and Wildcat add, ‘connectedness and relatedness are involved in the clan systems of many indigenous peoples, where nonhuman organisms are recognized as relatives whom the humans are obliged to treat with respect and honour.’<sup>19</sup>

14 Durning 1992, 7.

15 Salmón 2000, 1331.

16 Salmón 2000, 1332.

17 Salmón 2000, 1331.

18 Salmón 2000, 1332.

19 Pierotti and Wildcat 2000, 1333.



Indigenous knowledge encompasses knowledge about the ecology, the relationship between humans and nature, characteristics of the natural environment, ways of living, and so on. Indigenous knowledge is a cumulative body of knowledge transmitted from the past to the present. It is not only cumulative, but also an adaptive process and practice, namely an incremental learning drawn from practice, guided by cultural principles, beliefs, and values derived from shared experiences. Indigenous knowledge is placed at the centre of the preservation of biodiversity, transforming it into a shrewd application of development.<sup>20</sup> Indigenous knowledge is thus ‘a form of rational and reliable knowledge developed through generations of intimate contact by native peoples with their lands’.<sup>21</sup> Indigenous ecological knowledge is a ‘culturally and spiritually based way in which indigenous peoples relate to their ecosystems. This knowledge is founded on spiritual-cultural instructions from time immemorial and on generations of careful observation within an ecosystem of continuous residence.’<sup>22</sup>

The degree of human–environment, also culture–nature, human–nature, genius–loci ‘relatedness’ varies from culture to culture.<sup>23</sup> ‘Genius–loci’ relatedness is often explained in myths and other forms of folklore.<sup>24</sup> Such an explanation is true of the Mağangir myth of Lér, and this myth can be perceived as a cosmogenic myth of origin or creation as described in the classical works of theorists like Eliade and Leeming.<sup>25</sup> According to Eliade, ‘[m]yths of origin constitute a fairly coherent history. [...] They reveal what the supernatural beings and the mythic ancestors and cultural heroes did.’<sup>26</sup>

For Leeming as for others, there are myths of the origin of the universe and the world: ‘cosmology’ and ‘cosmogony’. Cosmology ‘is typically the way a culture sees the essential arrangement of the universe—the place of the stars, of the underworld, of heaven and earth’.<sup>27</sup> Cosmogony, on the other hand, is the origin story of a given culture, the way in which a group of people see themselves and others, their sense of who they are in the context of their surroundings, the way they perceive their ancestors and the

20 Berkes et al. 2000, 1252.

21 Mauro and Hardison 2000, 1263.

22 Brosius 1997, 65.

23 According to Strecker, the concept implies a people’s perception of ‘the characteristics of their environment as a kind of “environmental image” that provides them with an orientation and a sense of security’ (Strecker 2000, 86). On the basis of genius loci, ‘all cultures have developed systems of orientation [...] and special structures which facilitate the development of a good environmental image’ (Norberg-Schulz 1980, 19).

24 Pierotti and Wildcat 2000.

25 Eliade 1984 and Leeming 2002; 2005.

26 Eliade 1984, 141.

27 Leeming 2002, 2–4. See also Leeming 2005, 86.

mythic relations with their founding fathers and place of origin, and so on. In so doing, cosmogonic myths exemplify, among others, real priorities, real prejudices, and images of creation held by a specific group of people. The myths also 'describe the essential struggle between *chaos* and *form* in various ways'.<sup>28</sup> Foundational myths 'offer both a cognitive basis for and practical models of behaviour. From this point of view myths can be characterized as ontological: they are incorporated and integrated into a coherent view of the world and they describe very important aspects of life and the universe'.<sup>29</sup>

Honko further states that myths occupy a central place in defining a specific group of people's universe and the order, the cosmos, in it. They encode not only a world view with which a people describes or expresses its actual conditions, but also serves as a basis for knowledge and as a model of human behaviour, actions, and practices. The very reason for the emergence of cosmogonic myths lies in peoples' urge to create and maintain a world order and standards of humanity and sociality. Its underlying assumptions are then confirmed through ritual acting, imitating sacred actions and promoting core values. By 'ritual acting of myth' Honko means the defence of the world order or cosmos and by 'imitating sacred exemplars' he means the prevention of the world's being brought to chaos.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, 'cosmogonic myths establish a special authority for stories of how culture originated.'<sup>31</sup> Even more, '[m]yths pretend to account for the birth of the cultural order to which they belong. They make-believe and act as if they set up an order of things in the world.'<sup>32</sup>

In oral societies as in the case of the Maḡangir, myths specify the supernatural beings believed to exist. They describe the origin of things, give an explanation for the nature of reality and assert the proper organization of cosmological views: world-views, beliefs, values, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

To this end, central questions relating to the methodological (also theoretical) applications arise. Does the myth of Lér substantiate the highlighted theoretical concepts posited as cosmological and cosmogonic myths? And how do the mythically ordered forms manifest themselves as constitutive aspects of the unique human–nature relatedness in the society concerned? To answer these, performance-centred methodological approaches proposed by leading folklorists and folklore-anthropologists, like Dundes,

28 Leeming 2005, 82 (emphasis added); see also Leeming 2002, 37.

29 Honko 1984, 41.

30 Honko 1984, 49.

31 Honko 1984, 51.

32 Girard 1977, 922.

33 Messenger 1972, 218–220.

Ben-Amos, and Bauman, have been applied in this research to identify, describe, and interpret the mythically ordered forms and practices of the human–environment tradition within the cultural and situational contexts of the Maḡaṅgir.<sup>34</sup> As aptly put by Ben-Amos, ‘the meaning of a text is its meaning in context. A valid interpretation is an interpretation of a text in context’.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the ‘six broad foci’ of cultural and social contexts proposed for folklore and ethnographic field researchers by Bauman have been employed here: (1) context of meaning, (2) institutional context, (3) context of communicative systems, (4) social base, (5) individual context, and (6) context of situation.<sup>36</sup> I applied a synergy of observation, interviews, and focus-group discussions for collecting authentic data from the field.

### The Myth of Lér

The narrative of Lér is presented below by breaking the structure into opening and closing statements and into six episodes, in order to identify the mythically ordered forms and practices which underline the human–environment tradition.<sup>37</sup>

- Opening statement:

As our fathers told us, Eyeri is the creator of the world and all things we see today in it.<sup>38</sup> He has a son, only one son called Lér who is the only son of Eyeri like Eyesus Christos is the only son of Əgzi’abəher.<sup>39</sup> Lér lives in the sky with his father, Eyeri. Lér lived on earth and returned to the sky after saving the ancient Maḡaṅgir from death. This is the *toni-bha* I am describing here.<sup>40</sup>

- Episode 1:

There had been horrific flood-waters encountered by the ancient Maḡaṅgir. It was at that horrible time that Lér descended to the earth from the sky to save the ancient Maḡaṅgir from perishing. He came when the ancient Maḡaṅgir and the whole country were on the verge

34 Dundes 1980; Ben-Amos 1993; Bauman 1983.

35 Ben-Amos 1993, 215–216; also Dundes 1980, 1–34.

36 Bauman 1983, 362–369.

37 This narrative was told by Tāwkan Wawai (65), Upper Chemi village, on 21 August 2005, in the presence of five elders. It was translated into Amharic by Philip Ochudho (76) who was living in Gambella town during my fieldwork in 2005.

38 Some call the high god ‘Jwok’, probably borrowed from the Añwaa; some call god ‘Waq’ayo’, the name of the high god, probably borrowed from the Oromo, and others call god ‘Əgzi’abəher’, the Christian God as in Amharic/Gə’əz.

39 ‘Eyesus Christos’: Jesus Christ.

40 *Toni-bha*: ‘history’, ‘words’, ‘speeches’, and so on transmitted from the past.

of drowning in the flood-waters caused by continuous rainstorms. The amount of water was rising threateningly at every moment. It was rising up to the hill-tops and then to the mountain tops. The people climbed and gathered on the mountain tops to escape from death. The more the flooding waters swelled up the more the people became frightened.

- Episode 2:

It was at that terrible moment that Lér came down from the sky holding a huge, a very, very huge spear! As soon as he put his foot on earth, Lér forcefully speared the earth with his huge spear deep into its belly. He made a very deep hole, a very long tunnel. Then, the flood-waters started flowing into the earth's belly through the tunnel. Lér saved the ancient people from death. The rainstorm stopped after some time. The level of water decreased. After a time it drained off. That chaotic situation returned to normal order. The mouth of the underground tunnel is seen today around Gelish valley [a smile with feelings of pride]. Since then, the waters of the river Bakko started flowing through the tunnel into the earth's centre. The water never comes out of the earth's belly after entering the tunnel. It does not come out of the belly! Lér's footsteps are also seen stamped on the rocks very near the mouth of the tunnel. They were stamped while Lér was forcefully spearing the earth standing on the big black rocks.

- Episode 3:

Lér did not return to the sky after saving the people. He lived with them here in Mağangir country for a long time. Lér didn't die like human beings, like us. Instead, he returned to the sky where he lived with his father, Eyeri, without being seen. When he lived here with the ancient Mağangir, Lér begot seven sons. One is Mağang, our forefather. He is the forefather of all the Mağangir. [...] The others were the forefathers of the Surma, Nuer, Añwaa, Šeko, Benç, and the Oromo.

Lér was teaching his sons knowledge about many important things. He taught them *danbi*.<sup>41</sup> His other sons listened to the teachings of their father carefully. They were obedient to the orders given by their father and did things properly as expected. But, Mağang was not like his brothers. He was not as receptive as his brothers. He was careless and did not obey his father. Whatever Lér ordered him to do, he did

41 *Danbi*: 'culture', 'tradition'.

the opposite. He did the opposite of whatever he was told to do. Lér was always telling Maḡaṅg to be dutiful and compliant. Maḡaṅg did not change. He behaved badly and made Lér very angry. Maḡaṅg was not a good son. He was not obedient. Lér was disappointed and became angry with Maḡaṅg.

- Episode 4:

One day, the very angry Lér took a stick. He beat Maḡaṅg and cursed him. He said to him, ‘From now on your name is Maḡaṅg’, and ordered him to go into the forests. He told him to live in the forests, to live fighting the buffalos, elephants, pigs, gazelles and antelopes, and to live on eating *etété*,<sup>42</sup> making *warthong* fighting against the bee *thongs*,<sup>43</sup> making and hanging hives on trees and [...] on cultivating sorghum and maize. Then, Lér ordered Maḡaṅg never to keep cattle, never to eat cow meat, and never to drink their milk. He ordered him to drink *ogol*.<sup>44</sup> Lér told Maḡaṅg saying, ‘My other sons are blessed to keep cattle [...] but not you! You are not blessed to keep cattle!’ Finally, Lér gave the forefathers of the Surma, Nuer, Añwaa, Šeko, Benč, and Oromo all the cattle. Then, Lér showed Maḡaṅg how to hunt and trap game. Lér created maize and sorghum seeds. He gave the seeds to Maḡaṅg. He showed him how to slash and burn the bush and how to prepare the soil for sowing and for cultivating maize and sorghum. Lér made hives from stones and wood. He showed Maḡaṅg how to make hives from stones and wood, hang hives on trees, keep bees, and collect *etété*. Lér made *ogol* and showed Maḡaṅg how to prepare it. The beehives made by Lér himself can still be found near Dildilla Waq<sup>3</sup>a<sup>45</sup> across the Bakko river, where he lived till the time he ascended back into the sky.

- Episode 5:

Maḡaṅg went to live in the forests. He began to live on bee-keeping, hunting and by cultivating sorghum and maize. According to the *gwor*,<sup>46</sup> our forefathers lived in the forests. They lived on bee-keeping, hunting, and cultivating sorghum and maize. Like our forefathers, we also live in the forests depending on bee-keeping, hunting, and cultivating sorghum and maize. No Maḡaṅg can live

42 *Etété*: ‘honey’.

43 *Warthong*: ‘wax’. *Thong*: lit. ‘spear’, in this context ‘bites/stings’.

44 *Ogol*: traditional alcoholic drink made of honey.

45 Dildilla Waq<sup>3</sup>a: ‘god-made bridge’ (*dildilla* means ‘bridge’; *waq<sup>3</sup>a* refers to high god).

46 *Gwor* implies ‘order of things given by god’.

outside the forests. No life without the forests! Our forefathers loved the forests. We also extremely love the forests. Every Maḡaṅg extremely loves the forests. Our name is Maḡaṅgir. A single person is called Maḡaṅg. The name was given by Lér himself. Maḡaṅg means ‘a man of the forests’. *Ma* means ‘man’. *ḡaṅg* means ‘forests’. Maḡaṅgir means ‘the people of the forests’. Our land is also called Maḡaṅgir. We live in the forests and are called ‘the people of the forests’. No Maḡaṅg can live outside the forests, just as no fish is thought to be able to live out of the sea. Our forefathers never kept cattle. We also do not keep cattle. We hate keeping cattle. Not only keeping them, we are afraid of being close to cattle, but not to wild animals like the buffalos and elephants [laughter]. Our forefathers and grandfathers did not eat cow meat and drink their milk. We also do not eat cow meat or drink their milk. But... [pause].

- Episode 6:

But [...] these days, a few Maḡaṅgir have started keeping cattle, eating cow, sheep, and goat meat, and drinking cow milk learning from the settlers who came here [...] in the time of the *Därg*.<sup>47</sup> We did not drink coffee, although coffee trees are plenty on our land. We have started drinking coffee, planting and growing coffee trees like the settlers. We sell coffee at the markets as the settlers do.

- Closing statement:

This is the *toni-bha* told about the *danbi* and the *ḡwor* given to Maḡaṅg by Lér [...]. It was told by our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers about the Maḡaṅgir *danbi* of living from hunting, bee-keeping, and from cultivating sorghum and maize. [...] The *toni-bha* I told you today was told in the past. I told you as I heard it from the old people.

### The Mythical Models of the Human–Environment Relationship: Identification, Description, and Interpretation

Like other cosmogonic myths, the myth of Lér reflects the principles of creation and the order of things in the Maḡaṅgir context. Thus, it serves as the basic cosmological document of the Maḡaṅgir about the creation of *ḡwor* (the order of things set down in mythic times), about themselves and others, the surrounding world and life in it. Based on a critical understanding of concepts and images embedded in the structure of the myth of Lér,

47 During the Provisional Military Administrative Council (1974–1991).

six forms and practices representing the kincentric tradition are identified and described here. These are (1) identity, (2) modes of livelihood, (3) beliefs (belief system), (4) material culture, (5) social life, (6) oral tradition, each of which manifesting and validating the kinship-like tradition.

#### 1) Identity:

As told in Episodes 3, 4, and 5, the origin and ancestry of the name and ethnonym (also toponym) ‘Maḡaṅg’ (sing.), ‘Maḡaṅgir’ (pl.), form the basis of Maḡaṅg identity by creating beliefs and values and incorporating the special human–environment relationship. The motifs of ‘obedience/disobedience’ serve as a basis for self-categorization and self-image in relation to others. As recounted, the disobedient behaviour of Maḡaṅg functions as an explanation for the individual/collective naming, and organizing space and livelihood around forest resources, all of which attest to kinship ties with the natural environment. The perceived self-image has its roots in the meaning of the personal name, ‘Maḡaṅg’, literally ‘a man of the forests’. Combined with the plural suffix *-ir*, it forms the ethnonym ‘Maḡaṅgir’, ‘the people of the forests’. Lér is thus the primordial ancestor and founder of the Maḡaṅgir. After restoring order the deity lived on the earth with the ancient Maḡaṅgir and begot seven sons, the forefathers of the Surma, Nuer, Añwaa, Šeko, Benč, and the Oromo, as well as the Maḡaṅgir. The Maḡaṅgir see these groups as their distant relatives through Lér.

#### 2) Modes of livelihood:

The livelihood strategies of the Maḡaṅgir include traditional apiculture, hunting, and shifting cultivation. As recounted in Episodes 4 and 5, livelihood strategies were mythically transmitted, consolidating Maḡaṅgir identity and their orientation towards the natural environment. The angered Lér orders the disobedient and careless Maḡaṅg (the forefather of all Maḡaṅgir) to go to the forests, to live in the forest, and live on its products.

Lér created the original seeds of maize and sorghum, brought the first beehives and traps, taught and trained Maḡaṅg in skills such as how to make hives, tend bees, collect honey, hunt game, slash and burn bushes, and sow maize and sorghum seeds. Since that mythical creative moment, the Maḡaṅgir have lived and evolved in accordance with the *gwor* (order of things).<sup>48</sup>

#### 3) Beliefs:

According to Salmón, beliefs form and explain the human–nature relationship and help people to recognize their connection with nature and their responsibility for it.<sup>49</sup>

48 Stauder 1971, 2, 14.

49 Salmón 2000, 1131.

In the ‘Opening statement’, the narrator introduces us to the names of the Maḡangir high god Eyeri and his son Lér. Following this, Episodes 1, 2, and 3 promulgate the basic principles of the creation of the kinship-like beliefs developed in harmony with the natural environment. As in other cosmogonic myths, the coming of the divine hero Lér from the sky to the chaotic human world stands as the foundational element. Due to the fear of flooding, the ancient Maḡangir gathered on a mountain top. Lér descended from the sky when the people were in need of a saviour. He created a long underground tunnel through which the flood waters sank down into the earth’s inner core and so ensured the survival of life and (cosmological) order over chaos.

Lér did not leave the people alone after accomplishing his mission, but lived with them creating progeny, consolidating the sense of identity, establishing a new order, dispensing knowledge, and so on. Lér is seen as saviour, helper, and as a friend of man, as a supernatural being with qualities, powers, and abilities different in kind from and unsurpassed by ordinary humans. The Maḡangir believe in and deeply respect their forests as sacred, as abodes of gods, guardian spirits, souls of the ancestors and the dead, ghosts, among others. They believe that the souls of the dead do not go to the sky or to the underworld but dwell in the forests. They make sacrifices to the gods, guardian spirits, and souls of their ancestors therein. Cutting trees is believed to bring a deadly curse and is subject to strict taboo. The gods and spirits of peace, health, and fertility also dwell in the rivers, caves, and valleys. Varieties of, among others, plants, tree-barks, roots, seeds, fruits, and leaves possess medicinal powers. Hence, the beliefs guide individual and social behaviour regarding the natural world. *Dänbi-ḡang* (the rule of the forests) extends to customary tenure rights and practices regarding the use of forest resources as well as management methods. Trees in the forests are owned by the individuals who first settled there. The customary rights are transferred to members of the community. There is also a kind of tree-tenure rule in which individuals own those forest patches where they have placed beehives. The owner has the right to exclude others from the use of the forest trees and pass the rights of ownership to his descendants. Stealing honey or a beehive is seen as taboo and as cursed. If one is found guilty of stealing, he/she will be exiled by his/her clan or community.<sup>50</sup> ‘When a person who stole honey or a beehive dies, bee colonies from everywhere will prevent the dead body from being buried’.<sup>51</sup>

50 Bayleyegn Tasew 2009.

51 *Tapa’d* Bākälä Balti, 108-year-old highly-respected ritual leader, during an interview at Godäre Mission in Godäre district, on 15 February 2006 with five other elders.



*Puwok* (purification rituals) are performed in the forests led by *tapa'd* (ritual leaders) participated in by all members of the community whenever people see themselves in a critical situation. Forests are ritually cleansed to scare away evil powers or bad spirits who cause plagues, conflicts, homicide, raids from outside, drought, natural calamities, and so on. Ritual cleansing is carried out in order to mediate between the living and the gods and the spirits, to purify families, individuals or the society from curses, or to avert war, bad omens, and restore peace.<sup>52</sup>

4) Material culture:

The Mağangir depend on their forest resources for their material culture. They make shelters, baskets, stools, ropes, house utensils, and wooden tools from the wood of trees, bamboos, and vines growing in their forests. They make a kind of stiff cloth from the bark of a big forest tree called *tengi*. The Mağangir never cut a *tengi* tree because they value the bark. They systematically remove a large portion, leaving a small part of the bark vertically connecting the upper and lower parts of the tree's outer surface. The Mağangir say that a small part of the bark should be left in order to sustain the life of the tree. If a small vertical portion is left untouched, the tree can easily replace the removed part of the bark within six to eight months; but it would dry up if the bark were totally removed. The Mağangir produce herbal salt from wood ash and plant leaves; this salt is called *abwobwo*. From the soil they take clay to make pots and jars. From various varieties of soil, flowers, and seeds, they make red, white, and blue cosmetics for body decoration and ornaments. From rocks they make *shalle*—long, wide, flat stones often installed at the centre of a homestead symbolizing the presence of gods, ancestral souls, guardian spirits, peace, health, fertility, and so on. From bamboos and grasses they make the roofs of huts; they also make wrappings and coverings from leaves. The Mağangir prepare medicines from tree-barks, leaves, fruit, seedlings, roots, saps, and various other components of plants. From buffalo and elephant skins they produce *gashine* (shields) symbolizing power, sovereignty, and cohesion. From buffalo and gazelle horns they make a set of aerophone musical instruments called *puwok* (usually twelve in number) for *puwok* rituals. String instruments are made from tendons, skins, and skeletons of tortoises and other game. Components of big game such as elephant tusks, buffalo and gazelle horns, giraffe tails, leopard skins, among others, are directly associated with spiritual values, beliefs, identity, and livelihoods, all connected to the resources of the natural environment.

52 Informant: *Tapa'd* Bākālā Balti, as in n. 50.

## 5) Social life:

The natural environment serves not only as a dwelling place for the Maḡangir, but also as a hide-out against enemy raids. Social relations closely relate to the natural environment. Before marriage, a young man is required to be able to keep bees and to hunt. According to the tradition, such abilities symbolize masculinity and achievement among the Maḡangir.<sup>53</sup> Division of labour between men and women is structured according to the modes of livelihood. Depending on the season, groups of five to seven adult men and male youngsters spend much of their time in the forests engaged in traditional apiculture and hunting, while women and young girls engage in house work and cultivation. Usually, women and girls prepare food. They feed and take care of children, fetch water, and collect firewood. They also collect forest tree fruits and nuts, several types of edible roots, as well as a type of spinach for food.

## 6) Oral tradition:

As indicated earlier, Maḡangir is a fully oral culture where knowledge is explained through oral tradition and ritual practices. Various forms of oral tradition (*toni-bha*) deal with the creation of the 'human-natural kinship-like world' which is the most recurrent theme in Maḡangir oral tradition. A close look at any of about 110 oral narratives shows that the Maḡangir describe human situations, actions, and behaviours using metaphors of wild animals such as apes, monkeys, elephants, buffalos, leopards, lions, pigs, foxes, squirrels, rabbits, and tortoises; reptiles like lizards and snakes; birds; plants; insects such as bees, flies, ants, spiders, and fireflies.<sup>54</sup> Spirits, souls of the dead and ghosts, winds, waterfalls, rains, trees, among others, correlate with human thoughts, emotions, behaviours, actions, and experiences in such a way as to corroborate Murphy's idea: '[e]nvironment is very anthropocentric as it does not allow nature to be outside of human consideration.'<sup>55</sup>

The myth of Lér exists in its own right and explains principles of Maḡangir livelihood, identity, belief systems, material culture, and social relations centred on the values of the ecosystem. The myth continues to validate and consolidate the unique human-environment relationship built on reciprocity and coexistence.

The myth answers fundamental questions concerning ancestral descent, and the origin and formation of the Maḡangir as an ethnic group. In this

53 Stauder 1971; Bayleyegn Tasew 2009.

54 Almost all the oral narratives out of the 110 collected in the field between 2000 and 2009 focus on the behaviour of wild animals, birds, and insects which inhabit the natural world of the Maḡangir.

55 Murphy 2009, 10.

regard, other forms of narrative such as oral history and genealogical accounts often refer to the mythic hero, Lér, as the primordial progenitor of all Maḡangir people and of their neighbours, while instilling into the minds of the young the core principles of the human–nature tradition.

Lér is glorified in a number of legendary narratives as the emancipator of human beings from inhuman practices. Consider for example how a legend narrating how Lér defeats *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa* verifies the particular tradition.<sup>56</sup> According to this tradition, Lér opposed *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa* for his cruel act of drinking human blood. He repeatedly told the ritual leader to stop committing such crimes. *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa* did not comply with Lér's advice. The only means Lér had was to steal and desecrate *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa*'s emblems of power, without which he could not slaughter innocent boys and girls for their pure blood. Lér stole the emblems at night with his friends. *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa* ordered not only his people, but also living and non-living things to catch Lér with the stolen emblems. Nevertheless, humans, wild animals (like leopards), insects (such as fireflies and spiders), and non-living things (like rivers, mountains, and plants) cooperated with Lér in defeating *Tapaʼd Samuqʼa*. To help Lér, mountains turned into plains, rivers stopped flooding, powerful animals protected him from his adversaries. It is said that, since then, the Maḡangir live in freedom without fear of cruelty by their leaders.

Lér is also admired in another story for killing the Añwaa *ñiyeyiya* (king) who attacked, murdered, and raided the Maḡangir in the past. As told, there was a wedding ceremony prepared in the Añwaa community. Lér knew that the *ñiyeyiya* would be present at the wedding ceremony and prepared himself to kill the king. No one could identify him as a non-member because he was black like the Añwaa. So, he went to participate in the ceremony as a guest. Everybody drank too much *ogol* (local alcoholic drink). All lost their strength and fell asleep. The king also got very drunk. At last, at midnight, Lér killed the king with a knife and came back safely to his people and told them the story. Since then, the Maḡangir live enjoying relative peace with the Añwaa people.

Oral narratives often deal with belief systems expressed in *obedience/disobedience* and *blessing/cursing* motifs. One example of this is a story about *The Creation of Flies*.<sup>57</sup> As told, flies were created long after all living beings were made by Eyeri (god). First, Eyeri created bees, not flies. But some of them became flies due to a curse which fell upon them for the

56 Narrator: Getaččāw Gärna (39), at a storytelling session conducted in Gelish village, Meti district, on 18 August 2002.

57 Storyteller: Kəbərnaho Irāna (57), at a storytelling session conducted in Upper Chemi village, Meti district, on 22 February 2006.

disobedience they showed towards a needy old man. The story is told like this:

One day, the old man went out to the forests to attend to his beehives and collect honey as usual. As he arrived there, he climbed up a very large tree. But, strangely, he fell down from the tree while attending to the beehives. It had dire consequences because his leg was severely hurt. He could not walk back home by himself. Therefore, he asked the bees for help. A part of the bee colony helped him by giving medication, food, and guarding him from dangerous animals. They treated him until he got well. [...] But the rest of the group maliciously disobeyed and shouted at him saying, 'How dare you? Didn't you rob our honey many times? It would be self-defeating if we were gracious to you? You are punished for that!' Then, they stung him with their sharp tongues. The old man was very sad at the inhuman act of the ill-natured group of bees. Therefore, it is told that he cursed them to change into flies by saying, 'From now on you are flies, not bees.' They instantly changed into flies. Then, he said, 'You will not collect pollen and sip the nectar of flowers as you did before. [...] You will not live on *etété* [honey]. May *etété* be your fatal enemy! May it kill you by fastening your legs whenever you rest on it.' He cursed them to live on dirt. [...] Since then, they do not make honey. They do not collect pollen and do not sip the nectar of flowers. They live on eating dirt, having become unclean and hated creatures.

Thus, it is not difficult to understand how different forms of oral tradition validate reciprocity, coexistence, and companionship and how the human–environment relationship evolved and developed in the history of the Maḡaṅgir. This relationship was patterned on the natural world, and oral genres transmit and justify the origins, core principles, the major functions, and concrete forms and practices of tradition modelled on the myth of Lér.

## Conclusions

The unique Maḡaṅgir environment and ecological system is reflected in their oral traditions. The ecological system is considered as one of the world's most remarkable lowland rainforests, known for its rich biodiversity, species composition, and its capacities in biodiversity.

As demonstrated, Lér is understood as the creator of the order of things in the world. Thus, he is conceived of as the original force of creation of all forms of human–environment relations. The myth serves as a basic embodiment of Maḡaṅgir cosmologies: core cultural principles, worldview, outlook, beliefs, values, attitudes, self-images, as well as all reciprocal influences of humans and the natural environment. Perceived as mythic in origin the

Lér story represents the exemplary kinship-like relatedness of humans and the natural environment. The ethnonym Mağangir corroborates the identity theories held by Stets and Burke.

The self-name incorporates forest into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance. [...] More recently, identity theorists have drawn on this meaningful relationship between persons and things [...] to incorporate the concept of resources as a central component in identity processes.<sup>58</sup>

Seen together, bee-keeping, hunting and shifting cultivation, and the material culture of the Mağangir represent their exemplary kinship relations with the natural forests and the ecosystem.

The myths contribute to the preservation of the ecosystem and conservation of biodiversity from the mythic past to the present more so than modern institutions and judicial law.

Oral traditions play a great role in disseminating, transmitting, and instilling into the minds of the members of the society the underlying principles behind the forms and practices which exemplify the unique human–environment tradition. As indicated, almost all types of oral narratives deal to a great extent with the practices deriving from the kincentric world-view of the Mağangir. Oral tradition as a legacy and adaptive process continuously renders knowledge, and directs individual and social behaviours toward the protection and preservation of the ecosystem ensuring intergenerational links.

An assessment of the nature and scope of environmental problems shows that government development policies and their implementation endanger the traditions of environmental management. Policy implementations take place without the consent of the indigenous people. The problem is often buttressed by wrong notions of the basic concepts of *tradition*, *modernity/culture*, and *development* as well as an unwillingness to reconcile. Therefore, the situation of the indigenous people has deteriorated in the last four decades. The Mağangir have continued to suffer from displacement and from the degradation of their natural environment. Recall, for example, the ways in which reality is expressed by the narrator in Episode 5: ‘No Mağangir can live outside the forests. No life without the forests!’

Thus, reconciling development with tradition is most important, and can be achieved by

- 1) situating development in specific cultural contexts, and integrating the potential of the indigenous ecological knowledge with scientific advanc-

<sup>58</sup> Stets and Burke 2000, 225.

- es to create a dependable community-based ecosystem for preservation and conservation;
- 2) changing development policies in favour of the indigenous peoples and their cultures;
  - 3) creating awareness of the key concepts of tradition and modernity or, generally, culture and development to achieve effective, efficient, and sustainable development in the Ethiopian context.

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