

## **Islamic Literature in Ethiopia: A Short Overview**

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The study of the history and culture of Ethiopian Muslims has long been a neglected theme in Ethiopian studies.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that the oral and written literature produced by indigenous Muslims has received even less attention in Ethiopian scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his book on twentieth-century Amharic literature, Molvaer made no single reference to the existence of an Ethiopian Islamic literature,<sup>3</sup> although in an earlier work he did admit this serious lacuna: "There is little mention of Islam or Muslims in Amharic literature...."<sup>4</sup> This gap is also evident in general reviews of Ethiopian and African literatures.<sup>5</sup>

This paper is only a brief and preliminary introduction to Islamic literature as it developed and flourished through time, and it focuses on its main literary features and themes. It is intended as a modest contribution towards the enhancement of general public and scholarly awareness of Islamic literature in Ethiopia and of the need for a sustained research on it from the literary, historical and regional perspectives.

Objectively, there were a number of unfavourable factors which militated against the development of Islamic creative writing in Ethiopia, especially in the post-Italian period. Firstly, there were strict press censorship imposed on Muslim literary production and a ban on the importation and circulation of

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Islamic/Arabic books and periodicals. Secondly, an articulate and numerically significant modern-educated Ethiopian Muslim élite was slow to emerge because of the concentration of local Muslims on the trading and service sectors of the economy and on the pursuit of traditional Islamic studies. There was also considerable reluctance of Muslim parents to send their children to modern schools for fear that they might be exposed to Christian influences and lose their specifically Muslim identity. All these conditions contributed to the long absence of a vigorous literary tradition among educated Ethiopian Muslims.

The introduction and expansion of Islam in Ethiopia, and the subsequent emergence of an Islamic culture among the diverse communities of the country, gave rise to the development and flourishing of an indigenous and distinctive Islamic literature. The gradual spread of Islamic religious education contacts with the neighbouring Muslim world through trade, pilgrimage and travels undertaken for the purpose of acquiring higher Islamic education in Arabia, the Yemen, the Sudan and Egypt, and the emergence of a class of indigenous Muslim religious élite's were the main factors which contributed to the development of that literature. However, very little is known about the actual process of its emergence and the amount and diversity of literary output.

Islamic literature in Ethiopia consists of both oral accounts about local and external events and personalities, a large corpus of written works in the form of manuscripts which still await systematic collection and analysis, and a few publications. There is a substantial number of devotional texts, teaching manuals, and commentaries on classical Arabic works dealing with Islamic doctrine, law, grammar, and mysticism. Arabic was the dominant language used for the composition of the vast majority of both unpublished and published works,<sup>6</sup> although some were also written in other national languages such as Amharic<sup>7</sup> and Harari.

Many fragments of Arabic material in the form of inscriptions and local dynastic histories have been discovered in different parts of Ethiopia which suggest the long existence of Muslim literature communities. Although the chronicle of the sixteenth-century campaigns of *Imān* Ahmad b. Ibrāhīm (*fl.* 1506-1543) was written by a Yemeni jurist,<sup>8</sup> it provides valuable information on the economic, political and social conditions of the period.<sup>9</sup>

An early indigenous literary work is the *Kitāb al-Farā'id* (Book of Obligations), a manual for the teaching of Islam written by *Faqīh* Tayyib al-Wanāgī of Harar in the Harari language in Arabic characters. The manuscript was discovered, translated, and edited by the renowned Italian scholar, Enrico Cerulli, in 1936.<sup>10</sup>

In the second half of the eighteenth century another Harari scholar, Hāmid b. Siddīq, wrote three works in Arabic on such diverse themes as the duty of defending one's faith against unbelief, Islamic mysticism and the holy war.<sup>11</sup>

In other parts of Ethiopia, such as Wallo and Shawa, various types of literary work mainly dealing with hagiographical, doctrinal and, to a lesser extent, secular themes were produced. They were written in both verse and prose in either Arabic or Amharic/Harari in Arabic script. The latter, known as *'ajamī*, was a popular genre of indigenous Islamic literature.<sup>12</sup> An important form of oral literature is the type known as *Manzūma* (panegyrics in verse), recited on solemn occasions, eulogizing the lives and virtues of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, and those of indigenous saints.<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to the assertion made by some scholars that, after the sixteenth century there was a general decline in the composition of local Islamic literary works which persisted until the present century,<sup>14</sup> many of the scholars/saints of north/central and eastern Ethiopia, notably those of Wallo, Shawā and Harar, who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, did produce extensive commentaries on standard Arabic texts on Islamic law and grammar,

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and wrote original works on various subjects.<sup>15</sup> Hagiographical works called *manāqib* were also written.<sup>16</sup> As rightly noted by Gori, a major stimulus to literary production was the introduction and propagation of the mystical brotherhoods (*turuq*, sing: *tarīqa*).<sup>17</sup> These works and other texts in manuscript form remain, as noted earlier, to be collected and analyzed in depth, as they are important sources not only for the study of indigenous religious and literary history but also for an understanding of other relevant aspects of the social and economic organization of Muslim communities.

Three anonymous hagiographical works in Arabic on the life and miracles of *Shaykh* Nūr Husayn were published early this century.<sup>18</sup> *Shaykh* Talha b. Ja'far (c.1853-1936) is considered to have been a pioneer in the use of Amharic poetry as a medium for the teaching and dissemination of Islam in Wallo and northern Shawa. Although he authored many works, only one of them was published in the middle of the present century under the title *Tawhīd ennā Fiqh* (Theology and Jurisprudence).<sup>19</sup> In 1949 *Faqh* Hāshim b. 'Abd al-'Azīz's *Fath al-Rahmānī* was published.

Since the late 1940s, a number of Ethiopian Muslim writers have turned to writing on literary and secular themes in Amharic: *al-Hājj* Yusuf 'Abd al-Rahmān (a Harari) published a collection of proverbs and tales;<sup>20</sup> Muhammad 'Uthmān authored a short work of fiction dealing with marriage,<sup>21</sup> while 'Abd al-Bārī Muhammad and Sayid Abagāz (the latter from Wallo) wrote similar works on the theme of social and economic injustice.<sup>22</sup> According to one commentator, the publication of the last three works represents a new departure in the development of Islamic literature in Amharic as they are exclusively concerned with secular and not, as hitherto, religious themes.<sup>23</sup>

Since 1942 *al-'Alam*, an Arabic weekly, has been published by the Ministry of Information.<sup>24</sup>

The publication of the first official Amharic translation of the *Qur'ān* and the earliest history of Islam and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (the latter written by the late *al-Hājj* Muhammad Thāni Ḥabīb Bashīr)<sup>25</sup> also marked a higher stage in the development of Islamic literature in Amharic, as it enabled the Muslim community to enhance its knowledge about the contents of the Holy Book and the life and achievements of the Prophet.

During the period from 1975 to 1991, no major Islamic literary work was published because of the ban, strictly enforced, upon the importation of Islamic texts, including the *Qur'ān*, and on local production and circulation of Islamic literature such as books, magazines and newspapers. However, two works of compilation and translation came out during the period under discussion: 'Abd al-Wāsi' Yūsuf's *Male'ekta Eslām* (The Message of Islam) in 1988/89, sponsored by the Anwar Mosque Administration, and Muhammad Jamāl Mukhtār's translation into Amharic of al-Mawdūdī's *Mabādi' al-Islām* (Principles of Islam) in 1989/90.<sup>26</sup> One of the works of Egypt's prominent literary figure, Najīb Mahfūz, was translated by Amāra Māmmo; a part of the *Arabian Nights*, the most popular piece of Arabic literature, by Tafari Gadāmu; a play authored by Tawfiq al-Hakim (d.1987), the Egyptian novelist and essayist, by Mangestu Lammā; and Idrīs Shāh's collection of witty tales, also by Amāra Māmmo.<sup>27</sup> Mammo Wuddenah's translation of Muhammad Hasanyn Haykal's *The Road to Ramadān* could not be published because of censorship.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, the period from 1991 to 1995 was one of unprecedented growth of Islamic literature in Ethiopia, as it witnessed the foundation of private Islamic publishing houses and the production of a large number of literary works in Amharic, Arabic and other languages in the form of books, booklets, newspapers and magazines.<sup>29</sup> Many of these works are translations from either Arabic or English. They include the writings of the noted South African Muslim activist, Ahmed Deedat, the Pakistani reformer, al-Mawdūdī, and the

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French Islamist scholar, M. Bucaille. Two young and prolific translators working for the Hudā and Hirā' Publishing houses respectively are Muhammad Jamāl Mukhtār, mentioned earlier, and Awwal Rattā Hamza.

A collection of poems attributed to the Wallo Muslim clairvoyant, *Shaykh* Husayn Jibrīl (d.1915), was published by Boggāla Tafari Bazzu in 1991/92. During the same year Isāyyās Alamē Eshatē and Ādam Muhammad produced two textbooks on Arabic grammar and usage.

In 1992/93 *Shaykh* Ahmad Awwal Husayn authored a long book (in verse) on the fundamentals of Islam, the religious duties of a Muslim, permissible and reprehensible acts, the *Sharī'a*, *mawlid* (the Prophet's birthday anniversary celebrations), and the need to combat superstitions and other social practices incompatible with Islam.

One of the renowned contemporary Ethiopian Muslim scholars, *al-Hājj* Muhammad Walē Ahmad, wrote an Amharic manual on Islamic doctrine and practices in 1994, while Hudā sponsored the translation and publication of Mustafa al-Sibā'ī's biography of the Prophet (1994). In the same year Muhammad Jamal translated Mustafa 'Abd al-'Āti's *Ta'rīf al-Islām* (Instruction about Islam), the longest work ever translated from Arabic into Amharic, which mainly deals with the basic tenets of Islam. The Hudā Press Ltd. has also launched a project, the first of its kind, on the translation of the *Qur'an* into Amharic together with a parallel Arabic text, and published an Arabic translation of *Shaykh* Muhammad Mahmūd al-Sawāf's book, *Ta'lim al-Salāt*. Hirā' translated Mahmūd Shākir's work on the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad's followers to Aksum and 'Abd al-Hāmid Muhammad Tahmāz's biography of Khadīja, the Prophet's first wife.

The Islamic magazines and newspapers which flourished from 1991 to 1995, when they ceased publication, were very appealing to the Muslim public

because of their regularity and high circulation. More importantly, they covered local events, reported on foreign news and developments, and discussed issues of interest to the Muslim community.<sup>30</sup>

*Bilāl*, published by the privately-owned Najashi publishing house, was the earliest of the Islamic magazines. Another was *al-Risāla* printed by the Addis Ababa Publishing and Advertising Enterprise, while the Ethiopian Muslim Organization sponsored an Amharic-Arabic-English magazine called *al-Najāshi*. Among the major Islamic newspapers were *Najāshi* and *al-Manār*, the latter published by the Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. The Addis Ababa Press published a periodical entitled *Adhān*.

In 1996 several private Islamic fortnightly and weekly newspapers were published: *Hikma*, *Hayā*, *al-Kawthar*, *Hilāl*, *al-Hijāb*, *Ikhlas*, *Ihsān* and *al-Najāshi*. However, about half of these tabloids have ceased publication altogether.

In conclusion it should be noted that almost all of the contributors to the Islamic magazines and newspapers were Ethiopian Muslims. In their many highly informative and enlightening articles and commentaries, they raised and thoroughly discussed a number of issues of historical significance<sup>31</sup> and contemporary relevance -- both religious and secular - thereby enhancing the general awareness of the Muslim community about developments taking place in the country and the wider Islamic world. The most recurrent issues included the need for reforming the administrative structure and working procedures of existing Islamic organizations and the defence of Islam against traditional non-Islamic forms of belief and practices, and against prevailing misconceptions about, and the occasional assaults on, the doctrine of Islam and Muslims in general.

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Kane has emphasized the role of the development of Islamic literature in Amharic in bringing together Ethiopian Muslims of diverse backgrounds and in minimizing the disadvantages arising from lack of proficiency in Arabic.<sup>32</sup>

It is worth noting that the growth and development of Islamic literature in Ethiopia since 1991 has also been a manifestation of, and response to, the resurgence and revival of Islam in the Islamic world in general and in Ethiopia and the Horn in particular.<sup>33</sup>

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion, see the present writer's "The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol.3, No.1. (January 1992), pp.15-46.

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Gori, "Some Preliminary Observations on the Texts of Shaykh Husayn's Hagiographies" (an unpublished paper presented to the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, East Lansing, Michigan State University, 5-10 September 1994), p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Reidulf K. Molvaer, *Black Lions: The Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers* (Lawrenceville, N.J./Asmara: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1997). pp.xiii-xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia* (Leiden:E.J.Brill, 1980), p.4.

<sup>5</sup> The exception is Albert Gérard's *African Language Literatures* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1981), p.3.

<sup>6</sup> A.J. Drewes, *Classical Arabic in Central Ethiopia* (Oosters Genootschap in Nederland 7) (Leiden:E.J.Brill, 1976); C.A. Ferguson, "The Role of Arabic in Ethiopia: A Sociological Perspective" in J.F.Pride and Janet Holmes (eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp.112-124.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas L.Kane, "Muslim Writers in Amharic" in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici*, I (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1974), pp. 717-726; *idem*, *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975); Enrico Cerulli, "Canti Amarici dei Musulmani di Abissinia," *Rendiconti della R. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Ser. VI, II (1926), pp. 433-437.

<sup>8</sup> Shihāb al-Din Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Qādir b.Sālim b. 'Uthman ('Arab Faqīh), *Futūh al-Habasha* ed./trans.by René Basset under the title *Histoire de la Conquête d'Abyssinie* (Paris, 1897-1901). There are less authoritative Italian and German translations. The account was also translated into Harari: 'Abd al-Karim Ahmad, *Warēg Zamān Futuh al-Habash* (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press, 1955). An English translation, the first of its kind, is being prepared by Paul F.L. Stenhouse.

<sup>9</sup> The extensive, albeit scattered, travel literature on Islam and Ethiopian Muslims, both in Arabic and the major European languages, deserves a separate study. For a preliminary review, see Manfred Kropp, "La Corne Orientale de l'Afrique chez les Géographes Arabes," *Bulletin des Etudes Africaines d'Inalco*, IX, 17-18 (1992),pp.161-197.

<sup>10</sup> Enrico Cerulli, *Studi Etiopici I, La Lingua e La Storia di Harar* (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Brunschvig, "L'Islam enseigné par Hāmid b.Siddiq de Harar (XVIIe siècle)" in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici*, pp. 443-454.

<sup>12</sup> Assefa Mammo, "Some Prominent Features of the Menzuma Genre in the Wollo Region" (M.A. Thesis in Literature, School of Graduate Studies, AAU, 1987). and Seggē Negātu, "Oral Traditions on the Miracles of *Shaykh Sayid Bushrā* and the Celebration of the *Mawlid* Festival at Gatā (Wollo)" (in Amharic) (B.A. Thesis, Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature, AAU, 1990). There are also half a dozen of undergraduate theses on Islamic religious poetry from Wallo, Bale and Addis Ababa submitted to the Department between 1983/84 and 1990/91.

<sup>13</sup> On this, see Alula Pankhurst, "Indigenising Islam in Wallo: *Ajām* Amharic verse written in Arabic script," in Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst and Taddese Beyene (eds.), *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol.II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1994), pp.257-273; Minako Ishihara, "Textual Analysis of a Poetic Verse in a Muslim Oromo Society in Jimma Area, Southwestern Ethiopia" in Shun Sato and Eisei Kurimoto (eds.), *Northeast African Studies*, Senti Ethnological Studies 43 (1996), pp.207-232.

<sup>14</sup> Kane, "Muslim Writers in Amharic," p.718.

<sup>15</sup> Five, have already appeared in print: *al-Hājj* Bushra Ay Muhammad, *Minhat al-Ilāhiyya wa'l-Faydat al-Rabbaniyya* (Cairo.n.d.) *Shaykh* Jawhar b. Haydar b. 'Alī, *al-Jawahir al-Haydariyya* (Cairo,1906); *idem*, *al-Bid 'at al-Sanniyya 'alā'l-Lu'mat al-Bahiyya* (Cairo, 1929); Mahmud b. Sulaymān al-Tijānī, *al-Minhal al-Asfa fi Ziyarat al-Nabiyy al-Mustafa* (Cairo, 1953); *Shaykh* Muhammad Amin, *Kitab al-Dawa' al-Qulub* (Addis Ababa, n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> Hussein Ahmed, "Introducing an Arabic Hagiography, from Wällo" in Taddese Beyene (ed.), *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Frankfurt-am-Main/Huntingdon. 1988), I,pp.185-195.

<sup>17</sup> Gori, "Some Preliminary Observations...,"p.1.

<sup>18</sup> (Cairo, 1927, 1948/49).

<sup>19</sup> Sayid Ibrāhīm, ed. (Addis Ababa, 1958/59).

<sup>20</sup> ዩሱፍ አብዱራህማን፥ ያማርኛ ምርጥ ምሳሌና ተረት (አዲስ አበባ፥ 1942 ዓ.ም) See also አብዱራህማን ቆራም፥ መኸማኸ የሐረሪ ተረትና ምሳሌ ከነአማርኛ ትርጉሙ (አዲስ አበባ፥ 1992 G.C.)

፡ ጨቅቲ ክታብ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1992 G.C.) 0ብዱል ሙሀይማኒን 0ብዱል ናሲር፡ ሙስፍናይ ሂጋኝ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1996 ግ.ኛ.) ሙሐመድ ኢብራሂም ሱለይማን፡ ቀጠብቲ ሙዳይ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1997 G.C.)

<sup>21</sup> ሙሐመድ 0ብማን፡ ጓዴ እንግዲህ አማችህ ነኝ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1953 ግ.ም) On the theme of this fictional work, Kane has commented: "This story is typical of the many stories published by Christian writers on the theme of school romance versus parental opposition." Kane, "Muslim Writers in Amharic," p.720.

<sup>22</sup> አብዱል ባሪ ሙሐመድ፡ አንገት ያለው ይፍረድ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1962 ግ.ም) ሰይድ አበጋዝ፡ የመቃብሩ ትል (አሥመራ፡ 1960 ግ.ም)

<sup>23</sup> Kane, "Muslim Writers in Amharic," p.725.

<sup>24</sup> On this see Hussein Ahmed. "Al- 'Alam: the History of an Ethiopian Arabic Weekly," *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, 1994), I, pp.155-165. During the Italian period the newspapers had Arabic sections. The radio also had a programme in Arabic. 'Alberto Sbacchi, "I rapporti italo-etioipici tra il 1935 e il 1941" in Angelo del Boca (ed.), *Le Guerre Coloniali del Fascismo* (Roma: Laterza, 1991), p.484. (I am grateful to Shiferaw Bekele for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>25</sup> ቅዱስ ቁርአን (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1961 ግ.ም)፤ ሐጂ ሙሐመድ ሳኒ ሐቢብ፡ እስልምና የታላቁ ነቢይ ሙሐመድ ታሪክ (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1960 ግ.ም). C. earlier translations of the Qur'ān, see ደስታ ተክለወልድ፡ አዲስ የግርኛ መዝገበ ቃላት (አዲስ አበባ፡ 1962 ግ.ም) Dasta, p. 12, noted that Echaggē Enbāqom had translated the Qur'ān from Arabic into Amharic which was then translated into Ge'ez by Engedā of Zurāmbā, and the two translations were available at Aksum and in Gojjām. He also said that he had been told by an Argobbā *shaykh* in Dire Dawa in 1932/33 of the existence of a copy of the Qur'ān in Amharic written on parchment. See also Eugen Mittwoch, "Exzerpte aus dem Koran in amharische Sprache," *Mitteilungen Jahrg. 9* (Berlin,

1906), pp.111-147. (I am indebted to Dr. Berhanu Abebe for providing me with this important piece of information.)

<sup>26</sup> See the present writer's "Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973-1993)" in Harald G.Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies* (Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies) (Lawrenceville, N.J., 1994), I, pp.792-797.

<sup>27</sup> አማራ ማሞ፥ አሃረኛው (አዲስ አበባ፥ 1984 ዓ.ም)

This is an adaptation from the English translation published in Carior in Cairo in 1991 under the title *The Search* ተፈሪ ገዳሙ፥ አንድ ሺህ አንድ ሌሊት (አዲስ አበባ፥ 1979 ዓ.ም) አማራ ማሞ፥ ተረበኛው ናስሩዲን (አዲስ አበባ፥ 1981 ዓ.ም) based on Sir Richard Burton's translation.

<sup>28</sup> Molvaer, *Black Lions*, p.200

<sup>29</sup> Hussein Ahmed, "Current Trends in Islamic Literature in Ethiopia (1995-96)" (a paper read at the Fourth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art, Trieste, 24-27 September 1996) (forthcoming in proceedings).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Most recently the issue of whether or not the Aksumite king, who received and granted asylum to the Prophet's followers, had embraced Islam has been a subject of commentary --- some of it inflammatory and vicious --- published in both non-Islamic and Islamic tabloids.

<sup>32</sup> Kane, "Muslim Writers in Amharic," p.726.

<sup>33</sup> Hussein Ahmed, "Islamic Literature and Religious Revival in Ethiopia (1991-1994)," *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*. No. 12 (1998) (forthcoming).