

Muslims across Christian Chronicles of Imperial Ethiopia, from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century

Benjamin VOLFF
INALCO

Even if “stereotype” is a recent creation in its social scientific meaning, its use goes back as far as human societies had the need to differentiate themselves from others. Indeed, the term “stereotypes” refers to the printing and concerns the duplication of printed characters in a similar way. Such a process does not interfere between a dominant group and a subjugated one, or only as a disparagement, but requires a chemistry which activates both the creation of the discriminatory discourse and pieces of reality picked up from the discriminated society:

A stereotype cannot, however, be distinguished from other beliefs by asserting its falseness, for there are many examples in the literature which demonstrate at least a kernel of truth in what is called stereotype. Neither can it be identified as an oversimplification of attributes of the external world. Many stereotypes actually present an elaboration of such attributes.¹

Therefore, the subject of this paper is a matter of literary characters who are the actors of a literature they have not chosen to be part of.

This literature balances historical fact and creation of the mind. The flood of its inspiration flows from the high-plateaus of Ethiopia, from a time we could compare to the European Middle Age, this is to say the 14th century. Ethiopia is a Christian empire in expansion, ruled by a King of the kings (*Nəgusä-nägäst*), supported by a Church which calls itself *tāwahādo*, which means union of the divine and human natures of Christ, but could be also understood as referring to the unity of the Ethiopian people bound by its faith. Concerning its doctrine, Ethiopian Christianity is born from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, when the Egyptian Church, among others, split from the political and dogmatic influence of Rome. Then, the Ethiopian Church, linked to the patriarchy of Alexandria which provides its archbishop, became the first-born daughter of the Coptic Church of Egypt. With the spread of Islam across the Arabian Peninsula to the shores of the Red Sea and the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 642 AD, Ethiopia appeared like a Christian island

surrounded by a Muslim sea, to paraphrase a metaphor of emperor Mənilək II.² Henceforth, the Ethiopian clergy found itself isolated from other Christian powers, except the surviving Coptic Church of Alexandria, submitted to a Muslim Caliphate. Protected by the sharp mountainous relief that covers most of its territory, with human settlements extending to an average altitude of 2000 meters, the Christian kingdom remained unconquered until the 16th century. From the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana *circa* 330 AD to the *jihād* of Ahmäd Graññ in 1529, the Ethiopian state has grown in span and strength, being able to impose its rule on Muslims sultanates of the lowland deserts in the East as far as the coast and to claim tributes from them.

In such a context, our sources, emanating from the chroniclers close to the imperial court, shaped with religious culture, praising the power and consequently attempting to show its glory, however, are not only sycophants of their masters. Indeed, ecclesiastic authors are also witnesses of a dual society, gathering two monotheisms under a single government, this one being Christian and a proselyte one. As a consequence, chronicles of brave deeds of sovereigns and, to a lesser extent, of nobility, inevitably project a biased image of Muslims, in order to justify the ideology of the State. How does this making of Others operate, backed by which mechanisms? Studying the Ethiopian text with the tool of stereotypes is not sufficient to survey the building of identities, neither those of the makers nor those made. In fact, the creation of an image of Muslims throws back like a mirror to the Christian the perception of oneself, by opposing those who could threaten the identity of the builders of the dominant political ideology. We ought to search clues of what the texts cannot conceal: Muslims beyond the loud and harsh stereotype, the peaceful coexistence hidden by the haze of dust of regular warfare.

1. How two religious schemes collide from the fourteenth century onwards

First peaceful contacts

The traditional history of the deeds of Muhammad written by historians such as Ibn Hisham (9th century) and Tabari reports how, in the first times of his predication, his persecuted followers found a shelter in the Ethiopian court and moreover, the extent to which the king of Ethiopia (whom the Muslim sources called *Nagaši* Al-Ašama, an alteration of the Amharic *nāgasi*³) was curious of this new dogma coming from abroad. An ambiguous answer of a disciple of Muhammad, named Ja'far, saying about Jesus that he is a "servant of God, his messenger, his Spirit, his Verb thrown in Mary's womb, the Virgin"⁴ contributed towards the confusion about the essence of the two religions. On the one hand, a refugee from Mecca led the Ethiopian king to believe that both messages of the revealed religions were the same, and on the other hand, the latter's enthusiasm for the new friendly community gave the impression he wished to convert to Islam. For a long time, this event

should mark positive relations between the two monotheisms, a later *hadith* of the Prophet, claiming that no Muslim could go to war with Ethiopians because of the protection they gave to the first Muslims: “Leave the Abyssinians in peace, so long as they do not take the offensive.”⁵ Indeed, contacts, exchanges and migration between Ethiopia and the Arabian Peninsula are as ancient as the first millennium BC, and the consensual historical hypothesis, based on archaeology and epigraphy, asserts that Ethiopian society partly borrowed its political frame and its writing from South-Arabian settlers, coming from a space covering approximately the area of today’s Yemen.⁶ Until at least 525 AD, the date of the military campaign of emperor Kaleb in Himarya (South Arabia), Ethiopian rulers considered the eastern shores of the Red Sea as their sphere of influence. In fact, the two languages employed by the government, Gə’əz since the 4th century, and then Amharic starting from the 18th century, are Semitic and so bound by kinship to Arabia. But this peaceful neighbouring did not last.

First quarrelsome contacts

Our main source about the first glimpse of deterioration of relationships between the Christian centre of command and the peripheral Muslims sultanates is a chronicle of a war King Amdä-Ṣyon (Pillar of the Faith) engaged in against the Sultans of Yəfat, a state located in the lowlands east of Šäwa, the provincial base of imperial strength in the 14th century. Even if this text is part of a compilation put together four centuries later, one of its contemporary translators, George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, has supposed the relation of Amdä-Ṣyon’s campaigns could have been written during the events, by one clergyman of the royal team and also direct witness.⁷ Notwithstanding, *The Glorious Victories of ‘Āmda Ṣeyon*, as Huntingford entitled it, works as an inexhaustible source of stereotypes about the early times of large scaled military conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. From 1329 until 1445, several rebellions arose against the payment of tribute to Christian sovereigns, and those Gə’əz sources report that they were led by kings Säbrädin (Sabr al-Din) and Gəməldin (Ġamal al-Din) between 1329 and 1332. Beyond the dramatic bombast which characterizes the style of such writings, in the vein of hagiographies, but here the saint being replaced by the warrior-king, the chronicle is a prejudiced and violent description of a fight to death of two revealed religions, both declaring themselves to be the true faith and priding themselves on the right to tame the land: the only possible way out of such a conflicting focus is the submission or destruction of the Others.

2. How Muslims are made different

To name the Others

The scope of our sources stretches out as far as the second and most powerful period of

the reign of Haylä-Səllase the first (i.e. 1941–1974), and shows an evolution in the way Muslims are named. In the chronicle of Amdä-Ṣyon, the earliest text, Huntington has translated the designation *əlwan* [ዕለዋን] with “rebels”, when a previous French translator, Jules Perruchon in 1889, chose rather to convey it by “infidel”. The former expresses an armed movement for freedom; the latter indicates a religious deviation and contains a reminiscence of crusades. In fact, both Ethiopianists are right. According to Wolf Leslau, the roots of the word are the verb ‘*alläwä* [ዕለወ]: “deal treacherously, conspire, distort, pervert, act perversely, corrupt, violate (the law), rebel, be rebellious, transgress (laws), depart, desert, reject, be faithless, be an apostate, be heretical”’.⁸ This definition is a catalogue of faults and sins ascribed to those who are shown as enemies.

A chronicle of the 16th century, which makes narrative of the reign of Särṣä-Dəngəl, not only gives Muslims their real name back (*Əslam* [እስላም]) but even associates them with a particular territory, the Sultanate of Adal, through the name *Mäläsay* [መለሳይ].⁹ Since 1529, Adal had effectively become the epicentre of military opposition to Christian authority, expanded so much that it brought war to the almost inaccessible Christian mountains.

Four hundred years later, in 1941, a biography of the prominent officer of the King of kings Mənilək II, the ras Mäk^wännən (1852–1906), was written by Haylä-Giyorgis Bällätä, a layman attached to a monastery later under the patronage of Täfäri¹⁰—the future Haylä-Səllase. The author avoids here moral stigmatization in the designation of Muslims, but gathers them in the convenient ethnic name of Somali. The people extending from the borders of the Ethiopian high-plateaus to the shores of the Red Sea, because they were accustomed to rebellions, became the holders of Muslim identity, still seen as a strong factor of disturbances: “When King of kings Mənilək heard that Somali had rebelled and surrounded Christians, he ordered lords and officers should go and help them.”¹¹

The original difference is an original sin

The author of the warlike chronicle of Amdä-Ṣyon emphasizes it many times: the main crime of Muslims is Islam, which is considered as a false belief. The core of their error is that according to the Koran, Jesus is only a prophet. The dynamics of the text do not give the reader any respite in reminding him that Muslims are “children of evil which trust not in the Son of God” and that they scorn the Trinity.¹² For Ethiopian Christianity, this is not only an effect of style, the divine nature of Christ being an issue which led to vehement discussions and even opposite politic factions and political turmoil from the 17th to the 19th century. Hence, the denial of the incarnation amounts to a shattering of the meaning of *təwähado* identity, and in the same way, to threaten Ethiopian dominant identity itself. Thus compared to heretics, Muslims are said to be inspired by the devil, like Säbrädin, king of Yəfat: “That perverse one, the son of a viper, of the seed of a serpent, the son of a stranger

from the race of Satan".¹³ Furthermore, the spaces they live in look like hell.

The strange land

Indeed, the surrounding hot and lowlands of Ethiopia can be seen from the altitude of Christian mountains and are believed to be dangerous. The geographer Alain Gascon, in a recent work, reminds us how even today the lowlands are perceived as insalubrious and hostile by the inhabitants of the high-plateaus:

Même des emplois stables, de forts salaires et des avantages matériels n'attirent pas les Éthiopiens (et les Érythréens) des hauts plateaux dans les basses terres. [...] Depuis les régions basses chaudes et proches de l'enfer qui attend les infidèles, sont venues, tout au long des siècles, les conquêtes, les migrations, les épidémies: rien de bon n'arrive par le bas! Un proverbe éthiopien l'exprime: *Māhalwan gännät, dadarwan esat* [Au milieu, chez nous en Éthiopie, le paradis, à la périphérie, le feu de l'enfer]. (Gascon, 2006: 37)

Not only steady jobs, but even material benefits can't manage to move Ethiopians from high-plateaus to low-lands. [...] During centuries, from hot lowlands, close to hell to where the faithless are condemned, nothing good has ever come from this bottom but conquests, migrations, epidemics! An Ethiopian proverb says about it: "We are in the middle and in paradise; all around it is burning hell."¹⁴

Also, lands attributed to Muslims are spaces from where life itself is banished:

In the middle of the wet season (there was) a great heat which burned man and beast; no grass was found and water was severely rationed, for in their country there are no springs of water which break out, but wells foul and putrid dug by the hands of men; and the stones of their country are like thorns.¹⁵

The evocation of Ogaden, in the east of Ethiopia, when Haylä-Giyorgis Bälläṭä wrote in the middle of the 20th century, is now pictured as a country inhabited by human beings, however harsh the living conditions:

The *grazmač* Banti, rode from Wabi river and arrived in a desert land where there were no plant nor water. He dug a well and found water with many difficulties. Then, he and his children, wives and cattle drank. [...] *Ras Mäk^wännən* asked *grazmač* Banti if life were good in Ogaden. He answered him: "Wheat and wine could grow in such a land, but one cannot find any water, except at Wabi river or by digging."¹⁶

In the eyes of Christian authors, life is almost impossible because of aridity, hence what kind of people is able to live there? Through the speech of king Amdä-Şyon, the medieval chronicle with its biased focus does not hesitate to “zoomorphize” Muslims and in one of his infuriate speeches, the King of Ethiopia complained about being bitten by “hyenas and dogs, sons of vipers”.¹⁷ When humans appeared, they usually adopted strange forms of behaviour, because of the heat:

The people of the country walk on their hands, with their feet above and their heads below, and they run on their hands as (others run) on their feet.¹⁸

Truly, we must concede that over the centuries there has been an improvement in the perception of the Muslim territories, which are not occupied only by humans who appear to be wild beasts. In our latest source, Haylä-Giyorgis Bällätä’s text, we still find references to a land where humanity is absent. Ogaden is merely a desert, called in Amharic *mədräbäda* (ጦድረብዳ፣), which means country where nothing can grow, a no man’s land.

3. How Muslims are made dangerous

In Christian chronicles, Muslims are often pushed in the arena in order to engage in a lost battle. Their defeat is not one of men but that of Satan. Indeed, by refusing payment of the tribute, by denying the authority of the Ethiopian King of kings, they rebelled against the representative of God on earth, and so acted like Satan. As the chronicle of Amdä-Şyon emphasized it:

Now the king of Ethiopia, whose name was ‘Āmda Şeyon, heard that the king of the Rebels had revolted, and (his) arrogance was unfaithful to him, making himself great, like the Devil who set himself above his creator and exalted himself like the Most High.¹⁹

Six hundred years later, such a process is reproduced in Haylä-Giyorgis Bällätä’s biography of Mäk^wännən, by means of giving the fight a disembodied value and instilling spiritual strength into it, inserting in the narrative elements of Saint-Paul’s *Ephesians*: “Your fight is against those who are in the sky, masters of darkness and evil demons, and not against those who are made of flesh and blood” (*Ephesians*: 6: 12).²⁰ Not only do ecclesiastical authors take the confrontation to the field of ideological struggle, but they also transport events into an imaginary world, tenuously linked to reality. The tuning down of Muslims participates in the construction of a saga which justifies and reinforces the Christian power, by exposing their ambitions as ridiculous boasting:

But the feet cannot become the head, nor the earth the sky, nor the servant the master. That perverse one, the son of a viper, of the seed of a serpent, the son of a stranger from the race of Satan, thought (covetously) of the throne of David and said, 'I will rule in Şeyon', for pride entered into his heart, as (into) the Devil his father.²¹

Let's notice that at the 20th century, such undermining treatments are avoided out of respect for the territorial integration of Muslims, even if they remain second-rate subjects of the Empire where Christianity is the religion of the State. Now, Haylä-Səllase is not threatened by *jihad* but Somali irredentism. Notwithstanding, the soberest approach of Haylä-Giyorgis Bällätä continues to put down Muslim identity. There is no description of any qualities, but still the author refers to the traditional frame of defaults in order to raise the shine of Christian heroes. Amongst the most meaningful one may quote cowardice, because enemies only attack when they are outnumbering Christian armies ("They were as many as the sand of the sea and the land of Ğəğğəga was as covered by locusts "; Haylä-Giyorgis Bällätä: 64), or resorting to divination and spells.

For instance, in the main Ethiopian source about the reign of the emperor Mənilək II (r. 1889-1913), the chronicle written by the historiographer Gäbrä-Səllase from the events he has witnessed in some parts, gives a between-the-lines, mocking account of the campaign the *ras* Wäldä-Giyorgis led against the rebelling sultan of Adal, Mähämmäd Anfari, in Awsa, in north-eastern Ethiopia. Before the attack of the Ethiopian army, wizards and clairvoyants gave advices to their sultan, in order to gain him victory:

Those ones [the wizards and clairvoyants] replied to him: 'None of your men shall shoot with their guns. Ordain all the guns to be piled up in a place. If ever guns were shooting, our whole witchcraft will be destroyed. We will chain with our enchantment your enemies' rifles and none of your soldiers will be wounded. If you believe that we are telling a lie, you can tie our hands with ropes and chains behind our back and put us in front of your army line.' [...] Then, the Adal, as many as blades and leaves ordered in seven or eight rows, placed in front of them their *asmètəgna* [አስማተኛ።: *asmatäñña*: wizard, sorcerer] bound with chains and ropes and arrived in battle array. [...] they [The Ethiopians] attacked and destroyed them. During the fight, the *asmètəgnotch* were picking soil up and spread it around, throwing themselves in the dust, but it was useless. [...] As regard the soldiers from Šäwa [Ethiopian centre of power at this time], their shots were so fierce, their race so fast, that no Adal could escape. All the enemies lay on the battlefield like a pile of dead leaves.²²

The depiction of the scene appeals to the imagination but also ridicules the so-called

habits of the Muslims to cast spells on their enemies in the beginning of the battle.²³ The main aim is certainly to lower the war qualities of Muslims, but sometimes sources do not succeed in keeping quiet about the combatant value of the enemies, who are described as “great fighters” (Huntingford 1965, 91) or unafraid of dying as martyrs, in a harangue of Amdä-Şyon, comparing both armies:

Have you not heard what these Moslem rebels who know not Christ say against the anointed of God: “When the Christians kill us we become martyrs, and when we kill the Christians we gain paradise”?²⁴

The chronicle of the deeds of King Əskəndər (r. 1478-1494) even reveals the humiliating defeat he endured in Adal, as the punishment of God for the emperor didn’t protect his own subjects from the greed of his soldiers. He undertook a military expedition, despite some holy men dissuaded him to go:

Upon his return, the Muslims chased him; they were few; but when he engaged them in a fight, all the soldiers withdrew. Some were killed on the spot, some could escape, and others were taken prisoners. As regards the King, God protected him with the wings of his angels who brought him safe and sound to his palace. He stayed here sad and gloomy, as he contemplated going back to the land of Adal in order to take revenge on his enemies; but this idea would not become reality.²⁵

4. What the Christian chronicles don’t tell

Muslims were made strangers the more easily as they were politically dominated by the Christians. In fact, the reality is complex and questions the ambiguous balance of power between centre and peripheries. In the first place, the separation between both communities is not a clear line, but inhabitants belonging to the two monotheisms are mingled in the very heart of the empire, throughout the high-plateaus (Tigre, Wällo, south of Şäwa, for instance). Secondly, Muslims were long-distance traders. On their camels and in their harbours they handled the wealth of all Ethiopia. The chronicle of Amdä-Şyon, through the speech of Gäməldin, a Yəfat king, does not conceal it, even if the control of trade routes is attributed to the Christian sovereign, when in reality the latter is dependent on Muslim merchants for the breath of the kingdom’s economy: “For behold, the land of the Moslems is now ruined. Leave what remains (in) the country and do not ravage it again, that they may work for you by trading, because I and all the Moslems peoples are your slaves.”²⁶ A probably borrowed Arabian word *ğübarti* [ጀባርቲ፡፡], which can be understood in Amharic as ‘Muslims amongst Christian territories’, is understood by the Ethiopian

scholar Berhanou Abebe as 'Muslim trader'.²⁷ This meaning emphasizes their importance in the Ethiopian involvement in the Red Sea trade.

Next, the permanent state of war however leaves place for peaceful coexistence or even alliance, as the chronicle of King Sārṣä Dəngäl gives us an account of the episode of an alliance between the *azmāč* Taklo and the Lord Asma ʿadin:

Asmā ʿadin was sincere, did not lie and not break oaths and agreements [...] The King encamped with them and there was a perfect understanding between Christians and Muslims.²⁸

Finally, the Muslim part and component of the Ethiopian empire is recognized by the King himself, in this alleged speech:

Say not again those words to me, for I shall not return to my country while the rebel Moslems make war on me, (who am) king of all the Moslems of the land of Ethiopia, for I trust in the help of God. (Huntingford 1965, 67)

Conclusion

Chronicles produced by the Christian *Amhara* power have been an ideological tool whose use is to extinguish any doubt concerning the legitimacy of the rulers. The more their sphere of authority extended, the harder the discourse against Muslim tributaries became. Written by clergymen, the official texts are the fruits of the symbiosis between Church and State, whose words fostered continual wars so that the government's domination of a multidenominational society would be reinforced. Henceforth, the fabrication of Muslims played its role of sustaining the political order, according to one purpose of stereotypes as it has been defined by Alexander Hassam:

According to this view, stereotypes exist not to save effort but to make social and political behaviour possible. Hence, where it is observed, the error of stereotypes has its basis not in psychological deficiency but in the political positions and aspirations of the groups that holds them.²⁹

Consequently, the struggle increased in frequency and in length, as Muslims realized their common interest and their weight in the Ethiopian economical system. Indeed, Muslims are made different and their existence is distorted as a threat, when in reality they constitute a vital part of Ethiopian society. It is a case of the handling of the image of Others by politics, so far from concrete life.

Notes

- 1 M. Jahoda, 1964, "Stereotype", in *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, N. Y.: 694.
- 2 "[...] l'Éthiopie ayant été pendant bien quatorze siècles, une île des Chrétiens au milieu de la mer des païens." Source: djibouti.frontafrique.org/?doc59 (27/12/2011)
- 3 ነጋሢ, the verbal root is: ነግሠ, "become, king, rule, reign" (W. Leslau, 1987, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez*, Wiesbaden: 392).
- 4 J. Cuoq, 1981, *L'islam en Éthiopie*, Paris: 30.
- 5 J. S. Trimingham, 1965, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London: 46-47.
- 6 Taddesse Tamrat, 1972, *Church and State*, Oxford: 6.
- 7 G. W. B. Huntingford, 1965, *The Glorious Victories of 'Āmda Šeyon*, Oxford: 33.
- 8 Leslau, *op. cit.*: 61.
- 9 Täsämma Habtä Mika'el Gəššəw, 1951 *a.m.*, *Käsate Bərhan Täsämma*, Addis-Abäba: 67.
- 10 Haylä-Giyorgis Bäällätä, 1989 *a.m.*, *Yä-Ləul ras Mäk^wännən tarik*, Addis-Abäba: 72.
- 11 Haylä-Giyorgis Bäällätä, *op. cit.*: 64.
- 12 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 59; 67.
- 13 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 55.
- 14 Gascon, 2006: 37.
- 15 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 73.
- 16 Haylä-Giyorgis Bäällätä, *op. cit.*: 42.
- 17 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 67.
- 18 *Idem.*
- 19 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 53-54.
- 20 Haylä-Giyorgis Bäällätä, *op. cit.*: 26.
- 21 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 55.
- 22 Guèbrè Sellassié, 1932, *Chronique du Règne de Ménélik II, Roi des rois d'Éthiopie*, Paris: 404-406.
- 23 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 88-89.
- 24 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 69.
- 25 J. Perruchon, mars-avril 1894, "Histoire d'Eskender", *Journal Asiatique*, Paris: 357-358.
- 26 Huntingford, *op. cit.*: 67.
- 27 Berhanou Abebe, 1998, *Histoire de l'Éthiopie, d'Axoum à la révolution*, Addis Abeba/Paris: 59.
- 28 K. Conti-Rossini, 1907, "Historia Regis Sarša Dengel (Malak Sagad)", Paris: 19.
- 29 S. Alexander Haslam, 2004, "Stereotypes", *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, London/N. Y.: 1003.

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[The History of Prince *ras Mäk^wännən*, Manuscript first handed in to the National Printing Agency in 1946, Translated from Gəʿəz to Amharic and published in 1996–97 at Addis Abäba.]
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