Arabic language and alphabet in Ethiopia

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Connections between the two sides of the Red Sea: I millennium b.C.

Egyptian soldiers from Hatshepsut's expedition (1479–1458 b.C.) to the Land of Punt as depicted from her temple at Dayr Baḥrī.

Sabaic inscriptions found in Yeha, NE Ethiopia, capital of the Da'mat Kingdom.
Trade routes during the Aksumite Kingdom
Centuries ca. V b.C.-VIII A.D.
Ethiopian linguistic environment
Arabic language spreading channels:

Commercial context:
- Communities of Arabic-speaking traders; Arabic used in the markets.

Religious context:
- Christian: texts translated into Ge’ez from Arabic; Arabic used for political relationships together with Ge’ez
- Islamic: religious and cultural language of Ethiopian Muslims or immigrant Muslim learned men; Arabic used in Islamic institutions and as a common lingua franca among Muslims.
Arabic speakers in Ethiopia:

Immigrants of Arab origin or Arabic-speakers who mantain their native language in a non-Arab context (traders or Muslim learned men)
Ethiopian arabicised people (Arabic as a second language) who use Arabic in commercial and Islamic context.

Levels of oral skills:
- mnemonic recitation of the Coran and religios formulas
- salutation formulas
- perfect fluency for those who travelled to Arab world
- use of Arabic loan-words
Arabic literature in Ethiopia:

Arabic works imported from the Islamic world into Ethiopia, then copied and spread

Arabic works of local Muslim learned men (‘ulamā’) and intellectuals; its importance:

- Linguistically: level of knowledge of written Arabic.
- Culturally: main subjects that concern the Ethiopian Islamic community
- Historically: local historical sources about Islamic principalities of Ethiopia
Historical literature


[Egyptian edition 1984 A.D., from ‘Abd Allāh Šarīf Museum collection]

The text is the only Arabic source about the Muslim conquests made in southern, central and northern Ethiopia by *imām* Ahmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (alias Grañ) in the second third of the 16th century.
Historical literature

Fath Madinat Harar (The Conquest of the Town of Harar), by Yaḥyā b. Naṣr Allāh. It is a sort of hagiographical and legendary historiography of the town of Harar in the 13th century.

Ms. IES 794/a, ff. 1v-2r
Literary genres:

Historical:
about local history by Arab or local authors; chronological list of rulers; Genealogical trees;

Hagiographical:
works referring to characters, šuyūḥ, linked to specific regions

Mystical:
poetry, hymns in praise of the Prophet, litanies, invocations of the name of God intended to be recited during devotional practices; also in local languages with Arabic script (‘aḡamī)

Pietistic

Theological and moralistic

Juridical and administrative
Pietistic literature:

*al-Fath al-Rahmani*, (The Merciful Revelation), compiled by the Hararī šayḥ Ḥāsim b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (ca. 1711- ca. 1765), of the Qādiriyya ṣūfī order.

‘Abd Allāh Šarīf Museum, Ms. 1563, 1176H./1762A.D., ff. 2v-3r
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Pietistic

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Juridical and administrative
al-Fath al-Rahmānī, by the Hararī šayḥ Hāšim b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (ca. 1711- ca. 1765). [Ms. IES 2670, ff. 37v-38r, 20th century]
Taḥmīs qaṣīdat al-Burda li-l-Būšīrī, by the Egyptian Muḥammad b.ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Makkī al-Fayyūmī

[Ms. IES 1855, 18th century, ff. 3v-5r]
Kitāb al-Farā'id (The Book of Obligations); three different works in Old Harari by āw 'Abd al-Rahmān al-'Arāšī, faqīh Ṭayyib al-Wanāği al-Ṣadrī, 'Abd Allāh 'Umar b. Gibrīl al-Aswām al-Sāḥitī.
Kitāb al-Farāʾid (The Book of Obligations), section attributed to faqīh Ṭayyib al-Wanāġī al-Ṣadrī.

[Ms. IES 262, 18th-19th century, f.20v]
Juridical and administrative documents

local qādī court registers

[Ms. IES 955, ca. 1240H./1825A.D., ff. 82v-83]
Thank you for your attention

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