Languages and literatures of the Muslims in the Horn of Africa. Some first reflections

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Research framework

Islam in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Literary Approach

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- Dr. Michele Petrone
- Dr. Anne Regourd
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Theoretical framework

Linguistic situation in the Islamic world outside the Arab world

Some basic dichotomies:
- Classical Arabic/Local language (spoken and written)
  - Written Tradition in Arabic and in local languages
  - Higher culture/lower culture
  - Learned/popular culture
- Oral and written circulation of texts in both Arabic and local languages

Dachbegriff:
- Islamic Languages/Languages of Islam
- Not typical of Islamic civilization
Theoretical framework

Same dichotomies in other traditions
Example: Jewish tradition

- Hebrew and Aramaic/ Yiddish (Ladino, Judeo-Arabic)
- Written tradition in the “Classical” / Written traditions in vernacular
- Higher vs. Lower/Learned vs. popular

Dachbegriff:
- Jewish Languages
State of research: Islamic languages

Alessandro Bausani, “Per una lettura comparata delle lingue islamiche”, in Atti del II Congresso di Studi arabi e Islamici, Napoli, 1967, pp. 145-56


Islamic languages:

- Written languages influenced by Arabic (Persian, Ottoman Turkish) models
- Bookish superstratum influences on other written traditions in different languages
- Oral literature, folklore is apparently less influenced by this learned superstratum
State of research: Islamic languages in Africa

- Local languages (Fulfulde then Hausa) become “learned dialects” for religious explanation
- Texts have basic oral diffusion but are under a strong Arabic learned influence (e.g. in the Fulfulde Kabbe)

- Influence of Classical Arabic on local languages
- Creation of an «oral learned literature»
- Possible transition to the written form (no manuscript tradition)
State of research: Islamic languages in East Africa


- Complementarity between «scribal fluency» in Classical Arabic
- and stable orality in a local language


- Direct impact of Islam on the birth of Kiswahili
- Intervention of missionaries and colonial administrators (e.g. Johann Ludwig Krapf; Carl Meinhof)
- De-islamization of the language
- Passage from Arabic to Latin script
State of research: Islamic languages in the Horn of Africa


- General analysis of the Arabic literary production in Somalia


- Harari, not Arabic has been the major language of Islam in the Harar area in the past three centuries
- The language of communication between the various groups in the Gurage area South of Addis Ababa is Amharic not Arabic

vs


- Arabic as lingua franca of the Ethiopian Muslims (see also Ricci’s review of the Qeddus Qur’an)
The status of Arabic

Modern Standard Arabic official language of Eritrea (of Somalia until 1972)

- Contemporary production of Arabic literature
- Quite widespread command of spoken Arabic

Arabic

- Classical (written; sporadic oral usage: e.g. in religious sermons and exhortations)

Some kind of spoken Arabic

- Yemeni dialect
- Sudan dialect
- Egyptian dialect
- Gulf dialect
- Hybrid varieties of the learned milieu
Classical Arabic

Widely used in the Horn for teaching and learning

- Manuscripts since the end of the 17th century

Image:

Oldest so far found dated Islamic manuscript in Ethiopia
22 ǧumādā al-āḥīra 989
A.H./14 July 1581 A.D. — IES 1852, colophon.

Egyptian origin

Acquired by the emir of Harar
Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Yūsuf 1212/1797-8
Classical Arabic

- Printed books since 1920
- Standard texts for instruction as everywhere else in the Islamic world
- Oral explanation of the texts in local languages
- No written commentaries in local languages on Arabic texts found so far

Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali Muslim learned men did/do write extensively in Classical Arabic

Huge production in:
- Historiography
- Hagiography
- Arabic grammar
- Tafsīr
- ‘Aqīda
- Fiqh
- Pietistic literature
The case of Harar

Special case:
Walled town of Harar

Independent emirate 1647-1885 and 1885-1887

Both Arabic and Harari (‘aǧamī) manuscripts copied and produced in town

Copenhagen, 7 November 2014
Dias 12
The case of Harar: Arabic manuscript tradition

Huge Arabic manuscript tradition in Harar

Image:
First dated Arabic manuscript from Harar containing works of a local learned man:
VatAr 1791
Colophon June 4 1765

Copenhagen, 7 November 2014
Dias 13
Harari as language of Islam

Old Harari: manuscript literature in Arabic script
Manuscript tradition since 18th century
Tendency to orthographic standardization

Copenhagen, 7 November 2014
Dias 14
Harari as language of Islam

Harari

Pietistic literature
- Both written and oral circulation (e.g. recitation during Mawlid)
- Basic instruction texts in theology and law (Kitāb al-farā‘īḍ)
- Difficult to understand for contemporary Hararis
- Growing Modern Harari printed literature in fidal
- Spoken Islamic language

“Oral learned literature” in Harari?
- Harari language of the Harari people
- Practically unknown by other Ethiopian Muslims (also in the Harar area)
Amharic and Oromo as languages of Islam

Amharic (and Oromo)
Limited written tradition in ‘ağamî
Very recent manuscripts (since the end of 19th century)

Image above:
IES 263: Oromo Islamic poetry

Image below:
IES 4610: Amharic Islamic poetry
Amharic and Oromo as languages of Islam

Amharic (and Oromo) ‘aḡamī

- Pietistic literature
- Instruction basics
  - Both written and oral circulation
  - Texts to be recited
    - Some manuscripts are possibly just an aide-mémoire for recitation
- No structured manuscript tradition
- No standardized orthography

- “Indigenizing” Islam
  - Texts meant for the average believer
  - Texts full of learned references
  - Simple descriptions of the tenets of religion
Amharic and Oromo as languages of Islam

Growing Islamic printing production

Not only in Arabic script: more Islamic literature in fidäl (or in Latin script for Oromo)

Copenhagen, 7 November 2014
Dias 18
Amharic and Oromo as languages of Islam

Amharic and Oromo as “Islamic Languages”
• Huge production of Islamic audios and videos
• Spoken language of Muslims and Christians
• Difference between Islamic and Christian Amharic/Oromo

• Amharic lingua franca of the Muslims in Central Ethiopia
• Oromo increasingly exposed to Islamization
• Harari basic component of the local Harari identity
Somali manuscript tradition

Dispersed written text production in ‘aġamī

- Texts in different dialects
- Wide oral circulation
- Chimbalazi in Brava

No full-fledged manuscript tradition

- Manuscript texts in Somali difficult to understand nowadays
- No standardized orthography
- Possibly only support for by heart learning

Latin script used in modern and contemporary literary tradition
Languages and literatures of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa: tentative conclusions

Local Islamic literary traditions in the Horn

- Only complementary to Arabic in content
- Strongly influenced by Arabic language and sources
- ‘Ağamī script only rarely read nowadays
- Transferring basic religious instruction to the average believers

Basic circulation of knowledge through recitation, not reading

Partial exception: Harar (Old Harari tradition)
Languages and literatures of the Muslims of the Horn of Africa: tentative conclusions

Formation of Islamic communication languages

- Contemporary phenomenon

Spread of Islamic media

- Production of booklets for the believers in Oromo, Amharic, Somali, Tigrinya
- Translations from Arabic
- Video, audio, CDs

Birth of an Islamic variant of the common Islamic/Christian language
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