Islam in the Horn of Africa.  
A comparative literary approach

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Copenhagen, 7 October 2014
Dias 1
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Administrative data

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Originally based at the University of Florence (01.07.13)
Transferred to the University of Copenhagen on 01.02.14
Now based at the Institute of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies/University of Copenhagen

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Dias 2
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Staff

Principal Investigator: Alessandro Gori
Associated Researchers:
  • Dr. Sara Fani
  • Dr. Michele Petrone
  • Dr. Anne Regourd
  • Mr. Orhan Toy

One more position to be filled
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Geographical context

The Horn of Africa

- Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, Puntland, Somalia

Highly unstable

Main recent conflicts:

- Ethiopia/Somalia (2006-9)
- Somaliland/Puntland (2007-present)
- Djibouti/Eritrea (2008)
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Project fields

Arabic Literature in a wider sense:

- Both classical (pre-modern) and modern
- Both “Texts that are intended to do more than instruct and inform” (Geert Jan van Gelder)
- and especially:
  - Arabic grammar and rhetoric
  - Scientifical literature
  - Historical and geographical literatue
  - Theology
  - Law
  - Mysticism (devotional literature; invocations; supplications)
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Project scope

Islamic Studies
- The project focuses on the Islamic intellectual tradition in the Horn of Africa

African Studies
- The Project focuses on Islam in Africa (or African Islam) and its dialectic connexion with “main stream” Arab Islam
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Documentary base

Manuscript and printed texts

- Oldest so far found dated Islamic manuscript in Ethiopia 22 ǧumāda al-āḥrām 989 A.H./14 July 1581 A.D. — IES 1852, colophon.
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Documentary base

- Contemporary production
- Islamic printing presses and publishing houses exp. since 1991 after the fall of the “Derg” regime
- Large contemporary production of Islamic printed books
- Islamic calligraphy in local languages

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Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Documentary base

Texts copied or printed abroad
- E.g. manuscripts copied Egypt (or Yemen) and taken to Ethiopia
- Books printed in Cairo and sold in Ethiopia

Manuscripts copied and books printed in Ethiopia
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- Texts written in Arabic and in local languages (Old Harari, Amharic, Oromo, Somali)

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Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Digital research environment

Complex relational database of the works circulating among the Muslims in Africa

- descriptions of texts and manuscripts
- authors
- places
- bibliography

- A user-friendly browsing and search interface
- sample text editions (theological and legal thought, historiography and hagiography)
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Methodology

Methodology of the research

- Identification of texts (both known and previously unknown)
- Expand the corpus of available texts to make a more representative research

Classification according to

- Genres
- Contents
- Titles, authors
- Places of creation
- Number of witnesses
- Distribution of witnesses, and linguistic and graphic peculiarities

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Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: First results

- Handlist of the codices
- Only main works listed
- Codicological analysis
- Selected images of dated manuscripts

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Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Texts

Texts produced by local authors (main genres):

- Arabic grammar
- Commentaries on the Qur’ān
- Historical texts
- Pietistic literature
- Mystical literature

Texts produced in the wider Islamic world (main genres):

- Theology
- Law
- Science
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Main goals

Creation of:

- critical picture of the Islamic literary history of the Horn of Africa (beyond the Arabic Literature of Africa)
- growing database of African Islamic literature, African Islamic biography and African Islamic topography

Comparative research:

- between the different sub-regions of the focus area
- between the African “local” Islam and the “mainstream” Islamic tradition
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Main goals

Increase the awareness:

- of Islam in Africa for the scholarship
- of the value of local tradition in Africa itself

Contribute to the understanding of the processes of Islamization in the focus area and in Sub-saharan Africa in general

Contribute to the preservation and valorization of the Islamic cultural heritage in the area

Main targets:

- local people (esp. youth) and
- the international community

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Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Obstacles

- Absence of infrastructure
- Lack of economical means

Harar, private museum of ‘Abdallāh Šarīf
Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach: Obstacles

Unclear historical and cultural consciousness
Religious sectarianism

Film: Kisimayo (Somalia), 2012. Destruction of the holy shrines
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