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THE SPACE OF THE ORAL IN THE HISTORY OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF KINGLY TERRITORIES IN GONDAR, NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

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In the present paper I propose to bring together two literary traditions: that of European written documental sources on the history of Portuguese-Ethiopian contacts during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries and oral literature recently collected in Northern Ethiopia concerning the political and religious transformations occurred in that same period in that region.

Let me start by mentioning that much effort has been made by researchers regarding the classification and analysis of the literary and historiographic riches of both European and Ethiopian written documentation for that period (see Pankhurst, Abir, Pennec). Such studies span the fields of political and religious history, philology, literature and art, and gave rise to a fairly well-researched body of knowledge, which one could liken to that of many Eastern and Middle-Eastern contexts. In fact, this body has actually carved a distinct tradition of area studies not unrelated to others associated with the formation of Orientalist visions in Western productions.

By stressing the links between Western modes of research and sociological imagination about the Northern Ethiopian context and those Middle Eastern areas touched by the Orientalist discourse, Ethiopian studies have emerged as a particular strain of such discourse – one in which many of the Orientalist *topoi* have been curiousely transformed and even reversed, in view of the interest of recreating images of ideological identity under the Christendom cloak (an ancient pattern in European visions of Christian Ethiopia), while stressing the antiquity of Abyssinian cultural and linguistic ties with the Arabian Peninsula.

This state of affairs has sadly resulted in an enduring lack of interest, on the part of anthropologists and historians, in the flowering Amhara and Tigray oral literature of local and regional provenance concerned with the construction of political and religious memories of the afore-mentioned historical period. This lackadaisical attitude has resulted

1) in the absence of a systematic collecting work of oral literature of historical-legendary nature; and 2) in the resulting lack of confrontation between such oral sources with written documentation, of both Western and Ethiopian origin.

Before proceeding further on the subject proper of this paper, I would also wish to refer to an additional feature of the heteroclite trunk that make the so-called Ethiopian studies, one that was finely characterised by anthropologist Wendy James in her contribution to the collective work edited by Richard Fardon, *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing* (Fardon, 1990). Her chapter, like the others in that book, argues that the topical sources of anthropological thought and discourse on non-Western societies come frequently from literary, cartographic and iconographic materials of Western origin. The general idea behind it is that a basic, generally unconscious, process of thematic localizing of Anthropological research and production relies in the broad imagetic pool that Western travel writing, cosmographic and cartographic sources has been producing since the Classical era.

The special flavour of Ethiopian studies derives from the way that this regional area was touched by the weight of stereotypes and literary imagination compounded in an European medieval myth - in the sense given by Marcel Detienne in *L'invention de la mythologie* (Detienne, 1981): the one that flourished from the diffusion of the Letter of Prester John of the Indies (James, 1991). Comparing her own field of research – Sudan – and Ethiopia, she concludes that – contrary to scientific production on Sudan (in the area of social sciences) - centuries of Euro-Ethiopian playing with the afore-mentioned stereotypes have produced a world of mis-understandings, that greatly hurt scientific objectivity in the field of Ethiopian studies. The image of Prester John has, throughout the ages, acted as a double-sided mask which made Northern Ethiopians half-believe in the mask they put on to conform to the European expectations regarding the identity of the fabulous priest-king as a historical Ethiopian sovereign [see Biondo Flavio, *Historiarum ab Inclinatione Romanorum*, Década 4, 1442; see the letter of Theodros to Queen Victoria].

Her analysis of the enduring influence of the Prester John stereotype is precious, although the results of the comparison may need revising (after all, Wendy James sets out exalting the legacy of her *maître a penser* E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and the work of the British school of Sudanists, and we should remind ourselves that Britain was for almost a century the colonial administrator of that country).

To this myth, one should actually add another, no less cumbersome: that of the Queen of Sheba, which has in the late nineteenth century brought together European and Ethiopian

imagetic traditions anchored in the Biblical passages of *I Kings*, 10: 1-13, where the encounter of the Queen of the South (aka. Belkis or Maqeda) and the Jewish king Solomon is first mentioned. The French Historian Bertrand Hirsch has actually stressed that the chronology of Abyssinian identitarian imagistic can be traced through the rise of the Abyssinian assumption of the Prester John myth, in mid-fifteenth century, to its waning in the nineteenth century, the moment when it began being replaced as a national portrait by that of Sheba as queen-mother, and Menelik I as the son begotten from her sexual union with Solomon. This replacement seems to have come about just as Menelik II started consolidating the Christian Abyssinian hold on hitherto never conquered territories to the South and Southeast (Hirsch, 2005), after defeating the Italian army in the much celebrated battle of Adwa, in 1896.

Broadly speaking, these two mythical narratives, born and developed out of the collusion of European and Ethiopian political-geographical visions, depict Ethiopia looking from behind the looking glass at the Judeo-Christian world. They relate respectively to:

1) Christian identity and the relation between religious and political power structures, and 2) civilizational encounters via ethnic intermarriage (hyper-exogamy), structured along the lines of post-Biblical racial-geographical tripartite division of the world by the progeny of Noah (Sem-Japhet-Cham).

The entanglement of history and myth characterises Euro-Ethiopian relations, whether presented in literary form or extracted from historical documentation. This same entanglement is visible in Northern Ethiopian oral traditions relating to the documented presence of Westerners in the country during the 16th and 17th century.

I thus propose to briefly trace the rhetorical character of the “Portuguese” *topos* in this legendary tradition. As already mentioned, ethiopianist (also referred to as *ethiopisant*) historians and anthropologists have recurrently paid little or no attention to such tradition, the former traditionally dedicating almost exclusive attention to written sources, and the latter preferring Southern Ethiopia as their area of study.

A clarification on the use, in this context, of the complex and slippery concept of “myth” is, I believe, needed at this point. Not renouncing the virtues and gifts of the studies on the symbolic aspects of “mythical” narratives that emerged from Levi-Straussian structural analysis, I propose to complement it with an argumentative and stylistic analysis. I’m not going to expand my thoughts on the subject, but simply to note that one of the main rhetorical modes used in such kind of narratives is what is generally known as *reduction ad absurdum*. An absurd proposition that inverts experimental knowledge of the world is

placed at the beginning of a mythical narrative ("At the time when women ruled", or "At the time when men and animals could speak to each other", or "At the time when God created Man out of clay", etc.). The subsequent procedure is roughly to transform the initial proposition in such way that the empirical present, by definition senseless, is insufflated with a justificatory power ("that is why women are not equal to men", or "that is why the moon is chassed by the sun", or "that is why Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden"). Historical discourse, on the other hand, like Anthropology and other social sciences, is particularly permeable to the – frequently fallacious – mode of *petitio principii* (where "raising the question" becomes "begging the question"), in which the creation of temporal, or geographical, or cultural, distance is used as a tool to reflect upon contemporaneity, locality and identity [history is always *l'histoire pour*…, C. L.-S.].

Ethiopia was more obviously confronted with the European vision of the millenarian priestly king Prester John from the early 16th century to the mid 17th century. This was the time when Portuguese travellers, warriors and missionaries landed on the Christian Abyssinian royal court with a highly ideological project that we can trace to the millenarian and cruzading strains of the Portuguese kingship. From Rodrigo da Cunha's embassy (1520-26), to Cristóvão da Gama's expedition (1540-43), to the two Jesuit missions (1555-1590, 1603-34), the Portuguese accounts provide us with a transformative model where the search of the identical harbours disenchantment and provides matter to an effort, most visible during the second Jesuit mission, to conform Christian Ethiopian political, administrative and religious structures to the "lost" model: this intention is the background to the conversion of Susenyos, the nomination of a Catholic patriarch for Ethiopia, and the Catholic influence on Ethiopian architecture, religious art, and political reforms of the kingdom, attempted in the second decade of the 17th century. The final texts of the mission return, with a vengeance, to the disenchantment mode, where barbarism, heresy and diabolism become the driving descriptors of the country [Almeida, Mendes, Lobo].

It is most interesting that the written Ethiopian documentation for this period has been either manipulated, suppressed, or – when kept – very combative, in defence of the Orthodox point of view. Particularly, for the reign of king Fasiladas, the heir of the "Catholic" king Susenyos, and generally considered the restorer of the Orthodox faith and founder of the city of Gondar (that became the royal siege, until mid 19th century), an important written record is missing: that of the extended chronicle of the king.

A number of oral versions of the king's life do exist, but they hardly conform to the historiographical versions taken as canonical for the construction of modern Abyssinian

political and religious history. Contrary to Bertrand Hirsch's view, that tends to minimize the influence of the traditions connected to the 13th century *Kebra Nagast*, where a specific Ethiopian version of the Queen of Sheba narrative is first recorded, I would argue that important motives of the oral legends concerning the political and religious events of the 16th-17th century are interpreted according to what we could call the Queen of Sheba framework (from the Muslim jihad wars to the recomposition of the kingdom caused by the arrival of the Oromo populations at the highlands, to the religious civil wars and the expansion of the *k'bat*, or unctionist faith, in areas previously connected with the Catholic missionary effort).

The oral literature collected in Gondar and its vicinity, in Gojjam and in northern Tigray, offer us a number of examples of the construction of a “Portuguese” [or more generally *ferenji* – meaning “foreign”, “European” or “Turk”] *topos*, connected with Christian identity, Orthodox identity, of *k’bat* identity, and, in the other. It must be said that this isn't an oral tradition disconnected from the written. Often, the story-tellers, keepers of oral traditions [specially priests and church laymen], flow from oral reinterpretation of written sources to oral reproduction of written transcriptions of oral legends, to autonomy of oral accounts [*afatarik*], with outright separation between oral and written forms of legitimizing narrative traditions.

Some examples of the “Portuguese” *topos* in Northern Ethiopian legendary tradition are either relevant historical figures, subject to more or less detailed written prosopographies (Christóvão da Gama vs Grañ, Paez, Berdumez and Mendoz) or a collective entity (the Portuguese soldiers, the Portuguese builders of the Gondarine castles). What I'm most interested in is understanding the use of the, let's say, foreign *topos* in the oral narratives concerned with dynastical change, and national identity. The “Portuguese” in Ethiopian legendary tradition are figures of symbolic marginality, equivalent to the “Turkish” or “Yemenite” castle builders, the “Roman” princesses or the “Armenian” priests. They play a specific symbolic function within a narrative chessboard that includes figures like the Muslim adalis, the Oromo pastoralists, the Tigrynian monks, the slaves, *debtara* sages*, bahatawy profets.* They are creditors of mirrored Christian identity, foreigners endowed with the power to support the Christian royal institution, but also arbingers of political and religious dissent.

An homology ought to be stressed between the Portuguese castle builders (ineffective, in the case of Gondar's Fasiladas castle) and the Roman wife(s) of Ethiopian kings (Susenyos, Fasiladas, and even Portuguese wife of the emir of Harar). Be it in the

accounts relating to the establishment of royal compounds - the cycle of the Go prophecy (a motif inherited from the European vision of Prester John: the king, the patriarch and the castle), or in those narratives referring to hyper-exogamic marriage (rooted in the *Kebra Nagast* model – problematic sexual union of geographically and ethnically distanced kingship figures) that lead to bloody clashes between royalty and the Orthodox clergy, or even in the versions relating to royal lust (the stories of the hairy king who kills the women he sleeps with), the participation of the foreigner mediator generaly precedes the appearance of complementary key figures of symbolic and social marginality: the holy man, and the saintly slave.

The stress given to ephemeral but potent conjunctions between royal power and (ethnic, religious and social) marginality, in the context of dynastic change, seems to me an essential key to understand the disparate flow of legendary accounts that make up many of the oral interpretations of historical events, in Northern Ethiopia. The “Portuguese” *topos* in Ethiopian oral literature is then to be interpreted as a rhetorical functionality within a larger narrative framework, where marginal figures become key interlocutors of a number of kings that show marks of statutory ambiguity (holders of mystical and diabolical powers, abusive tyrants, etc.). No wonder that many accounts relate to the established locutory tradition of *semna work* poetry (Susenyos, Ment’wab, Bekafa), and connect royal emplacements with symbolic figures like the *Zendo*, or giant snake, that is also represented in the oral and pictographic traditions of the Queen of Sheba.

In a nutshell, one could say that historical events in Ethiopia took place and were interpreted within two clashing mythical constructions – the Prester John and the Queen of Sheba models – that were interweaved in a local oral tradition that is sadly dying out today.

The interweaved accounts produce a number of invariants, jumping from father Susenyos to son Fasiladas:

The Go prophecy

The hairy and dissolute king

The king who married a foreign (Roman) princess

The Portuguese builders

The saint or slave redeemer

The blood bath

The expulsion of the foreigners

The birth of K'bat

The issues:

The limits of kingly and Church authority, and their mutual aggression

The kingly alliance with European power

The dynastical rebirth and the foundation of the New Jerusalem: Gondar

Portuguese as rhetorical *topoi* – the foreign mediator- in a dynastical renewal, complemented with the other two figures: the saint (*bahatawi*), and the slave woman.

The diabolical power of the king. An ambiguous symbolic figure. The Zendo.

The doctrinal rejection and the absorption of foreign imagery: the hairy kwer'ata re'esu as royal icon, the adoption of the Roman virgin of Santa Maria Maggiore, a version of the *Hodigitria* - *She who shows the Way* (not the *Eleousa* – *The merciful*).

Water issue – zendo, king as snake

Stories:

King Susenyos:

King Susenyos was very hairy. He was also very lustful. Although he was married, he would almost everyday request a girl to sleep with. These girls were normally slaves. Because he didn't want people to know of his capillary secret, he would order the killing of every girl he slept with, so that the secret wouldn't be divulged.

One night, he ordered that a slave girl who was widely considered as a saint that she sleep with him. He took her to the dungeon (actually, the palace's water cistern). When he was about to undress, she – who suspected the reason for the slaughter of the girls – asked that he wouldn't undress while having intercourse, arguing that she was too humble to see the body of the great king.

So, the king had no reason to kill her and he let her go. The girl then influenced the king to abandon his heretical faith and return to the Orthodox fold.

[Other version: after that night, the king became ill and his tongue swelled to the point that he stop speaking. The girl suggested that he could only be cured if he renounce his faith, and offer the throne to his son, Fasiladas].

[Other version, from Azazo: King Susenyos was very hairy and used the pool made by the Indians / Portuguese / Yemenite / Qemant to wash himself and to raise his pubic hair, so that people wouldn't know of his strange condition. After his death, his son Fasiladas ordered the construction of a castle, in which the stones were glued with a secret mortar, made of human hair and egg white]

On the foundation of Gondar [or Azazo]:

King Suysenyos was so fond of an alliance with Europeans that he asked the king of Rome to send him his daughter, Princess Zaliha. She was sent to Ethiopia, with her sister Maliha [other version: she said she'd only go to Ethiopia if her brother accompanied her]. When she arrived, the king was already dead and his son Fasiladas had been crowned. He decided to marry her [or the two sisters]. This caused an outrage among the Orthodox priests and monks. They asked the king to abandon his project but he persevered. 9.999 monks from Debra Libanos were subsequently killed by the king's army [the monastery

that was the siege of the most important religious order in Ethiopia, and whose head was in the early 17th century transferred to Azazo, undoubtedly as a measure of political pressure and affirmation of status]. In the Gondar version of the story, this bloodbath was the founding moment of the city, a sacrificial act that evokes the bull sacrifice that's requested for the founding of a church or monastery.

Bloodbath before or after the construction of the seven bridges by Fasiladas....

The foundation of Gondar: the saint who appears to Fasiladas in a misty lake, when he was chasing a bull on his horse.

Fasiladas asks the Portuguese that stayed on after the expulsion of the Jesuits to build him a castle. They proceeded to do so, but each time the main tower would crumble before being completed. An holy monk asks him, ‘Why area you looking out for things that you have in your own home’? He was referring to saintly Oromo slave woman who worked at his house and did penitence every night by praying half immersed in water. The king identifies her and she tells him that he has to build seven bridges as a penance for his murderous deed and his unlawful marriage. He does so and the tower is then miraculously built by the angels of God.

The legends – local (Danqaz, Azazo, Guzara, Mertula Maryam), and the regional legend of Gondar.

Portuguese travel literature: From same to different – Jesuit Portuguese and historiography

Portuguese in Ethiopia – history and symbolism: Portuguese myths and Jesuit legends. From identical to different. From Alvares to Almeida and Lobo. Paez: exalting the Jesuits by grafting the history of the mission onto the Abyssinian-centred historical narrative.

See Portuguese historiographical tradition on Ethiopia: Portuguese-centred (Centeno, Boavida).

The entanglements of oral and written in Northern Ethiopia

Abstract:
The topical sources of anthropological thought and discourse on non-Western societies come frequently from literary and iconographic materials of Western origin.

The seminal book *Localizing Strategies* (Fardon, 1990) argues this much. A basic, generally unconscious, process of thematic localizing of Anthropological research and production relies in the broad imagetic pool that Western travel writing, cosmographic and cartographic sources has been producing since the Classical era.

The special flavour of Ethiopian studies lies in the fact that this regional area is particularly touched by the weight of stereotypes and literary imagination that two classical myths - in the sense given by Marcel Detienne in *L'invention de la mythologie* (Detienne, 1981): the one related to Prester John of the Indies, and that of the Queen of Sheba.

This entanglement of history and myth is apparent in Northern Ethiopian oral traditions relating to the documented presence of Westerners in the country during the 16th and 17th century. The present paper traces the rhetorical character of the "Portuguese" *topos* in this legendary tradition. A word is also said about the little attention such tradition has received from both Ethiopianist historians and anthropologists, the former traditionally dedicating almost exclusive attention to written sources, and the latter preferring Southern Ethiopia as their favourite area of study.

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