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The image of Muslims and Islam in Christian Ethiopic hagiographies written in Gə‘əz

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to reconstruct the image of Muslims and Islam in the Ethiopic hagiographical texts written in the Ethiopic (Gə‘əz) language. On the basis of ca. 20 texts (both edited and remaining in manuscripts) the author surveys how various themes related to Muslims and Islam are present in this genre of Ethiopic literature and what literary purpose they serve. These themes include: economic activities of Muslims, comparing them to Biblical figures, their conversion to Christianity or associating them with the satanic forces. Additionally, the article offers a comprehensive overview of the Ge‘ez terms which are used in reference to the adherents of the Muslim faith.

Keywords: Hagiography, Ethiopian Islam, stereotype, Christian-Muslim relations, Ethiopia, Ethiopic language

The period after the year 1991 has witnessed an unprecedented growth of the scholarly literature devoted to Ethiopian Islam/Islam in Ethiopia¹. Many sources have been published, which shed a new light on the life and history of the Muslim communities in the areas which now form the territory of the Federal Democratic

¹ This distinction is somewhat charged politically (see e.g. Østebø 2013: 1037). In the present text the term ‘Ethiopian Islam’ will be used. For a summary of pre-1991 research on this subject see Hussein (1992).

Republic of Ethiopia. Thanks to, among others, the efforts of the scholars centered around the ERS-funded project based in Copenhagen, entitled "Islam in the Horn of Africa", our knowledge of the Arabic Muslim literature written in Ethiopia has greatly expanded².

And yet, there is a large corpus of the indigenous Ethiopian writings which has virtually not been studied with the purpose of extracting therefrom information on Ethiopian Islam. This corpus is Christian literature written in Gə'əz which flourished from Antiquity until the 18th century.

At first glance, Gə'əz literature seems an unlikely source to seek for information on Ethiopian Islam³. A cursory glance at any catalogue of the largest collections of Gə'əz manuscripts in Europe (such as British Library, Bibliothèque Nationale de France or Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana) will reveal that the majority of these collections consists of the Biblical and liturgical texts which usually do not provide any information on Islam. Even if the proportion between Biblical or liturgical and other texts is at times biased due to the preference of European collectors, it will probably not be a mistake to apply this conclusion to the Gə'əz literature in general⁴.

Among the non-Biblical and non-liturgical texts hagiography is in all likelihood the most popular genre. This article presents a preliminary survey of this corpus guided by three research questions: 1) Can Ethiopian hagiography contribute to our knowledge of Ethiopian Islam? 2) What image of Ethiopian Islam is conveyed by the hagiographical texts? and 3) What purposes did this image serve for those who produced and transmitted it?

1. Introductory remarks

Before presenting the relevant source material it is important to put forward some methodological remarks concerning Ethiopian hagiographical tradition.

² See the website of the project available at: <http://www.islhornofafrica.eu/> [Accessed 1 August 2019].

³ Cf.: "(...) Ethiopic religious literature makes only brief and occasional reference to Islam. It is almost as if the mention of or a direct reference to Islam in religious works were believed to violate their sanctity" (Abraham 1972: 4).

⁴ To quote a foremost expert on the subject: „It is important to stress that, contrary to what one may think looking at some Ethiopian manuscript collections gathered by the Europeans, in reality service books, directly related to the liturgical life, outnumbered those which can be described as 'literary works', and came second only after biblical books (among which the New Testament and the Psalter dominated)" (Nosnitsin 2007: 55).

We owe to the unfailing efforts of the Société des Bollandistes the conclusion that a critical study of hagiographic texts may produce important factual information (Aigrain 1953). Much like elsewhere, the study of Ethiopian hagiographical tradition must take into consideration that first of all, these texts were constructed within a framework of a specific literary convention, and secondly, that a number of factors must be weighed in order to establish the factual credibility of a given text, the most important of them being the date of the composition in relation to the date of the life of its protagonist (Chernetsov 1995). There are instances of hagiographies (in Gə'əz *gädlät*, plural of *gädl*, literally 'combat', modeled after Greek *αγών*) written many centuries after the life of their protagonists who in turn may be entirely fictitious⁵. They cannot, however, be disregarded as historically useless, as they may reflect the situation at the time when they were put to writing (Fridman 2015). Some case studies undertaken so far have demonstrated the usefulness of the hagiographical sources for the study of such issues as the territorial expansion of the Ethiopian Empire (Taddesse 1972) or the pandemics in Ethiopia (Derat 2018).

Ethiopian literature in Gə'əz knows a variety of hagiographical genres. A standard hagiography will usually include three parts: a hagiography proper that is a biographical account of a saint's life, collection of miracles attributed to him or her (*tä'ammər*) and a *mälkä'*-type hymn in his/her praise. Such an arrangement is most common both in the manuscripts and therefore also in their academic editions. Other types of texts which may be classified as hagiographical are for example: homily, prayer, monastic genealogy, entry in the Synaxary, martyrdom. It will be assumed here that the narrative texts, in particular *gädlät* and the collections of miracles are particularly useful for extracting factual data and reconstructing mentality of their authors. Interestingly, collections of miracles are often much more "realistic" than usually very conventional *gädlät* and can offer insight into the daily life of Ethiopians.

Regarding the corpus of texts used in the present volume, I have relied primarily on critical editions of the Ethiopic hagiographies and the unpublished manuscripts. I have decided to exclude instances where I had no access to the Gə'əz original texts, in other words, where only translation was available to me⁶. Also,

⁵ This is the case of indigenous saints who flourished during the Axumite era such as Yared or the so-called Nine Saints.

⁶ This resulted i.a. in the omission of the hagiography of 'Enbaqom (Ricci 1954ff) whose protagonist is a convert from Islam.

I have excluded the “foreign hagiographies”, i.e. *gädlät* of various personages who were not active in Ethiopia⁷. The corpus is definitely far from exhaustive and many other texts may be found which will either confirm or disprove the arguments presented here. When referring to the hagiographies I use the name of a saint rather than of the editor (see bibliography) and the page numbers in brackets refer to the Gə‘əz text only.

2. Identifying Muslims in Ethiopian hagiographies

In the course of studying hagiographical texts for the present contribution it became clear that the seemingly simple task of identifying the presence of Muslims is in fact rather difficult. The reasons for this difficulty are at least twofold. First of all, in the texts we very rarely encounter attributes which would unequivocally point to Islam. Secondly, the lexical terms which the texts use for conveying religious “otherness” are often quite confusing. Let us start with the second problem.

The most common name for Muslims in Gə‘əz is in singular *tānbāl* (variants: *tānbal*, *tānbəl*, *tānbalatawi*, *tānbalatay*), the plural of which is *tānbālat* (variants: *tānabəl*, *tānabəlt*, *tānbalan*) (Dillmann 1865: col. 562-563). Its etymology is open to debate (Leslau 1991: 576-577). What is certain is that it is a proper noun with the meaning ‘mediator, ambassador, envoy, messenger’ which functions also as a name for the adherents of Islam⁸. This word in most cases unequivocally points to Muslims and is not charged with any negative connotation. A similar semantic shift is observable in the case of the name of Ethiopian Jews referred to as *fālasī* (from which the English *Felasha* is derived), the meaning of which is ‘landless person, an exile, stranger, monk, or ascetic’ (Dege-Müller 2018: 261).

Another word the meaning of which is perfectly clear is *‘əsmā‘elawī* (plural *‘əsmā‘elawāyan*), which like its English equivalent *Ishmaelite*, derives from the name of Ismael, Abraham’s eldest son (Gen. 25: 17). Equally obvious, though

⁷ This effectively means that all the texts taken into consideration are biographies of Ethiopian monks. But note that as I pointed elsewhere (Krawczuk 2017) “foreign” hagiographies may contain interesting references to Islam and Muslims.

⁸ In the corpus I did not find this word occurring in a context that would clearly mean ‘messenger etc.’ and not a Muslim, but such occurrences are listed in the entry in Dillmann’s dictionary. The nominal form used in reference to Christians attested in the corpus is *mätānbalan* (‘Ananya f. 45r).

seemingly less frequent, is the word *'aslam* used as a collective noun⁹ or *'aslamawi*.

A frequently occurring name which can be interpreted as a name for Muslims is *'arāb* and its various derivatives (such as *'arābawi*). Theoretically, this name should be regarded as ethnonym 'Arab' and in many passages this is the most appropriate translation. In the present corpus the name appears in the context in which their Christian protagonists are outside Ethiopia¹⁰. It cannot be excluded, however, that it may also refer by extension to Muslims. For example, the hagiography of 'Isay'yyas describes a persecution (*səddāt*) of Christians by the people called Qw'ändäla who are described with an epithet *täkwəlatä 'arāb* 'Arab wolves' ('Isay'yyas 250). While I was not able to locate the Qw'ändäla name elsewhere, there is no reason to believe that actual Arabs are involved. Rather, it is a pejorative epithet for Muslims, particularly since this group is also called in the same place *'igazuran* 'uncircumcised', a phrase used explicitly for describing Muslims (see below)¹¹.

A very problematic issue is the presence in the Ethiopic hagiographies of various words which can be translated as 'pagan'. These words include: *'arāmi* (variant: *'arāmawi*), *'äləw* (variant *'alawi* the basic meaning of which is 'treacherous, rebellious, disobedient'), to some extent also *ḥaqal* which, however, conveys the sense of 'uncivilized'. The question here is whether these words can refer to any non-Christian or whether they specifically describe the followers of what could be called indigenous beliefs or, somewhat offensively, 'pagans', i.e. people who are neither Christian, Muslim nor Jewish. These 'pagans' or 'idol-worshippers' appear very frequently in hagiographies, much more frequently than Muslims. Converting them and destroying the idols is almost an obligatory point in an Ethiopian saint's résumé (Kaplan 1984: 109-120).

Only occasionally there are contexts in which the two groups are neatly distinguished from one another. For example, the hagiography of Tadewos describes

⁹ Cf. [Ḍḏḥ] ነገር ለአቡነ ተክለ አልፋ ከመ ዓገትዋ ለይሉቲ ሀገር እስላም "[The Messenger] told our father Tāklä 'Alfa that the Muslims had besieged this city" (Tāklä Alfa 37) or መግባሎም ለብዙኃን እስላም "and he converted many Muslims" (Māzgābā Šəllase f. 52r).

¹⁰ Cf. መነገር ዝከርያ ለአቡነ ኢዎስታዊዎስ ከመ ገዳው-ዎሎ ዓረብ ለአርዳኢሁ „Zəkarya told our father 'Ewostatewos that Arabs had taken his disciples captive" ('Ewostatewos 97). ወእምዝ መጽእ አሐዱ ዓረባዊ እንዝ ዮንልፍ ይሉተ ፍኖተ „Afterwards a certain Arab came who was passing through this road" ('Ezra 97). Both episodes take place in Egypt, not in Ethiopia, therefore it is reasonable to assume that the narrators refer to ethnics, not religion.

¹¹ Also, in another text we find a similar phrase *kälābatä 'arāb* (Yonas f. 124v) 'Arab dogs', this time referring without a slightest doubt to Muslims.

how 'Anrewos and Samu'el destroyed pagan idols, after which they were taken captive by an "idol-worshipping king" and taken to "a Muslim king" called Māyəṭ. The Muslim king approves of destroying the idols because their worship is not in accordance with Islam¹².

Much more frequent are passages where a word for pagans is used interchangeably with a word for Muslims. For example, in the *gādī* of Yoḥannəs of Dābrā Bizān we read how some of his flock were ambushed and killed by Muslims (*əsmā'elawayan*). Those who managed to escape communicated the bad news to Yoḥannəs describing their attackers as *'arāmi* (Yoḥannəs zāDābrā Bizān 138). The famous ruler of Ifat, a Muslim polity neighbouring the Ethiopian empire, Sa'daddīn (1386-ca 1413), is referred to as *'alawī* in one of the hagiographies (Mārqurewos 38)¹³.

If therefore the language itself does not always clearly separates Muslims from other non-Christians, we must go back to the first question, namely: are there any attributes or particular features which can help recognize the Muslims in the corpus?

The answer to this question must be largely negative. In the gathered texts we find no reference to the Islamic holidays, the Qur'ān and other religious literature, the Islamic customs or places of worship. In some instances we encounter characters bearing Arabic Muslim names even if their religion is not explicitly stated, for example Məḥamməd (Yoḥannəs zāDābrā Bizān 144) or 'Abdəl Mal (Zena Marqos f. 20r). In my opinion, with some caution such episodes might be added to the survey.

Another clue which should be used with utmost caution are the place names. One can infer from certain passages that on the mental map of the hagiographers, areas where the position of Christianity was firm were distinguished from those where Muslims or pagans were numerous or prevailed. The Muslim or pagan territories were regarded as lesser or marginal. The land of Dara, to which Bāšälötä Mika'el is exiled, is described as a place where Muslims lived and to which "the king would send those whom he wanted to punish so that he would

¹² Cf. ሰበረ ጣዖታትሰ ሠናይ ውእቱ በጎበ አልህዋህድ።። ዘአምላክ አምላክ አንበሌሁ በጎቤነ ለሰብአ ተንባላት። „Destroying the idols is good in the eyes of Al[ī]ḥwahəd. Among us Muslims there is no worship but worship of him" (Tadewos 183-186). Note the transcription of Arabic *Allāh al-wāḥid* 'Allah the only'.

¹³ As a final note it can be added that the Gə'əz language knows yet another term for Muslims i.e. *mälāsay*, see <https://betamasaheft.eu/Dillmann/lemma/Lcc202775959b40b6863075ce716e02bd> [Accessed 27 August 2019]. I did not encounter this word in any of the texts analyzed here. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

be punished by them [i.e. Muslims]" (Bäšälotä Mika'el 31)¹⁴. The life of Samu'el of Wäldäbba offers advice to its readers: "do not live in a pagan land but rather pray in a Christian land" (Samu'el zäWäldäbba 27)¹⁵. In the lives we find places well known from the history of Islam in Ethiopia, such as 'Ifat or 'Adal. The fact that they are now remembered as Muslim territories does not mean, however, that they were Muslim when the events described in the hagiographies took place or when they were put to writing.

At least two passages point to the fact that Muslims could be distinguished by their physical appearance. The monk Mäzgäbä Šällase is at one point visited by "an evil spirit with the appearance of a rich Muslim" (Mäzgäbä Šällase f.46v)¹⁶. No details are provided, but one can assume that this description would evoke a certain image in the mind of the readers¹⁷. In one of the miracles of Zena Marqos monks tell a Muslim woman who came to visit the saint's grave that her clothes are different than the clothes of a Christian and are uncivilized¹⁸ (Zena Marqos f. 81r). Again, sadly, no specific details of the difference are provided.

To sum up, identifying Muslims in Ethiopic hagiographies requires careful reading of the texts and the possibility of an error cannot be entirely excluded. With this in mind, let me proceed to a survey of various ways in which Muslims and Islam are present in the texts.

3. Economic activities of the Muslims

The hagiographies provide certain information about the economic activity of the Muslim population of Ethiopia. These pieces of information can be corroborated with the data extracted from other sources.

In a number of texts Muslims are associated with camel herding and, as a consequence, participating in transportation and caravan trade. When 'Ewoštatēwos travels to Jerusalem, he is guided by a Muslim and the belongings of his company are loaded onto camels ('Ewoštatēwos 79-83). The disciples of Filäppos of Däbrä Bizän help Muslim camel drivers to rescue three camels which fell into a pit (Filäppos zäDäbrä Bizän 108). Camels are kept by the Muslims among whom Tadewos is performing his missionary work. They even take part in a miracle

¹⁴ ይትብቀል ንጉሥ ይፌኑ ኅቢሆሙ ከመ ይትብቀሉ ሉቲ።

¹⁵ ኢትንበሩ ውስተ ብሔረ አረሚ ይኔይስ ትግበሩ ጸሎተ በምድረ ክርስቲያን.

¹⁶ መንፈስ ርኩስ በእምሳሌ እስላማዊ ባዕል.

¹⁷ Or perhaps the listeners, as the large part of Gə'əz texts was intended for reading aloud.

¹⁸ ወልብስኪ ሊሉይ እምልብስ ክርስቲያን ዘከመ ልብስ ሐቃል።

by passing through an eye of a needle, an obvious reference to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 19: 23-26, Tadewos 246). It is even observed that Muslims drink camel milk (Filäppos zäDäbrä Bizän 139), a powerful accusation since camel meat (and consequently milk) is considered impure by the Christians (Guindeuil 2014: 64). Camel herding is typically a Muslim business to this day since camels are less useful in the highlands where the majority of the Orthodox population live¹⁹.

Related to the above is the Muslim involvement in long-distance trade. After crossing the Tākāzze river (traveling northwards) Märqorewos encounters a group of merchants (most probably Muslim though it is not clearly stated) heading for Gojjam whose camels are loaded with “clothes made of linen dyed in black for grief or in red fit for noblemen and kings, purple and scarlett, cotton stuff and salt” (Märqorewos 22). Muslims are also depicted as sailors, a profession generally not common for Christian Ethiopians, as in the story of a Christian woman who was kidnapped by Muslims but was miraculously saved when the ship became stranded in the sea (Yonas f. 125r).

A most interesting situation is described in one of the miracles of Zena Marqos. After a Muslim community residing in Morät and Wägda converted to Christianity, a famine struck their land. We learn that previously their tax duty was to provide the king with garments which they purchased “from the people of India and Arabia”²⁰ in exchange for slaves and cotton clothes. Now as Christians they no longer can participate in slave trade therefore they appeal to the king to have their tax duty relieved. After a miraculous intervention by Zena Marqos the king agrees and also grants them concession to trade in his name with ivory and horses from Šäwa under condition that they will donate part of their revenue for the *tabot* of Däbrä Bəśrat, a monastery of Zena Marqos (Zena Marqos f. 66r-67r).

An episode from the *gädl* of Märqorewos describes how Muslim merchants are stranded due to a local conflict in a region of Səre (contemporary Šəre) where

¹⁹ It may be added that camels are depicted in Ethiopian Christian art as accompanying Muslims. See for example the miniatures from *Tä'ammärä Maryam* (“The miracles of Mary”) at the website Mäzɡäbä Sə'əlat, available at: <http://128.100.218.174:8080>, reference numbers MG-2002.078:018, MG-2000.039:029, MG-2000.037:022, MG-2002.081:031 [Accessed 30 September 2019].

²⁰ ስብአ ገንድኩ ወግረብ. Note the explicit reference to the participation of Muslims in the transnational trade routes. This is not uncommon: the hagiography of Märqorewos mentions a Muslim trader named 'Emär who carries goods from Wäfla and Doba with the intention of trading them in Egypt and Jeddah but eventually he manages to sell his entire merchandise in Massawa (Märqorewos 30-31).

4. The Biblical allusions

Much scholarly attention has been paid to various aspects of the phenomenon of the self-representation of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia as the chosen people, the new Israel, the new Zion etc. (Schattner-Rieser 2012). It is not the place to present many threads of this discussion. What concerns us here is that one of the methods of perpetuating this self-representation was the skillful use of Biblical allusion and quotation in Ethiopic literature. This raises the question: if Ethiopia is Israel, its kings are heirs to David or Solomon etc., what does it make of others with whom Ethiopians were in touch? The exploration of this issue has already been started with historical literature as the source base (Pankhurst 1987).

In the hagiographical material Muslims are associated with various enemies of the Old Testament Israel, which by way of analogy means that Ethiopia and its sovereigns are symbolically represented as Israel and its righteous kings. Let us quote some examples.

When king Dawit is waging war with Sa'daddīn and must beg Mārḳorewos for intercession as Christian troops are about to be defeated, he refers to the Muslim king as the "second after Sennacherib, the king of Nineveh who was disrespectful to the Lord, your God, in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah, my father"²⁵ (Mārḳorewos 38).

The *gādl* of Yoḥannēs Məśraḳawi describes how a Muslim woman makes a pilgrimage to the saints' tomb. The local Orthodox community is, however, very hostile to her and call her *kānānawit* 'the Canaanite woman' (Yoḥannēs Məśraḳawi 400).

After some disciples of Yoḥannēs of Däbrä Bizän are murdered by Muslims he wants to punish them. He asks God to send draught onto their lands. While doing so he compares himself to the prophet Elijah and refers to the strife the prophet had with king Ahab (1 Kings: 18) saying: "[j]ust like] Israel prevailed over the house of Achab, isn't the evil of those Muslims [even] greater?" (Yoḥannēs zäDäbrä Bizän 141)²⁶.

In the same text we find a story of a local Muslim ruler (strictly speaking his religion is not specified but his name is Məḥamməd) who orders Yoḥannēs to provide him with nuns whom he could take as wives and young men whom he

²⁵ ካልኡ ለሰናከሬም ንጉሠ ነገሥት ዘተኣየሮ ለእግዚአብሔር አምላክከ በመዋዕሊሁ ለሕዝቅያስ ንጉሠ ይሁዳ አቡዮ. Notice how the king explicitly traces his lineage to the kings of Israel which remained a crucial element of the royal ideology in Ethiopia until the very end of the Empire.

²⁶ አምዕበዶሙ ለቤተ ኣካላብ ጁኤል ይፈደፍድ ወይበዝኅ እከዮሙ ለእሉ እስማዒላዊያን.

could sell into slavery. The saint sends a messenger who informs the king that should he pursue this he will perish “like Nebuchadnezzar, Nimrod, Tyre and Sidon and the pharaoh and his army” (Yoḥannæs zädäbrä Bizän 144)²⁷.

The above examples illustrate how Muslims are compared to people, ethnic groups or lands which are known from the Old Testament as opposing or persecuting Israel (and which in most cases were punished by God for doing so)²⁸. Through this rhetorical device the hagiographers seek to emphasize the place of Muslims in the divine order which God had planned for Ethiopia. By using the examples which certainly were easily recognizable for the Bible-educated audience they create the image of Muslims as opponents of Christian Ethiopia.

5. Conversion

Conversion of Muslims into Christianity is possibly the most frequent context in which they appear in the Ethiopic hagiographies. The episodes of conversion demonstrate the Christian God’s omnipotence and the spiritual superiority of Christianity over Islam. At the same time this hagiographical *topos* may be to some extent based on actual reality of the Christianization of some parts of the Muslim population.

In some instances the conversion is stated as a mere fact alongside other miraculous activities which are a visible sign of the saint’s charisma. No details are provided and conventional fixed phrases are used. Thus we read about Zena Marqos that “many people of Adal and Muslims believed through his action and he baptized them in the name of Christ and he healed the sick by performing miracles and wonders” (Zena Marqos f. 19v)²⁹. Most hagiographies, however, provide more detailed accounts of the conversion process and certain repeating patterns can be distinguished.

First of all, in most cases conversion is a direct result of a miracle. The miracle can have a twofold effect on conversion process: it may be a punishment for the Muslim stubbornness in keeping to their faith or it may be an impressive demonstration of Christian God’s power which encourages Muslims to willingly abandon Islam.

²⁷ ከማክ ናቡከደነ ጸር ወናምሩድ ወሰናከራም ወጸፋጸይዳን ወፈርዖን ምስለ ሰራዊቱ.

²⁸ To this we may add a passage from the *gäcl* of Mäzgabä Šällase which, when speaking about the Oromo invasions (they were not religious in nature), refers to the Oromo as Moab (ጦአብ ዘውአቶሙ ጋላ) (Mäzgabä Šällase f. 35r).

²⁹ ወብዙኃን እምሰብእ አዳል ወተንባላት አምኑ በእደዊሁ ወአጥመቆሙ በስሙ ለክርስቶስ ወፈወሰ ድወያኒሆሙ በገቢረ ተአምራት ወመንክራት.

We read in the life of Yafqərännä 'Əgzi' about a village where Muslims and Christians lived side by side. One day a lightning strikes the church which makes the Muslims deride the Christian faith. Archangel Michael in revenge destroys the Muslim huts killing people and animals by a lightning. On the spot where the lightning stroke, the Muslims find a *tabot* dedicated to Michael together with an incense burner and a cross. As a result, they convert out of fear (Yafqərännä 'Əgzi' 110-112). Yoħannəs Məsraqawi on one of his journeys is approached by a Muslim king with seemingly evil intentions and when asked, introduces himself as the servant of Christ. The king replies that if this be the case Christ should come to his rescue. At his moment archangel Gabriel appears in all his glory and orders the king to convert which he does after some deliberation (Yoħannəs Məsraqawi 207-213).

In some instances the miracle is part of what could be described as a *quid pro quo* transaction. The already mentioned Muslim ruler Mäyət declares that he will convert if Tawos heals his son who is possessed by a demon (Tawos 202-204). During the sojourn of Filəppos of Däbrä 'Asbo near lake Zway he meets a Muslim whose son is possessed by demon. None of the soothsayers (*'aqabəyänä šaray*) are able to get rid of it. The saint explains that the son will not be healed if the father does not believe in Christ. The father is ready to follow whatever the saint will order. He is given a portion of blessed water and instructed to treat the son with it and after the boy is healed the whole family eventually converts (Filəppos zäDäbrä 'Asbo 232-234). One day Zena Marqos during his stay in 'Əzara meets a Muslim man who is in despair because he is pursued by a man-eating monster³⁰. The saint asks whether the Muslim will abandon his religion if the God of St. George³¹ saves him.

The Muslim manages to kill the beast with a rod³² given to him by Zena Marqos and asks to be baptized (Zena Marqos f. 88r-90r).

In the consulted texts the instances where the conversion is not associated with some supernatural event are very rare. But for example we learn that the Muslims among which Bäšälötä Mika'el was preaching the Gospel decided to convert only through the inspiration of his teaching. What is quite interesting, the saint is reluctant to baptize them himself, sending them instead to the king and the royal

³⁰ አርጭ እኩይ ዘይውጎጥ ሰብአ.

³¹ Like elsewhere in Christianity, St. George of Lydda is depicted in Ethiopia as a dragon-slayer and his depictions are ubiquitous throughout the Christian parts of the country.

³² The motif of a rod with which miracles are performed, frequent in the Ethiopic hagiographies, is an allusion to the rod of Aaron (cf. i. a. Ex. 7:17, 8:5, 8:16-17, 9:23, 10:13).

priests. The king, however, sends them away³³ and Bāšālotä Mika'el eventually takes them under his spiritual protection (Bāšālotä Mika'el 31).

A second motif which appears in nearly all accounts about the conversion of Muslims is the fact that converting is a collective act. People hardly ever are baptized individually, rather they approach their evangelizer as a group (Bāšālotä Mika'el 10, Yafqarännä 'Əgzi' 110-112, Zena Marqos f. 65v). The decision of one man to change the denomination is immediately followed by his wife and children in the case of a *pater familias* (e.g. Märqorewos 232-234) or by his subjects in the case of a ruler.

The top-to-bottom model of conversion is very well exemplified by the story of Mäyət, the ruler of Šäq'än. After a series of test debates with the monks, he announces to his troops: "We Muslim people are dumb and the Christian people are chosen". He receives baptism and his people duly follow, after which the saint is free to conduct a successful mission among them (Tadewos 220, 258). An identical scene (the Muslim king gathers his army and orders them to convert which they do seemingly without any resistance) occurs e.g. in the life of Yoḥannəs Məšraqawi (Yoḥannəs Məšraqawi 207-213).

The presence of certain motifs can be deduced but only expanding the corpus could definitely tell whether they are typical or incidental. For example, in one *gädl* we find an episode in which newly converted Muslims not only embrace their new faith but excel in it or even make an ecclesiastical career. We learn that the already mentioned Muslim who was saved from a dragon by Zena Marqos became a priest and was ordained by the patriarch Yoḥannes in 'Aksum (Zena Marqos f. 90r). This might be a conventional way of further stressing the miraculous effect of the saint's activity.

It should, however, be noted that not all encounters between the monks and Muslims end in conversion. Yet even when the conversion is absent, the texts tend to emphasize the superiority of the Christian faith over Islam. Let us recall one such episode.

On their way to Jerusalem 'Əzra and his companions pass through the desert of Egypt. They are approached by an Arab. He asks them about their origins and

³³ In a somewhat remarkable act of tolerance the king tells them: ሉፋ ንብፋ በሕግ አባዎቻችሁ "Go and live according to the law of your fathers". This rather unexpected attitude is perhaps to be explained by the fact that this particular *gädl* is attributed to the period called by the great Russian scholar B.A. Turaev *время гонения* 'the time of persecution' (Turaev 118-203). In the hagiographies from this period the relations between the monks and the royal power are depicted as often strained and difficult.

destination, concerned that they are alone in the wilderness. 'Ezra explains that they come from Ethiopia and they are forbidden to travel on Sabbath. The Muslim chief (*mākwännänä tǎnbǎlat 'arābawī*) is so surprised and impressed, that he tells to his troops: „See how they do not break their law, unafraid of hunger nor thirst nor death?”. Then the Arabs give them food of abstinence (*sisayä tǎhrǎmtomu*) such as bananas, sugar cane, honey, almonds, wine and butter ('Ezra 76).

Occasionally it occurs that Muslims experience the power of the saint yet it does not lead to their conversion. This is the case in the life of Yoḥannəs of Dǎbrǎ Bizǎn. Some monks from his congregation are killed by Muslims on their way back from the market. In great anger the saint asks God to punish them and the rain stops falling on their lands. After three years of draught they realize that their crime brought this cruel fate upon them. They visit the saint and perform the traditional Ethiopian gesture of repentance by tying stones to their necks. They are forgiven and “the rain fell on the good and the wicked, on the righteous and the lawless”³⁴ (Yoḥannəs zǎDǎbrǎ Bizǎn 143).

To sum up, the motif of conversion is frequent and it serves as a justification for the presence of non-Christian Other in the texts. By including it, the hagiographers demonstrate the appeal of the Christian faith and the fact that the saintly monks are chosen by God and act in His name.

6. Muslim women

In the corpus there are only two episodes with a Muslim woman in the center. Interestingly, they are quite similar in terms of their plot³⁵. Also it is quite telling that they are listed among the miracles and not in the main hagiographic narrative because they take place after the death of the saints who are main characters in these *gǎdlat*. Perhaps the idea of a saintly monk interacting with a Muslim woman would have been too shocking for the audience.

During a commemoration feast for Yoḥannəs Mǎsraqawī (*bǎ'alǎ fǎlsǎtu*) a Muslim woman comes, having heard about his deeds. She carries a torch on a string and incense. She explains to the officiating priest that she has heard strange things about Christian ways and wants to observe them. She begs the priest to allow her to spend the night with the assembled or at least accept her gifts. After

³⁴ ወእዘንም ዝናመ ላዕለ ሓራን ወ እኩያን ወላዕለ ጸድቃን ወዐማዒያን.

³⁵ This may be simply explained by the fact that intertextual connections between *gǎdlat* are very common (Mersha 2015: 146).

some hesitation he accepts the gifts and allows her to enter the church. However, some of the congregation oppose but the priest confronts them and offers her food and water. After the feast the woman wants to go back home and the people demand that she take her gifts with her. They explain that the Christians should not mingle with Muslims³⁶. The priest accepts this suggestion and the despaired Muslim woman heads back to her country. She complains to Yoḥannəs Məsraqawi about the mistreatment she experienced for her Muslimhood (*məsłəmanna*)³⁷. Yoḥannəs Məsraqawi appears to the priest and orders him to bring her back. The woman is brought back and with joy receives baptism (Yoḥannəs Məsraqawi 397-409).

Another *gädl* tells a story of a Muslim woman from the country of 'Argobba who was barren and decided to travel to Zena Marqos's grave. The deacons prohibit her from entering and she is forced to stay outside. Having taken a little *šäbä*³⁸ from outside the tomb she heads back to her country. Soon after her return she gets pregnant and gives birth to children. She goes back to the monastery to tell this miraculous story but stresses that she did not allow the midwives to come near her because they were pagan. She recalls how the men from her village surrounded her house and wanted to set it on fire thinking she had become a Christian and Zena Marqos appeared to her rescue. Eventually she is baptized (Zena Marqos f. 81r-83v).

A common theme here is that the Muslim women seek conversion which is denied to them and only through the intervention of the deceased saint they are able to achieve it. For a proper understanding of this motif it would be necessary to conduct a study of the image of women in *gädlät*. Tentatively, I would seek an analogy with the female figures of New Testament who are humble and faithful to Christ even when they are frowned upon by men such as the adulteress

³⁶ The somewhat ambiguous phrase used here is *ወክርሲቲያን ብዑዳን አሙንቱ ኢየሁብሩ በግዝረት ወብተነዕቡ* rendered by the editor as „Ben altra cosa sono i cristiani, e non hanno niente a che vedere con loro, per il fatto della circoncisione e delle abluzioni” (Yoḥannəs Məsraqawi 405). What is implied here, according to Marrassini, is that Muslims are different from Christians because they are not circumcised and have the custom of ablutions. The assumption that Muslims are uncircumcised may seem surprising but it appears frequently in the texts. The word used is either *q'älafan* (e.g. Yoḥannəs zäDäbrä Bizän 139), *käfturan* (ibidem) or *'igəzuran* (e.g. Yoḥannəs Məsraqawi 212). It is open for debate whether it is to be understood literally or as a metaphor.

³⁷ This is the only instance where this word appears in the corpus.

³⁸ In Ethiopia this word (literally 'dust, powder') is used to describe a physical item such as dust or water which through the contact with a grave of a holy person has acquired miraculous properties.

whom Jesus refuses to condemn (John 7:53-8:11) or the sinful woman who anointed him (Luke 7:36-50).

7. Islam as the realm of Satan

Anyone who has read at least a couple of *gädlat* will notice that Satan, the lesser devils, the evil demons etc. are frequent guests on their pages. Their presence is in some way a reflection of Ethiopian Christian spirituality, here however I will try to analyze the association of Islam with diabolic forces as a literary motif in the hagiographic texts³⁹.

There are instances when the association of Muslims with Satan is used as an epithet. For example, on one of his journeys Filæppos encounters a haughty Muslim named Ḥəṭāṭay who is referred to as “Satan’s son” (*wäldä Säyṭan*) (Filæppos 110). Similarly, the Muslims who attacked some monks from the congregation of Yoḥannæs of Däbrä Bizän are called “children of Śamra in which the spirit of Satan is hidden”⁴⁰ (Yoḥannæs zäDäbrä Bizän 138) and “audacious from the fiery breath of Satan” (Yoḥannæs zäDäbrä Bizän 139)⁴¹. It may be argued, however, that these epithets are a comment on the evil ways of those Muslims (in both cases they physically attacked Christians) rather than an automatic association of Islam with the demonic presence.

A very interesting way of associating Islam with Satan (though one could say not explicit) can be found in the *gädl* of Märqorewos. The hagiographer recounts a story dating back to the days of the Aksumite Kingdom. Before the coming of the Ark to the Holy City, there was a devil who lived under a rock within the enclosure of a church there. When he heard the news of the Ark’s coming, he was frightened and left this place. He went to “Mecca that is Jeddah, the place which was blessed and adorned by the Devil for his son, Mäḥammäd, and he gave it to him as an abode in which he appeared”⁴². From there the devil went to Šäwa but was chased away by Täklä Haymanot. Finally, he settled in ‘Adal.

³⁹ This section is very much inspired by Wiśniewski (2003).

⁴⁰ ቁቅ ህምራ እለ ኅዱር ለዕሊቸሙ ሙንፈሰ ሰይጣን. I was not able to identify the name Śamra, perhaps the use of the word *däqiqä* ‘children of’ might suggest some ethnic or clan affiliation.

⁴¹ ምርዱዳን በሉሳስ እስትንፋሱ ለሰይጣን.

⁴² ሀገረ መካ ዘይአቲ ጅዳ ዘወድቀ ባቲ ቅድመ ዲያብሎስ ሊቁ ከመ ደብርክ ኪያሃ መካነ ለመሐመድ ወልዱ. ወዘይኩኒ ሰይጣን ፩ እምሐራሁ ለዲያብሎስ ነበረ ውስተ ደሊቲ መካን እንዘ ያስተሳኒ ኪያሃ መካነ ለመሐመድ ወልዱ. እስከ አስተራየ መሐመድ. As a side note, the purpose of this episode is to explain the etymology of the name ‘Aksum (or rather ‘Akʷəsəm, according to the orthography employed in the text) as deriving from the word *som* ‘sardonyx’.

Upon the death of Täklä Haymanot he returned to Šäwa but this time he was met by Märqorewos who successfully forced him into a deep abyss (Märqorewos 24-25).

In this passage the wandering devil symbolizes the pre-Christian, i.e. pagan or Islamic presence in the areas that were subsequently subjected to a Christian mission. What is striking here is the depiction of the holy city of Islam as a devil's residence.

In the same way one could explain the motif of the dragon or snake who ruled the people until the coming of the true religion (Six 1974: 113). This motif can be observed i.a. in the lives of the Nine Saints (Brita 2010: 13, 27, 64) or in the *Käbrä nägäšt* in its oral version (Littmann 1904: 2-12).

As already mentioned when discussing the narratives of conversion, we hear often about Muslims possessed by the evil spirits (*ganen*) in the context of a punishment for their wickedness (e.g. 'Ewošatewos 97) or as an opportunity for the saint to demonstrate God's power (Filəppos zäDäbrä 'Asbo 232-234, Tadewos 202-204). This ill fate, however, is by no means exclusive to Muslims, there are numerous examples of Christians who turn to the holy monk to relieve them from demons.

While all the above mentioned literary techniques seek to vilify Islam in the eyes of the Christians by associating it with Satan, the analyzed *gädlät* rarely go as far as to fully depict Islam as the product of the satanic evil.

8. Hagiography as apology in disguise

A common opinion, often expressed even with some degree of astonishment, is that the long co-existence of Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia did not result in flourishing of an apologetic and polemical literature among the latter, like it happened among the Syriac or Arabic Christian authors. The most famous exception to this rule is '*Anqäšä 'amin* („The Gate of Faith") by 'Enbaqom (Van Donzel 1969)⁴³.

The reason for this striking absence may perhaps be sought in the literary conventions of the Ethiopian authors. Just like the Church artists valued reproduction of conventional scenes over originality, the writers felt confined to the

⁴³ Cf. the opinion of Enrico Cerulli who calls '*Anqäšä 'amin* "una delle opere più curiose della letteratura etiopica" (Cerulli 1968: 126).

literary genres inherited from the Axumite (i.e. 3rd-7th centuries) phase of Ethiopic literature. These included the lives of saints, sermons, codes of canon law, Biblical apocrypha and the Bible itself but nothing similar to the apologetics or *refutatio* (Bausi 2018: 79-80).

Perhaps in an intention to compensate for this absence, some of the *gädlät* contain passages of various length which serve precisely the purpose of demonstrating through scriptural arguments the superiority of Christianity over Islam. The line of argumentation used in this passages deserved to be fully studied and should contribute to our understanding of the Christian-Muslim polemics in Ethiopia. Here I will confine myself to pointing a few of these instances.

The longest such fragment I was able to find is in the life of Tadowos. It consists of a series of debates between its Christian and Muslims protagonists (Tadowos 186-224). A very striking feature of these debates is that the Muslims consequently use Arabic, not Gə'əz, terms, for example they refer to the Gospel as *māṣḥafā 'anǧīl* instead of Gə'əz *wāngel* or call Jesus 'Isa not 'lyäsus⁴⁴ and Mary Marima and not Maryam.

Let us mention in brief the theological positions defended by both sides. Thus the Muslims, who are definitely an offensive side initiating the debate, argue that Jesus is their prophet but is not the creator, that the Gospel is indeed the word of God but was purposefully distorted by the Christian interpretation and that Christianity is not monotheistic, for it worships three gods. The monks, in return, refute these arguments with an ample use of Biblical quotations to demonstrate that Jesus existed before the creation, that the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled and confirmed in the New Testament and that the scriptural passages do not refer to three gods but to the fact that "God is worshipped in three names"⁴⁵.

In another text, the monk is approached by a Muslim who knows the Gospel and is asked to explain certain passages from the Gospel of John, namely why Jesus asked Philip about the bread (John 14:8-9) and asked Jews about the grave of Lazarus (John 11). The theological problem here is that asking questions seemingly

⁴⁴ These forms are perfectly normal and regular in the Christian Arabic literature. Incidentally, the same *gädl* mentions a situation in which the Eucharistic liturgy was on one occasion performed in Arabic alongside Gə'əz in Ethiopia, to the best of my knowledge the only text to do so (Tadowos 324). On the role of Arabic in the Christian context in Ethiopia see Lusini (2009/2010).

⁴⁵ ቪስም ጄአግዚአብሔር በዘቦቶ ያመልኩ (Tadowos 238).

contradicts Jesus' omniscience. Through his exegesis, Zena Marqos demonstrates that Jesus is in fact God and how the Gospel is a reflection of God's light and the children are drawn to it⁴⁶ (Zena Marqos f. 64v-f.66r).

Another important theological question is raised in a short debate included in the life of Yoḥannəs Məśraqawi. There a Muslim king states that Jesus did not die for the sins of human kind but for himself only. Yoḥannəs Məśraqawi proves by quoting 1 Cor. 15:21 that he truly died for our sins and adds furthermore that "he died in his human nature and through his divine nature he rose from the dead"⁴⁷ thus referring to the ever-returning question of two natures of Jesus Christ, an idea that Muslims of course do not share (Yoḥannəs Məśraqawi 207-213).

9. Other depictions of Muslims

In the final section I will consider some themes which do not fit neatly into any of the above categories.

The anthropological literature on the Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia often addresses the problem of preparing and consuming food as a religious boundary between the two communities (Ficquet 2006). This has found its reflection also in the hagiographies. Thus in the life of Yonas we read a story of a monk who during his sojourn in Egypt refuses to share a meal with a man whom he (wrongly) believes to be a Muslim. His refusal is justified by a quote from 1 Cor. 10: 23-25 (Yonas f. 108v)⁴⁸.

An event which is mentioned probably in every single academic text concerning the relations of Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia is the invasion of Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (nicknamed *graññ* 'the left-handed' in Amharic) which ravaged much of the Ethiopian Empire in the first half of the 16th century. It is not surprising that these events, which are remembered to this day, are reflected in some of the hagiographies, however I have identified this in only two sources. In both cases the dramatic events are not recalled with much horror, they are not depicted as God's wrath nor is al-Ġāzī styled in them as a messenger of Satan.

⁴⁶ Earlier in the text it was stated that the Muslim children abandoned their parents' faith and were drawn to Christianity.

⁴⁷ ሞተ በጎሱ-በእቱ ወበጎይላ መለኮቱ ተንሥኦ.

⁴⁸ It may be added here that this prohibition also extends to pagans as can be deduced e.g. from a story in which a nun refuses to take food from her pagan servant (Wälätä Pētros 47-50).

The times of the invasion are called in the texts *māwa'ālā saddāt* 'the days of exile' (Täklä 'Alfa 36) because Christians had to wander around the country fleeing from the Muslim army⁴⁹. The commander of the Muslims is not mentioned by name but referred to as *graññ nəgušä tänbalat* (Zena Marqos f. 51v) or *nəgušä 'əslam* (Zena Marqos f. 136r), both meaning 'the Left-Handed, the king of Muslims'. It is stated that he burned churches and monasteries (including the famous Däbrä Libanos monastery) (Zena Marqos f. 136v). Other than that no relevant information nor literary devices concerning these events can be found in the corpus. Similarly, an otherwise well-attested in the sources war between the Christian emperor and Sa'daddīn (Taddesse 1972: 151-154) is briefly mentioned in the life of Märqorewos, its sole purpose being to show the relationship of the king with the saint (Märqorewos 38-39).

The life of Filəppos of Däbrä Bizän contains an interesting narrative about the relations between the monastery of Däbrä Bizän and the local Muslim rulers in the Red Sea coast region such as the ruler of the Dahlak island (*malk säyumä Dahluk*) and *nayb*⁵⁰ of Massawa. The Muslims are very respectful towards Filəppos comparing him to a rabbi (*rābi*), however, there is some conflict about a passage⁵¹. Filəppos manages to convince the Muslims that it is in his power to "make the sea useless by the power of my God to you and to your children"⁵² and so the Muslim ruler issues a document stating that Däbrä Bizän must be left in peace and the monks should be allowed to freely use the passage for commerce (Filəppos zäDäbrä Bizän 106-107). Devoid of any supernatural elements or dramatic events this is a scene of sometimes tense yet in general peaceful coexistence between the monastery and the secular Muslim power.

10. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

While looking for the examples of the depictions of Muslims and Islam in Ethiopic hagiographies it became clear that they are not as frequent as I had originally

⁴⁹ Interestingly, not only people were forced into wandering but also objects. The life of Zena Marqos offers a fascinating description of how books and *tabotat* are dispersed throughout the country to protect them from destruction (Zena Marqos f. 136v-137r).

⁵⁰ *Nayb* (Arabic *nā'ib*) was the local official governing the Red Sea coastal areas.

⁵¹ The Gə'əz text uses the words *mahlāft* and *mākif*, both quite problematic but judging from the context they should mean the same. It is possible that they refer to the passage between the highlands (where the monastery is situated) and the coast (where the Muslims reside).

⁵² እጋሰያ ለዛቲ ባሕር በጎይለ አምላኪያ ኢየሱስ ክርቶስ እንተ ኢትብቀዕ ለከ ወለውሉናከ እምድጎሬከ.

assumed. Still, they offer plenty of material for thought and study. Regarding the three questions posed in the introduction, at this stage of research one can present but tentative answers.

The hagiographic material definitely corroborates many facts known from elsewhere, for example regarding the economic activities of the Muslims. It does not seem to contain very relevant historical information since recording facts was not the primary concern of the authors (Nosnitsin 2009: 83). Even when the *gädlät* present facts, for obvious reasons they focus on the Christian community.

The Islam in the texts is to a large extent reduced to a stereotype and there is no intention to understand and describe its specific traits. Hagiographies therefore do not appear to be a valuable source for the study of religious customs of Ethiopian Muslims.

In fact, the depictions of Muslims and Islam teach us more about the people who wrote them than about those who are described. In general, Muslims appear in the texts for a specific narrative reason. Their presence gives the protagonists, the holy monks, the opportunity to demonstrate their moral virtues and the power of the Christian God. Also, through the use of negatively charged language and the selection of facts, the texts seek to alienate the Muslims in the eyes of the Christian readers and through this to strengthen their morale and self-appreciation.

This short survey is of course in many ways imperfect, not only because the corpus of the hagiographic texts can surely be greatly expanded. A very important fact which I utterly ignored is that each *gädl* belongs to a very specific time and place. It would certainly be instructive to group the texts and to find whether for example the hagiographies which take place in the present Eritrea⁵³ depict Muslims in another way than those from Šäwa. Another question which immediately comes to mind is: during which era the presence of Muslims in the *gädlät* was most prominent and how it corresponds with the historic events in the Ethiopian Empire and the Orthodox Church?

What this study proves more than anything, in my opinion, is the need for comprehensive study of various motifs in Ethiopian hagiographies (such as women, demons, magic, conversion etc.) which together with the study of the literary conventions of this popular genre will surely enable a better understanding of their content.

⁵³ On the production of hagiographies in modern-day Eritrea see Villa (2018).

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