

THE WRITINGS OF THE MUSLIM PEOPLES OF NORTHEASTERN AFRICA

AN OVERVIEW

The modern states and near-states that make up the region here defined as Northeastern Africa comprise Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia. Although, in terms of population, the area is predominantly Muslim, leaving aside numerous small sultanates, either tribal or urban in origin, the major state-forming tradition in the region is Christian. The size and strength of Ethiopia has waxed and waned over the centuries, but its existence has defined much of the experience of Muslims within its borders or neighbouring upon it. Likewise, real or putative conflict between Muslims and Christians tends to dominate, perhaps overly, surveys, for example Trimingham (1952), of Islam and the Muslim presence in the region. This is not to say that war and polemic between Christian and Muslim have not happened, but the complexities of co-existence have been understudied (Ahmed (2001) is a beginning).

Within the wider context of Muslim Africa, both north and south of the Sahara, the region has a unique position within Islamic history, featuring as it does in the *sīra* of the Prophet. In about 615 CE, the first *hijra* took place, when several small groups of Muslims took refuge in the court of the *Negus*, assumed to be the ruler of Axum, in what is now Northern Ethiopia.¹ The details of this episode or its historicity do not concern us here, but its consequences, or rather the imagined recollection of its consequences, do. A Tradition of the Prophet is reported thus, “Leave the Abyssinians in peace so long as they do not take the offensive.”² From this tradition arose an ambiguity among the Muslim learned class about the status of Christian Ethiopians within the Islamic *weltanschauung* that was embodied in a distinctive literary *genre*, the *faḍā'il al-ḥabash* (or *ḥubshān*), “The virtues of the Ethiopians”, which in an indirect way goes

¹ Trimingham (1952), 44-46.

² Abū Daʿūd, ii, 133, quoted in Trimingham (1952), 46.

back to the "Blameless Aethiops" of Herodotus. This is no antiquarian issue; in modern times, the status of Axum as a place sacred to both Christian and Muslim has been and is a contentious issue between the two communities. Two political examples of overarching ambiguity of identity in the region are the membership of Somalia in the Arab League and the "Arabism" debate concerning Eritrea's identity in the 1960s and 70s.³ In this respect, both Eritrea and Somalia have affinities with the Sudan Republic, which has its own ambiguous relationship to the Muslim Arab world.

In this respect, Ethiopia and its environs, mark themselves off from much of the Muslim Africa recorded in the volumes of this series in that they partake of some of the issues that mark the complex multi-confessionalism of the Middle East and, for example, Muslim Spain. *Jihād* and counter-*jihād* there certainly was, but there was also a scholarly polemic, exemplified in the writings of °Embāqom and Zakāryās (*qqv.*). Little of this is found elsewhere in Muslim Africa, although there are some traces of it in the Christian/Muslim encounters of the late nineteenth century in East Africa (see, for example, °Alī b. Muḥammad b. °Alī al-Mundhirī in *ALA III*, Fascicle B).

It is not possible here to give a detailed ethno-history of the Muslims of Northeastern Africa. Crudely, the Muslim communities of the region may be characterised as nomadic, for example the Somali and Beja; settled agriculturalists, as in Wallo in Ethiopia, or dwelling in small urban coastal settlements such as Maṣawwā°, Zayla°, Harar, Mogadishu or Barawe, the latter two being extensions northwards of the Swahili urban environments that dominated the East African coast and whose writings will form the bulk of *ALA III*, Fascicle B, while the former three form part of a nexus of maritime city-states that rim the Red Sea (including Jiddah, al-Līth, al-Ḥudayda and al-Mukhā on the northern coast and Sawākin on the southern coast) and which have their roots in Greco-Roman times.

It is from one of these cities, Zayla°, that the first Islamic writings of the region come, namely the scholarly production of a group of emigré Zayla° scholars, largely based in Cairo in the

³ Erlich (1994), 151-64.

fourteenth century. Their surviving writings are recorded here in Chapter Two. This tradition continued with the presence in Cairo of Ethiopian Muslims, somewhat later designated as Jabart, and concretized by the establishment of a *riwāq al-jabartiyya* or hostel (literally "corner") for the maintenance of Jabartī Muslim students at al-Azhar (see further *EI*, ii, 355). The most famous Jabarti was undoubtedly the Egyptian chronicler, ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Ḥasan al-Jabarti (d. 1825 or 1826; *EI*, ii, 355-57), whose writings fall outside our purview, but whose family had a long connexion with the *riwāq*. The longevity and complexity of Islamic connexions in the region is well illustrated by the fact that the *riwāq al-jabartiyya* was to have an important role in the formal establishment in July 1960 of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which in turn led to an Eritrean state in 1991. The Islamic strand in the emergence of a distinctive Eritrean nationalism is a complex and ambiguous one.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the high point of the Muslim/Christian confrontation between the Christian highland empire of Ethiopia and the largely lowland Muslim cities. Here, for the first time, unless one includes the period of Abraha, the Sassanian Persian and Byzantine involvement in the region at the time of the birth of the Prophet, the region became the scene of a semi-global geo-political involvement, pitching alliances between Ethiopia and the Portuguese against the city states of the Hawash Valley, their largely Somali nomadic rescuers under Aḥmad Grāñ, backed to a degree by the Ottomans. The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabash* (q.v.) is the major record of this struggle. The geo-political scene moved on; the Christians fell out among themselves, as Portuguese Jesuits failed to win over Orthodox Ethiopia, while the Ottomans consolidated their control of the coast.⁴ It was only in the nineteenth century that confrontation resumed, with the wars between the Mahdist Sudan and a resurgent Ethiopia under Yohannes IV and Menilek II.

It is very hard to generalise about the character of Islamic writings in the region. In one sense, they differ little from what will be found elsewhere in Muslim Africa. At one end of the spectrum are the commentaries and super-commentaries on

⁴ G. Orhonlu, *Habesh Eyalati*, Istanbul 1969.

approved texts of *fiqh*, here largely from the Shāfi‘ī school, which dominates the region. But it is clear that both in Wallo and Somalia from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries onwards, there were winds of change in the form of greater *ṭarīqa* activity, activity that may very loosely be described as “Neo-Sufi”. This activity was characterised by the establishment of communities (*jamā‘a* in Arabic, *camaa* in Somali) of adherents to specific Sufi traditions—in our region mainly Qādiriyya, Sammāniyya, Tijāniyya, Ṣālihiyya, Dandarāwiyya and Idrīsiyya—and who were often recruited from hitherto marginalized groups. Other new trends appear to include the production of *manāqib* literature centred on both “international” and local saints (Harari writings are rich in this category), and the production of popular poetry, either in Arabic or in various vernacular languages; these two categories obviously overlap. Here one can usefully compare the careers of Muḥammad Shāfi b. Muḥammad (*q.v.*) with that of Uways b. Muḥammad al-Barāwī (*q.v.*), the one from central Ethiopia, the other from southern Somalia. One research area that is still in its infancy is the study of the links in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries between the Muslim communities of Northeastern Africa and those of the Islamic heartlands, in particular the Ḥijāz and the Yemen.

Popular Islamic poetry, whether in Arabic or vernacular languages, is to be found throughout the region. Research on the various traditions in the region is very uneven; the work of Cerulli and Wagner on Harari writings and, more recently, Samatar, building on Andrzejewski and Aw Jammac Cumar Ciise (*q.v.*) on the Somali male poetic tradition and Kapteijns (1999) on Somali sung womens poetry only highlight how much more there is to be done. There are interesting comparisons here to be made in terms of themes and the influence of classical Arabic prosodic forms both with Sudanese popular poetry (see *ALA* I, Chapter 3) and the complex prosodic developments of Swahili poetry (which will be documented in *ALA* III, Fascicle B).

Another area that deserves investigation is the creation of literacy in vernacular languages, whether through the adaptation of the Arabic script to the needs of local languages, whether Oromiñña, Harari or Somali, or the creation of new scripts, for

example Abū Bakr b. Usmān Odā's (*q.v.*) invention of a script for Oromiñña and the complicated history of the Osmania script in Somalia. This is a complex theme in the region; one example is the contemporary debate among Ethiopian Muslims on not whether to translate the Qur'ān into Amharic, but whether to print in Ajjami, i.e. the Arabic script, or in the Ethiopic alphabet. These debates have their echoes both among the Hausa and others in West Africa and among the Swahili of East Africa. But, it is, I think, true to say that the orthographic debate is more complex in Northeastern Africa than anywhere else in Muslim Africa.

The Islamic literatures of Northeastern Africa thus represent and reflect a variety of different impulses. Proximity to the Middle East, but not simply proximity since there is also the imperialist intervention of Ottoman Turkey and Khedivial Egypt to consider, plus the Islamic policies of Italy and later Britain in Eritrea, means that the nature of the relationship of Northeastern Africa with the Islamic heartlands was different in kind from, for example, West Africa. In intellectual terms there was, indeed, the traditional patterns of "shaykh-seeking", of the transmission of *isnāds*, both in *fiqh* and *taṣawwuf*, both from within the region and from without, the writing of commentaries and the like, and the coming of new Sufi affiliations, especially in the nineteenth century. But, because of the involvement of the region in both local and regional conflicts that consciously or unconsciously cut cross the religious divide, whether it be Turk versus Portuguese, British and Italian against the Mahdists of the Sudan with reverbrations in Eritrea and Western Ethiopia (see Ṭalha b. Ja'far) or Muḥammad °Abd Allāh Ḥasan (*q.v.*) versus the British, Italians and Ethiopians in Somalia, the nature of Muslim/non-Muslim interaction was qualitatively different in Northeastern Africa by comparison with most of the rest of Muslim Africa. Northeastern Africa is not quite Africa, nor is it quite the Middle East; it partakes of both but is not quite either and this is reflected in the complexities of its Islamic intellectual traditions.