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A Short Note about some Useful Documents for Diachronical Studies of Non-Semitic Ethiopian Languages

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The collection of manuscripts preserved in the Oriental Manuscripts Department of the French *Bibliothèque nationale* (Paris, 58 rue de Richelieu) contains documents about some thirty non-semitic languages spoken in Ethiopia. These documents belong mainly to the Antoine d'Abbadie collection and a few of them are part of the Casimir Mondon-Vidailhet collection. Most of these documents date back to the mid-19th century. Their exceptional age, far from making them out-dated, gives them an incomparable historical value. Some have already been used by *éthiopiens*.

I found it therefore necessary to assess the use which has been made of these documents, a task which appeared easy at first but was, in reality, a long and difficult undertaking. The authors who used A. d'Abbadie's documents did not clearly mention that they have referred to them. Not always, at least, which means that one has to check the full list of writings on Cushitic and Omotic languages (and, one day, of Nilo-Saharan languages) published since the beginning of public access to the manuscripts and papers left by A. d'Abbadie's family to the *Académie des Sciences* (Paris). These papers were later, around 1900, entrusted by the Académie des Sciences to the Bibliothèque nationale as a deposit. As a consequence, at a later date began the publication of parts of the travel note-books of A. d'Abbadie¹ often presented as his "travel journal". Carlo Conti Rossini opened the way to the exploration of all the linguistic and socio-linguistic material contained therein.

A. d'Abbadie wrote that "nul n'a le droit de s'affliger d'avoir entamé des travaux inachevés". Following his precedent, I will introduce my study, which still remains incomplete.

Antoine Thompson d'Abbadie (* Dublin 1810, † Paris 1897), a Basque who was born in Ireland, stayed in Ethiopia from February 1838 to October 1848 with intent to discover the sources of the White Nile. This long stay was interrupted by one absence in 1839–40 when he went to France in order to find instruments he needed for his research.

¹ TUBIANA 1959b, 1980, 1998 and TRIULZI 1989.

During his stay, he collected manuscripts he brought back to France, filed now at the Bibliothèque nationale in a special section marked “Ethiop. Abb.”. These manuscripts have been described first by A. d’Abbadie himself², then Marius Chaîne³ and also C. Conti Rossini⁴. Only one of them concerns a non-Semitic language: it is number 185, published and translated by C. Conti Rossini in 1904⁵. It is an Oromo-Amharic glossary of 320 words revealing some expressions in Oromo and also in Amharic, at that time unknown.

Next to the manuscripts are filed A. d’Abbadie’s private papers and travel note-books. These documents have been briefly described by M. Chaîne⁶, and in a little more detail by C. Conti Rossini⁷, who gives them just a few lines in his notice numbers 252 and 253, which spans respectively the volume numbers 266 to 279 and the volume numbers 251 to 264.

All the other linguistic documents are contained in the private papers and travel note-books of A. d’Abbadie. With regards to form, there are some (about 10 x 18 cm in size) note-books densely filled, in which linguistic notes are scattered among various kinds of notes and reflections. The reading of note-books in good hand-writing but written with a steel nib, and densely covering the whole page is a hardship which discourages the reader or the annotator, particularly if French is not his native language.

There are also some large volumes (about 21 x 35 cm) devoted mainly to vocabulary where twelve words on a page are separated by blank lines. As a matter of fact, these are a fair copy of the notes contained in the small size note-books or perhaps on sheets now lost. This remark had not been made either by M. Chaîne nor by C. Conti Rossini. For example, the 58 proverbs in *Kamtiga*⁸ transcribed in Latin characters in the volume 260 (ff. 426–431) are the same as those written in the note-book number 274, except for the transcriptions in Amharic and the re-reading notes.

The majority of the documents are lists of words, which are either written in Latin transcription (not always consistent) or in a double Latin-Amharic transcription. With ingenuity, A. d’Abbadie made use of the Ethiopian writing to create the signs lacking. For example, one sign derived from Ethiopian “d” (ደ) by cutting the right side of the buckle, expresses a sound that according to him, “tient le milieu entre d and r” (“is between *d*

² ABBADIE 1859.

³ CHAÎNE 1912.

⁴ CONTI ROSSINI 1914.

⁵ CONTI ROSSINI 1904.

⁶ CHAÎNE 1912.

⁷ CONTI ROSSINI 1914.

⁸ I do not discuss the names d’Abbadie has given to the languages.

and *r*”), in other words the “*d rétroflexe*” [cerebral]. This attention given to the transcription is strange (but laudable), especially when one recalls that he has been reluctant to insert a systematic transcription in his Amharic French dictionary⁹. If necessary, he resorted to stenography, English, Latin, Basque, Arabic and also to sketches. Thus, we are pleasantly surprised to discover in volume 218 (f. 134 v.) a nice sketch of a Somali sandal in water-colours with the following names:

“*tolan* (coutures en relief); *harar* (coutures en creux); *fāy* (pointe); *örīb* (talon); *semato* (semelles, il y en a 3); *darour* (côtés); *dagihī* (doubles des *darour*, 3 aussi); *inväl* (lien des doigts); *soun* (grands liens transversaux)”.

In the glossaries, a word corresponds to another word, but sometimes an explanation or a commentary is indispensable. For “*ckat*”¹⁰ (Arabic *qāt*), the explanation is as follows:

“*قانت* plante singulière bien connue dans l’Yémen et dans le pays galla où on la nomme **ጎጋ** *gofa* et dont les véritables effets sur l’économie humaine n’ont pas encore été étudiés par nos physiologistes”.

Some pages further, he writes:

“**ጎጎጎ** *gaudia* (*gandi*) mouche à trompe de plus d’un centimètre de long. Une seule de ses morsures suffit pour provoquer chez les chevaux une enflure qui est toujours mortelle. *Zalzalya* de Bruce?” (vol. 259, f. 242).

Somewhere else, he comments upon the Saho word “*kabura*, tombeaux”:

“Celui des hommes a deux pierres debout, celui des femmes trois. Si on est mort d’un coup de lance, il n’y a pas de pierres. Pour les femmes mortes enceintes, on met des pierres noires en bas, des blanches en haut. Des pierres blanches en forme de masgid indiquent le tombeau d’un chaykh. Celui qui est mort du mal vénérien a un tombeau sans ornement et *solitaire*. Un esclave ou un pauvre est enterré là où il meurt, en route”.

About another language, he wrote “On porte très peu d’anneaux et j’en ai oublié le nom” (vol. 262, f. 59).

⁹ ABBADIE 1881: XLI; ROUAUD 1982: 124 (but it might have been only a blind ...).

¹⁰ He is using “ck” for Arabic ق and Ethiopic ቀ.

Sometimes, A. d'Abbadie makes note of some non-existent words that might be especially useful to an ethnologist. For example, at the end of his Ginza vocabulary, he writes:

“Pas de salut, de balle à jouer, de bride, de nom pour la cheville du pied, de citron, pas de civet, pas de *ckat*, de *ckolkual* [euphorbia], ni clochette, ni coriandre. Pas de couvercle d'un plat ou *veso* des Galla, ni *maq* [ጠቅ] pour la pluie. Ni cuivre soit rouge ou jaune. Ni citrouille, ni coudée mesure [...]. Ni d'autre jour de la semaine que le Samedi [...]. Ni étain. Ni éventails” (vol. 260, f. 146).

In volume number 258, he explains how he has compiled his Oromo vocabulary. He revised a basic list with “trois interprètes dont un Yéménite qui a passé trois ans à Enarea”, then he extended it by one third with an Oromo of Enarea who did not know any other language, to bring it to a thousand words. After three months of this work, Antoine d'Abbadie said he could speak Oromo!

Languages which are often mentioned are the following (the number of the volume is written between brackets¹¹):

Afar (258, 274); Ara (Ari, 267); Barya (247, 262, 277); Bilen (258, 276); Bor (259); Dawāro (ou Kullo, 259, 266, 270, 271); Gamella (267); Gazamba (ou Haruro, 260, 267, 271); Ghimirra (Che, 270); Ginza (Gunza, 260); Gongga (Chönacha 252, 277); Hadiyya (276); Huarasa (261, 275); Kafacco (251, 261, 270, 275, 277); Kambata (271); Kamtiga (Xamta, 260, 274, 277); Mekan (262, 271); Oromo (ou Galla ou Ilmorma, 249, 252, 258, 261, 271, 273, 275); Qemant (Qimantnay 262, 270, 277); Saho (263, 273, 274, 277, 279); Sidama (264, 266, 271, 275, 277); Somali (Çomaliad 259, 274, 279); Yambo (264, 270); Yamma (266, 270), etc.

But, many other languages are mentioned as well. He also makes various comments on their structure and suggests a classification that leads us to think once more that he was aware of the existence of the chamito-semitic family (“Nous disons qu'il existe en Abyssinie et les contrées voisines une famille de langues bien caractérisée par ses rapports évidens [*sic*] avec la souche sémitique” [vol. 258, f. 20]).

His lists of toponyms also, are numerous and precious.

Antoine d'Abbadie, himself, used the information he gathered in the letters he sent to the French scholars (as Jules Mohl, Armand d'Avezac and others) and to the French scholarly societies (such as the *Société de Géogra-*

¹¹ See also : CONTI ROSSINI 1914, index.

phie of Paris, and the *Société Asiatique*) or to foreign societies, and he also used the information in his few written works after he returned. But, as is well-known, except for his Amharic dictionary, he did not publish any of the results of his linguistic work, thus leaving some material to be exploited by future generations.

It is C. Conti Rossini who best seized the opportunity. He himself mentioned in French that at the end of his stay in France in 1910, “les derniers mois hélas”, he discovered A. d’Abbadie’s travel note-books “avec une véritable émotion”. He wrote that it was “un véritable trésor enfoui, qu’on venait de reporter à la lumière”. Its scientific value was immediately apparent to him: “on m’assure que des peuplades que des voyageurs modernes y [dans le sud du Choa] trouvèrent dans un état assez florissant, ont été entièrement détruites, sont disparues: peut-être Antoine d’Abbadie nous en a sauvé des documents linguistiques autant plus intéressants qu’on ne pourrait plus les recueillir à présent.”¹²

His first important publication used the documents on the language of the Kemant, a doctoral thesis under Leo Reinisch¹³. Then he wrote other works using the Mekan¹⁴, Ginza (Gunza)¹⁵, Gamella (Gamilà)¹⁶, Ghimirra (Gimirra)¹⁷ and Haruro¹⁸ documents. These documents correspond to Conti Rossini’s publications classified by Stella respectively under the numbers 67, 76, 77, 97, 113¹⁹. I am in no doubt as to the existence of others. Carlo Conti Rossini makes use of A. d’Abbadie’s documents either by directly publishing them (in the Gongga case) or by using them in his own work. It will also be necessary to see what use might have been made of them by Martino Mario Moreno, Enrico Cerulli and other specialists on Ethiopia during the period between the two world wars.²⁰

Among Antoine d’Abbadie’s documents, the ones less used seem to be those relating to the languages which were, in countries other than France, the object of detailed studies, from the time when A. d’Abbadie returned to France with a vast quantity of documents, to his death which left these

¹² CONTI ROSSINI 1912: IX–X.

¹³ CONTI ROSSINI 1912.

¹⁴ CONTI ROSSINI 1913.

¹⁵ CONTI ROSSINI 1919a.

¹⁶ CONTI ROSSINI 1919b.

¹⁷ CONTI ROSSINI 1925.

¹⁸ CONTI ROSSINI 1936.

¹⁹ STELLA 1984.

²⁰ A long time after, in 1970, Gérard Troupeau seized the opportunity to publish the Arabic–Ethiopic vocabulary enclosed in ms 116f. 14–57 (TROUPEAU 1970: 333–342) but this work does not concern the non-semitics languages.

documents unused. Such is the case for Oromo and for Saho, from which he took a remarkable quantity of words and proverbs at Alitena, and for Somali. It would also be good to evoke the problem raised by the letter in “caractères ilmorma” (vol. 249)²¹ – which C. Conti Rossini perhaps tried to solve too rapidly by saying that A. d’Abbadie had been the victim of a swindle – and also the Oromo translation of the *Ineffabilis Deus* bull (8 october 1854) (vol. 252)²².

What can we say now about the C. Mondon-Vidailhet collection ?

Given the catalogues of M. Chaîne (1913) and of C. Conti Rossini (1914), Grover Hudson thinks that “both these nineteenth-century travellers [A. d’Abbadie and C. Mondon-Vidailhet] had collected data on ‘Sidama’ and Kambata, and Mondon-Vildailhet on Hadiyya as well”²³. A rapid examination of the C. Mondon-Vildailhet collection (we remember that Mondon-Vildailhet [1847–1910] stayed in Ethiopia between 1892 and 1896²⁴) shows that, in fact, C. Mondon-Vildailhet did not collect anything and that linguistic documents form a negligible part of his collection.

The Chaîne catalogue records some non-semitic languages in the volume 293 (Galla), 296 (Galla) and 297 (Afar, Agaw, Bilen, Falaša [?], Galla, Hadiya, Kaffetcho, Kwara, Kullo, Sidama [?], Somali, Dankali, Tambaro).

Volume number 293 is called “Éléments de la grammaire galla ou oromone [*sic*]” but the mention “d’après Massaja” (according to Massaja) immediately shows that these notes contain nothing original. They are completed by some “phrases recueillies à Entotto” (sentences collected at Entotto) without interest that augment the number of pages in this volume to 64 small pages.

Number 296 is a note-book which belonged to the well-known merchant Armand Savouré, in four columns of which we find some Amharic in Amharic characters, the French word which corresponds, the approximate Amharic transcription and the “Galla”. But it is clear that A. Savouré, caring only for practical things, started from a list of French words, for which he asked the equivalent meanings in Amharic and Oromo from casual informants. The result is not very satisfactory and only the French column has been completely filled.

Number 297 is all the more disappointing, as it was expected to be good from Chaîne’s description. Actually, it consists only of paradigms simultaneously given in different languages. In this case also, it seems rather to be

²¹ See also: *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, février 1842.

²² Chaîne ascribes this translation to G. Massaja.

²³ In BENDER 1976: 236.

²⁴ ROUAUD 1997.

study notes than research results. However, in front of the word “agaou” C. Mondon-Vidailhet wrote “d’après J. Halévy” and at the head of pages 44 to 59 which include a small glossary of Somali “Paulitschke”!

As we see, the documents in the Mondon-Vidailhet collection are useless and may be forgotten without regret. In compensation, those left by Antoine d’Abbadie remain till now of great interest for our diachronical research in the field of non-semitic Ethiopian languages.

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Summary

The collection of manuscripts preserved in the Oriental Manuscripts Department of the French *Bibliothèque nationale* contains documents about some thirty non-semitic languages spoken in Ethiopia which belong mainly to the d'Abbadie collection. Their exceptional age (they date back to the mid-19th century) gives them an incomparable historical value. I try in this short note to assess the use which has already been made of these documents by *éthiopisants* and to draw up the list of those which have not yet been used.