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### Dissertation Abstract

*Ethiopian Abønnät Manuscripts: Organizational Structure, Language Use,  
and Orality*

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Ethiopic literature has a category that I have called *abännät* in my dissertation. I have opted to use this very term on the grounds of internal textual evidence, secondary literature, and practitioners' (i.e. the *däbtäras*) knowledge. This genre which used to be called 'magic literature' and sometimes *asmat* is a rich area of research. As a result of the mesh of cultures and religions from which its contents are drawn, this genre is textually very rich. Research on this area has so far been directed towards the edition of individual texts which is limited in scope and variety. The dissertation focuses on the structural set-up of individual texts or *abännäts*, their language use, and the orality involved in using them.

The structural approach has shown that an *abännät* is comprised of parts (which I called sections) such as the introductory formula, the *asmat* 'names', the *ṭälsäm* 'images and figures', the *Brillenbuchstaben* 'letters with eyeglasses', the warning, the *gäbir* 'effectuation', and the *historiola*, to mention the main ones. From this we clearly see that the *asmat* which was used to name the genre is only one constituent part. This fact led me to argue against the purported functional dichotomies suggested by scholars up to the present, such as 'magico-religious' vs 'magical'. Such categories cannot be accepted without question, since the structure and function of the texts discussed coalesce into what I have called *abännät*. Furthermore, I show that some constituent parts of each individual text are recent additions, at least textually; earlier they were part of the encoded text but were only transmitted orally. One such section is the so called *gäbir* 'effectuation', that was originally only transmitted orally in order to maintain the secrecy of the texts. The *gäbir* can be likened to a password. Even if the full text of an *abännät* is found, it cannot be performed without the *gäbir*. There are various types of *gäbir*, such as *mäwwarässa* literally 'means of inheritance', *mäqwaddäsa* 'sacrifice', *mämälläsa* 'recourse' and *mätäbbäqiya* 'means of protection'. These types of *gäbir* are not part of an ordinary *abännät*. They are required in a complex *abännät*, usually of an aggressive nature. The languages of composition are used in such a way that Gə'əz (Ethiopic) is the language of the core *abännät* content and Amharic is the language of the *gäbir* 'effectuation' though a mix of the two is not uncommon. The language of the *asmat* is complex: what might be semantic nonsense is seen as having power in and of itself. Languages (alleged or otherwise) such as Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic are often used in *asmats*. Herbal lists have also been rendered in Təgrāñña which is the *däbtära* vernacular. The choice of the lan-

languages used in the *abännäts* can be traced to the following factors: the ‘sacred’ status ascribed to Gəʕəz, the learned position of the *däbtära* and their place in the hierarchy in the practice of *abännäts*, and, finally, the esoteric value ascribed to languages such as Hebrew and Arabic.

In addition to the function of the languages used in the composition of the texts, I have approached the texts using the Speech Acts Theory (SAT) in an attempt to understand how the power purported to be in the texts is performed. The application of such an approach into these Ethiopic texts is the first of its kind. Mediated by the special *asmät*, by visual elements (the *Brillenbuchstaben* and *ṭälsäm*) and by the formulaic presentation of the texts which rests in the shape of the main verbs, and executed by a specialist called the *däbtära*, the texts are believed to have the power to transform reality.

As with the oral aspects, the texts are highly secretive in that their transmission history is blurred and their use complex. I have shown that secrecy and complexity are partially exhibited by the use of cryptographic methods in writing the texts. Two types of cryptographic method have been identified: the *täwlat* ‘replacement’ and the *azawär* ‘juxtaposition’. In the case of what are called ‘*däbtära* notebooks’ (collections of *abännäts* compiled as manuscripts) customary copying of a manuscript as a whole is not possible. Through a gradual development, the so called *mäftähe šaray* ‘undoing of charms’ have entered into the religious sphere per se and may thus be copied. This is attested by the fact that a colophon in one of the *mäftähe šaray* indicates that it was donated to a church. The following ways of transmitting a text have been identified: *däbtära* barter (exchange among trainees/masters), hereditary acquisition (from father to son or to a relative), pity-based acquisition (when a handicapped trainee gets an *abännät* because the master wants him to sustain himself by using it), and merit-based acquisition (when the master gives the best student an *abännät* because of his merit).

Assigning a title is also part of the oral knowledge of the *däbtära*. It is known that the part of the incipit called *ṭəntä nəbab* ‘original reading’ is used as a cue to form a label and a title. As to the function of the incipits, academic opinion is divided. Some believe that they have inherent power in and of themselves. Others believe that they function *pars pro toto*, meaning as representations of a whole. In this second case, they represent the powers imbued in the larger whole they refer to. For example, Gospel incipits represent the powers of the Gospel referred to in the incipits. It is also known that these two alignments are present in the analyses of the use of the incipits in the *abännäts*. In conclusion, the fact that the *abännäts* are made up of constituent parts, the formal use of language and the orality they involve have counterparts in other cultures which can be useful for further comparative analyses.