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Personalia

In memoriam Yaqob Beyene (1936–2025)

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In memoriam Yaqob Beyene (1936–2025)

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Professor Yaqob Beyene passed away on 8 May 2025. He was born on 8 January 1936 in the small village of Mäybəräzyo, near ‘Addigrät, Təgrāy, Ethiopia, in a Catholic family of mixed Sāho and Təgrəññā ancestors. A brilliant youth, he had the opportunity of studying as a seminarist at the Collegio Etiopico di Santo Stefano dei Mori in the Vatican City, where he early on developed special interest in speculation and philosophy. As such, he always remained a profound admirer of Thomas Aquinas, who held his lectures in the complex of the Church of San Domenico Maggiore facing Palazzo Corigliano, one of the main buildings of the Università di Studi ‘L’Orientale’, where Yaqob Beyene worked for decades. It was at the initiative of Lanfranco Ricci, head of the ‘Seminario di etiopistica’, that on 8 January 1963 Yaqob Beyene started his work as librarian at the then Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli. Alongside his work, he was able to carry out regular academic study at the Orientale, where he earned two MA degrees. In the course of time, thanks to his knowledge and reliability, he received increasingly important tasks at the university. He was first ‘Appointed Professor’ (‘Professore incaricato esterno’); since academic year 1967/1968 he became ‘Professore incaricato stabilizzato’ (with tenure track); Associate Professor since academic year 1982/1983; and Full Professor since 1990/1991. He was eventually Director of the Department on Africa and Arab Countries, later President of the Academic Programme in Oriental Languages and Cultures for academic years 2001/2002–2003/2004, in a crucial moment of reformation of the university system, as well as a member of the Academic Senate. As an institutional figure, he played a pivotal role in the transition from the generation of scholars in Ethiopian and Eritrean studies marked by the figure of Lanfranco Ricci to the next generation. As Full Professor, Yaqob Beyene held the Chair for Amharic Language and Literature and was regularly appointed also for Təgrəññā Language and Literature. In addition, he also taught Gə‘əz whenever needed. He served for years on the editorial board of *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* and of the series *Studi Africanistici*, *Serie Etiopica*. He was also ‘Socio’ of the Istituto per l’Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino and ‘Socio onorario’ of Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente (ISMEO), since its inception.

He had a profound and first-hand knowledge of the three main languages of Christian Ethiopia and Eritrea (Gə‘əz, Amharic, and Təgrəññā), which he generously shared with students and colleagues. On the same languages he extensively

researched and published, carrying out field-research in Ethiopia and Eritrea, with reference to phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. A second focus of research was Ethiopian Christianity, with particular reference both to the theological positions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥədo Church and to the political life of the country. A third research focus was editing theological texts: his critical edition and translation of the *Maṣḥafa məṣṭir* (*Book of the mystery*) by Giyorgis of Saglā definitely remains his most remarkable achievement. Aside from this more visible work, he will be remembered for having tirelessly worked behind the scenes to support and encourage students and younger researchers at ‘L’Orientale’ in many ways. He was a person of gentle manners with an honest and ethically firm attitude, completely alien from compromises, who left a deep and lasting impression on whoever met him.

In addition to what I already wrote on the occasion of his *Festschrift*,¹ here I would like to resume a few lines from the preface I recently wrote on the occasion of the publication of the English translation of the *Maṣḥafa məṣṭir* by Hiruie Ermias.² My relationship to Yaqob Beyene started as a PhD student at the Istituto Orientale di Napoli. While I was studying some canonical-liturgical texts, during my PhD years and even before in my MA study, I came across the enigmatic collection mentioned by Giyorgis of Saglā in the last of the thirty homilies of his main work. Despite the reasonable hypothesis advanced by Yaqob Beyene that this collection had to be one with an arrangement of its own, I remained very sceptical. It was only after the discovery of the so-called *Aksumite Collection* in 1999, when I had become a colleague of Yaqob Beyene at the Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, that it became apparent that the texts composing the peculiar collection mentioned by Giyorgis of Saglā were texts extant in Ethiopic, but not yet

¹ The two-volume *Festschrift* which numerous friends, pupils, and colleagues dedicated to him, *Æthiopia et Orientalia. Studi in onore di Yaqob Beyene*, hosts several personal memories, as well as a partial list of his contributions; see A. Bausi, ‘Gli scritti di Yaqob Beyene’, in A. Bausi, A. Brita, and A. Manzo, eds, in cooperazione con C. Baffioni, and E. Francesca, *Æthiopia et Orientalia. Studi in onore di Yaqob Beyene*, I, Studi Africanistici, Serie Etiopica, 9 (Napoli: Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, 2012), iii–xi. Among the publications not included in this list, see at least: Yaqob Beyene, ‘I prestiti italiani in amarico e tigrino’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Nuova serie, 3 (46) (2011, pub. 2012), 97–140; and ‘La Corona imperiale e l’icona della Santa Famiglia’, *Studi Magrebini*, Nuova serie, 12–13 (= *Labor limae. Atti in onore di Carmela Baffioni*, II, A. Straface, C. De Angelo, and A. Manzo, eds) (2014–2015, pub. 2017), 627–630.

² See A. Bausi, ‘Foreword: The English Translation of Giyorgis of Saglā’s (Gāśəččā’s) *Maṣḥafa Məṣṭir* (The Book of the Mystery)’, in Hiruie Ermias, tr., *The Book of Mystery: Māṣḥafā Məṣṭir of Abba Giyorgis of Gāśəččā 1364–1424, Ethiopia’s Most Iconic Theological, Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Treatise*, annotated translation (Hamburg: Negarit Publisher, 2024), vi–ix.

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known from other sources. This has been a great lesson of humility which I learnt from an older and very humble colleague, with whom I strictly collaborated in quite difficult years in a number of extremely tedious and time-consuming, but important, administrative tasks, that is, not to disregard others' opinions when they do not fit in our hypotheses, in the absence of solid evidence to do that. For such lessons, and much else, Yaqob Beyene will be deeply missed.