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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London, 1917ff.).
- CSCO* Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- PdP* *La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi classici*, Napoli 1946ff.
- PICES 8* TADDESE BEYENE, ed., *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Addis Ababa (26–30 November) 1984*, I–II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies–Frankfurt am Main: Frobenius Institut, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, 1988–1989).
- PICES 10* C. LEPAGE and É. DELAGE, eds, *Études éthiopiennes: Actes de la X^e Conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes, Paris, 24–28 août 1988* (Paris: Société française pour les études éthiopiennes, 1994).
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND, A.J. DREWES, and R. SCHNEIDER, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches* (Paris: (Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres) Diffusion de Boccard, 1991).
- RRALm* *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Roma, 1892ff.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli, 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.

Some Notes on Binding Magic (*ma'əsärä əgr*) in Ethiopia*

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There are many Ethiopian magical texts which include of magical formulae for binding slaves (*ma'əsärä əgr*, 'the tying of feet'), and which were used with the intention of preventing, usually a slave, from running away.¹ However, it is apparent that coercive binding magic, of the type known as *ma'əsärä əgr*, was not only used on slaves but crossed class and gender boundaries and was often directed against wives, husbands, lovers and concubines. The rituals associated with binding magic aim at compelling (as opposed to eliciting) the will of the subject. This paper offers a description of binding magic in its various forms, as well as the context of its uses, and highlights the role of the *däbtära*, a skillful manipulator of archaic symbols in Christian Ethiopian culture.²

Much of the literature involving *ma'əsärä əgr* calls for the use of bodily fluids.³ Mary Douglas' argument that the body and its orifices are symbolic representations of the social structure and of its points of vulnerability can help to shed light on the ritual of ingesting bodily fluids and why, in cultures throughout the world, sorcerers often use 'bodily waste' in their incantations and spells. If the orifices of the body represent points of vulnerability in the body, and hence of structure as a whole, body fluids represent substances that have crossed (social) structural boundaries. As dialectically 'other', these substances are viewed as being deeply threatening to the form and function of the social structure, as represented by the body. Their use, according to Douglas, is laden with symbolic power, challenging the boundaries of the sacred geography of the human body. As Douglas argues, all rituals concerning 'exereta, breast milk, saliva and the rest' cannot be interpreted 'unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the power and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in

* I am grateful to a number of my *däbtära* informants who wish to remain anonymous. I am also grateful to Steven Kaplan for his extensive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Slavery in Ethiopia continued until the latter half of the twentieth century, sanctioned by the *Fəthä Nägäst*, the legal code which has governed Ethiopia since the thirteenth century. For a general discussion of magical practices in Ethiopia, see especially Strelcyn 1955; Lifchitz 1940; Worrell 1910, 398–401; Mercier 1997; see also 'Asmat', *E Ae*, I (2003), 381a–b (S. Chernetsov).

² See 'Däbtära', *E Ae*, II (2005), 53b–54b (S. Kaplan).

³ The use of bodily fluids in magic is well attested across cultures; see Douglas 2002; for the case of China, see Chu 1980, 38–55; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988.

small on the human body'.⁴ Griaule's collection of works pertaining to an 'Abyssinian Däbtära' lists such use of bodily fluids for purposes of binding:

So that a slave may not run away (do the following): mix the owner's urine, blood and semen (*ḥaṭiyat*, lit. 'sin') in honey, and after going thrice around the house, you shall give it to him to taste.⁵

Bodily fluids are not without their symbolic meaning in Ethiopian culture. The blood of slaughtered animals, for instance, in conformity with Levitical laws (either typological or historical), is never consumed; it is buried. In turn, the slaughtered animal serves to enforce the boundaries of a religious group and clearly seals one's belonging to this group; the animals ritually slaughtered by Christians is never consumed by the *Betä Īsra'el* or by Muslims, and vice versa. During communal gatherings (e.g. weddings, funerals) which bring diverse groups together, each party takes pains to demarcate these boundaries by readying an unslaughtered animal and giving it to his alien neighbour. Blood, as Hagar Solomon notes, 'not only sustains the body; it gives sustenance to the soul, and it seals and sanctifies one's religious identity. Like a river flowing between two nations, it forms a clear and hopefully defensible boundary'.⁶ Even more meaningful are the rituals and taboos associated with menstrual blood (with many applications in magic) in Ethiopian Christian (and *Betä Īsra'el*) culture; it is often used to demarcate persons (women) and by implication, spaces and times associated with pollution. Saliva, on the other hand is associated with either cursing *or* blessing. Semen (amh. *ḥaṭṭat*, lit. 'sin'), as its literal meaning suggests, is the cause of sin and pollution. The association between coitus and sin is, of course, not without its historical roots mirrored in the writings of the early church fathers.⁷ In line with the deeply monastic inclinations of Ethiopian Christianity, nocturnal emissions and/or coitus are clearly seen as a blemish on the idealized body, symbolized by the *male* body; priests are to abstain from sexual relations prior to leading liturgical services. And during regulated periods of ritual time (fasts and feast days), the prohibition against coitus extends to the general public, so that notions of 'holiness' are defined in opposition to coitus and bodily emissions.

When I personally asked a *däbtära* about the mechanisms of *ma'äsärä agr*, I was told the following:

It works by compelling (lit. *masgäddäd*) the slave. A slave (*barya*) will always think of running away from his master and plans an elaborate

⁴ Douglas 2002, 142.

⁵ Griaule 1930, 16.

⁶ Salamon 1999, 121.

⁷ For instance, in his *Confessions* (2.2, 3.1, 2.3, 3.1), Saint Augustine (1991) considered sexual desire to be the epitome of disorder and extolled the virtues of 'eunuchism'.

escape plan. He wishes to execute the plan and promises to himself that he will run away, tomorrow, the day after [...] Tomorrow passes and he is still bound in the home of his master, serving him. He constantly imagines and creates new plans to run away, and year after year passes, his heart longing to go, but the slave spends his life in the home of his master, without fleeing, and eventually dies there as well.

For the *däbtära*, the element of ‘compelling’ is integral to his interpretation of the function of bodily fluids in rituals of magic. As my *däbtära*, informant noted, ‘the *ma’äsärä ägr* is a lesser form of *mästäfaqər* (love magic); the subject realizes that he is a prisoner, bound. In *mästäfaqər*, the subject never feels compelled. He loves voluntarily, happily, never realizing he is bound’. Clearly, whether the subject is cognizant or not, for the *däbtära* there is no doubting the ‘compelling’ element of *mästäfaqər* and *ma’äsärä ägr*.⁸ The ingestions of bodily fluids is symbolic of re-establishing (or re-enforcing) the borders of the body and hence of social relations. The ritual of ‘going around the house thrice’ sets the social space of the binding, allocates its boundaries and its exact coordinates; the house, where the slave lives and sleeps, becomes the fortress of his binding.

Frazer’s notion of ‘contagious magic’ seems to be supported by the *däbtära*’s understanding of binding magic. Frazer observes that in this form of magic, the ‘physical basis’ serves as a continuum by which two distant objects are brought closer, ‘conveying impressions from one to the other’.⁹ Hence, as a form of ‘magical sympathy’, the body parts of a person—hair, nails, urine, semen, saliva—when used in ritual, act as mechanisms of imposing one person’s will over another, ‘at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut’.¹⁰ The opposite direction of ‘will transfer’ is also widely acknowledged in rituals of binding, whereby body parts of the magician or the client are implanted on the subject, allowing the magician or the client to control the will of subject.

It was not just bodily fluids that were used for purposes of binding; angels and lesser spirits were sought too. See for instance the following example of *ma’äsärä ägr*, invoking the names of various angels and spirits:

⁸ The widespread use of *mästäfaqər* has made its way into popular Amharic music and into the lyrics of Getachew Kassa’s *Təzzəta*: ‘አስቀመሽኝ፣ አሉ፣ መድኃኒት፣ በጠላ፣ አን ችን፣ አስወድዶ፣ ሌላ፣ የሚያስጠላ’ (lit. ‘It is said that you (feminine singular) have made me taste medicine put in beer, making me love you (feminine singular) and hate (sic!) everyone else’).

⁹ Frazer 2005, 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

In the name of God, the Father, and Christ, the Son, and thirdly, the Holy Spirit, (and) in the name of Mary, the mother of God, and (in the name of) the angels, Michael, Gabriel, Surafel, Kirubel, and Ṭuṭafeynoṣawoʿil and (in the name of) Amanuel, and Siqa and Siqa and Adonaʿel and Siṭaṭiro and Piʿal and by these names, you have bound and made my servants swear so that they may neither go up nor down nor right nor left. Blind their eyes and break their knees and annul their thoughts and blind their conscience so that they may not go and be separated from this house, this monastery, (neither) far nor close.¹¹

The names of the archangels are invoked, followed by the names of what appear to be lesser spirits ((*siqa and Piqa and Adyoʿel and siṭi(*)ro and Piʿal) *unknown* in general literary lore. The unknown or un-canonized, is at the root of the perception that these texts belong to the genre of magical literature. Texts of this kind are rare and, when we do find them, they are often defaced and destroyed, written in codes, and with many missing elements.¹² They are never shared with the general public but are passed from father to son or master to pupil, in secrecy, with the missing elements transmitted orally.¹³ Their propagation is not encouraged for complex theological and moral reasons (as well as the personal interests of the *dābtāra*).¹⁴ The age-old question of the difference between magic and religion resurfaces, and is a pertinent consideration in the Ethiopian context. Mauss would be partially justified: it is the contextual and social mode of delivery which distinguishes ‘religion’ from ‘magic’; magic is ‘private, secret, mysterious, and approaches the limits of a prohibited rite’.¹⁵

Ethiopian magic texts readily employ the use of *asmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā*, for rectifying worldly woes: sickness, poverty, barrenness, possession by demons, etc.¹⁶ The practical applications of *asmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā* are well doc-

¹¹ MS EMLL no. 5771, f. 92.

¹² See for instance the many erased magic texts in the EMLL collection, MS EMLL no. 3930 (f. 1r–v); MS EMLL no. 5397 (f. 119v); MS EMLL no. 3184 (ff. 218v–219r); MS EMLL no. 1331 (f. 1v); MS EMLL no. 1535 (f. 49r–v); MS EMLL no. 3267 (f. 23r).

¹³ For an elegant treatment of the concept of magic in the Ethiopian Church, see Kaplan 2004, 413–420.

¹⁴ Although many *dābtāras* ventured to live in church grounds, teaching and copying manuscripts for financial remuneration, many chose to leave ‘church grounds’ to add to their repertoire of knowledge of healing. The distinction must then be drawn between *dābtāra*-scribes and *dābtāra*-healers: not all *dābtāra*-scribes are healers but all *dābtāra*-healers are scribes.

¹⁵ Mauss 1972, 24.

¹⁶ See Gardet 1960, 714a–717b.

umented in Islamic writings, finding their full talismanic and theurgical expressions in the works of Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Būnī (d. 1225).¹⁷ Al-Būnī's *Kitāb šams al-Maʿārif al-Kubrā wa-Laṭāʿif al-ʿAwārif* is a comprehensive, exhaustive collection of Arabic talismanic and magical prescriptions. The practical applications of *asmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā* are also employed by the *dābtāra* in Ethiopia and, in the following example, we find a text of the *maʿāsārā ʿagr* using the *ʿasmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā* for binding purposes:

In the name of these names of yours, Al-Qadir Al-Muqtaddir (Ar. *Al-Qadir Al-Muqtadir*), may he be stunned and fearful by the power of these names. May he not go from me by his will, but only by mine. Al-Fatr ya-muqdr Qohdr, by the power of these names, bind him and paralyze so and so that he may not go or separate or flee from me to another city except until he dies. Amen.¹⁸

The use of *asmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā* by the *dābtāra* is even more surprising when we come across texts which open with praises to the prophet Mohammed (!).¹⁹ The frequency with which the *dābtāra*, the transmitter of the church's 'collective memory' (to use Halbwachs' term), crosses such theological boundaries is truly remarkable.²⁰ Furthermore, it directly points to the *liminal* status of the *dābtāra* in Ethiopian Christian culture, a state of ambiguity since 'this condition and this person elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states or positions in cultural space'.²¹ The sociology of binding magic is even more interesting. The allegiance of the *dābtāra*, at least in modern times, does not necessarily follow traditional lines of power relations. The *maʿāsārā ʿagr* (and *māstäfaqer*) was used for the benefit of those who had won the favour and goodwill of the *dābtāra* (through various means, including monetary payment, sexual favours). Binding magic could even serve as a powerful weapon of retribution, of redressing power imbalances, especially when used by those with lower social status whose grievances were generally ignored by structure: women, peasants, and the distressed against a powerful judge or ruler.²² Liminality grants versatility. In turn, the *dābtāra*'s versatile 'in-between' status works in surprising ways, diffusing the dramas and tensions of the social structure which are invariably played out in the personal and household spheres.

¹⁷ See especially Doutté 1909; Lory 1987–1988, 97–111.

¹⁸ MS EML no. 4289, f. 170^r.

¹⁹ Uncatalogued EMDL manuscripts.

²⁰ See Halbwachs 1992.

²¹ Turner 2008, 95.

²² See, for instance, the *Asmat* prayer in MS EML no. 1502 (ff. 2^r–12^v) to gain the favour of rulers.

The continuing decline of the *däbtära*, as scribe and healer, has happened almost by default, going hand in hand with the gradual replacement of the manuscript by the printed book, the spread of modern medicine, the increasing disappearance of the *Qəne Bet* and its teachers. The *däbtära*, as healer and scribe, is becoming as rare as his *grimoires*. When we do come across the *māʾāsārā ʾagr* and other magic texts, we recognize them for what they truly are: relics of a time when the *däbtära* roamed the highlands of Ethiopia, as healer, cleric, and scribe, shuffling between tradition and innovation, moving between borders, mending bodies and minds and tending to those social-structured tensions and rifts which often remain below the surface.

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- EMDL = Ethiopian Manuscripts Digital Library; an ongoing digitizing project in the northern regions of Ethiopia (the manuscripts in this collection have yet to be catalogued).
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Summary

Ethiopian magical texts abound in their inclusion of magical formulae for binding slaves (*ma'āsārä əgr*, 'the tying of feet'), used with the intention of preventing, usually a slave, from running away. This paper will embark on a description of binding magic, the context of their uses and highlight the role of the *däbtära*, whose 'in betwixt' status enables him to cross rigid boundaries of traditional power structures in Christian Ethiopian culture.