

ORAL TRADITION IN A LITERATE CULTURE :
THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA

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Christian Ethiopia is a culture profoundly animated by the spoken word. Its highest art is poetry, a literary form produced for performance. Verbal facility is widely diffused among different social classes. Ambiguity is prized, as is nuance and subtlety. As Donald Levine has noted, wax and gold is a central social metaphor derived from poetic form: two substances of radically different value, sharing a common shape which allows the one to hide the other.¹ Yet, unique among sub-saharan societies, Ethiopia has also possessed an indigenous literacy, dating back over two thousand years and responsible for its own script. Culture and literacy have informed a succession of different polities, currently a people's democratic republic, the revolutionary successor to a feudal monarchy which provides the context for this paper.

Solomonic Ethiopia, so named because its rulers claimed descent from the Biblical Solomon and Sheba, lasted from the late thirteenth to the late twentieth century. Its first heyday was the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; its second, the seventeenth and eighteenth. During the first it produced a variety of written works, primarily narrative chronicles and hagiographies, although the national prose epic, the Kebrä Nägäst, was also produced at this time as were a number of works of theology.² From the second period a much wider variety of writings has survived. The lengthiest, most detailed chronicles date to this era; but perhaps more characteristic are the non-narrative materials, some of them prayers, but the bulk of them essentially administrative in origin: lists of ecclesiastical officials; inventories of moveable church property; and a welter of documents, - statements of grants, registers, wills, sales, gifts, and marriage settlements, - dealing with land. An understanding of the social and institutional origin and function of these materials provides

the context for an understanding of the relationship between literacy and orality in this ancient culture.

Here as elsewhere, literacy was power.³ The ability to read was much more widespread than the ability to write. The latter was an arcane craft, in its raw form associated with magical and even demonic forces. The clergy monopolized literacy. The state drew on writing for a number of purposes: correspondence, propaganda and self-glorification (one of the principal uses of the chronicles, which directly and indirectly maintained the state's identification with Biblical Israel), and record-keeping. Although the latter was modestly developed, and has been very little studied, it was a dimension of social and political control.

One of the offices of court was a chancery under the direction of the S'ähafi Te'ezaz, the writer of the orders or commands. No body of chancery records has survived from a period prior to the twentieth century so their composition is largely a matter for speculation. However, we do have some hints of the administrative purposes for which writing was used. Richard Pankhurst has reconstructed and published tax records from the reign of Téwodros II (1855-67) and the English traveler Beke describes how Däjjach Goshu, ruler of Gojjam, received reports from his herdsmen of his cattle holdings, which "were written on parchment."⁴ Moreover, the chancery itself as a holder of key documents was much supplemented by the country's leading churches, the margins and fly-leaves of whose manuscripts are crammed with notes.⁵ Some major land grants list the many different places, both church and manuscript, in which they were registered. If the church marginalia adequately reflect the balance of chancery records, then land was their overwhelming concern.

In the first instance, the state and ruling classes used literacy to assert and formalize their rights, known as gult, to overlordship of the land. For the people at large literacy here served primarily a mystifying and solemnizing function. However, content was also important because it regulated intraclass claims for the rulers, delimiting sacred from secular, and, within each of these realms, further specifying rights according to individual or institutional holder. This use of literacy was important and was taken seriously. The mere fact of deploying such a scarce skill as writing at all suggests this; as does both the general reverence with which documents were held, and the occasional distortions and manipulations to which they were subjected. Deeds and transfers, whatever the scale, were frequently accompanied by solemn oaths, and always by formal witnesses. Manuscripts could be, and were, stolen. They were also defaced, key names and passages being scratched out, to nullify their meaning. Finally, one document could be countered by another with contradictory meaning. Nevertheless, the society as a whole remained deeply oral and its documents of ambiguous import.

We are engaged in a large scale project to collect as much information as possible concerning historic land tenure in the Ethiopian provinces of Gondär and Gojjam.⁶ In a number of senses, the conceptualization of the project entails literacy: could we have "historic land tenure" without writing? Our principal object is to photograph written materials: the grants and marginalia to which we have already referred. Without these it is unlikely that we could realize our goal of a narrative, interpretive history of Ethiopian land tenure. The written materials simply contain vastly more information, much more precisely located in historic time, than do the accounts of informants. Peasants concentrate on their heritable system of holding agricultural land, generally give highly fragmented accounts, and,

when they refer to larger issues of governance and overrights, rarely reach further back in time than about a century. Informants of clerical and noble backgrounds naturally focus on those larger issues and, occasionally, show an historical reach into the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the collection of oral traditions has been an important secondary focus for our project.

Writing exists both to help us remember and to allow us to forget. Writing, like all forms of communication, is highly contextual: its users deploy it to convey only what needs to be conveyed. The obvious, the underlying, need no expression: they are seen or shared by all. However, the world of eighteenth century Ethiopia is far removed from the late twentieth century whether we are in Ethiopia, Urbana, or Warsaw. Fortunately, unlike scholars of the ancient world, we are in direct, albeit tenuous contact with the milieu of our written sources through the people of the area. The trauma of the revolution has not yet obliterated the meaning of their documents from those who have preserved them, nor a willingness to share it with outsiders. Informants are indispensable to understanding the documents, which, at the same time, stand as a check on their accounts. Together, written and oral materials stimulate reflections on the nature of culture and its relationship with society and polity in this distinctive African country.

Although profoundly oral, Ethiopian culture was also permeated by the fact of literacy, at least in the circles with which our project deals. Where we encountered extended oral narratives, anecdotes and vignettes set in historical time, almost invariably we subsequently found written versions of them, and this was the more true the more substantive and detailed the traditions were on questions of land and/or personality. To be sure, we found stereotypical accounts which matched stock stories with

ostensible events through such devices as etymologies, and these accounts were perhaps rather less uniformly later found in writing. But where we hoped to find independent traditions capable of corroborating written documents generally we were disappointed.

A more complex question, however, concerns the deeper relationship between oral tradition and the first written versions of events. At what point did the tradition become fixed in writing? Some of our texts are clearly the crystallization of traditions, while others are near eye-witness in origin. Compare, for example, the accounts of the founding and re-founding of the Esté Mäkanä Iyäsus Church, which two of us recently published, with the unpublished accounts of the principal donations to the church of Mahdärä Maryam.⁷ The Esté documents, the one dating to the 1780s, the other to 1870s, must have been written down close in time to the events they describe. By contrast, the document describing the founding of the Mahdärä Maryam church was set down as much as a century after the event, but serves, no less than those from Esté, to determine subsequent accounts. Yet the story may not stop here. Belated as they are, the Mahdärä Maryam traditions probably rest, at least in part, on earlier documents, destroyed by fire, plunder, or some other disaster, since what they describe, the granting of land to the church, has, since at least the fourteenth century, been quintessentially a subject for writing.⁸ Is, then, the collection of traditions concerning land grants and tenure a waste of time? Far from it.

Informants play a number of vital roles. They fill in "unwritten text" by clarifying the original context of the documents. They explicate obscure passages and technical terms. And they further contextualize the documents by describing subsequent developments in land-holding and by identifying place names.

There is a functional dimension to tradition, but it is not wholly determining. While there tends to be a strong correlation between, on the one hand, what parts and features of the original documents are understood and remembered, and, on the other, what continued to function into the recent past, it is not a complete identification.

A good indicator of this is the term amesteya which occurs frequently in land grants and documents from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹ Literally, it means "one-fifth," but its applicability to land-holding is unclear. Does it refer to a division of the land itself; or to some other division? Informants are unanimous that it refers to the proportion of his crop due as tribute by the tiller to the land "holder". They have a strong memory of this having been the norm for tribute in their area (a norm distinct from that of neighboring areas), even though it did not hold sway in the more concretely remembered past. No one was able to fill us in on when it had fallen into disuse, to be replaced by lesser amounts of tribute reckoned in fixed amounts per field. The memory of this detail has profound ramifications, because it reinforces another claim by informants, this one reinforced by a degree of functionality, clarifying a major obscurity in the original materials.

Several different types of "founding" documents exist. Many churches have charters, summary statements, often in narrative form, describing acts of royal or noble donation of fixed property. These charters will list lands, sometimes assigning their revenues to a particular service of the church, and then specify other sources of income such as taxes on markets, springs, and the like. Less frequently, the church may also hold a more detailed register of its lands, sometimes connecting individual holders with individual fields. These documents are never, or

only very rarely, explicit about what kinds of rights are assigned to the holders, since, evidently, this needed no specification. A number of factors would tempt the modern reader to suppose that they were extensive, and possibly exclusive: the documents are highly developed and formalized; the rights granted are individual; and an extraordinary degree of detail, sometimes the specification of holdings by individual field, may be recorded. However, informants insist that the rights were those of overlordship, known generically as gult, and not exclusive. Rather they existed concurrently with peasant rights to till the land and pass it on to their heirs, subject only to the payment of conventional forms of tribute, such as the amesteya, mentioned above. In short, they inserted the eighteenth century documents into a framework, which, at its most general level, continued to operate into their own lifetimes, and, indeed, up until the Revolution of 1974, yet one which far from doing violence to their substance illuminates it quite significantly.¹⁰ Without these insights it is unlikely we could ever adequately understand the written record.

In one other area informants bring the documents to life and cast light on darkness: place names. As one would expect, place names bestrew the grants, registers, and transfers. Sometimes these are small, local references; often they are larger. It is an indication of the profound socio-cultural continuity obtaining in our area that, so far, the project has failed to come up with an eighteenth century place name which informants could not readily identify. This allows a careful scrutiny of the geography of the grants and holdings and, potentially, a very rich reading of what, on the surface, seem sterile catalogues.

And yet on a number of important points informants fail to understand, or to illuminate, the plain overt meaning of the doc-

uments. They are confused about some basic, important terms. They have difficulty with the very individualized character of the registers. And they cannot explain to us many of the abbreviations which the registers contain. An example of the first problem is the term gasha. Its primary meaning is "shield." Centuries ago, well before the eighteenth century, it had come by extension to mean a military fief or landholding. Within the last hundred years it has become a basic national land concept with a strong sense of area.¹¹ In short its primary field has shifted from tenure, to measurement or area. People educated in traditional things might also still retain, if only in a vestigial way, the military link. Our informants are modern men. When we ask them to explain gasha, as it appears in the eighteenth century documents, they talk about surface area and measurement, even though the plain meaning is that of a "holding," without fixed area. Indeed, the records graphically reveal just how varied a gasha could be in its composition. This is a classical case in oral tradition studies of contamination through feedback from an anachronistic literature. The documents, and the informants handling of them, also reveal massive amounts of amnesia.

Informants have generously provided us with, and allowed us to copy, grants and registers of lands once belonging to their churches. Beginning in the seventeenth century, with the Emperor Fasilädas's establishment of a church to his name saint at Qoma, the documents assign these lands to individual clergymen to hold on behalf of the church in return for performing specific liturgical offices according to a fixed rota. Eighteenth and nineteenth century documents reveal a brisk trade in titles to these lands. We have records of over 2,000 sales of them. Yet only the most informed of contemporary clergy in the Gondär region have any inkling that such a system existed in the past. The

situation in Gojjam is somewhat different since the earliest analogous grants occurred in the 1790s and there was a major wave of them as late as the 1880s. In the Gondär case the individualized character of the grants has receded into the remote past as social dynamics, discussed elsewhere, by returning this form of accumulation to societal norms of equitable inheritance among all descendants eventually diffused claims to the point that they were lost altogether and became institutionalized.¹² In Gojjam local memory at the churches holding the grants is strong, but general memory has never incorporated this information and even very knowledgeable informants may be ignorant of a tradition of individualized holdings of clerical land.

Oral tradition has also failed to maintain an understanding of many of the details contained in the registers, some of them apparently pretty important. The registers are very elliptical, compressed documents, which make frequent use of abbreviations. For example, the Qwesqwam register dating to the 1740s, by far our most detailed and the source of a tradition, summarizes each holding by means of a number of abbreviations, the meanings of which, alas, are not apparent, and which informants have been unable to explain.

Yet we repeat that the collection of traditions is a vital part of our project. To start with, the documents we seek are deeply embedded in institutions with direct, organic links to their origins. Simply to tear them from that environment would be an act of violence. Socially it would express arrogance. It would also mean the loss of the many insights which traditions still contain into the contents and meaning of the documents. Finally, it would cut us off from an informed understanding of subsequent developments in the tenures which the documents describe. Informants speak knowledgably and at length about the

administration of church lands during the past century when their holding had passed from its originally very individual form into a generalized, insitutional one. They also recognized, without rancor or passion, the substantial decline in overall revenues entailed in this transformation. Traditions do illuminate the written record, and in this sense are independent from it, a fact which suggests wider reflections on the relations between literacy and orality in this unusual society.

The historic culture of Christian Ethiopia is profoundly oral, but it is also permeated with the fact of literacy. Writing was scarce and used for very limited purposes. Traditional clerical education, even when it focused on written materials, was mostly an oral process. The creation of original written texts was a truly exceptional event. Nonetheless, writing and written materials possessed great authority, in part connected with and derived from the centrality of the Bible to the country's religious inheritance and self-understanding. In the formation of traditions within the national intelligentsia orality and literacy went hand-in-hand, but in their eventual preservation and transmission literacy dominated. Once a tradition was formed and deemed to be important, it was likely to be written down, and once written down it assumed a normative character.

Yet orality remained a dominant mode of conceptualization and means of communication, for literacy was marginalized and limited in importance. Bureaucracy, if developed at all, had reached only a very minimal level. Beke notes that, although the Gojjamé rulers kept a written record of their cattle holdings in a general sense, their overall scope, the sum and detail, was a matter of constant recalculation, and was not written. In the long run, what was important about the land grants to churches was not their detailed substance, but the few bare facts of the

broad lands involved, and even these facts, incontestably established in writing, were subject to endless erosion and subversion as at the local and regional levels personality clashed with personality, secular struggled with ecclesiastic, and peasant resisted overlord. In these conflicts the hard, established facts of written culture proved less important than the permeable, pliable character of orality.

References.

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4. Richard Pankhurst, Tax Records and Inventories of Emperor Téwodros of Ethiopia (1855-1868) (London, 1978); British Library, Additional Manuscripts, 30251, "A Diary written during a journey in Abessinia in the years 1840, 1841, 1842, and 1843," 26.

5. See such catalogues as W. Wright, Catalogue of Ethiopic MSS in the British Museum (London, 1877); and W. Macomber, A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, Collegeville (Collegeville, MN: vol. I, 1975), with subsequent volumes to vol. IX (1987) with increasing participation of Getatchew Haile.

6. With the financial support, which we gratefully acknowledge, of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Research Division, Interpretive Research Projects, Grant No. RO-21457-87.

7. D. Crummev and Shumet Sishagne, "Theology and Political Conflict During the Zämänä Mäsafent: The Case of Esté in Bägémder," pp. 201-211 in volume V of A. Gromyko et al (ed.), Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow, 26-29 August 1986 (Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 6 volumes, 1988). For Mahdärä Maryam, see: Tarekegn Yibabie, "The History of Mahadara Maryam (ca. 1596-1939)," unpublished BA thesis, History Department, Addis Ababa University, 1988.

8. Taddesse Tamrat, "The abbots of Däbrä-Hayq, 1248-1535," Journal of Ethiopian Studies, VIII, 1 (1970), 87-117, contains the earliest authentic land grant known to me. C. Conti Rossini, Liber Axumae (Paris, 1909), contains some highly problematic grants claiming to date to classical Axumite times. These are further reproduced in G. W. B. Huntingford, The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia (Addis Ababa/Nairobi, 1965).

9. See for example, the grants to the Qwesqwam church in Gondär or the Fänja church in Dämbeya, the former described in: D. Crummey and Shumet Sishagne, "The Lands of the Church of Däbrä S'ähay, Qwesqwam, Gondär," Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Paris, August 1988 (forthcoming).

10. The best account of recent land tenure is by Alan Hoben, Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia. The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent (Chicago, 1973).

11. For a useful discussion, see J. Mantel-Niecko, The Role of Land Tenure in the System of Ethiopian Imperial Government in Modern Times (Warsaw, 1980), as indexed. The evolution of the term's usage can be seen, in microcosm, in a succession of dictionaries: I. Guidi, Vocabolario Amarico-Italiano (Roma, 1901), "fief given on condition of carrying out military service;" J. Baeteman, Dictionnaire Amarigna-Français (Dire-Daoua, 1929), "a piece of land measuring, on average, 4 kilometres around;" I. Guidi, F. Gallina, E. Cerulli, Supplemento al Vocabolario Amarico-Italiano (Roma, 1940), "a surface measurement which in Shoa is normally given as equivalent to 35 hectares."

12. D. Crummey and Shumet Sishagne, "Land Tenure, the Social Accumulation of Wealth, and Agricultural Production in Eighteenth Century Ethiopia: Evidence from the Qwesqwam Land Register," paper presented to the symposium on Land in African Agrarian Systems, Urbana, April 1988, and forthcoming in a collected volume of proceedings.