



Faculty of Humanities



# Arabic language and alphabet in Ethiopia

Sara Fani

IslHornAfr (EU 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme, ERC Advanced Grant 322849)

Dept of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies  
University of Copenhagen  
Karen Blixens Vej 4  
2300 Copenhagen S

[www.islhornafr.eu](http://www.islhornafr.eu)



# Connections between the two sides of the Red Sea: I millennium b.C.



Egyptian soldiers from Hatshepsut's expedition (1479–1458 b.C.) to the Land of Punt as depicted from her temple at Dayr Bahrī.



Sabaic inscriptions found in Yeha, NE Ethiopia, capital of the Da'mat Kingdom.

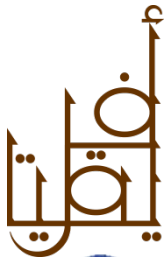


# Trade routes during the Aksumite Kingdom Centuries ca. V b.C.-VIII A.D.





## Ethiopian linguistic environment



## Arabic language spreading channels:

Commercial context:

- Communities of Arabic-speaking traders; Arabic used in the markets.

Religious context:

- Christian: texts translated into Ge'ez from Arabic; Arabic used for political relationships together with Ge'ez
- Islamic: religious and cultural language of Ethiopian Muslims or immigrant Muslim learned men; Arabic used in Islamic institutions and as a common lingua franca among Muslims.



## Arabic speakers in Ethiopia:

Immigrants of Arab origin or Arabic-speakers who maintain their native language in a non-Arab context (traders or Muslim learned men)

Ethiopian arabicised people (Arabic as a second language) who use Arabic in commercial and Islamic context.

Levels of oral skills:

- mnemonic recitation of the Coran and religious formulas
- salutation formulas
- perfect fluency for those who travelled to Arab world
- use of Arabic loan-words



## Arabic literature in Ethiopia:

Arabic works imported from the Islamic world into Ethiopia, then copied and spread

Arabic works of local Muslim learned men ('ulamā') and intellectuals; its importance:

- Linguistically: level of knowledge of written Arabic.
- Culturally: main subjects that concern the Ethiopian Islamic community
- Historically: local historical sources about Islamic principalities of Ethiopia

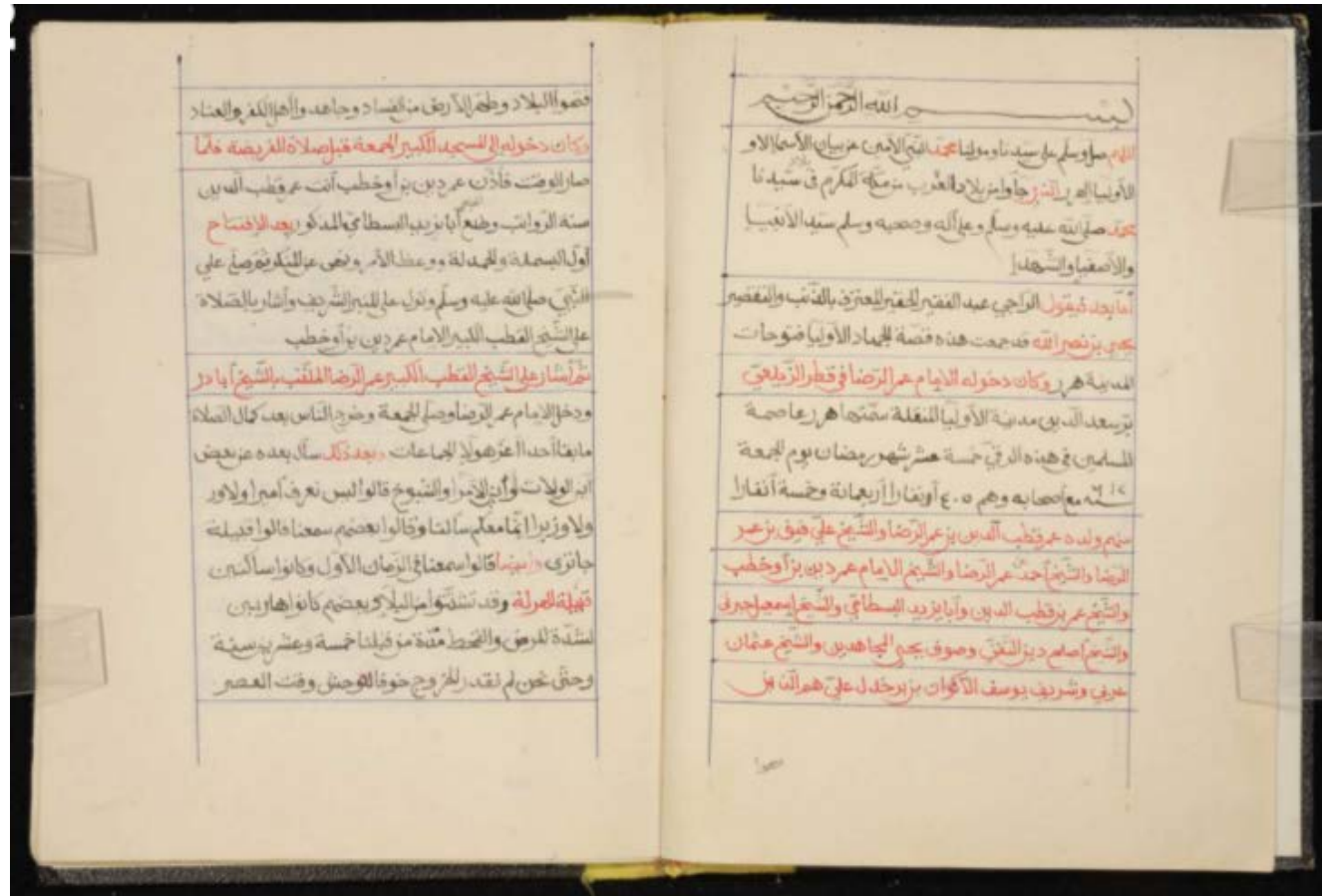






## Historical literature

*Fatḥ Madīnat Harar* (The Conquest of the Town of Harar), by Yaḥyā b. Naṣr Allāh. It is a sort of hagiographical and legendary historiography of the town of Harar in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



## Literary genres:

### Historical:

about local history by Arab or local authors; chronological list of rulers; Genealogical trees;

### Hagiographical:

works referring to characters, *šuyūḥ*, linked to specific regions

### Mystical:

poetry, hymns in praise of the Prophet, litanies, invocations of the name of God intended to be recited during devotional practices; also in local languages with Arabic script (*‘ağamī*)

### Pietistic

Theological and moralistic

Juridical and administrative



## Pietistic literature:

*al-Faṭḥ al-Raḥmānī*, (The Merciful Revelation), compiled by the Hararī ṣayḥ Hāšim b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (ca. 1711- ca. 1765), of the Qādiriyya ṣūfī order.



'Abd Allāh Ṣarīf Museum, Ms. 1563, 1176H./1762A.D., ff. 2v-3r

## Literary genres:

Historical:

about local history by Arab or local authors; chronological list of rulers; Genealogical trees;

Hagiographical:

works referring to characters, *šuyūḥ*, linked to specific regions

Mystical:

poetry, hymns in praise of the Prophet, litanies, invocations of the name of God intended to be recited during devotional practices; also in local languages with Arabic script (*'ağamī*)

Pietistic

Theological and moralistic

Juridical and administrative







*al-Faṭḥ al-Raḥmānī*, by the Hararī ṣayḥ Hāšim b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (ca. 1711- ca. 1765).  
[Ms. IES 2670, ff. 37v-38r, 20<sup>th</sup> century]

*Tahmīs qaṣīdat al-Burda li-l-Būṣīrī*, by the Egyptian Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Ṣamad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Makkī al-Fayyūmī



[Ms. IES 1855, 18<sup>th</sup> century, ff. 3v-5r]

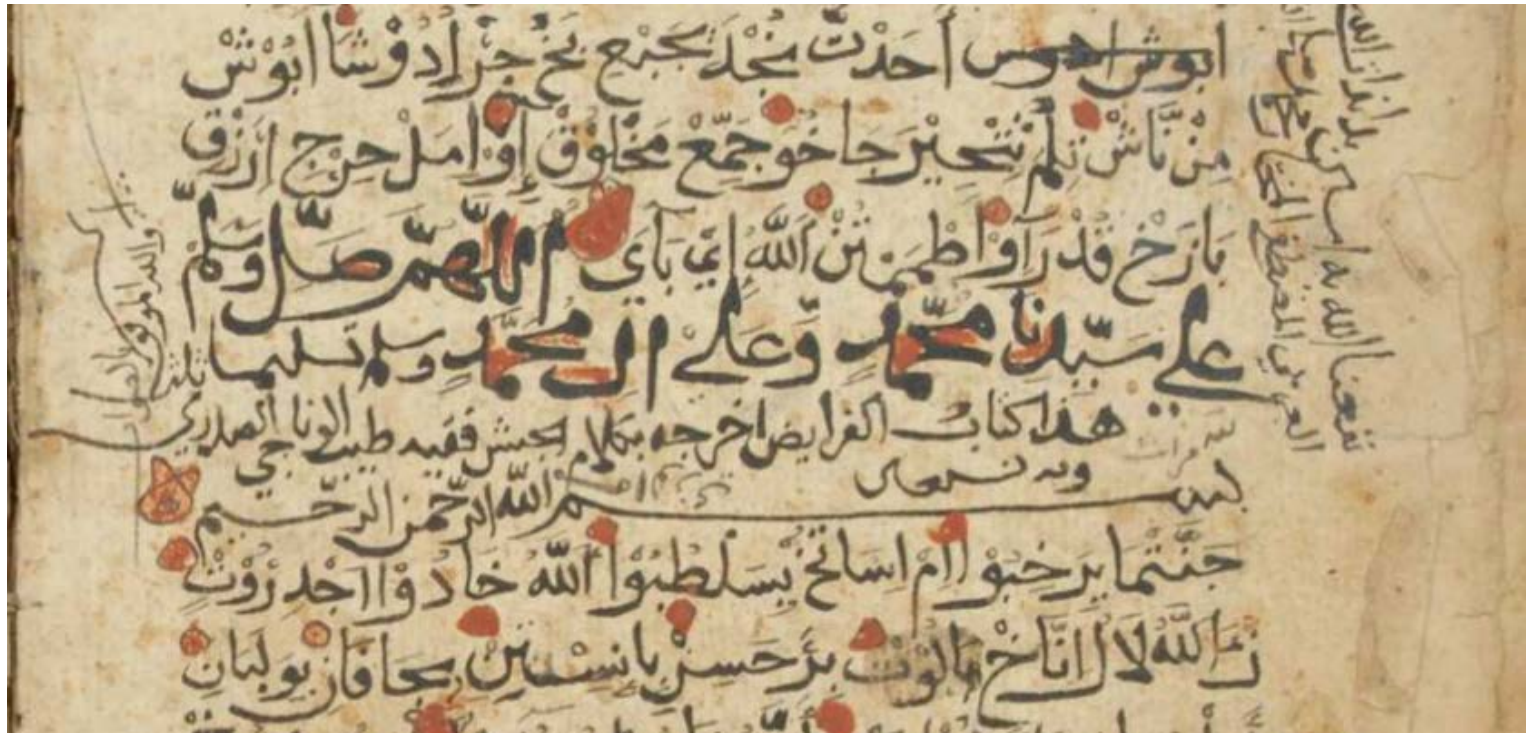


*Kitāb al-Farā'id* (The Book of Obligations); three different works in Old Harari by āw 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Arāšī, *faqīh* Ṭayyib al-Wanāḡī al-Ṣadrī, 'Abd Allāh 'Umar b. Ġibrīl al-Aswām al-Sāḥitī.



[Ms. IES 256, 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, ff. 1v-2r]

*Kitāb al-Farā'id* (The Book of Obligations), section attributed to *faqīh* Ṭayyib al-Wanāḡī al-Ṣadrī.



[Ms. IES 262, 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, f.20v]



# Juridical and administrative documents

## local *qāḍī* court registers





Faculty of Humanities



Thank you for your attention

Sara Fani

IslHornAfr (EU 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme, ERC Advanced Grant 322849)

Dept of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies  
University of Copenhagen  
Karen Blixens Vej 4  
2300 Copenhagen S

[www.islhornafr.eu](http://www.islhornafr.eu)

