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Magic, traditional medicine and theurgy in Arabo-Islamic manuscripts of the Horn of Africa: a brief note on their description

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Despite the pretentious title of this brief note, the subject of *siḥr* (magic) and its branches will be treated here only according to the description of Arabo-Islamic manuscripts from Ethiopia in the literary database of the project *IslHornAfr*: *Islam in the Horn of Africa*.[1] As the project is still in its initial stage, in this note I use primarily the materials from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) of Addis Ababa University—the collection that was the first to be evaluated and that was used to develop the descriptive standards for the project database.

The first crucial phase in the description of this kind of material is the identification of texts which may be classified as *siḥr*. This term, in fact, is usually related to different expressions of religious-superstitious beliefs that are strictly connected to Islam and, to some extent, also to a certain kind of traditional medicine. It is possible to find a common denominator among its various manifestations in the fact that the practices, formulas, or recipes related to or generally defined as *siḥr* are typically intended to obtain something or, better, to change something of the extant reality, through the intervention of supernatural powers or entities. Some of these practices aim at keeping away adverse or unfavourable conditions, while others aim at resolving some already existing unpleasant situations. In any case, as Arab sources and the actual practice show, it is a very complex subject, characterized—in its aims, means, actors, and in its relation to Islam—by rich details and vocabulary. Drawing upon the flourishing Arab literature on the subject can be crucial to interpret magical texts in their correct dimension; in particular, this can help to understand the intention, with which every text of this genre was written or composed, and to identify the roles of the characters involved in each 'magical practice' expressed by the text, thus revealing precious information about the use, circulation and history of the manuscripts that transmit such texts.

A first observation regarding this kind of literary and documentary material is that it is mostly found at a different 'textual level' within the corpus of manuscripts we are dealing with. Very few codices are made up of a single unit with a single text. Most codices are not homogeneous, revealing a com-

1 See Gori in this volume pp. 17–20.

plex genesis.[2] Many contain marginal texts or notes that were added at different moments during the period of their circulation, sometimes very recently. Empty pages were often used to register documentary information or to copy new texts.[3] It is among these guest texts that we find apotropaic prescriptions. The presence of these texts testifies to the importance that the Muslims, also in the Horn of Africa, ascribe to magic, which is practised alongside the more orthodox religious devotional practices. Sometimes such magical guest texts stand in no relation to the subject of the main texts.

Magic can also be the subject of entire literary works, as for example in MS IES 272, which was copied on 15 *Šawwāl* AH 1210 (23 April 1796; see f. 111r) and contains three different works with many indications and prescriptions of magical practices: the *Kitāb bahğa al-ṭarf fī ᶜilm al-ḥarf* ('The book of the joy of the glance into the science of the letters') by Nāṣr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ᶜAbdallāh Ibn Qurqmās (d.1477), the *Kitāb fī ᶜilm al-arqām wa-l-awfaq* ('The book on the science of number and of the magic squares'), anonymous, and *Al-Nūr al-asnā fī šarḥ al-asmāʾal-ḥusnā* ('The most brilliant light on the explanation of the most beautiful Names of God') by Aḥmad al-Būnī (d.1225).[4]

Aḥmad al-Būnī is known as one of the main authorities in the field of magic. His masterpiece is the *Šams al-maᶜārif al-kubrā* ('The big sun of knowledge'), a treatise on magical practices, which explains the orthodox concept of magic and its use[5]. The basic idea is that the Universe is made of numbers, the divine language that is at the same time expression of the energy of the Creator and of the cosmic organization. The nature of numbers found expression in the letters (hence the name of *ᶜilm al-ḥurūf*, 'science of letters', or *sīmiyā*, with a more specific relation to onomatomantic practices) and in particular in the letters of the Divine Verb, according to their numerical value and in relation and correspondence to other codices (for example the astrological one, upon which another specific science developed with the name *ᶜilm al-kawākib wa-l-burūğ*).[6] Human beings gifted with piety and knowl-

2 See Gumbert 2002. A contribution on this subject with regard to Ethiopian Islamic manuscripts was given by Alessandro Gori with the title 'A few observations on text collections, handbooks and miscellanies in the Ethiopian Islamic tradition', during the conference *One-Volume Libraries. Composite Manuscripts and Multiple Text Manuscripts*, Universität Hamburg, 7–9 October 2010 (forthcoming in proceedings).

3 These are then transmitted together with the original main text, for which the codicological unit was meant. On the issue of multiple text manuscripts cfr. Partridge and Kwakkel 2012, 61 and Gumbert 2002, 30–31

4 See Gori 2014, 6–7.

5 See Lory 1987–1988, 99–100 and Id. 2004.

6 In the work mentioned, al-Būnī identifies seven branches of spiritual sciences, through which it is possible to access the Divine language (see Rahal 2007, 118, note 9). In some

edge can understand part of this language and can use it to modify natural events and psychological states. This is not to be intended as a manipulation of the Divine forces, but as a cooperation with the Divine action through the spirituality of men who are initiated to these esoteric sciences. In this sense the *Šams al-maᶜārif* expresses a common tendency of popular Sufism, and of a certain kind of practices widespread among people all over the Islamic world. The universe and human knowledge can thus be read in this light as the expression of multiple correspondences that lead to the elaboration of formulas, invocations, and magical squares or talismans, in order to obtain the desired effects or protection.

A particularly common invocation in Islamic manuscripts, attested also in Ethiopia (in our case, MS Addis Ababa, IES 280), is the one called *al-Ǧawšan al-kabīr* ('The big shield') and ascribed to ᶜAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[7] The text is organized in one hundred sections, each containing ten names of God, and ending with a refrain. The text in MS IES 280 clearly expresses, at the beginning of each section, the specific function of each supplication, thus showing an evident intent not only to preserve the text, but also to use it and put it in practice for its original and esoteric power. Its fields of application are various, from general protection to more specific aims, for example against illnesses, evil eye, enemies, or to obtain strength, courage, victory, love etc.

A reference should be also made to the text *Mandal al-Sulaymānī*, a work intended to practice exorcisms and including the representations of *ǧinn*s.[8] A version of it seems to be transmitted in MS Addis Ababa, IES 286 (fig. 1). More detailed studies are still required on this text; it would be of great interest to relate and compare the Yemeni tradition to the Ethiopian one.

It is important to underline that the kind of practices and spells described in this work are not attributable to the same category as the first texts mentioned. It is therefore useful to introduce a general distinction within the category of *siḥr*, which is well defined by Toufic Fahd in three different branches: *ᶜilm al-siḥr* (which indicates in particular 'black magic'), *ᶜilm al-ḫawāṣṣ wa-l-*

cases, magic alphabets are used and attested in the manuscripts; see, for example MS Harar, ᶜAbd Allāh Šarīf Museum, 428, with explicit alphabetical correspondences.

7 See MS Addis Ababa, IES 280, ff. 7r–30v (*GAL* S I (1937), 938). Another arithmantic text related to the Šīᶜa, transmitted in MS Addis Ababa, IES 1853, ff. 3r–4v, is part of the *Iḫtiyārāt al-ayām wa-l-šuhūr* ascribed to Ǧaᶜfar al-Ṣādiq. It clearly states a correspondence between letters and numbers and offers divinatory indications and magical squares.

8 The title has been translated as 'Livres des formules magiques de Salomon pour entrer en relation avec les djinns' by Anne Regourd (2001, 123b); see also Regourd 2011.

talāsim (theurgy), and *ʿilm al-ḫiyāl wa-l-šaʿwaḍa* (natural magic).[9] These wide categories are based on Arabic sources, among which Ibn Ḫaldūn's (1332–1406) *Muqaddima* is the main one for the definition of the theoretical aspect of magic.[10]

In addition to this classification based on the contents of the magical texts and their theoretical implications, western scholars use secondary sources to offer different categorization parametres. Thus, in his numerous publications mostly in the 1990s, Constant Hamés suggested a useful distinction, focusing not only on the contents, but also on the method of elaboration for talismanic inscriptions. He mentions the following categories:

– *duʿāʾiyya*: these are texts structured like prayers and addressed to God who represents the only authority to obtain what the believer is begging. Quotations from the Qurʾān (sometimes even only the *basmala*) are chosen in accordance with the theme of the request. Within this category we also find the *ruqya* (Qurʾānic psalmodies with therapeutic and exorcising effects). This is, in fact, a procedure used by the Prophet, which is therefore permitted in particular cases, under the condition that no one is harmed. Moreover, in the so called *al-ṭibb al-nabawī* literature (Prophetic medicine, which is included in the same category of theurgy[11]) there are many practices and recipes ascribed to the Prophet. The *ruqya* is usually used in case of bites, against poisons, fever, evil eye. We find an example of this kind of text in MS Addis Ababa, IES 259 (f. 140r): here, brief excerpts from the Qurʾān are listed, to be recited during the week to obtain particular effects.
– *qasamiyya*: these are adjuratory inscriptions that imply mediation of spirits. They are based on esoteric formulations aimed at commanding the spirits to plead with *ǧinn*s so that they can fulfil the enchanter's requests. Such texts usually include the names of the spirits and their tutelary sovereign. An example from our corpus is the invocation to *kabīkaǧ* in MS Addis Ababa, IES 5513, f. 4r (see fig. 2). Thus adjuratory invocation for the preservation of books is well attested in Islamic manuscripts from

9 Fahd 1987, who also specifies: 'The first one including divinatory magic, exorcism of demons, spells and the summoning of spirits into bodily forms; the second one based on the properties of divine names, numbers and certain spells, sympathetic magic or sorcery, amulets, talismans and potions, charms, and the properties of medicinal plants; the third one considering the mutual connections between effective and efficient forces, the ability to vanish instantly from sight, and prestidigitation'. The specific distinction between magic and divination (*kihāna*), whose boundaries are quite blurred, is discussed in depth in Doutté 1909, 351–353 and Fahd 1966, 26–27.

10 Ibn Ḫaldūn 1967, III, 1089–1090, 1096–1098 (see also Lakhsassi 2007).

11 Cfr. *supra*.

other regions.[12] The name *kabīkağ*, of Persian origin, recalls a particular kind of plant of the genus *Ranunculus* (Persian buttercup or crowfoot) but was personified as the name of the king (a *ğinn*) of worms and insects that may damage books.

It is important to emphasize at this point that magic venerating spirits, demons, and *ğinn* or needing their assistance and invocation (*istinzāl*) is classified as 'black magic'[13] and is unequivocally forbidden in Islam. What is recognised and more generally accepted are the magical practices based on the word of the Qurʾān and conducted within the framework of the Islamic rituals. The awareness of this fact is well attested in MS IES 266, f. 53r (fig. 3), which contains a magical formula to be copied and used as a talisman against plague. Just before the chain of consonants that represents the actual formula (probably intended to conjure a supernatural entity), the author of this brief note wrote a Qurʾānic verse. In this case, the verse (Qur. VI, 1) is related to the possible accusation of *širk* (polytheism), with reference to the association of this entity to the unique God. It seems to serve as a sort of warranty of the legitimacy of what the scribe was going to write.

Other magic prescriptions dealing with illnesses or malaises could also include the use of medical substances and specific procedures in order to obtain the desired effect.[14] They are usually explicit textual indications of what to do, write, or say, following quite a simple syntactical pattern.[15] Sometimes the same types of instructions are found in recipes for acquiring particular abilities or power, which would be better related to the category of natural magic,[16] for example the prescription how to become invisible, not to burn in fire, or to walk on water.[17]

Apart from the indications for the different kinds of magical practices, it is also possible to find among the manuscripts the very object of these prescriptions, that is written amulets and talismans (*ḥirz, ṭilasm, ḥiğāb*) to be used with apotropaic intent.[18] In the collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, there are two similar examples of paper rolls that needed to be worn

12 See Gacek 1986 and 2009, 137–138.

13 Cfr. *supra*.

14 See also MS Addis Ababa, IES 266, f. 55r with the formulas and procedures to fight insomnia or MS Addis Ababa, IES, 299, f. 1r against various ailments.

15 The pattern is common for instructions; we find a similar textual structure in, for example, the prescription how to keep away pigs (most probably wild boars or warthogs) from the farmed fields (in MS Addis Ababa, IES 274, f. 41r).

16 Cfr. *supra*.

17 MS Addis Ababa, IES 2640, f. 9v. A specific *ḥiğāb* 'of invisibility', rendering the person unnoticeable when doing something forbidden, is also used by the Berti of the Sudan (El Tom 1987, 238–242).

18 For a general definition and bibliography see *EI*², X (2000), 500a–502a (J. Ruska et al.).

to obtain protection against 'the evil of *ǧinn*, men and devils'.[19] These kind of texts are sometimes combined with specific symbols, such as the Seal of Solomon or the Seven Seals of the Judaeo-Islamic tradition, as for example in MS Addis Ababa, IES 647.[20]

It is important to underline that magical practices cannot be investigated without taking into account their multiple dimensions: they are in fact not effective unless they involve interconnected sensory spheres resorting to written words, letters, numbers or symbols; the recitation and repetition of formulas; specific gestures, sometimes with particular instruments or objects, aiming to perform particular rituals, often accompanied by fumigations; treatments or consumption of medical herbs which empower the invocations with particular evocative strength.

The preliminary analysis of manuscripts from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies has shown that magic is not only the subject of theoretical speculation and traditional literary works, but also a lively practice in Ethiopia as in the rest of Islamic world. Adequate classification of magical textual material based on Arabic traditional sources is crucial for accurate descriptions, in particular when additional parametres are considered. In fact, the structure and the linguistic features of the texts and observations related to the context in which they have been registered (for example the textual level in which they occur) can add important information about the socio-cultural environment, in which the codices were written and used.[21] Brief but accurate descriptions in the *IslHornAfr* database, using relevant keywords referring to the mentioned classifications and considering theoretical and codicological criteria, genre and topic, would be hopefully useful for further enquiries—not only in the literary studies, which is its primary aim, but also in other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, or Islamic sciences.

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19 MSS Addis Ababa, IES 647 (translated) and Addis Ababa, IES 648.

20 See Graham 2012.

21 On this aspect and on the social role of the characters involved in these practices, see Hamès 1998.

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Plates to:

S. FANI, *Magic, traditional medicine, and theurgy …*

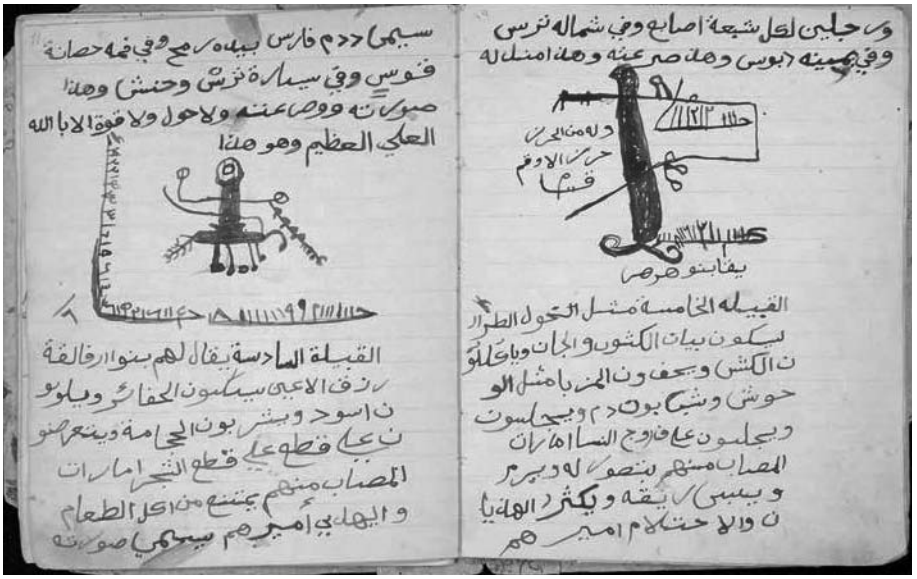

Fig. 1 MS Addis Ababa, IES 286, ff. 10v–11r, photo courtesy of Steve Delamarter.

Fig. 2 MS Addis Ababa, IES 5513, f. 4r, detail; photo courtesy of Steve Delamarter.

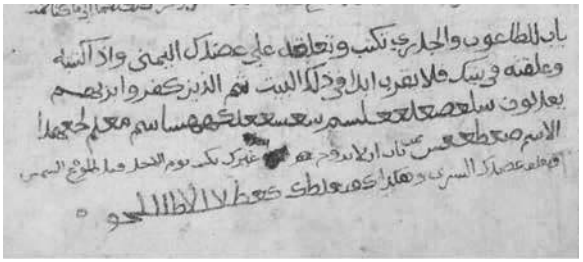

Fig. 3 MS Addis Ababa, IES 266, f. 53r, detail, photo courtesy of Steve Delamarter.