

Supplement to AETHIOPICA
International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies
7

Oral Traditions in Ethiopian Studies

Edited by
Alexander Meckelburg, Sophia Dege-Müller,
and Dirk Bustorf



Harrassowitz Verlag

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Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg

Series Editor: Alessandro Bausi
in cooperation with Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper,
Ludwig Gerhardt, Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg

2018

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

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The publication of this volume was supported by research funds of the Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik and the Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung.



Hamburgische
Wissenschaftliche
Stiftung



On the front cover (left to right): blessing for peace (Abore, 2007; photo courtesy of E. C. Gabbert), Fasil Gəmb (drawing with pen and watercolour, Gondär, April 1999; courtesy of M. J. Ramos); note taking during interview with Opuo elders (Wanke, Itang *wäräda*, Gambella, October 2006; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg); peace workshop's ritual slaughtering and final blessings (Abore, 2007; photo courtesy of E. C. Gabbert).

On the spine: Bible students in Wəqro Maryam (Wəqro Maryam, Təgray, September 2005; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg).

On the back cover (left to right): Gwama men members of a work party drinking local beer (Lake *qäbälä*, Mao-Komo special *wäräda*, September 2011; photo courtesy of A. Meckelburg); Kara elders debating the merits of irrigation (Dus, Hamär *wäräda*, SNNPR, October 2006; photo courtesy of F. Girke); the ethnographer immersed in the debates of the Nyinyankot age set (Dus, Hamär *wäräda*, November 2004; photo courtesy of F. Girke); *Sceriffa* 'Alawiyya among Muslim leaders (Piola Caselli private archive in Rome, around 1930; photo courtesy of S. Bruzzi).

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

For further information about our publishing program consult our website <http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de>

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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Typesetting and copy-editing: Francesca Panini and Thomas Rave

Printing and binding: Memminger MedienCentrum AG

Printed in Germany

ISSN 2196-7180

ISBN 978-3-447-11054-9

e-ISBN PDF 978-3-447-19768-7

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost we would like to thank the contributors and authors for their immense patience with the editorial process of this text. This volume would not have gone into print without the generous support of the Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung, and the support of Dr Johannes Gerhardt. We would furthermore like to thank Prof. Dr Alessandro Bausi, editor-in-chief of *Aethiopica*, for his financial, scholarly, and technical support during preparation of this project.

The board members of *Aethiopica* have helped to refine several arguments throughout the text. We would particularly like to mention the comments by Prof. Dr Ulrich Braukämper and Dr Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg.

The language of each paper was edited by Dr Joe McIntyre. We owe him much thanks for his engaging comments, suggestions, and corrections.

We are grateful to Magdalena Krzyżanowska for her help checking the Amharic.

The *Aethiopica* team at the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies has been truly cooperative. We would like to express our gratitude to Susanne Hummel, Thomas Rave, and in particular we owe much thanks to Francesca Panini for her rigorous and tireless help during the final editorial phase.

Last but not least, we would also like to thank Dr Barbara Krauß at Harrassowitz Verlag for her help in preparing the printing of this volume.

The editors, Hamburg–Nairobi–Sottrum, April 2018

Introduction: Oral Traditions in Ethiopian Studies

DIRK BUSTORF–ALEXANDER MECKELBURG–SOPHIA DEGE-MÜLLER

The study of orality, in its many forms, be it oral traditions, oral history, oral literature, and other oral arts, or types of oral data, has contributed greatly to the development of the academic tradition of Ethiopian studies. Researching orality and oral sources is especially important in linguistics, social and cultural anthropology as well as in history, (ethnography-based) political science, and various other fields. Orality in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa is a particularly fascinating field. Despite the fact that the countries of the Horn share some of the oldest literary traditions in sub-Saharan Africa, they are also home to a great number of living oral cultures.¹

Although the development of the modern State apparatus, literacy campaigns, modern education, and the mass media have led to an ever-growing significance of the written word, orality today maintains its central role in daily life as well as in social, political, and cultural discourse. In many cases the languages in question have not yet been developed into fully-fledged literary languages. While the spread of literacy has been an ongoing process for centuries, conflicts over language and identity show an enormous resilience in the countries of the Horn.² Moreover, the literacy rate even among youths is still very low. In 2008–2012 the literacy rate of males between 15 and 24 years in Ethiopia was 60 per cent while that of females of the same age was only 47 per cent.³

This supplement to *Aethiopica* began as a panel held at the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Dørre Dawa in September 2012. The organizers (the editors of the present volume) were interested in questioning the methods and styles used in the study of oral sources. During the panel, presentations were given by Chikage Oba-Smidt, Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł, Andreu Martinez d'Alòs-Moner, Helen Papworth, and Dirk

1 Carmichael 2006, 23.

2 Cf. Barnes and Carmichael 2006, 1.

3 UNICEF statistics for Ethiopia, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html (last accessed 20 September 2017).

Bustorf. For this volume the editors have asked yet other colleagues to reflect on their experience with oral sources.

The panel asked to investigate the idea that, in the history of Ethiopian studies, reflection on the methodology of orality did not receive the attention it deserves given its highly important role for research. Therefore, the core matter of this supplement is to explore how Ethiopian studies deal with oral texts as historical and (in the widest sense of the word) ethnographic sources.

As a tool for the study of African histories, cultures, and societies the use of oral sources has developed significantly.⁴ Yet, an overview of the different scholarly approaches to oral sources in the multidisciplinary field of Ethiopian studies is still missing. The methodologies of orality and oral sources developed in Africa as well as the contribution of African history to worldwide discourse and curricula are rather weakly reflected in the writings of scholars of Ethiopian studies. And, despite the interest this field provides for the discussion of the way orality turns into literacy and vice versa, few contributions have been made concerning this crucial question. Although oral sources play such an important role in the study of the histories, languages, and cultures of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopian studies did not receive much attention outside of its own academic field. With this supplement to *Aethiopica* we do not claim to fill the gaps identified here nor even to cover the topic in satisfactory breadth and depth. However, it aims at putting a finger on the issue and at contributing to the growing interest in the methodology and practice of orality research and oral sources.

Terminology and Concepts

The problems, genres, and theoretical and methodological issues concerning orality and oral sources are numerous and there are still no fixed and generally accepted definitions of terms such as orality, oral literature, oral traditions, or folklore. It is not our aim here to resolve this terminological plurality. However, in order to give a preliminary orientation, some preparatory definitions could be helpful.

Orality is often contrasted with ‘the written’ or literacy. A useful understanding of the term is that orality includes all forms of oral information, from oral data, to oral tradition, oral literature, folklore, or the verbal arts. However, the usual juxtaposition of oral and written sources is an uneasy one. It is strongly based on a Western-centric understanding of literacy, or

4 Cf. McCall 1964; Miller 1980; Toyin Falola and Jennings 2003; Vansina 1980; Vansina 1985; White et al. 2001.

‘technological determinism’.⁵ A simple dichotomy between orality and literacy does not work in the Horn of Africa where the mutual influences as well as direct or indirect references between the oral and the written prevail already to some degree since antiquity, forming common spaces of cultural memory. Within these spaces, however, a socio-political dichotomy can be identified, since, as Carmichael has pointed out, the dichotomy of orality and the written is related to the relations between society and government in Ethiopia.⁶

It is important to note here that the oral and/or written uses of language are not separate means in the construction and maintenance of memory. Other cultural forms such as music, dance, visual arts, architecture, fashion, and so on form an integral part of cultures where all types of expression and communication are deeply interwoven. Therefore, research focusing on orality or literacy cannot be complete without cultural and historical recontextualizing embedded in a holistic perspective.

Other important concepts in the field of orality research are folklore and oral literature.⁷ Since the distinction between them is due more to differing academic perspectives or interests than to the existence of substantially differing types of orality, they are not easily differentiated. This also defines the difference between the concepts *oral tradition* and *oral history*. A very broad understanding of folklore refers to all forms of ‘orally transmitted traditions’ encompassing ‘verbal forms such as stories, songs and proverbs’.⁸ A dividing line between oral literature and oral tradition may be that folklore offers relatively little analysis and in no way implies an analysis of a cultural group per se. Speaking about American folklore, Fox states that folklore studies are a preliminary genre of literature studies, with a focus on the aesthetics rather than on the socio-political meaning.⁹ Relating folklore research with its societal subtext is an interesting starting point; it may involve an attempt to describe or understand the circumstances under which folklore is produced or the way in which it is used to understand the socio-cultural or mental make-up, or mentality, of a group. Folklore, like literature studies, is closely related to the research perspective of oral literature or orature which is more a tool of cultural analysis. The concept of oral literature, which seems to be self-contradictory by its very name, again often encompasses the oral arts, folklore, and oral traditions. Oral literature may sometimes include the more performative aspects of orality and the genres

5 Finnegan 1992, 6.

6 Carmichael 2006, 25.

7 Cf. the important overview by Fekade Azeze 2001.

8 Finnegan 1992, 11.

9 Fox 1980, 1.

of the oral arts (i.e. folklore, proverbs, oral chronicles, prophetic texts, poetry, and songs).¹⁰

In this supplement oral texts and oral data are discussed as sources of historical and cultural research. Therefore, they are examined here mainly from the perspectives of oral tradition and oral history. According to Vansina's widely adopted methodological understanding, oral history can be differentiated from oral traditions in so far as oral history speaks of a closer past, something an informant has witnessed her/himself. In the case of traditions, the transmission of knowledge and information is kept intact over generations.¹¹

As a historical source oral traditions have undergone significant changes in their appraisal, from being reckoned 'fragile, critical, problematic' to being appreciated as 'opening important inquiries into the very nature of African subjectivity'.¹² At the early stages of its academic recognition, oral history aimed at reconstructing events through life histories, eyewitness accounts, and narratives. Later on, issues arose concerning the reliability of oral traditions and the way they should be properly used by scholars.¹³ Hence, according to our understanding, concerns about *historical truth*, *authenticity*, and such can lead to an incisive discussion analysed against the background of *orality as a historical method*.¹⁴

Oral Sources in Ethiopian Studies

The use of orally transmitted knowledge on Ethiopia goes back to the first encounters between Europeans and Ethiopians. Early visits of Europeans to Ethiopia (Antonio Bartoli in the 1390s and Pietro Rombulo in 1407) as well as of Ethiopians to Europe (in 1402 a royal delegation from Ethiopia reached the Republic of Venice) provided first insights into each other's history.¹⁵

In regards to historiography, the seventeenth-century collaboration between the German scholar Hiob Ludolf and his 'oral informant', the Ethiopian monk *Abba* Gorgoryos, may well be seen to be the first explicit transfer of oral data into academic writing in Ethiopian studies.¹⁶ However, the orality–literacy problem can already be identified in this initial event, since

10 'Oral literature', *EAE*, IV (2010), 38b–42a (G. Banti).

11 Vansina 1985, 13.

12 Cohen et al. 2001, 1.

13 e.g. Vansina 1985, 13. Moffa also critically discussed the methodological issues arising in oral history studies (Moffa 1993).

14 Following Vansina's terminology (Vansina 1966).

15 Krebs 2014, 35.

16 Cf. Smidt 2015.

Abba Gorgoryos was himself a scholar, with both oral and literary knowledge. Today, many oral informants in Ethiopia will be at least to some degree literate and their former readings, the mass media, and modern education will influence their oral performance.

In the Ethiopian context, the existence of a long written history, recorded in chronicles, especially in the northern Christian highlands, and to a lesser extent in the Islamic influenced areas, has traditionally outweighed any interest in orality on the part of the humanities and social sciences concerned with Ethiopia. This contrasts strongly with the interest in historiography, anthropology, or sociology of other sub-Saharan African countries. Scholars of Ethiopia built largely on a Semitistic Orientalist tradition. They were fascinated by Ethiopia's early statehood and Abrahamic religions. Moreover, many of them had a theological or missionary background. Due to this perspective, they put much more emphasis on written sources, using them for the reconstruction of the past as well as for theological, philological, or linguistic research. Thus, historical research often relied much more on written than the oral sources. However, as McCann shows by extending the methodology of oral tradition presented by Vansina in order to analyse written Ethiopic records, written sources such as the Ethiopian chronicles of the fourteenth to the nineteenth century may have the same fragility as oral sources. For McCann one of the main problems in Ethiopian historiography is the 'historians' failure to recognise the chronicle as an integrated body of literature only partially intended to report events objectively'.¹⁷

When oral sources were collected this was mainly done from the perspective of folklore or in order to use them as language data for linguistic analysis. Other oral data was randomly used to inform historical research but with no methodological consideration or proper reference.¹⁸ While in other African countries colonialism favoured the expansion of social anthropology, Ethiopia was, for a long time, mainly the field of orientalists, theologians, and historians.¹⁹ The oral civilizations of south and west Ethiopia were of much less interest to these scholars.

The above situation gradually changed as more and more knowledge of these societies reached Europe through explorers, travellers, and travelling scholars, drawing extensively on oral sources from oral cultures. However, to provide an overview of how these travellers used their oral sources would mean giving an account of the history of exploration, travellers, and re-

17 McCann 1979, 387–388.

18 Interesting and fairly rare works on oral traditions can be found in Andrzejewski 1974 or Goldenberg 1981. This intersection between linguistics and history/anthropology is also evident in Hayward and Lewis 1996.

19 James 1990.

search in Ethiopia. This is, of course, far beyond the scope of this Introduction, although Éloi Ficquet discusses an exceptional case, the nineteenth-century traveller Arnauld d'Abbadie, in the present volume. What can generally be noted is that most travellers used oral sources randomly and often without a clear methodology. Usually no evaluation of different sources is carried out in their writings. Oral informants are generally not mentioned by name or function and the circumstances are often not described. With the exception of individual legends retold in traveller's reports, most oral data seem to come from hearsay and informal conversation with the servants of authors or with feudal lords under whose protection they were travelling.

From the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, travellers and scholars exploring the western, southern and south-western parts of Ethiopia often contributed to the history of these regions by documenting oral sources. The protestant missionaries Krapf and Isenberg, for example, present some folk-tales in their diaries.²⁰ The travel report of Antonio Cecchi provides rich material and knowledge based on oral informants.²¹

Two fellow countrymen of Cecchi left us with further valuable material. Carlo Conti Rossini produced an impressive number of text editions. Moreover, his collection of songs and poems mainly of today's Eritrea should not be forgotten.²² The other very important collector of oral traditions was the orientalist Enrico Cerulli. His perspective was mainly a linguistic and folkloristic one but he was also interested to some degree in local histories based on oral traditions. His *Folk-literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*, the travel notes of his expedition to western Ethiopia, his *Studi etiopici* and his collection of Islamic materials are an invaluable collection based mainly on oral sources.²³ However, just like the aforementioned authors, he showed little concern for methodology.

Within the traditional education of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church oral teachings take a pride of place. Included are the extensive memorizing of Biblical books, especially the psalter, which is fully learnt by heart by the end of the first stage of school (*nəbab bet*), the art of poetry (*qəne bet*), singing and dancing (*zema bet*), as well as commentaries of Biblical books (*māṣḥaf bet*), all transmitted also in oral form. In order to compose *qəne* poetry, or to master the exegesis of Scriptures, the students need to have acquired a high understanding of language. The complex state of language proficiency, as well as

20 Isenberg and Krapf 1843.

21 Cecchi 1886.

22 Conti Rossini 1903; 1904–1905; 1906; 1942.

23 Cf. respectively Cerulli 1922; 1930; 1933; 1936a; 1936b; 1938; 1971. Cf. also Hylander 1969.

the fact that not all commentaries, and *qəne* only very rarely, were written down, might be an explanation why the study of these traditions is relatively small. Sylvia Pankhurst dedicated an entire chapter to the ‘Traditional Schools of the Church’, providing valuable insights into its structure, and quoting also a number of *qəne*, however without explicitly naming her informants.²⁴ This is in line with the Ethiopian tradition itself, ‘unlike the practice of rabbinic commentary material, the AC [*andəmta* commentary] only very infrequently cites the interpretations of named teachers’.²⁵ Networks of famous teachers are known, however, and most notable teachers or schools are provided in some studies.²⁶

Folklorist Perspectives

The collection of folklore and folk-tales has played an important role in the development of Ethiopian studies.²⁷ Largely linked to the work of linguists but also as an annex to ethnographic research, a rich body of folklore from various Ethiopian cultures has been collected. In line with the preceding definition we may describe the folklorist approach here as the collection of tales and myths without the intention of contributing to the analysis of society per se.²⁸ As Richard Pankhurst observes, the ‘collection of folk-tales, as opposed to the occasional mention of legends, began in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.’²⁹ Travellers and explorers collected the first folk-tales. Pankhurst mentions the Italian traveller Cecchi as an example.³⁰ Examples for the earliest systematic collection of folk-tales according to Pankhurst are among others Jules Schreiber,³¹ who included a short section on fables and proverbs in his *Təgrəñña* grammar,³² Ignazio Guidi’s collection of folk-tales,³³ or Enno Littmann’s collection of *Təgrəñña* folklore documented in the report of the Princeton Expedition 1905–1906.³⁴ One should also add Alberto Pollera’s collection of Gondarine tales.³⁵

24 Pankhurst 1955, 232–283.

25 Cowley 1983, 31.

26 Ibid. See further Chaillot 2009 for an elaborate overview of studies on the traditional teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

27 e.g. Amanuel Sahle 1982; Pankhurst 1982; Pankhurst and Pankhurst 1982–1983.

28 Fox 1980, 1.

29 Pankhurst 1982, 38.

30 See also the contribution by D. Bustorf in this volume. We are of the opinion that the texts collected by Cecchi fall into the category of oral traditions, see below.

31 Pankhurst 1982, 38.

32 Schreiber 1887.

33 Guidi 1894.

34 Littmann 1913.

35 Pollera 1936.

Collecting folk-tales was widely practised by both folklorists and linguists, and, as in the case of Schreiber, much folklore, proverbs, riddles, and folk-tales were collected and published by linguists in the course of their work. Important examples are the many publications of Wolf Leslau on Ethiopian Semitic languages.³⁶ While most linguists used folklore mainly as material for the reconstruction of the lexicon and further linguistic analysis, others also showed an interest in the content itself.³⁷

Apart from the linguistic perspective on folklore, oral traditions were also used as a source for understanding mentality and world views. Folklore and folk-tales were thought to open perspectives on the respective ‘character’ of the Ethiopian nationalities.³⁸ This approach mainly derived from the idea, originally introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder, that folklore could inform the analysis of ‘national character’. Thus, early German ethnological research in Ethiopia, as initiated by Leo Frobenius, analysed world views based on folklore research. However, as Ulrich Braukämper notes,

Frobenius’ categorization of African cultures on the base of certain *Weltbildern*, such as the Aethiopic and Hamitic concepts of the world, largely derived from folktales and myths, definitely failed to become an acceptable approach.³⁹

While such substantialist ideas of national character embodied in folklore have been largely overcome by a cultural-constructivist perspective, the idea that folklore may give answers to questions on the socio-psychological mindset and behaviour of a people is still alive in Ethiopian studies. One example is John Hamer’s ‘Folktales as Ideology in the Production and Circulation of Wealth among Sadāma of Ethiopia’.⁴⁰ Abdurahman Mohamed Korram in his collection of Oromo proverbs suggested that verbal arts and folklore ‘would reveal much of the deeper philosophy at the heart of life in Ethiopia’.⁴¹ Bayleyegn Tasew even employs the idea of a ‘folklore of conflict’ which may explain socio-cognitive factors of conflict.⁴² Monika Sommer also sought an explanation of conflict in the narratives she collected

36 Leslau 1949; 1964; 1981; 1982; 1983; 1996 to name but a few.

37 See, for example, Abdulahi A. Shongolo and Schlee 2007; Crass and Meyer 2001; Lange 1979; Meyer 2000 and 2001; Fekade Azeze 2002. Also important is the work of Abbink et al. 2013. These studies give examples, linguistic analysis, and an introduction to the cultural understanding of the texts.

38 ‘Folktales in Amharic’, *EAE*, III (2007), 556b–558a (A. Molvaer).

39 Braukämper 2005, 296.

40 Hamer 1994.

41 Abdurahman Mohamed Korram 1972, 106.

42 Bayleyegn Tasaw 2009.

from the Nuer in Gambella.⁴³ And as Mezgebu Belay's contribution in this volume shows, it can be a valuable source in the analysis of gender relations.

In today's politically ethnicized discourses in Ethiopia, folklore plays its role as an 'intangible cultural heritage' and as a source of ethnic pride. Here again, a lack of reflection on methodology is widespread.

Anthropological and Historical Perspectives

In Ethiopian studies a difference between southern and northern Ethiopia emerged which became almost standard, according to which social and cultural anthropologists studied the oral cultures of southern Ethiopia, while historians and philologists studied the literacy culture of the north. This statement is somewhat imprecise however, since important ethnographical and anthropological research was done in northern Ethiopia while historians and philologists evaluated their written sources as far as possible concerning the history of the south. Moreover, it seems unreasonable to treat historians and anthropologists in separate chapters here. In fact, it is typical of Ethiopian studies that social and cultural anthropologists may use written sources and write histories, while historians carry out ethnographic research and use oral tradition. Anthropologists have employed myths, folklore, and oral literature in order to understand the societies they are focusing on, while others have used oral histories to give voice to the often peripheral position of the societies they studied, and yet others have practised ethnohistory in search of an alternative bottom-up history of the shared Ethiopian state-building experience.

During the late nineteenth to early twentieth century work was often carried out in the course of colonialism, Western powers had a special interest in the regions which they newly got under control, this accounts especially for nowadays Eritrea and Somalia. Prominent figures such as Werner Munzinger, *Bāšā*, who served under British, French, and later Egyptian rule,⁴⁴ or Antonio Cecchi, who travelled Ethiopia extensively and in 1896 became governor in Italian Somalia,⁴⁵ combine scientific and political interests in one person. They left us with a large amount of historiographic-ethnographic descriptions, as well as language studies, which have not lost their importance even today. While it is not stated in their works explicitly, they relied on the information provided by their local informants.

In a series of research missions first led by Adolf E. Jensen, and later by Eike Haberland, members of the Frobenius Institut in Frankfurt am Main

43 Sommer 2008.

44 'Munzinger, Werner', *E Ae*, III (2007), 1070b–1073a (C. D. G. Müller and W. G. C. Smidt).

45 'Cecchi, Antonio', *E Ae*, I (2003), 704a (M. Lenci).

explored the ethnic and cultural landscapes of southern Ethiopia, collecting all kinds of ethnographic information about socio-political and religious systems as well as material culture and folklore.⁴⁶ The greatest part of their findings is entirely based on oral information, most of it oral tradition.⁴⁷ Haberland was interested in folklore which, according to him, revealed a certain type of thinking. Thus, in a short introduction to the folklore of the Maale, Haberland judged the Maale ‘*mythenfeindlich*’ and complained about the loss of mythical thinking among some groups he had studied.⁴⁸ Haberland also pioneered the attempt to reconstruct the history of non-Semitic groups on the basis of oral data. Jon Abbink concluded that, with regards to Haberland’s work on the Wälaytta,

Haberland tried to reconstruct Wolaitta ‘like it really was’, before the conquest. That is why he always put great value on older key informants (of elite groups) with a presumably purer and more complete knowledge of history. Perhaps the idea of such a reconstruction is now illusory.⁴⁹

Historians and social and cultural anthropologists have nonetheless lavishly made use not only of oral traditions but also of other oral data.⁵⁰ Historical narratives and data usually subsumed under the term ‘oral history’ have become a vital part of historical reconstruction especially in cases where written accounts are not to be found. While there are many texts that make implicit use of oral histories, the methodological debate is often not well advanced. More often than not the reader gets no clear image of where, when, and how the data has been acquired. Thus, a much debated question and subtext to any discussion on oral traditions as a source of history is, of course, the historical authenticity of the evidence.⁵¹

Braukämper, trained in the Frankfurt research tradition of Jensen and Haberland, and aware of such questions, developed a method combining both oral and written sources by filling in the gaps between established historical facts or events, using cultural-historical data drawn from oral sources.⁵² He used this approach in all of his work and was thus able to draw a detailed and

46 Jensen 1963; Haberland 1963; Straube 1963; and already preceded by an expedition by Jensen in 1934–1935, cf. Jensen 1936.

47 The use of oral informants by the members of the Frobenius expeditions is analysed in detail in Bustorf 2017.

48 Haberland in Jensen 1963, 297.

49 Abbink 2006, 11.

50 Noteworthy in this regard is Bahru Zewde’s ‘exercise in oral history’ (Bahru Zewde 2010).

51 McCall 1964, 1–28; Pankhurst and Ezekiel Gebissa 1987.

52 Braukämper 1973; 1976.

holistic image of the history of many southern Ethiopian ethnic groups.⁵³ While his style is mainly that of the classical habitus of the authoritative writer, he nevertheless makes his key informants visible. The commented collection of narrative songs of the Hadiyya by Braukämper and Tilahun Mishago,⁵⁴ together with the culturally contextualized collection of Gurage songs by William Shack and Habte-Mariam Marcos,⁵⁵ represent important examples of the oral literature of the Hadiyya-Gurage region and, at the same time, may be used as historical sources.⁵⁶

Alessandro Triulzi, whose research focuses on the western Oromo, as well as on the oral history of the Berta, is another ethnohistorian of great importance.⁵⁷ In the same area the missionary ethnographer Lambert Bartels collected his outstanding collection of Oromo oral literature.⁵⁸ In general, orality research contributed much to the growth of Oromo studies so that they became a vital subfield of Ethiopian studies. Oromo studies have, to a large extent, used oral traditions in the reconstruction of Oromo history. A book edited by Paul Trevor Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi is of crucial importance.⁵⁹ Most of the essays collected there implicitly and explicitly use oral traditions to develop a framework in order to analyse the emergence of Oromo identity.⁶⁰ Such noteworthy studies as those of Tesema Ta'a, Mohammed Hassen, and Negaso Gidada take a similar approach.⁶¹ Their works are a clear attempt to reclaim the history of the Oromo people by Oromo scholars, eventually confronting Ethiopian historiography with an emic perspective. Likewise, foreign anthropologists who, in many cases, study and learn the language of the people they study, have contributed to giving a voice to the people they live with. The anthropologist Hermann Amborn made explicit use of oral sources in order to present a 'history from below', a trend towards a history which is no longer dominated by the exclusive viewpoint of a literate elite.⁶²

53 Especially in Braukämper 1980; 1983.

54 Braukämper and Tilahun Mishago 1999.

55 Shack and Habte-Mariam Marcos 1971.

56 For further treaties of Hadiyya folk-takles see also Braukämper 2014, 271–291 and Horstmann 2010.

57 Bernardi et al. 1978; Triulzi 1980; Triulzi 1981a; Triulzi 1981b; Triulzi 1990; Triulzi 1994; Triulzi and Tamene Bitima 1996.

58 Bartels 1983.

59 Baxter et al. 1996.

60 Explicitly discussed in the contribution by Gemetchu Megerssa 1996.

61 Mohammed Hassen 1990; Negaso Gidada 1984; Tesema Ta'a 2006.

62 Amborn 1988, 751.

An important example for a learned emic perspective is Gabreyesus Hailemariam's monograph on the Gurage.⁶³ It may well be one of the best publications of this type and includes rich oral data and folklore. Under the political conditions of 'ethnic federalism' many mono-ethnic historical theses and books have been produced in Ethiopia. Some of them may lack methodological reflection or transparency but nevertheless provide valuable insights into concepts of history and identity.

The great interest in oral traditions and discussions about orality has continued in the younger generation of social and cultural anthropologists. Drawing his theoretical base from Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as a structuring element, Alexander Kellner, in his thesis on the Burji, analyses myth as an expression of habitus.⁶⁴ His documentation of the original text and his linguistically well informed translation are exemplary for this genre. Dirk Bustorf's study of the Səlṭe combines synchronic and diachronic perspectives and shows how oral traditions can be examined at the same time as historical sources and as a source for the reconstruction of both contemporary as well as past historical consciousness and identity structures.⁶⁵ An important recent publication on the emic history of the Oromo, based entirely on oral sources and many years of intensive field research, is Chikage Oba-Smidt's study of the Boorana oral chronicles.⁶⁶ It documents a voluminous corpus of oral texts in the Oromo language with an English translation. One may thus expect the work to have a great impact on both the outsider's and the insider's perception of the Boorana.

An important network of orality researchers has formed around Ivo Strecker, Jean Lydall, and the South Omo Research Centre. While many anthropologists and historians dealing with oral sources in Ethiopia have tended to leave questions of their research methods in the background, the situation and interaction of the researcher in the field is central here. Coined 'rhetoric anthropology', Strecker, together with Stephen Tyler, have developed an approach to the study of culture which seeks the roots of culture in the language and especially in rhetoric.⁶⁷ Based on this approach, several extensive oral histories have appeared in Ethiopian anthropology.⁶⁸ Echi Gabbert and Felix Girke, authors in this supplement to *Aethiopica*, belong

63 Gabreyesus Hailemariam 1991.

64 Kellner 2007; 2010.

65 Bustorf 2011.

66 Oba-Smidt 2016.

67 Strecker and Tyler established the book series Culture and Rhetoric published by Berghahn Books.

68 Pioneered by the Hamär trilogy of Strecker and Lydall 1979a; 1979b; 1979c.

to the same group. The ‘rhetoric culture’ approach is further discussed by Felix Girke in this volume.

Contributions and Themes of this Volume

In accordance with this supplement’s interest, most contributions presented here provide a discussion of the methodology, possibilities, and shortcomings of oral sources as a means of reconstructing historical or cultural realities.

Manuel João Ramos’ research focuses on the local memories of the Jesuit mission in northern Ethiopia and on how they are portrayed in written sources, both Portuguese and Ethiopian. His observation begins with the ‘feedback effect’—the reciprocal exertion of influence of the written sources and oral tradition. He points out how both forms of sources exist simultaneously, resulting in intermingled traditions.

In some of the interviews I conducted in Amhara and Təgray in recent years, it seemed clear that a few at least of the informants tended to enrich their stories with information directly or indirectly originating from the books of the late Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya. I was once even presented with a photocopy of an illustration from the first volume of his *Yä’ityopyya tarik*, where Cristóvão da Gama is depicted tied to a tree and surrounded by Muslims torturing him.⁶⁹

The author explores the continuing reinterpretation between oral accounts and written texts. Storytellers, ‘keepers of oral traditions’ in the words of the author, ‘switch between oral reinterpretation of written sources, oral reproduction of written transcriptions of oral legends, autonomous oral accounts, as well as outright separation between oral and written forms of legitimizing traditional narratives.’⁷⁰

Ramos collected his information on foreign influences, ‘foreign topos’ as he calls it, in different areas in and around Gondär, parts of Amhara and Təgray, as well as around Lake Tana. As ‘history’ is usually written by the majority or victorious groups he challenges the written reports and confronts them with oral traditions, which offer alternative information.

Anäis Wion is also in search of historical imaginations, by confronting the written with the oral around Gong monastery in Goḡgam. At the heart

69 Ramos in this volume (p. 28). Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya’s የኢትዮጵያ፡ ታሪክ (*Yä’ityopyya tarik*) is also discussed in the contribution of Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł. While Ramos proves how (oral) memory was influenced by modern publications, Rubinkowska-Anioł shows how Tāklä Šadəq Mäkwəriya actually included existing oral traditions in his book.

70 Ramos in this volume (p. 35).

of her analysis lies a religious political controversy: Gong, home to a community adhering to the *Qəbat* doctrine, was the victim of royal retribution when its abbot, Ṭābdān Dəngəl, openly rebelled against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who had declared *Qəbat* a heresy. ‘Nonetheless, a few decades later, Gong was richly endowed by the royal power and its violent and rebellious past seemed to be forgotten.’⁷¹ Wion elaborates on the question, ‘[h]ow did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting the rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past?’⁷² Wion collected the *afä tarik*—the oral history—of Gong as passed on by members of the local clergy and local community. For her analysis she compares, for example, a written document concerning the death of (the possibly invented *abunä*) Gərma Šəllus, with oral history about the same person. The oral reports lack a number of striking details kept in the written report. Wion argues that the details were dropped ‘perhaps because [they were] too specific and not directly comprehensible’⁷³ and the significance of these details has been lost. Thus in her reading, orality can only transport a certain degree of complexity or rather only focuses on the most important details. However, Wion adds that this perspective was ‘not at all clear to the scribe and/or historiographer who wrote the text’.⁷⁴

The parallel development of oral and written tradition is also examined by Hanna Rubinkowska-Anioł. The author explores a time when oral literature was still dynamic, retold by *azmaris* ‘and [also] as a medium of transferring historical knowledge, while at the same time written literature was developing very fast.’⁷⁵ The author bases her argument on the fact that the written eclipsed the oral. Grounded on the ideas of Havelock and Ong,⁷⁶ she describes how history turned from oral into written and was later co-opted by the leading elites. She sees striking similarities between Ethiopia and ancient Greece where orality died off and gave way to the written. However, both patterns existed simultaneously for several centuries and still do to some extent. The point of focus in Rubinkowska-Anioł’s contribution is, however, to analyse the intermingling of written and oral traditions and how they influenced official publications under Ḥaylä Šəllase I. Interestingly enough, at the time the majority of the population was still illiterate—thus oral culture played a substantial part in the worldview of the

71 Wion in this volume (p. 43).

72 Ibid. (p. 43 and 44).

73 Ibid. (p. 48).

74 Ibid. (p. 48).

75 Rubinkowska-Anioł in this volume (p. 66).

76 Havelock 1986; Ong 1988.

subjects of the emperor. Rubinkowska-Anioł's analysis shows how literature became a tool for legitimizing and constructing imperial power, and she describes the patterns by which orality was turned into writing in order to favour and create legitimizing narratives.

The production of texts from oral sources is also a feature of the work of Éloi Ficquet. His meticulous study gives us a direct glimpse of the oral history in the Amhara region in the mid-nineteenth century. Here the oral is turned into written by a foreign traveller and explorer. Arnauld d'Abbadie, who travelled Ethiopia from 1838 to 1848, left us a large number of field notes he recorded *in situ* with the help of his local informants.⁷⁷ The presented text edition gives us access for the first time to one fragment of this rich piece of oral history concerning the history of *Ras Wädaḡe* of Amhara in western Wällo. D'Abbadie had learned Amharic and was able to understand what was told. Nevertheless he relied on the information provided by the local people. About his most reliable informant, Ḥaylu Šämrü, d'Abbadie states that '[h]is education had been much neglected: he could just read and understand some prayers in the Gə'əz language. However, he knew the genealogy of everyone, the history of various provinces and he was accepted as an authority on the military and political events of the time'.⁷⁸

The oral report delivers much more than a written text could do. '[T]he psychology of the historical actors [in] this indigenous oral narrative adds a new layer of information to the political and social history'.⁷⁹ Ficquet enriches the report on *Ras Wädaḡe* with careful notes, and analyses the information hidden between the lines. He turns the report, which is scanty in parts, into a fully-fledged historical source.

Silvia Bruzzi provides a classical approach to oral history. She looks at the merits of oral sources for the study of modern history.⁸⁰ The author discusses oral contributions as means of questioning the archival sources on Italian colonial policies in Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. The focus is on Italian propaganda materials, and their juxtaposition with oral sources collected by the author in Addis Abäba and Harär. In doing so, the study sheds light on a female Muslim leader, *Sitti* ʿAlawīyya, and on the question of how realistic the picture of this person is, of her role as a collaborator

77 'These heterogeneous notes were presumably recorded from different Amharic-speaking oral informants', Ficquet in this volume (p. 84).

78 Ficquet's translation of d'Abbadie's notes, in this volume (p. 84).

79 Ficquet in this volume (p. 110).

80 Due to the long editorial process of this supplement, the original version of the chapter was published in Bruzzi 2018. While in the earlier version the author takes a very empirical lead approach, in the present paper the author positions herself in the theoretical discussion on oral history and sheds more light on her methodology.

based on propagandistic materials, and of how it can actually be challenged or put into perspective by oral sources.

Like in Gabbert's contribution (see below) *silence* plays a major role in Bruzzi's analysis. Oral sources break the silence and fill the gap of written history. The 'silence of the colonized' and the paucity of indigenous sources lead historians to focus on oral sources, such as oral testimonies and individual memory. In Italian East Africa this enriches available documentation on the colonial experience. The contribution aims at reconstructing intermingled histories in a cross-cultural perspective: it describes the complexity of discourses concerning colonial Islamic policy, both in Ethiopia and in Italy, through the prism of *Sittī* 'Alawīyya's role.

In a wider sense Dirk Bustorf's study also presents the patterns by which historical knowledge and legitimizing narratives are created. At the intersection between cultural and historical studies, his paper explores the multi-ethnic and multireligious settings of various Gurage groups as reflected in their oral traditions. The text provides a critical reflection on the different socio-political influences that manifest themselves in the oral sources. According to the author, the heterogeneous historical landscape of the Gurage shapes 'a complex historical memory in which every socio-political segment, from the level of lineage and clans up to that of larger ethno-territorial units, maintains its own historical memory'.⁸¹ Against this background the author explores how ethnicity, politics, and religious diversity affect the historical memory of the differing groups and subgroups. To account for the complexities, the author cites and analyses oral traditions from different Gurage groups and religious traditions with a markedly different *historical consciousness* (i.e. a heuristic concept, reflecting a given group's ever-changing world-view against the background of transmitted in-group historical narratives).⁸² The author refers to this patchwork of different narratives as 'pockets of memory', which are 'bound to local communities below the official ethnic level, or related to inferior religious traditions, [being] too small and weak to survive over the next generation'.⁸³

Like Bustorf, Fesseha Berhe tackles the methodological challenges of historical reconstruction as well. Fesseha Berhe, contrary to Bustorf, does not attempt to analyse the complex influences and fluidity of oral sources but emphasizes the use of oral data to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of history. While Bustorf offers the reader a view onto the ever-shifting interplay between oral traditions and the identity formation of a group, Fesseha Berhe uses historical knowledge shared with him in order to add additional

81 Bustorf in this volume (p. 140).

82 Bustorf in this volume.

83 Ibid. (p. 160).

facts about an ethnic group that no longer exists. His contribution explores the case of the Dob²a, probably an ancient Cushitic people of northern Ethiopia. The author clearly illuminates a feedback effect between the written and spoken word. He finds the written sources, mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are themselves largely based on oral accounts. Likewise, according to the author, the oral data gathered today cannot provide a definite historical appraisal of the group under study.

In an interesting twist, Chikage Oba-Smidt turns the oral into written. In her meticulous paper she transcribes and analyses the *Boorana Oral Chronicle* as a means of transferring historical knowledge in a non-literate society. Theoretically she engages in the discourse of Ong's 'primary oral culture' — a concept also taken up but criticized by Girke in this volume. In her contribution Oba-Smidt sees the performance of oral poems and chronicles by ritual specialists and indigenous historians as a means of constructing and preserving history. The paper gives interesting insights into the methodological complexities of her work. She compares the chronicles, finding fascinating historical accuracy, and, through statistical analysis of narratives, unravels reoccurring categories and patterns of oral traditions.⁸⁴

Andreas Wetter's paper is another exercise in methodology. Being a trained linguist, he examines the oral traditions of the Argobba which he collected while doing linguistic fieldwork. His paper presents a preliminary documentation, description, and analysis of an oral tradition from an Argobba area in south-eastern Wällo. It contains the narrative of two holy men who are regarded as the mythical ancestors of the two oldest Argobba villages in that region: Šonke and Ṭollaḥa. Not only does Wetter transcribe and translate the narrative, he also sheds light on the 'raw data' of the oral historian, namely the speech and language patterns as well as the historical and cultural contexts under which memories can be collected and used for academic analysis.

Echi Christina Gabbert's work in the present volume is radical and perceptive. Her study provides the reader with a glimpse at both the process of learning a language and the methodological challenges of doing fieldwork. Gabbert presents her work on the Arbore, a Cushitic-speaking group in southern Ethiopia. She reflects on the process of learning the language and the subsequent immersion into the culture, articulating much of the experiences later described by Girke as the 'triangle of orality'.

Contrary to other reflections in this volume, Gabbert does not primarily use oral sources to countercheck historical facts or as alternative sources that add to historical processes, but instead she focuses on the social production of memory and the construction of identity: '[oral sources] offer a conceptual

84 Oba-Smidt in this volume.

narrativist view on social action through a combination of an innate historicity and the individual and collective understandings of self and others with other pertinent social actions.’⁸⁵ What follows is a precise and honest presentation of working in the field and the path from the interview to the interpretation of oral data. Silence looms large again, but, contrary to Bruzzi’s text, here it is not the oral that bridges the silence but the silence that is part of the oral. Another lesson learned was to question anew: ‘[t]he lesson learned required me to reconsider, who am I to judge what a person wants to convey or hide, to forget or to nourish?’⁸⁶

Felix Girke provides further insight into the work of anthropologists in the South Omo zone. He portrays not only his own work with the Kara, but gives a more general view of the experiences of different South Omo scholars and their methodological underpinnings relating to a rhetoric-language based approach to culture and social life.

Girke approaches cultural immersion as a process which he refers to as the ‘triangle of orality’, linguistic competence, communication with the people, and, eventually, cultural knowledge. None of them is able to stand without the other and together they build the experience of the researcher who plunges into another culture. The author also gives space to other South Omo specialists, who briefly have reflected on their introduction to the culture they studied, as well as their experience with the triangle of orality. Girke provides an ethnographically grounded critique to the formalistic presentation of *primary oral culture*, the all too often deterministic transformation of an oral culture to a literacy culture as presented by Walter Ong.

Both Mezgebu Belay and Bayleyegn Tasew exemplify the folklorist tradition in Ethiopian studies. Mezgebu Belay gives an insight into how social construction can be analysed through the analysis of oral arts. His concern is the emotional and psychological reproduction of masculinity in the Amhara society displayed in proverbs and insults.

Bayleyegn Tasew’s contribution portrays the myth of origin of Maḡangir society. The author presents the myth as a basic pattern of environmental knowledge and of the cognitive perceptions the Maḡangir have of their environment, the forest, the animals, and the living space in general. In his analysis the author shows the indigenous concept of oral tradition as the ‘words of the ancestors’.

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Castle Building in Seventeenth-Century Gondär (Ethiopia)

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Abstract

Gondär's evolution to becoming the empire's capital went hand in hand with the construction of pompous castles by members of the Gondärine royal family, supported by foreign builders. However, foreign presence left its marks not only in the capital's architecture, but also in the Jesuit missionary reports of the time. As the history was written mostly from the Portuguese point of view—and was thus affected by their inability to make clear distinctions between nationalities—it is difficult to ascertain the dimension of foreign involvement in the empire's development. Furthermore, Ethiopian written sources also rather rarely mention the presence of *färänğ*, and still less often distinguish them according to their provenance. As 'history' is usually written by the majority or victorious group this contribution challenges the written reports, confronting them with oral traditions.

Introduction: Between the Interstices of Hegemonic Discourse

In the late 1940s, Mr Armando Aguiar, a Portuguese journalist, toured Africa and Asia sending home reports testifying to extant memories of the real or imagined lusophone presence in those parts during the so-called Age of Discovery. These reports, dedicated to the architectural and cultural heritage that resulted from centuries' old interactions between Portuguese overseas merchants, military and ecclesiastical groupings, were regularly published in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, in the mid-1950s, catering to the official nationalistic discourse, enhancing the relevance of past deeds of the Portuguese in the world.

In 1949, Aguiar arrived in Addis Abäba, the capital of Ethiopia, and made contact with a small group of Indians—merchants, teachers, and medical professionals—who had recently migrated to that country from the Portuguese possessions of Goa and Diu, attracted by King Ḥaylä Šəllase's (rather feeble) modernizing and developing efforts. In an emotional speech at a dinner in honour of the Portuguese journalist, the Goan medical doctor José Alfredo Antão, in the name of the community, appealed for Mr Aguiar's help in publicizing the historical ties between the two countries and in interesting the Portuguese authorities in the prospect of further migration from the Estado da Índia to Ethiopia. Mr Antão argued that integra-

tion would be facilitated by the country's millennial adherence to the Christian faith.

Mr Aguiar duly accepted this task and went on to report on the ancient Luso–Ethiopian ties and on the good disposition of Ethiopians toward the Portuguese, in his column of the *Diário de Notícias* and later in a report on the Goan diaspora in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In this report, he pressed the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs to consider the possibility of inducing migration from the Portuguese-ruled Indian possessions to Ethiopia.¹ This project found ready listeners in the Portuguese central administration, which, given the winds of independence in the post-war world, had begun to revisit its options on the state of the country's relations with its African colonies, and was searching for political alliances that could help sustain the survival of its 'overseas empire'.

At about the same period, the noted Ethiopian historian Tāklä Ṣadəq Māk^wəriya, then holding a post in his country's embassy in Paris, published a book on Ethiopia's premodern history. In the section dedicated to the sixteenth century's political and religious tensions that imperilled the Abyssinian Christian sovereigns' rule, it enhanced the importance of the Portuguese military expedition headed by Cristóvão da Gama, Vasco da Gama's youngest son, which had landed in Ethiopia to fight the invading Ad^cali armies led by *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī, who, had declared a *ḡihād* against the Christian kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands.

This brief Portuguese–Ethiopian diplomatic relationship that lasted from 1954 to 1963 was ideologically framed—on the side of the Lisbon government at least—by an overly selective reading of historical evidence concerning the interactions between Portuguese, Indians, and Ethiopians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Goa vice-royalty had played a prominent role in controlling political, religious, and economic routes and territories in Asia and East Africa.

The rhetorical confusion between the sociological categories of the Portuguese and the Indians, and the latter's subordination to the former, featured prominently in Mr Antão's speech in 1949, where he identified the Goan community as 'Portuguese'. This is not surprising, given the consequences of Portuguese domination over a few tracts of Indian western coastal territory since the early sixteenth century, as well as the effect of the Portuguese dictatorial regime's propaganda that relied on the antiquity of the Portuguese overseas presence to legitimize the assimilation of its colonial subjects to the hegemonic category of 'the Portuguese'.

1 Lisbon, Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Arquivo Diplomático, documentos desclassificados, AAA.M.736 (1956).

Such hegemonic subordination echoes the authoritative writings of the Jesuit missionaries who landed in Ethiopia in 1550, in the wake of the Portuguese military intervention of the 1540s, with the project of converting the Ethiopian Orthodox rulers and population to Catholicism. Even if individual Indians or the collective category of ‘Banyans’ are sporadically mentioned in their letters and books, the diplomatic and religious affairs of the foreign presence in Ethiopia was basically seen as a Portuguese enterprise.

The fact that this persistent discursive framework is mostly based on Portuguese diplomatic and religious writings makes it very difficult to assess the nature and extension of a Goan or Gujarati presence in Ethiopia in that period—just as its revival in the 1950s hinders the evaluation of precisely who the members of the ‘Portuguese’ community in Ethiopia were.²

Ethiopian written documents are also of little help, since, for that period, either they vaguely mention the presence of *färäng* in the country,³ and more rarely of Banyan (*vāṇiyān*, Gujarati Jains), or go on to name individual prominent figures such as the Portuguese Catholic patriarch Afonso Mendes. He is credited with having assisted the conversion of the Ethiopian king Susənyos (r 1606–1632) to the Catholic faith, though he was later expelled from the country by that ruler’s son, King Fasilädäs (r 1632–1667), who, it is believed, endeavoured to extirpate Catholic influence in the country and to promote the return to Orthodoxy.

Oral traditions from northern Ethiopia, the region where foreign Catholic missionaries and military men were active in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, are no more eloquent than the written documents on the presence of Indians. Almost no direct information is given that might otherwise encourage the investigation of clear material evidence of commercial interaction between Ethiopia and western India—namely, the presence of Indian textiles in church buildings and books, or a yet to be researched artistic influence on Ethiopian iconographic art.⁴ Therefore, it may be useful to investigate oral traditions in search of indirect and implicit indications regarding such ties.

What Ethiopian oral narrators mean when they refer to ‘the Portuguese’ is, at least today, rather dubious. They seem to have little or no knowledge of the origin of the foreigners and of the reasons for their arrival in Ethiopia beyond the clichéd notion that they, being Christian, were somehow sum-

2 The dispersion of the Goan migrants in Africa and the Arabic peninsula following the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 (and the abdication of Ḥaylā Śəllase) has not helped the authors’ tentative efforts at collecting oral testimonies on this community.

3 *Färäng* means both ‘foreign’ and ‘white’, and is used by Ethiopian storytellers to identify both ‘Europeans’ and ‘Turks’, within this regional legendary tradition.

4 See Chojnacki 2003; Gervers 2004; Henze 2004.