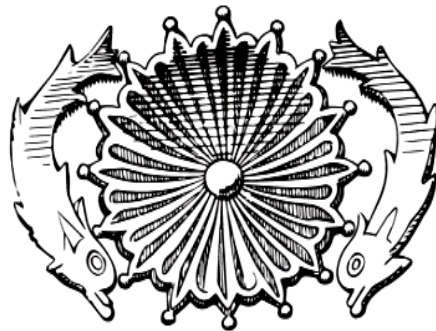


COPTIC LANGUAGE IN CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA
(UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY)

BY
MARCIN KRAWCZUK

[EXTRAIT DU *BULLETIN DE LA SOCIÉTÉ D'ARCHÉOLOGIE COPTE*, vol. 58 (2019) p. 65-73]



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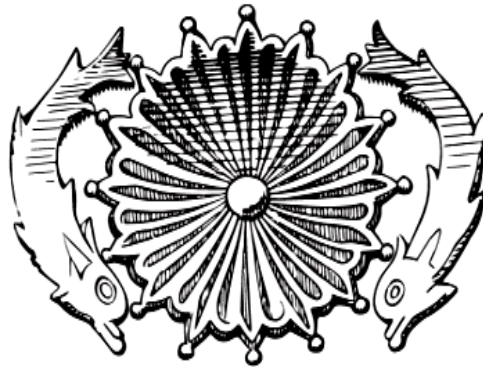
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COPTIC LANGUAGE IN CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIA (UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY)

BY

MARCIN KRAWCZUK

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present various forms of presence of the Coptic language in the Ethiopian writing until the 19th Century. In this period we witness the birth, flourishing and decay of a Christian ecclesiastical culture with Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez) as its literary language within a well-defined political entity of the Ethiopian Empire. The middle of the 19th Century saw a significant break with the tradition and radical shift towards modernity in many spheres of life.

The presence of the Coptic language in Ethiopia is an outcome of the long-standing relations between Ethiopia and Egypt or strictly speaking between their respective national churches. There is a large literature devoted to these relations, they will be therefore treated only briefly.

The article will deal with such phenomena as: Coptic loanwords in Ge'ez, documents written in Coptic within the context of Ethiopian church administration, the treatment of Coptic names in translated literary texts. It will certainly not be exhaustive but rather will put together information scattered throughout various publications, not necessarily accessible to the audience interested in Coptology¹.

Linguistic landscape of the Ethiopian empire

The linguistic situation in the Ethiopian Empire was characterized by the coexistence of a number of languages, restricted to particular fields. The most prestigious position was occupied by Ge'ez. Ge'ez ceased to be spoken probably somewhere near the end of the Axumite era (7th Century) but it remained the main language of Christian literature, Church liturgy

¹ For a comprehensive bibliography of the relations between Christian cultures of Egypt and Ethiopia see Bausi 2012.

and documentary writing (chronicles, administrative documents) until the 19th century.

The two main spoken languages of the Christian population were Tigrinya in the north and Amharic in the south. Among them there many minor languages of which we have little or no attestation². Amharic was also the language of the court (*lāsanä nəgus*) and since the 18th Century its importance as a written language began to grow until in the beginning of the 20th Century it has become the dominant literary language in Ethiopia, the position it still occupies today.

No survey of the linguistic situation in the Ethiopian Empire would be complete without mentioning the impact of Arabic. Its status was somewhat more complicated (for the sake of brevity we will not be referring here to the role of Arabic among Muslim communities which was naturally very important).

To begin with, Arabic was the main language from which Christian literature was translated into Ge'ez since the 14th century (in the Axumite era it was Greek). It therefore had a considerable impact on the usage of Ge'ez which is clearly visible through the presence of many loanwords and syntactic calques³. Almost invariably the originals would come from the Arabic literary heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the role of metropolitans appointed by Alexandria in transmitting those texts into Ethiopia is sometimes evident, like in the case of the famous Sälama (r. ca 1350-ca. 1388)⁴.

In addition to this, Arabic is attested in Ethiopia in a Christian context in the form of occasional documentary notes written in Arabic in Ge'ez manuscripts. The published examples are exclusively connected with circumstances where the part involved was the *abunä*⁵.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the *abunä* arrived in Ethiopia with some entourage and thus there usually was a small but influential group of Arabic native speakers in the country. The use of Arabic in ecclesiastical context in Ethiopia is not very well attested, but one finds its occasional traces in literature. For instance, in the hagiography of Tadewos, an Ethiopian monk and missionary living in the 14th century, we read:

² LUSINI, *Costs*.

³ KROPP, *Arabisch-äthiopische*.

⁴ LANTSCHOOT, *Abbä*.

⁵ LUSINI, *Lingue*, p. 141-143.

ወአቡነ ፊልጶስ ኮነ ንፍቀ ቀሲስ።
 ወአባ ታዴዎስ ኮነ በአምሳሌ ዲያቆን
 ዘይትለዓክ። ወቀደሱ ኅቡረ።
 በአሐቲ ቃል ወልሳን ለውአቱ ቁርባን
 ምስለ ጳጳስ ጄጊዜ እንዘ ይሠወድዎ
 ለጸሎተ ቅዳሴ በልሳነ ዓረቢ። ጄጊዜ
 በልሳነ ግዕዝ ዘኢርዮጵያ ሀገሪትነ።⁶

'Abunā Filāppos was assistant priest and 'abba Tadewos acted as serving deacon. They celebrated Eucharist together in one word and one language with the bishop. Once they officiated the Eucharistic prayer in Arabic and once in Ge'ez, the language of our country.

Finally, at least part of foreign epistolographic activity of Emperors was conducted in Arabic since Arabophone polities such as Yemen or Egypt were the country's important trading partners.

The ways of introduction of Coptic into Ethiopia

The presence of Coptic in Ethiopia is a result of two interconnected factors: the administrative dependence of the Ethiopian Church on the patriarch of Alexandria and the fact that a large part of Ethiopian Christian literature and liturgy was shaped according to Egyptian models and translated from Egyptian originals.

Although the coming of Christianity was not a product of an Egyptian mission, it was patriarch of Alexandria Athanasius (328-373) who consecrated the first bishop of Ethiopia, Frumentius, as attested by Book 10 of *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Rufinus of Aquileia. The custom of choosing the Ethiopian bishop by the patriarch of Alexandria from within the Egyptian monks continued until the 20th Century, even if at times there were vacancies lasting many years⁷. Maintaining this relationship required great financial and diplomatic efforts from Ethiopian side and the actual position of this bishops was sometimes nothing but symbolic.

⁶ SIX, *Vita*, p. 324.

⁷ AYELE, *Metropolitans*.

Since the Church of Ethiopia was overseen by Alexandria, it is not surprising that the principal texts of the Church such as liturgy were translated and adapted from Egyptian originals, first from Greek, then from Arabic⁸. Also, the majority of other texts such as hagiography, patristic writings, homilies and canon law were translated from Arabic intermediaries stemming from Egypt.

In this context it must be stressed that until now no Ethiopian text has been proven to be a direct translation from a language different than Greek or Arabic⁹.

Egypt, alongside Jerusalem, was also an important spiritual point of reference for Ethiopians. This can be exemplified by the presence of Ethiopian monks in Egypt or the common motif of studying under Egyptian desert fathers appearing in many indigenous hagiographies¹⁰.

Coptic loanwords in Ge‘ez

In general Coptic loanwords in Ethiopian are very few and some of them may in fact be indirect loanwords mediated by Arabic. One should also bear in mind that Coptic and the Semitic languages of Ethiopia are related (if very distantly) since they both belong to the Afro-Asiatic macro-family. This results in some lexical affinities e. g. Coptic $\sigma\gamma\omicron\sigma\omega$ “wolf”, Amharic *wəšša* “dog” (cf. Ge‘ez *kälb* “dog”).

Among the possible Coptic loanwords in Ethiopic one can mention for example¹¹:

አፓሩፔ *aparupe* < $\alpha\pi\alpha$ + $\bar{\rho}\tau\epsilon$ ‘church custodian’
 ብርባ *bərba* < $(\pi)\bar{\rho}\tau\epsilon$ ‘temple of idols’
 ብርስን *bərsən* < $(\pi)\delta\rho\omega\iota\mu$ ‘lentils’ (بُلس)
 ብኑኔ *bəhe* < $(\pi)\epsilon\rho\epsilon$ ‘hippopotamus’ (< ‘cow’)
 ከተማ *kätäma* < $\kappa\epsilon$ + $\tau\mu\epsilon$ ‘extremity, top, military camp’
 ሲሳይ *sisay* < $\sigma\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega$ ‘nourishment’
 ስኒን *səhin* < $\sigma\theta\upsilon\gamma\chi\eta\mu\epsilon$ ‘incense’
 ተርዋ *tärwa* < $(\tau)\delta\rho\omicron\omicron\gamma\epsilon$ ‘thistle’ (لسان نبات)

⁸ BAUSI, *Translations*, p. 79-80.

⁹ CERULLI, *Letteratura*, p. 27-29; for an alternative view see e. g. ZANETTI, *Ethiopian*.

¹⁰ MARRASSINI, *Egyptian*.

¹¹ These examples are taken from and discussed in detail in WENINGER, *Wortschatz* and ZABORSKI, *Some*.

Some of these etymologies present considerable problems and in some cases (e.g. when the passage p>b is to be found) Arabic may have been a mediating language. Apart from *kätäma* and *sisay* all of the above words are very rare.

Coptic documents preserved in Ethiopic manuscripts

There are very few examples of Coptic-Arabic-Ge'ez documents preserved in Ethiopic manuscripts. It was very common to include in prestigious manuscripts (particularly the so-called 'Golden Gospels') short documentary texts. One such example is EMMML 6907, f. 61v from the church of Mādḥanä 'Aläm, Lalibäla¹². The Coptic text contains a note left by *abunä* Bärtälomewos (r. 1398/9-ca 1438) made after his visit in Lalibäla. At the same folio we find a contemporary to it land grant (*waqf*) issued in Arabic¹³. The document can be securely dated to the year 1410 during the reign of emperor Dawit (r. 1379/80-1412). The Gospel manuscript itself is somewhat older and so the Coptic and Arabic notes must have been added later.

Another example is a trilingual document preserved in the monastery of Aṣḥi Däbrä Gännät Sällase¹⁴. As yet unpublished but available online¹⁵ is a document issued by 'abunä Qərällos (r. 1784-1788). Similar document is mentioned in a manuscript EMMML 2366, attributed to the metropolitan Matewos (in office between 1889-1926).

We may add at this point that even fewer are Coptic inscriptions preserved in Ethiopian churches. One such example comes from the Betä Maryam church in Lalibäla and in fact is an Arabic inscription with a Coptic phrase $\overline{\text{πXC}}$ ¹⁶.

Toponyms and personal names of Coptic origin in Ethiopic texts

There is a great number of Ethiopic texts translated from Arabic which originally take place in Egypt. Most of them are hagiographies of Egyptian

¹² The manuscript is available online at <https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/200535> [accessed 20 May 2019].

¹³ For a detailed study of this document see WION, *Documents*.

¹⁴ NOSNITSIN, *Historical*.

¹⁵ From the Mäzgäbä Šə'əlat website, reference no. MG-2004.092:031.

¹⁶ BOSCH-TESSÉ, DERAT, FRITSCH and WADI, *Inscriptions*, p. 48-50.

saintly monks and hermits such as the Desert Fathers¹⁷. The notable exceptions are the lives of Anthony and Paul of Thebes which were translated from Greek. Due to their setting they preserve many toponyms and personal names of Coptic origin. Another rich collection of such occurrences is to be found in the Ethiopic translation of the chronicle by John, bishop of Nikiu¹⁸.

Among the many Coptic place names which can be found in Ethiopic texts we can give following examples:

አክምም ḐAkməm < ὈΜΙΝ
 ቀሩስቋም Q^wəsq^wam < ΚΟΚΚΑΜ
 መንገጥ Mänpi < ΜΕΜΠΙ / Μέμφις
 ትሙይስ Təmuɣəs < ΘΜΟΥΓΙ / Θμοῦις
 ስንሃት Sənhət < ὈΗΗΤ
 ጠኔዎስ Ṭenewos < ΘΕΝΝΕΣΙ

For the same reasons as explained in the preceding paragraphs in many Ethiopic texts we find personal names of Coptic origin. As an example we can quote names of some of the illustrious figures of Egyptian monasticism whose hagiographies were translated into Ge‘ez:

ለትጹን < ΛΑΤΣΟΝ
 ኖብ Nob < ΝΟΥΒ
 ሲኖዳ Sinoda < ὈΙΝΟΥΤΙ

In some instances, the Coptic personal name may not be immediately recognizable when a Coptic article or a honorific title has been incorporated into the Ethiopic form of the name e. g.:

ብስታውሮስ Bəstawros < ΠΙ + ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ
 እምራይስ Ḑm(mə)rayəs < ἈΜΔ + ΗΡΑΕΙΣ

Coptic-Ethiopic vocabularies, transcribed texts etc.

A number of Ethiopic manuscripts contains short Coptic texts transcribed in Ethiopic characters. One such example is BN Éth. 50, which contains transliteration of Coptic words in Ethiopian characters and their translation into Ge‘ez¹⁹. The transliteration is interesting in that it offers

¹⁷ See e. g. MARRASSINI, *Egyptian* and GOLDSCHMIDT and PEREIRA, *Vida*.

¹⁸ ZOTENBERG, *Chronique*.

¹⁹ STRELCYN, *Matériaux*.

insight into the way Coptic was pronounced at the time of production of the manuscript:

Ge'ez	Transliteration	Coptic	Meaning
አብኖዲ	'əbnodi	ⲪⲚⲟⲩⲧ	God
አትባ	'ətba	ⲧⲪⲉ	heaven
ቢራ	bira	Ⲡⲡⲉ	sun
ዮኅ	yohj	ⲓⲟⲗ	moon
ስዩ	səyu	ⲘⲓⲮⲟ	star
አብከሂ	'əbkähi	Ⲡⲕⲁⲗⲓ	land
ፍዮም	fəyom	ⲪⲓⲠⲠ	sea

Some further, as yet scholarly unexplored, examples of this type of texts may contain transliteration of Coptic chants (EMML 999), names of Coptic months (EMML 1104), short vocabularies (EMML 2160), invocations of possibly magical character (EMML 2661). It should be highlighted that all these instances are very short and only appear as addenda or marginalia to the Ge'ez texts which constitute the dominant part of the manuscripts in question.

Conclusion

Although the contacts between the orthodox churches of Ethiopia and Egypt are long and intense they did not result in a visible presence of Coptic language in Christian Ethiopian culture. This is due to the fact that during the period when they are best attested, i. e. since 13th century onwards, they were mediated by Arabic and to the fact that when the cultural contacts between Egypt and Ethiopia started to be more intense (from the 13th-14th centuries onwards), Coptic was already a dead language.

Therefore the Coptic toponyms and personal names present in the Ge'ez texts as well as the few Coptic loanwords in this language are also most probably indirect.

Perhaps most significant traces of the Coptic language in Ethiopia are short Coptic texts preserved in Ge'ez manuscripts. These are invariably connected to the Egyptian metropolitans of the Ethiopian church. Since it is reasonable to assume that they were not widely intelligible to Ethiopian

readers, the use of the Coptic language in this context can be interpreted as a symbol of episcopal authority that defined the character of Egyptian-Ethiopian relations until the 20th Century.

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