

The Costs of the Linguistic Transitions: Traces of Disappeared Languages in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

For the most part, the linguistic history of the Ethio-Eritrean highlands in ancient and mediaeval times cannot be reconstructed because of the lack of direct sources. The hegemonic role played by a few cultural centers and the prevalence of the ‘dominant’ languages caused the disappearance of a number of unknown idioms. Therefore, in order to raise a reliable reconstruction, the modern historical research must take into account also the scanty philological traces of languages used by peoples that lost their linguistic identities as a consequence of the cultural assimilation. Particularly, the etymological interpretation of some royal names allows one to cast a light on the linguistic origin of the members of ancient dynasties ruling between the 3rd and the 13th c.

KEYWORDS

Da‘amat, Kingdom of Aksum, Agaw, Zagwe dynasty, Sultanate of Ifāt, royal names

Essentially, most of what we know about the ancient history of the Ethio-Eritrean plateau relies upon the considerable archaeological evidence, but when we attempt to reconstruct the linguistic picture of the highlands, all we have is nothing but a collection of scanty fragments from a selected number of written sources, namely no more than 300 inscriptions in Sabaic, Gə'əz and Greek. We don't know how many languages were spoken in the millennium and half between the Ethio-Sabaeen phase of Da'amat (8th-7th c. B.C.) and the end of the Kingdom of Aksum (7th c.), but most likely some idioms were used for a certain period of time and then disappeared without leaving clearly recognizable traces. In other words, as always and everywhere, in the Ethio-Eritrean regions too a few cultural centers played an hegemonic role, imposing their practices over the surrounding communities, and in this context the linguistic transitions were the result of strategies of gradual assimilation and forced integration (Taddesse 1988). These obvious statements prove to be of some importance when we consider that the commonly accepted ideas about the peopling and the historical development of the lands between the Red Sea coasts and the Ethio-Sudanese borders are based on a surviving documentation issued by some cultural *élites* pivoting around the leading political groups, and that most of the 20th c. scholars tended to consider the facts related by the written sources as the absolute truth. Instead, some philological traces of a more complex framework can be still detected and looking at the sources against the light we can try to understand also what the documents don't tell us openly.

A good example of this dynamics is given by the South-Arabic inscriptions of Ethiopia. In the second half of the 20th c. a brilliant team of scholars pointed out that «the language of the Sabaeen inscriptions from Ethiopia is distinguished from South Arabian Sabaeen by a number of features which are undoubtedly due to interference of the local language or languages» (Drewes 1980: 35). A long and intense debate about this hypothesis brought about a reshaping of the original idea. Particularly, the distinction between two different groups of inscriptions (named I and II) as expressions and products of separate linguistic communities entered into crisis. Firstly, the inscriptions of group I contain unusual features, differing from Classical Sabaic (e.g. the verb *sl'* instead of *hqny* and the preposition *h-* instead of *l-*); secondly, the peculiar phenomena of group II can be explained in terms of linguistic development and historical change within the Sabaic (e.g. the replacement of the interdentalals /t/ and /d/ by the sibilants /s/ and /z/, the third person plural suffix *-mw* instead of *-hmw*, with the loss of the laryngeal sound, a morpheme *-hy* denoting opposites, the indirect object of the verb *hqny* introduced by the preposition *l-*, the use of the *plurale maiestatis*).

Nonetheless, the researches carried by F. Anfray, A.J. Drewes and R. Schneider had the huge merit of calling the attention of the others scholars to the limits of the previously accepted reconstructions. Actually, the pecu-

liarities of the Sabaean inscriptions from Ethiopia deserve to be considered as the result of an interference between two linguistic levels producing «una situazione diglottica, presupposto al cambio linguistico, alla nascita di una nuova lingua» (Avanzini 1987: 221). In other words, the changes detected by comparing Classical and Ethiopian Sabaic can be better interpreted in terms of a drift of speech, because all of the features characterizing the Ethiopian Sabaic are nothing but forerunners of the Gə'əz grammar. This means that the society wasn't uniform. The kings of Da'amat used to bear the title *mukarrib* of Da'amat and Saba' (*mkrb d'mt wsb'*), without claiming the dominance over two different territories, but presenting themselves as the rulers of a 'confederation' between two components (whose full identity still remains to be explained). Eventually, this political agreement found its more complete expression in the 'supranational' Sabeian title of *mukarrib*, indicating the role the kings of Da'amat played as of guarantors of a coexistence.

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If we turn our attention to the linguistic situation of the Kingdom of Aksum, whose ruling class left inscriptions in Greek and Gə'əz (the latter written also in Sabaean characters), we must admit that things are less clear than we would desire. Though we have an incomplete, but sufficient understanding of the Aksumite Gə'əz used for the great royal inscriptions, some of the epigraphic records in Old Gə'əz still present many problems, «massimamente perché il tessuto lessicale che in essi appare sfugge quasi del tutto a ogni nostra interpretazione sia per il valore dei suoi temi sia per quello delle sue forme» (Ricci 1991: 1292-1293). The same definition of these inscriptions as written in Gə'əz is based simply upon their Semitic aspect, but as to their interpretation the results are completely frustrating.

Moreover, shadows of unknown idioms spoken in the Kingdom of Aksum can be still detected in the remaining sources, and at least in one case we can assume that an epigraphic language different from Gə'əz had been used in the Aksumite times. The inscription RIÉ 287, discovered in 1897 in the Eritrean place called by the local people Şəḥuf 'Ēmni ('inscribed stone' in Tigrinya), bears a text in South-Arabic alphabet totally impervious to every attempt of interpretation (Conti Rossini 1947: 13-15). According to the paleography, the carved letters look like those adopted by 'Ezana in the mid-4th c. for his inscriptions in South-Arabic characters, a writing use commonly called 'pseudo-Sabaic', but the text is not even in a Semitic language. Consequently, most of the scholars shared the opinion that the text is incomprehensible because the language is totally unknown (Drewes, Schneider 1970: 66-67).

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The Aksumite royal names represent another delicate matter. We must admit that the native tongue and the cultural origin of most of the kings of Aksum remain substantially obscure, because referring to the Gə'əz grammar and vocabulary it is impossible to ascertain the linguistic affiliation of names such as Endybis *bisi* Dachy, Afilas *bisi* Dimēlē, Ousana *bisi* Gisene, 'Ezana *bə'əse* Ḥalen, Sazana, Wazeba (*Ouazēbas*), Ebana, Nezana, Tazena (*Thezena*), Wazena. The title *bisi/bə'əsi* (Greek/Gə'əz), meaning 'man of' and probably indicating a tribal or clan designation, is the only recognizable Semitic word. In the case of Endybis *bisi* Dachy, the second has been considered close to Cushitic, provided this has to do with Saho *dakano* 'elephant' (Vergari, Vergari 2003: 68), appearing also in *sarwe dak'en* (*daken*), the name of one of 'Ezana's army corps.

Some attempts of interpretation based upon the assumption that the Aksumite kings should have been of Semitic origin since they used to write in Gə'əz are unsatisfactory. E.g., in the case of Ebana, because of the assonance with the Gə'əz word 'əbn 'stone', it has been suggested that this name «may be derived from a Semitic word designating a (sacred) stone, yet with a Christian connotation» (Hahn 2005: 211a). However, one should pay attention to the fact that the two endings *-ana* and *-āna* look like suffixes regularly employed in Aksumite royal names, as in Ou-/Usana (in Greek orthography and phonetic transcription), 'Ezana, Sazana, Ebana, Nezana, Tazena, Wazena. Therefore, if the semantic root to be isolated isn't Eban-, but Eb- (maybe the same element appearing in the name Waz-eb-a) the comparison with 'əbn 'stone' seems to vanish. Once this approach has been accepted, we can identify monosyllabic roots like Us-, 'Ez-, Saz-, Eb-, Nez-, Taz- and Waz-, and we can look for a reasonable comparison within a different linguistic domain, where this kind of 'short' roots is attested.

This is the case with the Agaw languages (particularly the Kəmantnäy), where the suffixes *-ana* and *-āna* are employed in the formation of derived nouns (Conti Rossini 1912: 105). Thus, the name of Usana could be tracing back to a base *'us recognizable in the forms attested in Bilin (*'us-), Ḥamtanga (*wäs-) and Kəmantnäy (*yus-), originally meaning 'male' (Appleyard 2006: 65). In modern Agaw feminine suffixes have been added to the monosyllabic root to generate the present words 'us-əri (Bilin) wäs-räy (Ḥamtanga) and yus-äy (Kəmantnäy) meaning 'female' (according to the same mechanism applied in Gə'əz to create *bə'əsit* 'woman' from *bə'əsi* 'man'). If we suppose that this base 'us- was expanded by adding the nominal suffix *-ana*, we can hypothetically reconstruct for Usana the meaning 'virility'. The name of Tazena (Kaleb's father) could be connected to the Kəmantnäy *taz 'kernel of grain' (Conti Rossini 1912: 262), and with the suffix *-āna* this could mean 'ear of corn' (cp. the Gə'əz personal name Säblä Wängel, 'ear of corn of the Gospel'). In this case, it is noteworthy to mention the possible relationship between this interpretation and the well-known design on the obverse of the Aksumite

coins, with the depiction of two wheat stalks framing the royal bust. The name of Wazena could be connected to the Kəmantnäy *waz ‘deposit’ (Conti Rossini 1912: 268), and with the suffix -āna this could mean ‘guarantor’ (possibly, the radical element is the same appearing at the beginning of the name Waz-eb-a).

One could find it dubious that some of the kings of Aksum could have brought names of Cushitic (particularly Agaw) origin, considered that they were rulers of a state whose official and literary language was Semitic, namely Gəʿəz. Yet, it is sufficient to recall that Aksum was a capital-city for at least six centuries, a long period during which it is reasonable to admit that several royal families alternated to the throne and we have no reason to postulate that these ruling dynasties were all of Semitic origin. Nobody doubts that the Agaw-speakers were a considerable part of the Aksumite society, and the political role they played within the Kingdom of Aksum is proved at least by a passage of the 6th c. *Topographia Christiana* of Cosmas Indicopleustes (II, 51), who describes the gold trade route between Aksum and the land of Sasou/-u and relates about the special role played by the ‘governor’ of the Agaw region (διὰ τοῦ ἄρχοντος τῆς Ἀγαῦ), serving as the trustee of the King’s interests.

At any rate, this is nothing but a linguistic and historical hypothesis, and the supposed Cushitic affiliation of some of the Aksumite names can be called into question only for a part of the documented rulers. The access of Semitic-speaking kings to the throne of Aksum is proved at least by the name of Sembrouthēs, whose Greek inscription can be dated to the period between the 2nd and the 3rd c.: «Sembrouthēs, (the) great(est) king from among the kings of the Aksumites, came and set (it) up in the 24th year of Sembrouthēs the great king» (RIÉ 275; Fiaccadori 2004; Marrassini 2014: 194-196). A brilliant interpretation of this name as a Greek adaptation of the Semitic form *Ṣanf Rəʿəd* ‘The border is Trembling’ or *Ṣanf Rəʿud* ‘The border is Terrified’ (with a typical Greek nominal ending -ēs) traces back to C. Conti Rossini (1919-20: 239), and has been recently reaffirmed by G. Fiaccadori (2004: 144). Since a Semitic onomastic typology offers a reasonable explanation, there is little need to look for a different linguistic affiliation, as provided by the problematic comparison of Sembrouthēs with the Σε(μ)βριταί/-ἰδαί mentioned by Strabo (XVI, 770 and XVII, 786) in the wake of Eratosthenes and Artemidorus, and the *Se(m)b(er)ritae* recorded by Pliny (VI, 191-193), inhabiting a territory along the Blue Nile (Abbay) between Meroë and Aksum, more or less in the historical region of Sennār.

Similarly, the explanation of the name of the capital-city Aksum through an half-Agaw and half-Semitic etymology, resulting from the combination of *aqʷ* or *axʷ* ‘water’ and *šum* ‘governor’, therefore ‘the water of the governor’ (to be compared to the place-name *May Šum*) is not only dubious, but also unnecessary. In this case both the verbal construction *ʾaksāmā* ‘to assign a land’ and the passive participle *kəsum* ‘land assigned’ are attested in Gəʿəz,

therefore with all probability the original meaning of Aksum is '(territory) assigned' (Ricci 1994). Typologically this is the same explanation suggested for the name of Adulis as a Greek adaptation of the passive participle **ʾdul* '(territory) allotted' from a Tigre verbal stem **ʾdlä* (0₁) that in the modern language brought about the intensive forms (0₂) *ʾaddul* and *ʾaddälä* (Lusini 2006: 451).

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The supposed Agaw affiliation of some of the Aksumite names immediately recalls the question of the linguistic identity of the members of the Zag^{we} dynasty (1137-1270). Since their Cushitic cultural origin is commonly accepted, the question is whether they used to speak a native language. To this direction points a passage in the 15th c. *Vita* of king Nä'akk^{wəto} Lä'ab (Conti Rossini 1943: 149 text, 208 transl.), containing a sentence and a proverbial saying addressed by Lalibäla, Nä'akk^{wəto} Lä'ab's uncle, to his own wife Mäsqäl Kəbra: 'Then he spoke to her in the language of his country; and the meaning of that speech was: first you gave him, and now you pray' (*wäka'əbä tänağära bänägärä bəheru wätərg^wamehu läwə'etu nägär qädimu wəhabkiyo yomässä sä'alki*). Probably this passage contains an allusion to the linguistic 'diversity' of the Zag^{we} kings.

It has been suggested (Taddesse 1972: 57, nt. 3) that an Agaw word is contained in a passage of the 15th c. *Vita* of king Yəmrəḥännä Krəstos (Marrassini 1995: 44 text, 80 transl.), referring how the people welcomed the coronation of the king: '*ḥawisa, ḥawisa* for the king of Ethiopia, *ḥawisa, Yəmrəḥännä Krəstos, ḥawisa*' (*ḥawisa ḥawisa lä'itoyḥaya nəgusa ḥawisa yəmrəḥännä krəstos ḥawisa*). Actually, in Kəmantnäy the verbal form *x^waš-* (causative stem of *x^wa-*) means 'he anointed' (Conti Rossini 1912: 209; Appleyard 2006: 24), but the interpretation is weak, because *ḥawisa*, whatever etymology it has, was already integrated in the Gə'əz vocabulary in the 15th c., when the *Vita* was composed.

Instead, more instructive seems to be the analysis of the names of the Zag^{we} kings, because some of them prove to have a Cushitic affiliation. The father of Yəmrəḥännä Krəstos is Gərwa Səyyum (the alternative form Gərma Səyyum can be explained as a later Semitic-looking form), and in several Agaw languages *gərwa* is the most common word for 'man', 'male' (Conti Rossini 1912: 201; Appleyard 2006: 96). For the interpretation of the name of Lalibäla, the most celebrated king of the dynasty, we can consider two Agaw words: one is *läla* meaning 'bee' in Ḥamta and Ḥamir, the two main dialects of the Ḥamtanga language (Conti Rossini 1904: 220, 1912: 223; Appleyard 2006: 30); the second element is close to *bäla* meaning 'strong, strength' in Bilin (Appleyard 2006: 130). The final meaning 'strength of the bees' (Mercier, Lepage 2012: 24, 44 note 9) can be explained through the sacred status of

these animals in the Agaw tradition (Haberland 1965: 123-127), an auspicious role reflected by the same 15th c. *Vita* of king Lalibäla (Perruchon 1892: 12 text, 77-78 transl.), telling the story of a swarm of bees that encircled the newborn ‘as the troops stay around the king’ (*kämä zäyā‘awdäwo ḥarahu länəgus*).

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In the same years of the Zag^we rule (1137-1270) and in the following decades, when the Christian kings, from Yəkunno Amlak (1270-85) to ‘Amdä Şəyon (1314-44), stabilized the power of the so-called ‘Solomonid’ dynasty, beyond the southern borders of the kingdom different aristocratic families and military heads of Islamic culture used to fight among themselves. Eventually, they gave birth to independent Sultanates that periodically confronted the Christian hegemony over the southern and central regions of the historical Ethiopia. Among these, the most organized and influent was the state of Ifāt. According to a statement by the 14th c. Egyptian writer al-Maqrīzī in the *Kitāb al-ilmām*, in the Sultanate of Ifāt an ‘Ethiopic language’ was spoken together with Arabic (Cerulli 1936: 19-20). The words used by al-Maqrīzī cannot be interpreted with precision, since *al-luğa al-ḥabašīyya* could indicate whatever Semitic or Cushitic language. In any case, according to the same author, Arabic too was spoken in that Islamic country, most probably as the trade vehicle or a prestige idiom. Indeed, all the rulers of the Walašma (or Walasma‘) dynasty had Arabic names, as shown by the so-called ‘Harär chronicle’, an Arabic text transcribed in 1926 and published in 1931 by Enrico Cerulli.

The beginnings of the preeminence of the Sultanate of Ifāt can be dated with precision to the year 684 of hijra, namely 1285 AD. In that year the Ifāt hegemony originated from a political and military clash with a previous Islamic state, ruled by the dynasty established by Wudd b. Hišam al-Maḥzūmī of the qurayšite clan of Banū Maḥzūm. Of this more ancient Sultanate, extending its own control over eastern Šawa, we know the name of the capital-city Walalah and the overall duration, 400 years starting from 896-897 AD, namely 283 of hijra.

These chronological data are reported in a different Arabic document, transcribed in 1936 from a 1863 original found in Harär and published in 1941 by the same Enrico Cerulli. Unlike the ‘Harär chronicle’, containing the ‘History of the Walašma’, in this text not all the rulers of the Maḥzūmī dynasty have Arabic personal names. Here and there one can find «nomi propri di sovrani e principi scioani che, pur non essendo di facile interpretazione, sembrano composti di voci di una lingua semitica del gruppo etiopico» (Cerulli 1941: 32). To cite but one example, the name of the tenth Sultan of the dynasty, who reigned from 1269 to 1278, is reported in the vocalized form Dilmārrah, to be analyzed as a composition of *dil* and *mārrah*. In Harari

dili means ‘victory’ (to be compared with Tigrinya, Amharic and Gurage *dəl*). The root *mrḥ meaning ‘to guide’ is well attested in North-Ethiopic, but it is reflected also in Argobba *mārraha*, Amharic *mārra*, and Gurage *māra*. Therefore, this Ethio-Semitic name can be interpreted as ‘guide to the victory’ (*ad victoriam ducens* in Cerulli 1941: 33).

In conclusion, this analysis highlighted once again the peculiar richness of the linguistic history of this corner of the world and the opportunity for reconstructing events of considerable importance through the comparative and etymological study of the sources. From this approach one can infer the possibility that several linguistic and cultural groups, both of Semitic and non-Semitic origin, were an integral part of the ruling classes that took power in different Ethio-Eritrean regions. The adoption of literary idioms, namely Gə‘əz or Arabic, as the instruments of the historical narrations, simply indicates that these ruling classes used to support one of the main religious systems, e.g. Christianity or Islam. And even though the use of a written language in place of the native tongue for purposes of communication is an obvious practice, this shouldn’t prevent us from trying to detect what is concealed under the veil of the cultural conventions.

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