MELEY MULUGETTA, York University

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Some Notes on Binding Magic (ma’osărä aṛṭ) in Ethiopia

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by Alessandro Bausi
in cooperation with
Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig
Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume


**AethFor**  Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (ibid., 2011ff.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (ibid., 2012ff.).

**AION**  Annali dell’Università degli studi di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, Napoli: Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’ (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.


**CSCO**  *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 1903ff.


**EMML**  Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.


**OrChr**  *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.


**PO**  *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.


**RRALm**  *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Roma, 1892ff.


**SAe**  *Scriptores Aethiopici*.

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Some Notes on Binding Magic (*ma’särä agr*) in Ethiopia*

MELEY MULUGETTA, York University

There are many Ethiopian magical texts which include of magical formulae for binding slaves (*ma’särä agr*, ‘the tying of feet’), and which were used with the intention of preventing, usually a slave, from running away. However, it is apparent that coercive binding magic, of the type known as *ma’särä agr*, was not only used on slaves but crossed class and gender boundaries and was often directed against wives, husbands, lovers and concubines. The rituals associated with binding magic aim at compelling (as opposed to eliciting) the will of the subject. This paper offers a description of binding magic in its various forms, as well as the context of its uses, and highlights the role of the *dábšàra*, a skillful manipulator of archaic symbols in Christian Ethiopian culture.2

Much of the literature involving *ma’särä agr* calls for the use of bodily fluids.3 Mary Douglas’ argument that the body and its orifices are symbolic representations of the social structure and of its points of vulnerability can help to shed light on the ritual of ingesting bodily fluids and why, in cultures throughout the world, sorcerers often use ‘bodily waste’ in their incantations and spells. If the orifices of the body represent points of vulnerability in the body, and hence of structure as a whole, body fluids represent substances that have crossed (social) structural boundaries. As dialectically ‘other’, these substances are viewed as being deeply threatening to the form and function of the social structure, as represented by the body. Their use, according to Douglas, is laden with symbolic power, challenging the boundaries of the sacred geography of the human body. As Douglas argues, all rituals concerning ‘exereta, breast milk, saliva and the rest’ cannot be interpreted ‘unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the power and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in

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* I am grateful to a number of my *dábšàra* informants who wish to remain anonymous. I am also grateful to Steven Kaplan for his extensive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 Slavery in Ethiopia continued until the latter half of the twentieth century, sanctioned by the *Fät’hà Nágsà*, the legal code which has governed Ethiopia since the thirteenth century. For a general discussion of magical practices in Ethiopia, see especially Strelcyn 1955; Lifchitz 1940; Worrell 1910, 398–401; Mercier 1997; see also ‘Asmat’, *EAe*, I (2003), 381a–b (S. Chernetsov).


3 The use of bodily fluids in magic is well attested across cultures; see Douglas 2002; for the case of China, see Chu 1980, 38–55; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988.
small on the human body’. Griaule’s collection of works pertaining to an ‘Abyssinian Däbtära’ lists such use of bodily fluids for purposes of binding:

So that a slave may not run away (do the following): mix the owner’s urine, blood and semen (ḥatiyat, lit. ‘sin’) in honey, and after going thrice around the house, you shall give it to him to taste.5

Bodily fluids are not without their symbolic meaning in Ethiopian culture. The blood of slaughtered animals, for instance, in conformity with Levitical laws (either typological or historical), is never consumed; it is buried. In turn, the slaughtered animal serves to enforce the boundaries of a religious group and clearly seals one’s belonging to this group; the animals ritually slaughtered by Christians is never consumed by the Betä Ṣra‘el or by Muslims, and vice versa. During communal gatherings (e.g. weddings, funerals) which bring diverse groups together, each party takes pains to demarcate these boundaries by readying an unslaughtered animal and giving it to his alien neighbour. Blood, as Hagar Solomon notes, ‘not only sustains the body; it gives sustenance to the soul, and it seals and sanctifies one’s religious identity. Like a river flowing between two nations, it forms a clear and hopefully defensible boundary’.6 Even more meaningful are the rituals and taboos associated with menstrual blood (with many applications in magic) in Ethiopian Christian (and Betä Ṣra‘el) culture; it is often used to demarcate persons (women) and by implication, spaces and times associated with pollution. Saliva, on the other hand is associated with either cursing or blessing. Semen (amh. ḥatat, lit. ‘sin’), as its literal meaning suggests, is the cause of sin and pollution. The association between coitus and sin is, of course, not without its historical roots mirrored in the writings of the early church fathers.7 In line with the deeply monastic inclinations of Ethiopian Christianity, nocturnal emissions and/or coitus are clearly seen as a blemish on the idealized body, symbolized by the male body; priests are to abstain from sexual relations prior to leading liturgical services. And during regulated periods of ritual time (fasts and feast days), the prohibition against coitus extends to the general public, so that notions of ‘holiness’ are defined in opposition to coitus and bodily emissions.

When I personally asked a däbtära about the mechanisms of ma‘asära agr, I was told the following:

It works by compelling (lit. masgäddäd) the slave. A slave (barya) will always think of running away from his master and plans an elaborate

4 Douglas 2002, 142.
5 Griaule 1930, 16.
6 Salamon 1999, 121.
7 For instance, in his Confessions (2.2, 3.1, 2.3, 3.1), Saint Augustine (1991) considered sexual desire to be the epitome of disorder and extolled the virtues of ‘eunuchism’. 
escape plan. He wishes to execute the plan and promises to himself that he will run away, tomorrow, the day after […] Tomorrow passes and he is still bound in the home of his master, serving him. He constantly imagines and creates new plans to run away, and year after year passes, his heart longing to go, but the slave spends his life in the home of his master, without fleeing, and eventually dies there as well.

For the dâbtâra, the element of ‘compelling’ is integral to his interpretation of the function of bodily fluids in rituals of magic. As my dâbtâra, informant noted, ‘the ma’asârâ agr is a lesser form of mástafaqor (love magic); the subject realizes that he is a prisoner, bound. In mástafaqor, the subject never feels compelled. He loves voluntarily, happily, never realizing he is bound’. Clearly, whether the subject is cognizant or not, for the dâbtâra there is no doubting the ‘compelling’ element of mástafaqor and ma’asârâ agr. The ingestions of bodily fluids is symbolic of re-establishing (or re-enforcing) the borders of the body and hence of social relations. The ritual of ‘going around the house thrice’ sets the social space of the binding, allocates its boundaries and its exact coordinates; the house, where the slave lives and sleeps, becomes the fortress of his binding.

Frazer’s notion of ‘contagious magic’ seems to be supported by the dâbtâra’s understanding of binding magic. Frazer observes that in this form of magic, the ‘physical basis’ serves as a continuum by which two distant objects are brought closer, ‘conveying impressions from one to the other’. Hence, as a form of ‘magical sympathy’, the body parts of a person—hair, nails, urine, semen, saliva—when used in ritual, act as mechanisms of imposing one person’s will over another, ‘at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut’. The opposite direction of ‘will transfer’ is also widely acknowledged in rituals of binding, whereby body parts of the magician or the client are implanted on the subject, allowing the magician or the client to control the will of subject.

It was not just bodily fluids that were used for purposes of binding; angels and lesser spirits were sought too. See for instance the following example of ma’asârâ agr, invoking the names of various angels and spirits:

8 The widespread use of mástafaqor has made its way into popular Amharic music and into the lyrics of Getachew Kassa’s Tazzata: ‘ totalitarian : I am : you and I : your: : peace’ (lit. ‘It is said that you (feminine singular) have made me taste medicine put in beer, making me love you (feminine singular) and hate (sic!) everyone else’).
10 Ibid.
Meley Mulugetta

In the name of God, the Father, and Christ, the Son, and thirdly, the Holy Spirit, (and) in the name of Mary, the mother of God, and (in the name of) the angels, Michael, Gabriel, Surafel, Kirubel, and Ṭụtafeynoṣawo‘il and (in the name of) Amanuel, and Siqa and Siqa and Adona‘el and Siṣṭiros and Pi‘al and by these names, you have bound and made my servants swear so that they may neither go up nor down nor right nor left. Blind their eyes and break their knees and annul their thoughts and blind their conscience so that they may not go and be separated from this house, this monastery, (neither) far nor close.¹¹

The names of the archangels are invoked, followed by the names of what appear to be lesser spirits ((*)siqa and Pi‘qa and Adyo‘el and siṣṭi(*)ro and Pi‘al) unknown in general literary lore. The unknown or un-canonized, is at the root of the perception that these texts belong to the genre of magical literature. Texts of this kind are rare and, when we do find them, they are often defaced and destroyed, written in codes, and with many missing elements.¹² They are never shared with the general public but are passed from father to son or master to pupil, in secrecy, with the missing elements transmitted orally.¹³ Their propagation is not encouraged for complex theological and moral reasons (as well as the personal interests of the dābtāra).¹⁴

The age-old question of the difference between magic and religion resurfaces, and is a pertinent consideration in the Ethiopian context. Mauss would be partially justified: it is the contextual and social mode of delivery which distinguishes ‘religion’ from ‘magic’; magic is ‘private, secret, mysterious, and approaches the limits of a prohibited rite’.¹⁵

Ethiopian magic texts readily employ the use of asmā‘ allāb al-ḥusnā, for rectifying worldly woes: sickness, poverty, barrenness, possession by demons, etc.¹⁶ The practical applications of asmā‘ allāb al-ḥusnā are well doc-

¹¹ MS EMML no. 5771, f. 92.
¹² See for instance the many erased magic texts in the EMML collection, MS EMML no. 3930 (f. 1r–v); MS EMML no. 5397 (f. 119v); MS EMML no. 3184 (ff. 218v–219v); MS EMML no. 1331 (f. 1v); MS EMML no. 1535 (f. 49r–v); MS EMML no. 3267 (f. 23r).
¹³ For an elegant treatment of the concept of magic in the Ethiopian Church, see Kaplan 2004, 413–420.
¹⁴ Although many dābtāras ventured to live in church grounds, teaching and copying manuscripts for financial remuneration, many chose to leave ‘church grounds’ to add to their repertoire of knowledge of healing. The distinction must then be drawn between dābtāra-scribes and dābtāra-healers: not all dābtāra-scribes are healers but all dābtāra-healers are scribes.
¹⁵ Mauss 1972, 24.
¹⁶ See Gardet 1960, 714a–717b.
umented in Islamic writings, finding their full talismanic and theurgical expressions in the works of Ahmad ibn ‘Alī al-Būnī (d. 1225).17 Al- Būnī’s Kitāb šams al-Maʿārif al-Kubrā wa-Latâ‘if al-‘Awârīf is a comprehensive, exhaustive collection of Arabic talismanic and magical prescriptions. The practical applications of asmā‘ allāh al-busnā are also employed by the dābtāra in Ethiopia and, in the following example, we find a text of the ma‘ṣārā ʿagr using the ‘asmā‘ allāh al-busnā for binding purposes:

In the name of these names of yours, Al-Qadir Al-Muqtadir (Ar. Al-Qadir Al-Muqtadir), may he be stunned and fearful by the power of these names. May he not go from me by his will, but only by mine. Al-Fatr ya-muqdr Qohdr, by the power of these names, bind him and paralyze so and so that he may not go or separate or flee from me to another city except until he dies. Amen.18

The use of asmā‘ allāh al-busnā by the dābtāra is even more surprising when we come across texts which open with praises to the prophet Mohammed (!).19 The frequency with which which the dābtāra, the transmitter of the church’s ‘collective memory’ (to use Halbwachs’ term), crosses such theological boundaries is truly remarkable.20 Furthermore, it directly points to the liminal status of the dābtāra in Ethiopian Christian culture, a state of ambiguity since ‘this condition and this person elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states or positions in cultural space’.21 The sociology of binding magic is even more interesting. The allegiance of the dābtāra, at least in modern times, does not necessarily follow traditional lines of power relations. The ma‘ṣārā ʿagr (and māṣṭāfaqer) was used for the benefit of those who had won the favour and goodwill of the dābtāra (through various means, including monetary payment, sexual favours). Binding magic could even serve as a powerful weapon of retribution, of redressing power imbalances, especially when used by those with lower social status whose grievances were generally ignored by structure: women, peasants, and the distressed against a powerful judge or ruler.22 Liminality grants versatility. In turn, the dābtāra’s versatile ‘in-between’ status works in surprising ways, diffusing the dramas and tensions of the social structure which are invariably played out in the personal and household spheres.

18 MS EMML no. 4289, f. 170’.
19 Uncatalogued EMDL manuscripts.
21 Turner 2008, 95.
22 See, for instance, the Asmat prayer in MS EMML no. 1502 (ff. 2r–12v) to gain the favour of rulers.
The continuing decline of the dӓbtӓra, as scribe and healer, has happened almost by default, going hand in hand with the gradual replacement of the manuscript by the printed book, the spread of modern medicine, the increasing disappearance of the Qunne Bet and its teachers. The dӓbtӓra, as healer and scribe, is becoming as rare as his grimoires. When we do come across the ma’asärä agr and other magic texts, we recognize them for what they truly are: relics of a time when the dӓbtӓra roamed the highlands of Ethiopia, as healer, cleric, and scribe, shuffling between tradition and innovation, moving between borders, mending bodies and minds and tending to those socially-structured tensions and rifts which often remain below the surface.

Bibliography
EMDL = Ethiopian Manuscripts Digital Library; an ongoing digitizing project in the northern regions of Ethiopia (the manuscripts in this collection have yet to be catalogued).
Ethiopian magical texts abound in the ir inclusion of magical formulae for binding slaves (maal’ig ‘r, ‘the tying of feet’), used with the intention of preventing, usually a slave, from running away. This paper will embark on a description of binding magic, the context of their uses and highlight the role of the dÄbtÄra, whose ‘in betwixt’ status enables him to cross rigid boundaries of traditional power structures in Christian Ethiopian culture.