Dissertation Abstract

*Ethiopian* Abǝnnät Manuscripts: Organizational Structure, Language Use, and Orality

Aethiopica 20 (2017), 341–342
ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
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Ethiopic literature has a category that I have called *abonnät* in my dissertation. I have opted to use this very term on the grounds of internal textual evidence, secondary literature, and practitioners’ (i.e. the *däbtäras*) knowledge. This genre which used to be called ‘magic literature’ and sometimes *asmat* is a rich area of research. As a result of the mesh of cultures and religions from which its contents are drawn, this genre is textually very rich. Research on this area has so far been directed towards the edition of individual texts which is limited in scope and variety. The dissertation focuses on the structural set-up of individual texts or *abonnät*, their language use, and the orality involved in using them.

The structural approach has shown that an *abonnät* is comprised of parts (which I called sections) such as the introductory formula, the *asmat* ‘names’, the *tälsäm* ‘images and figures’, the *Brillenbuchstaben* ‘letters with eyeglasses’, the warning, the *gäbir* ‘effectuation’, and the *historiola*, to mention the main ones. From this we clearly see that the *asmat* which was used to name the genre is only one constituent part. This fact led me to argue against the purported functional dichotomies suggested by scholars up to the present, such as ‘magico-religious’ vs ‘magical’. Such categories cannot be accepted without question, since the structure and function of the texts discussed coalesce into what I have called *abonnät*. Furthermore, I show that some constituent parts of each individual text are recent additions, at least textually; earlier they were part of the encoded text but were only transmitted orally. One such section is the so-called *gäbir* ‘effectuation’, that was originally only transmitted orally in order to maintain the secrecy of the texts. The *gäbir* can be likened to a password. Even if the full text of an *abonnät* is found, it cannot be performed without the *gäbir*. There are various types of *gäbir*, such as *mäwwaräšša* literally ‘means of inheritance’, *maqwaddaša* ‘sacrifice’, *mämälläša* ‘recourse’ and *mäṭäbbäqiya* ‘means of protection’. These types of *gäbir* are not part of an ordinary *abonnät*. They are required in a complex *abonnät*, usually of an aggressive nature. The languages of composition are used in such a way that Ge’ez (Ethiopic) is the language of the core *abonnät* content and Amharic is the language of the *gäbir* ‘effectuation’ though a mix of the two is not uncommon. The language of the *asmat* is complex: what might be semantic nonsense is seen as having power in and of itself. Languages (alleged or otherwise) such as Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic are often used in *asmats*. Herbal lists have also been rendered in *Tägrañña* which is the *däbtära* vernacular. The choice of the lan-
guages used in the abonnäts can be traced to the following factors: the ‘sacred’
status ascribed to Gǝʿǝz, the learned position of the däbtära and their place in
the hierarchy in the practice of abonnäts, and, finally, the esoteric value as-
cribed to languages such as Hebrew and Arabic.

In addition to the function of the languages used in the composition of
the texts, I have approached the texts using the Speech Acts Theory (SAT)
in an attempt to understand how the power purported to be in the texts is
performed. The application of such an approach into these Ethiopic texts is
the first of its kind. Mediated by the special asmat, by visual elements (the
Brillenbuchstaben and tälsäm) and by the formulaic presentation of the
texts which rests in the shape of the main verbs, and executed by a specialist
called the däbtära, the texts are believed to have the power to transform
reality.

As with the oral aspects, the texts are highly secretive in that their transmis-
sion history is blurred and their use complex. I have shown that secrecy and
complexity are partially exhibited by the use of cryptographic methods in
writing the texts. Two types of cryptographic method have been identified: the
täwla ‘replacement’ and the azawär ‘juxtaposition’. In the case of what are
called ‘däbtära notebooks’ (collections of abonnäts compiled as manuscripts)
customary copying of a manuscript as a whole is not possible. Through a
gradual development, the so called mäftǝḥe šǝray ‘undoing of charms’ have
entered into the religious sphere per se and may thus be copied. This is attested
by the fact that a colophon in one of the mäfteše šray indicates that it was
donated to a church. The following ways of transmitting a text have been iden-
tified: däbtära barter (exchange among trainees/masters), hereditary acquisi-
tion (from father to son or to a relative), pity-based acquisition (when a handi-
capped trainee gets an abonnät because the master wants him to sustain him-
self by using it), and merit-based acquisition (when the master gives the best
student an abonnät because of his merit).

Assigning a title is also part of the oral knowledge of the däbtära. It is
known that the part of the incipit called tɔntä Ṕ̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣.