

The footprints of the Companions - A Somali short travelogue by Jama Musse Jama

Introduction and Translation by Giorgio Banti¹

Jama Musse Jama is a Somali ethnomathematician who was born in Hargeysa, Somaliland. In 2016 he passed his final PhD viva in African Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, with a dissertation on Computational Linguistics for African Languages. He has authored and edited several books, both of his own fiction, and essays. He is also known for his research on traditional African games and their potential for use within formal education. A cultural activist, historical researcher and a preserver of Somali oral tales, cultural heritage and history, he has founded the Hargeysa Cultural Centre (*Xarunta Dhaqanka ee Hargeysa*), and the influential Hargeysa International Book Fair. In 2018, he was the host of the 13th International Congress of the Somali Studies International Association in Hargeysa, and is now the formal President of the Somali Studies International Association.

Somali is an East Cushitic language that belongs to the Afroasiatic phylum. It is spoken by more than 16.000.000 native speakers in former Somalia, Djibouti, eastern and southern Ethiopia, northeastern Kenya, and in a worldwide diaspora. It is called *af Soomaali*, i.e., ‘the language of the Somali’ by its speakers. In the past, it has been written both in Ajami (i.e., adapted Arabic), in indigenous and in Roman scripts. However, literate Somali mostly wrote in other languages, e.g., Arabic, English or Italian, while Somali remained a mostly unwritten language until 1972, when the national government of Somalia chose a Roman-based script without diacritics as its official orthography. Long vowels are represented by double letters, e.g., [a:] by *aa*, while *c*, *dh*, and *x*

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represent epiglottal or pharyngeal *ʕayn* (i.e., [ʕ] ~ [ʕ]), retroflex *ɖ* and pharyngeal *ħ*, respectively. Written Somali was immediately introduced in the public administration, armed forces, bank system and education all over Somalia, and after the fall of the Dergue also in the Somali federal state of Ethiopia. It is now a well-established written language, with newspapers, periodicals, novels, collections of poetry, essays, several monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, etc. There are regional and local varieties of Somali, but the present-day written language is mostly based upon Northern Somali. Yet there is a certain degree of variation in written Somali, to the extent that some authors² have described it as a “pluricentric language”; however, individual authors or groups of writers may follow their own linguistic and orthographic choices even within their regional variety.

“The footprints of the Companions” is a short travelogue that recently appeared on pp. 65-74 of a collection of short stories and travelogues by Jama Musse Jama.³ It has been chosen for the section *In altre lingue* (i.e., ‘In other languages’) of this issue of *Ethnorêma* because three years ago a paper on this very shrine has been published on this journal,⁴ with pictures and historical and bibliographical notes. The present writer thought it interesting for two contributions about an ancient historical Muslim shrine to appear on the same journal, one from the perspective of a Western non-Muslim, the other by a Somali

² For instance, M. Nilsson, 2018, “Somali as a Pluricentric Language: corpus based evidence from schoolbooks”, in R. Muhr & B. Meisnitzer (eds.) *Pluricentric Languages and non-dominant Varieties worldwide: Nation, space and language*, Wien &c., Peter Lang Verlag.

³ Jaamac Muuse Jaamac, 2019, *Balanbaalisyahay duul iyo sheekoyin kale*, Hargeysa, Ponte Invisibile (redsea-online), pp. 65-74.

⁴ M. Vergari, 2016, “The shrine of Nağāšī Aşham b. Abğar and the tombs of the companions of Muḥammad (Nägaš, Ethiopia)”, in *Ethnorêma* 12, 63-72.

intellectual who writes about his feelings and experiences in this holy place in Ethiopian Tigray.

The language Jama writes is northwestern Somali, as shown, e.g.,

- i.) by his using *-dh-* rather than *-r-* in *yeedhmadii* ‘the call’, *gaadhay* ‘I reached’, etc.;
- ii.) by clusters of negative particle and clitic subject pronouns like *aanad* ‘not’ + ‘you (SG)’, and *aanay* ‘not’ + ‘they’ rather than, respectively, *aadan* and *uusan* or *uunan*; and
- iii.) by always having *waxa* rather than *waxaa* in *waxa*-constructions like *Mekele waxa aan ka kiraystay tagsi i geeya Negaash* ‘in Mekelle, I rented a taxi for travelling to Negash’, where *waxa* makes it possible to place the focused heavy constituent *tagsi i geeya Negaash* ‘a taxi for travelling to Negash’ (lit. ‘a taxi that carries me to Negash’) after the verb *kiraystay* ‘I rented’.

As far as his orthography is concerned, there are occurrences of clitic subject pronouns spelt as separate words rather than coalescing with preceding *waxa*, e.g., *waxa aan ka kiraystay* ‘I rented in’, but also *boqorku wuxuu ku aasan yahay halkan* ‘the king is buried here’, with *wuxuu* ← *waxa uu*. And after *waa* and *ayaa* they are always coalesced, e.g., *waan la kulmay* ‘I met’, *ina Muuse ayaan ahay* ‘I am a son of Musse’. Separating clitic subject pronouns is a growing tendency in written Somali, advocated by Somali grammarians such as Maxamed Xaaji Xuseen Raabbi.⁵ In addition to this, after *ma* ‘not’, *ay* ‘they’ is spelt separately in *ma ay ahayn* ‘it was not’, and the enclitic

⁵ For instance, Maxamed Xaaji Xuseen Raabi, 2009, “Hawlaha naxweed ee qurubweedheedyadu / weedhtoosiyayaasha (sentence particles): ayaa, baa, waa iyo weeye” and “Astaamaynta Afsoomaaliga (Somali punctuation)”, in Maxamed Xaaji Raabbi, *Qaan gaadh ee qaabku waa ... - Qoraallo ku saabsan Afsoomaliga*, Djibouti, Machadka Afafka ee Jabuuti - ILD, pp. 117-139, 141-156.

conjunction *se* 'but', 'however' is generally separated from the preceding word here, as in *markii dambe se wuu ii wada sheegay runta* 'however, he later told me the truth', but never in the expressions *hase ahaatee* 'however' and *hase yeeshee* 'however'. Instead, the enclitic conjunction *na* 'and' is never spelt as a separate word, e.g., *dhawr qof oo kalena waan la kulmay* 'I also met several other people'.

In compounds, hyphens are avoided even in long and internally complex words like *xerudhaladka* 'local', 'rural', lit. 'originated in a *xer*' – i.e., a group of people or of domestic animals living far away in the bush – and *waxisusheeggu*.

For the style, the author has chosen a plain language: most words are quite common ones, and some are even typically northwestern ones, like *judhadiiba* 'immediately'; and he prefers the new word *goorsheegto* 'watch', 'clock' (lit. 'timeteller') to the more common Arabic loanword *saacad*. But he retains some features that characterize an elaborate and sophisticated literary Somali register, for instance alliteration. This is one of the typical features of Somali poetic diction, which also occurs in many proverbs, riddles and traditional curses, and even in blessings such as *Nabadgelyo iyo Naxariisi Korkiisa ha Ahaatee* 'may (God's) peace and mercy be upon him', which always follows a mention of the Prophet Mohammed, as an adapted translation of the Arabic eulogy *ṣallâ Allaahu ʿalayhi wa-sallam* 'may God bless him and grant him salvation'. In addition to this formula, alliterated pairs in this short travelogue are *xumaantii Qurayshta Maka iyo xaqdarradii Carabta qaarkeed* 'the fiendish Quraysh of Mecca and the evil-mindedness of some Arabs', and *Geeska iyo Gudaha Afrika* 'Horn of Africa and the interior of the continent' (lit. 'the Horn and the interior of Africa'), but their literary flavour is mostly lost in English translation.

Repetition and parallelism is another feature of Somali literary style, as in the two paragraphs after the mention of Abdurrahman Jabarti, that begin by *waxa ay iiga sheekeeyeen, oo i tuseen*, ‘they talked to me and showed me’. Actually, the parallelism is more complex in the Somali version, because these two coordinated clauses are followed by two phrases that both begin by *qoraallo* ‘writings’: *qoraallo farriin isweydaarsi ah* and *qoraallo laga sameeyey dooddii Jacfar binu Abii Daalib* In the English translation I rendered this as ‘some letters’ and, respectively, ‘some writings about Jaafar bin Abu Talib’s speech’, that somehow lose part of the effect of the original text.

Finally, two instances of syntactic redundancy should be pointed out, both of types that are quite frequent in contemporary literary Somali prose. They occur in the same paragraph that begins with *dareenka hawada* ‘from the feeling of the air’:

- a.) *marka laga reebo masaajidka cusub ee uu Turkigu ka dhisay mooyiye* ‘but for the new mosque made by the Turks’, where both *marka laga reebo* and *mooyiye* perform exactly the same excluding function as English *but*. One of them would have been enough, yet *marka laga reebo*, lit. ‘if one excludes from it’, is more transparent than *mooyiye*, and probably more easily understood by young readers.
- b.) *In aan raadkii saxaabada, oo weli sii muuqda, aan aniguna ku dul tallaabsanayay* ‘as if I were stepping myself in the footprints of the Companions that were still visible’, with the clitic subject pronoun *aan* ‘I’ occurring twice, at the beginning of the long dependent sentence, and immediately after the parenthetical remark *oo weli sii muuqda* ‘that were still visible’. As stated above, also this kind of repetition is quite frequent in literary prose.

Raadhkii Saxaabada

Neegush, Ethiopia, 5 Oktoober, 2018

Ma ay ahayn gef xilliga ah. Waxay ahayd 4:30kii. "Kuwa Eebbe rumeeyayow, ooga salaadda, sidaasaa ka door roon e," ayuu ku celiyey saddex jeer baaqa hortii. Yeedhmadii shalay ee salaadda arooryo, ee habdhaca luuqdeedu xerudhaladka ahayd, kolka aan saakana maqlay, waxa ay igu ridday jid cusub: in aan raaco raadhkii saxaabada Nebi Maxamed, Nabadgelyo iyo Naxariisi Korkiisa ha Ahaatee.

Mekele waxa aan ka kiraystay tagsi i geeya Negaash. Saacad iyo rubuc ka dib, waxa aan soo gaadhay oogo aad mooddo in goorsheegtada lagu hakiyey Rajab, Sannadhkii 5aad ee Hijriyada, kolkii 17 ka mid ah saxaabadii Nebi Maxamed (NNKHA), oo ka soo cararay xumaantii Qurayshta Maka iyo xaqdarradii Carabta qaarkeed, ay soo gaadheen buurahan qabow ee degganaanshaha nafsiga ahi hadheeyey. Kooxda hore waxay ahaayeen baa la yidhi 12 nin iyo 5 dumar ah oo ay ku jiraan Cismaan Ibnu Cafaan iyo Ruqiya Bintu Maxamed, Eebbe raalli ha ka noqdo labadaba e. Kooxda labaad oo 83 rag iyo 19 dumar ah ahayd, waxa hoggaaminayay Jacfar Abu Daalib, Eebbe raalli ha ka noqdee. Waxa soo diray Suubbanaha Maxamed (NNKHA), oo u sheegay in ay halkaa ku badbaadayaan, maganna u noqon doonaan boqor madow oo ka taliya dhulkaa nabadda ah.

Neegash, Negaash ama Nejaash, waa tuulo ku taal kililka Tigree, Itoobiya, waddada isku xidha Mekele-Adigrat, una jirta 6.5 km magaalada Wukro. Waxa la yidhaahdaa waa degaankii Islaamka ee ugu horreeyey Afrika. Magacu wuxuu ka yimi afka Tigreega waana boqor. Dadka ku nooli oo qiyaastii 10,000 ku dhow, in ka yar 700 ayaa muslim ah. Ashama Ibn Ajbar (Boqorkii Neegash) wuxuu ahaa boqor Kiristaan "Orthodox" ah oo ka taliya boqortooyadii Aaksum, wuxuuna noolaa oo xukumaayay Aaksum 614-631 CD, oo ku beegan sannadihii 5-22 ee tirsiga Islaamka. Tuuladan aan caawa joogo meel u dhow oo qowga buurta ka soo

hor jeedda ah, welina ka sii muuqdaan duugaalkii degganaanshuhu, ayuu fadhigiisu ahaan jirey. Waxa aad mooddaa sida loo nool yahay, in wax yari is beddeleen ilaa xilligaa. Boqorku wuxuu ku aasan yahay halkan, waxana uu ku geeriyooday Islaannimo kolkii dambe, ayay degaanku qabaan.

Saddex dhisme oo dhowaan Turkigu sameeyey oo si fil roon u dhisan, dhul nadiif ah oo biyo ka soo dhacayaan oo la isku daahiriyo, kuraasi dhadhaab ka samaysan oo loogu fadhiisto weysada, farshaxan joometeri isku dhafan ku salaysan, xayndaab qurxoon oo masaaqidka iyo xabaalaha kala oodaya, iyo goob shirarka lagu qaban karo oo qiyaastii 300 oo qof fadhiisan karaan, ayaa judhadiiba ku qaabilaya. Waxaad dareemaysaa ilbaxnimo, dadnimo iyo degganaasho, kolka limaan Aadan kaaga hor yimaaddo si kalsooni leh. “Haddii aad Islaam tahay u weeco xagga masaaqidka, haddii aad dalxiise kale tahayna dariiqa toos u qaad oo xayndaabka ka tallow,” ayay si kalsooni leh kuugu odhan doonaan marka aad is hor taagto. Hadday kuu gartaan soogaleetina, kolka ay yiqiinsadaan in aanad Af Tigree iyo Af Amxaari toona ku hadal, waxay kugu odhan, “Miyaad ku hadashaa Af Carabiga?” Kolka ay ku haybsadaan, waxay kuugu yeedhi qof afkaaga ku hadla: Soomaali, Amxaari, Canfari, Ingiriisi, Tigree iyo Carabi, intaba cid ku hadasha ayaa xerta ka mid ah.

Taariikhaha qoran ee Reer Galbeedka, kuwa buugaagta taariikhda Islaamka ku sheeggan, iyo kuwa afka ay iiga yidhaahdeen degaanku way is dhaafsan yihiin, kolkaa waxba ka odhan maayo jeeroon baadhitaan kale sameeyo, degaanku se waxay ay ii sheegeen in taariikhdii Islaamka ee dhabta uga dhacday halkan, ay dawladihii xoogga weynaa ee u kala dambeeyey Itoobiya dhalanrogeen. Waxa aan soo arkay dhawr qof oo dadnimadooda iyo iimaankooduba aad u sarreeyo. Walow hayntooda adduunyo ay dayro u muuqatay, haddana iftiin badan baa ka muuqday lebbiskooda iyo wejiyadooda. Ma ogi in ay maalin kasta sidan quruxda badan u lebbisan yihiin, iyo in Jimcaha daraadeed ay salaadda ugu soo diyaargaroobeen. Midi

waa Sheekh Aadan Maxamed Ibraahin, hayaha furaha iyo adeegaha Xarunta Negaash, ahna hagaha masaajidka xilliyada la oogayo salaadda. Midina waa Cali Muuse Cali, gacanyare xerow ah oo Af Soomaaliga ku hadla. Dhawr qof oo kalena waan la kulmay.

Qudbadda salaadda Jimce ma aan fahmayn kolka laga reebo meelaha hadal-qaadka Suubbanaha Maxamed uu ku jiro oo sare loo qaadayay xuskiisa iyo Allebarigiisa, Nabadgelyo iyo Naxariisi Korkiisa ha Ahaatee. Kolkaa waan raacinayay xuska oo Af Carabi ah, inta kale se Af Tigree ayaa waxisusheeggu ku baxayay. Salaadda ka dib ayuu Sheekh Aadan ii warramay, i soo mariyey dhismaha, i tusay xawaalka dhagaxaanta cusub lagu qurxiyey, hase yeeshee ay ku qoran yihiin inay ku aasan yihiin Boqorkii Negaash, oo sida dadka degaanku aaminsan yihiin, ku dhintay Islaannimo, iyo 15 ka mid ah asxaabadii ku geeriyootay intii aanay dib u noqon, oo laba iyo toban ka mid ahi isku meel kula aasan yihiin boqorka.

Waxa kale oo ku magaacaban dhagax-xawaallada midkood, Cabdiraxmaan Jabarti oo ay aad ugu ducaynayeen, waayo isaga ayaa dhisay, ilaaliyey goobtan, markii dambena labadiisii wiil u kala diray Geeska iyo Gudaha Afrika, si ay dacwadda u fidiyaan, ayay igu yidhaahdeen. Waxa ay iiga sheekeeyeen, oo i tuseen, qoraallo farriin isweydaarsi ah oo ah dhambaal uu Suubbaneheenna Maxamed u soo direy boqorka si uu uga mahadceliyo, iyo dhambaal jawaab ah oo boqor Negaash u celiyey Suubbanaha.

Waxa ay iiga sheekeeyeen oo i tuseen, qoraallo laga sameeyey dooddii Jacfar binu Abii Daalib ku badbaadiyey saxaabada markii nimanka awoodda badan ee Qurayshi ka soo daba dirtay si loo soo qabqabto asxaabta, oo uu hoggaaminayay aftahan Caamir binu Cabbaas oo aan weli soo muslimin markaa, boqorkana hadiyadda qaaliga ah u keeneen, ay ku andacodeen

in “kooxdani shufto soo goosatay yihiin oo qarandumis ah, diintaada Ciisena ku wacad furay.”

Waxa ay ii sheegeen sida uu Boqor Negaash u ahaa xaqsoore oo intii aanu go’aanka gaadhin hadalka uu u siiyey Jacfar, oo isaguna iskaga dhiciyey dood qiimo leh, una akhriyey qaybo ka mid ah suuradda Al Maryam ee Qawlka Eebbe. Kolkii Negaash dareemay runnimada doodda Jacfarna, jeclaystay in uu Jacfar bal u akhriyo qaybo kale oo hadalka Eebbe ee loo soo mariyey Maxamed (NNKHA) ah.

Waxa ay ii sheegeen in qaybo ka mid ah suuradda Al Cimraan kolkuu Jacfar u akhriyey Negaash, uu boqorku jidhidhicooday, kuna wacad galay in ay badbaado ku negaan doonaan ilaa inta ay iyagu iskood u noqonayaan, sidaana ku magan geliyey. Dareenka hawada, dadka wejiyadooda, cimilada degganaanshuhu hadheeyey waxa aad is odhanaysaa kun iyo badhkaa sannadood ee ka soo wareegtay taariikhda, in ay goorsheegtadu taagnayd. Dhismayaasha, marka laga reebo masaajidka cusub ee uu Turkigu ka dhisay mooyiye, dhulka intiisa kale dhagaxa uu ku samaysan yahay waxa ku muuqda duugaal muddo dheer soo jirey. Waxaan dareemayay in aan raadkii saxaabada, oo weli sii muuqda, aan aniguna ku dul tallaabsanayay, kolkaan sheikh⁶ Aadan la fadhiyey.

Cali Muuse wuxuu igu yidhi, “Waxa aan ahay Soomaali, oo ina Muuse ayaan ahay.” Anna waxaan ku idhi, “Aniguba ina Muuse ayaan ahay.” Markii dambe se wuu ii wada sheegay runta in uu isaga iyo waalidkiiba ku dhasheen Gondar dusheeda, oon asalkoodu ahayn Soomaali, hase yeeshee uu Jabuuti ku koray, afka ku bartay, aabbihiiina ku dhintay halkaa, hase yeeshee hooyadii u diidday inuu magaalada sii joogo, Jabuuti iyo Addis toona, oo ay ku tidhi, “Joog masaajidka oo xerow ka noqo.”

⁶ Read *sheykh* or *sheikh*, probably misspelt or automatically corrected by the word processor software.

Waxa aan go'aansaday in aan caawa u hoydo halkan, la cuno oonta yar ee ay isku fillaysiiyaan, kuna nool yihiin, tagsigiina waan fasaxay.

Translation

The footprints of the Companions

Negash, Ethiopia, October 5th, 2018

It was not the wrong time.⁷ It was 4:30. “You who believe in God, perform your prayer, because this is your best choice”, was repeated three times before the muezzin’s summoning. When I heard also today yesterday’s call to the morning prayer, performed in a local traditional way,⁸ I was thrown onto a new path: I would follow the footprints of the Companions of the Prophet Mohammed, may Peace and Mercy be upon Him.

In Mekelle, I rented a taxi for travelling to Negash. After one hour and 15 minutes, I reached a mountainside place where one had the impression that time had stopped in the month of Rajab⁹ of the 5th year after the Hijra, when 17 Companions of the Prophet Mohammed (may Peace and Mercy be upon Him), who had fled from the fiendish Quraysh of Mecca and the evil-mindedness of some Arabs, reached these cold mountains, whose peacefulness sheltered them. It is told that the first group were 12 men and 5 women, among whom there were Othman ibn Affan¹⁰ and Muhammad's daughter Ruqayyah, may God be pleased with both of them. The second group, composed of 83

⁷ It was the proper time for the morning prayer (*ṣalātu al-faḡr*), one of the five daily prayers Islam prescribes.

⁸ In recent years, especially in the major cities and towns of the Horn of Africa, the traditional styles of the muezzins’ call to prayer (Ar. *’aḡān*) have been replaced by a new standard style coming from Saudi Arabia.

⁹ The seventh month of the Islamic calendar. Since it is a lunar calendar, a few days shorter than the solar one, the beginning of Rajab changes every year.

¹⁰ The Prophet’s son-in-law, who later became the third caliph.

men and 19 women, was led by Jaafar ibn Abu Talib,¹¹ may God be pleased with him. They were sent by the Prophet Mohammed (may Peace and Mercy be upon Him), who told them that they would be safe there, and that they would find sanctuary by a black king who ruled that peaceful country.

Negash or Nejash is a village that lies in the Tigray regional state, Ethiopia, on the street that connects Mekelle and Adigrat, at 6.5 kms from the town of Wukro. It is reported to be the first settlement of Islam in Africa. Its name comes from the Tigrigna language, and it means 'king'. Of the people who live there, which are approximately 10,000, less than 700 are Muslims.

Ashama ibn Ajbar¹² (the king Negash) was a Christian Orthodox king, who ruled over the kingdom of Aksum, living there and reigning from 614 to 631 CE, which correspond to the years 5-22 of the Islamic calendar. His seat was in a place near to this village where I am now, in front of the mountain cliffs, where the remains of the dwellings are still visible. One has the impression that the way people live now changed very little from that time. The king is buried here, and people believe that he died after converting to Islam.

One notices at once three well-built structures, which were recently erected by the Turks, a clean and well-kept ground with water fountains, some stone benches where people can sit while

¹¹ Jaafar (*Ġāfar ibn 'Abī Ṭālib*, ca. 590–629 CE), a cousin of the Prophet and an early convert to Islam. One of the older brothers of Ali (*'Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib*, 601–661 CE), he was later to become the fourth caliph (656–661 CE). Shia Muslims differ from Sunnis in regarding Ali as the rightful immediate successor to Muhammad as an Imam.

¹² In the Arabic sources *'Aṣḥam(a) bin 'Abḡar*, the Ethiopian *naḡāšī*. He is frequently identified with the king known as Armaḥ from Ethiopian sources, the last coin-issuing king of Axum.

cleansing themselves,¹³ a decoration based upon connected geometrical patterns, a nice fencing wall that separates the mosque from the tombs, and a hall where meetings can be held, with more or less 300 seats. One has a feeling of good manners, empathy and poise, when the Imam Ahmed approaches you with confidence. “If you are a Muslim, turn towards the mosque; while if you are a different kind of tourist, follow the straight path, and enter the enclosure”, you will be told, when you stand in front of them. If they understand that you are a foreigner, when they see that you do not understand either Tigrinya or Amharic, they tell you, “Do you speak Arabic?” When they identify where you are from, they call a person who knows your language: Somali, Amharic, Afar, English, Tigrinya or Arabic. For any of them there is a person who speaks it in the place.

What Westerners wrote, what the works on the history of Islam tell, and what the local people narrated to me with their own words is much and diverse, and I won’t talk about it before doing some further research, but the people I met there told me that the true history of Islam that occurred in this place has been altered by the powerful governments that recently succeeded to each other in Ethiopia. I met several people whose humanity and religious feelings were profound. Even though they may have looked destitute to other people, there was much light that shined from their clothes and their faces. I don’t know whether they used to wear such beautiful clothes every day, or if they had prepared themselves for the Friday prayers. One of them was sheikh Adan Mohamed Ibrahim, who holds the key of the Negash sanctuary and is its caretaker, and who leads the mosque when believers are summoned to the prayer. Another one is Ali Musse Ali, the secretary of the community and a speaker of Somali. I also met several other people.

¹³ That is, while performing the *wuḍūʿ*, the ritual ablution that has to be done in preparation for praying, or before handling and reading the Quran.

I did not understand the sermon of the Friday prayer, with the exception of the portions where the Prophet Mohamed was quoted (may Peace and Mercy be upon Him), where his memory and praise were glorified. I thus repeated what was said in Arabic, but could not understand the rest that was uttered in Tigrinya. After the prayer sheikh Adan talked to me, showed me the different buildings, and the tombs that had been renovated with new stones. It was written on them that King Negash was buried there, whom the local people believe to have died after converting to Islam, and 15 Companions who died before they could go back, twelve of whom are buried together with the king under the same dome. One of the tombstones also mentions Abdurrahman Jabarti,¹⁴ whom they much revere, because it was he who built and guarded this place, and later sent his two sons to the Horn of Africa and the interior of the continent, in order to spread the call to Islam.

They talked to me and showed me some letters, one of them a message sent by the Prophet Mohammed to the king in order to thank him, the other the response sent by King Negash to the Prophet. They talked to me and showed me some writings about Jaafar bin Abu Talib's speech that saved the Companions, when the powerful men sent after them by the Quraysh in order to catch them, led by Amir bin Abbas,¹⁵ who had not become a

¹⁴ This is almost certainly the older ʿAbdu ar-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī, a Somali man of religion who also visited the communities of Ġabartī (i.e., the Moslems from the Horn of Africa) in Mecca and Medina, and later travelled to Egypt, where he established a well-known family of ulemas. One of his descendants was the homonymous historian and chronicler ʿAbdu ar-Raḥmān bin Ḥasan al-Ġabartī (1753-1825 CE).

¹⁵ Here written as ʿĀmir binu ʿAbbās. The most common tradition refers to him as ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ al-Sahmī (living probably 573 – 664 CE). He later converted to Islam and led the Muslim conquest of Egypt, where he served as a governor in 640–646 CE and 658–664 CE.

Moslem yet, brought precious gifts to the king and complained that “this group are dangerous bandits that threaten the nation, and have breached their oath with your Christian religion”.¹⁶

They told me that King Negash was a rightful judge, and that before reaching a decision he asked Jaafar to talk, and how he delivered a great speech, during which he recited to the king some parts of the sura of Mary¹⁷ from God’s Voice.¹⁸ When Negash heard the truthfulness of Jaafar’s words, he wanted him to recite for him also other parts of God’s speech that had been delivered to Mohammed (may Peace and Mercy be upon Him).

I was told that when Jaafar recited some verses from Imran’s sura¹⁹ for Negash, he was taken by a strong emotion, and solemnly stated that they could remain in peace until they wished to go back by themselves, and thus saved them. From the feeling of the air, the faces of the people, the quietness that sheltered them, one would say that the clock had not moved for the one thousand and a half years that had passed from that time. The buildings, but for the new mosque made by the Turks, the stones with which the other structures are made have an antique appearance that has been there for a long time. I felt as if I were stepping myself in the footprints of the Companions that were still visible, when I sat together with sheikh Adan.

¹⁶ In order to strengthen their case against the fugitive Companions with the Christian king of Axum, the Quraysh delegation accuses them of being former Christians who converted to the new religion, i.e., Islam.

¹⁷ The 19th sura (chapter) of the Quran, *sūratu Maryam*, where the stories of Zachariah and his son John, the precursor of Jesus, and of Mary and Jesus are told.

¹⁸ That is, the Holy Quran.

¹⁹ The 3rd sura of the Quran, *sūratu al-ʿImrān*, that talks about the human nature of Jesus, the oneness of God, man’s faith and temptations, and other issues.

Ali Muse told me, “I am Somali, and am a son of Musse”. And I replied, “Even I am a son of Musse”.²⁰ However, he later told me the truth: he and his father had been born in Gondar, and they were not of Somali descent. But he had grown up and learnt the language in Djibouti, where his father had died. His mother had forbidden him from remaining in a city, be it Djibouti or Addis, and had told him, “Stay in a mosque and become there a man of prayer”. I decided to remain there that night and eat the little food they are content with, and sent away the taxi.

²⁰ The names of the Moslems from the Horn of Africa are usually composed of two or three names: the individual person's, his father's, and his grandfather's. The author is thus Jama, son of Musse, grandson of Jama, whereas this Ali is a son of a different Musse, who was himself the son of an Ali. The wordplay, and the feeling of being somehow close, comes from their both having been fathered by men who were called Musse.