

“Holding living bodies in graveyards”: the violence of keeping Ethiopian manuscripts in
western institutions¹

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Abstract

Since the colonial period, European museums and libraries have accumulated a large collection of cultural and intellectual material from various African countries. Some of these materials are used by western writers to produce knowledge about Africans. This paper critically reflects on the practice of “saving” the intellectual and cultural properties of Southern countries as endangered knowledges. It demonstrates how collecting and holding African sources of knowledges in western institutions that are not accessible for Africans reproduces epistemic violence. Epistemic violence is defined as the practice of interpreting local knowledge with a foreign lens in a way that reinforces colonial, Eurocentric views that are then internalised within Africans themselves. The paper is based on a case study from Ethiopia where thousands of indigenous Ethiopian manuscripts and other materials are still held in western museum and libraries.

Introduction

There are two types of Africa. The first is a *place* where people and cultures live. The second is the *image* of Africa that has been invented through colonial knowledge and power. The colonial image of Africa, as the Other of Europe, a land “enveloped in the dark mantle of night” was supported by western states as it justified their colonial practices (Hegel 91). Any evidence that challenged the myth of the Dark Continent was destroyed, removed or ignored.

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While the looting of African natural resources has been studied, the looting of African knowledges hasn't received as much attention, partly based on the assumption that Africans did not produce knowledge that could be stolen. This paper invalidates this myth by examining the legacy of Ethiopia's indigenous Ge'ez literature, and its looting and abduction by powerful western agents. The paper argues that this has resulted in epistemic violence, where students of the Ethiopian indigenous education system do not have access to their books, while European orientalist use them to interpret Ethiopian history and philosophy using a foreign lens. The analysis is based on interviews with teachers and students of ten Ge'ez schools in Ethiopia, and trips to the Ethiopian manuscript collections in The British Library, The Princeton Library, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and The National Archives in Addis Ababa.

The context of Ethiopian indigenous knowledges

Ge'ez is one of the ancient languages of Africa. According to Professor Ephraim Isaac “[a]bout 10,000 years ago, one single nation or community of a single linguistic group existed in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Horn of Africa” (*The Habesha*). The language of this group is known as Proto-Afroasiatic or Afrasian languages. It is the ancestor of the Semitic, Cushitic, Nilotic, Omotic and other languages that are currently spoken in Ethiopia by its 80 ethnic groups, and the neighbouring countries (Diakonoff). Ethiopians developed the Ge'ez language as their *lingua franca* with its own writing system some 2000 years ago. Currently, Ge'ez is the language of academic scholarship, studied through the traditional education system (Isaac, *The Ethiopian*). Since the 4th Century, an estimated 1 million Ge'ez manuscripts have been written covering religious, historical, mathematical, medicinal, and philosophical texts.

One of the most famous Ge'ez manuscripts is the Kebra Nagast, a foundational text that embodied the indigenous conception of nationhood in Ethiopia. The philosophical, political and religious themes in this book, which craft Ethiopia as God's country and the home of the Ark of the Covenant, contributed to the country's success in defending itself from European colonialism. The production of books like the Kebra Nagast went hand in hand with a robust indigenous education system that trained poets, scribes, judges, artists, administrators and priests. Achieving the highest stages of learning requires about 30 years after which the scholar would be given the rare title *Arat-Ayina* which means "four eyed", a person with the ability to see the past as well as the future. Today, there are around 50,000 Ge'ez schools across the country, most of which are in rural villages and churches.

Ge'ez manuscripts are important textbooks and reference materials for students. They are carefully prepared from vellum "to make them last forever" (Interview, 3/10/2019). Some of the religious books are regarded as "holy persons who breathe wisdom that gives light and food to the human soul". Other manuscripts, often prepared as scrolls are used for medicinal purposes. Each manuscript is uniquely prepared reflecting inherited wisdom on contemporary lives using the method called *Tirguamme*, the act of giving meaning to sacred texts.

Preparation of books is costly. Smaller manuscript require the skins of 50-70 goats/sheep and large manuscript needed 100-120 goats/sheep (Tefera).

The loss of Ethiopian manuscripts

Since the 18th Century, a large quantity of these manuscripts have been stolen, looted or smuggled out of the country by travellers who came to the country as explorers, diplomats

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and scientists. The total number of Ethiopian manuscripts taken is still unknown. Amsalu Tefera counted 6928 Ethiopian manuscripts currently held in foreign libraries and museums. This figure does not include privately held or unofficial collections (41).

Looting and smuggling were sponsored by western governments, institutions, and notable individuals. For example, in 1868, The British Museum Acting Director Richard Holms joined the British army which was sent to ‘rescue’ British hostages at Maqdala, the capital of Emperor Tewodros. Holms’ mission was to bring treasures for the Museum. Before the battle, Tewodros had established the Medhanialem library with more than 1000 manuscripts as part of Ethiopia’s “industrial revolution”. When Tewodros lost the war and committed suicide, British soldiers looted the capital, including the treasury and the library. They needed 200 mules and 15 elephants to transport the loot and “set fire to all buildings so that no trace was left of the edifices which once housed the manuscripts” (Rita Pankhurst 224). Richard Holmes collected 356 manuscripts for the Museum. A wealthy British woman called Lady Meux acquired some of the most illuminated manuscripts. In her will, she bequeathed them to be returned to Ethiopia. However, her will was reversed by court due to a campaign from the British press (Richard Pankhurst). In 2018, the V&A Museum in London displayed some of the treasures by incorporating Maqdala into the imperial narrative of Britain (Woldeyes, *Reflections*).

Britain is by no means the only country to seek Ethiopian manuscripts for their collections. Smuggling occurred in the name of science, an act of collecting manuscripts for study. Looting involved local collaborators and powerful foreign sponsors from places like France, Germany and the Vatican. Like Maqdala, this was often sponsored by governments or powerful financiers. For example, the French government sponsored the Dakar-Djibouti

Mission led by Marcel Griaule, which “brought back about 350 manuscripts and scrolls from Gondar” (Wion 2). It was often claimed that these manuscripts were purchased, rather than looted. Johannes Flemming of Germany was said to have purchased 70 manuscripts and ten scrolls for the Royal Library of Berlin in 1905. However, there was no local market for buying manuscripts. Ge’ez manuscripts were, and still are, written to serve spiritual and secular life in Ethiopia, not for buying and selling. There are countless other examples, but space limits how many can be provided in this paper. What is important to note is that museums and libraries have accrued impressive collections without emphasising how those collections were first obtained. The loss of the intellectual heritage of Ethiopians to western collectors has had an enormous impact on the country.

Knowledge Grabbing: The Denial of Access to Knowledge

With so many manuscripts lost, European collectors became the narrators of Ethiopian knowledge and history. Edward Ullendorff, a known orientalist in Ethiopian studies, refers to James Bruce as “the explorer of Abyssinia” (114). Ullendorff commented on the significance of Bruce’s travel to Ethiopia as:

Perhaps the most important aspect of Bruce’s travels was the collection of Ethiopic manuscripts... They opened up entirely new vistas for the study of Ethiopian languages and placed this branch of Oriental scholarship on a much more secure basis. It is not known how many MSS. reached Europe through his endeavours, but the present writer is aware of at least twenty-seven, all of which are exquisite examples of Ethiopian manuscript art (133).

This quote encompasses three major ways in which epistemic violence occurs: denial of access to knowledge, Eurocentric interpretation of Ethiopian manuscripts, and the handling of Ge’ez manuscripts as artefacts from the past. These will be discussed below.

Western ‘travellers’, such as Bruce, did not fully disclose how many manuscripts they took or how they acquired them. The abundance of Ethiopian manuscripts in western institutions can be compared to the scarcity of such materials among traditional schools in Ethiopia. In this research, I have visited ten indigenous schools in Wollo (Lalibela, Neakutoleab, Asheten, Wadla), in Gondar (Bahita, Kuskwam, Menbere Mengist), and Gojam (Bahirdar, Selam Argiew Maryam, Giorgis). In all of the schools, there is lack of Ge’ez manuscripts. Students often come from rural villages and do not receive any government support. The scarcity of Ge’ez manuscripts, and the lack of funding which might allow for the purchasing of books, means the students depend mainly on memorising Ge’ez texts told to them from the mouth of their teacher. Although this method of learning is not new, it currently is the only way for passing indigenous knowledges across generations.

The absence of manuscripts is most strongly felt in the advanced schools. For instance, in the school of *Qene*, poetic literature is created through an in-depth study of the vocabulary and grammar of Ge’ez. A *Qene* student is required to develop a deep knowledge of Ge’ez in order to understand ancient and medieval Ge’ez texts which are used to produce poetry with multiple meanings. Without Ge’ez manuscripts, students cannot draw their creative works from the broad intellectual tradition of their ancestors. When asked how students gain access to textbooks, one student commented:

We don’t have access to *Birana* books (Ge’ez manuscripts written on vellum). We cannot learn the ancient wisdom of painting, writing, and computing developed by our ancestors. We simply buy paper books such as *Dawit* (Psalms), *Sewasew* (grammar) or *Degwa* (book of songs with notations) and depend on our teachers to teach us the rest. We also lend these books to each other as many students cannot

afford to buy them. Without textbooks, we expect to spend double the amount of time it would take if we had textbooks (Interview 3/09/2019).

Many students interrupt their studies and work as labourers to save up and buy paper textbooks, but they still don't have access to the finest works taken to Europe. Most Ge'ez manuscripts remaining in Ethiopia are locked away in monasteries, church stores or other places to prevent further looting. The manuscripts in Addis Ababa University and the National Archives are available for researchers but not to the students of the indigenous system, creating a condition of internal knowledge grabbing.

While the absence of Ge'ez manuscripts denied, and continues to deny, Ethiopians the chance to enrich their indigenous education, it benefited western orientalist to garner intellectual authority on the field of Ethiopian studies. In 1981, British Museum Director John Wilson said, "our Abyssinian holdings are more important than our Indian collection" (Bell 231). In reaction, Richard Pankhurst, the Director of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, responded that the collection was acquired through plunder. Defending the retaining of Maqdala manuscripts in Europe, Ullendorff wrote:

Neither Dr. Pankhurst nor the Ethiopian and western scholars who have worked on this collection (and indeed on others in Europe) could have contributed so significantly to the elucidation of Ethiopian history without the rich resources available in this country. Had they remained *insitu*, none of this would have been possible (qtd. in Bell 234)

The manuscripts are therefore valued based on their contribution to western scholarship *only*. This is a continuation of epistemic violence whereby local knowledges are used as raw

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materials to produce Eurocentric knowledge, which in turn is used to teach Africans as though they had no prior knowledge. Scholars are defined as those western educated persons who can speak European languages and can travel to modern institutions to access the manuscripts. Knowledge grabbing regards previous owners as inexistent or irrelevant for the use of the grabbed knowledges.

Knowledge grabbing also means indigenous scholars are deprived of critical resources to produce new knowledge based on their intellectual heritage. A Qene teacher commented,

Our students could not devote their time and energy to produce new knowledges in the same way our ancestors did. We have the tradition of *Madeladel*, *Kimera*, *Kuteta*, *Mielad*, *Qene* and *tirguamme* where students develop their own system of remembering, reinterpreting, practicing, and rewriting previous manuscripts and current ones. Without access to older manuscripts, we increasingly depend on preserving what is being taught orally by elders (Interview 4/9/2019).

This point is important as it relates to the common myth that indigenous knowledges are artefacts belonging to the past, not the present. There are millions of people who still use these knowledges, but the conditions necessary for their reproduction and improvement is denied through knowledge grabbing. The view of Ge'ez manuscripts as artefacts dismisses the Ethiopian view that *Birana* manuscripts are living persons. As a scholar told me in Gondar, "They are creations of Egziabher (God), like all of us. Keeping them in institutions is like keeping living bodies in graveyards" (Interview 5/10/2019).

Recently, the collection of Ethiopian manuscripts by western institutions has also been conducted digitally. Thousands of manuscripts have been microfilmed or digitised. For

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example, the EU funded Ethio-SPaRe project resulted in the digital collection of 2000 Ethiopian manuscripts (Nosnitsin). While digitisation promises better access for people who may not be able to visit institutions to see physical copies, online manuscripts are not accessible to indigenous school students in Ethiopia. They simply do not have computer or internet access and the manuscripts are catalogued in European languages. Both physical and digital knowledge grabbing results in the robbing of Ethiopian intellectual heritage, and denies the possibility of such manuscripts being used to inform local scholarship.

Epistemic violence: The European as Expert

When considered in relation to stolen or appropriated manuscripts, epistemic violence is the way in which local knowledge is interpreted using a foreign epistemology and gained dominance over indigenous worldviews. European scholars have monopolised the field of Ethiopian Studies by producing books, encyclopaedias and digital archives based on Ethiopian manuscripts, almost exclusively in European languages. The contributions of their work for western scholarship is undeniable. However, Kebede argues that one of the detrimental effects of this orientalist literature is the thesis of Semiticisation, the designation of the origin of Ethiopian civilisation to the arrival of Middle Eastern colonisers rather than indigenous sources.

The thesis is invented to make the history of Ethiopia consistent with the Hegelian western view that Africa is a Dark Continent devoid of a civilisation of its own. “In light of the dominant belief that black peoples are incapable of great achievements, the existence of an early and highly advanced civilization constitutes a serious anomaly in the Eurocentric construction of the world” (Kebede 4). To address this anomaly, orientalists like Ludolph attributed the origin of Ethiopia’s writing system, agriculture, literature, and civilisation to

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the arrival of South Arabian settlers. For example, in his translation of the Kebra Nagast, Budge wrote “The SEMITES found them [indigenous Ethiopians] negro savages, and taught them civilization and culture and the whole scriptures on which their whole literature is based” (x).

In line with the above thesis, Dillman wrote that “The Abyssinians borrowed their Numerical Signs from the Greeks” (33). The views of these orientalist scholars have been challenged. For instance, leading scholar of Semitic languages Professor Ephraim Isaac considers the thesis of the Arabian origin of Ethiopian civilization “a Hegelian Eurocentric philosophical perspective of history” (2). Isaac shows that there is historical, archaeological, and linguistic evidence that suggest Ethiopia to be more advanced than South Arabia from pre-historic times. Various Ethiopian sources including The Kebra Nagast, the works of historian Asres Yenesew and Ethiopian linguist Girma Demeke provide evidence for the indigenous origin of Ethiopian civilisation and languages.

The epistemic violence of the Semeticisation thesis lies in how this Eurocentric ideological construction is the dominant narrative in the field of Ethiopian history and the education system. Unlike the indigenous view, the orientalist view is backed by strong institutional power both in Ethiopia and abroad. The orientalists control the field of Ethiopian studies and have access to Ge’ez manuscripts. Their publications are the only references for Ethiopian students. Due to *Native Colonialism*, a system of power run by native elites through the use of colonial ideas and practices (Woldeyes), the education system is the imitation of western curricula, including English as a medium of instruction from high school onwards. Students study the west more than Ethiopia. Indigenous sources are generally excluded as unscientific.

Only the Eurocentric interpretation of Ethiopian manuscripts is regarded as scientific and objective.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is the only African country never to be colonised. In its history it produced a large quantity of manuscripts in the Ge'ez language through an indigenous education system that involves the study of these manuscripts. Since the 19th Century, there has been an ongoing loss of these manuscripts. European travellers who came to Ethiopia as discoverers, missionaries and scholars took a large number of manuscripts. The Battle of Maqdala involved the looting of the intellectual products of Ethiopia that were collected at the capital. With the introduction of western education and use of English as a medium of instruction, the state disregarded indigenous schools whose students have little access to the manuscripts. This article brings the issue of knowledge grabbing, a situation whereby European institutions and scholars accumulate Ethiopia manuscripts without providing the students in Ethiopia to have access to those collections.

Items such as manuscripts that are held in western institutions are not dead artefacts of the past to be preserved for prosperity. They are living sources of knowledge that should be put to use in their intended contexts. Local Ethiopian scholars cannot study ancient and medieval Ethiopia without travelling and gaining access to western institutions. This lack of access and resources has made European Ethiopianists almost the sole producers of knowledge about Ethiopian history and culture. For example, indigenous sources and critical research that challenge the Semeticisation thesis are rarely available to Ethiopian students. Here we see epistemic violence in action. Western control over knowledge production has the detrimental effect of inventing new identities, subjectivities and histories that translate into material

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effects in the lives of African people. In this way, Ethiopians and people all over Africa internalise western understandings of themselves and their history as primitive and in need of development or outside intervention. African's intellectual and cultural heritage, these living bodies locked away in graveyards, must be put back into the hands of Africans.

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