IslHornAfr
and its Database of Islamic Literary Production
from the Horn of Africa*

Alessandro Gori, University of Copenhagen

The project IslHornAfr deals with the Islamic manuscript and literary heritage from the Horn of Africa, primarily Ethiopia, but also Eritrea, Somalia/Somaliland, and Djibouti. It has been developing a relational database to incorporate all existing and new data on the works circulating in the area, whether local or imported/translated, the authors of these works, whether local or foreign, and the carrier media, whether manuscripts or printed books.

Literary heritage of sub-Saharan African Islamic societies as well as the local manuscript production has only relatively recently started attracting scholarly attention, the lion's share of which went to the western African areas. East Africa, in particularly the Horn, with Ethiopia at its core, has been more often than not perceived as the ancient Christian domain (as several projects discussed in this issue show), the Islamic studies having been considerably marginalized. Little systematic knowledge is available on the literature read and produced by the Muslims in the area. Against this backdrop, the project *IslHornAfr*: *Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach* was conceived as a contribution to both African and Islamic studies, with the aim of producing a critical and comprehensive picture of the Islamic literary history of the Horn of Africa.[1]

The project explores the Islamic cultural history in the Horn of Africa as it is reflected in the literary traditions of the region (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia/Somaliland). It considers primarily the manuscript tradition but also printed texts. Combining known sources and the new discoveries made during a series of field missions, the project has already considerably expanded our knowledge of the texts composed, translated, or copied by the Muslims in the Horn of Africa.

In the nearly five years of the project run, the team has been able to survey well over 2,000 manuscripts and books contained in 23 collections. Descriptions of varying degree of detail have been produced for all of them, which also meant filling in the relevant related tables in the project database, programmed by Orhan Toy.[2]

1 <http://www.islhornafr.eu>. See also Gori 2015.
2 See the current version at <http://islhornafr.tors.sc.ku.dk/backend>.

The database foresees distinct tables for (1) manuscripts and books themselves, each identified by a unique identifier provided by the project, which contains a reference to its current collection; (2) respective collections; for (3) persons (authors, copyists, sponsors, custodians, owners, etc.), (4) relevant places (locations of collections, places of manuscript production or ownership transferral, learning centres, places of activity of registered persons), and (5) texts transmitted in the manuscripts and books. Besides, controlled authority files establish taxonomy of genres, languages, and scripts. A separate database section is dedicated to the bibliography, subdivided in books, articles, book sections, and dissertations.

All texts (main texts and additional texts in the manuscripts, documents, books, whether in Arabic or in local languages) can be therefore classified with the help of the project database according to their genres, contents, titles, authors, places of creation, number of witnesses, distribution of witnesses, and linguistic and graphic peculiarities. So far, records for well over 4,000 texts have been created, many of those of local production and therefore previously unknown.[3]

In combination with the data collected on persons and places, the research into the literary production has already produced a new understanding of the various routes and mechanisms behind the spread of the Islamic culture in Ethiopia and surrounding countries. A special attention has been given to the application of Arabic script to local languages when writing down theological treatises, poetry, or documentary texts.[4]

The challenges encountered by the project are manyfold. Some are due to the particular geographical setting: the instability of the political situation in the Horn has strongly influenced the choices when defining the field mission research areas. Some important sites could not be reached so far during episodes of turmoil, or due to the lack of cooperation from the local authorities and/or library custodians. Some are due to the complexity of the research material: when dealing with manuscripts from Ethiopia, we have to deal with texts written, alongside Arabic, in a variety of local languages, both Semitic (such as Amharic) and Cushitic (Afar, Oromo, Somali). These language competences are rarely combined in one person. Besides, the texts in local languages are usually transcribed using the Arabic script (ʿaǧamī), applied in an unstandardized improvized manner by each author and/or copyist, making it often impossible to reconstruct the actual transcription and consequently understand the meaning. Identifying texts implies therefore a considerable effort.

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3 Cp. e.g. Petrone 2015, 2018.
4 Cp. e.g. Fani 2017; Hernández 2017.

Finally, there are the formalization challenges similar to those encountered by the projects working in other domains, such as the definition of a work. In the project's logic, the minimal level segmentation was accepted, and every textual unit distinct from the point of view of content was treated as a separate entity, irrespective of the form of presentation, i. e. whether it is a main text in a manuscript, or an addition, even a marginal note, as each of them can have been authored separately and can potentially be transmitted in a different constellation. Disambiguation of works, often sharing similar titles, is an ongoing work. Since we are lucky to be able to consult most of the manuscripts (or their images), in most cases we manage to identify each work with some precision.

Devotional litanies and hymns are particularly challenging in this respect, as they can circulate as components of a more or less established and structured textual constellation but also as independent textual units. This is the case for example of the *Mawlid* collection in Harar, or of *šayḫ* Hāšim's *Fatḥ al-Raḥmānī*:[5] the new material discovered by the project will allow a better understanding of the formation and the circulation of these two puzzling collections of texts.

Another challenge is the definition, and description of, a place. The easiest to encode have been the places the team could visit during the field missions. In these cases, precise coordinates could be recorded with the help of a GPS device, all names used to refer to the place could be registered in situ, and the geographical setting described with precision. When in addition to that we have historical sources referring to the place, an extensive database record can be produced. (Needless to say, manuscripts and persons related to the place are visualized automatically with each record.) Quite different are places that may be mentioned in manuscripts but we can only very approximately pinpoint on the map. In this case, we try to provide some very general indications (e.g. the district, or region, or a nearby town) to help the users orient themselves. For the moment, the database contains 325 place records (many of which lie naturally beyond the research area, as some of the manuscripts now in the Horn of Africa may have been produced e.g. in Yemen, or relevant persons may have been active in other areas of Arabia or North Africa).

Naturally, homonymy and the resulting disambiguation problem exists also for places and persons. Just as with texts, in case of doubt, separate records are created that can be merged later.

The *IslHornAfr* project aims at a longest possible sustainability. Thus, thanks to the cooperation with the project *Beta maṣāḥǝft* (see the project note

5   Gori 2016a, 2016b. Cp. also the paper by Sara Fani in this issue.

in this issue) and its openness to active interoperability, the project data shall be incorporated with the *Beta maṣāḥǝft* portal. A first attempt has already been successful, and much of the *IslHornAfr* material can be also accessed from <http://betamasaheft.eu/>.[6]

References

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6 This was possible thanks to the flexibility of the *Beta maṣāḥǝft* schema and did require considerable adjustment to the project data. Besides, the bibliography had to be imported into Zotero database maintained by the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies; some further corrections may still be needed.