



# In the search of that specific kind of manuscript

trip no. 3

by Jama Musse Jama

Scholars who in the past documented written culture in the coastal area of Somaliland and the wider Somali peninsula, including Harar and Ethiopia highlands, spoke about the existence of Ajami writings in Somali language at least since the 2nd half of the 19th century . I looked at the small but important corpus of manuscripts preserved at the Hargeysa Cultural Centre , as well as some key single manuscripts



Established ca. 120 years ago by an Agropastoral community, predominantly Muslim background, Welkite is in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples State of Ethiopia, and in particular the Gurage Zone. It is in the fertile region of the Western Highlands of Ethiopia. Today Welkite counts about 30,000 inhabitants .



owned by private collectors or families, or in isolated shrines in Somaliland and in Harar . Also, for the last three years, I was traveling through the eastern and the southern regions of Ethiopia, to traceback some of these writings. I spent time in different institutions in Addis Ababa, where old Islamic and non-Islamic Ethiopian manuscripts are preserved, visited Negash in Tigrinya , Jigjiga in Somali State Region, Harar in Harari region , and now Welkite in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples State. I am grateful to Yikunnoamlak Mezgebu, the director-general of the National Archives and Library Agency of Ethiopia as well as a scholar and lecturer at Addis Ababa University with a focus on Ethiopian Literature in Geez, Amharic, and Tigrinya, who arranged this visit, and my colleague Tirsit Yetbarek of the Hargeysa Cultural Centre for putting together such a great and insightful trip to Ethiopia.

The bigger Gurage zone community is composed of seven ethnicities Sebatbet Gurage which correspond also to seven different linguistic backgrounds, and they are the Kebena, Silte, Wallane, Aneba, Marako, Ambaro, and of course Gurage which also englobes others as major linguistic ethnicity. In Welkite however, the linguistic predominance is Kebena, and the symbols and the oral history elements of the five Islamic Kingdoms of the Gibe region (Gera, Gomma, Gumma, Jimma, and Limmu-Ennarea) are still notable through the privately owned manuscripts, in the widespread small mosques in the remote areas, and centres of religious and educational settlements.

The Zawiya (or the Hadra-s) are religious and educational centres formed in a complex of buildings

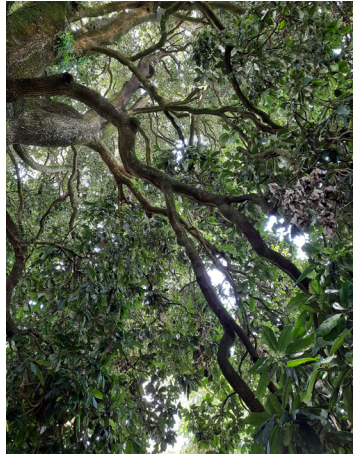
mainly a mosque, library or reading room, prayers room and some other buildings reserved for educational classes. They refer to a shrine or to a local renowned Sheikh, who could be the founder. Usually, they include separate buildings designated to host madrassa or to host travellers and members of the local Sufi brotherhood. Zabbi Molla Zawiya is the congregational place in Welkite that we have visited August 2021 .



The Zabbi Molla Zawiya Centre was established by Sheikh Kamāl al-Dīn al-Hāḡḡ Surūr (1856-1914) with Sheikh Muḥammad al-Raššād al-Qāqī. Kamāl al-Dīn al-Hāḡḡ Surūr was the founder of the Raššādiyya ṣūfī order in the area , and he passed the Centre's management to his son Sheikh Badr al-Dīn b. al-Hāḡḡ Surūr b. Bašīr (?) (1910[1917?]-1972[1981?]) , who continued the tradition until his death in 1972[1981?], and now the centre is led by the grandson Hagi Mohamed-Ammin b. Sheikh Badr Al-Dīn (1950?- ) who fathered 17 children, 9 of them working at the congregation while others moved to Addis Ababa or to outside of Ethiopia Hagi Mohamed-Ammin told me that he counts 32 ancestors to Ismail al-Jabarti in his genealogy clan tree,

and when I asked if he knows where the tomb of Ismail al-Jabarti is, he said "probably they took the body back to Yemen".

The Hadra is very welcoming and calm environment with old trees, according to the management of the congregation, dating back some 150 years ago. One of these trees locally called Leega tree is considered sacred and, according to Hagi Mohamed-Ammin, it was impossible to geminate elsewhere even from the local forestry department, and below in the photos, the tree with the green plate on its trunk, geminated by itself here at the Hadra. Other tree under which his father and grandfather used for teaching is still there, and the space is well cured and maintained.



The mosque has a space enough for 100-150 people to pray inside, and some books for reading, mostly Quran, are located in the small windows inside of the mosque. An interesting manuscript, which is usually read only during Ramadan nights, is found among the printed books in the mosque.

There is a small room for the Imam of the mosque who acts also as teacher for the madrasa, whose name is **Miṣbāḥ al-Dīn b. Ṣayḥ Ġamāl al-Dīn b. Ḥāġġ Surūr**. There were around 10 young students (between 11-16 years old), all of them male, learning in that morning



There is a nice residential area, with traditional hut, where Hagi Mohamed-Ammin's younger wife lives. She is, as Hagi Mohamed-Ammin says, a strong woman who coordinates the entire work at the Centre and manages people who works there.

Hagi Mohamed-Ammin says that his father has been trained by a well-known Sufi Mufti from Raya who taught the right interpretations of Hadiths. His father later became an author by publishing books on prohibited habits such as chewing Qat and learning Tawhid, and this book is published in Egypt and now used in schools at Wallo region. One of the texts written by the father is "Muḥammad Surūr al-Ma'rūf bi'l-Ubbiyy b. al-Ṣayḥ Muḥammad Baṣīr al-Zabiyy al-Qabīnī al-Ṣāfi'ī al-Qādirī al-Raṣādī". To follow the tradition, Hagi Mohamed-Ammin says, he sent one his sons to study al-Azhar, Egypt, to learn the correct interpretation of Islamic literature and teachings.





The Centre has a well-equipped library. They got support recently from the National Library whose staff spent some time to train the staff of the centre on how to catalogue. The library has been built by the founder of the Centre.

In the well catalogued library, there are some couple of hundred of manuscripts, 30 of them already digitized, and the oldest manuscript they own is, according to Hagi Mohamed-Ammin 175 years. He considers these manuscripts important for "the identity of his own people be preserved and these texts contain the reliable information about the origin of the people as well as the fate of correct Islam they obtained from their ancestors". Now that many descendants of Ismail al-Jabarti are dislocated in different wide geographical areas and spread in the Horn of Africa with different political orientations and

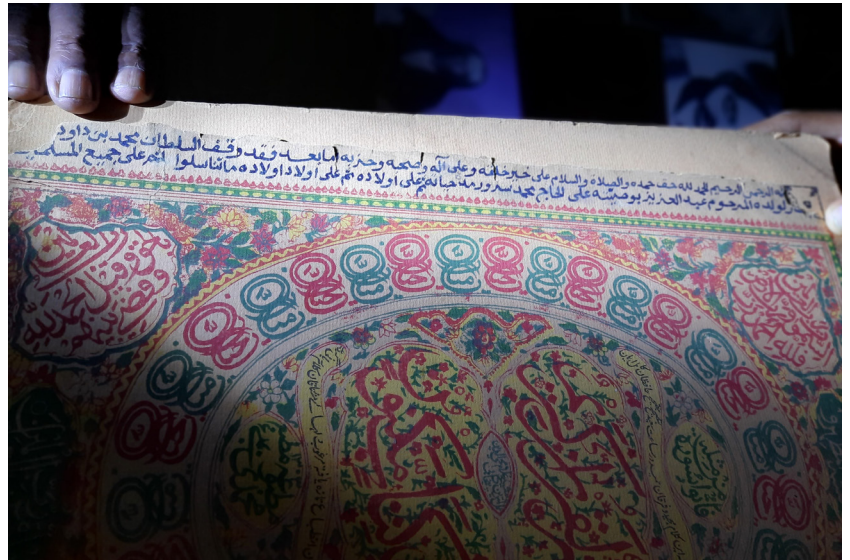
nations, Hagi-Mohamed says, we do not allow these politics interfere with history to rewrite the identity of our people. The second reason why these scripts are important, he says, that "the Wahabism ideology is putting in danger the Sufi tradition" which used to be our heritage. We want to teach these scripts to young people so they can learn from them the Islamic tradition that existed for centuries here, and to counterbalance the aggressive propaganda and the indoctrination of Wahabi by others using money and resources that we do not own.



The centre has also a separated gallery where special manuscripts and other Islamic tradition culture material are preserved. Interesting family photos and recent photos of other dignitaries who visited the Centre hung on the walls. Among the heritage material include Loah (the traditional piece of wood for writing Quran at the mad-rassa, traditional ink and pen for Quran teaching, as well as cloth-made special bag for Quran).



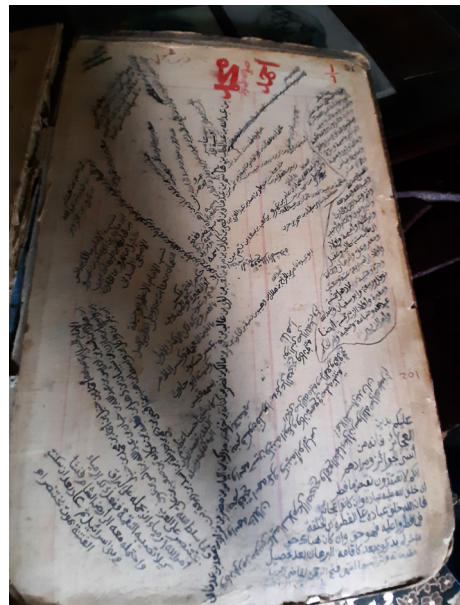
The gallery also hosts unique collection of manuscripts, protected in boxes, considered important historically by the management. One of these manuscripts is a donation to the founder of the congregation by Sultan Mohamed Bin Da'ud. The following lines are written on the colophon: In the name of Allah, the Munificent, the Merciful. And Peace be upon the noblest of all His Creatures, his family, companions, and followers. The Sultan Mohamed ibn Daud offers this as endowment for his late son Abdulaziz. This will covers and is for the benefit of the Haji Mohamed Surur as long as he remains alive and then his children and their children as long as they procreate and the after that it covers all Muslims.



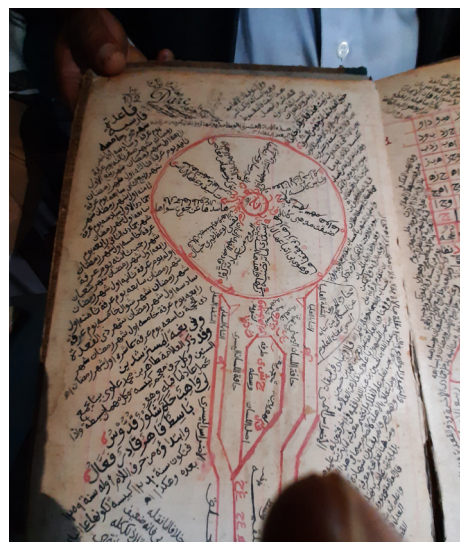
The old houses where the founder of the congregation used to meditate and isolate himself is still intact. There is a small window, where the students of the Sheikh collected the questions from the public and asked the Sheikh to answer back to the public. The entrance is quite difficult, and this door was not open to everyone, except the assistant of the Sheikh.

Many other families or small congregations now value the preservation of manuscripts in the region. For instance, the family "XXXX" had their house closed for almost forty years, because the father (a local Sheikh) passed away and the male children grew up and left the region to Addis Ababa. When they recently reopened, they found an interesting collection of manuscripts, but also clothes and other cultural material used in the past, and now they display the collection with a good income-generation scheme. Other families own small collection of Islamic manuscript, and they are proud of them, not only from the spiritual meaning but also now the heritage value these objects have.





We found many interesting manuscripts. Around 30 of them already digitized and accessible via computers at the library. Many others are still to be catalogued and digitized. Among these manuscripts on teaching religion but also some interesting treaties on justice, astrology, traditional medicine, calendars and other indigenous sciences.



There has been Kebene and other local languages Ajami, but unfortunately, we could not find a Somali Ajami as we expected.

The trip was an eye-opening to discover how many people dedicating themselves to preserve the local culture, their identities, and to promote among the younger generations these vital sources of knowledge and history. It was also a discovery of humanity. We were welcomed and treated well with food and amazing hospitality.



We were offered a delicious traditional dish, kind of a porridge called Buula made of the root of a false banana tree locally called Enset. It is served as a breakfast specially for new brides and special guests.



**Jama Musse Jama (PhD)** is the Director of the Hargeysa cultural center and also a senior researcher at the University College of Landen at the Planning Unit. He is also a fellow of the Rift Valley Institute. He comes from an Ethno-mathematics background but specializes in many areas including research on Islam in the Horn of Africa and Islamic manuscripts. He is the founder and organizer of the Hargeysa International Book fair the biggest Art and cultural festival in the Horn of Africa. He can be reached

at [jama@redsea-online.org](mailto:jama@redsea-online.org)  
or @JamaMusse

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See Moreno (1955), Cerulli (1864), Banti (2018) and Maxamed Cabdi Makaahiil (1354h=1935/65)

See Jama Musse Jama (2021), "Conservation of historical religious manuscripts in Somaliland".

Some the manuscripts have been also digitalized under the 'Islam in the Horn of Africa' project in 2015, led by A Gori. See Petrone (2016), Mission to Somaliland - First exploration of a larger corpus (Mission report of the Islam in the Horn of Africa project. This mission in Somaliland allowed to digitize important witnesses of Islamic culture of Somaliland, specifically of Berbera)

See Jama Musse, J. and Abdullahi, A., 2021, A close reading of an old manuscript found in Sufi Hassan shrine in Harar. *Dhaxalreeb Magazine*.

See Jama Musse Jama (2019), translated and commented by Banti: Banti 2019, *The footprints of the Companions A Somali short travelogue by Jama Musse Jama, Ethnorêma, No. 15, Vol XIV, pp. 148-149*

See Jama Musse Jama (2021), *Sadcaalkii xilgudashada, Dhaxalreeb, No. 1, Vol 17, pp. 7-11*

According to 2007 national wide Census, Welkite counted 28,866 population.

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It has been mentioned that the mosque and zāwiya were founded by šayḥ Muḥammad Raššād al-Qāqī (founder of the raššādiyya šūfī order) with Kamāl-Dīn al-Ubbī, and later became a tradition of the family of the first (šayḥ Muḥammad Raššād al-Qāqī).