PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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SOME ARABIC ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPTS
FROM SHAYKH HUAYN (BALE, ETHIOPIA)
(A SHORT DESCRIPTION BASED ON THE MÆ RAS PHOTOGRAPHS)

In 1913 the St. Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology sent a scientific expedition to South-Eastern Ethiopia. Head of the expedition was famous Russian poet Nikolai Gumilev. In 2008 the Museum sent another expedition that followed Gumilev's itinerary.

Shaykh Husayn, where it in 1913 and 2008 photographs of Arabic manuscripts were taken, was one of the key points of both expeditions. Arabic texts found in 1913 photos were partly deciphered in the course of the Museum research and exhibition project.

In June 2008 when I was studying the manuscripts stored in St. Petersburg collections I met Prof. Elman Rezan, Deputy Director of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography who, because of the absence of the necessary publications in St. Petersburg libraries, asked me to make an examination of the texts presented at the photos taken both in 1913 and 2008. What follows is a very brief description of the results of the work.

Analysis has shown that the manuscript photographed by Gumilev in 1913 contains the famous hagiography of shekhi Husayn (or Nür Husayn) [1] the most revered saint of Ethiopian Muslims, buried in his venerated shrine at Aratuk, in the Southern Ethiopian region of Bale, where twice a year (in Dhi al-khiyād, during the bi‘l period, and on the 15 of Jamādā I) a huge mass pilgrimage takes place.

The text of the hagiography was published for the first time in Cairo, at "Māṭba’ al-ša‘āri‘" in Rashīd 1345 (25 December 1926—24 January 1927). The expenses of the printing procedure were met by the "Māṭba’ al-Husaynyya", owned by Ahmad and Muhammad al-Husayni in Egypt and Ethiopia (al-Ḥabša) with an office in Addis Ababa [2].

In 1366/1948–49 it was republished, with minor changes, in Egypt at the "Dīr Bīlāh al-كنh al-‘anbiyya", property of the famous Egyptian printer İṣā al-Bīlāh al-‘alāmi, at the expenses of the much renowned Muslim Hariri learned man İṣā al-Bīlāh Yirzāf” İbrahīm al-Raḥmān [3]. Afterwards, it was several times reprinted in other local Ethiopian printing presses. In the following lines, all the page references will be to the first Egyptian edition.

All the printed editions present the hagiographical material divided into three different works: the Kūth ṭub‘al al-qulūb fī dhikr muṣannaf wa-faṣl‘i‘l sayyīdina al-shāhyd Nūr Husayn ("Book of the Spring of Hearts in Reminiscence of Merits and Virtues of our Lord shaykh Nūr Husayn") (pp. 1—43); the Kūth nashīr al-asrār wa-tāhārūt al-qabār fī muṣannaf wa-faṣl‘i‘l sayyīdina al-shāhyd Nūr Husayn ("Book of Delight of Hidden for Cleansing of Vices in his Merits and Virtues") (pp. 1—62) and, finally, the genealogy of the holy man (pp. 64—71), Nustābīt al-shāhyd.

In the manuscript which was photographed by Gumilev and his trip companion Sverchkov, we find the Kūth ṭub‘al al-qulūb fī dhikr faṣl‘i‘l Husayn b. Māṭa‘ (title page in photo 2198–25 [fig. 1] [4]; incipit—p. 7 (fig. 2), photo 2198–30; explicit—photo 2198–88) [fig. 3] [5]. As for the Kūth nashīr al-asrār, the photos contain its incipit (photo 2198–88 on the left side) [fig. 4] and the text until the first line of p. 14 (photo 2198–90). Then a wide lacuna is there and the text starts over again at p. 59 up to the end (p. 96; photo 2198–89). The manuscript has an incomplete colophon; no date of completion of the writing is mentioned but the copyist is remembered: he is an otherwise unknown ‘Abd al-Salām b. Husayn b. Ḥalīl b. Ḥalīl. Considering our scarce knowledge of the palaeography of Islamic Arabic manuscripts of the Horn of Africa, it is honestly impossible to date it by analyzing the kalīrī, which resembles the naskḥ dactylic current in South Ethiopia and Somalia.

This manuscript has a great importance for the text of the hagiography of shekhi Husayn whose critical edition is still missing.

The manuscript of Gumilev goes indeed to join the other unpublished manuscript of the work presently kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris [6]. Surprisingly enough, no manuscript of the hagiography of the shekhi

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not even the one photographed by Gumiljov, was found at the shrine during the recent Russian expedition.

The manuscript of Gumiljov presents a very important textual element: the series of prayers, eulogies and encomiastic expressions which in the printed text form the epigraph of Kitab al-adil wa-adl al-adil (pp. 2-4) are on the contrary placed before the Kitab Nuzhat al-asrār (photos 2198-88 and 2199-90). The text of the Paris manuscript, which contains with slight variations an untitled text identical to the Kitab nuzhat al-asrār, share this same characteristic.

For the time being, waiting for more manuscripts to be collected, in a somewhat impressionistic approach, one may situate Gumiljov's manuscript somewhere at mid way in the process of development of the structure of the text which culminated in the printed edition: partially divergent from the Paris manuscript but still closer to it than the printed text. It is possible that the manuscript of Gumiljov was used as a Vorlage of the printed edition: as noted, in this last the incipit presents a remarkable difference but the rest of the text is practically the same. This could also account for the lack of the manuscript at the shrine: perhaps it was too to Cairo to be printed and then disappeared.

As already underlined [7], the hagiography of sayyid Husayn is the basic source for the reconstruction of the main features of this holy man. It is presently impossible to ascertain when the hagiography started to take a shape. The BN of Paris manuscript was copied for Antoine d'Abbadie who described it in the catalogue of his collection [8] and it is dated Muharram 1264 (9 December 1847 — 8 January 1848). No older manuscript is known until now.

As in other works of the same kind spread in the Horn of Africa [9], the text of the hagiography is completely devoid of any logical arrangement. It is a conglomerate made up of tales relating the miracles (karāmu'ī) of the saint, anecdotes about his life, his wise admonishments (nawā'id) and instructions to his followers. Each section follows the previous one without any apparent connection. Only the sayings of the holy man are somewhat collected together but without any thematic organization. The origin of the material contained in the text must thus be retrieved in the oral legends and traditions born and spread in the community of the followers of the saint gathered around his shrine [10].

Carefully analyzing some passages in the hagiography of sayyid Husayn, which have a quite confuse historical frame, a very fragile hint may infered to put the life of the Bala saint towards the end of the 13th century. Of course, the very earthy existence of the sayyid is highly questionable but it is undeniable that the shrine of Husayn of Bala was one of the main ancient Islamic centres in South Ethiopia and crucially helped the spread of Islam among the Omots [11].

One other set of photos taken in 2008 (photos image 3056 — image 3105 [12]) contains the first part of the very famous and very widespread in Ethiopia Tanbih al-ā'īn.

Tambih al-ā'īn fi hayān 'aww muqām nabīnīy Muhammad ("Peoples Revival in Eulicitation of High Standing of Muhammad, our Prophet") known also as Shafii al-asālim wa-mashk al-asālim fi al-qalā' it-īli kgwar al-ā'īn ("Remedy for Deceases and Sins Extermination in the prayers for Peoples Prosperity") basically a huge collection of different pious invocations of blessings from God upon the prophet Muhammad (al-walī al-adil) but with a remarkable peculiarity which is a noteworthy development of this traditional literary genre: to the standardized formula of the classical safīna (Allāhumma salī al-sa'īlīg wa-mashk al-ā'īn) which repeated various thousands of times throughout the text, the author adds each and every time an equally wide series of epithets of the prophet, mostly in the grammatical form of rhyming participles or relative clauses. In such a way the author builds up an almost complete description of the personality of prophet, highlighting the miracles he performed, the exceptional qualities of his character, his ascension to heaven (ser' and mā'ā) and the transmission of his light from the time before the creation of the world until his birth. To some extent, one may say that Ibn 'Azmīn in his Tanbih al-ā'īn manages to realize a sort of movilad text in the form of a safīna collection thus mixing two close related literary genres particularly cherished in mystical milieus. The text was published several times in Ethiopia, Egypt, Singapore and is commonly available in different editions on Ethiopian book market [14]. Together with the Dalā'īl al-khayrāt by the Moroccan al-Jazuli (d. 1465) it is the most widespread text of devotion to the prophet in Ethiopia [15].

The manuscript photographed during the recent expedition in Sayyid Husayn contains a Makkasa'ir of Tanbih al-ā'īn. The existence of an abridged version of the work and its circulation in Ethiopia is confirmed by different pieces of evidence [16]. Photos do not show the entire manuscript but only its first part (photos 3056 to 3099: pp. 2 — 216 of the first part of the book) and the final section (photos 3100 — 3102, pp. 343 — 352 of the second part of the book). It is thus impossible to ascertain to what extent the Makkasa'ir is really shorter than the unabridged version.

The manuscript has no colophon. The khārij of the text is quite thick and bold, sometimes bulky, but also very regularly and carefully traced with fully vocalized ductus. The prose incipit (fig. 5) (photos 3056 — 3058; pp. 2 — 8 of the first part of the book) is written in a very thin and tiny but clear hand. The manuscript is rich in rubra and presents some very humble signs of red ornament. The ductus reflects the standard used in the area and offer no sure hint for any dating. The certificate of possession written in red just upon the incipit (photo 3056):

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