Translating Ethiopia

Translating Ethiopia:

Travel Writing, Explorations, Colonization

Edited by

Renato Tomei

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To my beautiful Ethiopian wife, Naomi
and to my two Italo-Ethiopian-Jamaican children.

Then you shall be radiant at what you see,
Your heart shall throb and overflow,
For the riches of the sea shall be emptied before you,
The wealth of Nations be brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you,
Dromedaries from Midian and Ephah,
All from Sheba shall come
Bearing gold and frankincense,
And proclaiming the praises of the Lord.
—*The African Bible* (Isaiah, 60. 13-23)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Access to rich sources and literary written and digital corpora has been provided by the awesome series of travels and translations published by the Hakluyt Society, the Royal Geographical Society, and the British Library.

Furthermore, living in Perugia, I was able to access rare materials from the collections of Orazio Antinori (CAMS, University of Perugia), the Italian botanist and explorer, who is buried near Ankober, where Matteo Baraldo and I visited his tomb in 2010.

PREFACE

Echoing Donald Levine's *Interpreting Ethiopia* (2011), *Translating Ethiopia* is the first title in the WorldCraft 'Travel, Translation, Tourism and Advertising' series, dealing with a thematic perspective on world writing and communication.

Ethiopia has always had mysteries within mysteries, itself a matrix of mystery, from its biblical legends to the tragic events of civil commotion and diaspora. Multilingual and multi-ethnic Ethiopia remains the only African nation not to have been subject to direct colonization. It remains a shrine protected from external cultural hegemony, albeit currently exposed to the ongoing risks in the scramble for tourism, famine, civil warfare, and eco-catastrophe, where the places and sites described here are endangered. *Translating Ethiopia* can claim to offer a translational perspective on the interpretation of space and place. The methodological frame derives from colonial and post-colonial studies on travel writing: in quantity and quality, it draws from a rich corpus of descriptions by Spanish and Portuguese missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, British explorers and botanists, the British and Italian military expeditions, and scientific missions. The selection of descriptions from travel guidebooks and advertising materials connotes the variation in spatial representation and the development of the rhetoric of 'heritage' and sustainability in tourism. The perception of Ethiopianism from the inside is thus updated and reconsidered.

The survey covers more than fifteen years of fieldwork since my initial research in Ethiopia for my graduation thesis and MSc on the problem of water resources (University for Foreigners of Perugia). Successively, in working for my doctoral thesis (Haile Selassie I, University of Addis Ababa in Language and Linguistics), I spent several years within the community of Shashamane in the State of Oromia (see Tomei *Jamaican Speech Forms in Ethiopia*, 2015). Since then, my academic research has covered different regions of Africa (Eastern and Southern Africa), India, and the Anglophone Caribbean, on colonial and Commonwealth travel writing and translation (co-author Tomei, *West of Eden*: *Botanical discourse, contact languages and translation*; *Descriptions Translations and the Caribbean: From fruits to Rastafarians*).

Ethiopia has been for a long time an area that has received only marginal visibility in studies on travel writing, compared to the other areas of the Continent. Recent civil strife and commotion, together with the massive migratory influx across the Mediterranean, and diasporic displacement inadequately covered by the media, have engendered misconceptions and misrepresentation of contexts and communities. Such phenomena can only be understood from a post-colonial perspective where the representation of the identity of people, place and space plays a crucial role. Conversely, even a little item, be it a plant or its lexical referent, can have a role in defining this specific group identity, let alone the beautiful architectural masterpiece as an emblem and enigma of ancient civilization unique to the world. Travel writing on Ethiopia across time can give us a vision of what the country was and how it was seen by the eye of the missionary beholder, explorer, pilgrim, traveller or tourist, through narration and imagery. The book series also stems from my teaching experience in university courses in international relations, Master's courses in tourism, and the need to equip students and researchers with critical frames of reference.

Renato Tomei

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSLATING ETHIOPIA: LANGUAGE, MYTH AND DISTORTIONS

RENATO TOMEI

Abstract

This section deals with travel writing in Ethiopia and crucial translational issues. It analyses shifts of descriptive focus in narrative structures, and dynamics of authenticity versus invention, due to language misinterpretations, cultural misconceptions and translation.

The study sheds light on the first encounters with pre-colonial Ethiopia, and colonial conflicts in the 'scramble for Africa' (Pakenham, Youngs, Marsden). Mediation, translation and intertextuality range across the multilingual context of Abyssinia/Ethiopia, functioning as screens and filters in a country which has always been a matrix of marvels to Western minds. Notwithstanding advances in research, Ethiopia seems to have been neglected in the specific area of translation and travel studies, save for single sections in collected works or monographs covering a restricted historical period, and with a focus on East Africa (Mazrui 2016).

Linguistic and ideological factors have shaped the representation of this part of East Africa as the place of the most intriguing myths of world literature, from the Queen of Sheba and Prester John to the Sacred Ark (Wallis Budge, Levine, Pankhurst, Carnochan, Munro-Hay), where the rhetoric of imperialism is reinforced by neo-colonial exploitation.

Key words: Ethiopia, travels, translation, language, myths, colonialism

Introduction

This section approaches the question of travel writing in Abyssinia/Ethiopia. It highlights the change in descriptive focus within travellers' narratives,

segmenting the traditional descriptive themes regarding space, place, and people within a translational framework. It accounts for the first encounters and contacts (the 'contact zone') of missionaries, subsequently followed by explorations and military expeditions. It is from the translation of these early descriptions that the great myths of Abyssinia/Ethiopia have survived to the present day, engendering quests for lost treasures. The question of translation and translatability problematizes assumptions and representations based on authentic sources, relying upon the presence of native informants and mediators.

As noted by MacLaren (2011: 221–41), the moment of direct eye-witness observation and the account written after the journey entail diversified dynamics in textual production and genesis. All the more so when the eyes of the beholder describing the scene pass through the words of a multi-translation task, and each party has its own mediator and interpreter. The Christian mores and the rituals of a distant culture, as in the case of Abyssinia, are thus represented and interpreted for the first time, through the eyes of the beholder and its mediators. Narratives and descriptions featuring the same places and spaces, can either warrant 'truthfulness' and authenticity in the previous narrative, or else totally discard previous assumptions. Either way, travel writing on Ethiopia has attracted literary attention and triggered debate. Such is the case of the accounts of the first missionaries, trying to expose doctrinal errors, thus engendering new ones, or the narratives of explorers and geographers, again, supporting and/or dismantling previous accounts and (mis)conceptions, as in the case of food habits and raw meat (Youngs 1994: 54–75).

In the output of explorations, mapping, and, in general, travel writing concerning Ethiopia, aspects of intertextuality encroach on various stages and formats, overlapping with rewriting and 'copying' to credited citation, and the question of authenticity in travellers' tales (Bassnett 1993: 92–114; 2000: 105–14). Curiously, this may credit early sources and disprove later claims to original explorations, as is the case of Francis Burton versus Speke (Carnochan 2006: 113–23) and James Bruce versus the Jesuits, regarding the paternity of the 'first visions'.

Throughout the process of writing and re-writing, linguistic mediation and, thence, the publication of travel writing in foreign languages, is an impacting factor.[1] The geographic space which is narrated and travelled upon is Africa, and the readers and audience are Europeans and Americans. Narrative accounts and representations of Ethiopia, more than other African regions and colonial contextualized domains, outline an ancient Christian country, with an early civilization, an independent writing system and many local languages. As suggested by the late Donald

Levine in his *Interpreting Ethiopia* (2011), interpreting in a cross-cultural and global perspective of 'Ethiopianism' as a distinctive identity trait, would also entail 'translating' from Ethiopian languages and vice versa.

Claims to authenticity and translation

Ethiopia has an ancient religious tradition and has maintained its cultural roots and Christian identity – a unique case on the African continent. Variations in the perception of sacred spaces are featured in the different textual typologies analysed: descriptions by faithful pilgrims, Ethiopian guide-tours, and the Catholic accounts of the first and the last Franciscan in Ethiopia (Francisco Álvarez on a mission in 1515, with his *Ho Preste Joam das Indias. Verdadera informacam das terras do Preste Joam* [1540], and Remedius Vaclav Prutky [1751–1753], with his *Itinerário*). This range also includes a multi-genre variety of reports and journals by missionaries of other confessions, botanists, military cartographers, geographers, archaeologists, and writers of tourist guidebooks. With reference to the latter, there is also an unsuspected hybridization in genre and authors, as in the case of the late Stuart Munro-Hay who collaborated in the production of guidebooks and wrote his *Quest for the Ark of the Covenant* (2005), still claiming authenticity in the subtitle, "The true story of the tablets of Moses", as in the early narrative accounts reporting and re-imagining the mythical figure of Prester John and his fabled kingdom.

The method of approach is based on the concept of the cultural translatability of space, and its attributed values (see also Iser and Budick 1996; Clifford 1997). The paradigms of identity in place and space are preserved against the adaptations and manipulations of the text and the 'real' geographical space underlying the interpretation of cultures (Geertz 1973). There are 'imaginative geographies' where interlingual translation is acted on existing narratives, interlinked with acclaimed authenticity and veracity. This constellation of studies has weaved in the 'spatial turn' in the humanities (Brazzelli and Regard 2016). In the wider perspective of translation studies and travel writing, beyond the accessibility of books translated into other languages, the role of interpreters (native and non-native), local informants, and mediators is crucial; these often 'invisible' interventions, enhancing translational intricacies impact on descriptiveness and the 'rhetoric of desire' (Blanchard 1980).

Travel writing and translation

There has been a prevailing attitude in geography and travel writing that translation is just 'there', present all the time, as one text is referred to in another, new editions are published, and narrative accounts re-written and sometimes plagiarized. This partly explains the role of translators of travel narratives and that of native informants which, before the 1990s, had received only sparse attention (i.e. Kartunnen 1994; Dingwaney and Maier 1996), and often in ancillary connection with traditional academic disciplines. Conversely, strategies in 'world writing' (Barnes and Duncan 1992; Duncan and Gregory 1999), emerged as an area of research in the wake of human geography and studies in post-colonialism. The turn of colonial studies and imperialism (i.e. MacKenzie 1982, 1992; Greenblatt 1991; Pratt 1992; Youngs 1994) enlarged the realm of interdisciplinarity to imagery and 'visions of empire' (Miller and Reill 1996). The aftermath of the Columbian anniversary celebrations reinforced cross-cultural research, stemming into the cultural iconography of landscape, including mapping, advertising, propaganda (see also Mitchell 1994; Buzard 1993), and, ultimately, the publication of encyclopaedias and fresh insight into travel narrative and exploration (Hulme and Youngs 2002; Speake 2013[2003]). The linguistic question fills in the interstices of cross-cultural discourse on travel writing. Some British explorers were legendary in their narrative skills and had a legendary knowledge of languages (i.e. Richard F. Burton, Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence), enabling them to elicit information from native populations using their own languages. Translation is the common thread interweaving the description of the African continent, and, in general, of explored and colonized space in the new worlds (Youngs 1994; Mancall 2006; Bohls and Duncan 2005; Smethurst 2012; Kuhen and Smethurst 2008, 2015). Although not openly recognized on frontispieces and cover titles of travel writing, labels such as true description narrative, account, journeys, report, diary, and itinerary, rely on overt or covert translation, re-writing, and intertextual citation.

Recent studies in post-colonial travel writing (Edwards and Graulund 2011) benefited from the humanistic culture of travel, or a cultural history of travel and visions, as outlined in the outstanding writings of Joan-Pau Rubiès (see also Elsner and Rubiès 1999). Notwithstanding advances in research, Ethiopia seems to have been neglected in the specific area of translation and travel studies, save for single sections in collected works or monographs covering a restricted historical period, and with a focus on East Africa (Mazrui 2016). In the 1950s and 1960s during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I and before the coup and the Mengistu dictatorship

(1975–1987), written reports were mainly travelogues and travel diaries (Murphy 1968). Carnochan (2008: 97–98) lists twenty-five narratives from 1949 to 2005 that would qualify as travel narratives. The list of academic and historical works sets apart and mainly features books in English, excluding the Italian contribution and missions in Abyssinia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

British interest in Ethiopia has no record at the time of the Spanish and Portuguese Catholic missions. Political barriers and ideological filters did not enhance translation from the Catholic world at the time of the first mission, and it is only at the end of the seventeenth century that the myth of Prester John is exposed.

Descriptions and distortions

The myth of Prester John, whether localized in India or Abyssinia, is not the only myth: Ethiopia has a whole array of iconography and iconic legends, of places and people and treasures. As a consequence, archaeological research and historical assumption must rely on written sources and the translation of manuscripts. As observed, titles on Ethiopia largely emphasize history and underlying 'mystery'. There is, however, an explicit or suggested assumption of new findings and discovery. An invaluable source for historical reference in English is the lifetime work of Sir Wallis Budge with his *History of Ethiopia* published in 1928, followed by the studies and edited works of C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, all collaborating with the Hakluyt Society. Other important contributions come from the Ethio-British Richard Pankhurst, founder of Ethiopian Studies, the American Donald Levine, with his lifelong Ethiopian socio-historical studies, and the late Edward Ullendorff, Semitist and translator.

The quest for places of myths, such as the 'mountain of Rasselas', led to solitary and individual explorations in the 1950s (Pakenham 1999 [1959]; Murphy 1966). These were followed by literary narratives relating more recent political events (Marsden 2006) and describing the remote and secluded spaces and places. The myth of Gondar was the beginning of discovery by Thomas Pakenham in a quest for the place where the princes of Gondar suffered lifetime imprisonment to prevent intra-dynastic bloodshed. The mystery of the princes of Abyssinia and the palace where they were held captive had presumably been located in a precise area on the top of a mountain by Thomas Pakenham, following Samuel Johnson's narrative of *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, and the notations in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.[2] Pakenham's narrative is more like a notebook

registration and logbook journal, rich in visual images. The first visions and descriptions rely on imagination and prescribed beliefs. As in the discovery of the New World, early accounts of Ethiopia rely on rhetorical similes, biblical citations, linguistic hedging, and prescriptions.[3] The prescriptions as omissions, and syllepsis (or ellipsis) are frequently used as a rhetorical technique supporting argumentative effects, it is an attention-seeking device which omits to give a complete description of the avowed impossibility of describing a phenomenon due to lack of symmetry between words and 'things'. The Franciscan friar, Álvarez, is emblematic when he writes about his fears of not being believed for the incessant discovery of new marvels in this one country. The circulation of Álvarez's first account, translated as *The Prester John of the Indies* (London 1881) from the Latin and Portuguese originals, and printed in Lisbon in 1540, emphasized the customary use of it as the 'true relation'.[4] The portraiture of this emperor, with other narratives regarding the cruelty of the seclusion of the princes in Gondar, favoured a conceptualization of Abyssinia as a land of secrets and mystery, reinforced by other even more ancient myths, regarding the existence of the Queen of Sheba and her palace, and of the Ark of Covenant and its location. Scientific exploration, however, was interested in mapping the sources of the Blue Nile. Since the late seventeenth century, the Royal Society provided instructions to be used in scientific exploration to help botanical and geological notations, mapping of the territory, and 'teaching the eye to see' (Rubiès 1996).[5]

Missionaries were complying with a tradition of describing the place (topography), and most of all the people and their languages (ethnography), and referred to prior narratives obtained from their predecessors. In East Africa, as elsewhere, the knowledge of languages and translating skills was mandatory for the success of the task of a mission for Protestants and Catholics alike. There hardly was a symmetrical alignment in such descriptions, albeit the common ground was the coexistence of ethical and moral values, and the impulse of spiritual colonization, when not a political or mercenary investment. The expulsion of the Jesuits was not only an Ethiopian incident in 1634, and the first Protestant missionaries who entered the country (Massawa, Dec. 1829) warily referred to it and listed a set of prescriptive rules to elicit information through direct linguistic contact and further translations. The seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were an age of missionary exploration and recording, favouring the French and the English in Africa. Yet, the 'closed doors' and bans on European missions enhanced the vision of a secluded country shrouded in mystery. The nineteenth century saw the full-scale 'scramble for Africa', in the name of 'Commerce, Christianity, Civilization, and

Conquest' (Pakenham 1992). It was during the first half of this century that the Church Missionary Society sent Protestant missionaries, Charles William Isenberg and Johann Ludwig Krapf. The *Journals of Charles William Isenberg and Johann Ludwig Krapf* (1839–1842) were prefaced by a leading specialist of the time, James MacQueen (1778–1870) of the Church Missionary Society in London, and enriched by some hundred pages of a 'Geographical Memoir'. As was common in travel writing and edited journals, there is an intricacy of citations and intra-textual translations. This is the translated citation from the French journal by the Catholic M. Rochet (1841):

> Our missionaries should not forget that the heat of the Portuguese Jesuits lost all the advantages which Catholicism had previously obtained, and ended by causing them to be driven out of Abyssinia in the sixteenth century. The Abyssinians still remember the violent dimensions which *the vehemence of the Jesuits had created among them*. The last traces of this remembrance—grievous precedent for Catholicism—must be effaced by means of forbearance and tolerance. Our Missionaries ought even to be cautious of avowing their intention. It will, I doubt not, be for the interest of their cause—and an able and auspicious policy—only to present themselves at first as chemists or mechanics […] It would be necessary to avoid showing any jealousy or animosity toward the Methodist Mission, whose wise conduct ought on the contrary to be followed as a model. *In every circumstance it would be necessary always to keep in view that the slightest imprudence, the slightest rashness, would suffice to destroy forever in Abyssinia the entrance of Catholicism, perhaps of Christianity and of Civilization*. (Rochet 1841: 190, in Isenberg, Krapf and MacQueen, 2011 [1841]: xiii; emphasis added)

The fact that Ethiopia had long been part of the Judaeo-Christian world, through Solomonic lineage, and was arguably the first nation in the world to accept Christianity in the first century AD, seems to be totally ignored.

The location of myths: Sheba and Prester John

The description and translation of sacred spaces in Ethiopia offer an exemplary perspective on cultural iconography and highlight the crucial role of contextualization impacting religious identity. Orthodox Coptic Christian theology and hagiography set Ethiopia apart from all other African countries subject to Western imperial invasion and colonization on the grounds of Christianization, and civilization through literacy. Ethiopia had its writing system, an inestimable treasure of sacred scrolls, sacred books, legendary Apocrypha (the *Book of Enoch*), and, according to the

Abyssinian imperial dynastic tradition, it is the land of the descendants of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. Ethiopia is the country the Scriptures refer to as a land of spiritual devotion and precious gifts. It is the location of the Axumite Empire, the legendary land of incense, myrrh, and gold, the land of Holy Zion (The Ark of the Covenant). According to literary traditions, it is also the land of the black beauty described in the *Song of Songs* (aka *King Solomon's Song*), 'Nigra sum sed Formosa…' in Latin translation. This literary reference alone would suffice to suggest and evoke a wealth of travel writing and rewriting, from the cryptic reference to Mount Amara in Abyssinia in John Milton,[6] to Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas Prince of Abyssinia*. Enigma seems to be challenged and unveiled by Sir James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, Sir Francis Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa or an Exploration of Harar* (1894), the solitary expedition to Magdala by Thomas Pakenham with *The Mountains of Rasselas* (1998 [1959]), and the last quest for the lost Ark by Stuart Munro-Hay (2005). Everything seems to be a quest for the discovery of mythical places, castles, and archaeological biblical manuscripts, from the palace of Gondar to the Ark of the Covenant, to the manuscript of the *Book of Enoch* brought home by James Bruce. Translation is ubiquitous, especially in the construction and diffusion of myths, as in the case of the Queen of Sheba. In most cases, comparative translation analysis is the key to solving the ambiguity of the descriptive paradox in the rhetoric of description (Meter 1980: 45–56), within travel narratives.

The name of Sheba has inspired countless masterpieces in music, poetics, and visual arts. In the Arabic tradition, the queen is known as Balkis or (Bilqis, Balkiyis), and in the Ethiopian Apocrypha *Kĕbra Naghast* or the *Glory of Kings*, she is known as Makeda. Other Greek and Roman sources identify her as Nicaule. The name in Ge'ez (ancient Amharic) connotes 'greatness'. The historical episode relates to the visit of the Queen of the South to Jerusalem (tenth century BC). The identification of the Queen with Sheba, the land of perfumes and incense, and the island of Put enhances its quasi-divine attributes. Sheba was a geographical area connected to the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, India, and East Africa; it was the name of the kingdom that identified the queen, and was emblematically recorded in prophecies.

A French encyclopaedic dictionary dating from the first decades of the explosion of French Romanticism (the 1830s), cites James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1768–1773). Conversely, James Bruce relied on Jesuit and Franciscan accounts, albeit his scientific prescriptive

modes tended to debunk Catholic sources. The citation below is from the Italian translation (1829) of the French dictionary:

> *Dizionario Storico-Mitologico di tutti i popoli del mondo* compilato dai signori Giovanni Pozzoli, Felice Romani e Antonio Serracchi *sulle tracce di* Noel, Millin, La Porte, Dupuis, Rabaud, Erienne & c. & c. (1829).

The dictionary was published in the wake of French 'Orientalisme', fostered by the craze for quests and exploration, as testified by the establishing of the Hakluyt Society in 1848. Regarding the Italian version, the word 'translation' is omitted and substituted by the vague and imprecise 'sulle traccie' (lit. 'on the tracks'). James Bruce is overtly cited ('says Mr Bruce'). The entry is preceded by the supposed identification of the region of Troglodytes, or cave dwellers, whereas its inhabitants are referred to as pastors. The country of Sheba is, however, described as a country exporting gold to the kingdom of Judah:

> …la regina di Saba, sovrana di quelle contrade, concepì naturalmente il desiderio di vedere ella stessa ciò che avvenisse dei suoi tesori che da tanti anni si esportavano da' suoi stati, e volle conoscere il principe che ne facea uso con tanta magnificenza. *Non vi può essere dubbio, dice il sig. Bruce, sul viaggio di lei.* Pagani, Arabi, Mori, Abissinii, tutti i popoli dei dintorni lo attestano, e ne parlano quasi coi termini stessi delle Scritture. (1829: 3626; emphasis added)

The different names add to textual ambiguity, as different names will also be given to the kings, saints in the many different languages of the Abyssinia. It is difficult to identify rulers and kings from their many names, honorific titles and epithets, let alone populations and geographic areas. For example, the term 'Barbaria' seems rather vague and disparaging. This is recorded in another author who cites the Latin name, Claudiano. G.C. in the citation uses the term 'Barbaria' to indicate a country between the Tropic and the mountains of Abyssinia, the land of shepherds. The French Dictionary is a sequence of translated citations from a total body textual translation, and Bruce's accounts are extrapolated with a vague reference to the Scriptures. The translation below has a direct citation weaved into other sources of reference. The fact that 'Arabi pretendono' can be read in its meaning of arrogance ('exige') or 'make believe'. In both cases, it is mildly disparaging:

> Gli Arabi *pretendono che* il nome della regina di Saba, la quale si recò a Gerusalemme, fosse Belkis; gli Abissini l'appellano Maqueda. Nel Vangelo, è dessa nominata regina del Mezzogiorno, e non le vien dato altro nome, ma le parole poste in bocca di G.C. attestano la verità di quel

> viaggio. "La regione del Mezzogiorno, dic'egli, sorgerà nel giorno del giudizio contro di quella generazione, e la condannerà: mentre venne essa dalle estremità della terra per udire la sapienza di Salomone, e contemplerà essa colui che di Salomone è più grande." (1898: 3627)

Comment on Bruce is warily reported with hedges 'Sembra che il sig. Bruce sia portato a credere ch'ella non fosse pagana…' (lit. 'it seems like Mr Bruce was inclined to think that she was not a pagan…). The term 'falsity' is a key word juxtaposed with 'truthfulness' and authenticity of accounts:

> Riguardo a ciò che si dice, aggiunge il sig. Bruce, per provare che la regina di Saba era Araba, ne è *bastantemente dimostrata la falsità*. Tutti gli abitanti dell'Arabia Felice, e quelli principalmente della costa opposta a Saba e Asab, erano riputati Abissinii, e dai primi secoli, sino alle conquiste dei Musulmani, ed anche lungo tempo dopo, il loro paese facesse parte dell'Abissinia. Erano sudditi di quell'impero: dapprima pastori Sabei, come gli altri sudditi di quelle contrade, poscia, *dice la tradizione convertiti in Giudaismo, durante la corruzione del tempio di Gerusalemme, continuarono ad essere Giudei, sino all'anno 622 dell'era cristiana,* epoca in cui divennero Maomettani." (1898: 126)

Pedro Páez, or Paes, or Pero Pais (1568–1622), reporting one century after Álvarez, was a Portuguese Jesuit missionary. He is credited with having been the first European to see and describe the source of the Blue Nile at Bahir Dar. Páez's two-volume *História da Ethiópia* is regarded as one of the most valuable and accurate written accounts of the contemporary Solomonic dynasty and empire up to his own time.[7] Written in Portuguese, it remains one of the most important narratives on that theme. It was widely cited and translated into many languages. The manuscript was completed in 1620, but not published in his lifetime. Manuel de Almeida borrowed from Pedro even in the title of his work, decades later: *Historia de Etiopia a Alta Abassia*. Odoardo Beccari, an Italian geographer and botanist edited Páez in *Historia in Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores occidentales Ineditii* (1905–1917). A Portuguese edition was published in 1945 *Pêro Pais*: *História da Etiópia*. It is surprising that English editions appeared only late; his *de Abyssinorum erroribus História da Etiópia* was translated into English by Christopher Tribe, and published by the Hakluyt Society in 2011. Conversely, Pedro was also a translator, and knew the local languages, as he translated the Roman Catechism into Ge'ez. As is common in travel accounts, he uses citations from previous travel, to analyse and compare facts and descriptions. In particular, the Portuguese Jesuit has lengthy citations from the Spanish *Historia de la Etiopia* by

Dominican Fray Luís de Urreta, where the wonders of Solomon and Prester John resonate with splendours and opulence in rituals and wedding ceremonies. In a current English translation (2011) he is wary of reporting assumptions made by others, thus protecting himself from 'untruthful' accounts. Chapter XV of his book '*in which it is stated whether the Prester John always enters into marriage with one of the families of the Three Magi or with the lady that he thinks best in his empire*' directly cites from de Urreta. The marvel of mystic marriage is enhanced by the mark of a star appearing on the bodies of legitimate sons. The brides travel in a litter and on elephants, to the city of Saba where the emperor awaits. Elephants could be plausible, but not the tigers described in Álvarez. This is the current English translation of Urreta cited in Páez:

> She always travels in a litter and, on arriving at a boundary shrine more than a league away from the city, she finds many pavilions erected and rests there for the night. The following morning, she has a (fine) elephant prepared with rich trappings on its back a tall reclining seat (of respect) on which they seat the empress, and some of the ladies who accompany her go on elephants to receive her […]
>
> When the wedding is over, the emperor takes off his imperial attire and, taking the empress by the hand, they walk to the palace accompanied by all the court. The people in the streets throw flowers and scented waters over them and follow them with a thousand blessings. (in Boavida, Pennec and Ramos 2011: 177)

The Portuguese Jesuit debunks the Magi family marriage as fable and fiction, quotes the Dominican Friar, Luís de Urreta, with a 'but', and stigmatizes the spread of false credence through print and in book form.[8] Pedro Páez could speak Arabic and had learnt Ge'ez and Amharic, so did not need an interpreter nor need to use Latin as a vehicular language. He could directly discuss matters of state and religion with Emperor Za Dengel whom he will convert to Catholicism. Za Dengel's successor, Susenyos I, was likewise fascinated by the missionary and built for him a centre for his fellow Jesuits on Lake Tana:

> But everything he says about them that happen in *the lands of the Prester John are fables and mere fictions, because not only is there no statute saying that the Prester John* must always marry a woman from one of the families of these holy kings, but there is no such family in all his empire, nor any memory that there ever was one. And *to confirm the truth, I did not content myself with asking many people who might know this*—and they said that they had never seen such a thing in books or heard tell of it—*but I even spoke to the emperor* himself. In short, when I mentioned [all] these things to him. He laughed heartily at the idea that they *should*

> *have given credence to an unknown man so readily that they authorized and printed them…* (p. 177)

This myth is debunked, as emperors choose their own wives (the one that they think best), and even a Moorish one, if they become Christian.

Again, on the theme of the Queen of Sheba, an interesting reference is the *Itinerário of Jerónimo Lobo*. The Portuguese Jesuit Jerónimo Lobo (1595–1678) compiled his commentary or *Itinerário*, following the previous early accounts by the Jesuit Pedro Páez and the Franciscan Friar Francisco Álvarez. He spent nine years in Abyssinia (1624–1634), until the expulsion of the Jesuits following the sanguinary revolution. His *Itinerário* was not printed during his lifetime, resonance came with the abridged English translation from the Portuguese by his disciple, the Jesuit Balthasar Tellez, in 1710. The complete French translation appeared in 1728, and it was this version which the young Samuel Johnson abridged and translated into English, laying thus the foundations for his *Rasselas*. The Queen of Sheba is presented with another notable Ethiopian Queen, Makeda, Candance (aka Judith).

> Two of these women are named in the Holy Scriptures, one, the Queen Saba, mentioned in the Gospel, whom the Abyssinians call Nicaula or Macheda and in the book they have the Gospels in their language, Negista Azeb, which means the same as Regina Austri, as the Sacred Text names her. And the place where she formerly had her court still exists today, with monuments of remarkable magnificence, as well as the town where they say she was born and which today still preserves her name, the land being called Saba by the Abyssinians, *all of which I saw and traversed on several occasions*. (in Da Costa 1984: 155-56; trans. Lockhart; emphasis added)

Lobo is warily reporting that what he writes is based on Abyssinian beliefs and sources, thus distancing from native informants:

> Through this famous queen, the same Abyssinians claim that the princes of this empire descend from the tribe of Judah, for they affirm that from the journey she made to Jerusalem, as attested in the Holy Scriptures, she had a son of Solomon named Minilech, from whom, now with increased nobility the Abyssinian princes continued. (in Da Costa 1984: 156; trans. Lockhart)

As observed, one of the early English adaptations of Lobo's *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (this was the first title) was by Samuel Johnson, who translated not from its Portuguese original, but second-hand from the French translation by the Abbé Johachim Le Grand, one hundred years later

(1728). Johnson translates into an 'abridged' form (1735) what Le Grand had translated in an 'augmented' edition. One hundred and fifty years later (1887), the Henry Morley translation followed. The reported facts go back to 1622. Lobo, who writes more than one hundred years after Álvarez, appears critical on the myth of Prester John, Solomon, Sheba, and the fabulous kingdom:

> …the history of Abyssinia is corrupted with fables. This empire is known by the name of the kingdom of Prester-John. For the Portuguese having heard such wonderful relations of an ancient and famous Christian state called by that name, in the Indies, imagined it could be none but this of Aethiopia. Many things concurred to make them of this opinion: there was no Christian kingdom or state in the Indies of which was true which they heard of this land of Prester-John: and there was none in the other parts of the world who was a Christian separated from the Catholic but what was known, except this kingdom of Aethiopia. It has therefore passed for the kingdom of Prester-John since the time it was discovered by the Portuguese in the reign of King John the Second. (Lobo 2006 [1887]: 51; trans. Morley, emphasis added)

The following passage rings with the same note as the Italian encyclopaedia on the Queen of Sheba when relating the renowned women, Makeda and Candance. Several ascribed names are attributed, creating confusion, between anthroponym and toponyms:

> The country is properly called Abyssinia, and the people term themselves Abyssins. Their histories count a hundred and sixty-two reigns, from Cham to Facilidas or Basilides; among which some women are remarkably celebrated. *One of the most renowned is the Queen of Sheba, mentioned in Scripture, whom the natives call Nicaula or Makeda, and in their translation of the gospel, Nagista Azeb, which in their language is Queen of the South*. They still show ruins of a city which appears to have been once of note, as the place where she slept with her court, and the village which, from being the place of her birth, they call the land of Saba. The Kings of Aethiopia draw their boasted pedigree from Minilech, the son of this Queen and Solomon. (Lobo 2006 [1887]: 51; trans. Morley, emphasis added)

The Sheba charade weaves into the construction of the myth of Solomonic descent and the land of Prester John, and the land of Punt, the mystical land of sacred incense, Sheba. There is a sort of fixity determined by biblical references and Abyssinian sacred books, whence reference to Prester John is unaffected by hagiology. Though a king, and not described in sacred books, in Álvarez the name of the emperor is Lebna Dengel Dawitt II, *nəgusä nägäst* or King of Kings (1508–1540), succeeded by

Claudius (or Claudianus). There are many possible names and translations of names: Lebna Dengel means 'incense of the Virgin' in Ge'ez. He was also known by the name of Wanag Segad. There have been countless rewritings of the myth of Prester John. Bliss Carnochan's *Golden Legends: Images of Abyssinia from S. Johnson to Bob Marley* (2008) is in line with recent studies with comparative literature and translation, and Mary Baine Campbell's "Asia, Africa, Abyssinia: Writing the Land of Prester John" (2015: 21–37) is a contribution to the field of cultural geography.[9] Another literary contribution is Wendy Belcher's *Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (2012), and the announced book on *The Black Queen of Sheba: A Global history of an African Idea*.[10]

Translators and mediators: Ethiopianism and its symbols

Translation, however, and intertextuality are elucidatory to the dynamics of the Ethiopianism in Western literature, the same as for Orientalism. In the Elizabethan Age, Shakespeare used the term 'Ethiop' as a metonymy for Africa, and did not use the term Abyssinian. The metaphor of blackness as an adjective ('Such Ethiop words, blacker in their effect / Than in their countenance' in *As You Like It*, IV. iii. 6), and with juxtaposed effect on the beautiful metaphor of Juliet: "She hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel on an Ethiop's ear" (I, v, 46). Shakespeare could have heard about the Álvarez narrative as it had been published in several European languages, first in Italian, then Spanish and German. The first English version would only appear in 1881 (Amharic in 1961). The Italian version was the first account of Ethiopia translated into a European language. Regarding the Prester John (or Lebna Dengel) in Álvarez, the exciting suspension in the whole narrative is the fact that the emperor is always spoken about, referred to, or mentioned. He does not speak, and is not seen until the narration pitches, as admittance to his presence is constantly postponed. Thus, the royal 'happening' is constantly wavering between a 'yes' and a 'not now', creating a delayed climax. The whole narrative features lists of his dominions, treasures, and customs. His whereabouts are detailed, as are his embassies and requests, but we never get to see him or hear him talk. Eventually, Álvarez is admitted into his tent. This is a description of luxury and opulence the emperor stages like a pageantry; brocades, silks, velvets, and damasks are the terms used by the Spanish narrator. The Italian abridged version by the humanist scholar, Monsignor Ludovico Beccadelli (from the above citation), was published ten years after the original text (1550), under another title: *La Historia d'Ethiopia di Francesco Álvarez. Ridotta in Italiano da Ludovico*

Beccadelli. Beccadelli was a religious man and lived in Rome at the time when Álvarez was also spending the last years of his life in Rome, where he died and was buried. There is no evidence that Beccadelli consulted or knew the Portuguese Jesuit, but nor is there evidence to the contrary (Raineri 2007). The philological appeal of this version lies in the fact that it is expressed in the Italian language spoken at the time of Álvarez in Rome where Beccadelli consulted with members of the Ethiopian clergy. The description below regards the Queen of Adea, wife of a Moor king, asking for assistance and help against the intrigues of her brother-in-law. She is escorted by a royal train of fifty Moors, horses, ladies, and one hundred men. On the third day, she is received by the king, in his pavilion of black silk. The emphasis is on the provenance of tissues and materials coming from the silk route through Arabia, as the 'beautiful Moorish shirts made in India' are seen through Spanish eyes:

> …il terzo giorno fu chiamata dal Re, al quale ella venne in un Padiglione di taffetà nero, et due volte quel giorno, una la mattina, et l'altra la sera fu vestita dal re di panni d'oro, et di velluto, con belle *camiscie moresche fatte nell'India*… (in Ranieri, 2007: 138; emphasis added)

The scene is set with an array of candles and layers of curtains and splendid carpets. Eventually, other precious curtains are drawn together, after a long listing of embassies and exchange of gifts with the Portuguese Ambassador. Communication is always by means of interpreters and court officials. Through them, the emperor asks about the difference in worship and liturgy, also regarding church festivities and celebrations. Johannis (Jo) is always seen behind curtains in pavilions, amid silks and taffetas, as when he wants to know more about the holy wafers and Communion, and all the significance of colours and liturgical vestments of the Catholic Church: "Jo era *dentro della sua tenda* … et esso aveva dinanzi a sé *una cortina di taffeta, et* guardava per una *sdruscita della detta cortina*, et pigiava un gran piacere di vedere quelle cose…" (in Ranieri 2007: 94; emphasis added). Interaction is carried through the mediation of interpreters, through several languages including Latin. The 'Cabeata' referred to is more properly the *āqābē sa'āt*, the official most closely in attendance on the king, through whom he spoke to the Portuguese. The Italian version considerably cuts and abridges, but this passage features all the opulence and sumptuousness of the East. There are first curtains, second curtains, and then the climax scene. The Portuguese delegates are summoned at night time, and they pass through an array of candles, torches, and guards. They are kept at the gate for a good three hours. The letters and credentials are handed in translation into the king's language,

then are simultaneously translated, as messages come and go from the Cabeata. The mediation of the Cabeata (Acavesatj) in the Italian description is more vivid in Beccadelli's ancient sixteenth century style:

> ... et ivano ambasciate inanzi, et indrietro, le qualj portava l'Acavesatj, cio è , il segretario maggiore molto favorito dal si(gno)re et à questo Acavesatj l'Ambasciatore diede le lettere del Capitano maggiore, le quali le portò al signore, et esso le lesse molto speditamente, per cio ch'erano tradotte nella sua lingua. (in Ranieri 2007: 98)

The ritual of the first row of curtains is usually to wear the magnificent clothes the king sends, and he also mentions writing in letters of gold.

Below is the same passage in the English translation of Lord Stanley Alderley (1881), revised and edited by the Hakluyt Society:

> *Messages came and went through the Cabeata.* […] When the questions and answers were ended, the Ambassador gave to the Cabeata the letters of instructions of the Captain Major put into their letters and language; and he gave them to the Prester who read them very speedily. (in Beckingham and Huntingford 1958: 303; emphasis added)

The above passage is preceded by the opening description in the palace, at night time:

> Having passed these last we found a large and rich dais with very splendid carpets. In front of this dais were other curtains with much greater splendour, and while we were standing before them they opened them, for they were drawn together, and there we saw the Prester John sitting on a platform of six steps very much adorned. He had on his head a high crown of gold and silver, that is to say, one piece of gold and another of silver from the top downwards, and a silver cross in his hand; *there was a piece of blue taffeta before his face which covered his mouth and beard, and from time to time they lowered it and the whole of his face appeared, and again they raised it.* At his right hand he had a page [dressed in silk], with a flat silver cross in his hand […] The Prester was dressed in a *rich mantle of [gold] brocade, and silk shirts of wide sleeves which looked like 'pelotes.' From his knees downwards he had a rich cloth [of silk and gold] well spread out*. (in Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: 303; emphasis added)

This is the same passage in the contemporary Italian translation, with substantial additions and permutations.

> …e dentro alle cortine, erano altri cortinaggi molto ricchj, et sontuosi et molto bellj tapej distesj in terra, et mentre noi stavamo guardando, furono aperte da ogni banda quelle cortine, che ci erano inanzi, dentro le qualj era

> un palco di sei gradi molto riccamente adobbato. Haveva in capo un'alta corona d'oro et d'Argento, fatta da alto à basso alternatim d'oro et d'Argento, *et haveva il viso coperto di taffettà azzurro, lo qual' abbassava alcuna volta, onde se li vedeva tutto il volto, et poi l'alzava, et haveva in mano una gran croce d'Argento*, et indosso *una veste grande di Broccato, et la camiscia di seta, con le maniche larghe, dalle ginocchia in giu haveva un grembiale ricco com'un camiscio di vescovo ben disteso*. (in Ranieri 2007: 97–98)

What is puzzling in the description of his face is his complexion, as there are striking variations in colours. The Beccadelli Italian version says it has a very fine beard on the upper lip, that he is not very brown "Non è molto Bruno, ma di colore di *mela*, ò *pera*", (in Ranieri 2007: 98), that is the colour of an apple or a pear; the English version has other nuances that are used for horses: "His complexion might be chestnut or bay, not very dark in colour" (p. 304). The trait of not being too black enhances positive appreciation in the English version: "In presence and in state he fully looks like the great lord he is" (p. 304).

There are variations depending on diverse manuscripts, but what is intriguing is the face which is veiled by the blue taffetas, and now and then unveiled. A recurrent theme is that of veils and of secrecy. Also the Portuguese historian Gaspar Correa or Correia, Correha (1496–1563) describes this meeting in *Lendas da India* (Legends of India). The pages and attendants to the king have crystal wands decorated with silver (vol. III: 33–37). The king speaks to a page who spoke in turn to a 'Cardinal' (the Cabeata in Álvarez), who gave the message to the ambassador (Dom Rodrigo). The interpreter (Covilha) stood behind him and interpreted. The curtains and veils seem to add in suspense and the sense of marvel of this new world (see also Greenblatt 1991).

Conclusion

In his journey from 1520 to 1526, Álvarez had described what he assumes was Presbyter John. In the original Portuguese, the thematic position of the name is clearly a declaration of intent, plus a repetition and claim to 'truthful' information: *Ho Preste Joam das Indias. Verdadera informacam das terras do Preste Joam*, published in 1540. His narrative was followed by *The Portuguese expedition to Abyssinia in 1541–1543 as narrated by Castanhoso*. Both texts were translated into English only very late.[11] The Italian Gian Battista Ramusio published an Italian edition complete with maps in Venice in 1563. Apart from Shakespeare's reference to the jewel on the Ethiop's ear, British knowledge of the land of mystery was also

indebted to an English translation from the Latin text written by a Lutheran scholar, Job (or Hiob) Ludolf.[12] Ludolf (1624–1704), an Orientalist, is rightfully considered the father of all Ethiopian linguistic studies by Ullendorff. Ludolf could master over twenty languages, including Arabic, Semitic languages, and Ge'ez, and is the author of first dictionaries and linguistic studies (he exchanged letters with Leibniz on this topic). The English translation of the title seems to challenge previous Catholic narration, and to allure readers: *A New History of Ethiopia being a full and accurate description of the King of Abyssinia, vulgarly, though erroneously called the Empire of Prester John.* It was printed in London in 1682 by Samuel Smith, and the translator from the original Latin was John Phillip, John Milton's nephew. The Latin is less 'emotional': *Historia Aethiopica, sive, brevis & succinta descriptio Regni Habessorum quid vulgo male Presterii Lohannis vocatur*. It was printed in Frankfurt in 1682. But it was the English version 'full and accurate' (the original has *brevis & succinta*) with the hedge-marker 'though erroneously called' that triggered speculation and had literary echoes of places and geographical identification.

Furthermore, the rise of Ethiopianism in Western literature correlates with the dynamics of imperialism and Orientalism. The chromatic code representing Ethiopians seemed to be a consistent translational issue, reinforced by ideological and ethnic stigma: Prester John acquires a positive image in translational hypotyposis, as he is not dark, but olive or like a 'pear'. On the same ground, the Queen of Sheba, or the Shulamite described in the *Song of Songs*, is 'Black but Beautiful'. Ambiguity is not in /Black/ (Nigra Sum Sed Formosa…) but in the choice of /but/ instead of /and/ which the Hebrew language includes in its lexical polysemy.

Rewriting and translating benefited from creativity in amplification of details, aimed to excite wonder and marvel in the new market of readers, made available by the diffusion of print. The 'true relation' and 'faithful translation' appeared to be an institutionalized cliché, through the curtains and veils of the unknown Orient. The reinterpretation and the manipulation of myths in translation have triggered a sequence of literature and travel writing on Ethiopia, engendered by quests for the land of Sheba, Prester John, the Ark, the Nile, and its treasures.[13]

Notes

[1] In the last two decades, travel writing and translation studies have benefited from innovative methodologies and theories (i.e., Cronin 2000), and edited works (Clifford 1997; Di Biase 2006, and Polezzi 2001, 2006), beyond the focus on single literary authors and their literary production. Descriptions and narratives on