

**PREMODERN ETHNOGRAPHY
A CUSHITIC CUSTOM DESCRIBED AND EXPLAINED BY
MEDIAEVAL ARAB OBSERVERS**

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The attempt to comprehend a culture temporally and geographically distant from one's own is fraught with difficulties. One will often stand baffled before exotic customs whose purpose and function are seemingly incomprehensible and, as any anthropologist can tell, even a long fieldwork period may not always be sufficient to dissipate the sense of bafflement. It is justified to regard contemporary cultural anthropology as the most consistent and determined attempt so far to make sense of customs and social structures that initially appear to be beyond comprehension. However, attempts – perhaps less sustained and certainly less systematic attempts – were definitely made in premodern cultures as well when travellers, scholars or just ordinary men going abroad confronted a culture that was very dissimilar to their own. The frequently voiced generalisation that mediaeval Muslim intellectuals had little interest in the cultures of non-Muslim peoples, which they perceived as vastly inferior to their own, is definitely not true of quite a number of such authors. Perceive as inferior they certainly did these non-Islamic cultures, but that did not mean a lack of interest, and attempts at comprehending the cultural significance of many exotic customs and phenomena are all too conspicuous in many mediaeval Arabic sources.

Such attempts at comprehension or interpretation faced a number of inevitable difficulties. First, like modern anthropologists, mediaeval Muslim authors also had to cope with the potential inadequacy of the vocabulary of their own language and the cultural repertoire of their own society to describe the function and meaning of customs existing in a very different social context. Second, these premodern authors obviously did not have the benefit of a vast pool of comparative data similar to that collected later in the colonies of the main European powers. Third, they also lacked the methodological insights that anthropologists of the post-Malinowski era can now freely draw on – indeed, as will be argued below, many of them did not have (or seek) direct access to native informants. And finally, most of them did not speak the languages of the peoples that they described. In spite of all these significant shortcomings, they would often make honest – and, as we will observe, at times surprisingly successful – efforts to come to terms with utterly exotic customs and understand the social context of these.

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These premodern efforts to understand various aspects of exotic societies are worth studying for at least two reasons. On the one hand, they can add historical depth to customs that are well attested in the western ethnographic sources of more recent periods. On the other hand – and in my view more importantly – they can give us some insights into the attitudes and the ethnographic ideas of the mediaeval Muslim authors themselves who strove to interpret the variety of bewildering customs that they encountered among exotic peoples. As in modern western societies, mediaeval Muslim images of exotic people were far from being either purely factual or purely fictitious portrayals. They were a blend of three principal constituents: observed facts, imagination, and stereotyping, with all three elements obviously affecting one another in ever-changing combinations (al-^cAzma 1991:33). The following pages offer a concrete case study of the interplay of such factors.

The objective of this essay is to show the ways in which a number of premodern Muslim authors tried to make sense of a perplexing and savage custom widespread among both non-Muslim and Muslim Cushitic peoples of the Horn of Africa, and to trace the subtle changes in their perception and interpretation of it as a result of the progress of Islamisation among these peoples. For while it is true that premodern Arabic sources tend to present ethnographic descriptions of exotic peoples in an ahistorical manner, often oblivious of the changes having taken place in those cultures¹, a comparison of the various sources reveals that those descriptions do evolve, if gradually and somewhat imperceptibly.

1. Some Mediaeval Arabic Accounts of a Cushitic Custom

1.1 Buzurg b. Šahriyār ar-Rāmhurmuzī

The following text is a passage from a book by Buzurg b. Šahriyār ar-Rāmhurmuzī (fl. mid-4th/10th c.) on the curiosities of the Indian Ocean and the lands surrounding it. The author was a captain (*nāḥuda*) of a seagoing vessel himself, although of course most of the information that he presents was narrated to him by various other Arab and Persian sailors and merchants he met in ports of the Persian Gulf or elsewhere. In addition to a multitude of outlandish customs observed among peoples inhabiting the shores of the Indian Ocean (and a good dose of travellers' tales mixed in), he presents the image of savage natives living in the Horn of Africa emasculating hapless outsiders falling into their hands. Here is the relevant passage:

¹ Cf. al-^cAzma 1991:221.

Sailors are in agreement on the Sea of Berbera [...] being one of the most dangerous seas. The Bantu (*Zanğ*) have many islands in one extremity of this sea. It is said that there are very strong currents of water there, and ships can traverse it in six or seven days. Now, if a ship [by bad luck] lands in [the coast of] Berbera, [the inhabitants] capture the ship's crew and emasculate them. However, if traders go to Berbera [on purpose], each one of them, in accordance with his position and wealth, has a whole group of [natives] with him to escort him, lest some of the local people should capture and castrate him. Everyone among them [i.e. the natives] collects the testicles of those whom he has emasculated and preserves them, and when they want to boast among themselves, they make a show of [the trophies] they possess so that others would envy them. That is because [the ultimate sign of] courage [in their eyes] is for a man of their people to emasculate a foreign/unrelated man (*ar-rağul min al-gurabā*) (Buzurg, *‘Ağā’ib* 113-4).

The author of this work on the ‘wonders of India’ (more accurately, the lands surrounding the Indian Ocean), as befits a sailor, shows an all too obvious interest in the curious and exotic, including revolting and barbarous customs of savage peoples such as cannibalism, headhunting and, to be sure, emasculation. It would be all too easy to dismiss these stories as mere travellers’ tales, but in fact many of the relevant passages offer ethnographic details and observations that correspond to known geographical and anthropological facts. For instance, his accounts of cannibalism among the Batak of Sumatra and headhunting in various parts of the Indonesian archipelago are corroborated by more recent western ethnographic sources, and – as will be shown shortly – so is the emasculation of enemies among some peoples of northeast Africa. This in itself makes these accounts deserve serious attention.

The editor of *ar-Rāmḥurmuzī*’s text, P. A. van der Lith, usually offers extremely helpful commentary and notes on the contents of this Arabic work, but here he seems to have seriously misidentified the context of the passage. According to him no other Arabic source mentions the custom², which, as we will presently show, is wide of the mark, as is van der Lith’s suggestion that these Berbera are to be identified with some people in Mozambique. While he helpfully shows that the custom may well have had its parallels among some Bantu-speaking peoples of Mozambique, there is no need to search for it in so distant a land, it being amply attested in both mediaeval Arabic and more recent European sources as having existed among the Cushites of the Horn of Africa, in which the Berbera coast is located. Wherever they mention this custom, Arabic sources consistently place it in

² He characterises it as “une coutume [...] qu’on ne retrouve chez aucun auteur arabe”, although he does cautiously add “du moins à ma connaissance”. See his notes in Buzurg, *‘Ağā’ib* 210.

the region of the northern coast of present-day Somalia, Djibouti and the adjacent parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea. While at such an early date one cannot be altogether certain of the precise ethnic identity of the people described in the passage, it is beyond doubt that they were a Cushitic-speaking black African people (the standard meaning of the ethnic label Berbera or *Barbar* when used in reference to the Horn of Africa). Since there is considerable speculation as to the exact internal ramifications and relationships of the group of southern Cushitic speakers and the migrations of such peoples over the centuries, it is not possible to decide with certainty which ethnic group is meant in these descriptions. Moreover, even the ethnic appellations °Afar, Danakil, Somali – not to speak of Oromo and Galla – are unknown in the written sources of this early period, and it is not clear if the absence of the terms in the sources reflects the absence on the ground of ethnic groups so named. To my knowledge, the first occurrence of the term Dankalī (the usual Arabic name for the °Afar) in an Arabic text can be found in Ibn Saʿīd al-Andalusī's work around the middle of the 7th/13th century³. However, it is safe to state that the texts describe what must have been an early Cushitic people related to the present-day °Afar and/or northern Somali, and more distantly to the Oromo of southern Ethiopia. In more recent times, the custom is usually mentioned in reference to the °Afar and the Oromo, but that is probably a reflection of the more profound degree of Islamisation of the Somali rather than a proof of the custom having always been absent from the culture of the proto-Somali⁴.

³ Citing Ibn Saʿīd, Abū l-Fidāʾ (d. 732/1331) says: “As for [the lands lying] beyond [i.e. south of] Sawākin right down to the Bāb al-Mandab [Strait], it is populated by an ethnic group (*ġins*) of blacks called Dankal”. See Abū l-Fidāʾ, *Taqwīm* 207. The Dankali were an °Afar clan living on the Eritrean coast around Baylūl and on the Bori peninsula, who lent their name to a small local state (9th-11th/15th-17th c.). This name was then generalised in Arabic and applied in reference to all the °Afar, who, according to Munzinger, are a conglomerate of diverse Cushitic-speaking groups united only by the adoption of a common tongue. The °Afar are also known by other names like Adal (in Amhara and Oromo), Odʿali (in Somali), Teltal (a pejorative Tigrinya term alluding to the uncovered upper bodies of °Afar women). See Yasin 2008:41; Kamil 2004:15; Munzinger 1869:209.

⁴ In view of the testimony of the mediaeval Arabic accounts discussed here, the absurdity of the claim that “it was they [viz. the Oromo] who introduced the horrible practice of mutilating the dead, and even the wounded and prisoners” (Rey 1924:86) is all too obvious. The Arabic sources cited here far antedate the Oromo invasion of south-central and southeastern Ethiopia. The practice, like many other cultural traits, is in all probability shared by these peoples because of their common origins and/or their later geographical proximity. The original homeland of Oromo, °Afar and Somali alike has convincingly been located in southern Ethiopia by Herbert S. Lewis, although alternative theories also exist. On this issue, see Lewis 1966; Lewis 1955; Lewis 1960; Lewis 1999:21-25; Turton 1975: 519-521.

I do not wish to elaborate on the portrayal of this custom by ar-Rāmhurmuzī; let it suffice here to mention the most important specifications made by this author. According to him, the practice can be defined as the castration – the removal of the testicles rather than the whole of the genitalia – of the victims, who tend to be outsiders, such as visiting traders. Local men follow this hideous custom as a way to prove their own virility, and they compete in gathering as many of these unsavoury trophies as possible in order to outdo their rivals. As we will see, other Arabic sources corroborate the existence of the custom, even though they may also differ in significant details.

1.2 Ṭāhir al-Marwazī

Some of the Arabic geographical sources are silent on the practice of emasculating defeated enemies among the southern Cushites, but a number of later sources do describe it, in some instances in terms somewhat similar to those that we observe in ar-Rāmhurmuzī's account. Some of these ethnographical descriptions of the custom are remarkably detailed, replete with quasi-scientific interpretations of its social background and meaning that seem to depart considerably from the explanation offered in ar-Rāmhurmuzī's book. One such account of the emasculatory custom of the ʿAfar (or some related Cushitic-speaking people) is in Ṭāhir al-Marwazī's (d. 514/1120) book, mentioning the Arabic ethnic name Berbera and locating these people near the coast of *Baḥr al-Ḥabaša*. Consider this brief interpretive passage by al-Marwazī:

On the shores of the sea of al-Ḥabaša lives a group of southern Cushites (*firqa min al-barbar*) whom traders visit and with whom they do business from afar and under the surveillance of watchmen and [armed] guards, fearing them greatly. The reason is their custom of cutting off the genitalia (*an yaḡubbū*) of those strangers they manage to capture. They do to them nothing beside that. That done, they hang the penises along with the testicles on their huts in order to boast and vie among themselves as to the number of [such trophies]... (al-Marwazī, *Ṭabāʿi* 206).

As is evident from as much as a quick glance, this explanation largely concurs with that of ar-Rāmhurmuzī but adds a number of important details. First, it confirms the sailor's observation that Muslim traders need armed escorts (and as ar-Rāmhurmuzī specifies, probably local partners and allies) to conduct their business so as to avoid the very real danger of emasculation among the Cushites. Second, it confirms that the typical victims of the bloody practice are visiting foreigners. Third, it confirms that the social purpose of the custom is to prove one's virility and prowess – that is to say, as a symbol of superiority in the arena of competition among males. A detail absent in ar-Rāmhurmuzī's account but clearly

defined here is the custom of sporting these revolting trophies on the perpetrators' huts for everyone to see.

1.3 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī

The geographical dictionary of Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī mentions the custom of emasculation in two entries: first in the description of the land of Berbera, and second, in reference to the town of Zayla^c. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) might have borrowed his information from an earlier authority instead of a direct eyewitness informant, but tracing the route of this information until it reached him is not the main concern of this essay.

In the entry on the town (or, as he more generally identifies it, region) of Berbera Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī says that the inhabitants of these lands – speakers of Cushitic languages who must have been the ancestors of the modern northern Somali and the ^cAfar – are people of extremely black complexion who speak languages that are unintelligible to all outsiders. According to him they are nomads who also hunt with the help of poisoned arrows (Yāqūt, *Mu^cğam* I, 369-370). These observations are accurate but not directly relevant to our purpose. However, in his entry on the Somali (and ^cAfar) town of Zayla^c and its environs (today in the extreme northwest of Somalia, near its border with Djibouti) he writes at more length about these Cushitic ethnic groups of the Horn of Africa⁵. Here Yāqūt correctly characterises these Cushitic-speaking Africans as Muslims and describes in more detail the ^cAfar (and Somali) use of poisoned arrows in hunting various species of game, including huge and dangerous animals like elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes and leopards. Moreover, it is here that he gives a very vivid description of the ^cAfar custom of emasculating enemies, providing the ethnographic background necessary for understanding the gory custom. Notably, he attributes the custom to a specific ^cAfar (or Somali) way of handling marriages between two people of unequal social standing. In his own words:

I was told by the sheikh Walīd al-Baṣrī, who is one of those who have travelled widely over the countries, that the Barbar are an ethnic group (*tā'ifa*) of blacks [living] between the land of the Bantu (*az-Zanġ*) and the Ethiopians (*al-Ḥabaš*). They have a curious custom [...]. They are [scattered] groups living over the arid plains (*al-barriyya*) in huts they construct out of [dry] grass. Now, if one of them falls in love with a woman and wants to

⁵ Yāqūt's dictionary entry talks of both Zayla^c town and the ethnic group inhabiting the wider region. The name Zayla^c simultaneously served as a geographical name and an ethnic appellation, a not uncommon usage in classical Arabic. al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) specifies that the toponym Zayla^c, virtually synonymous with Ġabart, is used in reference to a town on an island of the same name as well as to a vast region practically encompassing all the Muslim-dominated territories of the Horn of Africa. See al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 82.

marry her, but he is not equal to her in status (*wa-lam yakun kufu'an lahā*), he takes a cow from among the cattle of her father – one which must be a pregnant cow – and then he cuts off some of the hairs of its tail and lets it loose again to graze. That done, he flees in search of someone whose male organ he will cut off. Now, when the herdsman returns to the father of the girl or her [legal] guardian from among her kinsmen (*man yakūn waliyyan lahā min ahlihā*), they go out in search of him [viz. of the suitor]. If they can capture him, they will kill him and thus settle the affair. If they do not, he goes where he will, trying to find someone to cut the penis of and bring it to them [the woman's kin]. If the cow gives birth to its calves before he brings them a mutilated penis, his quest has been all in vain and he can never return to his kin again, leaving instead for some place where no-one knows anything about him, since should he return to them they will kill him. However, if he cut off the penis of a man and brings it to them [in time], the girl is his [to marry] and no-one will be able to deny her to him, regardless of who she is [viz. her family's status].

[Walīd al-Baṣrī] also said: Most of those you see around who are from these lands, from among the ethnic group called the Blacks of Zayla^c (*aṭ-ṭā'ifa al-mā'rūfa bi-z-Zayla^c al-sūdān*), are people who once tried to cut off a penis but failed. Then, when they reached the western lands [of the Arab world] they turned to the [study of the] Quran and asceticism, as you can observe (Yāqūt, *Mu'ğam* III, 164).

This presentation of the custom of emasculating defeated enemies differs on a number of ethnologically significant points from the earlier account of Buzurg b. Šahriyār ar-Rāmhurmuzī. Notably, the context of the custom is quite different in his interpretation. As can be observed, he links the custom to marriage – to be more precise, marriage of a man of lower social standing to a higher-status woman – instead of to male competition and boasting duels. Another important novelty in this description is the acknowledgement of the conversion to Islam of these Cushitic people, at least on a superficial level, and the statement that some people from these lands now visit the Middle East and reside there, pursuing studies of the Islamic religion at institutions of higher learning. Indeed, the presence of students from the African coast around Zayla^c and Berbera in cities of the Arabic-speaking Middle East may hint at the reason of the seemingly more profound understanding of the social context of the barbarous custom in Yāqūt's version. While ar-Rāmhurmuzī must have relied on stories heard from visiting merchants and sailors with little if any understanding of local culture, part of the background details of

Yāqūt's version may well be based on information obtained from native informants living in Middle Eastern cities⁶.

1.4 Abū l-Fidā'

The next source to discuss is a brief passage from the *Taqwīm al-buldān* of the Syrian prince Abū l-Fidā' (d. 732/ 1331). To a large extent this author relies on information obtained from Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī (d. 685/1266) as regards specific data relating to African societies. Here is the relevant passage:

[...] the Ḥāsa [are] an abhorrent type of Abyssinians (*maḍmūmūn min aġnās al-Ḥabaša*). They have become infamous for castrating whoever falls into their hands. They give away the penises of humans by way of dowry (*yadfa'ūn dukūr al-ādamiyyīn fī ṣadaqātihim*), and they boast of such things among themselves. To the east of their land towards the sea is [the region of] Samhar (Abū l-Fidā', *Taqwīm* 279).

The ethnographic explanation of the Cushite custom of emasculation that we find in this text is curious and differs from both ar-Rāmhurmuzī's and al-Marwazī's accounts on important details. First, the ethnic appellation that it uses is a novel one. Since he specifies that the people he discusses live inland to the west of the Samhar region, which is well-known and situated around the Eritrean coastal town of Maṣṣawa^c, it is clear that his description is concerned with a Cushitic-speaking group of °Afar or Sāho, the contemporary inhabitants of that region. The name *Ḥāsa* appears to confirm this; in my view it must be an Arabised form of the tribe-name Ḥaso, a group of °Afar speakers living inland from Annesley Bay next to the Sāho people right up to the foothills of Agame province of highland Ethiopia. The common language notwithstanding, the Ḥaso are not regarded as allies by the rest of the northern °Afar groups⁷.

Abū l-Fidā' apparently interprets the collection of severed penises as a practice somehow associated with marriage. The text uses the Arabic term *ṣadaqa* (or *ṣaduqa*, *ṣuduqa*, *ṣudqa*), meaning 'dower' or 'dowry'. Any Islamic religious overtones of the concept of dowry can of course be dismissed here⁸. While the introduction of matrimony as the social context of the custom is a novelty vis-à-vis ar-Rāmhurmuzī's account, the mention of ostentatious display (as suggested by the notion of boasting) creates a link with the latter.

⁶ On the appearance of natives of the Horn of Africa as active participants in the intellectual life of the Middle East (more or less in Yāqūt's time), see Wagner 2005.

⁷ Munzinger 1869:211. Elsewhere (ibid. 222) Munzinger says explicitly that the Ḥaso are not °Afar.

⁸ The Arabic term *ṣadaqa* also means 'alms'. However, this term, evocative as it is of charitable giving, is out of the question in the above passage. In the present context, it would be all too obviously perverse to consider the possibility of such a connotation.

In many respects the description of Abū l-Fidā' can be seen as an intermediate version between ar-Rāmhumuzī and the previous account, that of Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. In a chronological sense it is of course a later source than Yāqūt's, even if we keep in mind that, as noted above, it relies heavily on data borrowed from Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī (d. 685/1266), an author about a generation younger than Yāqūt. However, much of the information in Yāqūt seems to be definitely more specific and detailed than in Abū l-Fidā'.

2. The Testimony of Western Sources

In fact, all of the Arab authors cited above had it right in a way or another. Connecting the custom to marriage and regarding it as a kind of boastful display of virility were both accurate and perceptive observations on their part. Indeed, independent sources confirm that the custom served the purpose of proving, in a striking if ruthless manner, one's virility and worth as a warrior and protector before one could marry. This theme even appears in the folklore of Cushitic-speaking peoples, as in an Ḥafar poem praising the camel, which makes a chilling reference to "the naked blade dripping drops of blood"⁹. European travellers in later times, inasmuch as they went beyond a bare mention of the custom, also often explained it in the context of marriage and of proving one's superiority as a male. Here is Burton's presentation of the custom, which he attributes here to the Somali of the Ḥāsa clan and the neighbouring north-eastern Oromo tribes. As can be observed in the excerpt, Burton agrees with his mediaeval forerunners – notably Yāqūt and Abū l-Fidā' – in linking this custom with the theme of marriage and virility:

These tribes inherit from their ancestors the horrible practice of mutilation. They seek the honour of murder, to use their own phrase, "as though it were gain", [...] Then bearing with him his trophy, the hero returns home and places it before his wife, who stands at the entrance of her hut uttering shrill cries of joy and tauntingly vaunting the prowess of her man. The latter sticks in his tufty poll an ostrich feather, the medal of these regions, and is ever afterwards looked upon with admiration by his fellows (Burton 1855:139).

⁹ Morin 1996:271-272, and 270 on the social context of the verse lines in question. On marriage amongst the Ḥafar and the Somali in general, cf. Chedeville 1966:191-195; Munzinger 1867:218-219; Lewis 1999:137-141.

One of the most reliable descriptions of the custom is given by the Italian explorer L. M. Nesbitt¹⁰, who was the first westerner to cross the whole ʿAfar region (in a south to north direction). Like other outsiders he too has a tendency to dramatise the phenomenon, gory enough as it is to begin with, but he provides quite a number of useful details to help understand the social context of the tradition. Many of these details corroborate the mediaeval Muslim accounts to a remarkable degree. Thus Nesbitt claims – as did ar-Rāmhurmuzī and al-Marwazī – that the preferred victims of the practice are outsiders to ʿAfar society, especially Amhara from the Ethiopian highlands and Oromo¹¹. Again in concert with ar-Rāmhurmuzī and al-Marwazī, he also mentions that the ʿAfar proudly collect and display the trophies severed from the bodies of their victims, but here he is more precise. While among the Arab authors cited above al-Marwazī is alone in mentioning the manner in which the killing is publicised – namely, by hanging the trophies on the killer’s hut – Nesbitt provides other details. Thus he says that the trophies are either worn around the neck, necklace-like, or hung on the perpetrator’s hut, and among members of the Madima clan (living around the middle ʿAwaš river) the trophies may be hung around the neck of the killer’s horse, if he has one – a rarity, since horses were an expensive prestige item in this region¹². However, Nesbitt adds further data that are lacking in all the mediaeval Arabic accounts: the use of certain items of bodily adornment to symbolise past killings and the symbolic association of the custom of mutilation with funerals and graves. According to Nesbitt¹³ the young warrior who kills his first victim is entitled to wearing a feather in his hair to ostentate his fighting prowess, and after a year has passed other forms of bodily adornment replace the feather: the piercing

¹⁰ Nesbitt 1934. Being unable to access this important work in English (originally in Italian: *La Dancalia esplorata*, Florence, 1930), I have used its Hungarian translation (published as L. M. Nesbitt: *Az ismeretlen Abesszínia*, Translated by Gyula Halász. Budapest: Királyi Magyar Természettudományi Társulat, 1937; and henceforward referred to as Nesbitt 1937). To help locate my references to the work, I will specify the chapter in which the relevant data occur.

¹¹ Nesbitt 1937:50 [Ch. 5: Departure], 117-118 [Ch. 11: Towards Magu]. The testimony of Munzinger seems to confirm this. He states that “all strangers are natural enemies, so long as they ask not for protection” from an ʿAfar group, which is probably an accurate observation, even though his claim that all ʿAfar consider each other a friend appears to be a gross misrepresentation of facts. See Munzinger 1869:212; and cf. Thesiger 1935:15 for a case of ʿAfar seeking out ʿAfar victims to mutilate for trophies.

¹² Nesbitt 1937:92-93 [Ch. 9: Unte and Kortumi], 119 [Ch. 11: Towards Magu]. As regards the northern ʿAfar, Munzinger says laconically that “[t]he Afars, like the Gallas [i.e. Oromo], mutilate those they kill, and wear the trophy”. See Munzinger 1869:221.

¹³ And, as we have seen in the previous excerpt, Burton corroborates it with regard to the ʿTsa clan of the Somali.

of both earlobes, and special bracelets worn on the upper arms¹⁴. Furthermore, the striking circular cairns (*waidella*) that the °Afar erect in desolate places to mark the graves of great tribal heroes and particularly brave warriors are customarily adorned with a desiccated tree whose branches bear the shrivelled genitalia of the victims whom the deceased killed during his life. When these dreadful trophies are destroyed by time, pieces of leopard skin or flat stones (sometimes arranged in two parallel rows) replace them as menacing mementoes¹⁵. Any mention of these funerary aspects of the 'killer complex' in Cushite cultures is completely absent in the Arabic sources.

To my knowledge, the only western source to deny expressly that the custom of emasculation had anything to do with marriage is Wilfred Thesiger. He firmly and unequivocally places the custom in the context of warfare and male boasting only, and seems to argue – although he is not quite explicit on this – that the custom of patrilateral cross cousin marriage precludes the necessity of proving one's worth as a suitor. This, however, is not a logical necessity, especially in a polygamous society. Given the agreement of so many other sources on this point, it seems likely that Thesiger's reservations here are either relevant for certain subgroups of the °Afar or else altogether wrong. Be that as it may, his description of the practice, which contradicts Nesbitt on some points and adds curious details unattested in other accounts, is worth quoting in full:

The great ambition of every Dankali [i.e. °Afar] is to collect more trophies than his neighbour, and they invariably castrate the dead and dying and most usually their prisoners. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance attached by them to this custom, and many raids are undertaken solely with the object of collecting trophies. For a man's standing in the tribe depends on the number of his trophies, and ten will give him the right to wear a coveted iron bracelet. An elaborate system of decorations displays his prowess to his contemporaries, and a line of stones upright before his memorial hands down his fame to posterity. The most general method of denoting kills is to attach a brass-bound leather thong to knife or rifle, one for each trophy taken. But no man may wear a coloured loin cloth, a comb or feather in his hair, nor decorate his knife with brass or silver until he has killed at least once, and two kills will entitle him to split his ears. I never saw them wearing the testicles of their victims round their necks, as Nesbitt states is their custom; they actually deny this, and I find it difficult to believe that their denial is based on feelings of delicacy [...]. I have however seen them wearing around

¹⁴ Nesbitt 1937:49 [Ch. 5: Departure], 117-118 [Ch. 11: Towards Magu].

¹⁵ E.g. Nesbitt 1937:152 [Ch. 14: From Dadda to the Borkenna], 221-2 [Ch. 20: From Sekkadahara to Gaddaeita]. For more on °Afar graves and the symbols of past killings attached to them, see Thesiger 1935:9-12.

their wrists those of animals which they have killed, and they will mark themselves on the forehead with the blood of an animal, and probably do the same with human blood. On returning from a raid those warriors who have not yet killed must provide the animals for the feasting, and they are ragged unmercifully by their more successful companions, their clothes being soiled and cow dung rubbed in their hair. [...]

There is a widespread but incorrect belief that a Dankali may not marry until he has killed, but no woman other than his wife would submit to his embraces. “You are a woman and I am a woman, so why do you come to me?” she is reputed to exclaim (Thesiger 1935:4-5).

3. The Impact of Islamic Conversion

We have seen that far from being content to parrot earlier authors’ words, Arabic accounts of the Cushitic custom of emasculating enemies did evolve and offered ever new explanations of the exotic practice. One would expect the passage of time to result in ever more detailed accounts due to the sheer accumulation of data. Also, one would intuitively expect that the higher the number of Cushite converts to Islam, and therefore of potential native informants on the custom, the more precise the Arabic accounts and explanations. Although Yāqūt’s text cited above would seem to give substance to this intuition, in fact quite the contrary tendency appears to characterise more recent Arabic sources.

The Cushitic peoples of the Horn of Africa began to convert to Islam in significant numbers around the 5th/11th century, a process that gained momentum in the subsequent centuries¹⁶. Parallel with this development, an instantly perceptible change occurred in the tone of Arabic accounts of the culture and society of the peoples of the region. The reason is as simple as the resulting changes are striking: with the conversion of many Cushite groups to Islam the more barbaric (to Muslim Arab eyes) aspects of their cultures began to be downplayed or altogether glossed over in the sources. Growing familiarity with the African coast of the Red Sea and growing awareness of the professed (if largely nominal) Islamic faith of the Cushitic inhabitants of that region led to less emphasis in Arabic sources on the savage customs of those people and more emphasis on their piety (at least the piety of some of them).

Yāqūt’s text cited above juxtaposes information about the custom of mutilating enemies and the Islamic credentials of some of the Cushitic peoples, but this is somewhat exceptional. The general tendency among Arab authors is to highlight

¹⁶ The coastal cAfar of Eritrea began to convert in the 5th/11 c.; see Miran 2005:181.

either one or the other. Either the Cushites are heathen savages who mutilate their hapless adversaries, or else they are Muslims and then mention of their savage emasculatory custom has no place in the description of their society. As Aziz al-Azmeh observed, ethnographic descriptions in premodern Arabic texts tend to stress either the marks of civilisation or the marks of barbarousness to highlight either proximity to or distance from Arabo-Islamic culture respectively (al-^cAzma 1991:223). If that general observation is true, as I believe it is, it is hardly surprising that the more Islamised the portrayal of an ethnic group, such as the ^cAfar or the Somali, in Arabic writings the less emphasis on the custom of mutilation. The ‘land of Berbera’ gradually loses its status as a region of menacing black savages and is increasingly presented as a land of coreligionists, fellow human beings despite their strangeness and their ebony complexion. Such is the tenor of the accounts of, among others, Ibn Sa^cīd and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368-9 or 779/1377) on Berbera and Zayla^c respectively (Ibn Sa^cīd, *Ğuġrāfiyā* 81, 99; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla* 147). The nomenclature of ethnicity also perceptibly changed. One encounters fewer instances of the use of the umbrella term *Barbar* in reference to these peoples, whereas more exact ethnic appellations such as *Ğabart*, *Şūmāl* and *Dankal* (*Danākil*) appear¹⁷.

The Egyptian Ibn Faḍlallāh al-^cUmarī (d. 749/1349) is one of those Muslim authors who relied on native informants for their data on the Cushitic peoples of the Horn of Africa. He mentions a certain “Sheikh ^cAbdallāh al-Zayla^cī and a group of the jurists of those lands (*ġamā^ca min fuqahā^c hādhihi l-bilād*)” [i.e. southeast Ethiopia and northern Somalia] as the main source of his information¹⁸. As we will presently see, other persons with first-hand acquaintance of the Ethiopian lands were also among the informants of al-^cUmarī. Despite the remarkably good supply of data on this region that al-^cUmarī could draw on, he does not mention the infamous custom of emasculating enemies. His reticence

¹⁷ Even sub-ethnic labels occasionally occur in Arabic geographical texts, such as the name of the Hawiye clan of central and southern Somalia. See for instance Ibn Sa^cīd, *Ğuġrāfiyā* 82; al-Idrīsī, *Uns* 30. The ethnic name Somali first appears in the early 9th/15th century in songs celebrating the victory of the Ethiopian emperor Yeshāq over his Muslim enemies; see Lewis 1960:222.

¹⁸ Apparently ^cAbdallāh al-Zayla^cī headed a delegation of jurists from the small Muslim states of southeast Ethiopia visiting the Egyptian ruler’s court when al-^cUmarī had the opportunity to meet and interview him. See al-^cUmarī, *Masālik* III(iv), 17. A century later on, al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) – or the immediate source of most of his data, Ibn Sa^cīd al-Andalusī (d. 685/1266) – identifies the globetrotter (*al-ġawwāl fi l-arḍ*) and littérateur Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad b. ^cAbd al-Ḥāliq b. Muḥammad Ḥalaf al-Maġāšī al-Maġribī and “some of those who have travelled in those lands [i.e. the Muslim parts of Abyssinia] (*ba^cd al-musāfirīn ilayhā*)” as sources of the information he cites: not native informants but Arab visitors to Ethiopia. See al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 83, 105.

might appear curious, yet more curious still is the fact that this reticence seems to be deliberate. One must be led to this conclusion by observing that in a totally different social context he does mention the practice of castration and associates it firmly with the non-Muslim population. It is hardly conceivable that both al-ʿUmarī and his native informants would fail to bring up the theme of the widespread and well-known Cushitic custom during their detailed conversations on the practice of emasculating slaves intended for service as eunuchs. Here is the passage discussing the latter topic:

It is to the [capital] city [of the Muslim state of Hadiya¹⁹] that slaves (*al-ḥuddām*) are brought from the lands of the pagans. I have been informed by the trader al-Ḥāḡḡ Faraḡ al-Fawwī that the emperor of Amhara [i.e. the ruler of Christian Ethiopia to whom the small Muslim states paid tribute] prohibits the castration of slaves and objects to it very strongly. The slave-raiders (?)²⁰ go to a town called Wašalawā, whose inhabitants are savages (*hamaḡ*) without any religion, and it is there that the slaves are castrated. Other than them no-one in the whole land of the Abyssinians ever practices this. Likewise the traders: when they buy slaves they take them to Wašalawā with the intention of having them castrated, for this increases their price. Then all those who have been castrated are brought to the town of Hadiya, where the razor is operated on them a second time to open their urethra, because it tends to have been blocked by castration. That done, they are given medical treatment in Hadiya till they recover, since the people of Wašalawā have no knowledge of medical treatment. Now, I asked al-Fawwī of the reason why Hadiya, of all the similar [Muslim principalities of Ethiopia] specialises in this. He said that because it is nearer than any of the rest of [the Muslim] countries [of Ethiopia] to Wašalawā its inhabitants have acquired the skill to treat those [castrated slaves]²¹.

¹⁹ Hadiya is a Cushitic-speaking ethnic group of southern Ethiopia (west of Lake Zway), many of them today heavily Islamised and mixed with the Oromo. Here the reference is to a small mediaeval Muslim state dominated by this ethnic group. On the history of this group and their mediaeval state, see Braukämper 1980.

²⁰ This translation is a mere guess that appears to be dictated by the context. The manuscript reads *as-surrāq*, in a clear and legible hand, which makes little evident sense unless ‘snatchers [of people]’ is meant – the way I translated it.

²¹ al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik* III(iv), 22-3. The informant goes on to add that the lives of the majority of the castrated slaves cannot be saved by the time they reach Hadiya because treatment is too late to arrive by that stage, a sickening indication of the horrors of the slave trade. For a slightly different and somewhat abridged version (obviously going back to the same source), see al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 84.

Particularly noteworthy are the repeated and emphatic declarations regarding castration being a specialisation, indeed a monopoly, of *non-Muslim* Cushites of southern Ethiopia, living to the west of the Islamic state of Hadiya along the Great Rift Valley. It bears repeating that emasculation in fact continued to be practiced among the Islamised Cushites of this region – although in a social context very different from that of the slave trade – and therefore this statement seems to serve a deliberate ideological purpose²².

The Egyptian author Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) shares a significant part of his data with al-ʿUmarī, like the latter drawing heavily on information available in Ibn Saʿīd al-Andalusī's works. al-Maqrīzī's treatise titled *al-Ilmām bi-aḥbār man bi-arḍ al-Ḥabaša min mulūk al-islām* discusses the Muslim rulers of the Horn of Africa, the population under their dominion and their struggles against Christian highland Ethiopia. Needless to say where al-Maqrīzī's sympathies lay; one is not surprised to find a sympathetic portrayal of the Muslim side in these protracted wars. However, even the briefish ethnographical and geographical passages on various Cushitic and other black African ethnicities omit any mention of the savage customs of Cushitic-speaking Muslims. As noted above, here too one encounters the same account as in al-ʿUmarī on the non-Muslims castrating slaves to produce eunuchs and Muslims curing the wounds and scars resulting from the ruthless operation. And here too the subject of emasculating enemies being a custom rife among Muslims is not broached. On the other hand, the piety of the people of these lands is a recurrent theme in the treatise²³.

Indigenous (or quasi-indigenous) Muslim authors also tended to leave the savage aspects of Islamised Cushitic cultures discreetly unmentioned. An example is the chronicle of the wars of the Muslim state of Adal (in what is now east and southeast Ethiopia) against the Christian highlanders of Ethiopia. One would hardly expect a source intrinsically sympathetic to the Muslim side in these armed struggles to dwell at any length on the savage customs of the Islamised peoples, and indeed this work too is silent on this point²⁴. The work is an especially useful

²² Indeed castration of Ethiopian slaves with the aim of producing eunuchs for the Middle Eastern market also took place in Egypt itself as well, for instance in the village of Abū Tīg in Upper Egypt and in another village near Asyūṭ. See Toledano 1984:383. This does not mean, of course, that al-ʿUmarī's account is invalid as far as the Muslim principalities of south Ethiopia are concerned.

²³ E.g. al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 82; and see in particular the geographical passages on Berbera, Zaylaʿ and other Ethiopian Muslim lands on pp. 102, 104-105.

²⁴ To be sure, its main concern is historical instead of ethnographic, yet the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* (composed in the mid-10th/16th century) is not altogether devoid of ethnographic details when the occasion arises to mention them. For instance, in one passage it briefly describes the construction and use of the wooden rafts (*lahā*) employed in crossing the ʿAwaš river in ʿAfar territory (and, incidentally, correctly identifies Lake Abḥe as the end

source on the various Somali clans, mentioning as it does quite a number of clan names that exist to this day, such as the Marrēḥān, Habar Magadle, Gerrī, Herti, Yibirī²⁵. As befits participants of a jihad, the Somali are not portrayed here as savages, even though their formidable fighting prowess is occasionally hinted at. Indeed, while this is only a minor theme in the chronicle, the warlike and even perfidious nature of some of the (palpably unreliable) Somali allies of the Adal state is exposed in some passages, as when the Habar Magadle clan turned to banditry and refused to pay the *zakāt*, or when Ḥirābu, the chief of the Marrēḥān clan, killed a royal courtier and fled to the territory of the Hawiye clan²⁶. However, on the custom of mutilating defeated enemies the chronicle has nothing to say, although there is no reason to suppose that the Cushitic (°Afar, Somali and Sidāmo) participants of the jihad temporarily renounced their custom.

Another source that, while being quite preoccupied with the savageness of some of the Cushite inhabitants of the Horn of Africa, is silent on the custom of emasculation is the travel report of the Yemeni judge and statesman al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad b. Ṣalāḥ al-Yūsufī al-Ġamālī al-Ḥaymī (d. 1070/1660). Sent in 1056/1646-7 as an envoy from the Yemeni imam to Fasiladas, the emperor of Christian Abyssinia (r. 1632-67), he crossed the Red Sea and landed at the port of Baylūl on the south Eritrean coast, whence he made his way to the Abyssinian capital Gondar through the heartland of the °Afar region first and then through the lands of the formidable northern Oromo groups (Azebo, Wallo, Yaḡḡu and Raya). Having returned from his mission in Abyssinia after several years' absence, he recorded his experiences in a work titled *Sīrat al-Ḥabaša*, in which he dwells repeatedly and at great length on his troubles *en route* and on the warlike nature of the natives, especially the °Afar and the Oromo. As the Yemeni chronicle of Abū Ṭālib (d. after 1170/1756-7) puts it, al-Ḥaymī reached the Abyssinian court only “after he suffered great terrors and encountered perilous situations on account of the Galla [Oromo] and other peoples (*ba°da an kābada aḥwālan wa-laḡiya šiddat aḥwāl min al-Qālla wa-ḡayriḥā*)” (Abū Ṭālib, *Tārīḥ* 13-14). Nowhere in his report do we find mention of the emasculation of slain enemies, but it does elaborate on the theme of

of this river before it disappears in the desert). See °Arab-faqīḥ, *Futūḥ* I, 24 (French tr. II, 53-54).

²⁵ E.g. °Arab-faqīḥ, *Futūḥ* I, 20-1, 30-3, 56-8 (French text II, 44-6, 67-73, 118-21). The chronicle makes no mention of the °Afar, but according to Munzinger, “we cannot doubt that a large part of his army were Afars”. See Munzinger 1869:214.

²⁶ In both cases punitive expeditions (or the threat thereof) had to be employed to force the obedience of the supposed Somali ‘allies’. See °Arab-faqīḥ, *Futūḥ* I, 20-1, 80-1 (and French tr. II, 44-5, 151-2). Also cf. Lewis 1999:16-17. Later Arabic sources also occasionally picture the (Muslim) Somali as being formidable warriors (but not quite savages). See for instance Abū Ṭālib, *Tārīḥ*, 339-340, where the ethnic appellation Ṣūmal is used to describe the warlike inhabitants of the land of Adama near Zayla°.

the exceptional ferocity of these Cushitic-speaking ethnic groups. It is instructive to look at the passages dealing with the nominally Muslim ʿAfar, one of the Cushitic peoples infamous for the custom of emasculation. That al-Ḥaymī was not impressed with the depth of the Islamisation of this people is an understatement; as will be obvious from the following passages, he viewed them as little more than savages only marginally improved by Islam:

When we met the sultan Šaḥīm [b. Kāmīl ad-Dankālī, the ʿAfar chieftain of Baylūl], he arrived in the company of a numerous group of the Bedouin men [i.e. ʿAfar tribesmen] inhabiting that region: of a repulsive appearance, they are devoid of any trace of compliance with the rules of the noble and pure divine law (*šarʿ*). [I can state this] because of what I observed of their men and women freely socialising, all of them being naked, leaving their private parts uncovered (*lā yasturūna ʿawrātihim*) and carrying on their reprehensible deeds openly, as though reprehensible deeds were praiseworthy in their eyes and bad innovations acceptable and usual (*ka-anna l-munkar ʿindahum min al-maʿrūf wa-l-bidaʿ ladayhim min al-amr al-maʿnūs al-maʿlūf*). They do not speak Arabic, having a language of their own different from that of the Abyssinians, so that whenever we wished to talk to them we needed an interpreter. [...] Every one of these aforementioned Bedouins who came to us simply wanted to have a look and [get some] knowledge of these visiting Arabs [viz. our party]. When they arrived they would gaze at us from afar, all astonished by what they saw, but we were even more astonished by what we saw among them: “*Or deemest thou that most of them hear or understand? They are but as the cattle; nay, they are further astray from the way*”²⁷. Someone who knows them well told me that their chief whose orders they follow is married to twelve women. Others do the same, as we could ascertain from stories we heard from those who know them well. Moreover, they [the ʿAfar tribesmen] wanted to know our situation and spy on us [in order to know] whether it would be possible to ambush us on the route we follow and to take anything from our hands, or [to commit] any other corrupt act that robbers and Kurds and brigands tend to do²⁸.

The text certainly strikes the reader with its hostile tenor. The author shows little sympathy with the ʿAfar, effectively regarding them as dangerous brigands and ignorant nominal Muslims, akin to the warlike Bedouin tribes and the Kurds of

²⁷ Quran 25:44. I followed Arberry’s translation.

²⁸ al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra* 84-85. Indeed, on several occasions the Yemeni delegation got to the brink of armed violence against their own ʿAfar escorts supposed to protect them against hostile ʿAfar tribesmen; see *op. cit.* 93.

the Middle East. An implicit acknowledgement of the horror al-Ḥaymī and his delegation felt towards the ʿAfar is that they would not risk returning by the same route to Baylūl, preferring the northern route to Turkish-held Maṣṣawaʿ instead. Yet it is equally significant that, however grudgingly, al-Ḥaymī does recognise the warlike and treacherous ʿAfar tribesmen as fellow-Muslims and reserves the greater part of his opprobrium to the (still mostly non-Muslim) Oromo. He repeatedly stresses that the dreadfulness of the ʿAfar pales in comparison to the heathen Oromo. He speaks of being afraid of ʿAfar raiders yet adds that fear of the Oromo tends to be even greater (*al-ḥawf al-aʿzam min al-Qālla*). A few passages later he specifies his claim at more length, speaking of the horrendous and warlike character and military might of the Oromo and the fear they strike in their neighbours, including the ʿAfar of the Awsa state. Summing up his characterisation, he likens the Oromo to the mediaeval Mongol invaders of the Middle East²⁹. Given the well-attested ferocity of the ʿAfar and the more than justified dread of all outsiders to cross their lands, there is little reason to think that al-Ḥaymī’s judgement of the Oromo being even more dangerous is based on factual details (indeed, the Yemeni delegation suffered more from the ʿAfar than from the Oromo). His judgement must have rested at least partly on perceptions of cultural proximity and difference. Since the ʿAfar were, as we have said, already Muslim (if only nominally) at this time, for a Muslim traveller like al-Ḥaymī the Oromo were far more suitable candidates for the role of the ultimate bogeyman. In that period, most of the Oromo still followed their aboriginal Cushitic religion, even though they would later convert in large numbers to Islam (and to some extent to Orthodox Christianity), hence they were considered as heinous heathens by both the Muslims and the Abyssinian Christians³⁰.

²⁹ al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra* 86-87. Interestingly enough, the natives – the ʿAfar, the Oromo as well as (probably) Christian Tigrinya speakers of the Eritrean highlands – in their turn apparently also came to regard the Yemenites as violent savages and even cannibals, mostly due to the Yemenites’ use of firearms. See al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra, passim*; and aš-Šawkānī, *Badr* I, 132-133.

³⁰ Indeed a folk etymology sought to derive the name Galla (the older, pejorative term for the Oromo) from the Arabic phrase *qāl lā*, “he said no”, supposedly as an answer to the call to convert to Islam at the time of the great 16th-century jihad against highland Ethiopia. See Rey 1924:88. A further coincidence strengthening this explanation is the similarity of the Somali terms for ‘Oromo’ (*Gālla*) and ‘pagan’ (*gāl*); see Lewis 1999:11. The Oromo were the last great Cushitic group to convert to Islam (and unlike the ʿAfar and Somali, not all of them are Muslim today), but pockets of centuries-old Islamic communities do exist in their region, notably the famous pilgrimage site of Shaykh Ḥusayn in Bale province (southern Ethiopia). For a brief but informative eyewitness description of this shrine, see for instance Neumann 1902:376-378. On the conversion of the majority of the Oromo to Islam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see for instance Gnamo 2002:106-111; Abbink 1998:115-116; Shack 1978:301, 303.

In a later Arabic source that also offers a description of the Muslim inhabitants of the Horn of Africa, the chronicle of the Egyptian historian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī (d. 1241/1825-6), one finds absolutely no mention of the barbaric aspects of Cushitic cultures. This is hardly surprising, considering the fact that al-Ġabartī's own immediate forbears originated in that region and that the context in which he speaks of the Muslim Abyssinians is the memory of his father and his ancestors. This author dwells at great length on the piety of the Muslims of Ethiopia and their cultural links to Islam and Islamic history, especially with reference to those who come to the Middle East to study, a theme already introduced by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī:

The country of Ġabart is [the same as] the country of az-Zayla^c within the lands of Abyssinia under the dominion of the *Ḥaṭī*, [which is the title of] the king of Abyssinia. There are quite a number of countries inhabited by this ethnic group (*tā'ifa*) which is composed of the Muslims [living] in that region (*iqḷīm*). They follow the Ḥanafīte and Šāfi'ite legal schools and none of the other ones and trace their origin back to Aslam b. ʿAqīl b. Abī Ṭālib. Their leader in the time of the Prophet was the famous Negus (*an-Naḡāšī*) who believed in him [i.e. in the Prophet] even though he never saw him and for whom [the Prophet] performed the special prayer for an absent person (*ṣalāt al-ḡayba*), as it is well-known from the books of Hadith. A people characterised by austerity and righteousness (*yaḡlubu ʿalayhim al-taqaššuf wa-ṣ-ṣalāh*), they come from their country with the intention of the Meccan pilgrimage and to stay on for study (*wa-l-muḡāwara fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*), walking all the way to Mecca. They have a college (*riwāq*) of their own in Medina as well as in Mecca and at the Azhar University in Cairo... (al-Ġabartī, *ʿAḡā'ib* I, 441).

Let it be understood that the ʿAfar and other Islamised Cushites did not cease to practice the gory custom of emasculation and the display of severed male genitalia as war trophies. In fact, the custom is reported to have been alive quite into the twentieth century. Furthermore, despite a professed and often fervent allegiance to Islam, some of the Muslim Cushites could in fact be only very superficially touched by the requirements of their faith. One is reminded here of the remarks of al-Ḥaymī concerning the superficial adoption of Islam by the ʿAfar in the eleventh/seventeenth century, and later western sources seem to confirm this judgement. For instance, the explorer W. Munzinger (who eventually lost his life in an ambush of ʿAfar warriors) states that some of the northern ʿAfar, Muslim though they consider themselves to be, never bother to pray, indeed they actively discourage their fellow tribesmen from doing so as they believe that praying impedes rainfall. Outside the coastal strip, the northern ʿAfar did not fast and many

did not know as much as the name of the prophet Muḥammad³¹. However, in speaking of the Islamised Cushites of northeast Africa, some of whom came to be reputable colleagues of the Arab authors writing about them (authors in Arabic themselves like al-Ġabartī), the negative image inevitably gave way to a stress on the pious aspects of their culture. Among these aspects the ancient roots of Islam in the Horn of Africa are regularly evoked, as they are in al-Ġabartī's text cited above, so as to enhance the Islamic credentials of the Muslims of this region. The 'first emigration' (*al-ḥiġra al-ūlā*) of certain companions and relatives of the Prophet to the Abyssinian kingdom and the settlement of Muslims there well before the beginning of the Islamic calendar remains a source of pride and identification of Muslims in the Horn of Africa to this day³².

As a somewhat more benign, 'civilised' image was increasingly applied to the Muslim °Afar and the Somali, the emphasis on the savage aspect of Cushitic cultures could be shifted to other related, yet at that time still predominantly non-Muslim, ethnic groups, especially the Oromo. As we saw in al-Ḥaymī's text, even in this period the theme of the ferocity of the Cushitic peoples might appear in Arabic sources, but attention shifts to the particular savagery of Cushites not yet Islamised.

A possible point of contention needs to be addressed here before rounding off the preceding argument. One would be perfectly justified to observe that the absence of any commentary on, indeed recognition of, the barbaric customs of Muslim Cushites in many late Arabic sources could more plausibly be interpreted as a function of literary genre instead of a reflection of religious developments on the ground. That is an accurate observation. Indeed it is in biographies (of a

³¹ Munzinger 1869:211, 219; and also cf. Insoll 2003:75-76 for comparable assessments of °Afar Islam from various sources. As for the southern °Afar of the °Awaš river valley, Thesiger observes that "Islam sits rather lightly upon them" and notes the revulsion of many Somali at the °Afar custom of eating (ritually unclean) hippopotamus meat. See Thesiger 1935:2. It is worth noting that there seems to be a perceptible difference in profundity of Islamisation between the two great tribal blocs of the °Afar, with the °Asahyammara bloc of tribes being markedly more ferocious and preserving far more of their pre-Islamic culture than do the °Adohyammara. See Chedeville 1966:178. In the Horn of Africa, the °Afar were not the only case of a nominally Muslim people having beliefs and practices strikingly unorthodox in devout Muslim eyes; see for instance Braukämper 1992:199-201 on the Fandano cult of the south Ethiopian Hadiya people.

³² See for instance Abbink 1998:111; Miran 2005:180; Insoll 2003:46-47. The Muslim Cushites themselves also cultivated traditions emphasising their links to Islam and the Middle East, mostly in the form of the fictitious genealogies connecting their clans to various Arabian immigrants. Such mythical Arab forefathers included Ḥaḍalmāḥis (also known as Gibdo) among the °Afar and the sheikhs Dārōd and Isāq among the Somali. See for instance Chedeville 1966:178-179; Kamil 2004:184; Yasin 2008:41; Lewis 1960:219-220; Lewis 1999:11-12, 23-24.

sympathetic tone), chronicles and *manāqib* literature that one tends to find the positive (read pious) aspects of Cushitic societies emphasised, while the above examples of the negative portrayal of Cushites as savages come from traditional geographical literature. However, the very fact that the progressive conversion of Cushitic-speaking peoples went in tandem with an increase in the production of Arabic texts of the genres more amenable to a sympathetic portrayal of these black Africans seems to strengthen my basic argument. The conversion of these groups to Islam made it possible to treat them in the context of biographical, historiographical and hagiographical genres, and at the same time it made them less likely candidates for the role of exotic barbarians with savage folkways in the context of geographical literature. The changing perception of the objects of ethnographical curiosity affected the genres in which it was felt to be appropriate to discuss them.

4. Conclusions

Bloody and savage customs of exotic peoples have always fascinated observers, be they ethnographers, travellers or colonial administrators. This thrilling curiosity is amply demonstrated by the gallons of ink that have been shed on descriptions, explanations and condemnations of such horrific phenomena as cannibalism in the Pacific and elsewhere, headhunting in southeast Asia, and the gory religious ceremonies of the ancient Aztecs and Maya. An example of such a dramatically savage phenomenon, which obviously riveted the imagination of mediaeval Arab authors, is the custom of emasculating enemies among the Cushitic-speaking peoples of the Horn of Africa. The above overview of some Arabic sources describing this custom is evidence not only of a keen interest in the exotic and the savage but also of a serious attempt at understanding the social context that gave rise to such customs – of a sort of rudimentary ethnographic interest, despite the inescapable anachronism of using this modern term. Putting terminological questions aside, one can observe a number of interesting features in the sequence of Arabic ‘ethnographic’ accounts of the Cushitic custom. First and most importantly, they try to find the social function or meaning of the custom rather than simply attributing it to the inherent savagery of the natives. Secondly, they do not limit their efforts to accepting the earlier authors’ claims but offer their own independent interpretation (although this may be at least partly due to unfamiliarity with previous scholarship on the subject). Thirdly, the accounts rely on information obtained from eyewitness sources, typically traders having visited the Horn of Africa, and with the passage of time and the gradual Islamisation of the region one increasingly sees native informants cited as sources of data. One may well expect the growing numbers of Cushitic-speaking Muslim informants to result in increasingly detailed and accurate descriptions of the custom of emasculation (as

well as other aspects of Cushitic cultures), but perhaps surprisingly, this does not seem to have been the case. In a sense, one observes quite the contrary.

As more and more of the Cushitic peoples converted to Islam and thus rose from the status of heathens and savages to the dignity of fellow-Muslims in the eyes of Middle Eastern Arab authors, the savage and repulsive aspects of their indigenous cultures began to be downplayed in Arabic sources. While the emasculation of defeated enemies continued to be an important part of the culture of many Islamised Cushites, such as the ʿAfar, many Somali (notably the ʿĪsa clan of the Dir group of clans) and the Muslim Oromo, Arabic sources are perceptibly reticent about this phenomenon. Instead, they typically present the ancient cultural and historical links of the region and its Muslim peoples to Arabia and Islam (in the form of Arab genealogies, evocation of the ‘first *hiğra*’, etc.). When it comes to images of savagery, Arabic sources show a tendency to connect these with those Cushitic groups that remained non-Muslim, such as many Oromo groups. Thus al-ʿUmarī mentions castration as practiced only by the non-Muslim western neighbours of the Islamic Hadiya state, although he relied on an informant who was surely aware of the emasculatory customs of the people around Zaylaʿ town; and al-Ḥaymī focuses on the ferocity and barbarity of the non-Muslim Oromo, although he passed through the land of the Muslim yet dreaded and hostile ʿAfar nomads, a people infamous for the custom of emasculation.

Here deeply rooted notions of civilisation versus savagery seem to have played a prominent role. For all the obvious ethnographic interest of Arab travellers and intellectuals, stereotypes ended up victorious over ethnographic observation. Savagery is the antithesis of Islam, *ergo* Muslims cannot be savages, no matter how superficial their adoption of Islam. Caught between their keen ethnographic curiosity and a deeply felt solidarity with fellow-Muslims, authors would choose to go and look for authentic savages further afield, beyond the ever-expanding borders of the Islamic world.

Comparison of the data in Arabic sources:

ar- Rāmhurmuzī (fl. mid- 4th/10th c.)	al-Marwazī (d. 514/1120)	Yāqūt (d. 626/1229)	Abū l-Fidā' (d. 732/1331)	
people of Berbera	<i>Barbar</i>	<i>Barbar</i> : people living around Zayla ^c	<i>Ḥāsa</i> : a type of Ḥabaša; behind the Eritrean coast	ethnic group practising the custom
strangers: foreign traders	strangers: foreign traders	whoever is captured	whoever is captured	typical victims
male boasting: sign of courage	male boasting	marriage: proof of worth as a suitor	marriage: “dowry”, male boasting	social function of custom
yes	yes	–	–	collection of ‘trophies’
yes	yes (on huts)	–	–	display of ‘trophies’
–	–	yes	–	mention of Muslims among the Cushites

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