

**WHAT IS A NOMINAL MUSLIM?  
AN ARAB TRAVELLER'S ENCOUNTERS WITH MUSLIM  
COMMUNITIES IN 17TH-CENTURY ETHIOPIA**

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Professor István Ormos is the foremost – indeed very nearly the only – authority in Hungary on Ethiopian Christianity and the Ge‘ez language, to whom we owe, among other things, the Hungarian translation of the hagiography of Tāklä Hāymānōt. He is also a noted expert on Arabic geographical literature, although here his emphasis is on the Arabic sources for early Hungarian ethnohistory. I owe him a great deal of gratitude as a former student of his; my research interests, however, have little obvious overlap with the above-mentioned fields. Nonetheless, since studying Islam is an overriding concern for all of us who have an interest in Middle Eastern cultures, a few notes on how to define the concept of ‘nominal’ adherence to Islam seem to be a fitting contribution to this volume. To imbue the subject with additional relevance to Professor Ormos’s expertise in Ethiopian studies, I will rely on an interesting and relatively little-known Arabic source on Ethiopia in particular.

It is an account of a journey undertaken in 1057–1058/1647–1648 by the Yemeni intellectual al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad ibn Ṣalāḥ al-Ḥaymī (d. 1070/1660) as an envoy of the Yemeni ruler to the court of the Christian Ethiopian emperor Fasilādās (r. 1632–1667) in his capital, Gondār.<sup>1</sup> Al-Ḥaymī’s journal describes the historical circumstances and motivations of his embassy (al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 77–83), but we need not be detained by these aspects here. More relevant to this article’s subject is the fact that throughout his travelogue, he comments on the wide range of different kinds of religious observance and lifestyles that he encountered among Ethiopian Muslim communities.<sup>2</sup> These African Muslims included Cushitic-speaking lowland pastoralists having an extremely primitive material culture, as well as Semitic-speaking,

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the Egyptian edition that I use for this article, there are two earlier editions (and translations) of the text, namely Peiser 1898 and van Donzel 1986. For al-Ḥaymī’s biography, see aṣ-Ṣawkānī, *Badr* I, 132–133; al-Muḥibbī, *Tārīḥ* II, 16–17. For a brief summary of the mission, see Abū Ṭālib, *Tārīḥ* 13–14.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience, I am using the term “Ethiopian Muslims” in the loose sense of Muslims living in the wider region of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is to be stressed, however, that these communities show an extreme degree of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity.

sedentary highland communities with a great number of literate members among them. My essay is concerned with the way this Arab observer deals with the striking cultural variety to be found among local Muslim populations, focusing on his view about the more ‘primitive’ cultures of the lowlanders.

## 1 ‘Nominal Muslims’

### 1.1 *The Concept*

In colonial and postcolonial discussions of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, the idea of ‘nominal Muslims’ is a frequently used heuristic concept. In the colonial period, the idea is developed further to give rise to utterly misleading stereotypes such as *l’islam noir* of some French colonials, a variety of Islam that was supposed to be characterised by lack of religious fervour, ignorance of the essentials of Islamic dogma, and a preponderance of superstitions and primitive magical practices, as opposed to textual authority. It is, according to this fallacious view, quite unlike the ‘proper’ Islam of, say, the Arabs and other Middle Eastern Muslims. The problematic nature of the idea of ‘nominal’ Muslims has been noted and commented upon in African studies in recent decades, and the extent to which such ideas borrow from the simplistic discourse of Islamic reformists and fundamentalists has also been recognised.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2 *Nominal Muslims Par Excellence: The Cushitic Nomads*

Yet nominal Islam is a concept not altogether alien to the discourse of premodern Muslim authors. Many of them express bafflement, indignation and even intense disapproval of what strikes them as the superficiality of Islamic observance of certain ethnic groups, whether in Africa or elsewhere. Al-Ḥaymī’s ultimate ‘nominal’ Muslims were the ‘Afar of what is today the borderlands of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Let us consider his passages on his first encounter with these Cushitic-speaking nomads that took place in Baylūl, a modest settlement on the Red Sea coast in what is now Eritrea. The fear of and difficulties with the local ‘Afar population forced the author and his companions to camp outside the settlement:

“[...] A big group of the men of the [‘Afar] nomads came to see us: of repulsive appearance, totally devoid of the morality [associated with] the norms of the noble and pure Islamic law (*ṣarī‘a*). Thus we saw their men freely mingling with the womenfolk, all of them being naked with nothing to hide their private

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Colvin 1974: 593–594; Cordell 1985: 96; Magnant 1992: 7; Peterson 2002: 384–386.

parts (*lā yasturūna ʿawrātihim*). They do not even hide their ugly conduct, as though reprehensible acts (*munkar*) were for them commendable (*maʿrūf*), and innovations (*bidaʿ*) customary and usual things. They speak a non-Arabic (*a ʿgamī*) language, which is not the same as that of the Ethiopians, so that in speaking to them, we needed an interpreter. [...] When they came to us, they would watch us from afar, being astonished at our sight while we were even more astonished at theirs: “*Or deemest thou that most of them hear or understand? They are but as the cattle; nay, they are further astray from the way.*”<sup>4</sup> Someone who knew these people well told us that their chief whose word they follow has twelve wives, and others also do so, as we could learn from the reports of those who know their customs. In addition to that, they were eager to gather information and spy on us, so that they should learn what route we would take and find a way to take our belongings, and suchlike evil things that robbers, Kurds, and highwaymen will do.”<sup>5</sup>

According to al-Ḥaymī, only the threat of firearms deterred the ʿAfar nomads from attacking the expedition: one is reminded of colonial accounts of African travel *à la* Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904). Rather than fellow-Muslims, the objects of his description appear more like ferocious barbarians. It is instructive to compare this passage with the characterisation given by Ibn Ḡubayr (d. 614/1217) four and a half centuries earlier of the *Beḡa* nomads living around the port of ʿAyḏāb, another Cushitic-speaking group of the Red Sea coastlands. Even the wording, not to speak of the general message, is quite akin to al-Ḥaymī’s report:

“[ʿAyḏāb’s] inhabitants from among the Blacks are known as the *Beḡa*. [...] Now this aforementioned group of the Blacks is a group “*further astray from the way than the cattle*” [see above] and of less intellect, having no religion whatever other than the words of the monotheistic creed (*kalimat at-tawḥīd*) that they utter so as to appear Muslims. Beyond that, their corrupt ways and

<sup>4</sup> Qurʾān 25: 44 (Arberry’s translation).

<sup>5</sup> Al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 84–85. Among the ʿAsahyammara moiety of the ʿAfar, even in the early 20th century, men were permitted to have ten wives. Of the other moiety, the ʿAdohyammara tribes, those living in today’s Djibouti set the maximum number of wives at four, but others did not observe this limit. See Thesiger 1996: 119–120. Islamic law permits polygamy, but a man may have only a maximum of four wives at any one time. Yet in African societies, and even in some Muslim African societies, high status and wealth were often expressed by, among other symbols, an ostentatious number of wives far above the limits set by Islamic precepts. Thus the founder of the 19th-century Islamic theocracy of Northern Nigeria, Usman dan Fodio, denounces this practice, which was quite widespread among the Muslim Hausa rulers. See Hiskett 1960: 561 [Arabic text]. Usman’s former teacher, Ḡibrīl ibn ʿUmar, went beyond denouncing such breaches of Islamic norms and regarded the practice of having more than four wives and the lack of gender segregation and veiling as proofs of unbelief (*kufīr*). See Hiskett 1962: 589.

customs are disagreeable and not permissible. Their men and women go about naked except for a few rags with which they hide their private parts ('*awrātihim*), but most of them do not hide [even as much as that]. In sum, they are a people without morals, and anyone who curses them cannot be faulted" (Ibn Ġubayr, *Riḥla* 48–49).

Strongly reminiscent though it is of earlier Arabic accounts, al-Ḥaymī's portrayal of the 'Afar is not entirely stereotyped; indeed, many of his observations are fully corroborated by the mid-19th century explorer Werner Munzinger's account of travels through the land of the northern 'Afar. Besides their extremely rudimentary material culture, Munzinger also found that the 'Afar had no knowledge of even elementary Islamic precepts. Thus it is only the 'Afar living directly on the Red Sea coast near Maṣawwa' and exposed for centuries to Yemeni cultural influence that were gradually learning to pray and to fast during Ramadan – two of the five fundamentals of Islamic practice – in Munzinger's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> As little as twenty kilometres into the interior of the continent, prayer and fasting were virtually unknown, as was the name of the prophet Muḥammad – and this among a nominally Muslim population. Religious life revolved instead around ancient Cushitic rituals such as animal sacrifices (of cattle and sheep, to be precise) on the summits of certain holy mountains.<sup>7</sup> The remarkable non-compliance with Islamic precepts regarding marriage, sexuality, and proper female dress, about which al-Ḥaymī had complained, was still the norm. Thus women still did not cover their faces, or indeed even their breasts, and extramarital sexual affairs were not only common but also drew no criticism whatsoever among fellow 'Afar. Islamic marriage ceremonies were often absent, with the partners simply moving into the same hut to live together, and the children born of such unions being blessed by the chieftain by way of legal sanction. Children born out of wedlock altogether were not seen as problematic at all but treated as legitimate. Munzinger is no less dismissive of the Islamic culture of the 'Afar than al-Ḥaymī two centuries earlier: "[I]n the whole of barbarous Africa there is not a race more barbarous than the Afars..."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Some distance to the south, as obvious from al-Ḥaymī's report on Baylūl, such elementary Islamic practices had been adopted much earlier (see below).

<sup>7</sup> Similar sacrificial rites on holy mountains were also customary among the southern 'Afar as well as some other Cushitic-speaking ethnic groups (such as the *Bišārīn*, a *Beḡa* subgroup) and further afield in the wider region, as among the *Zaḡāwa* of northern Dārūr. See Thesiger 1935: 8; Trimmingham 1949: 178; Harir 1999: 206–208. On the general features of old Cushitic religion (including sacrificial rites), see Lewis 1956: 145–149.

<sup>8</sup> Munzinger 1869: 219–221. A comparable opinion from the beginning of the 19th century is cited in Insoll 2003: 76. On female dress, sexual conduct, and marital customs among the 'Afar, see Thesiger 1935: 3, 5–6; Chedeville 1966: 191–195.

### 1.3 'Proper' Muslims: The Ġabartī Highlanders

Al-Ḥaymī's description of the 'Afar appears in particular relief if we compare it with his passages on a different kind of Ethiopian Muslims that he also met during his travels. I am referring to the sedentary, Semitic-speaking communities of the central highlands, then as now a Christian-majority area. More precisely, he met Muslim saintly communities of the Tigray region as well as Amharic-speaking Muslim villagers and inhabitants of the Muslim quarter of the Ethiopian capital, Gondār. Both groups represent the Ġabartī Muslims of Arabic sources.<sup>9</sup> While in the highlands, he also met representatives of the Christian majority as well as Israelites, but unlike in his passages on Muslims, he gives only a very sketchy description of these communities.<sup>10</sup> On the Falaša Jews of the Simien Mountains, he simply notes their adherence to the Israelite religion, and the fact that Christian raids have decimated their numbers (al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 96–97). From discussions with Ethiopian monks and with the court interpreter of the Ethiopian emperor, he gathered only a few pieces of information on the Ethiopian church hierarchy, and on a recent church scandal involving the *abūna* (head of the church) and the *ečägē* (the second-highest person in the church hierarchy) and resulting in the imprisonment of the former.<sup>11</sup> Lacking any deeper knowledge of, even less sympathy for, Christianity, he does not differentiate between nominal and real Christians as he does for Islam, although he does note that most Ethiopian Christians, and even most monks, know very little of Christian dogma.

Now compare al-Ḥaymī's description of the 'Afar nomads with his passage on members of Muslim scholarly lineages whom he met on the eastern fringes of the Tigray highlands, in Enderta province. The laudatory tenor of his report is hard to miss:

“There came to us in that place some religious scholars (lit. ‘jurists’, *fuqahā*), the lineage of Kabīrī Šāliḥ. They are known by this name, which is a honorific (*ism ta'zīm*) given to a man who is regarded as a saint (*mu'taqad*).<sup>12</sup> We

<sup>9</sup> On the Ġabartī, see DeGregori and Weekes 1984; Trimingham 1952: 150–153; and in Arabic al-Ġabartī, *Agā'ib* I, 452–453 (the list of Ġabartī subgroups includes not just the Amhara and other Semitic speakers but the Agaw as well).

<sup>10</sup> Although he stayed for a long time, all in all almost three years, in Ethiopia, he had apparently little interest in Christians; see aš-Šawkānī, *Badr* I 133.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra* 108–111. Al-Maqrīzī in the early 9th/15th century already noted the practice of appointing an Egyptian to head the Ethiopian church; see al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām*, 79. Thus al-Ḥaymī's data offer nothing new in this respect.

<sup>12</sup> Trimingham notes the use of the term *kabīr* (lit. ‘great’, Arabic) for teachers of Quranic schools and other Muslim scholars among the Harāri and Oromo of southern Ethiopia, but he does not mention that it was so used in the eastern fringes of Tigray, the region that al-Ḥaymī is describing here. See Trimingham 1952: 229.

carried in our hands a letter to them from our master, the imam of Yemen – may God strengthen him – as well as a valuable and luxurious garment befitting their status. We handed them the letter, gave them the garment, and, seeing on them the signs of uprightness and the radiance of Islam, we felt extremely glad at [meeting] them. Some of them could speak the language of the Arabs, so we kept asking them about things that we needed to know, and found it helpful to ascertain. Together with them another man arrived, whose name was Kabīrī Ḥayr ad-Dīn, and who had good knowledge of the legal school of aš-Šāfi‘ī. He was more learned in law (*afqah*) than the lineage of Kabīrī Šāliḥ, yet the latter were better known in that region owing to their high status. All of them, however, follow the school of the imam aš-Šāfi‘ī” (al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 94).

Such holy lineages, claiming Arabian ancestry and specialised in scholarly services to the general population, were instrumental in the conversion to Islam of many local communities, both Saho- and Tigre-speaking. Assimilated into these populations, they are still influential in the region today, with one of the most prominent lineage being called al-Kabīrī.<sup>13</sup>

Arriving in the Amharic-speaking heartland of the Ethiopian monarchy around Lake Tana, al-Ḥaymī passed by a Muslim settlement near the capital, Gondār. Here again his account betrays a sympathy that is entirely absent from his portrayal of the ‘Afar nomads:

“After twelve [days’ march], we arrived at a village near the king’s city. All of the inhabitants were Muslim, and it had a mosque as well as a school (*maktab*) for teaching the Qur’ān to children. We felt very much at ease (*ista’nasnā*) because of this, and were exceedingly glad, since it removed all the burden on our hearts resulting from the hardships of keeping bad company with infidels, and looking at them and their reprehensible customs (*munkarātihim*) [...]” (al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 97).

Gondār itself had a Muslim quarter too, and Muslims, mostly foreign merchants, were also present at the king’s court. The author happily socialised with these Muslims as well, even though the king’s Arabic interpreter, a *soi-disant* descendant of the Prophet from Central Asia called Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Buḥārī, did not quite inspire sympathy in al-Ḥaymī, as he may in fact have been an apostate.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For more on these lineages, see Miran 2005: 181–182.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Ḥaymī uses the circumlocution “he has been deprived of faith, Satan has overpowered him, and he follows the way of God’s wrath” (*suliba l-īmān wa-staḥwaḍa ‘alayhi š-šayṭān wa-salaka fī masāliḥ ar-Raḥmān*). See al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra* 100. In this period, Muslims were tolerated by the Christian Ethiopian emperors, but excluded from important state and military positions as well as from hereditary land rights; see Abbink 1998: 114.

## 2 Comparing Two Kinds of Muslim

### 2.1 General Contrasts

There can be no doubt as to al-Ḥaymī's sympathies *vis-à-vis* the two kinds of Ethiopian Muslims. His sympathetic portrayal of the Ġabartī Muslim communities contrasts strongly with his entirely negative account of the 'Afar. In fact, his report leaves no doubt that he regards the 'Afar as barely deserving of the label 'Muslim' at all. The main difference between the Ġabartī and the 'Afar is, for him, religious: the superficial Islamisation of the latter as opposed to the more profound Islamisation of the former, or, in other words, the degree of conformity with the *ṣarī'a*. He consistently stresses the exotic and repulsive customs of the 'Afar on the one hand, and the familiar learning of the Ġabartī on the other. Obviously for him, as for most other cultured mediaeval Arab observers, Islam is – or should be – an urban (and urbane) phenomenon, basically a religion of educated and civilised people. This calls to mind the description by al-Maqrīzī of Ethiopian Muslim states, for which he gathered his information from Ethiopian Muslims and travellers to Ethiopia during a stay in Mecca in 839/1435–1436. This account has nothing to say about the primitive Cushitic-speaking peoples, but just like al-Ḥaymī later, al-Maqrīzī also notes approvingly the Muslim places of worship, the proper Islamic observance, as well as the Islamic learning to be found among the Semitic-speaking Ġabartī Muslims of the highlands.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2 Cultural Markers

Al-Ḥaymī's respective sympathy and aversion are expressed in several important ways, by emphasising certain culturally significant markers of inclusion and exclusion. I will briefly discuss three such markers: the nomenclature of ethnicity, the linguistic factor, and dietary habits.

It is highly significant that, instead of an ethnonym, al-Ḥaymī refers to the 'Afar as *badw*, 'Bedouin', a term full of pejorative connotations in certain contexts. He obviously uses this term in the Ibn Ḥaldūnian sense of a non-urbanised population with an extremely primitive material culture and superficial Islamisation at best –

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 82. So does al-'Umarī (d. 749/1349) about a century earlier, cited in al-Qalqaṣandī, *Ṣubḥ* V, 324; see also Wagner 2010: 157. Two centuries after al-Ḥaymī, al-Ġabartī (d. 1240/1825; himself of Ethiopian ancestry) also stresses piety and learning as defining characteristics of Ġabartī Muslims; see al-Ġabartī, *Ağā'ib* I, 452. On the long-standing tradition in Arabic literature of sympathetic portrayals of African Muslims, see Muhammad 1985.

rather like the colonials' 'savages' really.<sup>16</sup> Far from coincidental, this usage is all the more remarkable given that al-Ḥaymī is obviously aware of the usual Arabic name for the 'Afar, *Danākil*, since he uses the *nisba* ad-Dankalī in reference to the (somewhat civilised) 'Afar ruler of Baylūl.<sup>17</sup> This usage, while seemingly idiosyncratic to al-Ḥaymī, is not without precedents in Arabic written sources, since it had long been customary to use a somewhat pejorative term in reference to the 'Afar, Somali, and related peoples of the Horn of Africa. Earlier Arabic sources tend to use another, more or less derogatory term, *Barbar* or *Barābir* (lit. 'Berbers', 'Barbarians'), to refer to the Cushitic-speaking, mostly pastoral populations of the Horn of Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Ḥaymī's aversion had undoubtedly nothing to do with ethnicity or language, for he readily excepted more civilised and urbanised 'Afar from his condemnation. Baylūl, a small town on the coast of today's Eritrea, had an 'Afar ruler whose control barely reached beyond the immediate surroundings of this settlement.<sup>19</sup> This ruler, called Šuḥaym ibn Kāmil ad-Dankalī, maintained good relations and correspondence with the governor of al-Muḥā on the Yemeni coast, as well as with the Ethiopian Christian monarch in the highlands to the west. In fact, he was brought up in the Christian highlands and still had some of his kin residing there. He also had literate courtiers, and apparently had the habit of escorting Ethiopian (presumably Muslim) traders to his town. In Baylūl, it seems to have been customary to hold the proper ceremonies for Friday prayer and the Ramadan fast. Because of his contacts with Yemen, this local ruler was quite willing to help the expedition, entertaining them lavishly as his guests, and later escorting al-Ḥaymī's party to the interior as well, through the desert wastelands of the Danakil Depression. The tenor of al-Ḥaymī's description of him is accordingly far more sympathetic than for other 'Afar.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For Ibn Ḥaldūn's understanding of the term *badw*, see Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Muqaddima* I, 243–252. On the varied connotations of the stereotyped concept of 'Bedouin' among mediaeval Arabic speakers, including characterisations of the Bedouin as primitive, wild, and irreligious, see Binay 2006, esp. 55–59, 73–74.

<sup>17</sup> On the ethnic labels applied in various languages to the 'Afar, see Yasin 2008: 41–42; Thesiger 1935: 1–2. On the use in Arabic of the term *Dankal* as early as the 7th/13th century, see Trimmingham 1952: 171; Chedeville 1966: 173 [note no. 3].

<sup>18</sup> See Yāqūt, *Mu'ğam* I, 369–370 (art. "Barbara"); al-Maqrīzī, *Ilmām* 93, 102.

<sup>19</sup> On the traditional political structures and chieftaincies of the 'Afar, see Chedeville 1966: 181–183; Yasin 2008: 44–45; Kamil 2004: 165–166; Harbeson 1978: 482–483; Trimmingham 1952: 174–175. On the role of chiefs among the related Somali, see Lewis 1955: 585–586.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 84–86. Armed escorts were an absolute precondition for crossing these badlands; see Burton 1855: 139–140.



The language barrier is an obvious constituent of cultural distance, which profoundly informs perceptions of the Other. The nomadic 'Afar could not speak Arabic: there was no direct way to communicate with them. There were, contrastingly, people capable of speaking Arabic among the highland Ġabartī, both among the scholarly lineages of Tigray and in the Muslim settlements around Gondār. Al-Ḥaymī does not fail to take emphatic notice of this fact.<sup>21</sup>

Food is another important marker of cultural exclusion and inclusion, and highly symbolic of outgroup versus ingroup status.<sup>22</sup> Between the hospitable table of Baylūl's sultan, which he praises, and the decent Muslim fare of the Muslim settlement near Gondār, al-Ḥaymī finds no palatable food. First, he complains about the all but entirely dairy- and meat-based diet of the 'Afar nomads, only occasionally supplemented with the fruit of the doum palms.<sup>23</sup> Here he craves for cereals but has to make do with the outlandish nomadic diet, a hardship exacerbated by the scarcity of water. Later on, he complains about having to prepare his own dishes when among non-Muslims, relying on his own provisions of flour ground by Muslims, while his companions had to resort to non-Muslim food by way of necessity (*ḍarūra*). It is only among the Ġabartī that he has no dietary concerns.<sup>24</sup> Here again he regards only the sedentary highlanders as fully civilised Muslims and his equals, excluding the 'Afar nomads from the orbit of Muslim civilisation. They are, in short, barbarians only nominally within the *umma*, with the exception of their sultan, whose hospitality is acceptable to a proper, civilised Muslim.

### 3 Conclusions: How to Define a Nominal Muslim

Whatever their shortcomings, nominal Muslims *are* Muslims. Here the terminology of inclusion is unequivocal and significant. Like both al-Ḥaymī and Ibn Ġubayr in the excerpts cited above, learned Muslim authors would often express the notion of 'nominal' Islam by juxtaposing the mechanical utterance of the Islamic creed

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<sup>21</sup> Ignorance of Arabic is likewise cited as a mark of nominal Islam in Usman dan Fodio's *Sirāḡ al-iḥwān*; see Hiskett 1962: 580.

<sup>22</sup> It is an especially important sign, and indeed determinant, of religious identity in the wider Ethiopian region; see Braukämper 1992: 204–205; Insoll 2003: 72–73.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, the doum palm also furnished another essential item in the diet of some desert-dwelling 'Afar groups: the fermented sap was made into palm wine and drunk daily. See Munzinger 1869: 199–200; Kamil 2004: 173.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Ḥaymī, *Sīra*, 93, 97. On the markedly dissimilar dietary traditions of the Ġabartī and the 'Afar, compare DeGregori and Weekes 1984: 346 and Kamil 2004: 173, respectively. The southern 'Afar and the Wayto of the Lake Tana region also had an item on their diet that made others question their Islamic credentials, namely hippopotamus meat. See Thesiger 1935: 2; Thesiger 1996: 106; Gamst 1984: 853–854.

(*ṣahāda*) – a necessary precondition of conversion to Islam – and failure to observe elementary norms of Islam. The Nigerian jihadist leader Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817), for instance, in his *Sirāḡ al-iḥwān* highlights the Songhay emperor Sonni ‘Alī’s lip service to Islam (“*yanṭiqu bi-ṣ-ṣahādatayn wa-naḥwahumā min al-fāḏ al-muslimīn*”) and his fasting and pious alms, which starkly contrast with his continued observance of pre-Islamic rites and respect for animist ritual specialists.<sup>25</sup> Thus a ‘nominal’ Muslim is perhaps better defined in emic terms – from the learned Muslim perspective – as a ‘declaratory’ Muslim: someone who makes a verbal declaration of Islamic belief but fails to comply with Islamic norms and to acquire any religious learning beyond the creed.

What makes, then, a ‘nominal’ Muslim? Certainly not lukewarm religious fervour. More pertinent features are lack of knowledge (of anything beyond the bare essentials of the Islamic creed and of the Arabic language), lack of education, lack of proper Muslim-style clothing (as understood by a Yemeni of al-Ḥaymī’s time), lack of gender segregation, lack of state structures and security (leading to a general Bedouin-like ferocity towards strangers), lack of compliance with marriage regulations, neglect of the sexual morality of the *ṣarī‘a* (e.g. multiplicity of wives), and lack of proper (i.e. to an Arab visitor non-exotic) food. In sum, nominal Islam is almost coterminous here with lack of urbanisation, state formation, religious education, and any obvious signs of Arabic cultural influence. Of course, just like beauty, a nominal Muslim is in the eye of the beholder, and that beholder being an Arab, it is little wonder that Arabic ethnocentric notions should be part of the package of ‘proper’ Islam.

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<sup>25</sup> See the text in Hiskett 1962: 579–580.

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