Africa e Mediterraneo

ISSN: 1121-8495

Francesca Romana Paci, "Before Our Past. The Jesuits in Ethiopia and Other Traces of a Long Fascination", in «Africa e Mediterraneo», vol. 28, n. 92-93, 2020, pp. 58-65

DOI: 10.53249/aem.2020.92.93.11

http://www.africaemediterraneo.it/en/journal/

Africa e Mediterraneo
CULTURA E SOCIETÀ

DOSSIER

Encouraging Prospects for Good Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Italy's Residual Legacy in the Horn of Africa as a Factor of Cooperation

La musica moderna in Etiopia e la sua diffusione a livello globale

n. 92-93 | Corno d'Africa: prospettive e relazioni

Pubbl. Semestrale n. 1-2/20 (92-93) novembre 2020 - Edizioni Lai-momo, Bologna- Poste It. Spa, sped. in abb. post. D.L. 353/2003 (conv. in L. 27/02/2004 n. 46) art. 1, c. 1 DCB-BO

Africa e Mediterraneo
Cultura e Società

Direttrice responsabile
Sandra Federici

Segreteria di redazione
Sara Saleri

Africa e Mediterraneo
Semestrale di Lai-momo cooperativa sociale
Registrazione al Tribunale di Bologna
n. 6448 del 6/6/1995
ISSN 1121-8495

Direzione e redazione
Via Gamberi 4 - 40037
Sasso Marconi - Bologna
tel. +39 051 840166 fax +39 051 6790117
redazione@africaemediterraneo.it
www.africaemediterraneo.it

Impaginazione grafica
Silvia Gibertini

Editore
Edizioni Lai-momo
Via Gamberi 4, 40037
Sasso Marconi - Bologna
www.laimomo.it

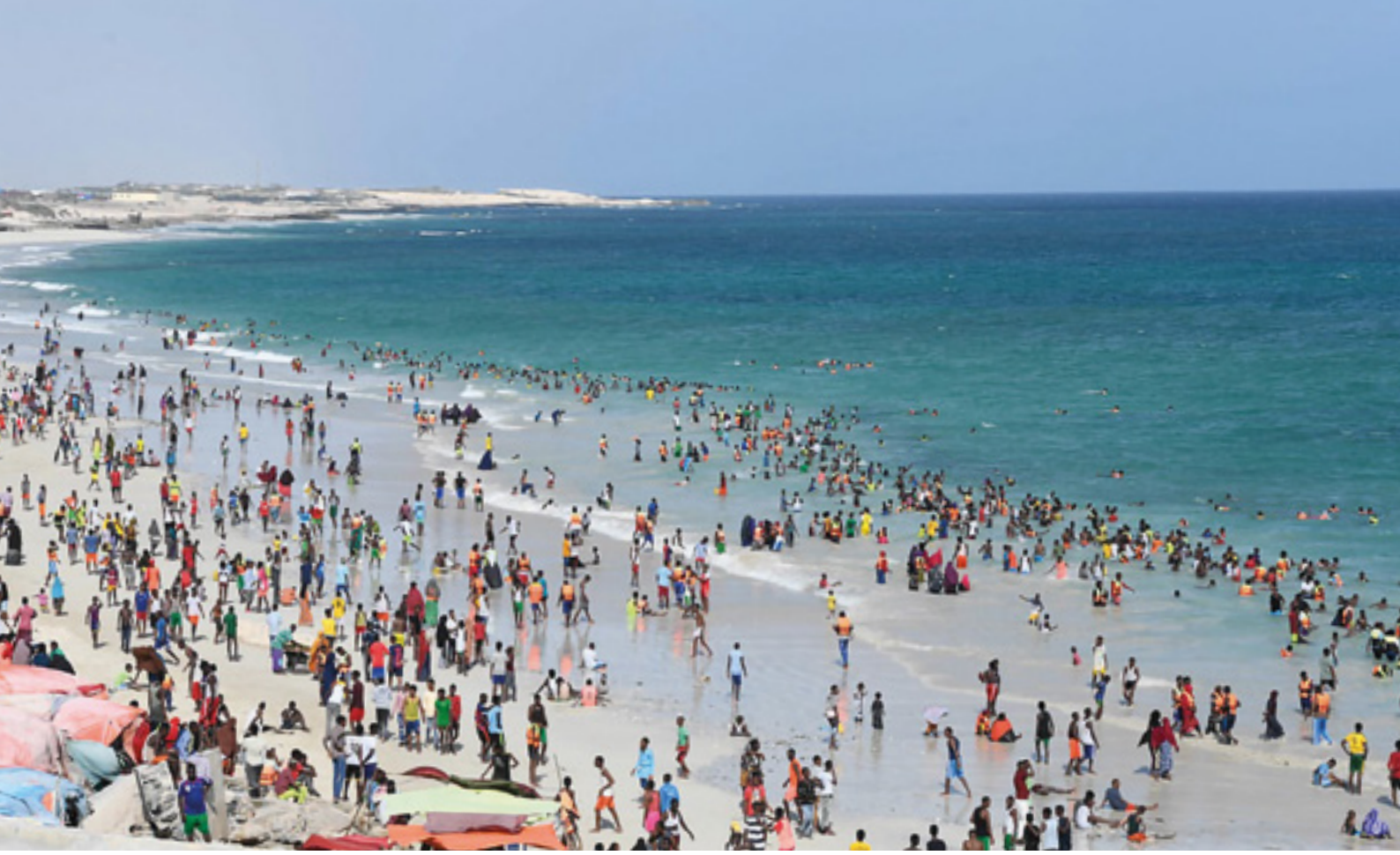
Finito di stampare
Novembre 2020 presso
Ge.Graf Srl - Bertinoro (FC)

Africa e Mediterraneo è una pubblicazione che fa uso di *peer review*

Foto di copertina
© Aïda Muluneh, *The World is 9; Postcards to Asmara*, 2016 photograph.
Courtesy: Aïda Muluneh

Indice

n.92 -93



Mogadiscio, Lido. © Delegazione EU in Somalia.

Before Our Past. The Jesuits in Ethiopia and Other Traces of a Long Fascination

A glance at the Portuguese Jesuit Jeronimo Lobo's memoir *Voyage to Abyssinia* in Samuel Johnson's English translation. Lobo's Seventeenth Century nine-year mission in Ethiopia was both an attempt to convert its people to Roman Catholicism and a bridgehead for a far more colonial-oriented enterprise. Johnson himself was influenced by Lobo while his translation became an authoritative cultural benchmark.

by Francesca Romana Paci

From our Western perspective, the vast African region we call the Horn of Africa claims a very ancient history grounded in a moderate and yet important wealth of texts and documents, part of which are historically reliable, part made up of or fraught with legends, and part a salmagundi of both. In the history of Europe, during our Middle Ages, during the Renaissance and in the following centuries, documents, historical data and records of direct observations are more numerous, though the limitations of our European point of view must always be taken into consideration. Some of these medieval and later documents and narratives are still mingled with old legends, while new tales come from travellers and traders, who, often fascinatingly, were wont to enrich reality. Especially after the XIV Century all documents should be read while considering at the same time the whole of European history and Colonialism.

Politically, the Horn now comprises Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Geographically, it is often considered to include parts of Sudan - mainly the Upper Nubia - and Kenya. We do not know precisely when it was named the Horn of Africa; probably in comparatively recent times because from very ancient up to Medieval epochs those lands were known simultaneously by several different names, some used by the inhabitants of the territories themselves and some given to them by external peoples, including the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, and later Turks (Ottomans), Portuguese, English, French, and others. The word "horn" is commonly believed to derive from the shape of the peninsula recalling the stubby back horn of a rhinoceros.

Since the 32nd Century BC, the prehistory and the ancient history of the Horn of Africa has been linked to those of Egypt and the river Nile. Seen from the point of view of the Mediterranean civilizations, the geographical position of what we now call the Horn of Africa was that of a most important commercial bridge to the East and the South of the world, to other seas and countries (largely India), to profitable traffics and valuable goods, while being itself a source of riches such as gold, precious stones, jewellery, spices, textiles (imported from a farther East), ebony, ivory and prized animals. Egypt exploited the areas of the upper Nile and of the Horn and was in turn deeply affected by the succession of reigns and potentates flourishing there. Even a bare chronology is «un problème très délicat», as the African scholar Ki-Zerbo[1] writes in his *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris, Hatier, 1978, p. 26). The centuries-long Egyptian Dynasties, the legendary Land of Punt (the "Land of the Gods"), the still scantily known Reign of D'mt, the Reign of Cush[2] (geographically more or less Nubia), the conquering appetites of the Assyrians, the powerful town of Napata and the reign and royal town of Meroe[3] and its proud Ethiopian queens (Candace/Candaces[4]), the *Old Testament*'s implicit *regestum* of powers, King Solomon's wisdom and wealth, the elusive Queen of Sheba (her beauty and intellect), the Reign of Aksum[5] (a centre of early Christianity, which will later become the Ethiopian Empire), a plethora of reigns, including, later, the legend of Prester

John's Christian Reign, and, most of all, the historical rise of the long and powerful Ethiopian Empire (1270-1974) and its complex and composite stability form an impressive corpus of knowledge, susceptible even today of much more in-depth research.

In the course of centuries geographical names and borders changed a number of times, succeeding one another depending on political, colonial and para-colonial powers, the attribution of names being endonymical or exonymical or both at the same time. While the present-day state toponyms of Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti are relatively young (respectively, 1888-1890, 1890, 1977), the name Ethiopia dates back centuries before Christ, while in the past medieval and modern epochs as well as in recent times, a vast northern portion of the land was also called by the semi-exonym of Abyssinia, deriving from the Habesha people[6] and/or from Habasah (Al-Habashah), the Arabic name for the country. For centuries the names of Ethiopia and Abyssinia have been considered almost interchangeable – almost, not completely. The term Ethiopians (Aethiopians) is of Greek origin and roughly means "burnt faces", hence the name of the land. For centuries, up to XVII Century, Ethiopians was often a general term for black Africans (See Note 10).

Since its beginning in the XIII Century, the power and prestige of the Ethiopian Empire has been such as to influence the history of a large part of Africa, of the Near East and of Europe. From the Solomonic Dynasty to Haile Selassie, the Empire's history is indeed very complex, involving numerous different ethnicities and ethno-religious groups, mainly belonging to Coptic Christianity (now the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church). The national epic *Kebra Nagast* (*The Glory of the Kings*), which begins with the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, contributed significantly to the fame of the land. Based on and partly composed of much older texts, it is believed to have been assembled in the XIV Century. The story of its circulation in Europe is not a simple one: the earliest first step is Portuguese, but it was not until Carl Bezold's critical edition, published in 1909, that the *Kebra Nagast* could be appreciated in all Europe.[7]

The national epic *Kebra Nagast* (*The Glory of the Kings*), which begins with the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, contributed significantly to the fame of the land.

Crumbs of ancient and less ancient tidings

Though unquestionably less than scholars would like to possess, mentions and fragments of information about the past of the Horn of Africa are too many to attempt a list of them.[8] The few items that follow are selected to offer at least a glimpse of the attraction those lands have exercised through the centuries on countries West and East of the Mediterranean and especially on Europe. The Ethiopians are mentioned twice in the *Iliad*, where they are Troy's allies (I, 423; XXIII, 206); and three times in the *Odyssey* (I, 22-23; IV, 84; V, 2882-287). From various sources we know that Amenemhat I (first Pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty; reigned 1991-1962 BC) had a Nubian mother (from the Island of Elephantine), and was therefore the founder of a Nubian Dynasty (following the matrilinear principle). Much later came the Black Pharaohs of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty (774-656 BC), originated from the Kingdom of Kush – fascinating history of conquests and defeats, and fascinating art. Hesiod in his mythological poem *Theogony* (c. 730-700 BC) narrates of Memnon, son of Eos and Thitonus, King of the Ethiopians, suggesting a fabulous yet popular knowledge of Ethiopia.

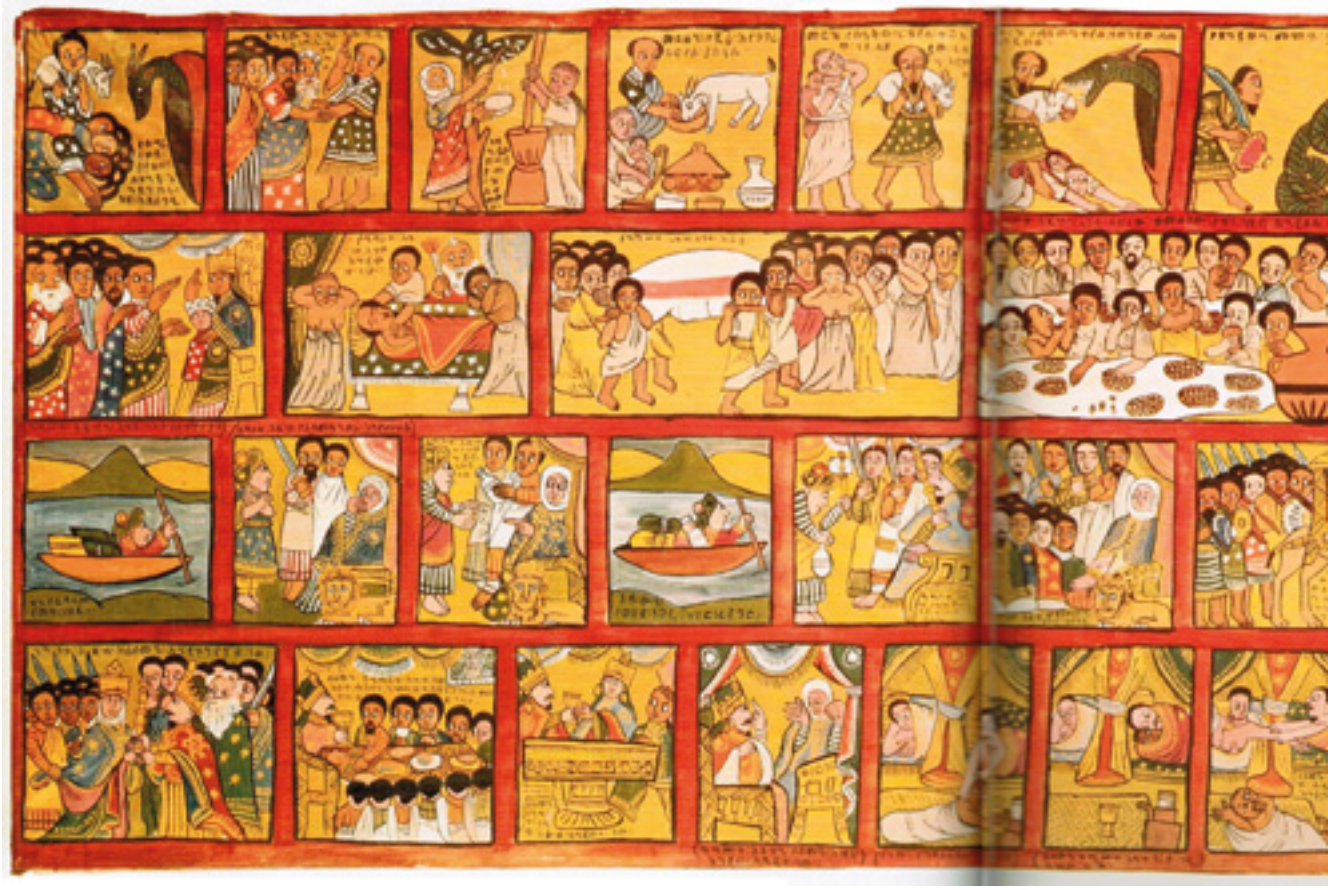
According to Herodotus, the Pharaoh Necho II (610-595 BC) of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, well aware of the importance of commerce and trade routes, began to open a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea – the earliest of the precursors of the modern Suez Canal – to allow the transport and transit of goods between the Horn's naval outposts and the Mediterranean. Herodotus reports that Necho also commissioned a Phoenician naval expedition to attempt the circumnavigation of Africa towards the West (*Histories*, II, 159; IV, 42).[9] Herodotus travelled in Egypt up to or even beyond Meroe and therefore he provides in his *Histories* (c. 440 BC) quite an amount of direct information about Ethiopia, which he believed to be an extremely large land situated in the farthest part of Libya – Libya being for him a name for Africa. Herodotus's fortune was great[10] and his work provided material for several subsequent Latin and Greek authors who wrote in his wake (too many to mention them here).

Ethiopia is of course also referred to in the *Old Testament*, where it is a land extending more or less South of Egypt and including Nubia and other territories (now part of Sudan). Leaving aside, for the moment, the well-known narrative of Noah's sons, Shem. Ham and Japheth (*Genesis*, 9, 20-27), it is interesting to remember that in *Numbers* (12, 1), Moses incurs in Aaron's and Miriam's displeasure for taking an Ethiopian wife.[11]

Progressing in this necessarily meagre list, it is interesting to remember that Seneca in his *Quaestiones Naturales* writes that the Emperor Nero, around 61-62 AD, desirous to discover the source of the Nile: «centurions duos [...] ad investigandum caput Nili miserat» (VI, 8, 3-4); Pliny the Elder not much later suggests in his *Natural History* (VI, XXXV) that the expedition was the first step of Nero's budding project of conquering Ethiopia.

Almost five centuries later, Isidore, Archbishop of Seville, in his *Etymologiae sive Origines*, composed c. 624-636 AD and intended to be a summa of all the knowledge of his times, when dealing with Ethiopia and its neighbouring lands leans mainly on the *Old Testament*, while curiously he mentions Herodotus only once, though he makes use of several writers who followed him. Isidore's work was very popular in the Middle Ages as well, and no less in the Renaissance.

It would be interesting, at least for some readers, to proceed in this albeit sparse sketch of events, set far-off in time and yet eloquent even today, but since it is here unfeasible to go on, only one more item will enter the picture: the pseudo-historical, legendary figure of Prester John, who was said to be the Nestorian Monarch of a very rich Christian kingdom. The legend had its origin in a letter in Latin written to the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenus by a Presbyter Johannes – king, priest and soldier – in the second half of the XII Century. The



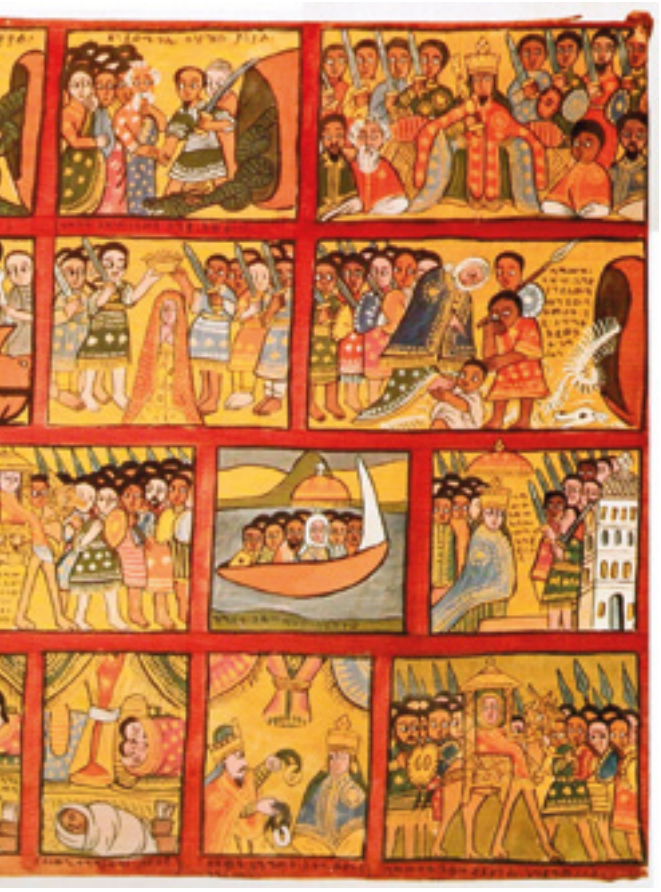
Dipinto anonimo (olio su tela, c. 1920) di episodi del *Kebra Nagast* (*Gloria dei re*), antico testo etiope, composto di parti più antiche riunite in unica compilazione nel XIV secolo. Nel XVIII secolo l'esploratore e studioso James Bruce ne riceve una copia in dono in Etiopia e ne traduce e pubblica brani scelti. Tra le più interessanti traduzioni europee, essenziale è quella in tedesco, annotata, di Carl Bezold, pubblicata nel 1909, conosciuta e adoperata dallo studioso inglese E. A. Wallis Budge per la sua versione, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Meneylek*, pubblicata nel 1922. Una traduzione italiana del lavoro di Wallis Budge è uscita nel 2007 e, rivista, nel 2013, a cura di Lorenzo Mazzoni. Nel 1958 Enrico Cerulli aveva inserito proprie traduzioni di brani del *Kebra Nagast* nella sua *Storia della Letteratura Etiopica*. Come ben noto, il *Kebra Nagast* è un testo di riferimento del Movimento Rastafari.

letter, later recognised as a forgery, is in fact an epistolary fable (or better a prose narrative-romance - possibly even a mock-romance) where the Presbyter describes his reign and its riches and fabulous wonders. The letter soon became very popular in all of Europe and was considered authentic for more than four centuries.[12] The geographic position of Prester John's reign was at first believed to be somewhere in India or in the near East; the Portuguese travellers and later the Jesuits were convinced, and some of them actually testified in their reports, it was in Ethiopia, if not Ethiopia itself.[13] It is also worth remembering the presence of Prester John in the extremely entertaining, ironic and cultured chivalric romance *Il Meschino da Durazzo* or *Guerrino detto il Meschino* by the Italian writer and storyteller Andrea da Barberino (c.1370-c.1432). It was written about 1410, circulated in manuscript and was finally published in 1473 meeting with great success.[14] One of its most interesting features is the creation of an easy and credible fictional geography, gauged and described from a candid and confident Mediterranean standpoint.

Ethiopia is of course also referred to in the *Old Testament*, where it is a land extending more or less South of Egypt and including Nubia and other territories (now part of Sudan).

***A Voyage to Abyssinia* - Jeronimo Lobo S.I. and Dr. Johnson**

Since the beginning of their Colonial adventures, the Portuguese were extremely interested in the Horn. Especially during the XVI and XVII Centuries, they sent to Ethiopia a host of Jesuit missionaries to win the already Christian, but Orthodox, land to Roman Catholicism. The Jesuits needed constant military protection and were normally escorted by soldiers, so much so, in fact, as to appear a sort of bridgehead to establish Portuguese secular power. The Portuguese had to take care of the English and the Dutch, but they had to consider the Ottomans as well, because the Ottoman Empire (c. 1299-1922), then almost at its greatest extent, had penetrated deep into the regions around the Red Sea and clashed, though not belligerently, with their colonial and commercial ambitions. The project of converting



Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism did not meet with success but the missionaries' memoirs, as we shall see, are rich sources of information.

The Jesuits' writings were seldom published – understandably, since, after all, they were testimonies of a failure. Jeronimo Lobo S.I. is one of those missionaries, and he is particularly interesting because, albeit more than a century after it was written, his work was translated and circulated in French and in English.

In 1622 Lobo was sent to Goa (India), then under Portuguese colonial rule, to convert heathens. He stayed there nearly two years and then managed to cross to Ethiopia, which was already mostly Christian, with the aim of converting the country from their Oriental Orthodox Christianity to Roman Catholicism. He arrived in Ethiopia in 1625, and stayed there for almost nine years, moving from one place to another, alternating successes and disappointments until the final failure in 1633, when the Jesuits were expelled from the country by the Emperor Fasiladas.[15]

Lobo wrote extensively,[16] his most interesting work being precisely a memoir of his voyages to India and Ethiopia, entitled in Portuguese *Itinerario*. It was not published in his lifetime, though manuscripts seem to have circulated privately. After various vicissitudes, in 1728 part of it, considerably shorter than the complete manuscript, was translated into French by the Abbé Joachim le Grand and published with the title *Voyage historique d'Abissinie*.

In that same year, a nineteen-year-old Samuel Johnson was at Pembroke College, Oxford, and in the university library he read the French translation of Lobo's memoir, which was then an absolute novelty. He was much impressed and, encouraged by friends, started translating the book from le Grand's French into English. His translation of le Grand's translation, partly abridged, was published in 1735 with the title *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. It must be remembered, therefore, that Lobo's original is much longer than both le Grand's and Johnson's translations. Some time after it was written Lobo's original manuscript seems to have disappeared for a long time, to be found again only in 1947. Now we have a complete and annotated English translation of the *Itinerario*, published by the Hakluyt Society in 1984.[17]

Apparently not intended as a major literary event, Johnson's translation became widely popular and influential,[18] besides being an important formative experience for Johnson himself.[19] When, years later, he wrote his *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia: a Tale* (1759), the Christian and troubled tragedy *Irene* (1749), and some Oriental narrative essays/tales, though not quoting from Lobo's work directly, Johnson clearly had it vividly in mind.[20] To mention just one aspect of a long question, Prince Rasselas wants to travel the world outside the Happy Valley in a quest for Knowledge, as in the Ethiopian national epic *Kebra Nagast*, the son of the Queen of Sheba, Prince Menelik, travels to encounter his father, King Solomon, to learn wisdom and history – to learn, ultimately, about himself.

Johnson's translation is preceded by a *Preface*[21] by Johnson himself, where he writes: «The following relation is so curious and entertaining, and the dissertations that accompany it so judicious and instructive, that the translator is confident his attempt stands in need of no apology [...]. The Portuguese traveller [...] has amused his reader with no romantic absurdities or incredible fictions [...] He appears by his modest and unaffected narration to have described things as he saw them, to have copied nature from the life, and to have consulted his senses not his imagination [...]». Besides, Johnson adds, «a reader will discover what will always be discovered by a diligent and impartial inquirer, that wherever human nature is to be found there is a mixture of vice and virtue, a contest of passion and reason [...]» – subtly putting Lobo and the evoked reader in the category of «impartial inquirer[s]». Thus Johnson finds a way of declaring his *ante litteram* refusal of any racism and his belief in the universality of human nature.

The Portuguese traveller […] has amused his reader with no romantic absurdities or incredible fictions […] He appears by his modest and unaffected narration to have described things as he saw them, to have copied nature from the life, and to have consulted his senses not his imagination […]

There is in fact far more of Dr. Johnson than of Lobo in these sentences, which reflect so many aspects of the XVIII Century's favourite intellectual issues – there is little doubt that Johnson finds in Lobo what he wants to find, because even a moderately accurate reading of the *Itinerario* shows that Lobo was not so

«impartial», both from the religious and the human point of view – suffice it to mention this passage: «The Christianity professed by the Abyssins is so corrupted with superstitions, errors, and heresies, and so mingled with ceremonies borrowed from the Jews, that little besides the name of Christianity is to be found here [...]. This proceeds in a great measure from the diversity of religions which are tolerated there».[22]

Johnson, who was a convinced Anglican, acknowledges that Lobo's is «a Popish account of a Popish mission», but writes that he praises Lobo because «he neither exaggerates overmuch the merits of the Jesuits [...] nor aggravates the vices of the Abyssins». However, in the following paragraph he craftily adds that an imaginary «inhabitant of some remote and superior region [...] in search of the true church [...] would not look for the true church in the Church of Rome». Nonetheless, as his biographer Boswell recounts, Johnson was a fierce advocate of Lobo's work and had frequent fiery discussions on Ethiopia with the famous Scottish explorer (and freemason) James Bruce, who was a detractor of Lobo's reports and descriptions – particularly of those concerning the river Nile. In the narrative of his travels (published 1790; see Note 18), Bruce accused Lobo of mistakes and falsities, some of which, later, were proved to be actually Bruce's own mistakes and inaccuracies.

A land of «honey and butter» where Catholics are «shunned [...] as heretics»

Johnson's translation of Lobo's work is divided into two parts, the first, *The Voyage to Abyssinia*, consisting of eight chapters, the second, *A Description of Abyssinia*, consisting of fifteen chapters. Part I is especially concerned with the voyage itself to reach Ethiopia (Lobo writes «Aethiopia»), and in particular the city of Fremone (Fremona) in the region of «Tigre» (Tigray), where the Jesuits had their «residence». Part II, after a first chapter where Solomon, the Queen of Sheba and their son «Minilech»[23] are mentioned, together with Prester John, deals with information on customs, behaviours, objects, and, in short, with all those elements and aspects that now are collectively called "Material Culture". As a matter of fact, both Part I and Part II include many elements of "Material Culture" and involve much internal travelling through Ethiopia. Both Parts also contain chapters which are sorts of digressions – on the Red Sea (I,4), on the river Nile (II, 9, 10, 11), on the Moors' attempts to «submit» Ethiopia (II, 5, 6, 7), on the Catholic «martyr» Cristobal de Gama (II, 5, 6,7).

In both parts, Lobo basically follows a chronological narrative route and constantly restates that the Jesuits' main concern is the conversion of the Abyssins, but he cannot help his evident desire to communicate his discoveries, encounters and observations with what could be *post litteram* defined an anthropological curiosity. Whatever the title of the chapters, he moves rapidly to and fro in a mesh of information about his geographical movements and various events, intermingled with descriptions of places, trees and animals. To all that he adds accounts of and comments on customs, food, drinks, clothes, adornments of various ethnic groups belonging to the mosaic of the Ethiopian Empire. For people and places, he uses an abundance of names the spelling of which often needs interpretation.

Frequently, natural descriptions and sundry aspects of "Material Culture" are intermingled with events, which, appearing politically momentous, would seem to deserve more attention; as when, in the first chapter of Part I, in little more than a dozen words, Lobo tells the readers that, having doubled the Cape of Good Hope, when already nearing «Mosambique», three English and three Dutch ships attacked the Portuguese fleet, sinking three of its ships. And when in several chapters of both Part I and II, he states as common knowledge the power of the Turks over the Red Sea and the danger their ships represented for the vessels of other countries. The Ottoman Empire (c. 1299-1922), in fact, was almost coeval to the Ethiopian Empire (1270-1974), and in the years when Lobo was in the Horn, its extension, as already mentioned, was indeed impressive. However, these disproportions are clearly due to the cuts operated by the Abbé le Grand to the original text and in turn by Johnson to le Grand's translation.

The sheer accumulation of events, descriptions, fragmentary narratives, and personal comments precludes a chapter-by-chapter reading of Johnson's translation, however shorter than the original it may be. The following paragraphs will try to show some of the more interesting elements. One of them is money, or better, valuables: money in the form of coins, Lobo says, is used only in a very small part of the land, while bartering is the norm, and salt «is of the same use of money» (I, 7); and yet western money is continually asked for and given. More important than money are «presents»: all the inhabitants, rich and poor, pretend presents from the missionaries, who in turn seem well prepared. Calico is much appreciated, and silver objects, and even Chinese artifacts. Commoners and petty «kingv», all play a comedy of «avarice» (I, 1; I2; I, 5; I, 6 and more). Even the savage and most cruel «Galles» (Galla) can be bought by presents – or «submitted» by «muskets» which the missionaries have no compunction in using.

We arrived at this happy place about noon, and the next day at evening left those fanning winds, and woods flourishing with unfading verdure, for the dismal barrenness of the vast uninhabitable plains, from which Abyssinia is supplied with salt.

Lobo often indulges in describing landscapes. At least two of them inspired Johnson's Happy Valley in *Rasselas*:

> We arrived at this happy place about noon, and the next day at evening left those fanning winds, and woods flourishing with unfading verdure, for the dismal barrenness of the vast uninhabitable plains, from which Abyssinia is supplied with salt. These plains are surrounded with high mountains, continually covered with thick clouds which the sun draws from the lakes that are here, from which the water runs down into the plain [...] (I, 7).

And again, commenting another spot:

> The place was cool and pleasant, the water was excellent, and the birds melodious. Some of our company went into the wood to divert themselves with hearing the

birds and frightening the monkeys [...] (I, 8)

Lobo is interested in trees, plants, fruit and crops:

> Æthiopia produces very near the same kinds of provisions as Portugal; though, by the extreme laziness of the inhabitants, in a much less quantity: however, there are some roots, herbs, and fruits which grow there much better than in other places. What the ancients imagined of the torrid zone being uninhabitable is so far from being true, that this climate is very temperate [...] in Abyssinia they enjoy a perpetual spring, more delicious and charming than that in our country. [...] they have two harvests in the year [...]. They have in the greatest plenty raisins, peaches, sour pomegranates, and sugarcanes, and some figs (II, 1).

Here and there he mentions other trees and fruit, the ancoy, for instance, which is a kind of apricot; and the ensete (false banana tree), of which he writes:

> This tree, which the natives call ensete, is wonderfully useful; its leaves, which are so large as to cover a man, make hangings for rooms, and serve the inhabitants instead of linen for their tables and carpets. They grind the branches and the thick parts of the leaves, and when they are mingled with milk, find them a delicious food. The trunk and the roots are even more nourishing than the leaves or branches, and the meaner people, when they go a journey, make no provision of any other victuals. The word ensete signifies the tree against hunger [...] (II,11).

He also admires the «cocoa-tree» (coconat-tree): «out of the cocoa-tree alone a ship may be built, fitted out with masts, sails, and cordage, and victualled with bread, water, wine, sugar, vinegar, and oil» (I, 4).

As far as animals are concerned, Lobo mentions with a kind of awe elephants and lions; crocodiles and hippopotamus in the Nile (II, 9; 10); deadly serpents, including the basilisk (I,3), which does not «kill with [his] eyes»; but he is far more interested in domestic animals: horses, mules, goats, sheep and especially cows, which represent the measure of wealth of an Ethiopian family. Lobo, Johnson writes in his *Preface*, is no fanciful writer, and yet he maintains he saw unicorns:

> In the province of Agaus has been seen the unicorn, that beast so much talked of, and so little known: the prodigious swiftness with which this creature runs from one wood into another has given me no opportunity of examining it particularly, yet I have had so near a sight of it as to be able to give some description of it. The shape is the same with that of a beautiful horse, exact and nicely proportioned, of a bay colour, with a black tail [...] (II, 2).

Marco Polo's identification of unicorns and rhinoceros is not mentioned. Just as peculiar is Lobo's belief in the power of the «bezoar,[24] a sovereign remedy against [...] poisons, which I always carried about me» (II,12).

To food and drinks Lobo refers indeed continually and, in addition, he devotes to them two specific paragraphs (II, 3). The Ethiopians drink beer and mead «to excess», and it is a great offence «to let the guest go away sober». Their favourite dish is «raw beef newly killed», seasoned with pepper, salt, a sauce made of what they find in the guts of the ox, and especially gall – Lobo finds the use of gall rather astonishing. They love honey, which they gather from wild beehives, and also love their food to «swim in butter»; this is why, Lobo writes, he calls Abyssinia «a land of honey and butter» (II, 2, 3).

The way the Abyssinians dress gives Lobo the opportunity of stressing the difference between poor and rich and of letting his misogyny surface:

> The meaner sort of people here dress very plain [...] drawers, and a thick garment of cotton [...]; the people of quality [...] ruin themselves with costly habits. They wear all sorts of silks [...] and velvets of Turkey. [...] Their robes are always full of gold and silver embroidery. [...]. The ladies' dress is yet more magnificent and expensive [...] They have various ways of dressing their heads, and spare no expense in ear-rings, necklaces, or anything that may contribute to set them off to advantage. They are not much reserved or confined, and have so much liberty in visiting one another that their husbands often suffer by it; but for this evil there is no remedy, especially when a man marries a princess, or one of the royal family (II, 3).

They wear all sorts of silks […] and velvets of Turkey. […] Their robes are always full of gold and silver embroidery. […]. The ladies' dress is yet more magnificent and expensive

Lobo's words suggest a rigid gender code, but the true reason of his misogyny has its roots in the historical fact that the «royal ladies», wives, sisters, daughters and cousins, were strong opponents of Jesuits and conversion. Priests and monks, Lobo writes, did not waste love on Jesuits too, and even spread falsities on them – for example when they told the people that the grasshoppers, «the pest of Abyssinia», always followed the Jesuits (II, 4).

The immediately following chapter, entitled *An account of the religion of the Abyssins* (II, 4), is a fluid narration, but it is strangely disappointing. Lobo insists that because of «intercourse with Jews, Pagans, and Mohammedans, [...] their present religion is nothing but a kind of confused miscellany of Jewish and Mohammedan superstitions, with which they have corrupted those remnants of Christianity which they still retain» (II, 4). Still, he praises their «piety» and their «great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, the angels and the saints».

Then, he remarks, with perhaps unconscious irony and arrogance, that «They are possessed with a strange notion that they are the only true Christians in the world; as for us, they shunned us as heretics, and were under the greatest surprise at hearing us mention the Virgin Mary with the respect which is due to her, and told us that we could not be entirely barbarians since we were acquainted with the mother of God».

A miscellany of brief information follows, potentially very interesting, such as: «They have some opinions peculiar to themselves about purgatory, the creation of souls, and some of our mysteries», but Lobo does not explain nor discuss, disposing of everything in a minimum of words. This, of course, may be once

more the result of the cuts operated by le Grand and Johnson. There are many more aspects well worth mentioning and going in-depth into in Lobo's memoir and Johnson's translation – suffice as a provisional conclusion the following lines, where the use of the word «blacks» is peculiarly modern and the final statement denies blackness as malady and the extolled power of the "Thaumaturge Kings":[25] «The blacks here are not ugly [...], but have better features, and are not without wit and delicacy; their apprehension is quick, and their judgment sound. The heat of the sun, however it may contribute to their colour, is not the only reason of it; there is some peculiarity in the temper and constitution of their bodies, since the same men, transported into cooler climates, produce children very near as black as themselves» (II, 1).

NOTES

1 - Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922-2006) is a Burkinabé scholar, historian, politician and creative writer. He studied both in Africa and France (Sorbonne). A pupil of Marc Bloch (among others), in his *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire* (cit.) he admirably builds up a comprehensive history of Africa from ancient to recent times. Particularly useful is the extensive chronology he adds at the end of his work. Ki-Zerbo has largely contributed to the UNESCO *General History of Africa*.

2 - Cush, also spelt Kush by the Greeks, is the son of Ham, one of the three sons of Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth – the main source, obviously, is *Genesis*, followed by a large body of classical secondary sources, all based on *Genesis*. Just as geographical names, personal names have different spellings, according to the language in which they are transliterated. And they may also be altogether different, in connection with the culture of those who are the name-givers.

3 - The Meroitic language has not been deciphered and is still under study.

4 - "Candace" (Kandake), in the *New Testament*, is the name of a Queen of the Ethiopians (for the Greeks "Meroe"), converted to Christianity (*Acts* (8, 27): later it clearly appears that "Candace" was a title given to many successive queens of the country.

5 - In 2008 a group of German archaeologists announced the discovery of what might have been the Queen of Sheba's palace. Other scholars think her palace was situated in Yemen. The Queen of Sheba appears in the *Old Testament*, without a name, in the Kuran as Bilquis, in the Ethiopian epic *Kebra Nagast* as Makedà (or Makadda).

6 - "Abyssins" translates the autochthonous "Habesha", which refers to the Othodox Christian peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

7 - Léopold Sédar Senghor published his *Éthiopiques* in 1956. The title of the collection is a celebration of all Africa and simultaneously an acknowledgement of the glory and fame of Ethiopia and of the Queen of Sheba, who represents in Sengor's poetic vision the emblem of African beauty, dignity and self-awareness: «Mais qu'elle reviandrait la Reine de Saba [...]» (L. S. Sengor, *Oeuvre poétique*, Seuil, 1964; 1990, p. 115) – almost needless to remind here the complexities of "negritude". In 1976 Senghor published *Élégie pour la Reine de Saba*, the last of his *Élégies Majeures*, where he transforms the biblical narration into a voyage to the source – the title of the *Afterword* he writes for *Éthiopiques* is in fact revealing of his entire poetics: *Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source*. A completely different kind of work is Evelyn Waugh's caustic and witty reports of his stay in Abyssinia in the thirties as a London Daily Mail correspondent (published 1936; as *Waugh in Abyssinia*, 2007); just a lapidary mention must be made also of Waugh's satiric and openly most politically un-correct novel *Black Mischief* (1932), where the main agonist is the Oxford-educated Emperor of an African imaginary country. A due elucidation: the love-and-adventure romance *Aethiopica* by Heliodorus of Emesa (III/IV Century), which was translated into English (1569) by Thomas Underdown, influenced even Shakespeare, and was in Ben Jonson's library, has just the title in common with Senghor's *Éthiopiques*.

8 - Ki-Zerbo is once more helpful. After deploring the limited number of written documents and their uneven distribution in the African continent and outside it, he states: «Les sources écrites peuvent être classées dans les grandes catégories suivantes: – Sources antiques (égyptiennes, nubiennes et gréco-latines); – Sources arabes; – Sources européennes ou soviétiques (narratives ou d'archives); – Sources africaines 'récentes' (méroïtiques, éthiopiennes, en langue ou en écriture arabe, en écriture africaine moderne, en langues européennes ...); – Sources asiatiques ou américaines. Les sources arabes [...] sont les plus importantes à plus d'un titre [...]» (Ki-Zerbo, cit., p. 13). The bibliography concerning African history is by now very extensive, both internal and external; Ki-Zerbo is here privileged because his standing point is African and at the same time he manages to make use of both African and non-African frames of reference.

9 - Incidentally, Necho II is mentioned also in the *Old Testament* (*Kings*) for his war victories and defeats (he was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar II). Herodotus tells us that Necho did not complete his canal project, which was then fulfilled by the Persian Darius I. Without maintenance the canal was easily obstructed by silt. Plutarch in the *Life of Anthony* (69, 1-4) narrates that after Azio, Cleopatra, attempting to transport by ship her treasures and money out of Egypt to the countries facing the Arabian Gulf, found it silted up.

10 - Herodotus was still well known and valued in all of Renaissance Europe, when travellers and traders contributed with their writings to a better geographical knowledge of Africa. It is probably due to Herodotus that "Ethiopians" was often the name for the Africans of the Southern part of the continent – the inhabitants of the Northern part of Africa and the Muslims in Spain were, as is well known, called Moors (suffice to mention the Crusades). Lobo never uses "Sarasenes" ("Sarracenos"). In brief, the Moors are not black, rather bronze, and they are mostly Muslims.

11 - In King James's *Authorized Version* Moses's wife is "Ethiopian", while in other translations she is "Cushite" (for example, in Diodati's Swiss-Italian translation she is "Cusita"), from the Kingdom of Cush/Kush, then part of Nubia. It is an interesting issue because Moses has inspired a long line of scholars and writers. Just two examples: Sigmund Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die monotheische Religion* (1939), and Arnold Schönberg's *Moses und Aron* (music and libretto, 1926-1932). In both works Moses is a means of elaborating political visions of the metastable climate between the World Wars.

12 - The legend of Prester John is still rather popular, at least in creative literature. Suffice to mention, among much more: John Buchan's adventure novel *Prester John* (1910); Wilbur Smith's *Birds of Prey* (1997); Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2000). Prester John appears as a character also in a series published by Marvel Comics; in some of *Martin Mystère* adventures by Alfredo Castelli; and lately in *Equatoria* (2017) by Juan Diaz Camales and Rubén Pellejero, who kept alive Corto Maltese after the death of Hugo Pratt. Recently, Matteo Salvadore, Assistant Professor of History at the American University of Sharjah, UAE, published his study *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations 1402-1555* (Routledge, 2016).

13 - Father Francisco Alvares, who published his treatise on Ethiopia in Lisbon in 1540, was particularly influential. His treatise circulated in England in Portuguese (Robert Southey had one copy) and was finally translated into English and published in 1881 by Lord Stanley of *Alderley as The Prester John of the Indies – A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520.* Alvares's work was translated into Italian by Ramusio, and published in his *Delle navigazioni et viaggi* (1550).

14 - Among other remakes of the *Guerrin Meschino* suffice to mention Diego Valeri's *Il romanzo di Guerrino il Meschino*, published in 1932; and Gesualdo Bufalino's *Il Guerrin Meschino, frammenti di un'opra di pupi*, published in 1991.

15 - The course of events leading to the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia is not a linear one. Roughly: the Emperor Susenyos I, for complex reasons, favoured Catholic Christianity and protected the Jesuit missionaries; when he abdicated, in due time his son Fasiladas went back to the traditional Ethiopian Church. Lobos's return to Portugal was almost two years long and extremely difficult.

16 - Lobo also wrote *A Short Relation of the River Nile* [...]. Translated into English by Peter Wyche and published in I687.

17 - See *The Itinerario of Jeronimo Lobo*, translated by Donald M. Lockhart from the Portuguese text edited by M.G. da Costa with introduction and notes by C. F. Beckingham. Father da Costa in 1947 found the complete manuscript in the Public Library of Braga.

18 - This is a vast issue. Suffice to mention S. T. Coleridge's «Abyssinian Maid» in *Kubla Khan*. As well-known, Coleridge states he knew Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage*, but it seems clear enough that he knew Lobo/Johnson as well.

19 - The American scholar Wendy Laura Belcher, Professor of African Literature at Princeton, in 2012 published her *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (OUP Online).

20 - Johnson lived in a time when works on geographical discoveries and travels in far countries were even more popular and more widely read than in the two preceding centuries. He shows direct knowledge of the Scottish clergyman and historian Michael Geddes's works, particularly of *The Church-History of Ethiopia* (1696), which he actually mentions in his Preface. Of course Johnson knew well James Bruce too, though not his complete writings because the five volumes of Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile. In the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773*, were published only in 1790, six years after Johnson's death.

21 - The entire text of Johnson's *A Voyage to Abyssinia* is available online. No pages given, it must be quoted by chapters.

22 - The question and story of the Abyssinian Jews, the Falashas, has been studied extensively, though perhaps not exhaustively. Lobo writes: « The provinces [of the Empire of Abyssinia} are inhabited by Moors, Pagans, Jews, and Christians» (II, 1).

23 - Lobo does not mention the *Kebra Nagast*. He might have known it through Francisco Alvares' writings (published 1540) and through Pedro Páez's translation in his *História da Ethiópia* (then unpublished).

24 - The "bezoar" is a petrified bolus found in the gastrointestinal system of some animals. For centuries it was believed a potent antidote; its composition has been studied even recently. Just out of curiosity: the bezoar enters twice in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, in *The Philosopher's Stone* and in *The Half-Blood Prince*.

25 - See here Edvige Pucciarelli, *«To Blanch an Aethiop»*.

Francesca Romana Paci

è Professore Emerito di Letteratura Inglese e Letterature post-coloniali all'Università del Piemonte Orientale "Amedeo Avogadro". Le sue principali aree di interesse sono il Romanticismo e il Neo-Romanticismo, oltre a studi contemporanei con particolare attenzione ai contesti post-coloniali.

Prima del nostro passato. I Gesuiti in Etiopia e altre tracce di una lunga fascinazione

Nell'articolo Francesca Romana Paci effettua una rigorosa disamina delle fonti storiche e letterarie che testimoniano la conoscenza del Corno d'Africa in Occidente, composta di elementi sia leggendari sia storicamente fondati e che si può far risalire a vari secoli prima di Cristo.

Alcune tra le più antiche fonti a nostra disposizione provengono dall'Egitto, le cui vicende sono strettamente legate a quelle del Corno fin dal 3200 a. C. Inoltre, alcune dinastie imperiali egizie ebbero origini nubiane, termine che si riferisce a una parte del Sudan, dove testi nilotici situano il regno di Kush, da cui ebbero origine, per esempio, i Faraoni Neri della venticinquesima dinastia. Molte altre fonti parlano del Corno d'Africa: greche (*Iliade* e *Odissea* menzionano gli Etiopi rispettivamente due e tre volte, ma anche la *Teogonìa* di Esiodo e le *Storie* di Erodoto); bibliche (si pensi solo alla fama di re Salomone e della regina di Saba); latine (le *Quaestiones Naturales* di Seneca, Plinio il Vecchio). Sulle scritture bibliche si basò Isidoro, Arcivescovo di Siviglia, per scrivere nel VI secolo d. C. le sezioni sull'Etiopia della sua opera enciclopedica sulle conoscenze del tempo. È poi ricordata la leggenda del Prete Gianni, fantomatico e favolosamente ricco monarca di un imprecisato regno cristiano orientale la cui leggenda, nata da una falsa lettera indirizzata all'imperatore bizantino Emanuele I Comneno nel XII secolo, ebbe grande fortuna per più di quattrocento anni.

Una delle opere più interessanti è l'*Itinerario* del gesuita portoghese Jeronimo Lobo, che racconta la sua esperienza di missionario a Goa e in Etiopia tra il 1622 e il 1633. Mai pubblicato durante la sua vita, il resoconto arrivò nel 1728 tra le mani dell'abate Joachim le Grand, che ne diede alle stampe una sua versione tradotta in francese e considerevolmente più breve. Questa versione fu rapidamente tradotta in inglese da Samuel Johnson (l'autore del primo *Dizionario della Lingua Inglese*), e col titolo di *Voyage to Abyssinia* è arrivata fino ai giorni nostri. Il testo – che presenta una descrizione quasi etnografica dei territori, delle popolazioni incontrate e dei loro costumi – ebbe grande influenza sia negli scritti successivi di Johnson, in alcuni dei quali, come *La storia di Rasselas, principe di Abissinia*, si possono chiaramente riconoscere i debiti nei confronti del *Voyage*, sia nella cultura popolare tanto britannica che europea, contribuendo a formare l'immagine del Corno d'Africa che si è diffusa nell'immaginario popolare.