

**THE ART OF BOOK-MAKING TRADITION
IN ETHIOPIAN CHURCHES AND
MONASTERIES: HISTORY AND
PRACTICE IN MAHDERE MARYAM,
SOUTH GONDAR**

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Abstract

The art of writing in Ethiopia has been a long tradition since the beginning of the first millennium BCE. The use of parchment as a medium of writing could be dated back to 7th C AD and continued actively until 19th C AD. Nowadays, writing on parchment is practiced only by few church fathers in few places. The objective of this article is to show the historical development of book-making and its change and continuity among the past and current practices in Ethiopian churches and monasteries. Data were collected through detailed survey in book-maker's workshop, observation, interview and secondary data analysis. As the data shows, books in *Mahdere Maryam* are being produced in codex and scroll forms. Parchment, ink and ink pen are used in the production of a book in the form of manuscript. The parchment is processed from skin using different materials through various stages. Similarly, inks are produced from vegetable substances through traditional techniques. Ink pen also prepared from bamboo, reed and hen's feather. While writing the books, the book-makers use one to four columns depending upon the nature and size of the book copying or writing. After they wrote the book in a selected column, the next step is binding the book by using

thin wood and ox skin as a cover. As a part of binding they use different materials to decorate the cover of the book. The use of those materials to incise the cover to make decoration is not diversified as it was in the past. Finally, the tradition of book-making and its related knowledge has lost its importance and partially reliable among few Ethiopian churches and monasteries.

I. Introduction

Historically, Ethiopia has been the land of civilizations with written traditions since the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Northern part of Ethiopia witnessed the early introduction of parchment roll and codex which was been strongly fostered by the Christianization of the country in the 4th century AD (Bausi, 2012:52 and 2014:9). According to Sergew (1981:7), written language in Ethiopia was started in around 1000BC by the Sabeen emigrants believed to be indigenous with stone and iron as the medium of writing. References to stone inscriptions and archaeo-metallurgical studies indicate that these materials were actively used during the early phase of the Aksumite period until the third century AD. The stone tablet of King Ezana (written in three languages, i.e. Geez, Greek and Sabeen in three rows) in Aksum discovered through archaeological excavation witnessed the use of stone as writing material. With regards to the use of metal, the evidence is probably limited due to the precious nature of the material.

During the 3rd and 4th C AD the writing materials in Ethiopia included stones, metal, clay and probably wood (Sergew, 1981:7). The introduction of Christianity as a state religion around the second quarter of the 4thC A.D. led to a new situation in writing tradition. It is commonly assumed that the introduction of the new religion caused a shift in writing system (beginning of a graphic means for representing the vowels), the use of new materials for writing, and the adoption and further development of book-making techniques (Nosnitsin, 2012:1 and 2013:9). This new change contributed its own

role in the development of book-making in Ethiopia. According to Hassen (2015:3), the culture of owning books and manuscripts is an ancient tradition of bookmaking in Ethiopian churches and monasteries. He further noted that Christians have made and collected manuscripts in churches and monasteries since the fourth century AD. Therefore, the introduction of Christianity to the country played an important role for the rapid development of writing practice on parchment.

Scholars suppose that Papyrus as was the case the case in Egypt and Sudan, it was probably used in Ethiopia to prepare the manuscript prior to parchment. According to their argument the plant is grown in Ethiopia mainly in Lake Tana and Zeway where it is used to make canoes and raincoats for herdsmen. Moreover, the geographic proximity of the two countries which were dominantly used papyrus is considered to bolster the argument that the tradition of papyrus writing was practiced in Ethiopia. But, there is no direct evidence which strongly justifies this hypothetical argument (Sergew 1981:7-8). On the contrary, as Uhlig and Bausi, (2007:738) stated, writing on papyrus is not attested in the Ethio–Eritrean region. Later Bausi in 2014(41) explained that, though there is no sufficient evidence about papyrus usage in Ethiopia; the only exception is the very recent description of the Four Gospel Books of Abba Garima by the restorer, which includes the important remark that the binding of the first of the two manuscripts bears traces of deteriorated papyrus. As far as sources concerned are concerned, this would be the evidence for papyrus as book material in Ethiopia. Thus, using papyrus as a medium of writing in Ethiopia remains conjecture except the recent and the only evidence at Enda Abba Garima.

Bausi further stated that in Ethiopia the practice of making books from parchment goes back to 7th century AD. The two parchment codices, called Enda Abba Garima four Gospels manuscripts are considered to be the oldest surviving Ethiopic manuscripts. It ranges from the 6th c up to 7th c AD. Those manuscripts show external link of Aksumite kingdom developed with Eastern Churches (Finneron,

2007:200). This argument reveals the use of parchment in Ethiopia dates back to 6th and 7th C AD when soft writing materials were started to be used. The history of soft writing material on parchment in Ethiopia began with the coming of Nine-Saints in Ethiopia in the 6th C AD. With this, the skin in the form of manuscript as a medium of writing material in Ethiopia began to be used (Sergew, 1981:7, Bausi, 2014:10 and Nosnitsin, 2012:5). This manuscript tradition continued to blossom until the 19th C. Parallel to this, according to Bausi (2016:5) and Pankhurst (1986), Ethiopian manuscripts since the 16th C started to use a single leaf for multilingual writing and still bookmakers wrote multilingual in a row on a single page. To Bausi and Pankhurst, the use of multilingual orthography on a single leaf might have been influenced by Portuguese manuscript tradition. This is debatable and needs further evidences to say so. As far as the researcher's knowledge is concerned, the argument is not convincing; because the knowledge of book-making tradition in the country had been deep-rooted for centuries. It was not a new tradition that can be influenced easily.

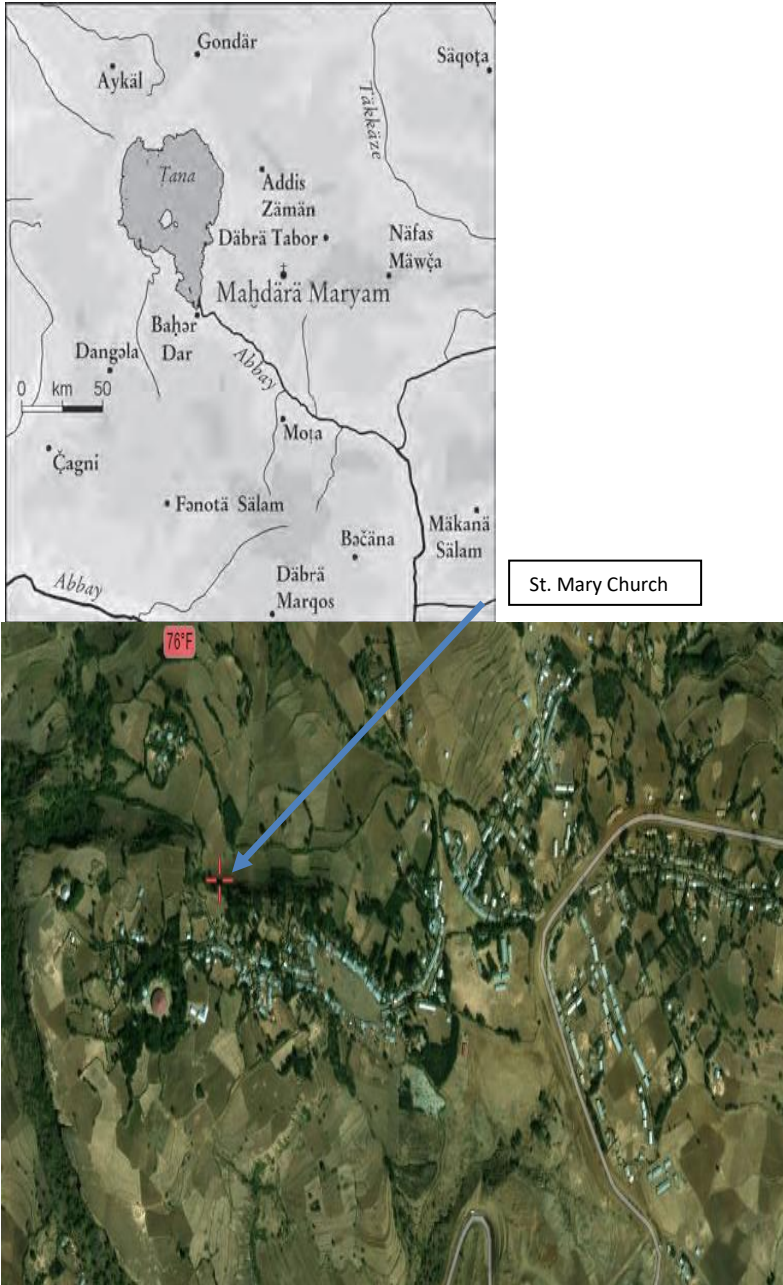
There are scholars who believe that the use of printing paper was a 19th C phenomenon in Ethiopia. According to Uhlig and Bausi (2007:738), the peculiar and exceptionally relevant importance of manuscript in Ethiopian culture is determined by the very late introduction of an extensive use of printing tradition, which does not antedate the 19th C. However, Sergew and Nosnitsin stated that, Ethiopians used to print paper rarely before 19th century AD as per the analysis of manuscripts from Vatican library and Biblio the Que Nationale of Paris (Sergew 1981:9). So, whether the use of paper was the 19th C or prior to that, the use of manuscript made from parchment was a dominant tradition in Ethiopia to ninetieth century and is being practiced today.

Since the Aksumite period down to the 19th C and even the modern time, manuscript making and production has been an integral part of Ethiopian (Nosnitsin, 2012:2 and Jossi, ND). Book-making in Ethiopia has been a long tradition with diversified materials and techniques which reflects history, culture, art,

creativity and indigenous knowledge of the society. The absence of up-to-date research to show the current practice of the tradition and the gradual vanishing of book-making initiated the researcher to conduct this investigation. *Mahdere Maryam* where book-making tradition is still active is selected by the researcher to show the change and continuity over time and analyze its existing practice.

II. A History of *Mahdere Maryam*

Mahdere Maryam is a church in a small town located in the Farta district in the former province of Bagemder, in the district of Gerarya; 30 kilometer Southwest of Debere Tabor town. Geographically, it located in 11° 43' N, 37° 55' E with 2301meter above sea level. The name of the village is coined from the church's name. It has a fascinating view to *Este*, *Dera* and *Fogera* districts of South Gondar Zone including Lake Tana from the hill of *Mahdere Maryam*.



The map of Mahdere Maryam taken from Wion(2007) (left) and the aerial view of the town(right)

Etege Maryam sena, the wife of *Emperor Sertse Dingel* (r.1571-1605), founded the church of *Mahdere Maryam* in 1561 and she was buried there. Her daughters *Amete Mikael*, *Kessosawit* and *Wolete Giyorgis*, wife of *Ras Zasellase*, were also buried there (Conti Rossini 1893:810 and Guidi 1926:377as cited in Wion (2007:655)). So, the history of the church of *Mahdere Maryam* goes back to 16th C AD. Later In 1747 *Begerond Wolde Giyorgis* and *Ras Hailu Wand Bawasan* in 1818 were buried in *Mahdere Maryam*. It was considered as a royal church and notable persons were buried there. A proverb says: አገር አለት ይበሉኝ፣ ማህደረ ማሪያም ቅበሩኝ፡፡ literally ‘bury me in *Mahdere Maryam*, so that people would say: “she has her own country’ (Wion, 2007:655). Between 16th and 18th C, the church was very famous and many persons of high class has extended their wish to be buried at this prestigious church.

Indeed, *Mahdere Maryam* possessed a lot of land and, as a royal foundation, received grants from rulers. As the numerous archival documents preserved in the manuscripts of the church state, the church was burnt during the time of *Susenyos*. *Emperor Iyasu I* rebuilt in 1681/82 and restored its wealth and granted numerous lands as later did *Emperor Bakaffa* and *Takla Haymanot* (Wion, 2007:655). Due to this reason *Mahdere Maryam* seems to have stayed away from the theological debates of the *Gondarine* kingdom, remaining a centre of traditional church education and a place of asylum.

In the 19th C a town developed around the church, and several travelers reported about its beauty and its wealth. *Manan Liban Amade*, *Ali Alula’s* mother, established her court at *Mahdere Mariam* in 1847 after defeating by *Tewodros II*, and was visited by several European travelers (such as *Beke*, *Combes* and *Tamisier*) (Wion, 2007:656). Later the church was burnt down in 1848, seemingly a result of a criminal act and must have been rebuilt already from 1849 to 1850 (Ibid). Subsequently *Emperor Tewodros II* persecuted and killed the priests of *Mahdere Maryam* and burnt the town in 1867, when he was leaving for *Maqdala*, his last stronghold (Wion, 2007:656).

Emperor Takla Giyorgis granted lands to Mahdere Maryam in order to restore its prosperity, and emperor Yohannes IV had the church decorated with fine murals. Images of Yohannes himself, wearing a crown and holding the pearl, were executed on three sides of the *meqdes* (west, east and north), always next to the images of St. Mary. As Wion (2007:656) additionally stated that an oral tradition in *Mahdere Maryam* has it that Yohannes had the painter's hands cut off, so that he would not repeat such magnificent paintings elsewhere. Menilek, Taytu and Zawditu also made donations of *regalia* to the church. The church is still famous for its schools of *andemta*, *aqwaqwa* and *deggwa* and it has a rich and today one of the largest libraries in south Gondar. Throughout the history of the church and the village, book-making has been practiced a lot and still being practiced by few church fathers.

III. The Knowledge of Book Production in *Mahdere Maryam*

In Ethiopia, production of parchment and codices must have been of primary importance since ancient times (Bausi, 2014:38). For Bausi, writing on parchment and producing codices in Ethiopia was much earlier than other African countries or the tradition of codices and writing on parchment in Africa was first invented in Ethiopia and the Islamic world also borrowed the knowledge from Ethiopia, mainly from the churches and monasteries. The church fathers who have this knowledge in Mahdere Maryam justify the above argument, and they said "book making tradition in Ethiopia has a long history; Ethiopian church fathers started to make books long years ago before the birth of Jesus Christ. They believed that, the book of Enoch was the first book which was made by them." They further added that, "since the invention of the book of Enoch many fathers have made different books by making their life in caves and remote or inaccessible places to concentrate on their work only". This idea is congruence with the Sergew's (1981:7) argument, which was bookmaking in Ethiopia dated back to 100 BC. Hence, the tradition of book-making started much earlier in Ethiopia than other African

countries; though it is difficult to pin point the exact time when it was started.

The church fathers (informants) in *Mahdere Mariam* describe the knowledge as follows;

“ብራና ዳምጦ ፣ ቀለም በጥብጦ መጽሀፍ መስራት የመንፈስ እርካታ አለው።” (preparing a book by rubbing parchments and mixing ink has a spiritual satisfaction)

This means, they believed that it has a spiritual satisfaction or the motivation to engage on this work obtain spiritual satisfaction at the end. Besides, it is a knowledge that needs passion and a special religious knowledge. According to informants, our forefathers marginalized themselves in a caves and remote areas by making butter on their head during the non-fasting days and well pound *noug* (*Negotia Abyssinica*) during fasting days to keep themselves while they sit and work for a long time. In the past, the one who engaged in this tradition is considered as an educated man; because when they write and copy different books from different sources they obtain immense knowledge. It also served as a source of income for the church fathers. But, they underlined that it is extremely time taking.

Nowadays, those books of manuscripts made from parchment are valuable historical sources, particularly for local history (Uhlig, et al 2017:172). It helps us to reconstruct the history, culture, technology, literature and the level of civilization of our past. Hence, preserving and studying this tradition has a paramount importance in the mentioned themes. In *Mahdere Maryam* preparing a book from parchment was a hobby for priests, today however, only a very few of them are engaged in it.

IV. Steps and Materials Used to Produce Manuscript Book

There are detailed steps and various materials needed to prepare manuscript books. The materials are parchments, ink and ink pens. The entire process of its production is full of arts and knowledge.

Each material is also obtained through a range of processes and materials.

A. Materials and Steps to Prepare Parchment

Parchment, sometimes called vellum, is prepared from and through the following materials, steps and each material also prepared through different steps.

Materials

- a. Skin: - Currently goat, gazelle and horse skins are preferable to produce parchment. However, sheep, ox and cow skins are also used in the absence of the above mentioned skins. Sergew (1981:9) added the skin of a calf from domestic animals and lion, tiger and antelope skins are used for the preparation of parchment in addition to aforementioned animals. Comparatively, Gazelle and goat skins are more preferable and horse skin is advisable for thick and large books. This variation among the existing practice and Sergew's work shows the difference in skin/raw material diversification in ancient and contemporary time. I.e. the knowledge of using diversified skins for parchment production is minimized through time. Nowadays, in *Mahdere Maryam*, only goat skin is used to produce a manuscript leaf. The other concern that varies from source to source is the use of sheep skin for parchment preparation. According to Sergew (1981:9) sheep skin is commonly used for non-religious books only due to its yellowish color. Whereas Balicka and Witakowska (2007:749) noted that the choice of skin depends on the size and nature (religious or secular) of the intended manuscript. Sheep and goat skins are most common, the pieces of high quality are said to be extracted from young goats of uniform hair color. But, the authors did not make clear which skin is for religious and which one is for secular. However, as the researcher's observation in a *Mahdere Maryam* book-maker's workshop and informants knowledge, due to its weak strength (thin in thickness) sheep skin is not

preferable. Thus, strength matters in skin selection for parchment preparation.

- b. Rubbing Knife and Small Axe: - It is somehow curved medium size knife and small ax are used to rub or remove unnecessary fleshes and hair of the skin respectively. After the immersion of the skin in water, the knife and ax are used to remove the hair and the flesh.
- c. Pumice (ጣረመጣረ ደንጋይ):- the stone which is locally called “*marememia*” meaning pumice which is used to smooth the rubbed skin. Sometimes it is also used to rub the skin on the flesh side like a knife. The stone is not found everywhere and some geological knowledge is needed to identify the material. According to informants from *Mahdere Maryam* it is rarely found and most of the manuscript producers obtained this equipment through inheritance from their forefathers. The surface of the pumice is very rough and somehow sharp.





Fig.1 Smoothing/sometimes rubbing stone which helps to rub and smooth the skin

d. *Lehote* (ለሆቴ)

It is a small polished black stone basically used to sharpen the materials and sometimes it is used to smooth the skin. The same as pumice, it is also a material which is hard to find and they obtained through inheritance from their forefathers. According to the informant from *Mahdere Mariam*, such kind of stone was brought from Aksum and was not found nearby.



Fig.2 the *Lehote* stone in *Mahdere Mariam* Manuscript maker's workshop

e. Smoothing Clay (መርመጽ)

It also is used after the skin processed and leafs are cut into the proposed size. To make surface of the leaf suitable for writing, it should be smoothen by this material. It is made out of clay and it is too smooth. The size and the way they used during smoothing is like how we use iron press on our cloths.



Fig.3 the internal surface of the Smoothing Clay (መርመጽ)(left) and external and handling of the smoothing clay (right)

- f. Needles (ጥቃጥቅ ማውጫ):- these materials are used to make small holes in a straight line on the prepared parchment before writing or copying. Then the parchment becomes full of lines in parallel to write by following the lines. It is to mean that, the needle helps the book-makers to make a line and to follow the line while writing in straight.
- g. Ruler: - the perfection of the lines on a manuscript enables to say the writers used ruler like materials to make perfect lines. According to Balicka and Witakowska, (2007:749), a ruler made out of bamboo was used to have margins and columns. Currently, book makers use metal ruler and they said as far as they know their forefathers were used the same material and certainly said that wooden made rulers were probably used.

B. String Sticks and Ropes

Those materials are used to string the raw/unprocessed skin on the rectangular tied bole to remove the hairs and fleshes by using equipments stated above. The sticks are used to tie properly and balance the string.

Steps to produce Parchment

- a. Immersion of the Skin in water: - at this stage the skin is immersed into water prior to any steps of production. As Sergew (1981:10-11) and informants commonly stated that, there are two ways of immersing the skin. The first is putting the skin in the water inside the bucket or similar containers at home. The second is immersing the skin in river water by putting the skin under a big stone and the hair side should not be visible and then the flesh side of the skin could have a direct contact with the water; because at the end, the hair can be removed easily. Regarding the length of stay within water, it depends in the nature of the skin. If the skin is fresh 3 days are enough and if the skin is dried it requires a minimum of 7 days. So, after having immersed skin with a required immersion date, the book-makers can proceed to

the next step. In this part there is basic change from the past and current practice is not observed.

- b. Removing the Hair and flesh of the Skin: - After getting the skin ready for this step, it is stretched in four sides with sticks and stay on the sun. This facilitates the drying up of the skin through maintaining the water level. It stretched on the sticks in four sides and tied up by ropes through balancing with thin sticks.





Fig.4 A tauten skin in the flesh side (left) and hair side (right)

- A. The arrow shows the tautened and drying skin for further processing; B. bole prepared for this purpose only, C. A rope that used to string the skin through tying with boles and D. thin sticks that helps to balance the string skin and to avoid damage on the skin

After the sun maintained the level of water on the stretched skin, the hair and unnecessary flesh is removed carefully. They used rubbing knife and stone for the flesh and small ax for the hair sides. This stage

needs a strong care and is a crucial stage in producing parchment; because if the skin is damaged at this stage it will be useless.

- c. Smoothing: - the skin is smoothed with a small round stone which is called *merememia* that helps to remove the hair and to discard the flesh. During this stage the skin is smoothed carefully and the parchment becomes ready having been cut into the proposed size.
- d. Cutting the Parchment into the Proposed Size: - at this stage, the book-maker cut the smooth parchment in a book or scroll size. The size may vary from person to person and depends on the need of the book-makers and the size of the book and they use traditional measurement. Finally, it becomes ready to adjoin with ink, pen and the writer.

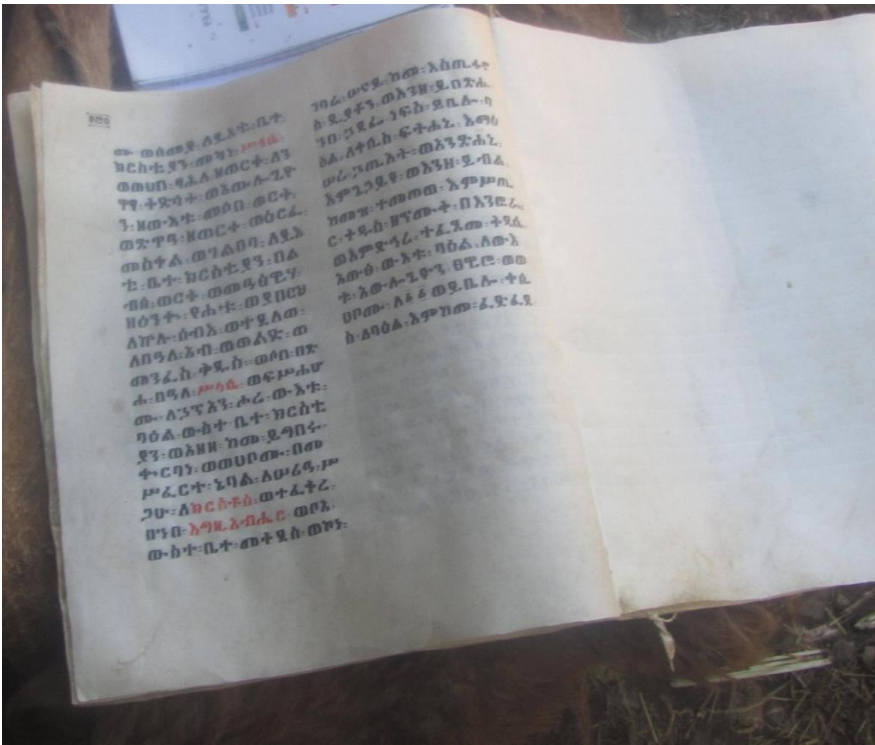


Fig.5. parchment on copying by priest Abebaw Haile at *Mahdere Maryam* in his workshop

In a nutshell, there are changes and continuities in material usage from the past and current practices of parchment preparation in Ethiopian churches and monasteries as it is observed in *Mahdere Maryam*. There are also changes in material usage through time. Currently, raw materials for parchment preparation are not diversified as it was in the past. However, the steps of the preparation remain constant. So, there is no significant change on the steps unlike the raw materials used.

B. Ingredients and Steps to Prepare Ink

Ink production is an important material aspect of manuscript preparation (Bausi, 2014:50). In comparison with other elements of the tradition, ink preparation is time taking and needs detail knowledge about Ethnobotany. According to informants (church fathers) and Sergew (1981:14), black and red colors are widely used in writing books mainly for manuscript books. However, in rare cases particularly in recent time other colors are used on some manuscripts (Uhlig, et al 2017:172). The black ink is used to write the entire leaf of the manuscript and the red used occasionally. Always when they start a new book, headlines, punctuations they use red color and the name of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, Trinity, and other bold and respected names are written in red color. That is the reason that red colors are rarely observed in manuscript books.



Fig.6. a manuscript written in 2 inks (black and red) and 2 columns at priest Abebaw Haile’s workshop, Mahdere Maryam

Ingredients:

As it is mentioned already, black and red inks are widely used in manuscript writing. Accordingly, elements to prepare inks vary from ink to ink depend on the type of color the scribes used. During the preparation of the ink, writing and copying the books they mostly used horn and similar colors are different. The ingredients and the steps of preparing black and red colors are different.

a. Black Ink

The black inks are mainly two in colors, charcoal black and green black. The black inks are prepared for serious works and the latter for daily use, particularly for magical prayers (Sergew 1981:14 ind Bausi, 2014:50). As the current practice in Mahdere Maryam shows, the quality of ink is dependent on the ingredients. Thus, the quality of an ink is determined by the types of ingredients used and careful follow-up of the steps. Black ink is commonly used and it is possible to say manuscripts are written entirely using black colors. In *Mahdere Maryam*, the scribes used mainly vegetable substances for the

preparation of ink. The ingredient includes leaves of *kitkita* (*Dondonea Viscosa*), *Tenbelel* (*Jasminum Abyssinicum*), *qotentina* (*Vervasicum Siniaticum*), *bisana* (*Macrostachyus*), *endod* (a type of *endod* which have no fruit) (African soapberry), *leaves of coffee* (*Coffea arabica*), *qentefa* (*Pterolobium Abbyssinicum*), *Qeret* (*Osyris Compressa*), *Gumaro* (*Cappsrus Tomentosa*), *Astenager* (*Datura Stramonium*) and *Ameraro* (*Discopodium Penninervum*), glue, flour of barley, wheat and sometimes finger millet, powder of dead battery, soot, and as some scholars added that, garlic and pepper were used as an ingredient to prepare ink. So, all these are the ingredients needed to prepare black ink.

Steps: - first the vegetable substances or the leaf of aforementioned plants are dried properly by adding glue; then the dried ingredient (the vegetable substance and glue) are roasted until it seems charcoal. In parallel with this in other process, wheat or barley and sometimes finger millet grain is roasted again until it looks like charcoal and pounds it carefully. Then, the pounded flour of the burned grain is boiled. So, the two ingredients came through separate processes mixed together and knead within a container and powder of soot or dead battery is also added. In the past, cattle's horn and vessel ware served as a container to knead the ink ingredients; but nowadays, small buckets and other plastic containers are also used. The reason of burning the leaf, using soot and the powder of dead battery is to make the color black. Consequently, the knead ingredient in a horn or small bucket is put in a permanent place and should be mixed up and follow up its progress in every month. To produce a good quality black ink, it may take from two to three months. The other issue that the church fathers stated is "cow or ox urine was added at this stage"; but this has not been celebrated by other studies.



Fig.7. black ink prepared through traditional techniques

b. Red Ink

According to Sergew (1981:15-16), the preparation of red ink was neglected since the 19th C. The possible reasons are: the availability of readymade powdered ink in the market, limited use of red ink during writing the manuscripts and laborious manufacture of red ink. Similarly, nowadays the preparation of red ink is almost left and they shifted to use the modern inks available in the market. The church fathers accept the above reasons for the absence of preparing red ink. When they prepare red ink in a very rare case and as the informants told to the researcher orally, the followings are the ingredients. Flowers of *Tenbelel* (*Jasminum Abyssinicum*), red earth and a red powder available on market are the main ingredients. However, Sergew (1981:16) added red pepper, egg yolk, red earth gum, Root of acabar (not identified), *aday ababa* (*coreopsis malcrantha*), leaves of *qarat*

(*osyris compressa*) and *azamar* (*bersama abyssinica*) as an ingredient to produce red ink. But, nowadays the researchers can't find any person who prepares red ink through traditional techniques.

C. Materials to Prepare Ink Pen (መጻፊያ ብሔር)

Ink pen is a traditionally produced pen for the purpose of writing on the parchment. It prepared mainly from bamboo, reed, *kirkiha* and hen's feather. If the ink pen is prepared from bamboo and *kirkiha*; first, medium size bamboo, reed or *kirkiha* which are comfortable to hold and write is cut into a proposed size; then, it has to be prepared by using barchans and other sharp materials. Finally, like modern pen used nowadays, the peak of the ink pen that the side used to write on the parchment (nib) has to be hackled to maintain the ink. Whereas if a hen's feather is used to an ink pen, it is just used as it is without any adhesive equipment.





Fig.8.the red ink pen (left) and black ink pen (right) made from bamboo

The other important concern in this aspect is besides a well-prepared hackle; the peak should split in to two carefully to hold the color on the crack.

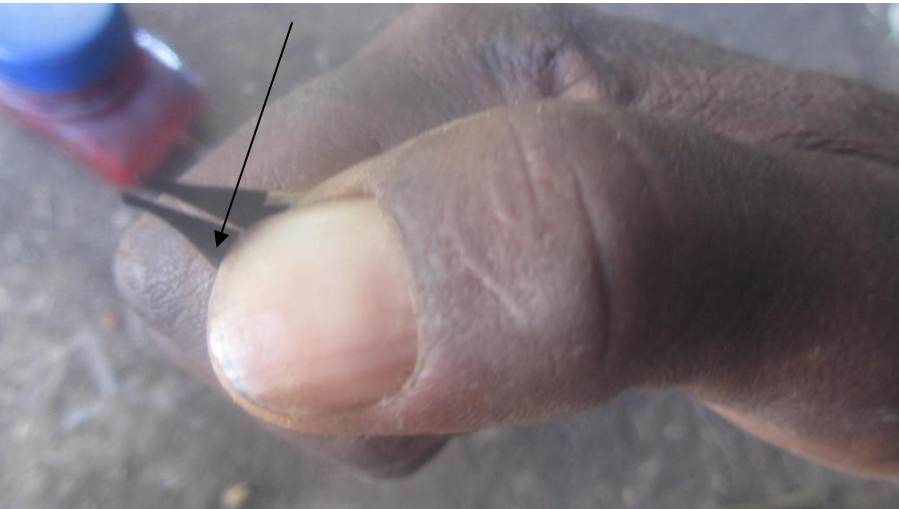


Fig.9 as it is indicated by the arrow on the image, it is a split/crack that helps them to hold the ink to write on the parchment.

V. Writing and Producing a Book

After making the parchment ready, ink and pen and the parchment lined by the needle and ruler carefully; the next is writing or copying on the parchment using the ink and pen. To write a book needs concentration and enough time. A book may have various leafs and a single page may have three or four columns based on the need of book-makers and the type of the book going to be produced. The type of the book determines the number of columns. According to bookmakers from *Mahdere Maryam*; gospel books written in two languages (Geez and Amharic) are written in four columns, gospels of one language (Geez or Amharic only) always written in three columns, hagiographies are written in two columns and psalms are always in one column. Besides, if the size of the book is too large; there might be more columns per a page.



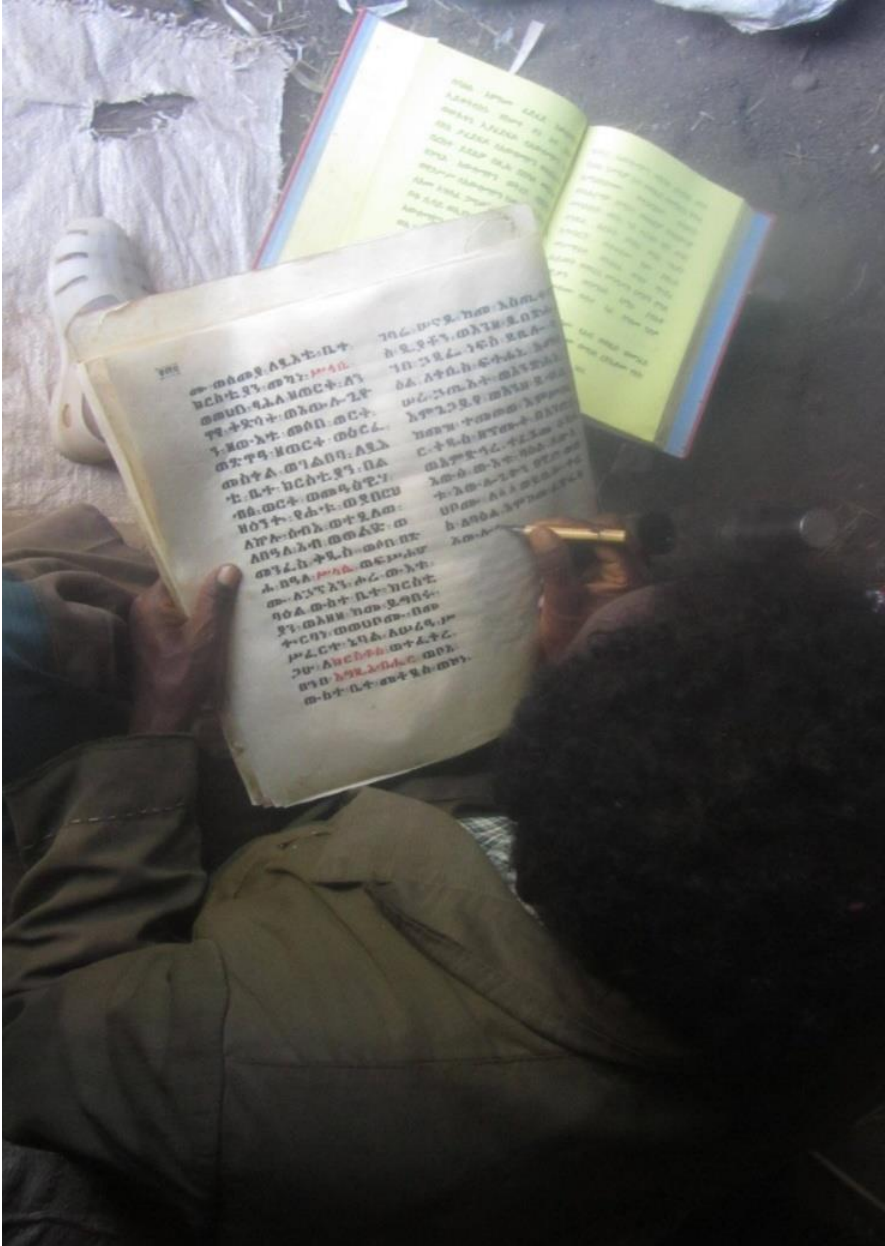


Fig.10. Priest Abewaw Haile copying a book with two columns at *Mahdere Maryam* in his workshop

a) Codex

According to Uhlig, et al, (2017) and Bausi, (2014:38), codex is the final form of a book produced from parchment and usually with wooden binding and leather cover. Codices includes Church literatures such as Bible (esp. Gospels); liturgical texts; hagiographies, devotional texts (prayers, hymns); theological treatises, Monastic literature and “Secular” literature such as Protective texts; Historical texts; Legal documents (Nosnitsin, 2013:9). This book form has dominated the local manuscript culture throughout its history. It is impossible today to establish the exact time when it was first started in Ethiopia, but the earliest known Ethiopian manuscript types are codices. The size of the codex varies greatly, depending on the time of preparation and the given text. There are codices from “pocket-size” books to large volumes more than forty five centimeters in height, so heavy that a grown man could hardly carry them (Nosnitsin, 2012:4). As it is already mentioned above in the historical background part, Ethiopia was the pioneering country in codex tradition in the history of bookmaking and contributed to the introduction of codices to the other African countries and even to the Islamic world. Similarly, in *Mahdere Maryam* book makers are still dominantly producing books in codex form.

b) Scrolls

It usually contains one to three pieces of parchment sewed together and rolled up lengthways and it is believed to be used for magical prayer and spells for protections from sickness and other ills often understood as the work of evil spirit (Uhlig, et al 2017:173). It uses drawings (*tendrils*) in different parts of the piece of the scroll. The scroll is a strip of parchment (or two sewn together), with texts and pictures on one side only. Scrolls are usually prepared by the *dabtera* (Ethiopian “non ordained clergy”) who specialize in different fields of the church learning and occasionally in magic and healing (Nosnitsin, 2012:4 and Wesley, 2017:7). Beside of this magical writings in an Ethiopian manuscript culture appear mainly in the form of scrolls, produced by healing *dabteras* in the size of the person

they meant to protect; however, *dabteras* also owned source books from which they copied magical drawings, prayers, and formulas onto personalized scrolls (Papahagi and Burtea, 2012:107). This shows that, scrolls are used for magical purpose and they are always copied from source books by the *debteras*. In terms of size scrolls are much smaller than the codices and they are not time taking though it needs its own skill and knowledge in religion.





Fig.11. the scrolls (left) and the codex (right) which are produced during the researcher's survey at Mahdere Maryam

VI. Book Binding (locally called medegos)

Binding is the means of adjoining leaves together in a square or rectangular volume and it is a way of collecting, preserving, organizing, and reading written materials possible (Poletti, 2017:463). The prevalent Ethiopian binding technique seems to be of a specific

type, technically termed as “chain-sewing with two threads” (Bausi, 2014:50). Thus, it enables to say binding is another interesting portion of the book-making tradition. In most churches and monasteries of Ethiopia including *Mahdere Maryam*, still it is a business for church students and fathers and it is the most surviving knowledge of book making practice. In every church schools and book-makers workshop billboards are found which read “መጽሀፍ እንደጉሳለኝ” (we bind a book).

It is the final stage of book making and the way to preserve books; because it is a means of conserving a manuscript through the sewing of a book and protecting leafs of the manuscripts using thick ox skin and wood. Currently binding practice is applicable not only for newly produced books; but also for old books to avoid further deterioration. Awl, bradawl (*mesafecha* ,(መላፍቻ)), thin strap (called *tihutan* (ትሁታን)), thick skin (usually ox skin), and well-prepared wood are the necessary materials to bind a book. The skin used for binding and the strap are made by tanners.

The concept of binding is not restricted to adjoining and sewing leafs with thick skin and wooden cover. It also includes the art of decoration on the external part of the cover. During decoration of the book cover, first the wood is cut into the size of the produced book and 2 pieces are needed; then, it is covered with skin and sewed with strap. Finally, the external cover needs to be decor in different styles. Different decorations styles on the cover of the manuscripts are the result of various incising materials. According to Sergew (1981:25), book binding materials are classified into ten types based on their shape. However, in Mahdere Maryam the materials used currently that are used to hollow out the skin and make decoration are classified into four types. These are *chira* binding (ጭራ መደጎስ), title binding (ርዕስ መደጎስ), cross binding (መስቀል መደጎስ) and dove eye binding (ዐይነ እርግብ መደጎስ). In comparison with Sergew’s work in 1981, the diversity of incising materials to make decorations have decreased in type. The incising materials have a handling made from stick and cob; because during decoration the materials should get heat to drill the skin and make the desired decoration. The materials used today

are handed down from their forefathers. This is the other indication that shows book making tradition is on the way to vanish.





Fig.12. *chira* binding (left photo) which is used to make line on the skin cover.¹

1 Usually line decorations are made by this incising material; whereas, cross bindings (right photo) are different in style. I.e. since there are different cross styles in Ethiopia, these materials also made with different cross styles. So, cross like decorations on the cover of the book are made with these materials.



Fig.13 title binding (left photo) which is indicated by the arrow is used to decor the cover like the bending line and the shape indicated on the photo; whereas dove eye binding (right photo) which looks like a dove eye.

VII. Challenges of Book-Making Tradition

Traditional teaching in general and book making in particular in Ethiopia has been surviving for centuries being deeply part of the religious education, life and ethos of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The traditional teachers and students (including the book makers) are still practicing book-making, but the greatest teachers are passing away and Ethiopian youth are attracted to modern way of life (Chaillot, 2009:1). It is to mean that, the knowledge of book-making as it has a strong link with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is nowadays in the hand of few fathers and the youth have ignored the tradition and engaging themselves into the modern way of life. This ignorance has endangered the knowledge of book-making tradition. Furthermore, it is a fact that the life of students of the traditional teaching is hard. For example, they leave their family; they beg for their food among families of the neighborhood but also sometimes far away; and their daily life as students of the Church tradition is most of the time poor and very demanding (Ibid). This is truly challenging the tradition in the study area and it is the reason that book-making is in the hand of few church fathers.

The other challenge for the knowledge of bookmaking in Ethiopia is lengthy steps to produce a single book. For instance, to accomplish a minimum small size book requires minimally five months. But nowadays, the world needs to accomplish more work in a short period of time. From the beginning the skin needs time to immerse in the water, the ink also requires a minimum of three months and it is hand written which time taking: leads to ignoring the tradition by the bookmakers.

Preparing parchment necessitates large space that should be free from the dense human settlement. Because when the skin is immersed into water, it has bad smell which disturbs people in the immediate environment. Particularly in urban areas or villages which have large population, it pollutes the area and now the tradition is totally stopped in these areas.

Economic status of the bookmakers is also the other contributing factor for the endangered situation of the tradition in Ethiopia. As it

is mentioned already, it is time taking and requires resource. So, it brings economic constraints for them and they have been forced to look for other opportunities.

Misconception towards book making tradition is the other factor that hindered the sustainability of the knowledge. Most of the people believe that such kind of activity is primitive. For example, only a handful of priests are involved in it and the communities are not considering the knowledge as valuable.

Absence of a responsible institution to teach the skill and institutions are not endeavoring to preserve such a long aged and outstayed indigenous knowledge. Churches and monasteries are working only on teaching the beliefs and institutionalize the belief system only. But unlike the past, nowadays they forgot to teach such irreplaceable tradition with the churches and monasteries. For example, in *Mahdere Mariam* church, there are various young church students; but no one has learnt this skill and there is no system which encourages the young students to engage in this skill.

CONCLUSION

In Ethiopian in general and in *Mahdere Maryam* in particular, book-making tradition is one of the valuable indigenous knowledge that has been practiced since long time ago. Historical evidences so far shows, using parchment and producing a book was started since the 7th C AD. Since this time, book-making was one of Ethiopians' golden tradition and it is an important source of information about history, culture, religion, level of knowledge and similar activities of the past. To produce a book parchment, ink and pen are the basic materials. Parchment serves as a paper and produced from skin. First, they immerse the skin in water for three to seven days; then dried by the sun and remove the hair and flesh carefully. Then the parchment is ready for writing and they have to have inks to write on it. There are two inks/colors used to write on manuscripts, these are red and black. Nowadays preparing red ink traditionally is totally stopped and they purchase it from shop. However, black ink is still prepared by the professionals from vegetable substances through time-consuming steps. After having the prepared parchment and ink the other

material needed to write a book is ink pen. It prepared from bamboo, reed and hen's feather. Hence, the next step is writing or copying the book by using the above stated materials. When they write the proposed book they use different columns on a single page based on the nature and size of the proposed book. For example, gospel books in two languages (Geez and Amharic) are written in four columns, gospels in one language (Geez or Amharic) always written in three columns, hagiographies are in two columns and psalms are always in one column. In *Mahdere Maryam*, books are produced into two forms; these are codex and scroll. The books are bind with thick skin as a cover and thin wood added within the skin and then leafs are sewed together. As a part of binding, the cover of the book is usually decorated with different shapes incised through different decoration materials. These materials in *Mahdre Maryam* are classified into four; these are *chira*, title, cross and Dove eye bindings. Nowadays, the youth are attracted by modernity and they ignore to engage in this indigenous knowledge. Due to this and other impediments the tradition is kept only by few church fathers.

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