



Investigating Contemporary Changes and Continuity in the Technological Aspects of Traditional Manuscript Preparation in Ethiopia: Gojjam Province in Focus

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Abstract

Gojjam is home for a number of ancient churches and Orthodox religious educational centres. This abundant religious tradition in the area makes it home for the bulk of ancient religious manuscripts that are still found in Churches and different places. Most of the manuscripts found in this area are believed to be produced here in the area, as we still can get the practice of traditional manuscript preparation in the area witnessing the existence of such a practice in ancient periods. This research was conducted aspiring to show the changes in the technological aspects of traditional manuscript preparation in the contemporary era focusing in Gojjam province. The study employed qualitative research approach through which data were collected from purposively selected participants through interview, observation and FGD. The data were analysed and interpreted thematically. The finding unfolded that there are few practices that are not changed yet such as, sewing, binding and covering, but there are observable changes in the practice that are related to the type of traditional manuscripts produced, the scope of producing them and the practitioners' perception about the significance of traditional manuscripts. As the result revealed, these changes existed mainly because of the influences emanating from technology, which presents the Branna manuscripts in a simplified format and ample magnitude. The finding also indicated that this inescapable influence of technology is endangering the continuity of this traditional practice. This research therefore, concluded by forwarding recommendations to safeguard this invaluable tradition of the country.

Keywords: Manuscript preparation; Ethiopia; Change; Continuity; Gojjam

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a country with enormous traditional wisdoms. Emanating from its deep rooted religious and cultural institutions, the country is famous with its religious, philosophical, medicinal and artistic wisdoms that even influence the intellect of the world at large. These traditional wisdoms are found depicted, and of course has been transmitted to generations through different forms. Hieroglyphics, sculptures, manuscripts and oral traditions are few out of many. However, manuscripts are the most common means through which these traditional wisdoms are kept and transmitted. The literary tradition of the country which dates back to the 4th c, help Ethiopians produce bulk of manuscripts with different genres **Error! Reference source not found.**

The uniqueness of Ethiopians in knowledge production and transmission lays on their enthusiasm to novelty. This novelty is highly reflected in their practice of producing manuscripts. Even though manuscript preparation is an age old practice worldwide which believed to be started around 6th BC, the technology Ethiopians had been using to produce manuscripts was highly different from what had been widely known in the rest of the world. Even though the Coptic Christian tradition of Egypt had had a significant influence on Ethiopian manuscript preparation tradition, it is evident that bookmaking in the country has its own singular features that make it different from the rest of the world **Error! Reference source not found.**

Such uniqueness, therefore, makes traditional manuscript preparation an indigenous knowledge that has been practiced in different parts of Ethiopia. Gojjam is one of the places where this tradition has been wildly practiced. Religious manuscripts made from *Branna* parchments and the practice of producing them was introduced to Gojjam province in the medieval period of Ethiopian history. Since then a number of *Branna* manuscripts were produced in the region, and this traditional practice is still existent in the area. Nonetheless, this practice is being challenged by technological and other social influences that yield changes both in use and production of this traditional wisdom. Hence, Investigating the change and continuity of this indigenous knowledge in a scientific way is vital, for it helps promote and preserve the ancient wisdom prevalent in the area.

2. Materials and Methods

As the title of the research implies, the approach to this research is purely qualitative, With this big domain of approach, historical research design had been employed as a research design, for this research was interested in collecting, verifying, and synthesizing evidences from the past to establish facts that defend or refute a hypothesis to the present.

Source of Data

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were persons that involve in traditional manuscript preparation and /or have detail experience and knowledge about traditional manuscript preparation; archive sources, and manuscripts written of Ethiopian traditional manuscript preparation were used as secondary source of data.

Sampling and Selection of participants

Informants were selected through purposive sampling. Snowballing was employed as a preferred means of selecting informants, as these informants are very few in number and rarely known publically and found in scattered places in the area. Through this mechanism six informants were selected from Churches and Monasteries in East Gojjam Zone. These informants were individuals currently working on book binding and maintenance called *Degossa* in Amharic. The first informant ZA¹ was a traditional school student in *Abema Tserehatsion Cathedral Church*. WG was a priest in the same church. WE and AS were Priests in *Dima Georgis Church*; whereas, HE and WH were from *Mertule Mariam Monastery*.

Data collection instruments

For this research, three types of data collection instruments were used: Observation, document analysis and interview.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data collected through the aforementioned tools were analysed thematically. The data first was first transliterated and translated in to English, then the content was described, analysed and interpreted thematically.

Scope of the study

¹ The initial letters of the names of informants were used to refer them purposely to maintain the ethical considerations of the research.

Traditional manuscript preparation is a practice that passes through a number of time taking and labour consuming stages. Starting from parchment preparation to binding it involves a number of materials and skills of practitioners. The present research is not interested in the how of the traditional manuscript preparation practice, as it is already explained sufficiently by previous literatures. It rather endeavours to explicate the changes in the technological aspects of that well known practice under three major stages: Manuscript production (Type and magnitude), writing and binding.

Results and discussion

3.1. Changes in traditional manuscripts production: Type and magnitude

Change is evident everywhere in any form of life. Especially when it comes to practices and activities, the dynamism is unstoppable and quick. Traditional manuscript preparation, as it is one part of social and cultural practice, also undergoes a number of observable changes that come because of technological and socio-cultural influences. When we talk about changes in traditional manuscript preparation in Gojjam, the following three feature got due attention: Change in production (the type and magnitude of manuscripts produced in the area) , change in writing and writing material (parchment, ink and pen) and change in binding. Comparing and contrasting the past and the present, the changes were analysed based on these three features as follows:

Change in types of manuscripts produced in Gojjam

According to Nosnitsin, there are three types of manuscripts produced in Ethiopia:

- 1) The codex, (*Müshaf, Branna*) made of folded parchment leaves which are collected in gatherings, sewn together, and given covers.
- 2) The so-called protective (or “magic”) scroll, which is used as a written amulet. Such scrolls (interestingly called *Ketab* are mostly reserved for a very specific (protective or “magic”) type of literature.
- 3) Accordion book (called *Sensul*). It is made of one or more folded strips of parchment, with or without covers, to which ties can be attached **Error!**

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According to our informants, in the past, all of these three types of manuscripts used to be prepared in Gojjam in a significant amount. However, the production of *the codex* and *accordion manuscripts* is no longer found widely these days. Their production is decreasing following the introduction of printed religious manuscripts in the area. One of our informants describes the status of codex production in Gojjam as fol

Branna manuscripts were the most prominent forms of ancient manuscripts that used to be produced in Gojjam. Our forefathers were very kin in producing these manuscripts, and they left for us a number of precious manuscripts and their wisdom. They produced those manuscripts from animals' leather paying a very huge sacrifice in time, labour and cost. But, the period we are living in is different. We can get the manuscripts we need published technologically. There is no need to waste long time for manuscripts production in a traditional way. Because of this, *Branna* book production is decreasing if not neglected. The practice is still exists in a very limited remote monasteries only. (Interview, HE)

Of the three types of manuscripts stated above, the one that is widely made still today is the protective (magic) scroll or *Kitab* in Amharic. Because of the protective function this manuscript has, there is a huge demand from the society. Hence following this demand, *Debteras* that are "itinerant religious figure[S] who sing and dance for the congregation, and who perform exorcisms and medicinal magic" **Error! Reference source not found.** are still working on it. According to our one of informants (WE):

Even though it is out of the teachings of the church², *Kitabs*(Magic scrolls)are produced for different protective and healing purposes, and the production is not still substituted by other technologically produced materials because of two major reasons: 1) *Kitabs* in their original form of production are considered sacred and more protective than paper made ones ,and 2) the parchment used to produce *Kitabs* is very small and does not require much time and labour for production.

Other than *Kitabs*, the other forms of manuscripts are not being produced in a significant amount if not all in all, as it was in previous periods. *Branna* manuscripts are not prepared regularly, and so are accordion manuscripts. Our informants indicated few reasons for the

² Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers magical and medicinal practices by *Debretas* as nonreligious.

decline of the production in these types of manuscripts, but the major one was replacement of the function of these ancient manuscripts with technologically printed ones. There is no need for *Branna* manuscripts and *accordions*, as religious manuscripts needed for religious purposes and church education are found abundantly in the market with reasonable price. “Unlike traditional manuscripts that require more cost in labour and price, these printed manuscripts are easy to get and friendly to use.” (Interview, ZA)

The other reason indicated by our informants for the decline of *Branna* manuscripts and *accordions* production was the change in the perception of traditional book makers about these heritages. According to informant WG, most of the individuals working on traditional manuscript preparation are youngsters that lack sufficient knowledge about the spiritual and traditional values of *Branna* manuscripts. As he further indicated, “these youngsters don’t want to sacrifice their labour and time by making such manuscripts. They rather focus on getting money by only maintaining manuscripts (*degossa*), which doesn’t require serious knowledge and effort.”

From the above discussion, therefore, we can construe that the change observed in the type of manuscripts being produced in Gojjam is that there is greater focus on *Kitabs* than *Branna* and *accordion* manuscripts production.

Changes in writing and writing materials

The observation paid to different working places of our informants indicated that there was no such a significant change observed in writing system and the writing materials used to produce manuscripts. The ancient style of writing and the materials used for writing such as pen, ink and parchment were still used by practitioners. However, the purpose of these materials is becoming less as there is a lesser need for writing on parchments because of the lesser interest in producing *Branna* manuscripts. As indicated in the above section, there is no as such big practice of writing in the traditional fashion. The writing is found fully practiced by *debtaras* while producing *Kitabs*, otherwise there is little or no practice of traditional manuscript writing in the places we paid a field visit.

Rather than writing *Branna* manuscripts and/or preparing *accordion* manuscripts, the practitioners of traditional manuscript preparation are mainly focused in binding old and new manuscripts. The ink, the pen and the parchment are used for this purpose only. The

parchment, which is used to cover the hard covers of the book is not produced by the book bonder, as it used to be done in the past, rather, according to our informants, it is simply bought from the market place. And there is no choice of leather for binding; it can be the skin of whatever kind of animal. The ink is used to paint the leather cover, not for writing purpose as such. Non-religious

According to our informants, the ink used for decorative purpose is the one locally called *yealelakelem* (that means ink of the *alela*) which is bought from stationary shops. The ink production tradition by traditional book makers is not practiced by most of our informants. They have a perception that the ink they are using (i.e., the *alelakelem*) has equal function with the traditional one. Hence “why should I waste my time passing through all the tiresome steps of preparing ink from plants and charcoal? I prefer buying the ink I need from the market and use it for my purpose” (informant As.). Rather than preparing inks by mixing leaves of different plants and colouring materials such as Charcoal as the tradition of ink preparation for book makers in Ethiopia **Error! Reference source not found.**, the individuals involving in book binding and also *kitab* writers use fabricated ink powder and use it for their purpose by simply mixing it with water. However, we have found few informants who produce ink powder by themselves following the tradition that they inherit from their fore fathers.

Hence in relation to writing and writing materials, there is no such an observable change in the nature of the materials, but in their purpose a lot is changes. The traditional pens that are prepared from *horn and Bamboos* (Shegalem, 2021) are no longer give service as there is no *Branna* writing practice. Their service is limited only for *Kitab* writing. The ink used for writing is used only for painting the covers and few decorative purposes. The parchment which is not produced by the book maker but bought from the market is used as a cover not as a paper.

Changes in binding

As indicated in the above section, the practice of traditional manuscript preparation in the present era is more focusing on binding (*degosa*) than producing *Branna* manuscripts. Hence, binding is the most important activity of traditional book maker these days. This practice, unlike the other features of traditional manuscript preparation, has not entertained significant

changes. Astonishingly, almost all of the materials and the practices employed for binding in the present time are similar to the ones that existed in the past. Binding involves activities such as sewing, covering and decorating. In all of these activities the materials used and the way of doing the binding are very similar to the past. Let's see these similarities one by one

Sewing

According to Nosnitsin (2020), Ethiopian sewing is often referred to as *Coptic*, a potentially misleading term, as there are/were several distinct styles of Coptic bookbinding. It is characterized by a linked chain-stitch, generally performed on two sewing stations. Contrary to what has been written on the subject, the stations are not performed with paired needles, the awl taking the place of the needle in both making the hole and passing the thread through. Historically, ox-gut, sinew, and other animal products may have been used, but threads of natural fibres are used predominantly today. The following pictures best elaborate the similarity between the past and the present in sewing.



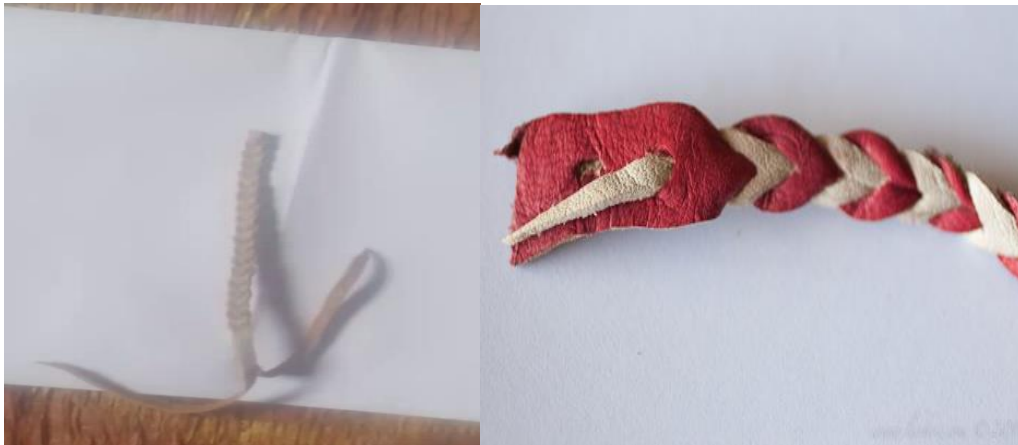
Sewing in the past

(Picture taken from internet source)

Sewing in the present

(Picture taken by researchers)

As we can observe in the two pictures presented above there is no difference in the method of sewing among the past and the present. The owl is still used to for the whole on the leather for the needle. A slight difference is seen only on the tread used for sewing. Unlike the past where ox-gut, sinew, and other animal products were used as a thread, threads of natural fibres such as *Siyrin Amharic* are used widely today. End bands used for binding purpose are made in a similar fashion and are used for similar purpose as in the past.



End bands (present and past, pic. 1 is taken by researchers and pic 2 is found from internet source)

The sewing materials are also the same. The awl used for sewing purpose in the past is still serving for this purpose



The awl used for sewing (picture taken by researchers)

Covering

As observed in the sewing practice, there is no significant change observed in the covering too. Except the source of the leather product, as in the past it was produced by the book maker but now it is bought from the market place, there is no change both in characteristics and purpose. One significant difference researchers found in their field observation is that the hard cover used to cover the two sides of the book which was mostly made of locally produced wood or clay plates is now replaced by a fabricated wooden plate which is commonly called *Compersato*, which is bought from the market. Otherwise, the covering practice doesn't involve significant changes from the past.

Decorating

Similar to covering and sewing there is no observable change in the decorating practice and the decorating materials between the past and the present.



Decorating materials (picture taken by researchers).

The decorating materials shown in the above picture are used for similar purpose since antiquity. They are mostly produced in and brought from Axum. According to our informant their name is from right to left

-DumbuloGebese

-GebesZerezere

-Mesekel

-WofeAyene

-QerneBego

Their name is derived from the decorated structure found at the top of each material. Their purpose is still similar to the past. When stamped on the wet leather cover, their decorated structure remains stamped on it and give an attractive look for the book.

Generally when we see the changes observed in traditional manuscript preparation in Gojjam a significant change is found in the type of the manuscripts being produced today, as the present focus of traditional book makers is on producing *Kitabs* than *Branna* manuscripts. And also in terms of practice,, binding is being seen as a dominant one than producing manuscripts. Almost all of the traditional book makers are now engaged in binding manuscripts than producing new ones. Otherwise, there is no as such big difference especially in the materials used for binding, writing and decorating. Many of the materials that had been used in the past are still serving.

3.2. Continuity of traditional manuscript preparation in Gojjam

As indicated in the above section, the practice of traditional manuscript preparation is still existent though with many observable changes both in magnitude of production and purpose. This practice will also continue existing as far as Orthodox Church exists. However, this practice is highly endangered because of one major reason i.e. technology. The availability of printed paper manuscripts everywhere, the soft copy formatted ones added, makes the significance of producing traditional book very less. One of our informants puts it in the following way:

Producing *Branna* manuscripts is very expensive and tiresome. To produce *Senkesar* in a *Branna* form, for instance takes at least a year. Why should one suffer this long while he can get it easily from the market?

This opinion of our informant is a shared concept among traditional book makers that we get in different places. Almost all of them adore the advantage of the modern technology. They take it as a relief from a tiresome expensive practice. Of course we have got few that prefer the traditional manuscripts than the paper printed modern ones as according to them the traditionally made *Branna* manuscripts are more sacred than the technologically made ones. It seems because of this that still there is a demand of having these manuscripts. Our informant says:

I fell sorry when I see that wisdom of our fore father being neglected by the new generation. These paper print cheap books are not as sacred as the *Branna* ones. *Branna* manuscripts are not mere manuscripts; they are filled with the Spirit of God Almighty. That is why we still need them.

The above statement of the informant gives an important clue for the significance of insuring the continuity of this practice for today and tomorrow. Even though the technologically supported manuscripts dominate the area and the traditional manuscripts are no longer serving in the day to day activities of the church as the past, these manuscripts are still needed. More importantly the demand for them doesn't vanish. According to our informants, there are still individuals and institutions that order traditional book makers for *Baranna* manuscripts. But the problem for the practitioners is mostly related to the scarcity of the materials and the time and labour dedicated for production. As one of our informants put it:

In the past, there was no problem in getting materials to produce *Branna* manuscripts. The materials needed to decorate the manuscripts; the hard covers of the manuscripts that are made of wood or clay, and different decorative materials made of metals and silver were brought from Axum. These days, there is no way to get them. Even the parchments that are needed for the preparation are not found easily. Producing them at home is also tiresome and time taking.

Because of such reasons, traditional book makers are no longer interested in *Branna* manuscript preparation rather they limit themselves on binding manuscripts that are printed in paper.

The uninterrupted continuity of this practice is vividly seen in the materials being used for decoration and binding purposes. As shown in the picture elsewhere in the above section, most of the materials being used for these purposes are the ones that had been used for centuries. Of course there are few changes in this regard too. For instance, the tread used for sewing is changed from natural fibres to manufactured fibres, the materials used to fasten the leather with the book covers is also changed from homemade wheat powder fluid(*muqe*) to fabricated stick called *Kolla*. However, these minor changes can not cover the continuity seen in this regard.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

Traditional manuscript preparation is an age old culture in Ethiopia. The literary tradition of the country which dates back to the 4th c, help Ethiopians produce bulk of manuscripts with different genres with their own indigenous technology of manuscript preparation. It is an indigenous knowledge that has been practiced in different parts of Ethiopia. Gojjam is one of the places where this tradition has been wildly practiced. Being the home to abundant religious traditions, Gojjam becomes home for bulk of ancient religious manuscripts that are still found in churches and different places.

According to the findings of the present research the history of traditional manuscript preparation in Gojjam, as part of the Art history of the area, is highly related to the coming and presence of Orthodox Church in the area. Even though there is no recorded history in this regard, the attachment of the practice to Ethiopian Orthodox Church strengthens the afore mentioned idea.

Regarding the changes observed in the technological aspects of traditional manuscript preparation, significant changes are observed in the type of traditional manuscripts produced and the scope of producing them. Presently, the production of *Branna* manuscripts and coronations are being neglected by traditional book makers, on the other hand, magic scroll manuscripts are still produced in a better magnitude. Most of the practitioners are working on only this aspect of the practice.

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Declaration of Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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