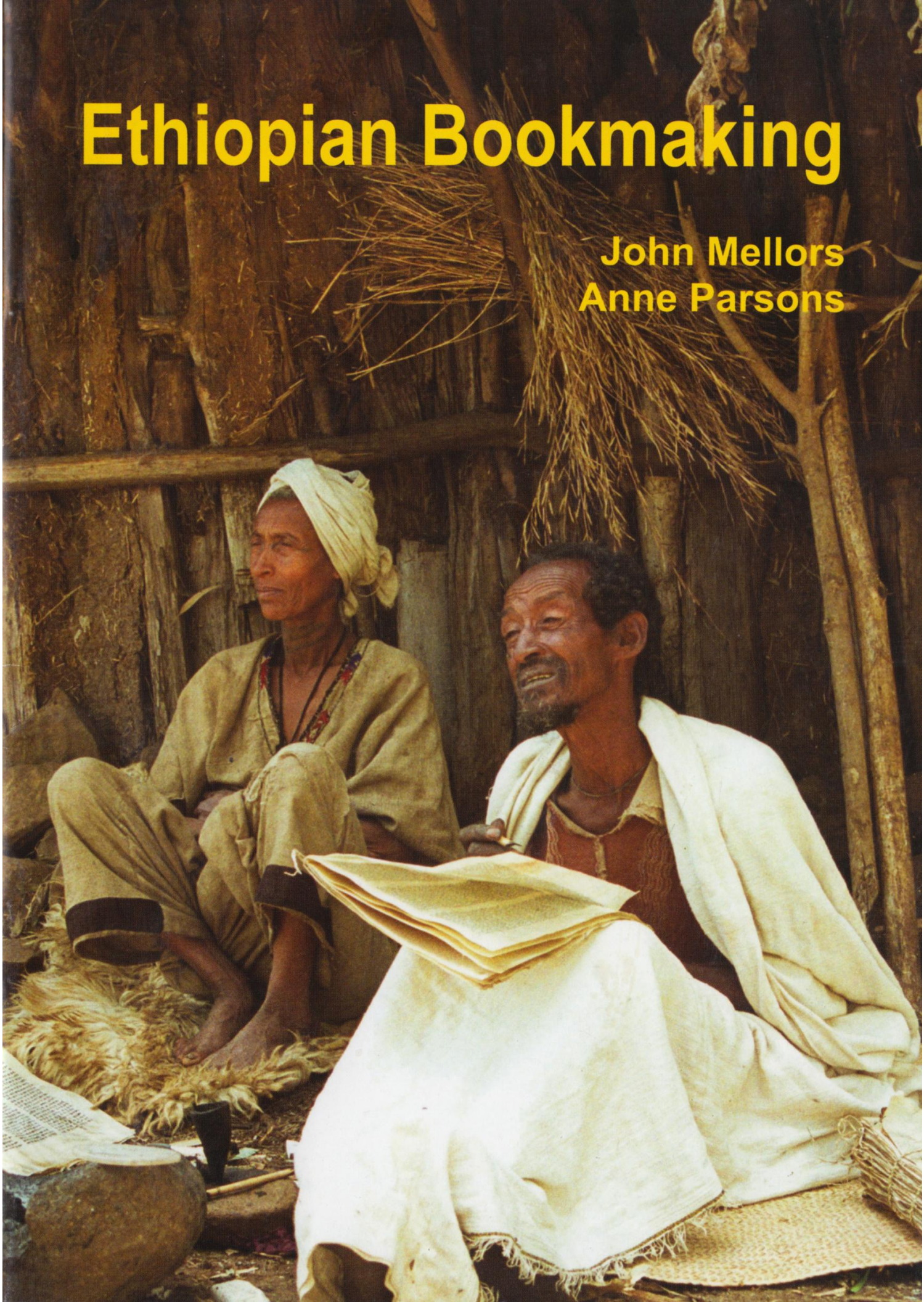
Ethiopian Bookmaking

John Mellors
Anne Parsons



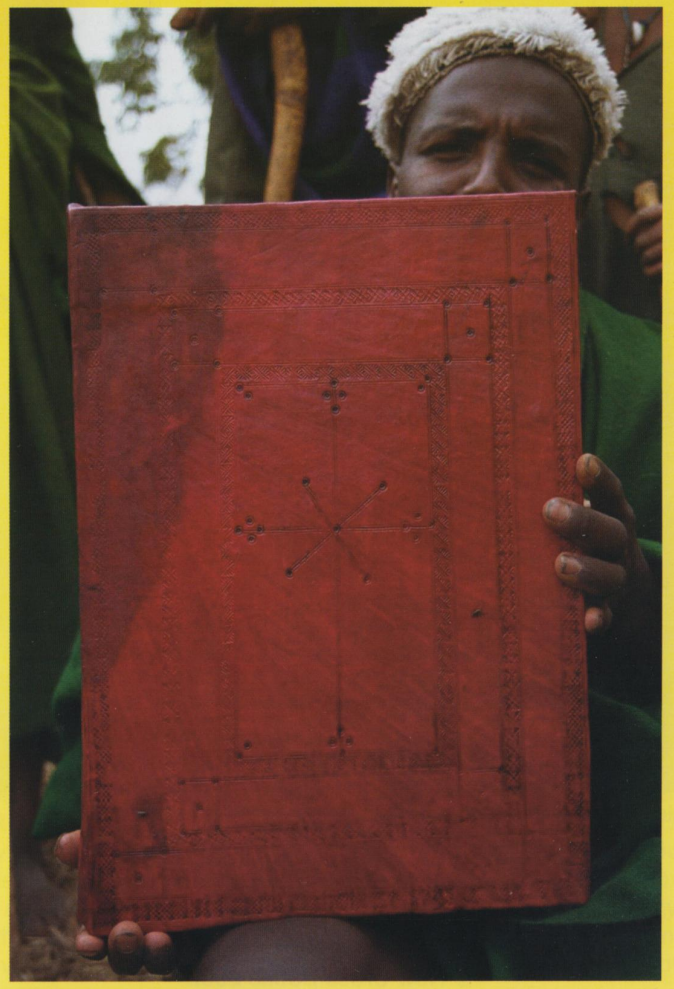
Above
Map of Ethiopia: red highlight shows main area in South Gondar where scribes are still working (For detailed map see inner back cover)
Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

Title Page (opposite)
Deacon Bantaye Haile holding completed Sinksar, April 2001

Front Cover
Qés Fenti Mihret writing Sinksar, December 2000

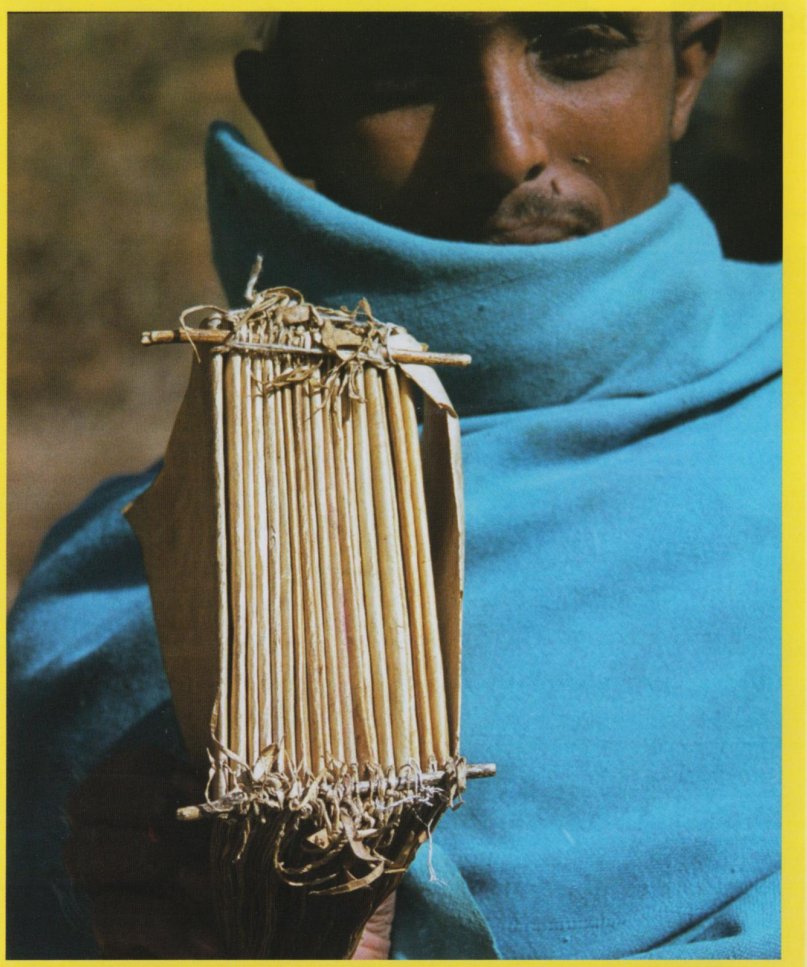
Bookmaking in Rural Ethiopia in the Twenty-First Century

Ethiopian Bookmaking



John Mellors & Anne Parsons

New Cross Books
2002



Book sections held together with twigs before binding
Qés Misganew Asaye, Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

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Retford, Notts DN22 7WF, England

Foreword

Despite the fact that the craft of bookmaking in Ethiopia has remained relatively unchanged for centuries there has been comparatively little study of the methods of book production that are in use today. Only two works giving detailed descriptions of the techniques used appear to have been published. In 1958 Assefa Liban wrote an article entitled *Preparation of Parchment Manuscripts* for the Addis Ababa University Ethnological Society Bulletin. In 1981 Sergew Hable Selassie published a pamphlet entitled *Bookmaking in Ethiopia*. Both authors noted that the number of scribes was steadily declining as more books from the church canon became available in printed form.

Today, all of the church books can be obtained in printed form, although one of the largest books, the Sinksar (Synaxarium), was only printed at the very end of the twentieth century. Up until this time writing the Sinksar had formed the bulk of the many scribes' work, and so we felt that the start of the twenty-first century was a good time to review how the craft was surviving.

Sergew Hable Selassie mentioned that a village called Andabét in the Gondar region was famous in oral folklore for the skill of its calligraphers. Attempts to locate Andabét on modern maps failed, but it was found that the *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana (1938)* includes a place named Andabiet located about half way between Debre Tabor and Mota, a little south of the modern town of Iste. We visited the countryside around Iste three times between November 2000 and July 2002. With the help of the local church authorities we interviewed about thirty scribes in this area of South Gondar. Andabét was found to be the name given to a large church administrative district south of Iste, rather than the name of an individual village.

We must thank all of the scribes who so freely shared their knowledge with us and hope that this publication, its companion volume *Scribes of South Gondar*, and the associated exhibitions, will help to raise awareness of their work. Thanks are also due to Endalkachew Mamo and Mola Melese and to Qés Yohanis Melese Dubale who allowed our party to stay in their homes.

We also gratefully acknowledge the help of many others who assisted us in a variety of ways: in particular in England, Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, Jen Lindsay, Canon Richard Marsh, and Jim Randell and the Anglo-Ethiopian Society; in Germany, Sergew Hable Selassie; in Ethiopia, Abba Gerima, Abuna Elsa, Abuna Selama and Ambassador Tebebe from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Richard and Rita Pankhurst, and the Ethiopian Mapping Authority. Finally, special thanks to our friend Habte Selasie Asemare, a tour organiser from Gondar, who helped to arrange the visits and translated for us on all of our trips to the region.

John Mellors and Anne Parsons
London, October 2002

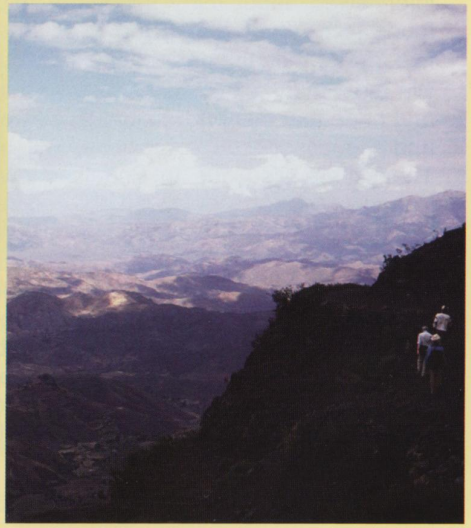
Introduction

Ethiopia, situated in the Horn of Africa, has a land area of roughly 1.1 million square kilometres (440,000 square miles). In 2000 the population was just under 63 million with about 45% being Christian, the majority of these belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The Ethiopian Church has a very long history with Christianity being adopted as the state religion in the fourth century. By the end of the fifth century missionaries from Syria, shown as the Nine Saints in church art, had established many monasteries in the north of the country. By the end of the seventh century the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs largely isolated Ethiopia from the rest of the Christian world. This isolation, together with the difficulty of travelling in such a mountainous country, has meant that Ethiopia has been subject to very few external influences.

It is likely that biblical texts were first translated from Greek into Ge'ez, the classical language of northern Ethiopia, in the fifth century. These texts have subsequently been copied by scribes using techniques that appear to have changed very little up until the present day and it is this that should make the study of Ethiopian bookmaking so important for modern scholars. It was not until the twentieth century that any of the books were widely available in printed form and, until a few years ago, the Sinksar (Synaxarium - a very large compendium of biographies of the Saints with notices of the festivals and fast days) only existed in manuscript form.

Aerial view of Ethiopian highlands
Gondar to Lalibela, December 1995



Highland footpath
Lalibela to Yemrehana Kristos, December 1995

Clockwise from left: Scenes from Ethiopian church walls.
Crucifixion, Azwa Maryam, Zegie
Abraham and Isaac, Ure Kidane Mehret, Zegie
Equestrian Saint, Ure Kidane Mehret, Zegie
Three of the Nine Saints (Yemata, Guba and Panteléwon), Debre Sina Maryam, Gorgora

Ancient manuscripts and bindings kept in church on Lake Tana, Tana Kirkos, Lake Tana, December 2000

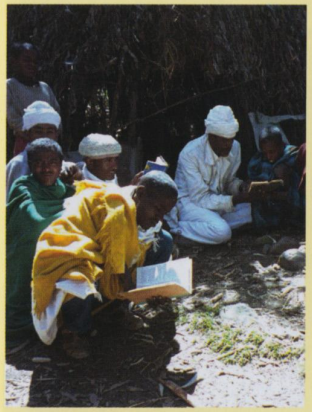
Ancient copy of the Four Gospels, showing John as a scribe, Debre Maryam, Lake Tana, December 2000

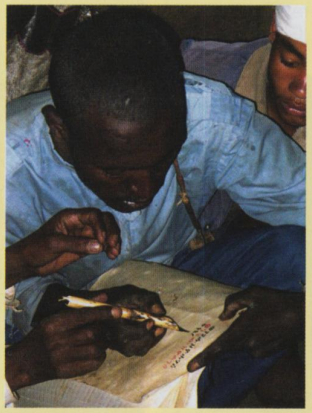
Training

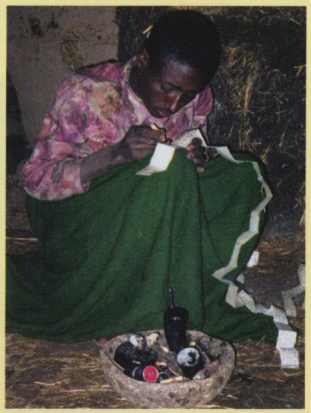
In the past the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was usually responsible for the education of the population, but secular education for children is now provided by the state. Church schools are still very common, however, and the large number of men who hold official roles within the church undergo at least part of their training in such schools. They will initially learn Ge'ez followed by specialised disciplines such as Degwa (hymns), Zayma (chanting and singing), Qiné (poetry), and Akwakwam (movement to accompany the singing). Manuscript production is not a certified church discipline and it is only in the churches in the countryside around the town of Iste, South Gondar, that recognised training in this subject is widely available.

Students will not normally begin training in manuscript production until they have had about eight years of religious instruction and so will generally be at least seventeen years old. The training usually takes the form of an apprenticeship to a master scribe and will cover parchment preparation, pen cutting, ink making, and binding, as well as writing. Many scribes will at some point in their career teach students, although they receive no formal payment for doing this and often appear to have to contribute towards the upkeep of their students.

The length of training given varies considerably depending on the teacher and the aptitude of the student. Some students will be selling work after only six months training whereas it may take others two years or more before they reach this stage. Towards the end of their training students will usually practice writing short works such as the Lefafa Sedq (Bandlet of Righteousness). This text is often carried on a person throughout their life, is intended to be read at their funeral, and be buried with them when they die.







Above, left to right
Student practising Zayma with teacher Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign, Zigora Gebriel, November 2000
Student practising writing, Zigora Gebriel, November 2000
Student Melkamu Ewenatu writing Lefafa Sedq, Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002

Parchment

The manuscript books are normally written on parchment (ብራና, *brana*) made from goatskin. To make the parchment, the goatskin, which can be used either fresh or dried, is soaked in water for about seven to ten days before stretching and drying on a wooden frame (መዋጠርያ, *mewateriya*). Unlike parchment made in Western Europe, no chemicals such as lime are added to remove the hair. Young male goats or young female goats who have had only one litter are said to produce good quality skins while old females provide large skins but the quality is inferior. Goats of uniform hair colour are preferred as there are no pigmented areas on the parchment. After soaking, the skin is tied to the frame using support poles (ጨንባር:ወይም:ለበቅ, *chinbar weyim lebeq),* a technique that is possibly unique to Ethiopia.

Above top
Ethiopian goats, Jimma, July 2002

Above centre
Goatskin soaking in water pot
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Right top and bottom
Cutting slits along the edges of the skin

Threading the support poles through the slits in the skin
Merigita Fenti Indelew,
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Whilst still wet, the flesh side is then scraped and cleaned using a special curved knife (መአፈፊያ:ክራ, *mafefiya kara*) and pumice stone (መራመሚ:ደንጋይ, *meramemi dengay*). The tension of the skin is carefully adjusted before it is left for one or two days to dry in the sun. A slightly longer time may be needed in the rainy season for the skin to dry.

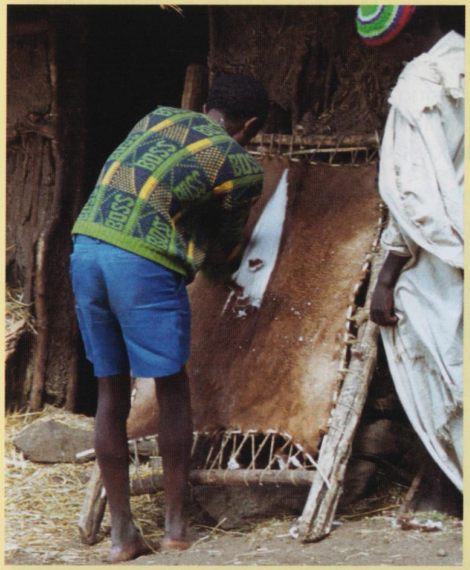
Above left
Mounting the skin to the wooden frame via the poles
Merigita Fenti Indelew,
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

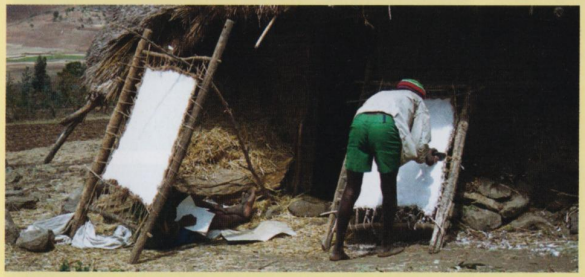
Above centre
Using a curved knife and pumice stone to clean the flesh and remove fat
Qés Gétu Biruh,
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Centre right
Using a pumice stone to clean the flesh and remove fat
Merigita Fenti Indelew,
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Top right and bottom right
Frames with skins drying in the sun
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001
Zeboye Mikael, July 2002

When dry, an adze like tool (መጥረቢያ:መላጫ, *metrebiya melacha)* is used to remove the hair and to thin the parchment. The flesh side undergoes a final cleaning with the curved knife, pumice stone, and, sometimes, a little soapy water. During this time the tension is carefully controlled by tightening or loosening the ropes around the edges.





Left top to bottom
Qés Misganew Asaye using the adze like tool to remove the hair and to thin the parchment

Melkamu Ewenatu practising using the adze

Final cleaning of the flesh side
Qés Misganew Asaye and Melkamu Ewenatu
Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

Right top to bottom
Checking tension on the parchment
Qés Gétu Biruh,
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Detail of tying poles to frame
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign,
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

When preparation of the skin is complete it is carefully marked up to show where the parchment sheets are to be cut out. A template is used as a pattern, the location of the sheet corners being pricked using an awl (መካፍቾ, *mekafiche*). The number of sheets that can be obtained from a skin varies between about three and eight, depending on both the size of the skin used and type of book required.

After the skin is removed from the frame the sheets are cut out and folded in half. Four, or sometimes five, folded sheets are nested together to form a section which is then held together using temporary parchment ties.

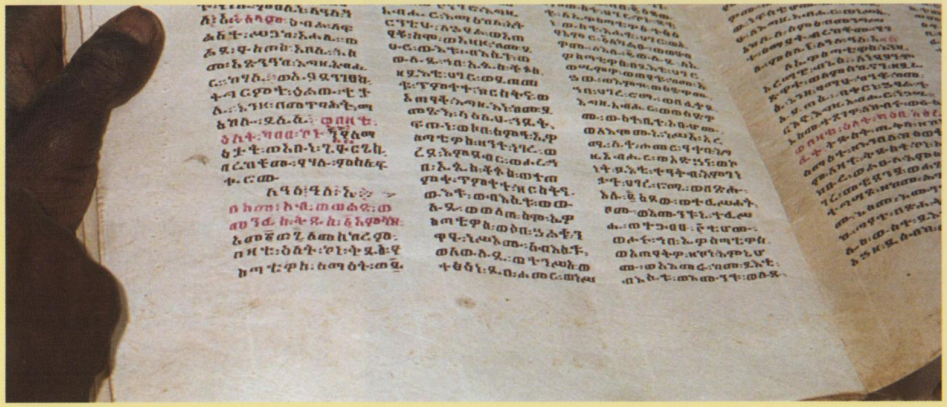
Small holes, to mark the position of each line and column of text, are pricked along the edges of the parchment section using the template. A blunt instrument, such as the back of a knife, is used to score faint lines joining these holes to give guides for the scribes to follow. Usually a book will comprise of between six and sixteen sections.

Above left to right
Marking a skin using a template, Qés Misganew Asaye, Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

Scoring lines to mark column positions, Merigita Fenti Indelew, Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Bundle of sections showing parchment ties, Qés Fenti Mihret, Galawdiwos, December 2000

Below
Page detail showing scored guidelines, Qés Fenti Mihret, Galawdiwos, December 2000



Pens

Pens are made from a type of tall reed (ሽምበቆ, *shembeqo)* that grows locally. The reeds are dried carefully before being carved into pens by the scribes. The diameter of the reed used and the length of pen made varies widely from scribe to scribe. The width of the pen nib is dictated by the size of writing required. Several pens will be prepared before starting to write. Different pens are used for the red and black inks. A pen with a slightly wider nib will usually be used on the hair side of the parchment because the ink tends to spread more on the flesh side. Pen nibs usually need to be resharpened after about four sides of parchment have been written.

Top left
Reed plantation
Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

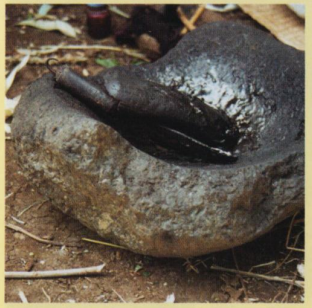
Top right
Cutting reed pen
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

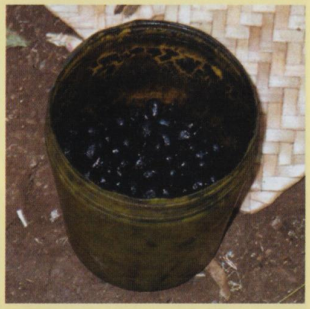
Bottom left
Reed pen
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Inks

The basic ingredient of the black ink used is carbon, usually in the form of soot collected from the bottom of cooking pots or from kerosene lamps. Roasted grains of maize, barley, or finger millet, are infused in a small amount of hot water and the starchy liquid decanted off and added to the soot to act as a binder. The only other ingredient normally added is a natural insecticide to keep flies away; the juice of the fruit from certain *Solanum* species is frequently used. These ingredients are mixed on a grindstone or stirred in a pot every day for a period of perhaps several months. Eventually a skin forms on the top of the mixture and this layer is skimmed off and dried into blocks. The dried ink is stable for many years and small amounts can be mixed with water in an inkhorn to give a dense liquid black ink whenever required.

Red ink is normally only used to write the names of God, Christ, Mary, and Saints and Martyrs. It was traditionally prepared from natural ingredients such as red flowers and red soils but very few scribes do this today. Usually commercial red ink is bought and then mixed with a binder such as acacia gum to thicken it.





Above, left to right
Black ink being mixed on a grindstone
Qés Fenti Mihret, Gelawdiwos, December 2000

Layer of ink forming on top of mixture
Melake Yibabé Abeje Laqew,
Gota Kidane Mihiret, April 2001

Roasted maize used in making binder
Qés Fenti Mihret, Gelawdiwos, December 2000

Centre right
Yellow Solanum fruit used as insecticide
Iste, April 2001

Bottom right
Ink stand with natural red ink
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign,
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Writing

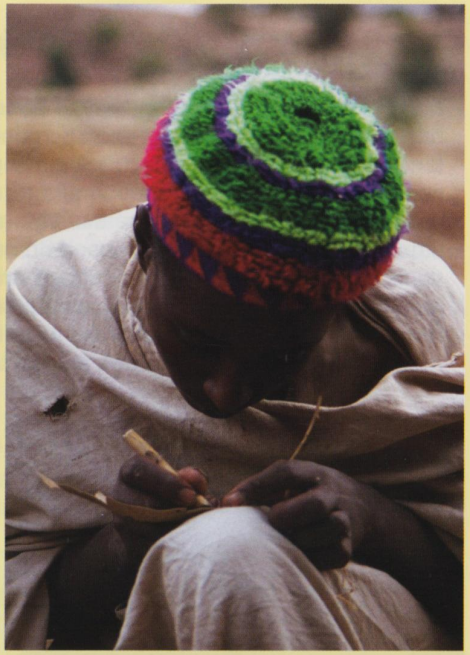
Most scribes can only spend a few hours each day writing as they usually have other duties to perform for the church and also have a plot of land and animals to tend. The Sinksar, a large book having about 400 sides, will typically take a scribe about eight to twelve months to complete if he works on average two to three hours a day. The scribe usually writes sitting on the floor, or on a very low stool, with the parchment balanced on one knee. Immediately prior to writing, the surface of the parchment is rubbed with a very fine grained stone (መድመኛ, *medmets*) to smooth the surface and remove any fatty deposits that might still remain. Any holes in the skin are usually repaired while the parchment is being made so that the whole surface area of the skin can be written on.

Left top to bottom
Writing a sample page, Merigita Fenti Indelew
Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Writing a sample page, Qés Misganew Asaye
Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

Right top to bottom
Detail showing repair to a hole in a skin

Ink stand; inset, bottle of commercial red ink
Qés Fenti Mihret, Gelawdiwos, December 2000



Top left

Giving writing instruction to a student
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign
Zigora Gebriel
November 2000

Top right

Student practising writing on a eucalyptus leaf
Melkamu Ewenatu
Gimb Giyorgis
April 2001

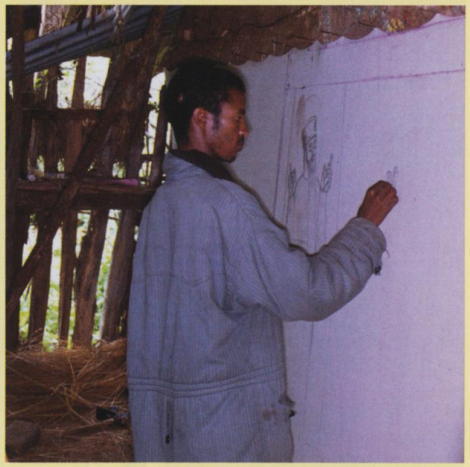
Bottom right

Writing a sample page
Qés Yohanis Melese Dubale
Gono Gebriel
April 2001

Decoration

Very few of the books written today require any pictures but, if they are needed, most scribes rely on the services of an artist and his assistant at Shimagile Giyorgis. The scribes simply leave a space in the text where the illustration is to be painted. Until recently, the artists painted using natural colours and pigments made from locally gathered ingredients but now they more often use factory made colours. They still make their own brushes using hair from the manes of donkeys. Most of the artists' time is now spent painting large canvases for the inner walls of churches.

Some book chapters are marked by a type of decoration known as a harag. Some scribes commission this from the artists, but many will paint their own.



Above left

Manuscript pages with harag
Student holding work by Qés Misganew Asaye,
Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002

Left

Manuscript pages with harag
Student holding work by Qés Misganew Asaye,
Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002

Above right

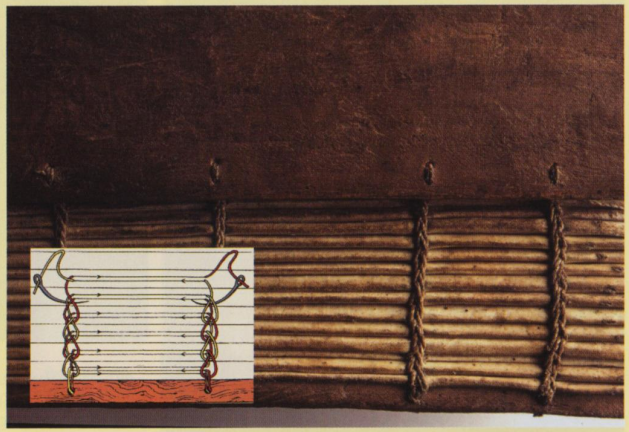
Sketching canvas for church wall painting
Merigita Alebele Degu,
Shimagile Giyorgis, July 2002

Binding

When all the writing, and painting if any, has been completed, the individual book sections are sewn together between permanent wooden boards. In the past the sewing thread was made from animal tendons, typically from the thighs of cattle. Today, it is more common to use synthetic material such as thread picked from woven plastic sacking or cording stripped from the inside of car tyres.

The Ethiopian style of sewing is very different to that now used in the rest of the world. The key feature is the use of independent pairs of link-stitch sewing to join the sections together and attach them directly to the outer wooden boards. Each pair is sewn with one thread and two needles.

The wood for the cover has to be strong but relatively lightweight. Traditionally olive wood was preferred, but other woods such as acacia, eucalyptus, fig, or juniper have been used. All these are now very difficult to obtain so many books have to be bound in boards purchased from carpenters. Thin plywood is popular, but its use requires a change in the traditional sewing techniques.

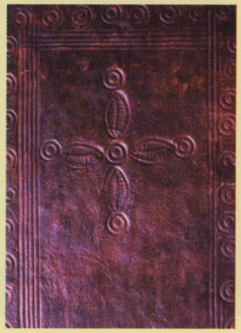


Above left
Piercing holes through folded sheets before sewing
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign,
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Above right
Spine of modern hymn book with two pairs of link-stitch sewing; Inset, line drawing showing a pair of the link stitches

Right
Sewing first section to board
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign,
Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Sometimes the boards are then covered in cowskin that is purchased from the local tanner. The skin is dyed red or reddish-brown before being pasted over the wood. Decorative patterns are often stamped on the leather using heated iron finishing tools which are usually obtained from Aksum. Seven basic designs of tool are commonly found; cross (መስቀል, *mesqel),* horizontal lines (ጭሩ, *chru),* circles or dove's eye (ዓይኑርግብ, *ayne regib*), crescent (ቀርኑበግዕ, *qerne bege),* criss-cross (ርዕስ, *res),* palm shape (ባለዘምባባ, *balezembaba),* wave form or water insect (የውሃ:እናት, *yewiha inat*). While all seven tools may be used on a large book, it is common to use only three on smaller books.

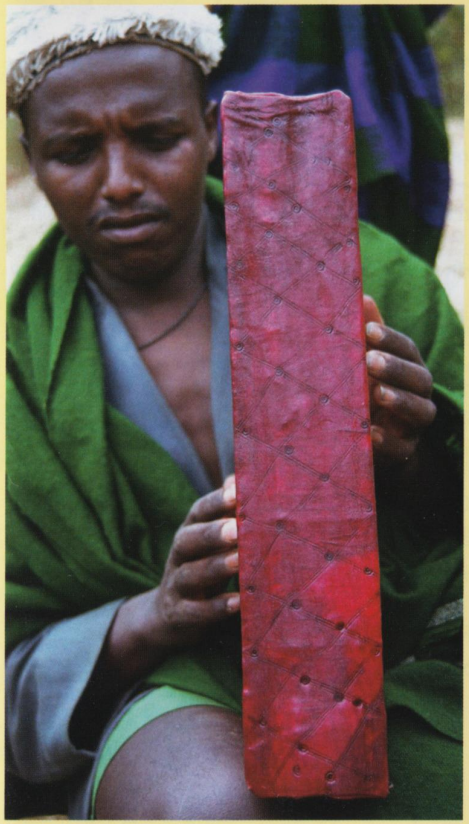


Above
Heating the tools and demonstrating tooling on leather samples, Mulugita Areaya Gebeyehu and Qeñgita Birhan Hilina, Gelawdiwos, July 2002
Inset: Set of seven tools, Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign, Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Upper left
Enlarged views of finishing tools
clockwise from top left: crescent, dove's eye three lines, four lines (side view), four lines, cross, criss-cross
Qeñgita Birhan Hilina, Gelawdiwos, July 2002

Lower left
Decorating a book cover
Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign, Zigora Gebriel, November 2000

Lower right
Enlarged central motif of a typical book cover showing tooling detail



Deacon Bantaye Haile with completed Sinksar for sale, Debre Kera Maryam, April 2001

Opposite upper and lower
Fabric lining on the inner front cover

Book open at the middle of a section

Above left and right
Plaited leather endband

Tooled red leather cover

Bottom left
Spine showing details of tooling

Inner Back Cover
Map showing area where working scribes can be found
Based on EMA Sheet NC 37-2

Back Cover
Typical style of tooled leather binding on old Ethiopian manuscript

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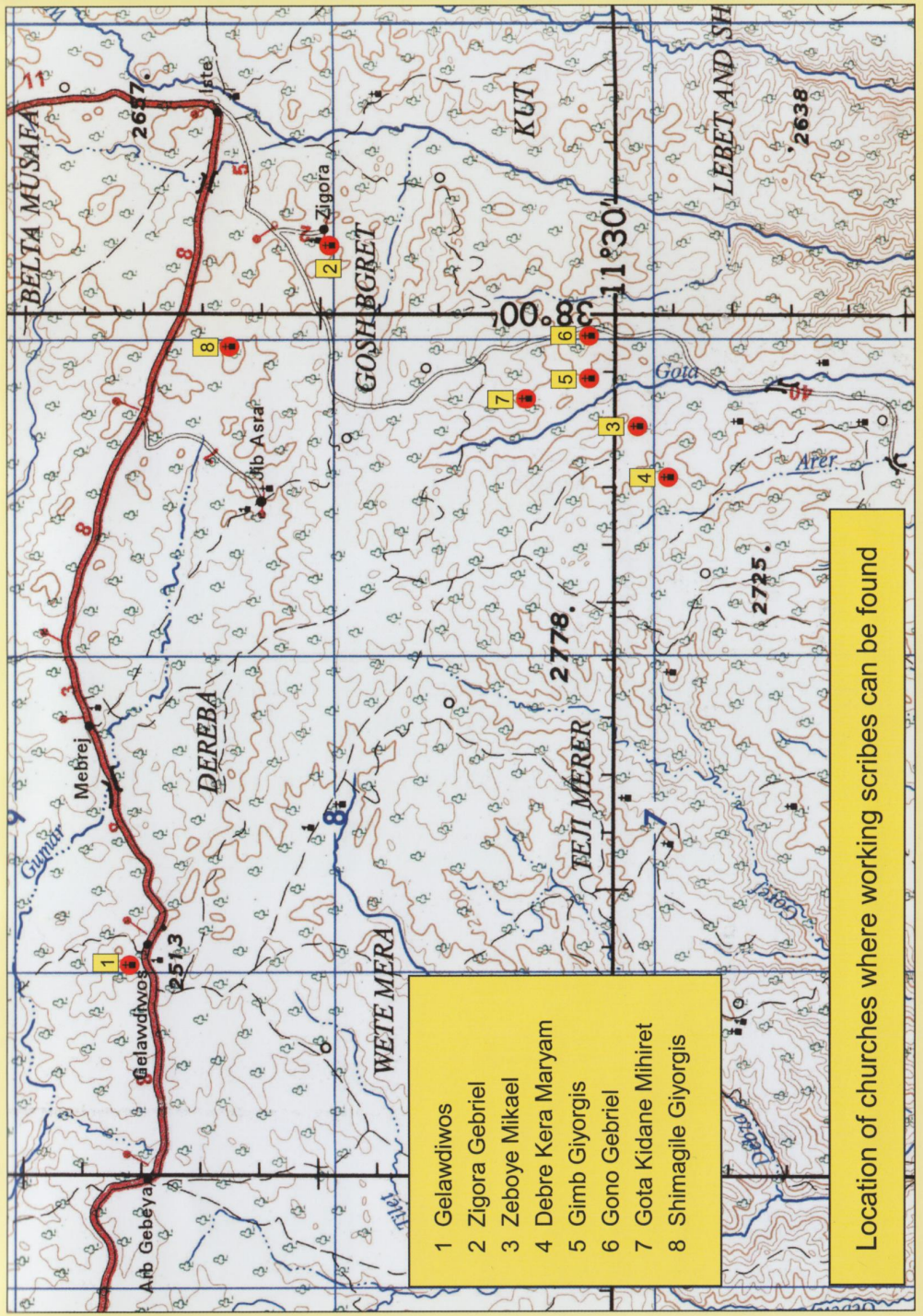

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