

Visual Representations of Christian Talisman Arts in North and Central Ethiopia

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Abstract

Talisman art esoteric practices evolved from indigenous knowledge, religious values, and cultural perspectives. Most talisman art practices in the world have disappeared or evolved into other artforms. But Ethiopian talisman arts are a living experience, and are still developing in highland areas. On the other hand, Western scholars claim and that Ethiopian talisman arts directly adopted from Coptic and Arab talisman arts. The study investigates this vis-à-vis the development of indigenous practices of Ethiopian talisman art images, visual representations, material culture, and artistic compositions. Nineteen Ethiopian *Däbtäräs*/scroll makers and practitioners are selected based on purposive sampling method from potential areas in north and central Ethiopia. The study employs a qualitative research method based on in-depth interviews with experts, manuscript analyses from museums, and field observations with practitioners to determine the development and basic characteristics of talisman art practices in Ethiopia.

Keywords: *Ethiopia, talisman arts, visual representations, symbols*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the visual representation of Christian talisman arts in central and north Ethiopia. It focuses on the representation of figures, signs, symbols, and colours in Ethiopian Christian talisman art traditions. Ethiopian talisman arts were closely related with Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC) arts due to the common Orthodox Christian traditions and styles of art. EOTC was part of the Coptic Orthodox Church for hundreds of years. From the 4thC to the 20thC, the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Church shared the same central administration (see, e.g., Ayalew, 2002).

Ethiopian church traditions are ambiguous, although the official EOTC doctrine is negative towards esoteric traditions and local experts known as *Däbtäräs*. The *Däbtäräs* are experts' that passes through the Church's traditional education system in different types of esoteric knowledge. Most magic scrolls are made by *Däbtäräs*, who also practice herbal medicine and other therapeutic traditions, and gain an income from such activities (Chernetsov, 2006: 189). Talismans are used in Christian and Islamic traditions to ward off evil spirits or for protective purposes, and to assist the ailing. Even though Emperor Zärä Yakob of Ethiopia condemned using talisman objects during the 15thC, however, the practice survives and flourishes in central and northern Ethiopia to this day.

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Ethiopian talisman arts express comprehensive, systematic, mystical, and artistic views that connect human life with nature and the supernatural world. Such practices exist in different forms in many parts of the world, connecting art and science. Esoteric practices have different meanings according to their context and cultural values, including divination, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, occult, and magic (Burns, 2016: 213). However, the use of talisman elements, artistic expressions, and styles depending on a certain culture and lifestyles, are slightly different. Some magical symbols are commonly used in Ethiopia, Egypt, Greek, and Hebrew talismans and amulets (Chrentsov, 2006: 192). Moreover, Ethiopia and Egypt had close relations and have prominent Christian and Islamic communities, as well as a Jewish presence.

Ethiopian talisman experts and Christian clerics translated '*The Book of Buni*' into Ge'ez language and adapted it into an Ethiopian talisman image (Mercier, 1979: 48-52). On the other hand, Wallis Budge claims that Arabic talisman arts are adapted from the traditions of other countries. However, it is advanced that the Arabs borrowed many talisman drawings, decorations, and symbols from their neighbours: ancient Egyptians and Hebrews (Budge, 1930: 67). There is a similarity between Jewish and Ethiopian highlands concerning wearing necklaces (silver) for protective purposes. Jewish talismans are referred to as 'Kabbalistic signs'; and they also use 'ring letter' characters similar to Greek letters (Bohak, 2011: 26). This kind of shared influences called for further investigation of Ethiopian talisman art culture. This study specifically inquired on visual art representations of Ethiopian Christian talisman arts, focusing on images than on rituals and magical texts.

2. Background of the Study

The dictionary meaning of the word talisman is "... *an object that is thought to have magic powers and to bring good luck*" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020 edition). The English word 'talisman' has different variations in different languages: in Arabic, it is '*tīlsam*'; in Greek it is '*telesma*', in Coptic magical symbols it is '*eroukh*', and in Amharic it is '*tālsām*'—commonly referring to a '*powerful object*' (Encyclopedia Ethiopica, 2010: 850; Shaw, 2017: 237). Talisman art is associated with amulets used for therapeutic purposes or healing processes in many cultures of the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Christianity became the state religion of Ethiopia in the mid-4thC under the Aksumite kingdom, during the reign of King Ezana (Abebaw, 2002: 3). After the introduction of Christianity, Ethiopian Christian arts and ritual activities flourished. The metropolitan archbishop of the EOTC was appointed and sent from Egypt for a long period. Finally, the EOTC was permitted to become autocephalous in 1959, and Abunā Baseliyos became the first Ethiopian patriarch (De Ménonville, 2018: 9).

Christianity in Ethiopia was the major source of inspiration for political, cultural, and economic activities (ibid: 7). To some extent, Talisman art styles adapted elements from orthodox iconography. Ethiopian healing scrolls are written in

Ge'ez language, and date back to the 7thC. Most of the magic scrolls, including secret codes, are written in the Ge'ez language (Luna, 2015: 2). Scholars, such as Luna, mentioned colour symbolism in magic scrolls, especially the use of black and red to write clients' names and the names of Gods.

The *Däbtäräs*' talismans include mystical names from religious books with protective words to guard one's person against evil spirits (ibid: 2). *Däbtäräs* are recognized as the most educated and talented priests (Encyclopedia Ethiopica 2005: 53), fulfilling such roles as healing practitioners, poets, painters, and producers of amulets. *Däbtäräs* are alternatively categorized positively or negatively: giving service in churches; and as *šänquay*, giving therapeutic services without the authorization of the Church doctrine and tradition: just as own business activities (Ménonville, 2018: 15).

1.1 Problem Statement

This study focused on investigating the basic elements and common characteristics of Ethiopian Christian talisman arts. As mentioned earlier, Ethiopian magical scrolls are influenced by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim arts (Wesley, 2017: 3). Even before the acceptance of Christianity in the early 4thC, different magical practices flourished in Ethiopia. Ethiopian magicians learned from their Egyptian counterparts and concurred with them in upper Nubia, two millennia before Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia (Budge, 1930: 177).

Scholars like Wesley mention that talismanic arts originated from one centre, and then influenced different cultures. Other scholars like Mercier claim about the existence—as well as the originality—of Ethiopian Christian talisman images and symbols (Mercer, 1979: 48–52). Arabic talismans were used as an inspiration for Christian talisman arts like 'the Book of *Buni*'¹ and translated into the Ge'ez language. Under the auspices of the EOTC, many miracle books and other literature from abroad were translated. The *Miracles of Mary*, hagiographies, etc., were translated to Ge'ez and Amharic languages, with such translations including both spiritual and magical texts side by side.

In addition to mysterious signs and symbols, Ethiopian *Däbtäräs* use a secret language—or '*Asmat*'—to expel demons. However, over time Ethiopian talisman art came to include some indigenous signs and symbols; and evolved into an indigenous artform, with elements related to the EOTC iconography. This paper identifies the presence and originality of Ethiopian talisman art images and its characteristics. Basically, it focuses on the forms of Ethiopian Christian talisman images and their interpretation of symbols, numbers, colours, codes, human and animal representations in scrolls and talismans.

¹The Book of *Buni* explains traditional knowledge and art of magic square and table based on 99 names of Allah, letters, and numbers. *Buni* is an Egyptian author of the 13th century. Ahmed Ibin Ali al-Buni's book is *Shams al-Ma'arif al-Kubra wa Lalafu al-Avarif*.

1.2 Basic Questions

This study set out to address two basic questions: (i) What are the basic elements in Ethiopian Christian talisman images? (ii) What are the basic visual representations, symbols, secret names and codes in Ethiopian Christian talisman arts?

1.3 Research Methodology

This study employed purely a qualitative research method, including observation, document analysis, and in-depth informant interviews. The research design is an anthropological approach that is focused on the general, symbolic, and mystical strategies used by Ethiopian Christian talisman art, and its characteristics, to answer questions about visual representations, secret symbols, and languages. The research involved active participants such as talisman makers (*Däbtäräs*), researchers, talisman painters, and EOTC clergy to realize the indigenous knowledge systems.

A sampling technique was purposely used to select talisman experts and potential areas involved in the different places of north and central Ethiopia. The data collection process was conducted in north and central Ethiopia, which are centres of Orthodox Christian culture and scroll-making. The *Däbtäräs* were selected from north Ethiopia in a snowballing method. The data gathering places focused on Addis Ababa, Gojjam, Gondär, and Tigray. Also, five Coptic talisman experts were interviewed essentially to gather information about the characteristics of Coptic talisman arts. The primary data collection methods included field observation, and in-depth informant interviews. Furthermore, the data were gathered from talismanic art collections in museums, manuscripts, indigenous scroll makers (*Däbtäräs*), modern talisman makers (*talisman painters*), and those who were using magic scrolls (*ketab*) therapeutically in different parts of Ethiopia.

2. Discussion

2.1 Talisman Arts in Ethiopia

The exact date of when talisman art started in Ethiopia is controversial due to the lack of early surviving evidence. Former Ethiopian kings and rulers used a talismans to retain their authority and expand their territory. The oldest surviving scrolls are from the 15th–16th centuries (Mercier, 1992: 122–123). Basically, there are two arguments concerning the origin of talisman art. Western scholars believe that talismanic culture started with elements of classical culture, flourished in the Middle East, and eventually came to Ethiopia. Scholars like Jacque Mercier and Van der Vliet argue that talisman art started from the Middle East and expanded into Ethiopia. On the other hand, Ethiopian talisman experts like Samson Käbädä and Henok Melkamzeryhun contest this idea, arguing that Ethiopia had hidden types of talismans that have been of potential importance to the rest of the world. They further contend that ancient Ethiopia talismans spread in much wider areas than in current Ethiopia, reaching as far as Egypt and Yemen, where the art flourished before expanding into Middle East countries.

This esoteric wisdom in Ethiopia was transferred from one generation to the next informally over centuries. The early experts wisely insisted on the need for secrecy in transferring this knowledge. Ethiopian talisman art traditions showed strong continuation from the late antique, medieval period, to the modern era. If it had been easily accessible, it would have disappeared from Ethiopia. The mixed origin *Dekalahoheyat*² letters were created purposely to preserve the secrecy of talismans (Mercier, 1979: 19). Such words and symbols have their power despite being difficult to pronounce or write by outsiders.³ The *Däbtäräs* believe in the imperative to retain the secrecy of esoteric knowledge as an aspect of defending national interests. The earliest Ethiopian long scrolls (*Lifäfü seidek*) were prepared for specific individuals. The size of the scrolls are of the equivalent length to the height of the owner, and buried with him when he passed away. This may be the reason for the damage of the earliest Ethiopian scrolls, in addition to wars and natural disasters.

Talismans were more multi-purpose, whereas magic scrolls were commonly used for healing, love, and acquiring property. Magic scroll elements and symbols are taken from talismans and are used for specific purposes. Talismans in Ethiopia can be used for astronomical purposes, calendric computation, preservation of secret knowledge, and environmental protection. While Talismanic representations are stylistically similar in different countries, interpretations vary according to cultural adaptations (Mercier, 1979: 16).

Ethiopian talisman is depicted in various materials and types according to its function. Goat and sheep skin, or *Branna* parchments, were used widely for magic scrolls; with sheep symbolizing purity, and goat symbolizing evil character (Mercier, 1979: 161; Wesley, 2017: 7). But Ethiopian talismans did not consist only of scrolls and talismans, but also other things made of bracelets, wall paintings, and household objects; especially starting from the reign of *Amadä šion*. The thrones of Emperors Minilik II and Haile Selassie I had decorations based on talisman symbols. At the battle of Adwa, in addition to the Ark of the Covenant, the priest used talismans on drums and swords to defend against the Italian army.

Talismans are primarily classified according to their functions, such as healing, causing romantic attraction, protection, divination, astronomy, and other secret purposes. Magical arts, in terms of visual form, are grouped into four categories: representational images, secret signs, illustration of texts, and geometrical images (Chernetsov, 2006: 191). This paper's examination and finding focuses on these visual representations of talisman artworks than their purpose or ritual activities.

² *Dékala Hohiyat* is informal letters that used only in talismans just like ቃ፡ቁ፡ ረ ... Even there are also special letters only used by *Däbtäräs*. These letters are difficult to pronounce.

³ Samson Kābādā, observation at his art exhibition that was held at Lela art Gallery in April 2020.

2.2 Visual Representations in Ethiopian Talisman Arts

Ethiopian talismans have five basic elements: letters (Ge'ez letters), numbers, face, pattern (*Häräg*), and colours.

- A. **Letters** – such as ሀ-ግእዝ፡ ሁ-ካእብ፡ ሂ-ሳልስ፡ ሃ-ራብ፡ ሄ-አምስ፡ ህ-ሳድስ፡ ሆ-ሳብ constitutes talismans with crucial symbolic value.
- B. **Häräg/illumination** – defines patterns beginning from a point, developing into a line and constituting forms often with specific names and special meaning. Combined with colours it can have the power to predict the future.
- C. **Colour** – there are 7 basic colours in a talisman. These colours are prepared from plants and soil from the surroundings.
- D. **Number** – is the basic formula in talisman art to symbolize the supernatural power and nature. Ethiopian talisman number is reasonable: it begins from 1 (not from 0).
- E. **Face** – is a portrait or facial expression that can be human, animal, divine, or angles.

Evil characters are depicted in profile as in iconography paintings in EOTC. This representation of the evil is familiar in Ethiopian talismans, reflecting the ugliness of the devil as in Ethiopian iconography. Such representations of devil characters are always dark or dull in colour, uniquely inspiring horror.

Concerning representations, human figures, angels, saints, and demons are symbolized stylistically. In protective scrolls, the seven archangels—Michael, Gabriel, and others with swords—are illustrated at the beginning and end of scrolls. Face [portrait] is a very important aspect of Ethiopian talismans. Portraits and figures in Ethiopian talismans are King Solomon, Alexander, and Ethiopian saints. Animal representations in Ethiopian talismans are also related to Christian symbolism. Animals such as lions, serpents, doves, sheep, and eagles are used symbolically in Ethiopian talismans.

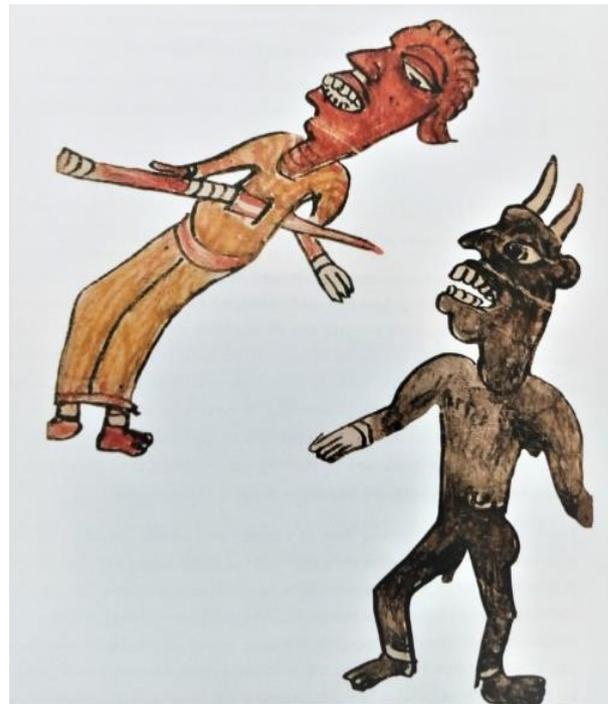


Figure 1: Demonic Representation



Figure 2: Animal Representations in Talismans

“The eye represents beauty; it is also powerful, even death-dealing” (Mrecier, 1997: 94). Different eye styles and shapes in scrolls and talisman paintings, including the eyes of God, Angels, demons, and animals are drawn on scrolls and canvas paintings.



Figure 3: Types of Eyes in Talisman Images

The Ethiopian *Däbtärä* assimilated many elements from Ethiopian Orthodox Church iconographic styles such as big eyes, circular face of angelic and ugly demonic characters, and the colours are almost identical. Also, the assimilation of Christian motifs is found in Ethiopian magical arts. This includes magical literature in the Ge’ez language (Chernetsov, 2006: 199).

Unknown symbols/*characters* are found in Ethiopian talismans, according to *Zämänu Hädis and Samson Käbädä*, commonly referred as *maeser*. These secret signs are also found in Coptic, Arab, and Jewish Kabala talismans. Ethiopian *Däbtäräs* may have used these talisman codes for two purposes: first, they may be used deliberately to keep the secret of talismanic esoteric wisdom; and second, these symbols were associated with the common languages of ancient magical experts; and gradually became unknown as speakers passed away.

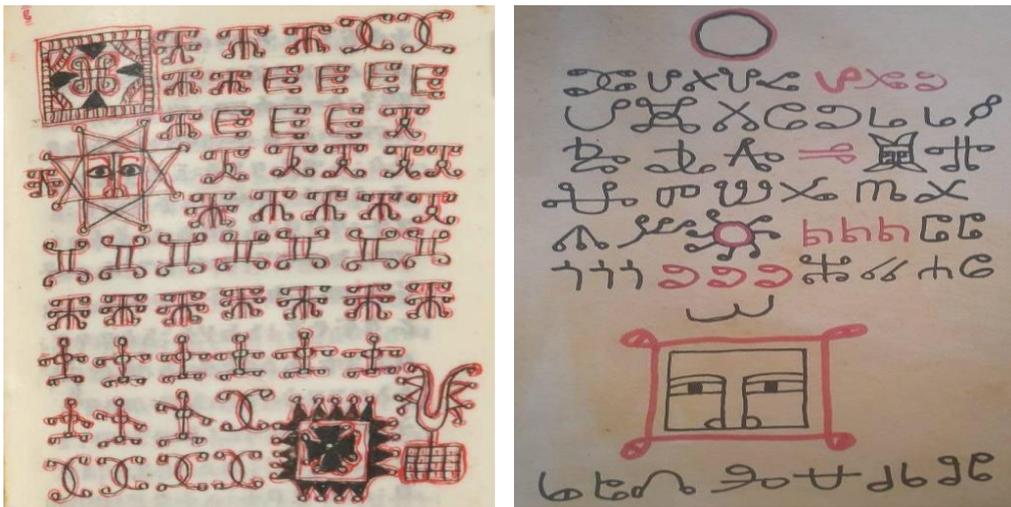


Figure 4: Secret Symbols in Talismans Taken from the Institute of Ethiopian Studies



Figure 5: Geometrical Talismans

In addition to figures, geometrical shapes in talismans have their symbolic representations. Many scrolls in Ethiopia are attributed to King Solomon, including the Seal of Solomon, Net of Solomon, and the Ring of Solomon. Such talismans were used to bind demons to exorcise evil spirits from the sick.

Secret names in talismans are very common in scrolls. The word *Asmat/magical names in Ge'ez* mean 'a collection of names', or the plural form of name. It is considered to have power in the universe; and associated informally with magical activities and divination. Secret names of God are the unknown names shown in talisman drawings (Mercier, 1997: 51). God has an unlimited number of names, more than the number of stars in the sky or the grains of sand on earth. These names are important for healing purposes and are used in combination with images. They are believed to cause demons to automatically leave people, written on scrolls and paintings they include ዴርሻማኤል፣ ተክቱኤል፣ አፍህሹም፣ ኘኘኘኘኘ፣ ዠኘኘኘኘ፣ መመመመመ etc. There are local demonic names like ጋኔን፣ ውለጋ፣ ቆናጭር፣ጥላ ዎጊ ወዘተ. Some paralleling Coptic, Arabic and Syriac terms like ሰይጣን as *shaytan*, ባርያ as *Legion*, ጋኔን as a demon, ቡዳ as evil eye/shadow eye; can also be found in other countries.⁴ Numbers in Ethiopian talisman are symbolic and an element of the artwork, especially numerals 1–10 which have their talismans. Numbers like 3, 5, 7, and 10 are the most significant.



Figure 6: Modern Talisman Art

⁴Gasten Dekenson (2019). Magic, Angelology and Daemonology, Scrolls, Enoch, Intercultural Exchange, Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Radio interview with The Modern Hermeticist. Nov 14, 2019, retrieved from YouTube.

Gäbäta hides secret codes and formula in a table form. The magical table/sator square talismans from the *Book of the Seal of Alexander* (*Eskender* in Ethiopian context) are unique in their calculation's methods and interpretations. Of course, Alexander's book is translated from a text of Arabic origin; however, one must bear in mind that there is an overlap of schools of magic in different Middle Eastern traditions, which relate to a common Christian culture.

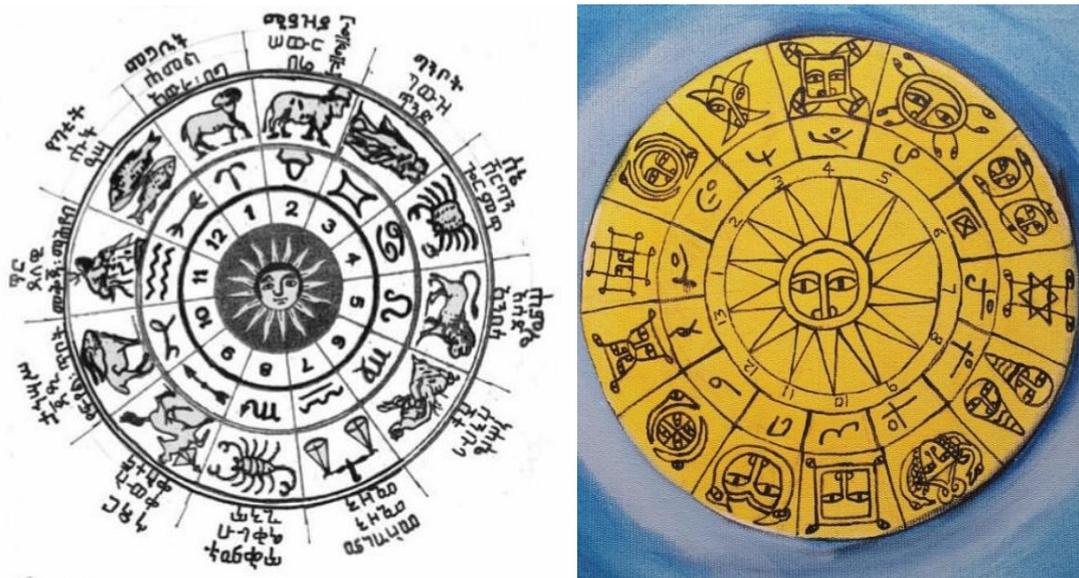


Figure 7: Influences in Ethiopian Talisman Arts

4. Coptic Talismans

The history Coptic Church relates that Christianity first came to Egypt during the late 1st century, and was consolidated by the activities of St. Mark. Christianity became popular and expanded widely, replacing the worship of traditional gods. The Coptic language was used for passing on magical spells, as well as becoming the Church's official liturgical language during the 3rd century (Meyer & Smith, 1994: 8). Coptic 'magical' and 'medical recipes' were written on papyrus, and parchments. Medical texts were mainly used to heal physical diseases; and treatments involved the use of plant, mineral and animal products; while magical treatment was based on written amulets to free one from demonic control. Amulets used biblical texts or the names of saints and angels for supernatural protection against evil spirits, and could be considered as 'magical texts' used in homes on household materials (Vliet, 2011: 555-574). Papyrus was clearly the dominant material, although parchments became an important secondary material from the 4th century onwards. Pottery and limestone ostraca remained as the less-used tertiary supports throughout the period. After the 10th century, most of the Coptic magical art materials were substituted by paper, instead of papyrus (Dosoo, 2019: 3).

In addition to papyrus, Coptic magical arts and texts were written on materials such as ceramic, parchment, wood, and metal plates (Richter, 2015: 86-88).

Basically, there are two forms of Coptic magical art. The first depicts supernatural powers -- mostly angels, sometimes also demons -- in a very recognized and stylized way. The second uses 'grids'-- abstract patterns filled in with texts, letters, words, or numerals.⁵ Coptic magical arts vary according to their function: artwork and written texts are inseparable. There are simplified human figures, angels, demons and animals, secret signs, unknown symbols or *charakters*, and magical names. Unlike Ethiopian talisman arts, the Coptic talismans do not use colour: they are simply drawn or written in black ink, which becomes brown as it ages.



Figure 8: Figure Representations in Coptic Talismans

⁵Jacques van der Vliet, expert on Coptic esoteric art at Leiden University the Netherlands, informant interview in September 4, 2020

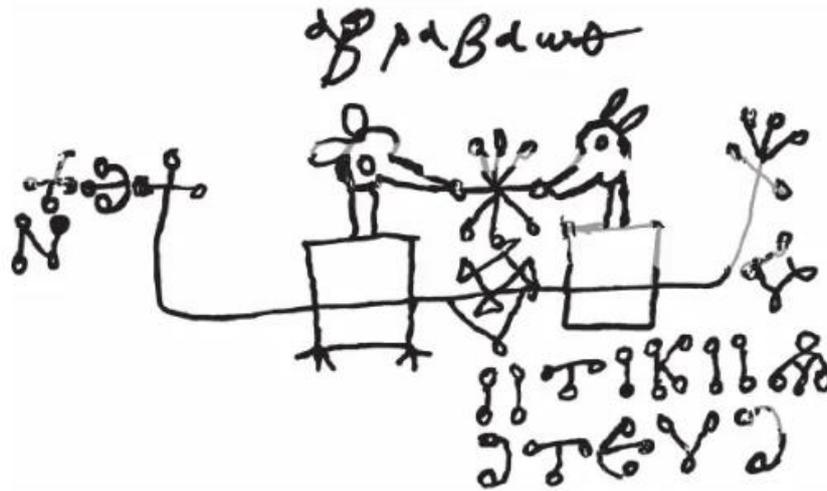


Figure 9: Animal Representations in Coptic Talismans

5. Conclusion

Talisman images are found in Ethiopian, Arabic, Jewish, and Syrian Christian cultures. Due to strong relation with Egypt and Arab, Ethiopian talisman arts were influenced or adapted. The Egypt and Arabic talisman arts are almost extinct, but Ethiopian talisman art is a living experience in Ethiopian highland areas. The adaptations of talismans into Ethiopian culture are familiar in religious books and iconographies. Still, Ethiopia has its unique talisman image style, material culture, interpretation and healing process.

We cannot deny the influence of Coptic culture in Ethiopia due to the strong relationship between the Copts and the EOTC. During many centuries of the Coptic Church rule, their hegemonic power exerted influence, which led to the adaptation of culture, art, and mythologies; with Ethiopians making efforts to adopt Coptic models. When the Ethiopian *Dābtārā* accepted one talisman from abroad, they changed it into three or more styles based on Ethiopian culture. Most of the Ethiopian talisman art styles are adapted from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church iconography styles of material, colour symbolization, figurative representations and mythologies.

Generally, the visual representations of Ethiopian talisman art are unique in material culture, and in the way of representation in animal and human figures. The numbering systems of Ethiopian talisman arts are totally unique because of the Ge'ez language. The devilish character in talisman images are adapted from EOTC iconographies. Some talisman image styles are also found only in Ethiopia. It names in Ethiopian rivers like Awash, Abay, and Tekeze. Protective scrolls, talisman images and healing processes are purely of Ethiopian styles, even though they share common talisman origins.

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