

Lecture Transcript:

ARCE Presents: From Slave to Demon: Barya in the Ethiopian Prayer Scrolls by Solange Ashby Saturday, December 12, 2020

Louise Bertini:

Hello, everyone, and good afternoon or good evening, depending on where you are joining us from. I'm Dr. Louise Bertini, the executive director of the American Research Center in Egypt, and I want to welcome you to the first of a four-part lecture series called "Africa Interconnected: Ancient Egypt and Nubia." This virtual lecture series will delve into the history and interconnections of Ancient Egypt and Nubia, the study of which has been largely marginalized by western scholarship. This series will address the biases behind this lack of attention and examine how Egyptology, Nubiology and other disciplines have intersected.

Today's lecture with Dr. Solange Ashby is "From Slave to Demon: Barya in the Ethiopian Prayer Scrolls." Before I introduce Dr. Ashby, for those of you who are new to ARCE, we are a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to support research on all aspects of Egyptian history and culture, foster broader knowledge about Egypt among the general public and support American-Egyptian cultural ties. As a nonprofit, we rely on ARCE members to support our work, so I want to first give a special welcome to our ARCE members who are joining us today. If you are not already a member and are interested in joining, I invite you to visit our website, arce.org, to join online and learn more. We provide a suite of benefits to our members, including our private member only lecture season, and our next member only lecture will be on January 10 at 1 p.m. Eastern Time with Dr. Thomas Landvatter of Reed College and is titled "Fluctuating Landscapes: Continuity and Change in Ptolemy's Abydos." Our next public lecture is on January 16th at 1 p.m. Eastern Time and is a special panel discussion featuring Donald Reid, Salima Ikram, Vanessa Davies, Fayza Haikal, Eve Troutt Powell and Annissa Malvoisin titled "Anxieties About Race in Egyptology and Egyptomania 1890-1960." And on January 23 at 1 p.m. Eastern Time is the second lecture in our "Africa Interconnected: Ancient Egypt and Nubia" virtual series with Dr. Denise Doxey titled "New Perspectives on Ancient Egypt and Nubia at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston." For more information on this lecture series or any of our other

virtual events, you can visit our website: arce.org. So with that, I'm going to introduce our speaker today. Dr. Solange Ashby received her PhD in Egyptology with a specialization in Ancient Egyptian language and Nubian religion from the University of Chicago. She has researched in Egypt at the Temple of Philae and participated in an archaeological excavation at El-Kurru in Sudan, the royal Kushite cemetery. Her first book, "Calling Out to Isis: The Enduring Nubian Presence at Philae" is published by Gorgias Press. Her current research explores the roles of women in traditional Nubian religious practices. Dr. Ashby is working on the first monograph dated to the history, religious symbolism and political power of the Queens of Kush. Dr. Ashby currently teaches in the Black Studies department at University of Nebraska Omaha, and in January 2021, she will begin teaching at Barnard's College Department of Classics and Ancient Studies. So welcome Dr. Ashby.

Solange Ashby:

Thank you, Louise. I'm honored to have this opportunity to serve as the first speaker for ARCE's series on Ancient Nubia. I will begin this talk in a somewhat incongruous manner by discussing prayer scrolls used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition to protect against evil forces, demons and the illnesses that they bring. Yet, as we explore the text of one particular Ethiopian prayer scroll which protected a young woman against demons, we will enter into a history of slave trafficking perpetrated on an ethnic group on the borders of Ethiopia. Within the text of this prayer scroll, we will unpack a fossilized execration text against enemy kings who confronted the Ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, 4th Century to the 7th Century CE as it expanded westward into what is today Sudan and ultimately toppled the Kushite kingdom of Meroë. Oops. Sorry about that, folks. Okay. So this map on the left will show you where the kingdom of Aksum was located in the highlands of Ethiopia. Here is the capital city of Aksum. Just south of it is Lake Tana, headwaters of the Blue Nile, and the red lines will indicate all the trade routes that enriched and sustained this ancient kingdom in Ethiopia. I want to point out the proximity of Meroë to Aksum. That'll be pertinent later in this discussion and also to point out that Egypt, during this period, had become part of the larger Byzantine empire. Here in the center is a particularly pertinent piece of antiquity associated with Aksum, an obelisk that was looted by the Italian army when they invaded Ethiopia and was returned to Eritrea now as recently as 2005. Below, you can see some gold coinage from the kingdom of Aksum. This is the earliest African civilization to adopt coinage, probably due to the fact that they

were trading with so many other foreign polities: Byzantium, Rome and even as far east as India. On the upper right of your screen, you can see a painting of the Queen of Sheba, who is the purported ancestor of the Solomonid dynasty in Ethiopia that ended as late as 1975 with the death of Haile Selassie. So that's Aksum in a nutshell. The use of prayer scrolls as a form of protection against inimical forces is common to several cultures. Egyptologists will think of the Oracular Amuletic Decrees of Egypt's 21st dynasty. In the Nubian tradition, such oracular decrees have been found at Qasr Ibrim written in Demotic and engaging the protection of Isis and Amun of Qasr Ibrim, as well as other amuletic oracular decrees written in the Meroitic language from Shokan near Abu Simbel. In Ethiopia, the Christian prayer scrolls, also called magic scrolls, date as early as the 16th Century CE and come from the Ethiopian highlands. Home to the dominant Amhara people, for hundreds of years, highlands Ethiopians kidnapped and trafficked into slavery several populations on their borders, including the Nara people, who lived along the border of what is today Eritrea and eastern Sudan. Meroë, the Kushite capital, was here, along the Nile in upper Nubia. You can see how the kingdoms of Aksum and Meroë, with the homeland of the Nara between them, were essentially neighbors. Oh, I see that my ... Okay. My arrows weren't showing up. This arrow is meant to point to this border region between what is today Eritrea and eastern Sudan, homeland of the Nara people, and Meroë here just south of the divide between the White Nile and the Atbara River. Finally, in this lecture, I will discuss the linguistic connections between groups that Claude Rilly refers to as "enemy brothers" Meroitic, Nubian and Nara, three members of the Nilo-Saharan language family. The scrolls are written in the ancient liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ge'ez, also known as Ethiopic. Written on parchment, prayer scrolls measure approximately 1 1/2 to 9 inches in width and range from 16 to 78 inches in length. Often the prayer scrolls are made to equal the length of the purchaser's body. The scrolls include images of Christian saints, angels and demons, as well as geometric patterns, such as rosettes, crosses, knots and "characters," letters from the Ethiopic alphabet that terminate in circles, all of which are an inheritance from ancient indigenous magic. Sounds, words and letters are considered to hold miraculous power, as well as images and figures. The scrolls are explicitly Christianized by the inclusion of an image of the archangel Michael or Gabriel which often adorns the top of each scroll. Nearly every prayer scroll begins with the phrase, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the holy spirit," followed by the introductory phrase, "A prayer for or against." In the Ge'ez, [foreign]. All of this is written in red ink and then that phrase, [foreign], "a prayer

for or against" introduces the demon or illness against which the scroll aims to protect. Prayer scrolls are a mean by which the general populace seeks to protect itself against diseases caused by demons and unclean spirits, which can take many forms: human, serpent, dog or hyena. These then transform into diseases by means of their evil eyes. The scrolls contain fabulous images of bound demons, on the right, and avenging angels, on the left. Imagery is accompanied by text written in Ge'ez. At least part of the Bible was already translated into Ge'ez by the end of the 4th to the early 5th Century CE. The Garima Gospels are the earliest extant literary works in Ge'ez, being translations of the Christian gospels from Greek and dated to the 5th or the 6th Century. The Garima Gospels remain housed in a monastery in Ethiopia. From the 7th to the 13th Century, a period marked by political disturbances and inaugurated, I might add, by the woman shown behind me, the Queen Gudit, fierce warrior queen. There was no literary activity during this period, but with the proclamation of the new Solomonid dynasty in Ethiopia in 1270, there began the most productive period of Ge'ez literature. The subject matter remained primarily theological, but the most prominent work of this period was the 14th Century "Kebra Nagast," translated as "Glory of the Kings," the central theme of which is the visit of the Queen of Sheba, called Makeda in Ethiopia, to Israel's King Solomon and the birth of their son, Menelik, who became the legendary founder of the Ethiopian dynasty. The prayer scrolls are created by debteras who are not ordained members of the clergy but rather lay priests who deal with magic and traditional medicine. They are easily identified by their white turbans and long staves. Debteras undergo multi-year training as cantors, scribes, poets, dancers, herbalists and magicians. They are masters of oral poetry. A quick note from the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, quote, "The debtera writes amulets to keep away sickness and evil spirits. He knows formulas that can protect one from bullets, help a student in his or her studies and attract a mate. He can bring rain or plague and stop them as well. He performs divination using books, brews and interpreting leaves and writes on paper. He is an expert on knowledge of plants and herbs that heal. He also performs sacrifices." Debteras provide musical accompaniment to the worship services in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, playing the barrel drum and shaking rattles. These musical instruments in Egyptology are related to Nubians, in the case of the barrel drum depicted here in the center of this image, and the worship of the goddess Hathor, where rattles are called sistra. The musical tradition of debteras dates back to Saint Yared, a figure credited with arranging the corpus of Ethiopian Christian liturgical music under divine inspiration in the 6th Century CE. The debtera then is a repository of Ethiopia's

oral history. An Ethiopian prayer scroll from a private collection in Berlin dated to the 20th Century was created to protect a young woman named Walata Mariam. Her name means daughter of the Virgin Mary. This was created to protect her from male and female zar spirits and other demons that cause chest pain, headache, rheumatism, black magic, miscarriage and the evil eye. This scroll, which forms the basis of my talk today, features apotropaic magic against named enemy kings, including the king of the baria. Baria is an Amharic ethnic term used to refer to the Nara people, yet it carries larger connotations in addition to ethnicity. The Nara reside along the western border of Ethiopia and Eritrea and into eastern Sudan. Held to be mere savages and brutish blacks who follow pagan and unholy rituals, Nara people have been heavily raided for slaves for centuries by the Aksumites and later the Amhara, the dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia. The term baria, meaning slave, denotes blackness, racial inferiority and paganism in contrast to the Christianity of the dominant lighter-skinned, red, Amhara. The Nara, a matrilineal society, were mentioned as a conquered people circa 350 CE on stela erected by the Aksumite king Ezana, the first Christian monarch of Ethiopia. East African slave trade persisted longer than the European trade in West Africa, which was, in theory, abolished in 1807. Yet between 1810 and 1860, the West African slave trade transported 3.5 million slaves with 850,000 of them having been transported during the 1820s, post of the so-called abolishment of slavery. The trade in East Africa served purchasers in Egypt, Arabia, India, Persia and Iraq with enslaved Africans being traded as far east as China. The bulk of Africans captured and sold as property in this abhorrent trade through Ethiopia and Egypt were Nilo-Saharan speakers from the Nuba, Darfur and Kordofan hills who were trafficked into Egypt. So you can see on this map, the width of the arrows shows the bulk, the number of people traded, so the heaviest arrow being transport from these hills west of the Nile up into Egypt and then secondarily from Ethiopia and the Horn up into Saudi Arabia. So the bulk of the people were Nilo-Saharan speakers from the Nuba, Darfur and Kordofan hills who were trafficked into Egypt and the Nara who were taken into bondage to the Arabian peninsula and points east. Female slaves made up the majority of the Arab slave trade and were often used as concubines, while the male slaves were used as soldiers and manual laborers. Among the ethnic groups targeted in Ethiopia were the Oromo to the south, Gumuz and Berta to the west, Afar and Sidama to the north and south and Nara, among others. Each group was referred to by ethnic slurs, such as galla, shanqella and baria, all of which denote blackness and slavery. This map shows the main areas of slave raiding on the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands and southern Ethiopia. The territory of the Nara is

located within this circle, so comprising the western, southwestern part of what is today Eritrea, northeastern Ethiopia and then of course into ... northwestern, I should say, then into eastern Sudan, including what is today Kassala. So this is an image of the scroll that I will focus on for today's talk. Embedded in a 20th Century prayer scroll created for a young woman, among the ritual protection meant to safeguard against illness and misfortune is an execration text against several kings whom I suggest were enemy rulers of the Ethiopian Aksumite empire in the 4th Century CE. Execration texts are cursing formulae. Used in Ancient Egypt from the Old Kingdom, which begins around 2600 BCE, through the Late Period, ending in 332 BCE, these execration texts are meant to magically attack enemy rulers who were specifically named in order to target an individual. The magical power of execration texts was strengthened by their specificity, elucidated in a quote from Robert Ritner, who his "Egyptian Magical Practice," page 137, "Unlike the prisoner motif, which presents only generalized images of foreigners, the execration texts are quite specific in their intended victims. The coupling of name and prisoner image thus affected directly parallels standard practice in the hieroglyphic script as well, where enemy names may receive a bound prisoner determinative, Gardiner's Sign List A13." This section of the prayer scroll begins with the repetition of six magic apotropaic words beginning on line 54. Each word is repeated five, six or seven times to ward off the power of enemy kings. [foreign] Words without meaning which contained the power of magical protection through the mere recitation aloud and preservation in the ancient written language of Ge'ez. This text seems to represent a fossilized relic from pre-Christian ritual practice that offered protection against six enemy kings, called negus in Ethiopic. The feared non-Christian enemies were the king of the baria, and I'm just underlining the names here in the text. So the baria, king of nedad, king of metch, king of kings of the chanafar, an unnamed king referred to merely as negus, and so this is an N and G and the S is there on the next line, and king [foreign]. The inclusion of the term Noba, underlined here in blue, and repeated multiple times, so you can see, Noba, Noba, Noba. You'll have to probably take my word for that. So the repetition of this term, Noba, as an apotropaic term in the text brings us firmly into Nubia where the Noba people battled Meroitic troops and clashed with the Aksumite king Ezana circa 350 CE. The inclusion of the term Noba in line 60 to 61 clearly refers to a specific ethnic group that migrated from the hills of Kordofan west of the Nile River into the territory controlled by the kingdom of Meroë, whom the Aksumite king, Ezana, battled around 350 CE. According to ancient texts, this group, too, meaning the Noba, is divided into red and black Noba. This bronze figure, now

housed in the British Museum, depicts a bound figure. The inscribed Meroitic text tells us, "This is the king of the Noba." The prominent Meroitic linguist Claude Rilly has suggested that the ethnonym Noba comes from the Meroitic word nob, meaning slave. Rilly has suggested that the Noba called themselves Magid. So their ethnic self-designation being Magid, from which the Nubian Christian kingdom of Makuria likely derived its name. Ideally, the execration text embedded in this prayer scroll would provide eight names to match the image of eight bound enemies that you see here on the right and labeled with the following phrase in Ethiopic here. "This amulet depicts the heads of the blacks." Perhaps the names of the two missing kings might be found in the text reference to Qore which immediately follows the repetition of the ethnonym Noba in line 61, which I've underlined here again, and the hashard noba of the king [foreign] in line 67, which I suggest was the title of an official of the king [foreign], so his title being the hashard noba. The use of the Meroitic phrase Qore, which means king or ruler in the Meroitic language, strongly suggests that this section of the text is a fossilized execration text against the historical enemies of the Aksumite state and preserved in a 20th Century prayer scroll. Identification of these bound kings as enemy of the highland Ethiopian rulers is further emphasized in the closing paragraph of this section of the scroll, lines 68 to 73, which reads, "All of your, plural, magicians of the land of [foreign], your cities are kept far and repulsed with each of your armies. The evil demons and impure spirits likewise do not approach the soul and body of the maidservant of God." And so even though I'm proposing that these repulsive texts are aimed against these enemy kings, the closing line, "Do not approach the soul and body of the maidservant of God," is referring specifically to the owner of this scroll, Walata Mariam. This is pre-Christian apotropaic magic pure and simple. The Nilo-Saharan language family is one of four major language families on the African continent, Afroasiatic here in blue, including Egyptian, Hebrew and Arabic as well as the Semitic languages of Ethiopia, including Ge'ez and Amharic; Nilo-Saharan here in yellow, which we will return to shortly; Niger-Congo here in red and orange, this includes the large, extensive Bantu language family; and finally, Khoi-San in green, the language of the diminutive San people, the original inhabitants of southern Africa, the largest and oldest language families originate, not surprisingly, in the rift valley of east Africa, homeland of humanity. It is to the Nilo-Saharan language family that we will turn our attention. Within the Nilo-Saharan language family the Northeast Sudanic branch contains Meroitic, Nara and the Nubian languages, among others including Berta, Gumuz and Kunama, languages of people who were enslaved along the borders of Ethiopia. Nara you

will note is closely related to the pre-Nubian languages spoken along the Nile before the arrival of Nubian people from the mountains of Darfur and Kordofan. So here on this branch to the left we have these still unidentified pre-Nubian languages that were spoken along the Nile, the middle Nile valley, being of one branch with those Nara people in Eastern Sudan along the border of Eritrea. The roots of the Nara/delta C-group people in the region on Nubia are ancient and deep. It may be that they are the aboriginal people of this area, although the time depth of human occupation in East Africa is astonishingly long. You will also note that Meroitic and the Nubian languages come from a single subfamily of Nilo-Saharan, specifically of this Northeast Sudanic branch of the language family, thus Claude Rilly's designation of the Meroites and the Noba as enemy brothers. So here we see this second branching of the Northeast Sudanic family group with Meroitic here and then the very earliest Nubian languages divided into Western Nubian so these languages spoken in the hills of Kordofan and Darfur, Birgid which is probably also related to Megid and Makuria as an ethnic self-designation of these people, Midob and Kordofanian Nubian. So that's the mount ... so-called Hill Nubian and here are the Nile valley Nubian languages derived from old Dongolawi, old Nubian resulting in the modern languages of Kanuzi, Dongolawi and Nobiin. Ethiopian prayer scrolls are often regarded as replete with unintelligible terms and bizarre statements that do not reflect Orthodox Christian practice, rendering them unappealing to the very scholars of Ethiopian Christianity who can comprehend the language of the text Ethiopic Ge'ez with the result that few of the scrolls have been studied and published. Yet prayer scrolls also have a deep potential to shed light on the pre-Christian religious beliefs and the geopolitical interactions of the many ethnicities of Ethiopia and, as I hope I have shown, Sudan. Both subjects remain poorly understood. Study of these ritual texts by scholars first in the ancient magical practices of Egypt and Meroe can shed light on the fossilized pre-Christian elements embedded in such texts to illuminate practices shared across the cultures of ancient East Africa. These three images were taken by the photography Chester Higgins during a visit to Ethiopia. The first two on the left and in the center depict religious rights practiced by Oromo women, veneration of the sacred sycamore tree on the left and a priestess praying at an altar decorated with cow udders. The symbolism of both images might bring to mind immediately the iconography of the goddess Hathor. On the right, a young Afar man wears his hair in a way that we might associate with the so-called "Nubian wig" in Egyptian art. Expanding the reach of our studies beyond the borders of Egypt to learn more of the people who interacted, intermarried and shared many cultural traits with ancient Egyptians will

go a long way towards situating Egypt in its African context as one among many sibling cultures in the Nile valley which we would do well to remember begins in the Highlands of Ethiopia at Tana, the headwater of the Blue Nile and Rwanda and Lake Victoria Nyanza, the headwater of the White Nile. Thank you.

Louise Bertini:

Wow, thank you so much for that very interesting lecture. I want to draw everyone's attention that if you do have a question to please put it in the question and answer button not in the chat, so we can ask your question, and Solange can answer it. We'll start. We have our first question from Keisha. In the image of the dabtaras, are they carrying canes, crutches or another object?

Solange Ashby:

It's a ritual staff that they are holding which is part of their insignia of their office, and so let's see if I can get back there. It might be too long to get back there, but the sistrum, which as Egyptologist I would just associate as a ritual musical instrument associated with the goddess Isis, is used by the dabtara, and they also hold a staff of office, and I believe as the music and dance providers to the Ethiopian Orthodox church services they will also use the staff as part of beating out the rhythm of this liturgical music.

Louise Bertini:

Next question from Rocky, was there any significance to the number of repeated words in the prayer text?

Solange Ashby:

Not that I could identify. That's why I was calling out that it was five, six and seven. It didn't ... As far as I understand, it didn't seem to be directly associated to a particular enemy king although there's so much more for me to learn about these traditions that I may have to come back and correct that answer.

Louise Bertini:

A question from Iman, thank you so much for an excellent lecture. I'm wondering if in your research you saw any instances where elements of Christianity were being used as a justification for slavery as it was in the American European slave trade?

Solange Ashby:

Yes, certainly. It was somehow decided to be okay to enslave these particular ethnicities because they had not adopted Christianity, and so they could be seen as heretics, heathens, pagans. All of that was understood to make them open and available to be taken as slaves, and I have to say this is not unique to the Christian tradition. This is also part of the early Muslim and Jewish traditions as well. Anyone who is outside of the faith could be deemed to be able to be exploited and sold into slavery.

Louise Bertini:

A question from April, I'm surprised that the ink on the scrolls is not faint. How did they preserve it?

Solange Ashby:

So in this particular case, this scroll is from the 20th century. So it may not be actually that old and okay, good. A friend brought a scroll back for me from Ethiopia, and so they are still being produced. Oh, because of my background I'm not able to show you on the ... Sorry. So they're still ...

Louise Bertini:

You can put it in front of you.

Solange Ashby:

Can you see?

Louise Bertini:

Now I can see it.

Solange Ashby:

Okay. So this one was just probably produced 10 or 15 years ago. It's a little bit rough around the edges, but it is on parchment like I suggested they have been traditionally made. As I unfurl it I can smell incense, and so it was certainly made in a ritual context, perhaps just a private home of a dabtara, but these scrolls continue to be made, and if you go to Ethiopia, you can just find them and buy yourself one. I'm really grateful to have this one to look at but yeah. So they continue to be made. This one is from the 20th century, and it is, as I said, in a

private collection in Berlin and so probably well cared for, although mine just sits on my dresser in my house in DC.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Gayle, are most of the languages to which she refers to mostly oral, or is there a history of some of them having a written history other than those which have been translated in more recent times?

Solange Ashby:

Okay, good question. Yeah, a lot of these languages have not traditionally been written down. So the Nubian languages, for example, didn't start to be written down until the 8th century when Old Nubian was written down using Greek letters and incorporating some letters from the Meroitic script to cover sounds not made in Greek. So that was 8th century. The Meroitic language created ... They created their own script to write their language probably in the 2nd century BCE, and that script was based on Egyptian hieroglyphic script or Egyptian Demotic. Nara, I know less about their writing tradition. I am fortunate enough to be communicating with some folks in Western Eritrea who are Nara about their culture, and I know that they are using an app to translate from writing in Arabic script to be able ... so that I can comprehend what they're saying. So I don't know if they have their own indigenous writing tradition, but I would say probably not. It's in the horn of Africa, the Egyptians kind of stand out as the particular culture that was, as we can see from Egypt, obsessed with writing and wrote all over the face of everything. In Nubia and further South this seems not to have been a tradition until later, starting maybe earlier in Ethiopia. 7th and 8th century BCE we start to see some textual evidence, and then as I said in Meroe indigenous writing about the 2nd century BCE.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Rocky, what year were the Chester Higgins photos taken? I think ...

Solange Ashby:

Oh, err. Well, Chester is here. He could probably pop in and answer that question. He was kind enough to share them with me. Honestly, I don't know, but I don't think it's more than a decade ago, and I have to say he was so kind. I just received this book from him yesterday about the Oromo religious traditions, and so I just want to publicly thank Mr. Higgins for his support of my deepening my knowledge

of the traditions of Ethiopia and for generously sharing his amazing images, but, Chester, if you want to drop in or drop a note in the Q and A about when those pictures of the Irreecha festival were taken, that would be great.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Janice, do you know any more about the sycamore veneration or the cow-udder altar rituals and context?

Solange Ashby:

I do not. I wonder if this is Janice Yellin. If so hi, thanks for coming. Okay. I don't, but I am ... I got ... As I mentioned, I got this book at Oromo religious traditions yesterday. I read about 20 pages as soon as I opened the package, and there's so much good stuff there that I hope to gobble it up and report back more later. From what I see from the images that Chester shared with me, and I can be corrected, Chester, if you want to jump in, but it looks to me like women's religion. What he's showing in the image around the sycamore tree is all women raising their hand in what an Egyptologist will think of as the traditional gesture of prayer and reverence, and then that second image the priestess is deep in prayer. I know from the image that that altar is within a circular-shaped hut that's formed of branches, very similar to an image that I show in other lectures on the Keranog bowl, that bronze bowl, which, Janice, you will know what I'm talking about, the woman sitting in front of that bronze bowl receiving milk offerings from a man, and so I just love all of these similarities, and I can't wait to really dig into this book and learn more about the Oromo, and, Janice, I'm really happy to share the name of this book with you, but I'll just say it's called "Sacred Knowledge: Traditions of the Oromo of the Horn of Africa" and seems to be written by two Oromo men who are scholars of their tradition.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Mikale, just a point to look into, there is an Ethiopian hierography that was seemingly forged in the 19th century that of Abrenha and Asabeha, my apologies if I'm pronouncing it wrong, that preserves information about the Aksumite Himyarite ... I'm ...

Solange Ashby:

Himyarite.

Louise Bertini:

... were in the 6th-century Yemen. Evidence like this may bolster a case for deep memory of historical events in these prayer scrolls.

Solange Ashby:

Great, yes, yes. I wish I could open the Q and A. I seem not to be able to see that, and so I'm hoping that once I stop sharing screens I can get that reference because yes, what I'm seeing in these ... What feels really ancient execration texts also seems to indicate that, there this is this long-lived memory or that it is just sort of encoded in the texts that these dabtaras need to memorize in their training, and so they just ... Depending on what the purchaser is requesting, they just sort of put down large sections of memorized texts into the prayer scrolls that they are creating, and what an amazing attestation to this tradition of oral history being passed on from father to son or dabtara to his trainee and then recorded in text on these prayer scrolls.

Louise Bertini:

From Vincent, it's fascinating that Meroitic core has survived in this 20th-century scroll. What is the surrounding linguistic context in the text?

Solange Ashby:

So it says ... Here I happen to be on this screen. It just says before it it's repeating, "Noba, Noba, Noba" as a kind of protective, magical sound, and then it just says, Qore and then comes "Negusa, Negus" so that king of kings, that unnamed king that I was referring to in my text. I'm wondering if this is referring very specifically to whoever was the ruling king in Meroe when this attack from Axum happened because if so, this king of kings ... So here "Negus, Negusa" is proceeded by the title Qore which it makes sense that they are using this particular Meroitic title to refer to the very king in Meroe, and we see something similar ... I'm working on an article about Nubian magicians as spoken about in the Demotic, 2nd-century Demotic text Setna II so stories about a magician, Setne Khaemwaset, and in that text when they're talking about Nubian magicians who are in the employ of the Meroitic king, they also transcribe into the Demotic Qore, and so it seems that the neighbors are familiar with this Meroitic title for their ruler and that they use it in their own script, in this case in the Ge'ez script and then in the "Tale of Setne II" in the Demotic script. I hope I've answered your question, Vincent. If not, we can

correspond by Twitter later, or I can do a follow-up question from you if I didn't catch what you were asking.

Louise Bertini:

By the way, from an earlier question about Chester Higgins photos, he said they were made in 2010. Female priestesses were important figures in [Indistinct]. Men are also faith leaders. So there we go.

Solange Ashby:

Thank you. Thank you.

Louise Bertini:

Thank, you for that one, Chester. Question from Eltemy, in addition to Hathor do you see other Egyptian gods mentioned in the writings or rituals?

Solange Ashby:

So I should make clear that Hathor is not mentioned by name. I'm just seeing similarities in this worship or reverence for the sycamore tree which in Ethiopian tradition is closely associated with Hathor or the fact that this Oromo altar is decorated with cow udders for me as an Egyptologist brings to mind the goddess Hathor who's often portrayed as a cow. She's one of many cow goddesses in Egyptian religion, but I have not seen these texts mention Egyptian gods by name. So that's not to say that they are not there. What I'm seeing more is these ethnic names so references to the ethnicities of Barya, [Indistinct], Charnagar, and I should say while I was messaging with those Nara people via WhatsApp I was sort of passing all these names by them and saying does this refer to any sort of subgroups of your larger ethnic Nara community, and they did not recognize those names. They shot back other names to me. So thus far Barya is the one that I identify, and it is ... I just want to reiterate that this is an incredibly offensive term. It's like the equivalent of our N-word, and so it is not really even to be used in reference to these people, but it is preserved in these very traditional and conservative language of these prayer scrolls.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Charlotte, what is the condition of the Nara today? Do they have modern schools, professions, et cetera?

Solange Ashby:

Yes, yes. The group of folks that I was messaging with, I've never actually met them but very high level of scholarship, very strong pride in their culture. The information that I could get from them is profound, really happy that the published article associated with this talk I sent to them, and they are translating it into Nara, so the people of the culture can read it. They are mostly Muslim now, having been converted some centuries ago, and so as I mentioned I think that they are writing in Arabic, but they are very aware of the antiquity of their culture and very knowledgeable about it. So a prayer for their safety because I have to just say they are in the midst of this area that is under attack right now and this sort of looming or developing civil war in Ethiopia but yes, very well educated about their culture. They even said to me, "Oh, yes, our traditions tell us that our people came from Ta-Seti," and I was like, "What? That's the ancient Egyptian word for Nubia," and they were like, "Yes, we know." So it's been a very fruitful exchange with them.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Roger, slightly off topic verse prayer scrolls, I was in Ethiopia in 1998 visiting Oromia, Lalibela ... Again, sorry.

Solange Ashby:

Lalibela.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you for pronouncing that, et cetera ... but only able to go to Gondar and Lake Tana areas, not Aksum due to the forever war with Eritrea. Are the Nara people part of the Tigray region, and does the present-day diaspora reflect a historic view of the Nara as Baria?

Solange Ashby:

Oh, okay. So there's a lot, Louise. I might have to ask you to remind me of the multiple parts of this question but ...

Louise Bertini:

I can send it to you in the chat if you can't open the ...

Solange Ashby:

Okay, yes please.

Louise Bertini:

... Q and A.

Solange Ashby:

All right. Let's see if I can ... All right. Oh. Okay, good, better late than never. Oromia, okay, let's see if I can get to map where I'm showing that. Yes, perhaps here is good. Aye, aye, aye. Sorry, folks. Good, okay. So this is the area that our questioner is asking about here to the South of the highlands of Ethiopia, and Lake Tana, that I mentioned, being the headwaters for the Blue Nile. I'll just remind you that the Nara are here to the Northwest of these highland area. Are the Nara people part of the Tigray region, and does the present-day diaspora reflect the historical view of the Nara as Baria? So the Nara are living kind of in a transnational cross-border area. They are in the West of Eritrea but probably also going down South into Tigray which is one of the very Northern-most provinces of Ethiopia and then over into Eastern Sudan as well. So with colonial borders and then modern borders, it often divides ethnic groups who should have always remained as a unit. Does the present-day diaspora reflect a historical view of the Nara as Baria? I'm unclear on what that question is but perhaps getting at the disrespect inherent in this term. Baria is used for the people that their land has now been apportioned between different nations, warring nations. In that case, yes.

Louise Bertini:

Question from Janet, I was first introduced to the facts about Ethiopian prayer scrolls at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore in the late '80s. Are they common in private homes as well?

Solange Ashby:

Yes, I think as sort of you could say that I have my own that was just gifted to me from a friend who I have no idea what he paid for it, but I think that they are not expensive. Thank you for pointing out, I meant to say that the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore has an amazing collection of all kinds of Ethiopian antiquities including prayer scrolls, illuminated manuscripts, gold Aksumite coins. They've just ... It's very rich in Ethiopian treasures, and so once we're all out of lockdown if you are anywhere near Baltimore, it is well worth a visit to that museum. I should also say that the two largest collections of Ethiopic texts, including prayer scrolls, are at UCLA, which was gifted a whole amazing group of Ethioic texts while I was

still living in Los Angeles, so maybe 2010, 2011, by ... Oh, my gosh. I'm blanking on his first name. Weiner is his last name, but the same gentleman from LA made another gift to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and by fortuitous chance, I was by then living in Washington, D.C., and got to go to so both celebratory conferences around the gifting of these very large collections. So UCLA, Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore's Walters Art Museum are great places to interact with these Ethiopic texts and all that to say that if you also find yourself in Ethiopia, you can just as well buy yourself a modern prayer scroll, and they are meant to still be written in this traditional liturgical language of Ge'ez. Even though people don't still speak that language, it's kind of like Latin for the Catholic Church. It's a liturgical language.

Louise Bertini:

A question from Stewart, "The placement of an atropeic text in a container that might be worn reminds me of the ancient Egyptian practice with smaller and shorter text, but I wonder if you think there might be some connection."

Solange Ashby:

Yes, certainly. When I first gave this lecture as a fellow at Catholic University, I did this whole long intro about the similar traditions, amuletic-wearing traditions in Egypt and then what I had found for Nubia as well, but that lecture went on way too long, and so I have just sort of cut it down to be focused very specifically on this Ethiopian tradition, but, yes, absolutely, and the fact that these are meant to be worn at the neck very much echoes the Egyptian tradition and makes me think of that Nubian man. I'm blanking on where he was buried who was found with a big old chunk of gold also looking very much like an amulet at his neck, and so this, I would imagine, is protecting the airway, restoring speech much like the opening-of-the-mouth ritual performed after death in Egypt, so there are so many similarities, and that's very much my point in making this lecture, that there's so much to be learned, so much insight into Egyptian traditions, language, religion, all of that, by sort of stepping back and taking a broader view at African traditions.

Louise Bertini:

Actually, Solange, how are you on time? We do still have a lot of questions.

Solange Ashby:

Let's ...

Louise Bertini:

Out of time?

Solange Ashby:

Yeah.

Louise Bertini:

Okay.

Solange Ashby:

I think I do. I have to get my son at 2:30, but that means I can go for another little bit.

Louise Bertini:

All right. We can do a few more.

Solange Ashby:

All right.

Louise Bertini:

There's so many because it's so interesting.

Solange Ashby:

I'm honored. I'm great.

Louise Bertini:

We have a question from Anonymous, "Do you see any references to or the indication of protection from buda, the evil eye, in the debtera literature?"

Solange Ashby:

Yes, yes, absolutely, and now I'll just give a shout-out to Aaron Butts, who was a fellow student with me when I first took the Ge'ez class with Rebecca Hasselbach at University of Chicago and is now a professor at Catholic University, and so it was in his text class that I just joined that we translated this prayer scroll that I'm talking about today, but in other texts that we read together, there is, yes, a request for protection against buda, the evil eye, so absolutely. That, I think, appears more

frequently even than this somewhat bizarre execration text that I've just pulled out as a special example.

Louise Bertini:

A question from Carol, "Do these fossilized Meroitic words you mentioned have some documentation from recent research on Meroitic language? I wasn't sure what you said about these."

Solange Ashby:

Yes, yes, the term Qore appears very frequently in Meroitic texts because it's like Ns- Bity in Egypt, right? It's this sort of official way to refer to the king, in this case, the king of Meroe, so it is recorded in Meroitic funerary inscriptions, especially those that decorate the interior walls of the funerary chapels associated with royal burials at Meroe, but it also shows up in the corpus of Nubian prayer inscriptions that I studied in the temples of Lower Nubia so most prominently at Philae where we see references to the Qore in the Demotic, so late script of Egyptian language, these Demotic prayer inscriptions engraved into the wall of the temple at Philae. It's also part of the inscription in the interior of the pylon of Dakka in Lower Nubia, and so, once inside the doorway of that pylon, you'll see cartouches, this traditional shape that surrounds a royal name in the Egyptian tradition, except for in these cartouches are Meroitic language inscriptions that refer to the queen, Amanirenas, the king, Teriteqas, and probably their heir, Akinidad, and they, the royalty, is referred to as Qore, this Meroitic term that means ruler in an ungendered, this ungendered language, so it can refer to a female ruler, a male ruler, but, yes, this word appears a lot, especially in Meroitic royal text.

Louise Bertini:

A question from Anonymous, "Are the current conflicts in the Ethiopia-Sudanese region carryovers from this same historical religious tribal and linguistic differences between peoples that you described. In particular, the current conflict in Ethiopia seem to be in the same area."

Solange Ashby:

Yeah, so I thought I might get such a question, and I sort of rushed to get up to speed on what's happening in this conflict, but this seems to be, as opposed to interaction with these outsider populations, if you will, that were open to slaving as

far as these ... the Christianized populations were concerned, this modern conflict seems to be between more recent power players in Ethiopia, so the Amhara, who had often been traditionally the most dominant group, and the Tigray, who were ruling Ethiopia most recently from 1991 to 2018, so there's just been a changeover where the Tigrayans are no longer in control, and this seems to be kind of retribution. I should also say that Tigray, the province, is the location of the ancient city of Aksum, so they are very closely related with this power that came into being from the 4th to about the 7th or 8th century C.E., and their language, Tigrinya, is the direct descendant of Ge'ez and Ethiopic. It's less a battle between these traditional highland Ethiopian power players and the people that they had traditionally enslaved and more a conflict between two groups that have tended to be dominant in Ethiopia for ... I guess we can say millennia now. So that was a sort of a rambling answer, but, yeah, it's these modern nation states, I think, everywhere in the world, but I study Africa, so I'll just say, in Africa, they are pulling together ethnic groups that don't have a common cause, I should say, and so the tendency to get into conflict is sort of there from deep history and also from the history of European colonial powers pitting one group against another, so it's multifaceted, the reasons for this conflict, and since I don't study modern Ethiopia, I won't comment more on that.

Louise Bertini:

A question from LR, "How did the conquest of Egypt in the 7th century by Arabs and Islam affect the practice of slavery and religion in Nubia and Ethiopia?"

Solange Ashby:

So with Arab conquest of Egypt came then an attempt to push further south into Nubia, and I didn't show the map that showed those three Nubian kingdoms, Nobatia in the north, Makuria in the center and Alwa in the south, but these three kingdoms were Christian kingdoms, were strong enough to resist the attempt to push south by the Arab invaders of Egypt, and so a truce was made whereby the Nubian kingdoms promised to, if you will, pay a tax to the new Arab rulers in Egypt and that they would send a certain number of slaves every year, and so this probably accounts for this very thick line of folks who would've then been captured and gathered from further south than these Nubian kingdoms and shipped up into Egypt to be enslaved there. So that is part of the history. There is sort of a longer, deeper history than of when the Turks controlled Egypt, colonizing Sudan and engaging in slaving in Sudan as well, and oddly, kind of hypocritically, it was

when the British came in and took over both Egypt and Sudan they got to be the good guys and outlaw slavery although those of us of African descent in the Western world know that they were themselves heavily involved in slavery, so it's just so many layers to this history.

Louise Bertini:

I think we'll do two more questions. Question from Gail, "Could there be a similar connection between worn Egyptian amulets and the prayer scrolls with the gris-gris worn in many African cultures for protection?"

Solange Ashby:

Not being familiar with gris-gris, that name sounds familiar, but I'm not even going to try to pretend I know what that is, but just the fact that they're being worn for protection, yes, I think that this is just a human need to deal with the unpredictability and frequency with which we have to deal with hardship and tragedy to try to feel like we have some control in protecting ourselves and so then to use amulets, to offer prayers, to even believe in gods who we feel we can call on to protect us from the vagaries of life, so certainly this is just a part of a larger cultural tradition to try to use amulets in a way to ward off disasters.

Louise Bertini:

Think, due to time, we'll do the last question from Max, "You mentioned ancient Ethiopic texts distinguished between black Nubians and red Nubians. Could you talk a little more about that?"

Solange Ashby:

Yeah, I highlighted that. Specifically, it shows up in the text, I think, in the Meroitic language text where ... or the Ethiopic text as well where they're talking about these invasions of the red and black Noba, and I'm not quite sure what distinction it is that they are making. Certainly as many others have mentioned, including most recently Aaron de Souza in his lecture for the Badè Museum, talking about the incredible ethnic diversity of Nubia. That's also certainly true of Ethiopia as well. And so somehow or other based on skin color, a distinction is being made by these populations that fall under the ethnic term Noba. Some of which are being described as red because of lighter skin, and some are being described as black because of darker skin. I wanted to highlight that specifically because the same thing is happening in Ethiopia where the Amhara or the

Aksumites are describing themselves as red because they're clearly African people, but they're lighter skinned, and they're describing the people on the periphery of their land as black, meaning the Nara from this slide, the Gamos, the Sidama, the Oromo. Those folks are falling under the descriptor of black, and so I just found it interesting that the same thing is happening with these Nobo people.

Louise Bertini:

Well, thank you so much for your lecture and for taking questions. I think you did share your e-mail earlier if anybody else has any questions, or if not, they can always e-mail info@rc.org, and we'll be happy to forward any questions to Dr. Ashby as well. Thank you all for joining us today, and if you're interested in RC's efforts to research and conserve Egypt's past, I urge you to visit rc.org and make a contribution today as we rely on your support to make our work possible. Thank you again, and I look forward to having you all join us at our next lecture in this series on January 23rd, and I hope you all have a good day. Thank you.

Solange Ashby:

Thank you so much for having me. I plugged my e-mail address in the chat, so I'm hoping it's not buried there, but it's just solange@uchicago.edu. Thanks for having me, Louise.

Louise Bertini:

Thank you. Take care.

Solange Ashby:

Take care.

Louise Bertini:

All right. Bye.