

Languages of Africa in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas: uses, circulations, learning, representations (1500-1700)

In the chapter entitled « De la langue Africaine » of his *Thrésor de l'histoire des langues de cest univers* (1613), Claude Duret describes, based on the writings of Swiss theologian Theodor Bibliander, a homogeneous linguistic situation in Africa: ‘as regards the generality of Africans today, divided into so many lineages and families, and spread over such long distances of land in Africa, and through such diverse regions of it, they all speak the same language, which they call Amarig, a noble and illustrious language called by the Arabs of Africa the Barbaresque language, which is the native African language [...]’ (p. 551). He also gathered information on the “Ethiopian, Indian or Nubian language”, based primarily on Bibliander’s *De ratione communi omnium linguarum et litterarum commentarius* (1548), but also on texts by Guillaume Postel and André Thevet. Later, in the Netherlands, the *Description of Africa* (1668) by the physician Olfert Dapper was compiled from medieval data and information from the Dutch East India Company. While this compilation does not necessarily imply that the information relayed is inaccurate, these two examples show that discourse on the African continent in these areas and at this time was often based on second-hand information.

The European presence in Africa, and the African presence in Europe, is nevertheless an established fact, but its centre of gravity lies more in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. In 1513, the *Psalterium Davidis et cantica aliqua biblica aethiopice*, the first book printed in Ethiopian characters, was published in Rome, the result of a collaboration between Johannes Potken and Ethiopian monks residing in Santo Stefano Maggiore, including Brother Tomās (Kelly 2024, Adankpo-Labadie 2026). In his preface to this psalter of David written in Ge‘ez, the written and liturgical language of Ethiopia, Potken wrote, ‘[...] With God’s help, I am now able to publish David’s psalter in the true Chaldean language and offer it to lovers of foreign languages’ (Adankpo-Labadie 2026, 113). The *Psalterium Davidis* contains notes on Ethiopian grammar. Through contact with Ethiopian pilgrims, several Italian scholars became fascinated with the Ge‘ez language during the sixteenth century. In 1548, for example, Mariano Vittori collaborated with the Ethiopian scholar TASFĀ Şeyon and wrote a synthesis on the origins of the Ethiopian language as well as a Ge‘ez grammar (Salvadore, De Lorenzi and Deresse Ayenachew Woldetsadik 2024). In the first half of the sixteenth century, the diplomat Yuhanna al-Asad, better known as Leo Africanus, contributed to the spread of Arabic in the Italian peninsula by compiling, with Jacob ben Samuel, a dictionary in Arabic, Hebrew and Latin, as well as an Arabic grammar (Zemon Davis 2006, 83-87).

At the same time, Portuguese merchants, sailors, diplomats, warriors and missionaries sailed and traded along the African coast. Africans also stayed or settled in the Iberian Peninsula, either forcibly in the case of enslaved people, or as part of diplomatic missions or to pursue studies, such as the Kongos from the nobility of the Christian Kingdom of Kongo. The first bilingual Portuguese and Kikongo catechism, written by Gaspar da Conceição, was published in Evora in 1556 (Fernandes 2015). Several Kikongo grammar books were published in the seventeenth century, notably by the Propaganda Fide press in Rome (Macedo 2013). While the importance of the Iberian empires in structuring Roman knowledge of the world has been highlighted by the BABELROME project led by Elisa Andretta between 2017 and 2021, linguistic knowledge,

its uses and circulation deserve renewed attention, focusing on the peninsular areas and their interactions concerning knowledge about Africa. Did the interest in African languages develop in the same way in Portugal, Spain and the Italian peninsula? Were languages other than Arabic, whose spread in humanist Spain has been demonstrated by Émilie Picherot (Picherot, 2023), at the centre of the interests and uses of peninsular actors? To what extent were representations of these languages, and of those who spoke and learned them, shaped by the discourse surrounding them? Finally, what role did printing play in the usage, circulation, learning and representation of these languages?

This study day aims to examine the role of actors (travellers, missionaries, pilgrims, scholars, printers, theologians, language teachers, diasporas, interpreters) in the constitution of knowledge and representations of the languages of Africa, from Arabic to Kikongo, Kanuri (Cyffer 2021, Salvatore 2021) and Ge'ez, in the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. The aim is to study and compare the contexts in which this linguistic knowledge was developed, whether the interest in languages was based on curiosity or had a practical purpose, such as religious, economic or diplomatic interests. We also aim to shed light on the methods used to collect and construct this knowledge, whose sources can be found in field experience or in the textual transmission of information, as well as the future of this knowledge in various geographical and social spaces. We are particularly interested in the methods used to disseminate and circulate data on languages, as well as the construction of representations of these languages and their textual reconfigurations. Works in history, book history, literature, linguistics and philology will feed into the discussion and may focus in particular on the following non-exhaustive list of elements:

- Actors: interpreters, missionaries, ambassadors, travellers, pilgrims, teachers, scholars, diasporas
- Tools and media and their dissemination: grammars, dictionaries, vocabularies, translations, multilingual works, printed materials and manuscripts
- Narratives and representations: accounts of encounters with the language, of learning the language, representations of the polyglot, representations of the language

Participation is open to young researchers. Travel expenses to Grenoble will be partially covered.

Proposals for presentations in French, English, or Portuguese, lasting 25 minutes, should be sent jointly to clemence.jaime@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr and mathilde.alain@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr before 15 March 2026. The study day will take place on 25 September 2026 on the campus of the Université Grenoble Alpes.

A publication of the proceedings will be considered.

Event organised with the support of the ANR Ethiokongrome project, which studies the connections between the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia and Kongo with Rome, as well as that of the UMR Litt&Arts, LUHCIE (UGA) and IHRIM (Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3).

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