Preservation through Elaboration -
The Historicisation of the Abyssinians in Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's
Rafʿ shaʾn al-ḥubshān[1]

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Introduction

The text *Rafʿ shaʾn al-ḥubshān* (lit. 'Raising the importance of the Abyssinians') presents with a symptom akin to other treatises from the late Mamlūk period in that it is a compilation entirely based on textual materials from the formative period.[2] Al-Suyūṭī raised the matter of the Abyssinians in the form of a selection of prophetic traditions and historical reports.[3] According to G. Rotter the content of this work was invaluable for a literary-historical investigation into 15th century notions of racial prejudice in Arabic-Islamic societies.[4] He assigned the work to a corpus of *Verteidigungsschriften* ("works written in defense of the blacks"), but declined a source-critical exegesis of the text itself.[5] A. Muhammad continued where Rotter left off and analyzed the foreword as well as the table of contents and al-Suyūṭī's sources.[6] He considered the missing link to al-Suyūṭī's contemporary Abyssinian communities to be crucial.[7] It complicated or rather prevented any venture into reconstructing the socio-historical environments of Abyssinians during the late Mamlūk period.[8] The *Rafʿ* could not conform to 'great expectations'. Instead it was degraded to serve the purpose of 'fact-mining' for earlier traditions or was left to gather dust on al-Suyūṭī's bookshelf of curiosities among his other works on the *sūdān*: the *Nuzhat al-ʿumr fī tafḍīl bayna al-bīḍ wa al-sūd wa al-sumr* ("The enjoyment of life concerning the preference of the Whites, the Blacks and the Browns"), a collection of poems written

[2] In the following reference to the *Rafʿ shaʾn al-ḥubshān* relates to the edition al-Suyūṭī. *Rafʿ Shaʾn al-ḥubshān*. Ṣafwān ʿAdnān Dāwūdī [et al.] (eds.). Jiddah: Dār al-Qiblah lil-Thaqāfah al-Islāmīyah, 1995. For another edition cf. al-Khathlan, Saud H.. *A Critical Edition of Kitāb Rafʿ Shān Al-Hubshān by Jalāl Al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī*. St Andrews, 1983. The latter also contains a detailed description of the surviving manuscripts of the "Rafʿ al-shaʾn al-ḥubshān", cf. Ibid. 81-107.

[3] The term *ḥabash*, pl. *ḥubshān* literally means Abyssinian and *al-ḥabasha* refers to the geographical region of Abyssinia with various usages in medieval geographical works. Cf. Beckingham, al-Ḥabash in Muslim geographical works 6-7.

[4] Cf. Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers* 10.

[5] Ibid. 10-17.

[6] Cf. Muhammad, The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature 57-59.

[7] A work by the historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), *al-Ilmān bi-akh bār man bi-arḍ al-ḥabasha min mulūk al-Islām*, deals with the Muslim rulers of Abyssinia. I would like to thank Yehoshua Frenkel for pointing this out to me.

[8] Cf. Muhammad, The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature 57-59.

in "praise and satire of women",[9] and the work *Azhār al-ʿurūs fī akhbār al-ḥubūsh* ("The flowers of the thrones concerning the reports about the Abyssinians") an abridgement (*mukhtaṣar*) of the *Rafʿ* written towards the end of his life.[10] At best, the *Rafʿ* provided evidence for the wide-held notion of al-Suyūṭī's trivial reworking of existing marginal themes exhibited in numerous other works of his considerable oeuvre.[11]

B. Lewis further elaborated Rotter's designation of the text as a "work written in defense of the blacks" as part of his historical study on *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*. He argued that the close affinity of several treatises of defense in general can be read as an indicator for dominating hostilities towards people of black skin color throughout the Islamic medieval period.[12] Consequently, the text was defined according to literary criteria based on a general pattern of defense and subsumed under a tradition of similar texts. This corpus of *Verteidigungsschriften* presumably originated with the *Kitāb fakhr al-sūdān ʿalā l-biḍān* by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868), a *mufākhara* within the field of *adab* advocating a hierarchical integration of black peoples in the ʿAbbasid Iraq based on their ethnic and cultural qualities.[13] A few centuries later, the work *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī al-faḍl al-sūdān wa al-ḥabash* ("The enlightenment of the darkness concerning the merits of the Blacks and the Abyssinians") by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) established a new model.[14] It differed fundamentally from his predecessors, since it was based entirely on *aḥādīth* and *akhbār*.[15] As Ibn al-Jawzī mentioned in the preface, he observed discriminatory attitudes towards contemporary Abyssinians and *sūdān* in Baghdad.[16] Therefore, he dedicated his treatise to them, refuting the biblical 'curse of Ḥām' as the cause of blackness, denying the superiority of 'white peoples' and stressing the importance of piety and good deeds.[17] Thus, according to Lewis, the main purpose of these works was to defend the *sūdān* and positively acknowledge their qualities and peoples.[18] This interpretation was then cursorily conferred upon the *Rafʿ* assigning the text to a corpus of *Verteidigungsschriften* based on textual similarities.[19]

However, al-Suyūṭī never stated a particular social purpose similar to Ibn al-Jawzī. In the short foreword of the *Rafʿ* he expressed two intentions: firstly, he wanted to raise the importance of the Abyssinians, but he never mentioned a reason or an

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[9] Ibid. 58.
[10] Cf. Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers* 15-18.
[11] Cf. Irwin, al-Suyuti 746.
[12] Cf. Lewis, *Race and Slavery* 28-33.
[13] Cf. Enderwitz, *Gesellschaftlicher Rang und ethnische Legitimation* 45-49, 90.
[14] al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr.*
[15] Cf. Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers* 12-14.
[16] Cf. Muhammad, The Image of Africans in Arabic Literature 52.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Lewis, *Race and Slavery* 31-33.
[19] Ibid. 33.

intended effect of his text.[20] Secondly, he claimed to surpass and complete the work of his predecessor Ibn al-Jawzī by treating the subject in the form of an abridgement (*talkhīṣ*) and a conclusion (*ikmāl*).[21] Although al-Suyūṭī based his work to a great extent on Ibn al-Jawzī's, the compilatory emphasis differs considerably, a point which I will refer back to in the course of this paper. The *Rafʿ* comprises seven chapters of which three accumulatively list the appearance of Abyssinians in *ḥadīth, asbāb an-nuzūl* traditions and Abyssinian words that occur in the Quran.[22] Then several narratives are quoted, referring to the migration of the Muslims to *bilād al-ḥabasha* ("land of Abyssinia") in the 5th year of the revelation (615 AD).[23] The longest chapter entails biographical entries of Abyssinian "excellencies",[24] followed by the enumeration of special qualities and miscellanies.[25] The work is introduced by ethnographic and geographical details and concluded with prophetic traditions admonishing the believer to manumit his slave and marry his concubine.[26] Apart from al-Suyūṭī's preliminary remarks, no further clues in terms of how to read the compiled materials can be retrieved from the text. All these aspects contributed to Rotter's dictum of historical and literary triviality.

Yet, new trends in the field of Mamlūk literature in general, and in the study of *ḥadīth* compilations in particular, run counter to such notions of triviality. The statement of historical and literary invalidity as expressed by scholars with respect to al-Suyūṭī's *Rafʿ* adhered to a broader notion of purported "decadence and stagnation", a paradigm of "cultural decline" that has long cast a shadow over the study of Mamlūk and Ottoman literature and was based on "Western prejudices that originated in the colonial climate of the nineteenth century."[27] T. Bauer formulates a general programmatic suggestion of approaching literary works with the consciousness of "relativity" as well as investigating "the social, aesthetic, and ideological circumstances of any period of Arabic literature and thus establish the values and standards that the members of the specific literary communities themselves applied to their own literature."[28] Following this line of approach is helpful in the study of the *Rafʿ* since it can contextualize the standards for interpreting this work in correspondence with al-Suyūṭī's academic and scholarly affinities.

More specifically, this fresh perspective can open up the interpretation of literary works deemed unworthy of consideration for historical research. An analysis

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[20] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 31.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 37-68.

[23] Ibid. 69-94.

[24] Ibid. 95-202.

[25] Ibid. 203-211.

[26] Ibid. 32-36, 212-215

[27] Cf. Bauer, Misunderstandings and New Approaches 105-107. For a general reformulation of the study of the wider "Nile-to-Oxus region" in terms of its multi-cephalous cultural, religious and intellectual landscape of the 13ᵗʰ to 15ᵗʰ century" cf. Pfeiffer, Introduction 1-3.

[28] Bauer, Misunderstandings and New Approaches 107.

that corresponds to the parameters of relative value and standard according to the respective literary community can reveal hitherto unacknowledged cultural significances of a text. Recent scholarship on the examination of *ḥadīth* compilations has advanced various concepts in order "to understand the motives behind the arrangements of *ḥadīths* in a compilation" drawing on methodologies from literary theory and especially biblical studies such as "canonical criticism and redaction criticism."[29] In contrast to an earlier focus on *isnād* and the "authenticity" of the textual materials, the idea of "compilation criticism" now looks at ways of analyzing *ḥadīth* compilations by tracing an "authorial voice" embodied in the selection and arrangement of their textual units.[30] These methodological considerations can support an analysis of the *Rafʿ* by approaching the text based on commensurable notions of textual production.

Therefore, in contrast to the previous scholarship on al-Suyūṭī's *Rafʿ*, I will question the dicta of unoriginality and historical irrelevance. Instead of judging the literary contents of the work by their cursory similarity with other writings, a close reading of the *Rafʿ* can reveal its multiple layers of significance. My main argument is that al-Suyūṭī's work has to be read as a historiographical treatise that canonizes the historical legacy of the Abyssinians. Their share in Islamic culture is reflected in their social status as slaves, and in the symbolic role they performed in the early Islamic period. This cultural significance of the work is achieved through his scholarly methods which corresponded to the broader conventions in *ḥadīth* scholarship of his times. The presentation of his materials is based along the line of a preservationist method while an elaborative tendency is recognizable in his techniques of compilation. As a double-method of preservation and elaboration it generates the effect of a historicisation of the Abyssinians following the parameters of al-Suyūṭī's larger work.

In order to present this analysis, firstly, I will consider al-Suyūṭī's scholarly habitus as a point of departure to approach the text. Secondly, my analysis will follow 'along the grains' of his methods of textual production. These generally build on a preservationist stance through the exact reproduction of historical reports. Thirdly, I will discuss his elaborative tendency through the specific selection and disposition of these materials. Finally, I will explicate the function of the list of biographical entries. This chapter has been constantly overlooked as simply an enumeration of worthy individuals. Instead I will argue that al-Suyūṭī structured this 'biographical dictionary' in order to establish the Abyssinians as a diachronically evolving group within the Muslim community. In general, while the 'morphology' (i.e. the textual materials remain static), the 'syntax' (i.e. the structure) of the *Rafʿ* is subject to an authorial

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[29] Cf. Burge, Reading between the lines 170-171. For further examples relating to the reading and interpretation of 40 *ḥadīth* compilations in their complex historical contexts cf. Mourad/Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology*.
[30] Cf. Burge, Reading between the lines 177 and 196-197.

voice. This elaborates on an argumentative space generating the historical significance of *al-ḥabasha*.

Canonising Islamic Knowledge in an 'Age of Decadence' – al-Suyūṭī's academic aspirations

Al-Suyūṭī's academic background will provide for the crucial starting point for identifying a socio-cultural purpose of the work *Rafʿ shaʾn al-ḥubshān* during his time. Reconstructing a scholarly habitus, i.e. the framework, interests and methods that guided his erudite endeavors, can shed light on the intellectual environment in which the *Rafʿ* was composed. To this end, E.M. Sartain offers the most detailed analysis of al-Suyūṭī's education and scholarly self-image mainly based on his autobiographical writings *al-Taḥadduth bi-niʿmat Allāh* and a hagiographical account of his student ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Shādhilī, *Bahjat al-ʿābidīn bi-tarjamat Jalāl al-Dīn*.[31] Although it is virtually impossible and redundant to determine a universal significance of this work, an assemblage of dominant elements as they are discernible in his academic career can reveal focal points in the fabric of the text. Following these significant traits will guide a reading of the *Rafʿ* that is in accordance with the parameters of his larger academic work.

The last decades of research on al-Suyūṭī have located his scholarly habitus squarely within an academic culture of the *ʿulamāʾ*, who stressed an educational conservatism with regard to religious knowledge (*ʿilm*), which in turn was widely considered as fixed and articulated by past scholars in an authoritative manner.[32] As a disparate professional group mainly concerned with such disciplines as *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), the *ʿulamāʾ* derived their social importance and status through a self-proclaimed intermediary function among societal groups.[33] In general, they transmitted and interpreted the religious knowledge which in their self-conception constituted the normative regulatory principle in Mamlūk society.[34] This position was bolstered by the fact that the *ʿulamāʾ* represented the main group of recruitment for ranks in the higher educational echelons, holding posts at the *madāris*, mosques as well as sufi khānqahs and thereby dominating the professional networks of scholarship in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria.[35]

While al-Suyūṭī's autobiographical writings certainly followed the rationale of portraying excellent scholarly credentials, his educational upbringing nonetheless boasts of an extraordinarily broad range of disciplines. Corresponding to the customary curricula of his time al-Suyūṭī had memorized the Quran when he was still a child and devoted intensive studies to grammar (*naḥw*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), belles-

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[31] Cf. Sartain, *Biography and Background i-ii.* For a more recent biographical sketch cf. Spevak, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī.
[32] Cf. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam ii*, 437ff; Cf. Saleh, al-Suyuti and his works 73-76.
[33] Cf. Berkey, Culture and Society 387; Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge* 3-6; Gilliot, 'Ulamāʾ, ?.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge* 6-9.

lettres (*adab*) and rhetoric (*ʿilm al-balāgha*), among others, in his subsequent schooling.[36] His autobiographical writings meticulously enumerate disciplines, teachers (*mashyākha*) and acquired teaching certificates (*ijāzāt*), depicting himself as an erudite scholar while exhibiting a vast personal network of scholarly acquaintances across Cairo, Mamlūk Egypt, the Hijāz and beyond.[37] This academic success is also reflected in the variety of institutional posts he held during his lifetime, for example teaching shāfiʿī law at the Shaykhū-mosque, transmitting *ḥadīth* at the Shaykhūnīya madrasa and pursuing administrative obligations at the Baybarsīya Khānqā and the mausoleum of Barqūq al-Nāṣirī, all in Cairo.[38]

In principal, al-Suyūṭī emphasized the importance of concentrating on a preservationist stance, conserving a corpus of authoritative knowledge transmitted from the prophetic age onwards by authoritative scholars. Amid his diverse studies and teaching duties this preoccupation with the field of *ḥadīth* and related sciences crystallized gradually. Such a proclivity towards legitimately transmitted prophetic knowledge was furthermore underscored by his full-fledged rejection of the so-called rational sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-aqlīya*). Thus his pupil al-Shādhilī quoted him saying: "Know that, from the time I grew up, I have been inspired with a love of the *sunnah* (exemplary practice of the Prophet) and of *ḥadīth*, and with a hate of *bidʿa* (heretical practices) and the sciences of the ancients, such as philosophy and logic. I wrote on the censure of logic when I was eighteen years old, and it was anathema to me."[39] In contrast, al-Suyūṭī considered *ḥadīth* as "the noblest branches of knowledge," but he disregarded the widely accepted and encouraged practice of *ṭalab al-ʿilm* (travelling in search of knowledge), instead preferring the study of related books with scholarly eminences of his time.[40]

At the same time, this preservationist attitude was correlated with a strong tendency to distinguish himself from his colleagues and contemporaries. Again a quote can expound this notion:

> *[…] I hoped, by the favour and grace of God, to be the mujaddid at the end of this ninth (fifteenth) century, just as Ghazālī had hoped for himself, because I alone have mastered all kinds of different disciplines, such as Qurʾānic exegesis and its principles, Prophetic tradition and its sciences, jurisprudence and its principles, language and its principles, syntax and morphology and their principles, polemics, rhetoric and good style, and history. In addition to all this, there are my outstanding, excellent works, the like of which nobody has written before, and their number up till now is about 500. I have originated the science of principles of language (uṣūl al-lughah) and its study, and nobody has preceded*

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[36] Cf. Sartain, *Biography and Background i*, 27-33.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Cf. Geoffroy, al-Suyūṭī, ?; Sartain, *Biography and Background i, 42*-45.

[39] Sartain, *Biography and Background i,* 32-33.; quoted from al-Shādhilī, *Bahjat al-ʿabidīn* fol. 33v.

[40] Cf. Ibid 30f. Nevertheless, this didactic predilection did not prevent him from a series of studies he conducted while on the *ḥajj* and during travels to Alexandria and Damietta (868-869/1464-1465). Cf. Spevak, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī 396.

me in this. It follows the same lines as Prophetic traditions and principles of jurisprudence. My works and my knowledge have travelled to all countries, and have reached Syria, Rūm, Persia, the Hijaz, the Yemen, India, Ethiopia, North Africa, and Takrūr, and have spread from Takrūr to the ocean. In all that I have mentioned, I have no equal, nobody else living has mastered the number of disciplines which I have, and, as far as I know, nobody else has reached the rank of unrestricted ijtihād except for me.[41]

He clearly considered himself erudite in all the traditional subjects of his metier. Moreover, as an exceptional ʿālim his professional achievements also carried a responsibility with regard to the conservation of Islamic knowledge. The pretention of simultaneously exercising *ijtihād* (reaching independent legal decisions beyond the four *madhāhib* based on the Quran and the Sunna) and proclaiming himself as the *mujaddid* (renewer) of the age caused a public outcry and harsh criticism from other scholars.[42] According to K. Brustad these moves have to be understood as a mechanism by which he tried to differentiate himself from his colleagues in the scholarly community.[43] At the same time, it points to a deep-rooted incentive for interpretive duties and intellectual responsibilities on his behalf. In an age of decadence he represented the last bulwark of Islamic guidance based on a transmitted authoritative Islamic corpus of knowledge that he had mastered to perfection. While especially the *mujaddid*-complex has to be viewed within the larger framework of an 'Islamic premillenialism' and a transregional eschatological conjunction,[44] this academic posture makes an extraordinary claim with regard to scholarly autonomy and textual exegesis.

These exegetical rights that he exercised on a corpus of ʿilm represent an elaborative trend, a methodology that can be traced through the majority of his writings. Scholarship considered both the incipient explanation of his academic approach and the accurate quotation and critique of existing materials as common traits of his writings.[45] Moreover, his intellectual endeavors featured an inclination towards the composition of specialized monographs. As E. Geoffroy states, the wide range of the topics he dealt with in an encyclopedic manner were explained in terms of a self-proclaimed mission, "assembling and transmitting to coming generations the Islamic cultural patrimony before it might disappear as a result of the carelessness of his contemporaries."[46] Correspondingly, his *Taḥadduth bi-niʿmat Allāh* contains an enumeration of a great bulk of his works with the *Rafʿ* ranking among those which he

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[41] Sartain, *Biography and Background i,* 70-71, quoted from al-Suyūṭī, *al-Tanbiʾah*, fols. 123r-v.
[42] Cf. Sartain *Biography and Background i,* 61-71. Especially the ʿālim al-Sakhāwī vilified him in his writings. Cf. Saleh, al-Suyuti and his works 79.
[43] Brustad, Imposing Order 329.
[44] Cf. Poston, Islamic Premillenialism 100-101.
[45] Cf. Geoffroy, al-Suyūṭī.
[46] Cf. Ibid.

regarded as particularly original and specific in their composition.[47] Thus, a close reading and analysis of the *Raf* has to trace significances in the textual fabric along the lines of both a preservationist stance and an elaborative tendency, two criteria which dominated al-Suyūṭī's academic aspirations as a self-proclaimed *savant extraordinaire*.

Preservation as authoritative compilation

First of all, the application of a preservationist methodology has to be considered in al-Suyūṭī's *Raf' sha'n al-ḥubshān*. It builds on a bias towards canonical traditions and their correct transmission, two aspects that become clear when reading the *Raf'*. He gives priority to the exact citation of prophetic traditions and early Islamic historical anecdotes.[48] With respect to these *aḥādīth* and *akhbār* S. Leder emphasized that in certain genres 'transmission' was far more prevalent than the notion of 'authorship'.[49] The characteristics of *aḥādīth* and *akhbār* as self-contained primary textual units comprising a chain of transmission (*isnād*) and the text (*matn*) of the utterance or anecdote made them suitable for constant de-contextualization from earlier works and re-contextualization within new compilations.[50] While the word *khabar* was generally used to refer to a historical event or anecdote, the term *ḥadīth* took on an exclusive religious connotation during the formative period, meaning sayings and deeds of the prophet recorded by his followers (*al-ṣaḥāba*) and subsequent generations in order to provide guidance in all matters concerning the Muslim community (*umma*).[51] Although over the course of time generations told stories in various ways and some were certainly made up to serve sectarian and political interests of one group or another,[52] editorial alterations due to changing narrative strategies and literary techniques produced different versions of the same *ḥadīth*, which could nonetheless denote the same thought and concept.[53] In several instances, al-Suyūṭī quotes similar or identical versions of a *khabar* or *ḥadīth* thereby expounding his breadth of knowledge and engaging with its history of transmission.

In the case of the *Raf'* both these *aḥādīth* and *akhbār* constituted the building blocks of al-Suyūṭī's '*khabar*-history' with each of these textual units presenting an idea that had already been framed as a story to comply with established conventions of literary communication.[54] The link of the selected *aḥādīth* and *akhbār* with Abyssinian figures represented the guideline for the composition. More specifically, it is the intersecting reference to Abyssinians in each *matn*, which provided for the

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[47] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *al-Tahadduth* 111-113.
[48] Cf. especially the chapters 1-3 in al-Suyūṭī, *Raf'*.
[49] Leder, *Authorship and Transmission* 67ff.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Cf. Conermann/Eisenbürger, Die Überlieferungen vom Propheten 155-158.
[52] Donner, A study in Strategies of Compilation 45-46.
[53] Cf. Günther, Ḥadīth Revisited 171-176; Günther, Fictional Narration 433-437.
[54] For "khabar history" cf. Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography* 66; Cf. Leder, *The Use of the Composite Form* 125-126.

common thematic ground of al-Suyūṭī's compilation. The succession of accumulatively arranged primary textual units displays a kaleidoscope of prophetic and early Islamic normative attitudes towards the *ḥubshān*. A re-contextualization within this thematic configuration as addressed in the title, subtitles and the foreword shifts the focus of the reader to the Abyssinians and their deeds, utterances, as well as related prophetic sanctions. At the same time, the majority of *aḥādīth* in al-Suyūṭī's work enable a reader to view these sequences with a continued presence of the prophet and his past. An idealized early Islamic age is implicit in the fabric of these primary textual units and thereby raises them to a supreme religious importance. This prophetic paradigm was never deleted, but, on the contrary, ensures the authoritative framework of the whole sequence *a priori*.

The full citation of the *isnād*, though a commonplace, exhibits a significant technique of textual production. It provides for a scholarly framework legitimizing the statements on the Abyssinians according to generally acknowledged academic standards of al-Suyūṭī's times.[55] The extended version of the chain of transmission guarantees the soundness of a normative prophetic requirement. Furthermore, al-Suyūṭī sometimes adds commentaries for an assessment of the transmitters and for definitive purposes. Throughout the text, he strictly adheres to academic conventions of his profession enjoining a correct trans-generational dissemination of religious and historical knowledge within the parameters of *taqlid* (uncritical transfer). He thereby references earlier scholarly authorities such as al-Dhahabī, al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭabarānī and al-Tirmidhī besides a variety of his teachers and contemporaries such as al-Bulqīnī and al-Shumunnī.[56] Thus, his sources are situated across several disciplines ranging from *tafsīr* to *ḥadīth*, *taʾrīkh,* and *fiqh*, demonstrating the amplitude of his scholarship. In addition to this confirmation of erudition, the continuous use of the *isnād* displays his integration into various professional networks of his period.

Most importantly, though, the indication of his *ijāzāt* transcends a pure illustration of acquired knowledge and social networks. On the one hand, the chain of transmission in its person-centered configuration guarantees the authenticity of a report or prophetic tradition.[57] On the other hand, the chains of transmission also reveal the diverse trans-textual correlations of al-Suyūṭī's composition. G. Genette defined such intertexts as texts within a text maintaining secret and obvious connections with other texts.[58] Al-Suyūṭī displays these trans-textual relationships in the *Rafʿ* in a particularly explicit manner. Orally received prophetic traditions and numerous *ḥadīth*-compilations constituted his archive.[59] The additional use of standard works of Islamic scholarship indicates al-Suyūṭī's intention to collect a

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[55] Cf. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge* 30-32.

[56] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ*. These scholars appear multiple times in the *asānīd* of the text.

[57] Cf. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge* 30-32.

[58] Cf. Genette, *Palimpseste* 9-10. For the semantic use of *ḥadīth* and other authoritative religious materials as intertexts in *adab* works cf. Malti-Douglas, Playing with the Sacred 59.

[59] Cf. e.g. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ*, 44-45 and 183.

particularly broad spectrum of information on his subject. Through the *isnād*-based link with the 'bygone authorities' these materials were defined *per se* as the knowledgeable corpus. Thus, the complementary, direct, and pervasive citation of the *isnād* with the diverse references to earlier authorities presents his work as a 'multiple palimpsest'. This form functioned as an authoritative framework for the statements made in the *matn*. Through this 'multiple palimpsest' paradigm the argumentative pattern is evoked by external trans-textual references that award the historical and prophetic materials concerning the Abyssinians their normative quality.

Elaboration – Evoking meaning through techniques of compilation

While the traits outlined above are generally acknowledged as common features of such compilations, an argumentative pattern is discernible that operates beyond a sanctioning of a linear sequential progression of *aḥādīth* and *akhbār*. However, with this argumentative framework based on authoritative transmission, there remained no further exigency to expand on causality or lines of reasoning. The elaboration was intended in a different manner. The short foreword represents one of the very few parts of the *Rafʿ* in which the author does not quote transmitted knowledge, but exposes his subjective purpose in 'his own words'.[60] As mentioned previously, with his two objectives al-Suyūṭī wanted to set himself apart from Ibn al-Jawzī by composing an all-encompassing work focusing solely on the *ḥubshān*, but not on the *sūdān* in general.[61] However, the purpose of exalting the importance of the Abyssinians in the form of an abridgement and a completion indicates an additional reworking of his predecessor's book. Al-Suyūṭī used the argumentative space for his elaborative agency to create a historically rooted subaltern 'Abyssinian identity'.

In order to achieve this, al-Suyūṭī applied various procedures of textual compilation whereby a semantic calibration of a textual unit is evoked through a combination with other such units and their external approval or falsification, i.e. the assessment of the transmitters in the *isnād*. F. Donner explained in his analysis of Ibn ʿAsākir's *Tarīkh madīnat Dimashq* that techniques such as selection, repetition and placement could impart meaning in the compilation of transmitted texts.[62] As repositories of pre-existing materials these compilations reveals "a compiler's agenda" through the crafted order and structure of such works, even if they "almost never speak with one voice."[63] Through the analysis of al-Suyūṭī's elaborative techniques, the diverse semantic significances of the text can be probed in order to detect his appreciative characterization of the Abyssinians. In the following I will give major examples by concentrating on his techniques of segmentation, repetition and contrastive succession.

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[60] al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ*, 31.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Donner, A study in Strategies of Compilation 46-47.
[63] Ibid. 46.

Inducing meaning through the segmentation of textual materials was one of the standard methods of compilation. The division of al-Suyūṭī's work into chapters creates a variety of spheres of knowledge with respect to the Abyssinians' share in Islamic culture. Although all the textual materials consist of *aḥādīth* and *akhbār* the first three chapters divide them with respect to Abyssinians' appearance in the prophetic traditions, the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and their words in the Quranic terminology, respectively.[64] The *muqaddima* prefigures these sections by putting *al-ḥabasha* on a definitive geographical and political map utilizing information from compendia.[65] Similarly, the fifth chapter contains a list of biographical entries of Abyssinians that resembles a biographical dictionary.[66] Thus, splitting up the corpus of *akhbār* and *aḥādīth* into thematic sections provided a basic tool for structuring the compilation. Thereby, the transmitted textual units were ordered according to textual genres with each chapter accumulating a rearranged body of Islamic knowledge with respect to the Abyssinians.

As each chapter establishes the cultural and religious significance of the Abyssinians a specific importance comes with a saying that introduces the *ḥadīth* section by laying down a prophetic position towards the *ḥubshān*:

> *Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥalabī reported to me in written form (mukātibatan), based on the authority of [...], based on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, who said: 'The Prophet of Allāh, peace be upon him, said': 'Take the sūdān, because three of them belong to the masters of the people of paradise (sādāt ahl al-janna): Luqmān the Wise, the Najāshī and Bilāl the muʾadhdhin.' And al-Ṭabarānī said: The word sūdān refers to al-ḥabash [i.e. the Abyssinians].*[67]

This prophetic statement legitimizes the social integration of the Abyssinians into the *umma* by referring to the extraordinary status of three people that are characterized as the "masters of the people of paradise." Their fine example establishes the Abyssinians collectively as a respectable ethnic group within the Muslim community. However, a societal acceptance of the Abyssinians simultaneously stipulates their social status as slaves.

Nonetheless, as an ethnic community the Abyssinians played a crucial historical role during the life-time of the prophet Muḥammad. This aspect is epitomized in the fourth chapter through the strategy of repetition. It contains several much longer traditions which are concerned with the *hijra* of the early Muslim community to *al-ḥabasha* in the fifth year of the beginning of the revelation (615 CE).[68] The central aspect of these narratives revolves around the confrontation of the

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[64] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 37-68.
[65] Ibid. 32-36.
[66] Ibid. 95-202.
[67] al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 37.
[68] Ibid. 69-94.

Meccan Quraysh, who followed the Muslims to the court of the Najāshī, the Abyssinian king. In the framework of a debate relating to the role of Īsā in the Islamic revelation, the Najāshī accepts the strict monotheistic interpretation of the Muslim group. He is therefore considered to have converted to Islam, protecting the Muslims from the Meccan persecutors. Ibn al-Jawzī provides one narrative report of the migration.[69] However, in al-Suyūṭī's text the repetition of this report is based on multiple different chains of transmission.[70] This works as an emphasis within the overall structure of the narrative. The migration (*hijra*) to the land of *al-ḥabasha* was highlighted as a critical event in the history of the early *umma*, providing a safe place for the adherents of the new prophetic revelation. Simultaneously, it accentuates the protective role of the Najāshī. It even goes so far as to regard him as a fellow Muslim, though in a rather patronizing manner. Since the Najāshī as the political sovereign can be viewed as the *pars pro toto* of the Abyssinians, the people of *al-ḥabasha* are considered in the crucial role which they played in early Islamic history.

In another context, the mythological past of the Abyssinians is specified through the method of contrastive succession. This juxtaposition of contradictory reports demonstrates al-Suyūṭī's critical engagement with different traditions. He finalizes his own choice through the order of their arrangement. A case in point is the group of reports dealing with the fate of Ḥām the mythological ancestor of the *sūdān* and the *ḥubshān*.[71] Noah's curse was considered by several medieval scholars to explain the blackness of the African peoples.[72] In a further step, it provided a convenient ideological justification for their enslavement by the Arabs and Persians, the progeny of Ḥām's two brothers Shem and Japheth.[73] While al-Suyūṭī quotes traditions which support this position, he later engages with other opinions.[74] The latter explain the blackness in terms of an arbitrary divine intervention.[75] At this point, his argument conforms to Ibn al-Jawzī's, who rejects the curse as an explanation.[76] Then al-Suyūṭī presents a tradition according to which Noah had pity and transformed his dictum of slavery into a relationship of merciful servility for Ḥām towards his two brothers.[77] Thus, al-Suyūṭī reconfigures the servile position of the Abyssinians. His final position conforms to the overall benevolent attitude of the Prophet Muḥammad in his sayings and deeds, a religious guideline which could not be breached given his scholarly propositions.

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[69] Cf. al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr* 62-69. Both Al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī provide alphabetical lists of those Muslims who migrated to Abyssinia at that time. Cf. Ibid 57-60 and al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 90-94.
[70] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 69-94.
[71] Ibid. 32-35.
[72] Cf. Enderwitz, *Gesellschaftlicher Rang* 26.
[73] Cf. Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 44-46.
[74] Compare al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 32-35 and 207-208.
[75] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 207-208.
[76] Al-Suyūṭī quotes Ibn al-Jawzī in this matter, cf. Ibid 207. Cf. al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr* 35.
[77] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 208.

A crucial qualification of the Abyssinians' historical role is detailed in the context of a disagreement between al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī relating to the assignment of the call to prayer (adhān). Here again, the technique of contrasting different traditions is used to construct a line of argument. Ibn al-Jawzī conceded this religious duty of the (adhān) to the Abyssinians by quoting a single tradition.[78] Accordingly, the caliphate belonged to the Quraysh, the judgeship to the Anṣār and the Abyssinians were responsible for the call to prayer (adhān).[79] While al-Suyūṭī can cite two traditions in this respect, he finally refutes the Abyssinians as muʾadhdhins of the umma, based on a commentary by the Meccan historian al-Fāsī.[80] Thus, Muḥammad's muʾadhdhin Bilāl was an exception and his role did not translate into a precedent that would honor the Abyssinians with this religious office.

In sum, the Abyssinians' historically rooted identity is elaborated on from various different perspectives exemplifying al-Suyūṭī's intensive engagement with his selected textual materials. A crucial element consists of a cursed mythological past as the progeny of Ḥām. They were condemned to serve as slaves based on the precedent established by a variety of traditions that developed the incident relating to Ḥām's discovery of Noah's nakedness, as it appears in the Book of Genesis.[81] This past, however, was mitigated and upgraded symbolically by prophetic prescriptions, thus justifying their service as slaves and dependents in the umma. Such an integrative stance could again be based on their critical historical role as a refuge for the Muslim umma, with the Najāshī embracing the message of the prophet. Nonetheless, the difference of opinion between al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī with respect to the assignment of the call to prayer seems to emphasize a social status as slaves. In conclusion, the Abyssinians constituted an inherent and functional subaltern group within the umma during an ideal prophetic age and contributed positively to its evolution. All these aspects demonstrate al-Suyūṭī's dominant authorial voice that guides the reader along the effects of various structural techniques. The thread of his elaborative trend that runs through his work levels out a profile of significances that transcend the purely accumulative features of a compilation. Al-Suyūṭī selects and revitalizes existing cultural knowledge about the Abyssinians in the early Islamic period. Through this rearrangement of authoritative reports he illuminates their crucial historical role by arguing within the parameters of prophetic attitudes and sanctions.

Historicisation – Constructing the ideal Abyssinian Community

The historical significance of the Abyssinians is further embellished through a selection of worthy *dramatis personae* in the fifth chapter of the *Rafʿ*. This part can be

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[78] Cf. al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr* 82.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 38-40.
[81] ?.

understood as a biographical dictionary that lists biographical entries (*tarājim*, sg. *tarjama*) of altogether 35 individuals and of varying length.[82] The title of this chapter contains the phrase "a few of their noble ones" (*baʿḍa nujbāʾihim*) indicating that al-Suyūṭī aimed this chapter at a particular group of Abyssinians.[83] These figures become even more exclusive through a short note which he placed after the penultimate *tarjama* emphasizing that, although there are numerous excellent ones among them, they cannot all be mentioned, especially because some of them do not fit the pattern.[84] Nonetheless, there are no more clues as to his criteria of inclusion and to the purpose of this miniature biographical dictionary within the entire composition. Therefore, as the compilatory characteristics of this chapter conform to the other sections of the *Rafʿ*, this chapter too, has to be read accordingly. It has to be analyzed as a narrative text comprising religiously sanctioned materials that produce a specific meaning in their configuration as a biographical dictionary.

Scholarship has located this genre of "collective biography" within the parameters of historiographical texts. Conventionally, a collection of *tarājim* is delineated in contrast with "a single-subject and stand-alone biography" (*sīra*) which focuses on the prominent achievements of one individual.[85] The genre of collective biography was conceived as an intrinsic literary tradition of Arab-Islamic culture, with its origins residing in the formative Islamic period and the elaboration during the prolific ʿAbbasid era.[86] Sir H. Gibb stated that, "the conception that underlies the oldest biographical dictionaries is that the history of the Islamic Community is essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture."[87] Correspondingly, M. Cooperson has argued for a close interrelation of biographical composition with the notion of genealogy and the collection of historical reports as practiced by the earliest historians (*akhbārīyūn*, sg. *akhbārī*).[88] Early writings from the formative period comprised lists (*tasmiyāt*, sg. *tasmiya*) of personages with varying professional backgrounds, which runs counter to the idea that the collection of information on transmitters of *ḥadīth* (*muḥaddithūn*) stood out as the sole purpose.[89]

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[82] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 95-202.

[83] Ibid. 95.

[84] Ibid. 200.

[85] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* 61, 66.

[86] Cf. Young, Arabic biographical writing 168-173. On the historiographical and cultural significance of this genre cf. al-Qāḍī, Inner Structure and Cultural Significance, and Ibid., Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars' Alternative History of the Muslim Community.

[87] Gibb, Islamic Biographical Literature 54. Nevertheless, scholars have continuously debated the social function of biographical works. Cf. Auchterloine, Historians and the Arabic Biographical Dictionary 187.

[88] Cf. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* 2.

[89] Cf. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* 3. Still, "*rijāl*-works", which recorded the participants in the dissemination of knowledge and commented on the extent of their reliability in that matter, represent one of the major branches of the genre. Certainly, the exigencies of assuring an authoritative genealogical chain in the transmission of religious knowledge (*ʿilm*), and especially the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muḥammad, provided a major impetus. Cf. Ibid. 7-8.

One possible point of entry for fathoming the narrative structure of such biographical dictionaries lies in the analysis of the contents and structure of its building-blocks, i.e. the biographical entries or *tarājim*, within their overall arrangement in the composition. M. Cooperson advanced the concept of the *ṭāʾifa* (pl. *ṭawāʾif*: 'group') based on the "division-of-labor model" which, according to him, emerged as "the most productive paradigm for collective biography", with *ṭāʾifa* referring to a "group entrusted with an exclusive body of knowledge or characteristic activity."[90] These groups were usually furnished with a foundational figure, such as the *ḥadīth*-transmitters claiming the "heirship to the prophet", which played a pivotal role for the construction of their authoritative lineage in the transmission of *ʿilm*.[91] Similarly, other professions, for example musicians, grammarians and poets, articulated their group identity and traced the knowledge and skills of their occupation back to a point of origin, personified in the "exposition of the virtues of individual exemplars within the category" and framed in "self-defined fields of expertise."[92] Thus, the manner in which meaning is constituted through the disposition and linking of personages and their deeds offers an important element of inquiry.

A more specific literary-historical approach can highlight various aspects in this "act of constituting a community."[93] Especially in the case of biographical dictionaries with a diachronic outline that follows the characters through the generations, their recording serves the preservation of a "mythologized version" of a group's authoritative historical account in the form of a "charter myth."[94] At this point authorial strategies feature prominently, since they determine the criteria for excluding or including figures in the *ṭāʾifa*.[95] On the whole, the narrative structure of the biographical works comprises an interrelation of "doctrinal necessity", "transmitted memory" and "compositional skills".[96] Thus, from this perspective, the ambivalent character of the biographical dictionaries is emphasized, combining the purpose of recording figures and their transactions with the framework of certain literary norms.[97]

For an analysis of al-Suyūṭī's Abyssinian biographical dictionary, the search for an authorial voice as it manifests itself in a group's "charter myth" and in the "transmitted memory" that preserves a "genealogy of authority" provides a crucial line of investigation.[98] In comparison, al-Suyūṭī's predecessor Ibn al-Jawzī divided his list of worthy *sūdān* into nine chapters – one chapter for each group: prophets, kings,

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[90] Ibid. 14-15.
[91] Cf. Ibid. 13.
[92] Ibid. 9-13.
[93] Cf. Cooperson, A Literary-Historical Approach 179.
[94] Cf. Ibid. 179.
[95] Cf. Ibid.
[96] Cf. Ibid. 180.
[97] Cf. Cooperson, A Literary-Historical Approach 177.
[98] Ibid. 179-180.

scholars and so forth.[99] Whereas Ibn al-Jawzī presents professional diversity and social omnipresence, al-Suyūṭī concentrates on a single community. Taken together his *tarājim* constitute the Abyssinians as one *ṭāʾifa* whose history evolves diachronically through the laudable deeds and lives of 35 individuals. However, while they equally appear as Abyssinians some of its members are considered more equal than others. It is the diachronic succession of these figures that reveals the internal structure and calibration of the biographical dictionary itself. Al-Suyūṭī's arrangement of his Abyssinian characters within the biographical dictionary creates a 'semantic of disposition'. In other words, the succession of characters combined with their function within the Abyssinian group at large produces a particular significance beyond the textual contents of the biographical entries.

More specifically, a 'genealogy of authority' is established and a 'transmitted memory' articulated through the sequential arrangement of three sub-groups within the *ṭāʾifa*. The first consists of three figures that are quoted in the tradition on the "masters of the people of paradise" (*sādāt ahl al-janna*), three *sūdān* which the prophet considered as particularly eminent.[100] First of all, there is the extraordinary prophetic wisdom of the Quranic and mythical figure Luqmān which becomes evident from the various anecdotes displaying a pattern of moral behavior which in turn conforms to a normative set of Islamic guidance.[101] Secondly, the political role of the historical personality of the Najāshī in protecting the Muslim refugees during their *hijra* to Abyssinia is again emphasized in the context of a verbatim quoted correspondence between him and the prophet Muḥammad.[102] At the same time, the Najāshī is invited to convert to Islam and follow the prophecy of Muḥammad, an act of submission which the Najāshī complies with in his response.[103] Finally, he is even characterized as a *tābiʿī* and thus obtains a crucial status within the Islamic hierarchy of approval and prestige.[104] Thirdly, the significance of Bilāl as Muḥammads *muʾadhdhin* is central to his very long *tarjama*, in addition to his participation in the battle of Badr.[105] Thus, all three *tarājim* exhibit deeds and qualities which were conducive to the evolution and growth of the *umma* during the prophetic period. These exceptional personalities establish a triumvirate as foundational figures of the Abyssinian *ṭāʾifa*. With their exemplary lives they provide the 'charter myth' that legitimizes the reference of the subsequent figures.

The following sub-group constitutes the great majority in al-Suyūṭī's biographical dictionary: slaves (*ʿabīd*) and freedmen (*mawālin*). Among them are, for

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[99] Cf. chapterisation in al-Jawzī, *Tanwīr* 31.
[100] Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 37.
[101] Cf. Ibid. 95-98. In this sequence of anecdotes, his acquisition of prophetic wisdom is narrated. Then various maxims elaborate on the related moral codex. Cf. Ibid. 95-109.
[102] Cf. Ibid. 115-116.
[103] Cf. Ibid.
[104] Cf. Ibid. 117.
[105] Cf. Ibid. 123-151.

example, Shuqrān al-Ḥabashī who fought at Badr and transmitted *ḥadīth*,[106] the mutilated Yasār al-Ḥabashī who used to clean and moisten the mosque,[107] as well as the prophet's nurse Umm Ayman who was later manumitted by Muḥammad and participated in both the *hijra* to Abyssinia and Medina.[108] Besides their contribution to the transmission of prophetic traditions, their actions exhibit a variety of mainly symbolic values within the environment of Muḥammad. In this realm sanctioned by the prophet, they served as slaves in the early Muslim community and were integrated on the basis of their laudable forebears to perform various functions. Nevertheless they retain their overall subaltern status throughout.

The last group of a few *shuʿarāʾ*, *ʿulamāʾ*, and *ṣūfīs* then demonstrates the possibility of professional careers. Figures such as the two poets Suḥaym and Abū Dulāma are praised for their literary qualities, underscored by excerpts from their poetry.[109] The ascetic Abū l-Khayr al-Tinānī's importance is demonstrated by his performance of miracles (*karāmāt*),[110] while the scholar ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ is characterized in multiple ways as famous for his inexhaustible knowledge.[111] Altogether, the figures of this last sub-group excel in their fields of knowledge and are acknowledged by their contemporaries. Their professional careers point towards a certain degree of social mobility in the later centuries of the formative period. These achievements build on the individual effort of each personality, simultaneously defying restrictions of social ascent based on ethnic prejudice.

However, this selection of successful professional careers is then finally contrasted with the case of an insurmountable ethno-cultural barrier. A hierarchical subaltern status of the Abyssinians is epitomized by the historical example of Kāfūr al-Ikhshīdhī, who is introduced as 'one of their leaders' (*min ruʾasāʾihim*).[112] Bought as a slave under the Ikhshīdhid dynasty of Egypt in the 10th century, he rose to the highest military ranks.[113] Later he declared himself sultan and reigned until his death a few years later. This *tarjama* is separated deliberately from the previous figures through al-Suyūṭī's remark on the exclusive provenance of his Abyssinians.[114] Al-Suyūṭī then concludes this biographical entry by quoting verses by the famous poet al-Mutanabbī, who lived and worked at the court of Kāfūr for some time. The first verses praise him:

> *I go to Kāfūr and abandon the others,*
> *For he, who approaches the sea, despises the little waters*
> *There comes a human who is an important man of his times*

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[106] Cf. al-Suyuti, *Rafʿ* 154-155.
[107] Cf. Ibid. 165.
[108] Cf. Ibid. 168-169.
[109] Cf. Ibid. 190-194.
[110] Cf. Ibid. 194-196.
[111] Cf. Ibid. 184-188.
[112] Cf. Ibid. 201-202.
[113] Cf. Ibid.
[114] Cf. Ibid 200.

> *He leaves the whites behind himself and even in the corner of his eyes*[115]

And the following lines ridicule him:

> *Who taught the castrated black a noble deed?*
> *Are his people the whites or rather his ancestors the hunted ones?*
> *And when even strong white people are incapable of good deeds*
> *How then should a castrated black be capable of them.*[116]

While the first section praises Kāfūr's unstoppable rise to political power, the verses that follow revile him as the progeny of "hunted" slaves. He is incapable of "good deeds" because of his blackness and thus condemned to serve and never to exert political power. His failure in the words of the poet functions as an an admonishing historical example (*ʿibra*) at the end of the biographical dictionary, which retrospectively underscores the subaltern role of the Abyssinians. Their main historical and social value is restricted to their primary function as slaves within a normative Islamic societal framework sanctioned by the prophet.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can link the different argumentative threads in order to identify possible social and cultural purposes of al-Suyūṭī's treatise and thus, how it made sense in his academic and societal context. On the one side, Rotter saw the sole motivation in the final *aḥādīth*, which are concerned with the legitimate treatment of concubines and slaves.[117] According to him, this was justified associatively through the laudable depiction of the servile and subaltern Abyssinians. On the other side, al-Suyūṭī clearly stated his intention in the preface to supersede his predecessor Ibn al-Jawzī. However, a more comprehensive reading discloses al-Suyūṭī's work as part of his broader scholarly concerns. The two notions of preservation and elaboration connect authoritative scholarly methods with a diverse compilatory reworking of religious traditions to generate the historical significance of the Abyssinians. Al-Suyūṭī's authorial voice is guided by the strict adherence to a sound transmission of religious traditions. Nevertheless, his agency is visible in the revitalization and arrangement of existing textual materials, a process that creates knowledge through the recalibration of historical and religious significance within a specialized monograph on the Abyssinians.

While a societal purpose that lauds them as worthy slaves might be read into the work, the full effect of al-Suyūṭī's work unfolds primarily on a normative academic level. The Abyssinians are treated as an aspect of a normative scholarly discourse and

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[115] Al-Suyūṭī, *Rafʿ* 202.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Cf. Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers* 16-17.

thereby canonized as a mosaic stone of the Islamic cultural heritage. Instead of Ibn al-Jawzī's rather straightforward positive religious dedication, al-Suyūṭī aimed at a meaningful historicisation within the parameters of an Islamic religious culture. The praiseworthy historical legacy of the Abyssinians was elaborated as part of a broader process of canonization, through the construction of an 'Abyssinian identity' that emerges as part of the memory of the early *umma* as well as their diachronic development as a discernible group within it. This differentiation of Islamic knowledge was meant to memorialize the intrinsic share of the Abyssinian community within the early Muslim community justifying their integration and paving the way for numerous individual contributions to its evolution. The Abyssinians are acknowledged in their symbolic performances and social role as slaves, but never transcend the predetermined normative prophetic framework.

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