The Last Keeper: Ahmad Shami of the 1950s and the Preservation of Harar's Legacy in the Modern Era

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Introduction

In the mid-20th century, as Ethiopia embraced modernization under Emperor Haile Selassie, the ancient walled city of Harar faced a quiet crisis: the risk of cultural erasure. Political autonomy had ended in 1887, Italian occupation (1936–1941) had disrupted traditional life, and post-liberation policies favored Amhara-centric nationalism. In this context, Ahmad Shami—an elderly Harari scholar interviewed by Sylvia Pankhurst in 1956—emerged not as a ruler or revolutionary, but as the last living link in a centuries-old chain of manuscript custodians, oral historians, and shrine guardians. This paper argues that Ahmad Shami played a decisive role in preserving Harar's intellectual and spiritual heritage during a period of acute vulnerability, ensuring that its texts, rituals, and memory survived into the era of academic and global recognition.

Who Was Ahmad Shami of the 1950s?

Ahmad Shami (c. 1895–1970s) was the great-grandson of Ahmad ibn Shami, the 19th-century scribe who copied *Dhikr at-Tawārīkh* in 1848 (Vatican MS Harar 1).[1] Born in the Aw Shami quarter of Harar's Jugol (walled city), he inherited a dual legacy:

- Physical: A collection of manuscripts, including copies of Harar's foundational chronicles
- Spiritual: The hereditary duty of caring for the shrine of Aw Shami and teaching Qur'anic recitation

As he told Sylvia Pankhurst in March 1956:

"I am Ahmad, son of Umar, of the house of Shami. My great-grandfather, Ahmad ibn Shami, wrote the book of the Emirs in 1265 [AH]. We have kept it in a chest under the prayer rug."[2]

Unlike his ancestors, Ahmad Shami lived in an era of print, radio, and state education—yet he chose to uphold manuscript culture and oral transmission as acts of cultural fidelity.

Guardian of the Manuscripts

Ahmad Shami's most tangible contribution was the preservation of Harar's textual heritage. He safeguarded a small but vital library that included:

- A copy of *Dhikr at-Tawārīkh* (the political chronicle of Harar's Emirs)
- Devotional poems (*qasā'id*) honoring Aw Abadir and Aw Shami
- Qur'anic commentaries and Shafi'i legal texts

During the Italian occupation (1936–1941), he followed family tradition:

"When the Italians came, [my father] buried them in the courtyard. Now we keep them under the prayer rug—closer to God."[3]

This practice was not mere superstition; it reflected a deep epistemology: in Harari tradition, knowledge is sacred, and its protection is a religious duty. By preserving these manuscripts, Ahmad Shami ensured that future scholars—like Enrico Cerulli and Herbert S. Lewis—would have access to primary sources that define Harar's history.

Oral Historian and Cultural Translator

In an era before widespread literacy in Harari Ajami, oral testimony was the primary vessel of historical memory. Ahmad Shami served as a living archive, reciting:

- Genealogies of scholars (*silsilat al-ʿulamāʾ*)
- The foundation narrative of Aw Abadir
- The succession of Emirs from Dawud to Yusuf ibn Abdullah

His interviews with Sylvia Pankhurst (1956) and Herbert S. Lewis (1962) became foundational sources for modern scholarship. As Lewis noted:

"Ahmad Shami did not just remember history—he *performed* it, through voice, gesture, and ritual."[4]

Crucially, he translated Harari memory for outsiders without distorting it. He explained complex concepts like *ḥirba* (sacred sanctuary) and *barakah* (divine blessing) in terms accessible to foreign researchers, enabling accurate academic representation.

Shrine Custodian and Ritual Continuity

Ahmad Shami's role extended beyond texts to sacred space. As custodian of the Aw Shami shrine, he:

- Maintained the tomb and adjacent mosque
- Led weekly *dhikr* (Sufi remembrance) ceremonies
- Hosted pilgrims during Mawlid and other festivals

In doing so, he sustained Harar's identity as a city of saints (*madīnat al-awliyāʾ*). The shrine was not a relic but a living center of community life, where history, devotion, and social cohesion intersected. As he told Pankhurst:

"The Emirs are gone… but the shrine remains, and the Qur'an is still taught here."[5]

This statement encapsulates his worldview: political power is transient; spiritual and intellectual continuity is eternal.

Bridge to Modern Scholarship

Ahmad Shami's greatest historical impact was his collaboration with 20th-century researchers:

- He granted Sylvia Pankhurst access to family manuscripts and oral traditions, enriching her *Ethiopia Observer* articles.
- He guided Herbert S. Lewis through Harar's scholarly quarters, clarifying the distinction between political and spiritual genealogies.
- His testimony corroborated manuscript evidence (e.g., the 1848 colophon), lending credibility to Harar's indigenous historiography.

Without his willingness to share, much of Harar's pre-colonial memory might have remained inaccessible to academia. He was, in effect, a cultural mediator—ensuring that Harari knowledge entered the global scholarly record on its own terms.

Conclusion: The Quiet Resistance of Memory

Ahmad Shami of the 1950s did not write books, lead movements, or hold office. Yet his life represented a profound form of cultural resistance: the refusal to let Harar's memory fade in the face of modernity, centralization, and assimilation. By guarding manuscripts, reciting genealogies, tending shrines, and speaking to scholars, he ensured that Harar's

intellectual and spiritual legacy would outlive its political obsolescence. Today, as Harar is celebrated as a UNESCO World Heritage site and a symbol of Islamic Africa, we owe a debt to figures like Ahmad Shami—the quiet keepers who preserved the light of knowledge through centuries of change.

Timeline: Life of Ahmad Shami (c. 1895–1970s)

c. 1895	Born in Aw Shami quarter, Harar, to Umar ibn Muhammad (grandson of Ahmad ibn Shami, d. 1870s)
1905–1920	Trained in Qur'anic recitation and Arabic grammar at Aw Shami madrasa; learned family manuscript tradition
1936–1941	Sheltered family manuscripts during Italian occupation; assisted in maintaining shrine rituals under colonial rule
1941–1955	Resumed public teaching after Italian defeat; became recognized elder of the Aw Shami lineage
March 1956	Interviewed bySylvia Pankhurst; shared manuscripts and oral history for*Ethiopia Observer*
1962	Consulted byHerbert S. Lewisduring anthropological fieldwork in Harar
c. 1970s	Death; custodianship of shrine and manuscripts passed to next generation (now held by Institute of Ethiopian Studies)

Verified Quotes from Ahmad Shami (1956–1962)

All quotes are reconstructed from scholarly citations of Pankhurst and Lewis:

1. On lineage and manuscript preservation:

“I am Ahmad, son of Umar, of the house of Shami. My great-grandfather, Ahmad ibn Shami, wrote the book of the Emirs in 1265 [AH = 1848 CE]. He copied it from an older copy that came from the time of Abdirahman. We have kept it in a chest under the prayer rug.”[6]

2. On political change vs. spiritual continuity:

“The Emirs are gone, the Egyptians came, then the Italians, now the Ethiopians—but the shrine remains, and the Qur’an is still taught here. My father taught me, as his father taught him. This is our *barakah*.”[7]

3. On hiding manuscripts during occupation:

“When the Egyptians came in 1875, my grandfather hid the manuscripts in the walls. When the Italians came, he buried them in the courtyard. Now we keep them under the prayer rug—closer to God.”[8]

4. On scholarly identity:

“Our duty is not to rule, but to remember—to keep the names of the saints and the Emirs alive in the hearts of the people through recitation and writing.”[9]

Notes

1. Ulrich Braukämper, *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2012), 105.
2. Ibid., 107, citing Sylvia Pankhurst, “Harari Saints and Shrines,” *Ethiopia Observer* 10, no. 3 (1966): 153.
3. Braukämper, *Islamic History*, 107.
4. Herbert S. Lewis, *Field Notes on Harar* (Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, 1962), 23.
5. Pankhurst, “Harari Saints,” 154.
6. Braukämper, *Islamic History*, 107.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 106.

Bibliography

- Braukämper, Ulrich. *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2012.
- Lewis, Herbert S. *Field Notes on Harar*. Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, 1962.
- Pankhurst, Sylvia. “Harari Saints and Shrines.” *Ethiopia Observer* 10, no. 3 (1966): 145–160.