Repositório ISCTE-IUL

1. A Palace for the Hairy King – An Ethiopian Political and Religious Riddle

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This chapter proposes to revise the strict distinction between materiality and immateriality in the consideration of the intersections between archaeological evidence, written documentation and oral sources in the study of the of sixteenth–seventeenth century Ethiopia. It traces the meaning of an enigmatic lead offered by Amhara and Agäw oral historical legends that refer to the building of royal palaces in the Gondär region, Northern Ethiopia, and the complex political and religious tensions the region witnessed at the time. By considering the narrative trope of the lascivious hairy king who doubles as an apostate of the established Christian Orthodox faith, it analyses the dynamics of othering and assimilating local communities in the context of the renewal of state power in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia / Ethiopia.

On the Fervours of Classification

One recurring point of discord between historians, anthropologists and literary theorists is the varying status and function each of these disciplines tends to give to popular oral traditions. Such dissent originates naturally from the difference in approaches and in focuses about realities whose boundaries are frequently less rigid and static than the disciplinary perspectives deem them to be. Their relation to written sources and to material evidence is complex and the links unclear. Still, to discard them or to reduce them to mere appendages may be a needless self-harm. Rather than looking at oral traditions simply as subsidiary historical sources, I propose here to interpret them as narrative productions whose interplay with written and physical ones needs not to devalue its status neither as historical source nor as collective mental creation. That is not to say that I propose to savage history but that I simply try to be cautious (in the Hayden White manner; White 1985, 274–275) when vying to establish historical facts by weaving through such narrative productions. It follows from this that I wouldn't favour the worn-out dialogic opposition between what is supposed to pertain to "myth" versus what belongs to "history". In any case, I vow to limit the scope of my reflexions to the particular Ethiopian context, unhindered by any ambition of dwelling in generalising propositions.

Regarding the concept and topic of "material culture", again as may be applied to in the specific Ethiopian context, I gather that establishing what "we" mean by this notion goes to the heart of the matter of the whole issue of interreligious and intercommunity relations in the period (fifteenth–

seventeenth century) and place (Northern Ethiopia) I'm concerned with. When one considers slicing through a given subject using a strict categorical distinction between its "materiality" versus its "immateriality" (or as is now more fashionable to say, "intangibility"), one should be aware of the imposed semantic limitations of such procedure (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 60; Chiang 2018 passim; Ramos 2009, 29; 1999, 61–63). It seems to me that when the topic of a research is the understanding of the mental framework that underlies the consistence of narrative productions – and we can justly admit that an architectural entity can be considered as such, albeit one of a very particular kind, we should acknowledge the peculiarities of the context of their production.

To clarify my meaning, here is one anecdotical example of what I mean by this: the simple question about the age of a particular physical structure – such as a church or a palace – can easily become an instance of misunderstanding between Ethiopian informants and Western enquirers, inasmuch as what is perceived as material evidence by one doesn't match what the other expects it to be;[1] a building that was for the latter obviously erected in 1970, for instance, is dated from the ninth century by the former – as for him / her it's the sacrifice that rendered the place sacred that matters as the founding date, not the erected physical structure. This kind in mis-interaction can have perverse effects: based on the locally accepted wisdom of Western-based dating, one can, for instance, find a plaque on the roadside in Northern Amhara region pointing to the castle of Gubaʾe, in Guzara (south of Gondär), indicating that it was built by order of King Śärṣä Dəngəl (mid-sixteenth century), although it was most probably built a century later; although there is textual evidence that that king had established his *katama* (royal camp) there (Conti-Rossini 1961, 50; 2001, 269; Boavida et al 2011a, 207; 2011b, 377), even if without mentioning the existence of a castle structure, Western experts relied on local oral traditions and associated the king with the palace as a material entity,[2] thereby reinforcing Ethiopians' views on the castle's antiquity and, what's more important, of the South-North direction of the legendary travels of Abyssinian royal power in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries in search of the suitable location to establish the New Jerusalem that in the end was to be the city of Gondär – a locally well-known legend known as the *Go* prophecy that links a series of symbolically important sites: *Go*-zara, *Go*-rgora, *Go*-mangé, *Go*-ndar (Pollera 1936; Ramos 2018a, 137).

One mustn't ignore the epistemological underpinnings of religious ideas either. I'd argue (that is, I've argued in previous texts; see Ramos 2009, 293–296; 2004, 54–55) that what one tends to perceive as Miaphysitism in Ethiopia goes much beyond a simple religious creed, that which refuses the Chalcedonic doctrine of the double nature of Christ, in the sense that it signals a cultural philosophy that to a great extent overrides and blurs the Western dualist concepts that lie at the source of the distinction between what is "material" and what is "immaterial". To a certain extent, the use of Western-based borders between religious adherences (or ethnic identities, for that matter) to fashion the understanding of intra- and interfaith relations in Ethiopia need to be treated with extreme caution (see Ficquet 2006;

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[1] More generally on the conundrums of heritage and memory, see Smith 2006, 58–59, 285.
[2] See, for instance, Quirin 1979, 243; Conti-Rossini, 1961, I, 51; II,7–8, 31, 35, 60, 63, 132.

Hussein Ahmed 2001; Kaplan 2004). This means that such cultural philosophy is an important common substratum whereupon different religious doctrines, practices and identities have flourished, diverged but also met throughout Ethiopian history, fashioning them in ways irreconcilable with external perceptual views. This has held true for Ethiopian Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, and in many instances has fostered tensions with their non-Ethiopian counterparts.

One final point of order relating to the specificity of working with oral materials in connection with written and material sources: it's worth taking heed of anthropologist Maurice Bloch's advice on the traps of what he refers to as "folk psychology" during the researcher's oral interactions in the field (Bloch 1998, 16). The researcher's questions betray a kind of verbal knowledge to which the informant tries to adhere by producing inferred prepositions and speculations that may be quite distant from his / her own knowledge system. Such answers are reinterpretations of what frequently needs not to be interpreted at all in an everyday basis. Therein lies a danger of delusional absurdity: the researcher's enthusiastic trust in the authenticity of oral traditions needs to be continuously checked.

On the Dangers of Essentialisation

The when and the how the three religions of the Book arrived in Ethiopia lies outside the scope of this essay, which is primarily concerned with the interaction between oral memories, written sources and material culture, and the way this interaction may somehow enlighten Jewish-Christian relations in the Ethiopian context. The general historical framework here is that of the dynamic interplay between political-military conquest and religious proselytising as concurring faces of the expansion of the traditional state power identified as the Abyssinian Christian kingdom, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, when it first reached, and attempted to dominate and convert the Agäw-speaking peoples inhabiting the North-western mountainous regions bordering the planes of present-day Sudan (Tamrat 1988, 13–14). Although occurrences of the word *ayhud* in Ethiopian texts occur from earlier periods, only from the sixteenth century onwards are Agäw groups, namely the Betä Ǝsraʾel (also referred to as Fälaša), identified as *ayhud*. Steven Kaplan very convincingly shows that *ayhud* gains in being understood as an "indigenous category" covering a semantic reality that bears little or no semblance with Jewish religion and ethnicity. In a variety of ancient Ethiopian textual instances where the word surfaces, it is used with political intentions to refer to whomever is targeted as a dissident or adversary, or whose (Christian) faith is either questioned or viewed as heretic (Kaplan 1992, 214–215; 1995, 54 ff).[3] He moreover argues that, given the weight of the Old Testament in Ethiopian religious and ritual practices, Jewish-Christian relations are better understood as a continuum than by means of a categorial dual opposition (Kaplan 1992, 213).

Today, the autochthonous origin of the Betä Ǝsraʾel seems indisputable. The trope of the "lost tribe of Israel" must be understood as a literary-political concoction originating in the perceptions of

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[3] On the plethora of terms that refer to the "heretic other" in Ethiopian literary sources, see Dege-Müller 2018, 257–262.

Western travellers (Jewish and otherwise) to the region in the nineteenth century, who opted to take at face value Betä Ǝsraʾel's self-ascribed claim to an Israelite (not Jewish) ancestry (Kaplan 1993, 649–651; Shelemay 1986).[4] Such claim is in fact a local variation of the overarching mythical ancestry of Abyssinian Christians as the product of a mix between the indigenous population and foreign elements arriving from Israel during the reign of King Solomon. As Jon Abbink and James Quirin make it clear, the ethnogenesis of the Betä Ǝsraʾel was a counter-ideological reaction of part of the Agäw populations to the othering practiced by the hegemonic Amharas-Abyssinians, as a result of the arrival of Christian centralised power in the region, from the fifteenth century onwards (Abbink 1990, 400–401, 426 ff; Quirin 1979, 239–242; 1993, 301–303). Such othering was clearly reinforced and reshaped by the activist presence of Western missionaries in the next centuries: first by the Catholic Jesuits in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, then by Protestant missionaries, from the seventeenth century onwards, and finally by Western Jewish *maskillim* travellers, in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries. Against this background, it is worth noting that the birth and spread of both "fundamentalist" and "reformist" sects in sixteenth–seventeenth centuries Northern Ethiopia correlate with the genesis of a "Jewish" counter-ideology among the Agäw and their clash against the Abyssinian Kingdom; also noteworthy is the fact that their final defeat and submission came at the hands of the king who most visibly flirted with Western Catholicism: King Susǝnyos (reigned from 1606 to 1632) (Quirin 1979, 242–243, 76; Abbink 1990, 410).

In an article published in 2000, in the *Annales d'Éthiopie*, French historian Bertrand Hirsch (2000) sets out to critically review a book edited by Bernard Nantet and Édith Ochs (*À la découverte des Falasha. Le voyage de Joseph Halévy en Abyssinie, 1867*). There, the reviewer remarks that Halévy, who had been sent to Ethiopia by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* to inquire about the Betä Ǝsraʾel populations there, resorted to Flavius Josephus' *Wars of the Jews* to interpret and embellish the episodes of the *Chronicle of King Śärṣä Dǝngǝl* that depict what he himself calls *Sarsa Dengel's War on the Falasha*. Halévy stresses the "Masada" trope to produce a mirrored reading of the sixteenth century (Christian) chronicler's narrative of the first recorded sustained military campaign of the Ethiopian kingdom against the populations of the Sǝmen Mountains, north of Gondär. Hirsch concurrently notes that Halévy's reworking of the original text was facilitated by the possible inspiration, by the sixteenth century writer, on a Geʿez version of *Yossippon* (albeit one that inverts Josephus' tone by stressing the Solomonic legitimacy right of the Christians to battle the heretics; Hirsch 2000, 375–376).

This work of critical analysis of the pseudo-historiographic nature of Halévy's narrative draws attention to the need of grounding our assertions in such a way that we avoid falling into argumentation traps. Instead of searching for conjunctures relating to the origins of the Betä Ǝsraʾel, it is perhaps more

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[4] As Steven Kaplan notes: "In the Ethiopian historical context *ayhudawi* ("Jew") was a pejorative term applied to someone one wished to label as heretic or apostate. While "Israelites" were good, "Jews" were without exception bad […]. Even more than the frequently cited Falasha *ayhud* ("Jews") was highly negative label that no group would apply to itself. Moreover prior to the second half of the nineteenth century the Beta Israel did not speak of themselves as Jews" (Kaplan 1993, 653).

relevant to try to understand the ideological framework that addresses religious and national ("ethnic") diversity within an historical-cosmological set of narratives, as Jon Abbink does in his "Enigma of the Beta Esra'el Ethnogenesis". This means, of course, that, in-as-much as the *Mahabharata* epic is the coda[5] for historical narratives in many parts of India, the body of the *Kebra Nagast* or *Glory of Kings* (in conjunction with the biblical texts) has frequently served the same goal in Ethiopia (Kaplan and Solomon 2002, 384, 388–390; Hecht 1979; Levine 1975; Spencer 1979). Therefore, an understanding of that framework is essential to understand the riddles that Ethiopian written and oral historiography present to the interpreter.

One quick word on the founding narrative that is the *Kebra Nagast*: it is a heterogenous corpus of texts whose earliest compilation dates from the fourteenth century (Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001, 65), wherein we find a long narrative that recounts in detail the voyage of Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, to Jerusalem with offerings to Solomon, as the temple was being built, thus embellishing the brief and dry biblical references (1 Kings 10:2). "Never again came such an abundance of spices" (1 Kings 10: 2 and 10:10; 2 Chronicles 9:1–9);[6] once at his palace, she is tricked by him and returns to Ethiopia pregnant with Menelik, Solomon's firstborn child. As the heir of both thrones comes of age, he visits his father and is told he is to stay in Jerusalem and inherit the Israelite throne. But he prefers to return to Ethiopia with the firstborns of the twelve tribes and found the kingdom of Israel there – and for this, they steal the Ark of the Covenant; Solomon pursues them, but the Angel of God helps them cross the Red Sea by air; Solomon then marries the daughter of the Pharaoh, and God chooses the Ethiopians to be His true elected people.

Jon Abbink has elegantly run through this mythical framework, showing how groups "*later* to be called Falasha or Beta Esra'el" (my emphasis) developed their set of beliefs, symbolism, ideas of political opposition and ritual practices under the direct influence of (Amhara) Christian ("fundamentalist") dissidents, prosecuted by ("reformist") Abyssinian kings mainly from the fifteenth century onwards (Abbink 1990, 403). He goes on to explain how "the two groups, evincing historic rivalry, had a kind of standing dispute about the interpretation of Ethiopian destiny and religious orthodoxy within the same body of mytho-legends" (Abbink 1990, 420). This they did by appropriating Geʿez, the liturgical language of the Christian Amhara and Təgrayans, by rewriting received Christian texts, and by operating a transformation on their own version of the *Kebra Nagast*, in order to legitimise their ancestral precedence in the territory "as the true Israelites, as inheritors of ancient traditions". That is, as Cushitic-speaking (!) descendants of the Israelite companions of Menelik, the legitimate heir of the Davidian line of kings.

In the same article, Jon Abbink also proposes to reinterpret the essentiality of the Betä Ǝsraʾel as a Jewish community whose identity has been historically fashioned in opposition to mainstream

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[5] In the sense given by Northrop Frye (1982) to the notion of "great code".
[6] See Beylot 2008; for a fuller discussion of the various Middle Eastern and Mediterranean versions of the legend: Beylot 2004; Lassner 1993; Shahid 1976; for content studies of the Ethiopian versions, see Hecht 1979; Levine 1975; Richelle 2012; Spencer 1979.

Ethiopian Christianity. He follows an interesting path – that of stressing their connection with a neighbouring group, commonly described as "Pagan-Hebraic": the Qəmant (see Gamst 1969). Both are speakers of close varieties of Agäw, a Cushitic group of languages from Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea; notwithstanding their divergent economies (and publicly held doctrine), their cosmology, ritual practices, kinship terminology, political and religious organisation are closely related and intertwined (Abbink 1990, 439). Later, James Quirin (1998) published a complementary article, again drawing attention to their commonalities and to their diverging response to the Abyssinians (Amharas and Təgrayans, that is). Quirin declares that:

> The Agaw who *became* Kemant and Beta Israel created their identities and their histories through differential responses to pressures from the Ethiopian state and Abyssinian culture over at least a six-hundred-year period. The dominant response of *ayhud*-Falasha-Beta Israel was to resist incursions by every means possible: refusing to pay tribute, fighting desperately, developing a new economic base, segregating themselves and reinforcing their religious distinctiveness and sense of moral superiority. […] The less well-known case of Kemant suggests they also did all they could to protect their identity and integrity, but did so by co-operating with the new pressures. Despite their relatively more accommodationist actions, Kemant in general were no more interested in total assimilation than were Beta Israel (Quirin 1998, 218).

Quirin concludes his text with a warning against "the absurdities of oversimplified views of either unilinear assimilation or unilateral primordialism" in analysing processes of identity formation and maintenance (Quirin 1998, 218).

On the Musings of Appropriation

Having begun my research in the late 1990s, and restricting it to the Northern Ethiopian context, my interactions with Betä Ǝsraʾel (in the Gondär city area) were sporadic and the stories collected by the few that had not left for Israel in the 1980s (for instance, because they were not "eligible" to migrate, as was the case of the so-called *Fälaš mura*) added little to the body of historical legends I've been collecting. This would be the sort of stories they'd tell:

> All Falasha are from Israel, originally, and arrived in Ethiopia through Egypt. We are called Negede Falasha and Negede Qemant. The Qemant are Jews that converted to Christianity. Negede Felasha is the label that others give us. They say we eat people, and we are *buda* [people who cast the evil eye], we eat blood, and we change into hyenas. The Bilen Agaws are Tigrinyan. They now speak Tigrinya, and some are Christian, but still, they share the *karra* [sacrificial knife] with us. Our forefathers built the castles in Fasil Gimb. They were

living in the Simien Mountains and, after they were defeated by Susenyos, they were invited by his son Fasiladas to Gondar, to build and to fight the Oromo (Ramos 2018a, 169).

The mytho-historical views expressed in such kind of testimonies simply confirm much of the published oral traditions originating from Betä Ǝsraʾel informants, either in Ethiopia or in Israel (Kaplan 2006; Quirin 1988). Still, as Quirin notes, whereas the Qəmant readily admit their connections to the Betä Ǝsraʾel, the opposite often not the case – possibly because such kind of admission would negatively impinge on the claims to Jewishness upon which migration to Israel has been based.

I was particularly interested in the claim by local Betä Ǝsraʾel that they intervened in the construction of the royal compound at the time of King Fasilädäs, since it more or less coincided with the Qəmants' claims. These are the words of a *šəmagəlle* (elder) of the Qəmant community in Azäzo:

> The Qemant were brought from Egypt by Fasiladas – who was a Qemant himself – to build the Azazo palace; the king made the Qemant workers shave off all their body hair to mix with eggs and water in order to make the *norra* [mortar] used in the building work (Ramos 2018a: 164).[7]

I shall come back to this testimony. First, let me say that this minority group, contrary to the Betä Ǝsraʾel, hasn't stopped existing as a socially recognisable community in the mental and spatial economy of Gondär. Although rural exodus and overseas migration took a heavy toll on the community, as it did generally in all the region, Qəmant have succeeded, particularly in recent years, to assert their relative identity in the city as one of the original, even if dispossessed, founders. Key to their survival strategy – as is recognised by Quirin and Abbink – was their chameleonic adaptation and accommodation to the hegemonic Abyssinians. In fact, as I heard frequently, "Qəmant means 'we are like you'. We don't have evil eye [*buda*]." Qəmant may thus means, literally, to become invisible, to keep traditions and beliefs to themselves, even though intermarriage with Amharas and adhesion to Orthodox Christianity is now common (especially since the mid-nineteenth century, when Qəmant women dropped the use of their distinctive large wooden earrings; Quirin 1998, 215).[8]

One of the figureheads of the Qəmant identity revival in Gondär – as one of the three components of the city's old social body (Amhara, Tigrynia and Qəmant, or should we say Agäw) – told me the following story:

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[7] Quirin (1998, 207) reports a Qəmant oral tradition dating back to the eighteenth century that states that they had been baptised by King Fasilädäs.

[8] On the quest for autonomy within the Amhara regional state that led to the establishment in 2015, by the Ethiopian federal government, of a self-administrative zone for the Qəmant community in West Gondär, and on how the dynamics of cultural identity became enmeshed with regional and national politics, giving rise to a simmering conflict with the Amhara, see Yeshiwas Degu 2014.

When King Fasiladas became king, he heard that on top of Gondar Mountain there was a sacred place where the Qemants held their traditional water healing ceremonies. It was an important *anzaymerkum* ['sacred spring'] with forty-four holes, where Noah took refuge during the Flood because God had told him, 'Go and live near the River Gehon [Nile]', and that is where he is buried. The king met with the Orthodox priests, who wanted to build a church on the *anzaymerkum*.

The king summoned the four *womberoch* [religious and political leaders] of the four Qemant tribes of Gondar and promised them he would maintain access to the spring, safeguard their religious freedom and their political and legal autonomy, and allow them to continue speaking their own language in return for ceding to him a place in the valley where he could build a pool for bathing [the so-called 'baths of Fasiladas', which replicate Susenyos's construction in Azezo]. The Qemant chiefs also agreed that the farmers would start paying tribute to the king and that Christians could settle in Gondar, while the Qemant chiefs would keep control over the four roads leading out of the city.

But King Fasiladas did not honour the agreement made with the four Qemant tribal chiefs and seized the holy place to build his palace and persecuted the Qemants, doing them terrible ills. It is said he used to lay them on the ground and grind flour on their backs and, when there was no more flour to grind, he would ask them, 'Ehele yefechew neber?' ['What are you doing there (lying on the ground)?]. (Ramos 2018a, 169–170)

Many oral legends told in Gondär area involve King Fasilädäs, who is also given a prominent place in the standard Ethiopian nationalist historiography. He is recurrently depicted as the "restorer of the Orthodox faith" (after the reckless Catholic adventure of his father), the founder of modern Ethiopia's first fixed capital (Gondär, that is) and the builder of Fasil Gəmb there, a fortified palace that stands as one of the major monumental expressions of the country's nationhood. His modernising urban project is also depicted as ecumenical, in the sense that Gondär not only is a sacred city for Christians, with its 44 churches built upon the 44 water springs held sacred by the Agäw (see Martínez d'Alòs-Moner and Sahile 2016), but was also explicitly populated by Muslims, Betä Ǝsraʾel and Qəmant, from its beginnings.

It's quite interesting that Oromos rarely feature in either oral or written early documents as dwellers of Gondär, but Muslims, Betä Ǝsraʾel and Qəmant do. The former were still at war with the Abyssinians whereas the latter were by then being integrated in the political-social fabric of the Kingdom.[9] Fasilädäs has been depicted by historians as a shrewd politician who, in a troubled period and pressed to ward off his rivals (namely his brother Gälawdewos), looked for ways to reconcile royal power with the divided Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, and the formerly rebellious Betä

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[9] On the complexities of the autonomic and integrative process that marked the consolidation of the Oromo presence in the southern marches of the Christian kingdom, see Mohammed Hassen 1990, 71–82.

Ǝsraʾel (Wion 2004; 2012, 213 ff). Externally, he abandoned previous efforts towards partnering with Western allies or give allegiance to Rome (and Goa) and instead leaned towards a political (and commercial) dialogue with the Yemeni rulers (Van Donzel 1979).[10]

One of the features of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia was the systemic chronicling of kings' lives. Strangely enough, Fasilädäs, for all his relevance in Ethiopia's national history and critically for the founding of Gondär, is an exception in this, as there is not an extant written chronicle of his life and deeds (Kropp 1986; Wion 2012, 215–217). So, in a context so reliant upon the memorial powers of the written word, much of the knowledge about the critical period of the mid-seventeenth century comes from oral sources (the expulsion of the Catholic missionaries of course meant the suspension of their prolific literary and documental flow) and from the archaeological-architectural evidence (Anfray 1980–1; Pennec 2003, 139 ff; Fernandez et al 2017).

Let me note in passing that the Jesuit presence in the kingdom, from 1555 to 1633, and the eventual conversion of King Susǝnyos (Fasilädäs' father) to Catholicism was disruptive in a wide range of ways: the declaration of obedience of the king to Rome was accompanied by a decree interdicting the Sabbath and circumcision of the Christian populations; Jesuits preferred giving mass in Amharic rather than Geʿez, and introduced the first *creeds* in Amharic; obedience to Rome also meant to imply a doctrinal revolution in Ethiopian Christology, namely the imposition of the Chalcedonic formula of the double nature of Jesus; politically, all these novelties pitched royal power against the Church – or at least, to parts of it –, and were conceived as part of a reformist and integrative drive. For the Jesuit missionaries, faithful to the spirit of the Catholic Counterreformation, it was of primordial importance to extirpate all traces of heretic, pro-Mosaic, "Jewishness" from Ethiopian Orthodoxy and so they became instrumental in the widening of the religious gaps and splits in the country, that indirectly furthered the crystallising of a separate "Jewish" identity of the Betä Ǝsraʾel, just as they were drawn to integrate the social fabric of the "New Jerusalem" (Gondär).

Against the backdrop of this very troubled period, a kaleidoscope of oral legends developed and was kept by a large range of local communities in Gondär area (mainly Amhara and Agäw) with different religious views (Ramos 2018a, 119 ff). The result is an interesting dialogic situation that has prevented the monopoly of a hegemonic discourse on the history of Gondär. Through them, the various groups inserted themselves in the narrative, asserting their claims to the city grounds and, crucially, to the ownership of the physical structures that symbolise the apocalyptical character of the Abyssinian kingship (namely by the novel introduction of a square plan in palatial buildings, as opposed to the round tents of the previous roving kings). Be them Betä Ǝsraʾel, Qǝmant, Christian or Muslim, they all claim to have participated in building these structures – both by forging, owning, using or trading the building tools, and by mystically participating in the actual building material (their bones and hair were used to

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[10] Still, Manfred Kropp's (1984) analysis of the presence of the Protestant missionary Peter Heyling in Fasilädäs' court must be taken into account.

make the secret *norra* [mortar; a material exclusive to royal buildings]) and inspiring the *ənqulal* [egg-shaped towers] of the castle(s) (Ramos 2018a, 148, 157, 164, 174–175, 178–180; 2018b).

Either the result of a theft (in the Agäw perspective) or of miraculous intervention (in the Amhara Christian, but also in the Muslim, perspective; Ramos 2018a, 178–180), the erection of the castle (and the initial sacralisation of the space through the sacrifice of a buffalo) is made to symbolise much more than the so-called restoration of the Orthodox faith in Ethiopia. The backbone of the stories is the following: just as his father Susənyos, Fasilädäs was sexually lascivious; because he was ashamed of being very hairy, like his father, he would kill the women he would have sex with; and he also inherited Susənyos' building passion. But either because of lustfulness (towards the female *barya*, pagan slaves), because of his breach of contract (with the Agäw), or due to his illegal marriage (to a Roman princess), the Gondär castle couldn't be finished, as its towers kept falling apart (Pollera 1936, 76 ff; Ramos 2018a, 171).

One of the versions tells that Susənyos had agreed to have his son marry the daughter of the king of Rome, but as he died before she arrived in Ethiopia, Fasilädäs married her himself. This act led to a rebellion by the Orthodox priests which ended with Fasilädäs ordering the killing of 9,999 monks, whose blood tainted the rivers of Gondär red (a curious qualification for the "restorer of the Orthodoxy"; Ramos 2018a, 180–181; Kropp 1984, 245).[11] It was only after he was impelled to redeem his sins (by building Gondär's seven bridges connecting the city to the different communities around it; and/or the king's submission to a female saintly slave; and/or by building churches over the sacred water springs), that the castle was finally erected with the miraculous help of the Angel of God (Ramos 2018a, 172–173).

Many of the tropes present in these stories clearly echo those of the *Kebra Nagast* narrative: the concept of a hyper-exogamic marriage / union as source of dynastic foundation; the breach of contract and theft; the freakish hairiness of Ethiopian sovereigns (Belkis' hoof is changed into a hairy foot or leg in Ethiopian versions of the Queen of Sheba); the Roman princess (she marries Solomon and bears his second son, in the *Kebra Nagast*); the building of the temple / palace; the intervention of the Angel of God. As I noted earlier, stories such as these should not be either dismissed or given the diminished role of supporting historical sources. As popular productions that have survived until today through oral transmission, they echo both the model and tropes of the national epic of the *Kabra Nagast* and a variety of details that can be found in written hagiographic and historiographic sources.[12] In their diversity, they advance a common thread: that of a narrative that is both contested and agreed upon, about the foundation of a city where geographically, religiously and culturally distinct populations are brought into coexistence, under the symbolic aggregator that is the towering architecture of Abyssinian royalty.

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[11] The trope of the slaughter of the monks is likely a muted evocation of Fasilädäs' stance during the Christolological conflicts between "unionists" and "unctionists"; see Kindeneh Endeh 2014, 55; Kropp 1984, 245.
[12] On the centrality of oral traditions in Ethiopian society, see Wion 2012, 73 ff.

On the Anxieties of Assimilation

One final word about the *Go* prophetical legend, mentioned above. It may be that is a rarefied oral memory of a historical millenarian drive of the Abyssinian Christian kings[13] in the aftermath of the devastating Jihad war led by the Adalite emir Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (known in Ethiopia as Aḥmad Grañ) in the mid-sixteenth century, or else a *post ex facto* prophetic narrative forged to justify the consolidation of royal power in the North-western regions of the kingdom, or indeed both. Whatever the case, it is consistent with contemporary information about the south-north direction of the series of royal *katamas* that preceded the foundation of Gondär. But the architectural evidence that relates to the dating of palatial buildings seems to tell a much more muddled story. Monumental construction in stone and mortar was revived in the first decades of the seventeenth century, when King Susənyos, partnering with foreign missionaries and masons, led a feverish construction program around Lake Ṭana, the style and construction methods of these structures distinguishing his period from that of his successors. Recent archaeological excavations in Azäzo, a royal compound a few kilometres South of Gondär, have unearthed the foundations of his palace, similar to that he built in Dänqäz – Gomänge, (rectangular stone structures with locking quoins, and blue limestone masonry) and shown that it lay under the remnants of a later palace possibly built by his son Fasilädäs there (Fernandez et al. 2017, 56 ff), one which seems rather close to those of Gondär and Guzara, to the South (square stone structures cornered by cylindrical *ənqulal* towers, and masonry in red volcanic stone).

In the face of the lacunae of written sources in the so-called post-Jesuitic period, it is tempting to appeal to oral traditions that reiterate a south-north process of conquest marked by the establishment of royal compounds, even if material evidence seems rather to point to a south-north axis in the construction of palatial structures (during the reign of Susənyos) and *then* a successive north-south construction axis. Or it may be that the historiography of early Gondarine political and territorial dynamics has been tainted by Western notions of centre-periphery that may not readily apply to the Ethiopian case (Pennec and Toubkis 2004). Historians, be them Ethiopian or not, usually rely on a strict divide between the pre-Gondarine model wandering courts and the sedentary model centred in a fixed capital city projecting its (waning) power to the surrounding regions. But, as Hervé Pennec (2003, 203–220) aptly notes, historiographic and archaeological sources talk rather of a continuum than a divide, inasmuch as kings continued to affirm their hold on the territory through seasonal military campaigns that doubled as ritualised displays of state power. Hence, their cyclical return to the earlier royal encampments and the construction of palatial structures there.

In any case, oral traditions (and the later Ethiopian texts that refer to the period) seem less concerned with historical details than with making sense of deeply traumatic times and with stitching together a narrative capable of accommodating distinct groups and populations, while diabolising the memory of a sovereign who had committed the supreme heresy of converting to the "foreign" Catholic

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[13] On the importance of millenarism in late medieval Ethiopian Christianity, see Merid Wolde Aregay 1988; Krebs 2021, 220–224.

faith – stories abound of Susənyos' dead body being swallowed by the earth and dragged to Hell (Ramos 2018a, 144). His birth name had been given with clear prophetic tones (his namesake Saint Susənyos was a slayer of a female child-eating monster) but as he strayed from his destiny, his son Fasilädäs was given in the local legends the task of both doubling him (in sexual lust) and in mirroring him (in adherence to Orthodoxy). Little wonder, then, that Qəmant informants still today are adamant that they were masons for Fasilädäs and not for Susənyos, so to stress their allegiance to the accepted Orthodox Christian faith. After coming head-to-head with Abyssinian power, the Agäw began integrating in the new city: Betä Ǝsraʾel farmers became artisans and military, and Qəmant farmers became masons. In a period marked by both dissidence within Ethiopian Christianity (the long-standing doctrinal controversy born out of the brief presence of Catholicism, mainly between the Täwaḥədo and Qəbat followers; Getatchew Haile 1986; Kindeneh Endeg 2014, 48–51) and zealotry against other religions, Betä Ǝsraʾel and Muslims are progressively segregated from the Christian majority, in the urban texture of Gondär (Quirin 1979, 246; Trimingham 1952, 103). All the while, architectural replicas of the towering symbol of royal power that was Fasilädäs Gəmb began dotting the Southern route that had previously led the kings north to the emplacement of the city.

What I wish to posit here is that material evidence gains in not being untangled from dynamic narrative flows such as those expressed in oral historical legends. Listening to differing voices offers a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of physical structures as connectors of social and religious identities (Ramos 2018b, 36–37). And to understand the fluid way Ethiopians seem to approach religion (what Steven Kaplan referred as a continuum bridging religious adherences), the key is to investigate the common substratum – the so-called "factual beliefs", the "what goes without saying" cultural philosophy over which doctrinal divergences are carved (Bloch 1998, 23–25; Pouillon 1979, 50–51).

So, singling out discrete Jewish-Christian relations, as well as distinguishing between material and immaterial heritage, are procedures that risk mischaracterising complex and dynamic systems in context. A heuristic that relies heavily on (dualist) categorisations may not be the most convenient to approach the Ethiopian context, if we are to understand the nature of Jewish-Christian relations, and indeed, the role that material culture tropes play in the construction of mytho-historical narratives.

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