

“The Invention of a Mission: the Brief Establishment of a Portuguese Catholic Minority in Renaissance Ethiopia”,
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The Invention of a Mission:

The brief establishment of a Portuguese Catholic minority in renaissance Ethiopia

Like most concepts in the social sciences, the notion of cultural minority entails some degree of fallacious labelling. As Bertrand Russel frequently alerted his readers (Russel 1995, pp. 210-212), supposedly general analytical categories are, firstly and foremostly, linguistic categories and thus their semantic scope is always culturally determined. Apart from this epistemological reminder that conditions the validity of any discourse in the field of the social sciences, such a notion, ambiguous as it is (for it enmeshes demographical and ideological premises), may prove helpful in the apprehension of the domination structures, discourses and practices of sixteenth-seventeenth century Ethiopia.

In the Ethiopian context - and in the specific case here presented -, the consideration of the relations between cultural (and frequently demographical) minorities and the access of some social, ethnical, political, religious groups to a position of dominance, or their disempowerment, is an important key that gives intelligibility to the historical documentation, if not to the cultural-historical reality.

The tendentially contrasting terms "cultural minority" and "dominant group" are used here to refer to a specific national context. But it must be accepted that no clear-cut definitions can here be applied: in a country where there was never a clear demographically dominant group, many cultural minorities, have had historically strong pretensions to become culturally and socially dominant groups (the Jewish Falasha, the Tigrinean and Eritrean Christians, the Muslim from Adar, the Gala peoples, frequently opposed the Amhara Christians), and so it's never possible to assert that, when a specific group is said, in a particular set of documents, to exert a dominant role, or when it puts forward a dominant discourse, this necessarily reflects a dominant status on the level of social structure . On the other hand, one must bear in mind that when notions such as "dominant group" and "cultural minority" are used with one specific sense for the purpose of systematizing dominator-dominated relations within a "national context", this sense cannot be isolated from sometimes diverse senses at other social and cultural levels or contexts: for instance, Ethiopians historically like to think of themselves as a (somewhat harassed) minority both within the East-African and Semitic context, and thus as part of a Christian, historically and culturally dominant supra-national group; the Monophysite Ethiopians, and generally the Copts, thought and think of themselves as a

persecuted minority within Christianity; the Jesuit (referred to in this article), who seemed to have played a key role in Ethiopian imperial empowerment actions were to some extent a minority in Portuguese ecclesiastical and political life during the counter-reformation years (dominated by Dominican views), and their endeavours didn't meet with any substantial encouragement in Portugal and Portuguese India; the Portuguese foreigners were a demographical minority within the catholic community in Ethiopia even if their discourse can be interpreted as clearly dominant.

With these heuristic limitations in mind, one should note that the problem under consideration in this article may benefit from being considered within the framework of social empowerment and domination issues. But, in this case, a further theoretical constraint hangs above the present analysis: if one broadly accepts that, frequently, a dominated cultural minority can only be defined by the fact that it isn't yet or is no more a dominant cultural minority in a given context, then a basically oppositional perspective that doesn't take into account the common grounds or properties that consubstantiate a (tendentally cyclical) dominating-dominated relationship, seems to lack explanatory power, and can be replaced by a more general, if apparently less "objective", view (see Gomes da Silva 1989, p. 77 seq.).

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A year ago, in August 1995, the roof and all the stone arches of an imposing church, which stood on a deserted small peninsula that enters the lake T'ana in central Ethiopia, collapsed. With it were brought down the walls and every standing masonry work. Now, under the rubble of tons of cut stones, lie a quantity of decorative stone reliefs of Portuguese and Goan style of the early seventeenth century. Buried underneath lie also almost four whole centuries of abandon and oblivion that have besides touched the rest of the compound - the church actually adjoins a equally damaged royal palace of which only a tower still stands. Why, we could ask, would a fervently Christian power like the Ethiopian ruling ethnical group show such an evident and, in some ways, exceptional neglect towards a once major religious and political monument?

To answer this question is to shed some light onto one and a half centuries of a sometimes intense relationship between the Christian Ethiopians and the renaissance Portuguese involved in the project and movement of what the latter called the "Discoveries" - i.e. the early stages of European world expansion. In general terms, the documentation show us that, partially due to the ideological conditions that embodied this expansion, the limits of the will of mutual understanding between

culturally different communities could not be overcome; eventually, these limits caused such grave mutual misunderstandings that they quickened the cessation of that relationship.

It is true that, for a number of political, military, economic and even demographic conditions, the Portuguese overseas expansion in the Indian ocean was exhausted by the end of the sixteenth century (Boxer 1965; Cortes, 1985; Godinho 1990; Kammerer 1947). The Red Sea became inaccessible to the Portuguese ships and diplomatic and strategic interest in Ethiopia dwindled considerably. But the community of Portuguese migrants, their descendants - and the many catholic converts, some of mixed Portuguese-Ethiopian blood -, was active and seemed to have had social importance, at least until the end of the reign of the emperor (*Negusa Negast*) Susinyus, who died in 1632: like some of their most militant Copt opponents, the Catholic converts had in the Imperial family and circles their most important leaders (specially Susinyus' brother, the overlord Si'la Kristos); in the early seventeenth century, they "probably surpassed a hundred thousand" (Abir 1980, p. 221)(1). This emperor Susinyus was, in fact, the sovereign to whom the now derelict palace compound once belonged (Pereira 1892-1900, p. 239 seq.). Churches, palaces, castles, bridges, and civil constructions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries testify the relevance of Portuguese influence, even in castles of sovereigns who, like the Negus Fasiladas, were demonstrably hostile towards the Catholic minority.

We should bear in mind that, as eloquent as is the state of total abandon of the earlier mentioned church and palace in the Gorgora peninsula on lake Tana, so the fact that the presence of this minority, and the affairs of the Jesuits, is passed in almost complete silence in contemporary Ethiopian texts like the royal chronicle of Susinyus (Pereira 1892-1900), express a strong intention of obscuring part of the memories of this emperor's times. It is, then, through the eyes of the Portuguese migrants and travellers, and specifically in the letters and accounts of the Jesuit missionaries, that we must rely to try to reconstruct the history and purpose of this relationship: it is actually through the reading of the chronicles of military achievements, the study of Ethiopian architecture of Portuguese influence, and the analysis of the contemporary writings of the Jesuit missionaries - a special group with declared empowerment interests in the Ethiopian court -, that we can glimpse at the otherwise largely undocumented presence and evolution of a Catholic minority in a country where the Coptic Christian majority ruled over an ethnically and religiously diverse population. We shouldn't never-the-less forget that the vision these Catholic writers expressed of the Coptic Christians served, more than anything, to self-legitimize their own presence and identity as a specific group within Ethiopian society.

It seems certain that the Portuguese Catholic exerted a visible degree of influence in Ethiopian affairs: as military aides of the Copts against Somali and Galla-Oromo invaders, as artisans, masons and architects participating in an important monumental building effort, unparalleled in Ethiopia since the times of Za'ra Ia'qob (Ullendorf 1973:158). On another level, the coming of the Jesuits to Ethiopia, which occurred some fifty years after the entrance of the first Portuguese groups in the country, had a central inspiring objective: they attained at the conversion to the catholic faith of the Coptic emperor, the sovereign identified in Europe with the legendary king Prester John. Through intense politicking, that was finally achieved with his public baptism in 1625 (Telles, 1660, p. 312 seq.; M. Abir, 1980, p. 211 seq). One should note, though, that thirty years before, Za Dingil, one of Susinyus' predecessors, had already seriously considered a catholic conversion; as in Susinyus' case, his interest was primarily political and strategic, and didn't seem to correspond to any pressing religious issue, socially relevant in Ethiopia.

This ephemeral success of the Jesuit missionaries implied the (intended) forceful conversion of the Copts, and the simultaneous interdiction, in a Susinyus' imperial decree, of the age-old liturgical Monophysite practices and doctrines (Abir 1980, pp. 221-222; Coulbeaux 1929, pp. 209-213). According to Jesuit accounts, Susinyus adopted Catholicism and died a baptized catholic. But, by then, the country was plunged in a raging civil and religious war that was brought to a close shortly after the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia and Eritrea. In 1634, the documented presence of the Catholic minority came to a sudden and abrupt end - still, it is more than likely that a unknown number of Portuguese stayed on, as traders and masons, for it was only with Yohannes I, the grand-son of Susinyus, that the "Franks" - *ferenji*, i.e., the Portuguese - were forced to join the Monophysite Church (Ullendorf 1973, p. 76).

In Susinyus' royal chronicle, the absence of information concerning the Portuguese and Jesuit influence in his court (and the various religious disputes), might be, in some way, explained by the assumption that this chronicle was rewritten during his successor's reign - Fasiladas. This was now a time of very strong and negative reaction against the catholic community and the Jesuit missionary group. It was this reaction, exemplified in the persecution, killing and exile of the Catholic converts and the Jesuit missionaries (Coulbeaux, 1929, pp. 245-246; Telles 1660, pp. 352-366), that would also account for the ostentatious abandon of the "catholic" Susinyus' palace compound in Gorgora, the one that included the presently destroyed catholic church (Fasiladas' own palace, in Gondar, closely resembling a Portuguese medieval castle, was itself decorated with stone pillaged from Susinyus palace in Gorgora).

It is now established that it was the erosion of the relation between emperor Susinyus and the Monophysite clergy (plus the feudal class), and his need to transcend the resistance of some sectors of Ethiopian society towards his raise to power (which he usurped from the appointed heir to the previous Negus), that resulted in his conversion to the catholic faith (M. Abir 1980, pp. 204-207, 220-221). But the political intentions behind the conversion to Catholicism - as a means to reduce the controlling power of the traditional Coptic clergy - seemed to have been largely misunderstood by the Portuguese Jesuits, whose missionary zeal consequently led them to disregard and to try to suppress essential traits of the Coptic Ethiopian faith and culture (Abir 1980, pp. 224-226; Caraman 1985, chapter I). This action backfired and eventually resulted in the persecutions against the Catholic.

The reasons for Susinyus' actions and options, enigmatic and desperate as they seemed - in the context of Ethiopian politics -, needn't concern us further. Instead, let us focus our attention in the motives that led to the equally strange obsession, on the part of the Jesuits - with the Vatican and some portuguese court circles behind them -, to convert the Ethiopian Copts to Catholicism. These motives were based in the essentially same ideological frame that, in the early sixteenth century, had directed the Portuguese to Ethiopia, in the first place.

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As mentioned in the beginning of this study, a dichotomic perspective that directs the description of a situation or discourse of assymetry and conflict between dominating and dominated groups, may fruitfully give way to an awareness of the logical dependence between opposition and communion as defining any kind of social and cultural interaction. In the particular case here presented, we are primarily dealing with a quantity of literary documents produced by the Jesuit missionaries, with mainly self-legitimizing intentions. In order to categorize the conflicting and uncontrolled reality of Orthodox Ethiopia, they systematically qualified it as in a state of progressive "otherness". But the history of European views about the realm of Prester John give us a compelling example of the consubstantial quality of a relation where "sameness" and the "otherness" are overlapping categories.

So, in order to understand the way the catholic minority in Ethiopia - through the words of the Jesuit missionaries - envisioned and categorized Ethiopian society, and particularly the Coptic dominant group, we must take into account the Portuguese, and also generally European, religious, political and cultural expectations towards the sought after "kingdom of the Prester John".

Prester John, as the utopian-like description of his Indian kingdom in the early medieval letters clearly show (Zarncke, 1879, pp. 909-924), was a very potent image of a Christmimetic priestly king, intimately connected with the concept, common in western Europe, of the "king of the last days" or *Endkaiser*, who would, in alliance with a western sovereign, emerge from the Orient to conquer Palestine and free Jerusalem from Muslim hands - this pious act would be a prophetic sign of the end of the world and, simultaneously, of its apocalyptic renewal, with the coming of the New Heavenly Jerusalem (Gosman 1983, pp. 270-284).

In the course of five centuries and up to the seventeenth century, we can witness the transformation and eventual eclipse of the Christmimetic image of the Indian priestly king reigning over a perfect society. This derived, not only from an overall alteration of the limits of History (since the end of the world hadn't happened and the *Endkaiser* hadn't liberated Jerusalem), but from specific circumstances like the Mongol invasions of Muslim and European countries, the fall of Byzantium and the western European travel and expansion to the East.

The gradual dissolution of the Christmimetic character of Prester John, and the abandoning of the millenarian theme of the end of the times, coincided with a new location for his kingdom, initially proposed in late medieval travellers' and cosmographers' accounts: Ethiopia or Nubia(2). The acceptance of an identity between the Prester John of the Letter and the actual Christian (but Monophysite) ruler of the Ethiopian kingdom meant that he was now spatially and conceptually separated from the Christian Indian followers of Saint Thomas and the area of the spice production, and that he was an heretical black African ruling over heretical black Africans.

This change in Prester John's characterization - becoming black, he was consequently considered a cursed descendant of the biblical Cush (See Genesis, X, 10; Devisse, Mollat 1978) -, came to imply, in seventeenth century Jesuit literature, a suggestive tint of an evil character of the imperial Ethiopian figure. This change still depended upon particular cosmographical co-ordinates: a weakened Christmimeticism was initially allowed, in this east African region, by the underlining, both in maps and in travel accounts, of its proximity to the sources of the Nile (one of the four rivers that were supposed to flow from Eden), its oriental and mountainous location (by the Mountains of the Moon, one of the hypothetical emplacements of the Earthly Paradise), and the ancient identification of Ethiopia as the "third India" (Medeiros 1985, pp. 87-94).

The Prester John figure was evidently millenarian in its conception - even it didn't support any intentions of marginal social revolt(3). It originated in the very centre of the German imperial court as a propagandising stanza in favour of the crusading movement and also in ideological opposition to both the papacy and the Byzantine ruler (coincident with an alternative political theology of the *Rex Sacerdos*). Considering this fact, it is interesting to observe the evolution of Prester John, through late medieval and renaissance History. Apparently, linear evolution seemed to dismantle the cyclic scheme implied by the millenarian idea of the end, and renewal, of the world (since the world didn't come to an end), but through the use of space codifications (the microcosmic re-invention of the kingdom in East Africa) the cosmological order was again to be reset.

The same logical principle of contrariety according to which certain animals of the medieval bestiaries, depending on the context and the perspective, can be either classified as "animals of Christ" or "animals of the Devil", is at work in the re-definition of Prester John's image in his new Ethiopian context. It is especially in Portuguese travel and diplomatic literature, and in the Jesuits numerous accounts from the period of their missions in Ethiopia, that this new, and radically altered, image of the "African" Prester John can be more fully observed.

To understand the consequences of this displacement, we must keep in mind not only the intimate relationship between time and space coordinates in medieval thought, but that geographical space was equally intelligible through a system of religious, ethical, cosmic and elemental co-ordinates (Lecoq 1989, p. 22 seq.). As can be seen in medieval ecumenical maps, with the East at the top and West at the bottom, the *oecumena* is conceived in more or less strict analogy with the body of Christ - the head, in the extreme East, is where the earthly Paradise is located and is nearer the celestial sphere; Jerusalem is the navel of the world; the feet, in the West, are its lowest part (this can be seen very clearly in the now lost Ebbensdorf ecumenical map of the early XIVth. century).

In this system, where moving westward signified to go down and to degenerate, and to go East was to physically and ethically ascend, North and South also had analogical significance, in terms of the right and left sides of Christ's body. Whereas the colder northern regions were thought to be populated with long living and temperate people, the more one travels south, in the direction of the Torrid Zone, the more degenerate, dissolute and, eventually monstrous, humanity was thought to be. Africa, and specially its western part, was thus, both in cartographical and in cosmographical European expressions, a land that harboured a cursed, degenerate population (Medeiros 1985, p. 163 seq.).

As is easily recognisable, the ideological background of the Iberian discoveries was highly ecumenical. To "discover" (i.e., to "uncover") the world was to cast the light of true faith upon the darkness of ignorance and evil that subjected non-Christian humanity (Carvalho, 1983, p. 529 seq.; Randles 1966, p. 3 seq.). In the Portuguese case, travel around Africa was also conceptualized as a crusading project which meant to a large extent the penetration of the continent through its water courses (Randles 1960, pp. 20-27); these were thought to be connected, in some unknown ways, to the sources of the Nile (through a central African lake), and consequently to Prester John's kingdom - the west African rulers were often treated as his vassals. At the same time, envoys of the Portuguese king were sent by land to East Africa, with letters to "Preste Jo,ão das Índias" (See: Ficalho, 1898).

The alliance between Prester John and a western sovereign (now the Portuguese king), that had come down from the medieval Letter, was to be kept alive in the Portuguese-Ethiopian diplomatic epistolary, and in Portuguese strategic military writings: the conquest of the Holy Land, and the destruction of the Muslim world are frequently suggested or proposed in the documentation(4).

But, by the first half of the sixteenth century, the Ethiopian Negus was publicly and officially contacted and the discrepancies between the Ethiopian reality and the magnificent kingdom described in the Letter were highlighted by Portuguese writers(5); endless theological polemics derived from the presence of an Ethiopian ambassador in Portugal (A. J. Davis, 1971, pp. 211-302; G. Besha, M.W. Aregay, 1964). Hereticism, poverty, evil ways and uncivilised, improper customs, Jewish and Arabic influences were to be held as definitive proofs of the inadequacy of the identification between the self-styled author of the Letter and this African ruler. This inadequacy became manifest when Portuguese troops had to be sent inland to rescue the Negus' weak armies from defeat at the hands of the Somali invaders (1541-1543)(6).

Specially in the writings of the Jesuit missionaries, for whom the conversion of the Ethiopian ruler and the search for the sources of the Nile were two interrelated obsessive goals, it is clear that the Ethiopian reality posed a difficult conceptual problem: like other travellers before, they retained the designation of "Prester John" as the valid title of the Negus; they confronted Ethiopian social and physical reality having the medieval Letter in their minds, and were eager to convert Ethiopia so it would conform to the Indian model. Partly Christian but heretical, African but in some important ways Asiatic (with Semitic kingship structures, with Semitic language and writing systems), degenerate but visibly "civilized" since the Aksumite period, Ethiopia was, in the end, to be

declared a true monstrosity, by the Jesuit writers (P. Manuel Almeida, in: Beckingham & Huntingford, 1954, p. XXXIV)).

One should mention that since the Ethiopian sovereignty system, which invested the Negus with priestly powers and functions, was deeply intertwined with a Monophysite theology - based on the view that there is but one nature in Christ -, the emperor was thought to be, as a reflection of Christ, a true *rex sacerdos* (indeed, like the medieval legendary Prester John). The Jesuit missionary proposal thus seemed, to Monophysite's eyes, quite absurd: there was no reason for the emperor to declare his submission to the Catholic Pope, for not only had he equivalent spiritual powers, but he was the chosen descendant of the "second David" (the son of king Salomon and the queen of Sheba who, in the imperial chronicles, brought the Arc of the Covenant to Ethiopia).

Still, in this context, it is interesting to note that, in their attempts to convert the Ethiopian sovereign to Catholicism and installing a papal patriarch in the Ethiopian court who would symbolize the Negus's submission to Rome, the Jesuit missionaries seemed to have followed the narrative model of early accounts inspired by Syrian religious literature. These stories (all based on the Syrian Acts of St. Thomas), that depicted the Christian conversion of India, elaborate on the close relationship between the patriarch of India and the king, or the king's son, who is ordained a deacon. Here, references are made to a celestial palace given by Saint Thomas to the Indian sovereign, Gundafor. This same motive reappears in the twelfth century Letter, where it is said that Prester John's and Gundafor's palaces are identical (Zarncke 1879, p. 917).

Curiously enough, but by no means coincidentally, Pedro Páez, the Jesuit who managed the conversion of the Negus Susinyus to Catholicism was the same who designed and presided over the construction of the palace and church on lake T'ana - which is, incidentally, the source of the Blue Nile. In Jesuit writings, though, the connexion between the mythical Indian king and the real Ethiopian king was now being suggested by an analogy, not with the final but with the initial part of the Indian king's reign, before his conversion by Saint Thomas (supposedly the first patriarch of India), and therefore prior to the establishment of his Christmimetic quality and of his character of "king of the last days". Thus, by a structural correspondence with its early stages - through the palace, the patriarchy, the conversion and the source of the Nile -, the Prester John's cycle was, thus, about to end.

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The analysis of the Portuguese Catholic minority's views of the Copts gives us a curious historical example of how ethnocentric ideology can express itself. Starting with a medieval millenarian elaboration of a semi-divine, Christlike, hypothetical ally, an idealized image of "sameness", the later invention of a mirrored "black Prester John", a figure of "otherness" in need of conversion, was used to help justify two consecutive failures: the failure of the Portuguese crusading projects of the sixteenth century, and that of a Jesuit mission, a century after. Since a diplomatic and military alliance had lost purpose, a western style political and religious model was then tentatively introduced to, and rejected by, Ethiopian society. For the persecuted Portuguese of the early seventeenth century, that eventually implied a demonizing of the Copts and a final clear refusal of any identity between the figure of the Negus and the legendary Prester John of the Indies (Lobo 1971, pp. 786-789).

In conclusion: the difficulties the spiritual leaders of the Catholic minority had in understanding the main flux of the dominant Coptic culture in Ethiopia derived from their overwhelming expectations in the issues of Catholic ecumenism and political domination, tainted with racism and cultural intransigence. That this intransigence could work both ways is now very visible in the catholic ruins of the Gorgora peninsula on lake T'ana.

Nevertheless, behind the confrontational rhetoric that percolates from the discourses of social-political domination and disempowerment, we recognize an equally relevant play of the elements that speak of recognition, identity, "sameness". It is only when we take notice of the whole ontological and relational process that defines the "realm(s) of Prester John", that we understand the effectiveness and strength of the pulleys that hold opposing categories together.

Endnotes

1. In the eighteenth century, the famous empress Mentuab (Walatta Giyorgis) was renowned for her Portuguese-Ethiopian origin: "The Queen inherited the colour of her European ancestors; indeed, was whiter than most Portuguese. She was very vain of this her descent..." (Bruce 1790, p. 611).
2. See the accounts of travellers such as Pero Tafur and Niccolò de' Conti (Longhena 1929), and Jourdan Catalan of Severac, *Mirabilia descripta - Wonders of the East*, (ed. H. Yule, London, 1863); cartographical information on Ethiopia had a overwhelming effect on the European visions of the whole African continent (Y. K. Fall 1982, p. 183; U. Knefelkamp 1986, p. 102).
3. Hence, it's absence from important and thorough studies as Norman Cohn's (1957) *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, Cambridge: C.U.P..
4. Anonymous (1521), *Carta das Novas que vieram a el rei nosso senhor do descobrimento do Preste João*, Lisboa; see also Afonso de Albuquerque (1576), *Comentários de Afonso d'Albuquerque*, Lisboa: Regia Officina Typografica, IV, XVIII.
5. See F. Francisco Álvares (1543), *Verdadeira informação das terras do Preste João das Índias*, Lisboa: Luiz Rodriguez.
6. Cf. the narrative of these successes in the contemporary work of Miguel de Castanhoso (1564) *O Tratado dos feitos de Cristóvão da Gama em Etiópia*, Lisboa: João Barreira.

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