

Gujaratis in 17th century Gondar (Ethiopia)

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Introduction: in the interstices of a hegemonic discourse

In the late 1940's, Mr. Armando Aguiar, a Portuguese journalist, toured Africa and Asia sending home reports testifying on the remaining memories of the real or imagined lusophone presence in those parts during the so-called Age of the Discoveries. These reports, dedicated to the architectural and cultural heritage that resulted from centuries' old interactions between the Portuguese overseas' merchant, military and ecclesiastical constellations, were regularly published in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* catering to the nationalistic official discourse enhancing the relevance of the past deeds of the Portuguese in the world.

In 1949, he arrived in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and connected with a small group of Indians – merchants, teachers and medical professionals - that had recently migrated to that country from the Portuguese possessions of Goa and Diu, attracted by King Haile Selassie's (rather feeble) modernizing and developing efforts. In an emotional speech at a dinner in honour of the Portuguese journalist, the Goan medical doctor José Alfredo Antão, in the name of the community, appealed to Mr. Aguiar's help in publicizing the historical ties between the two countries and in interesting the Portuguese authorities in the prospect of further migration from the *Estado da Índia* to Ethiopia. Mr. Antão argued then that integration would be facilitated by the country's millennial adherence to the Christian faith.

Mr. Aguiar dully accepted this task and went on reporting about the ancient Luso-Ethiopian ties and on the good disposition of Ethiopians toward the Portuguese, in his column of the *Diário de Notícias* and latter in a report on the Goan diaspora in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. In this report, he pressed the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs to consider the possibility of inducing a migratory flow from the Portuguese-ruled Indian possessions to Ethiopia.¹ This project found listeners in the Portuguese central administration, which by then, to prevent diplomatic isolation given the winds of independence in the post-war world, had began revising its options on the stand

of the country's relation to its African colonies, and searching for political alliances that could help sustain the survival of its “overseas empire”.

At about the same period, the noted Ethiopian historian Tekle Tsadq Mekuria, then holding a post in his country's embassy in Paris, published a book that, in the section dedicated to the 16th century's political and religious tensions that imperilled the Abyssinian Christian sovereigns' rule, enhanced the importance of the Portuguese military expedition headed by Cristóvão da Gama, Vasco da Gama's youngest son, that landed in Ethiopia to fight the invading Adali armies led by Ahmad ibn Ibrihim al-Ghazi, known as Amhad Grañ, that had declared a *Jihad* against the Christian kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands.

The brief Portuguese-Ethiopian diplomatic relationship that lasted from 1954 to 1963 was ideologically framed, on the Lisbon government's side, by a overly selected reading of historical evidence concerning the interactions between Portuguese, Indians and Ethiopians in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the Goa vice-royalty held a prominent role in the control over political, religious and economic routes and territories in Asia and East Africa.

The rhetorical confusion between the sociological categories of the Portuguese and the Indian, and the latter's subalternization to the former, clear even in Mr. Antão's speech in 1949, where he identifies the Goan community as “Portuguese”, is not surprising. It is, after all, the consequence of Portuguese domination over a few tracts of Indian Western coastal territory since the early 16th century, and the effect of the Portuguese dictatorial regime's propaganda that relied on the antiquity of the Portuguese overseas presence to legitimize the assimilation of its colonial subjects to the hegemonic category of the “Portuguese”.

Such subalternization echoes the authoritative writings of the Jesuit missionaries who had landed in Ethiopia in 1550, in the wake of the Portuguese military intervention of the 1540's, with the project of converting the Ethiopian Orthodox rulers and population to Catholicism. Even if individual Indians or the collective category of “Baneanes” are sporadically mentioned in their letters and books, the diplomatic and religious affairs of the foreign presence in Ethiopia was basically seen as a Portuguese enterprise.

The fact that this persistent discursive framework is mostly based on Portuguese diplomatic and religious writings makes it very difficult to assess the nature and extension of a Goan or Gujarati presence in Ethiopia in that period – just as its revival in the 1950's hinders the evaluation of who were the members of the “Portuguese” community in Ethiopia.²

Ethiopian written documents are also of little help, since for that period they only either vaguely mention the presence of *Ferenj* (meaning “Franks” or “white foreigners”) in the country, and more rarely “Banyan” (*vāniyân*, Gujarati Jains), or go on naming individual prominent figures such as the Portuguese Catholic patriarch Afonso Mendes, who is credited with having assisted the conversion

of the Ethiopian king Susenyos (1606–1632) to the Catholic faith, being afterwards expelled from the country by that ruler's son, King Fasiladas (1632-1667), who purportedly endeavoured to extirpate Catholic influence in the country and promote the return to Orthodoxy.

Oral traditions from Northern Ethiopia, the region where foreign Catholic missionaries and military men were active in the 16th and early 17th centuries, are no more eloquent than written documents on the presence of Indians, and give almost no direct information that may concur to explore otherwise clear material evidence of commercial interactions between Ethiopia and Western India – namely, the presence of Indian textiles in Church buildings and books (see Henze, 2004; Gervers, 2004), or a yet to be researched artistic influence on Ethiopian iconographic art (Chojnacki, 2003). Still, it may be useful to investigate these oral traditions in search of indirect and implicit indications regarding such ties.

What Ethiopian oral narrators mean when they refer to the “Portuguese” is, at least today, rather dubious. They seem to have little or no knowledge of the origin of the foreigners and of the reasons for their arrival in Ethiopia beyond the clichéd notion that they, being Christian, were somehow summoned to help the Abyssinian kingship resist the Muslim invasions emanating from the South-eastern Lowlands. In some of the interviews I conducted in Amhara and Tigray (Northern Ethiopia) in recent years, it seemed clear that a few at least of the informants tended to enrich their stories with information directly or indirectly originating in the late Tekle Tsadq Mekuria's books. I was once even presented with a photocopy of an illustration from the first volume of his *Ye Ityopia tarik*, where Cristóvão da Gama is depicted tied to a tree and surrounded by Muslims torturing him. This image, which has even made its way into the naïf popular paintings that reached Adis Ababa's tourist market in the sixties and seventies of last century, was inspired by a reading of the narrative of the *Dos Feitos do Capitão Cristóvão da Gama*, by Captain Miguel de Castanhoso, one of the participants in the 1540's Portuguese expedition.

Furthermore, as Indo-American researcher Shaalini Ranasinghe has cleverly noted in her unpublished PhD thesis *The Castle of Emperor Fasiladas: missionaries, muslims, and architecture in Gondar, Ethiopia* (Ranasinghe, 2001, 179-181), present-day oral traditions in Gondar, when referring to the “Portuguese” as builders of King Fasiladas’ castle may most probably have absorbed an interpretation initially put forward by mid-19th century's travellers of Western origin that, as was then common, refused to accept the notion that African civilizations had the technological and inventive ability to master the complex tasks of designing and building large monumental infrastructures, and opted to attribute them either to Middle Eastern or European hands.

This was certainly the case of the enigmatic ruins of the Great Zimbabwe. In Ethiopia, the Jesuit missionaries have themselves actively forged a legendary view that stresses their own deciding

intervention as architects and builders of stone and mortar Catholic churches (even though they refrained from extending their activity to the case of the royal castles built during the period when they were most influent in the Abyssinian court) (Boavida, Pennec and Ramos, 2008, 36 ff). As Ranasinghe reminds us, “foreigners” easily became “Portuguese” and any local oral memory specifying a different origin was lost forever.

Her subsidiary contention, which seems at times somewhat far-fetched, is that an Indian architect and mason known as Manuel Magro,³ was no other than Abdel Karim, mentioned in the surviving copy of the *Chronicle of King Susenyos* (Esteves Pereira, 224; 1900, 290), and therein loosely identified as a “baneane”, who is credited with conceiving the king's residential buildings, along with an Egyptian charged with producing its woodwork. Ranasinghe goes so far as noting that the Christianized, and Westernized, name of the Gujarati mason had been probably given by the Jesuit missionaries who contracted him to go to Ethiopia, and that after their expulsion from the country he stayed on and reassumed his Muslim identity (Ranasinghe, 2001, 235). She makes no mention, though, that it seems somewhat unlikely that a Banyan, a trader, would be charged with courtly architectural or building tasks. A surviving icon of the so-called first Gondarine period seems to have retained the reference of the *Chronicle of Susenyos* to the Egyptian and the Banyan builders: it shows two Middle Eastern and/or Oriental foreigners involved, not in building churches for Susenyos, but his son Fasiladas' castle. They are depicted wearing turbans, tunics, vests and baggy pants (Chojnacki, 2003, 16-19).

Speculative as the Manuel Magro – Abdel Karim connection may be, it evolves around two independent pieces of information (Ethiopian and Jesuit) referring to the presence of Gujarati masons in Ethiopia, accompanying the Jesuit mission in that country during the period when stone and mortar royal buildings started being erected in the North-western regions of Gondar and Gojjam: the already mentioned *Chronicle of King Susenyos* and the writings of Father Manuel de Almeida (Almeida, 1907, 390). The Portuguese-Indian style used in the construction of some of the Catholic churches around Lake T'ana, and specially in its decorative elements, should also be brought in as a further material sign of a relevant Gujarati presence in Northern Ethiopia at the time. In this respect, it is worth mentioning here the noted similarities between the monumental church of Gorgora Nova, on the shores of Lake T'ana, and the church of Saint Paul in Diu, Western Gujarat, as well as the rich Gujarati-style decorations on the walls and columns of the royal church of Martula Maryam, in Eastern Gojjam, and also the structure of the royal leisure pavilions built on rectangular water basins in the royal compounds of Azazo (Susenyos) and of Gondar (Fasiladas). Although such material hints seem sufficient to establish a comparative architectural research programme, this is yet to be carried out.

Even if they haven't retained any specific information about the identity of the “foreign” builders of

kingly architectural structures, oral narratives do abound in details in respect to the goals and intentions of the Ethiopian royalty concerning the construction of the stone and mortar buildings, a practice that, having been recorded in Axumite times, some thirteen centuries before, was subsequently abandoned, along with the implied knowledge of producing mortar from kaolin stone. What is proposed here is a brief glance over the ideological framework of these oral traditions, in order to find an interpretative window over the narrative uses of the concept of the “foreigner” in Northern Ethiopia, which will eventually help us circumscribing (even if only by omission) what is implied in categories such as “the Portuguese”, “the Italian”, “the Banyan”, and otherwise.

Foreigners and other marginal figures in Northern Ethiopian legends

The ancient *katama*⁴ of Azazo, founded in the early-seventeenth century, lies in the northern sliding slope of a small hill a few miles from the city of Gondar, in the North Amhara region of the Ethiopian highlands. The king’s castle compound, the Catholic church of Gänätä Iyesus (“Paradise of Jesus”), and the royal pavilion built over a rectangular leisure basin are almost totally ruined today. The extensive destruction these structures underwent testifies the eventful and sometimes tragic history of the relations between religious and secular power structures in Christian Ethiopia. This *katama*, which precedes the foundation of the capital city of Gondar, was established during an important turning point in the political, religious and architectural history of the Abyssinian Christian kingdom. Built by order of King Susenyos in the early 1620’s, it was, like the one of Danqaz, thirty kilometres to the southeast, the stage of dramatic events opposing the sovereign and the newly empowered Catholics to the Orthodox monastic order of Debra Libanos. Echoing canonical historical views, local oral traditions vividly narrate episodes of a dilacerating civil war that supposedly ended with the resignation of King Susenyos and the accession of his son Fasiladas to the royal throne and the restoration of the Orthodox faith as the official creed of Christian Ethiopia. But they depart from written sources taken as canonical for the construction of modern Abyssinian political and religious history inasmuch as they insist that the new king didn’t immediately end the great social upheaval caused by his father’s public declaration of obedience to the Roman pontiff and his acceptance of the Catholic dogma brought to the country by a handful of Jesuit missionaries, in 1624. Rather, these legendary tales underline the fact that the first years of Fasiladas’ reign were marked by the murder of thousands of Debra Libanos’ monks and priests, because they refused to sanction his marriage to an Italian princess named Zelyha who had been originally sent by the “King of Rome” to marry Susenyos, who was by then deceased. One of these oral versions has been published in the 1930’s by Alberto Pollera (Polera, 1936, 76 ff), and I have myself recorded a few more both in the urban setting of Gondar/Azazo and in rural

villages, convents and churches around the city and lake T'ana (see Ramos, 2000). Stories about *Atsie Fasil* (“King Fasiladas”) are to this day told not only by Christian Amharas but by the few Beta Israel (also known as Falasha, or “Ethiopian Jews”) that haven't migrated to Israel, by Gondarine Muslims (a community as old as the city's foundation) and by urban and rural Qemant (a group of Christianized Agaw, who are both linguistically and religiously related to the Beta Israel). *Q'bat* believers in and around Mertula Maryam and Debra Tabor, in Eastern Gojjam, also include mentions to Fasiladas in their repertoire of *afatarik* (“oral history”).

Depending on the storyteller and the location, the number of killed monks ascends to 9,999 or lowers to 7.777; the Roman princess travels to Ethiopia alone or with a sister (who is also made to marry the lustful King Fasiladas, or Fasil); if the story is set in Gondar and not in Azazo, the seven rivers that surround the city become red with the monks' blood, and this collective sacrifice marks the moment of the foundation of the royal capital.

The composite outline of the various stories told in Azazo and in Gondar is the following:

After becoming king, Susenyos established his court in the region and ordered that a bath be built (a rectangular basin located in a valley between the hill of Gänätä Iyesus and that where the convent of Takla Haimanot stands). Being both very lustful and very hairy, he would have frequent sexual intercourse with young women who he then killed so that his shameful bodily condition wouldn't become publicly known [or, he resorted to shave his whole body in that bath, including his bushy pubic hair].

He renounced the Orthodox faith and submitted to the Roman pope, under the influence of *Ferenj* missionaries⁵. Subsequently, he ordered the forceful conversion of his vassals to the Catholic faith. Since then, he suffered greatly: he became afflicted with a skin disease and his tongue swelled to the point where he couldn't speak. In this period, a slave girl who was renowned for being holy was living in the royal court. When her time came to sleep with Susenyos, she invoked her low birth as reason not to see the king's naked body, for she guessed that the reason he would kill his sexual partners was to keep his bodily condition secret. Susenyos agreed to keep his clothes on while having intercourse with her. When, afterwards, he was about to order her death, she said to him, that there was no reason for him to kill her since she hadn't disclosed his secret. Not only he didn't kill her but, bewildered by her ruse, he agreed to take her healing advice, which was to return to the Orthodox fold and resign in favour of his son Fasil.

He died briefly after having resigned in favour of his son Fasiladas. His body was buried in the church of Tara Maryam, but kept resurfacing and poisoning the soil. Finally, the earth opened and the body was swallowed and pulled directly to Hell.

He had arranged to marry the daughter of the Roman king to seal his submission to the Pope. But, when she arrived in Ethiopia [with her sister], he had died already and his son was now reigning. Since Fasiladas shared the same sexual appetites [and suffered the same hairy condition], he decided to marry her [and her sister]. The monks and *debtaras* (Church laymen) of the Orthodox monastic order of Debra Libanos opposed the king's marriage to the foreign princess and were slaughtered by the royal army. As had happened with his father, Fasiladas is cursed by God (the foreign builders of his castle cannot erect it) and finally redeemed by a saintly slave woman who tells him that he must repent and build either two churches or seven bridges. Once these are built, angels from Heaven finish the castle themselves.

The story is reminiscent of a much older narrative, included in the 13th century book known as the

Kebra Nagast (or “Glory of Kings”), where a hyper-exogamous union between Maqeda, the Queen of Sheba, and Solomon, the biblical king of Israel, sets the ground for the foundation of the early roots of the Abyssinian royalty (see Ramos, Boavida, 2005; Spencer, 1979). Of particular interest to us here are, on the one hand, the reference to the *Ferenj* missionaries and builders and, on the other, the riddle of the slave saint and the marriage of the Roman princess(es).

It is also worth noting that these pseudo-historical narratives told by Christian Amharas reveal as much as they conceal. In a metaphorical way, they compound memories both of the complex political, military or indeed cultural turmoil the region – and the whole Abyssinian kingdom – experienced during the period of Susenyos’ and Fasil’s reigns, as hundreds of thousands of Oromo pastoralists were raiding and settling in the Highlands, and of the international connections promoted by the Ethiopian royalty, be it the case of the intensive correspondence exchanged with the Portuguese kings, the Portuguese Indian viceroys, or with the Emirate of Yemen that led to the arrival of a Yemenite embassy in Gondar in the 1650’s (Donzel, 1986, 149-151). The Muslim and Q’emant⁶ versions that I have collected introduce a number of interesting additional and divergent informations about the Christian kingship of the time. As expected, they tend to stress (or even over-stress) the role of these minority communities in the foundation of Azazo and/or Gondar, in the construction of the royal palaces and in the import of Asian textiles; but they also give important hints as to the need to revise the Orthodox official historiography that tends, on the one hand to obliterate these communities’ contribution to the birth and development of the city, and on the other to silence the complexities of the theological rivalries between the adepts of different religious parties (the *Thewahedo* or “unionists”, the *Q’bat* or “unctionists, the *Säga* or “gracists”, among others) in seventeenth-eighteenth centuries’ Ethiopia, and their vying for royal favour in the Gondarine court.

The stories regarding kings Susenyos and Fasiladas in the North Gondar region are complemented by a series of others told in Eastern Gojjam, in the southern part of the Amhara region, that give further details about the running conflict between royal power and Orthodox religious authorities. Both these oral stories and the surviving written documentation of that time suggest Fasilada’s (and other subsequent kings’) somewhat embarrassing association with the followers of the *Q’bat* creed, an hitherto heretical doctrine within the Ethiopian Orthodoxy that’s almost extinct today except in few pockets in rural eastern Gojjami communities (namely in Enebse district). Such association, which hardly conforms to the Orthodox historiographical canon that has long tended to suppress any documental evidence of internal dissension within the Christian community and to overstress the foreign missionaries’ responsibility in the destabilisation of the kingdom, seem to have been retained in the popular oral narratives that talk of this improbable (and to this day unconfirmed by any documental evidence) marriage arrangement between an Ethiopian ruler and the daughter(s) of

the “Roman king” and of their descendants. Still, it’s widely accepted in this part of the country that Fasiladas and Zelyha had conceived a daughter, whom they refer to as Sabla Wengel, frequently associated with the construction of religious settlements in Gojjam and with a hinted promotion of the *Q’bat* sectarian movement.⁷

The stories regarding the slave girl and the Roman princess are but two small fractions of an intertwined network of legendary stories dealing with royal legitimacy, religious identity and dynastic change in 17th century Christian Ethiopia, where the often tense relations between the kings and the Church are under scrutiny. Zelyha belongs to a gallery of complementary marginal figures (either foreign or indigenous) destined to a sporadic close relation with royal power, which include Portuguese, Indian and/or Egyptian castle builders, foreign ecclesiastics, giant snakes, slave women and holy men (Christian and/or Muslim). The message that the episode of the marriage between Fasil and Zelyha seems to convey cannot be understood without some degree of integration with the stories concerning these other peculiar figures, which can grossly be divided in two poles: marginal demonical characters that induce or express the fall from grace of the king (stressing his evil side); and saintly characters whose presence and action are instrumental to the king’s redemption (or attempt at redemption).

From the early 16th century to the mid 17th century Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was directly confronted with European Catholicism. Western travellers, warriors and missionaries landed on the Christian Abyssinian royal court with a highly ideological project that we can trace to the *rusading* strains of the Portuguese kingship (Subrahmanyam, 1997, 258), and to the extraordinary attention this country received in Ignatius of Loyola’s (the founder of the Society of Jesus) letters detailing the order’s missionary plans (Pennec, 2003). This endeavour was rooted in a loose identification of the Ethiopian sovereign with the legendary priestly king known in Medieval Europe as Prester John of the Indies.

From Rodrigo de Lima’s embassy (1520-26), to Cristóvão da Gama’s expedition (1540-43), to the two Jesuit missions (1555-1590, 1603-34), the Portuguese accounts offer us a transformative model where the search of the identical harbours disenchantment when confronted with cultural and religious difference, and leads to an effort, most visible during the second Jesuit mission, to conform Christian Ethiopian political, administrative and religious structures to the “lost” model of the medieval Prster John: this intention was the background to the conversion of Susenyos, the nomination of a Catholic patriarch for Ethiopia, and the Catholic influence on Ethiopian architecture, religious art, and political reforms of the kingdom, attempted in the first decade of the 17th century. The final texts of the mission return, with a vengeance, to the disenchantment mode, where barbarism, heresy and diabolism become the driving descriptors of the country (in particular, in Manuel de Almeida, Afonso Mendes, Jerónimo Lobo; see Ramos, 2006, 125-127).

It is most interesting that the written Ethiopian documentation for this period has been either manipulated, suppressed, or – when kept – very combative in defence of the Orthodox point of view. Particularly for the reign of king Fasiladas, the heir of the “Catholic” king Susenyos, and generally considered the restorer of the Orthodox faith and founder of the city of Gondar (that progressively became the royal siege, until the mid 19th century), an important written record is missing: that of the extended chronicle of the king (Kropp, 1984). Still, not only later kings’ chronicles present relevant data that helps interpret Gondar’s early period, but few versions of abridged chronicles are known (based on churches’ saints calendars, or *sinkesar*) and contemporary texts such as the *gadla* of Saint Wallata Petros or the determinations of the *Q’bat*’s sinode of 1658 in Aringo, Gojjam, promoted by Fasiladas himself, are important aides to the study of Gondar’s foundation.

The oral versions of Fasiladas’s life hardly conform to the historiographical versions taken as canonical for the construction of modern Abyssinian political and religious history. One has been published in the 1930’s by Alberto Pollera (Polera, 1936, 76 ff), and I have myself have recorded a few more both in the urban setting of Gondar/Azazo and in rural villages, convents and churches around the city and lake T’ana (see Ramos, 2000). Stories about *Atsie Fasil* (“King Fasiladas”) are to this day told not only by Christian Amharas but by the few Beta Israel (also known as Falasha, or “Ethiopian Jews”) that haven’t migrated to Israel, by Gondarine Muslims (a community as old as the city’s foundation) and by urban and rural Qemant (a group of Christianized Agaw, who are both linguistically and religiously related to the Beta Israel). *Q’bat* believers in and around Mertula Maryam and Debra Tabor, in Eastern Gojjam, also include mentions to Fasiladas in their repertoire of *afatarik*.

The oral literature collected in Gondar and its vicinity, in Gojjam and in northern Tigray, offer us a number of examples of the construction of a “foreign” *topos*, connected either with opposing Christian identities (Catholic vs Orthodox, *Tehawedo* vs *Q’bat*) or with technological competence (military or architectural). It must be stressed that this isn’t an oral tradition disconnected from the written. Often, the storytellers, keepers of oral traditions (specially priests and church laymen), flow from oral reinterpretation of written sources to oral reproduction of written transcriptions of oral legends, to autonomy of oral accounts, with outright separation between oral and written forms of legitimizing narrative traditions.

Examples of the “foreign” *topos* in Northern Ethiopian legendary tradition are either relevant historical figures, subject to more or less detailed written prosopographies (Cristóvão da Gama vs Grañ, Afonso Mendes with Susenyos and vs Fasiladas) or a collective entity (the “Portuguese” soldiers, the “Portuguese” builders of the Gondarine castles). In such context, it is relevant to

understand the use of the foreign *topos* in the oral narratives concerned with dynastical change and national identity. The *Ferenj* mentioned in Northern Ethiopian legendary traditions are figures of symbolic marginality, be it the “Portuguese”, “Turkish” or “Indian” castle builders, the “Roman” princesses or the “Armenian” priests. They play a specific symbolic function within a narrative chessboard that includes figures such as the Muslim Adalis, the Oromo pastoralists, the saintly female monks, the Southern slaves, the *debtara* sages, the Muslim sheiks and the *bahataway* prophets. In this setting, the “Portuguese”, endowed with the power to support the Christian royal institution, but also harbingers of political and religious dissent, are seen as creditors of a mirrored Christian identity.

A homology ought to be stressed between the “Portuguese” castle builders (ineffective, in the case of Gondar’s Fasiladas castle) and the “Roman” wife(s) of Ethiopian royalty: Susenyos, Fasiladas, and even the Emir of Harar (in present-day Southeastern Ethiopia) are involved in the promotion of problematic hyper-exogamic marriages with “Roman” or “Portuguese” women. Be it in the accounts relating to the establishment of royal compounds – the cycle of the so-called *Go* prophecy (a possibly *post est factu* pseudo-prophetic account that points to a millenarian streak in Abyssinian royal ideology and that revolves around the triple key of the king, the saint and the castle), or in those stories referring to hyper-exogamic unions (rooted in the *Kebra Nagast* model – problematic sexual interactions between geographically and ethnically distanced kingship figures) that lead to bloody clashes between royalty and the Orthodox clergy, or even in the versions relating to royal lust (the stories of the hairy kings who kill the slave women they sleep with), the participation of the foreigner as mediator generally precedes the appearance of complementary key figures of symbolic and social marginality – the holy man, generally an “ascetic monk” (*bahetawi*), and the saintly slave woman (*bareya*) – who are able to reverse a negative situation (be it the problems in erecting the king’s castle, or the his unholy sexual and exogamic appetites), and restore the due order of things, in which religious obedience to the Orthodox faith precedes and conditions royal power.⁸

The stress given to ephemeral but potent conjunctions between kingship and (ethnic, religious and social) marginality, in the context of dynastic change, is an essential key to understand the disparate flow of legendary accounts that make up many of the oral interpretations of historical events, in Northern Ethiopia. The “foreign” *topos* in Ethiopian oral literature is then to be interpreted as a rhetorical functionality within a larger narrative framework, where marginal figures become key interlocutors of a number of kings that show marks of statutory ambiguity (holders of mystical and diabolical powers, abusive tyrants, etc.).

Conclusion: narrative meaning and selective deletion

Oral traditions don't tell historical truths and, in this, they are very much like written accounts. They may be offer memorial hints to reinterpret and contextualize past events, and they should, like archaeological findings, be valued as relevant testimonies in particular where written data tends to be either lacking, contested or excessively stereotyped. But their most remarkable quality is the way they condition historical conjunctures to the general laws of collective representation, which bridge the past, the present and the future of societies and communities. In the case of Northern Ethiopian oral histories, the imbrications they manifest with written literature only make them more, not less, important in as much as they give us the possibility to transcend our own ideological limitations, so eager to impose dichotomic grids between the "oral" and the "written". By recognizing the relevance of local *afatarik*, we become more aware of the *coda* that underlies all historic discourses.

When referring to the "Portuguese", Ethiopian storytellers don't seem preoccupied with identifying historical figures that may have had a life beyond the limited scope of their local historical knowledge. As a social category within a legendary framework, their meaning is to be found in juxtaposition to a myriad of local characters. If indeed the castle builders were Indian and not Portuguese, the historical subtleties of their differentiation haven't made an enduring impact on local memories.

What, then, about the Indian presence in Ethiopia? Scattered records stating that Banyan merchants were active in the Red Sea and in Eritrean coastal towns even before the Portuguese arrived in region do exist (Alpers, 2009; Keswani, 1980; Pankhurst, 1974). They would reach the ports of Zeylah (in present-day Somaliland) and Massawa (in Eritrea) with textiles that they would trade against goods brought from the Ethiopian highlands via the Afar caravan routes. Textiles of clear Gujarati style can be still found in 16th-17th centuries' ecclesiastic book bindings. They would also be quite frequently used as covers to the iconostasis icon paintings that surround the cylindrical or cubic church *maqdas* (the "holiest of holies", as the central station of Ethiopian circular churches is known). The main evidence of the importance of this trade, though, is the one found in Ethiopian Orthodox iconographic art, which suffered great stylistic and conceptual changes in the wake of the "Jesuit period" in the court's life: both the robes of sacred figures (Mary, Jesus, the saints, etc.) and the geometrical and floral decorations in the background point to the great relevance of imported textiles as fashionable items praised by the Ethiopian kings and their courtiers. This trade hasn't stopped with the expulsion of the Jesuits, but, as the presence of painted imitations of Dutch style ceramic tiles in many churches of the 17th-18th centuries show, it found new competitors in the Dutch East Indies Company (Bosc-Tiesse, 2002).

During the one hundred or so years that lasted the period of direct contact between Portuguese Goa

and the Ethiopian kingdom, the Gujarati merchant network was an important linking factor, as Banyans acted as transporters of people and goods, and as couriers of diplomatic and ecclesiastic correspondence to and from the Abyssinian highlands. Their privileged position in Diu derived from an agreement with the fortress commander allowing them free passes in Portuguese dominated waters to reach Muslim ports in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea (Varadarajan, 1989). Hard as it was for Jesuit missionaries to make the dangerous journey from Goa or Diu to the Ethiopian highlands through the enduring Muslim blockade, they tended to make use of this network. Frequently escorted by Indian merchants or servicemen originating from the Goa province or from Gujarati coastal areas (specially from Diu), they would reach Ethiopia under disguise, masquerading as Armenian merchants in Gujarati vessels heading to the Red Sea ports. Through its mostly unrecorded activities, the Gujarati trading network soon became the logistic platform for the establishment of the fragile and overstretched Jesuit mission in Ethiopia, and it was through them that communications between the Ethiopian court and Portuguese authorities in India (and the Jesuit Provincial) were enabled throughout the second half of the 16th century and the first thirty years of the following century, until the expulsion of the missionaries from that country in 1634.

One of the legends told in Gondar by elders of the Muslim community that is as old as the foundation of the city itself, refers the presence of a sheik called Abdel Bashik (Ramos, 2010, 214-215). The story states that King Fasiladas asked the “Portuguese” to build his castle in Gondar. They agreed but confessed that they hadn’t taken the necessary tools “from their country”. The king addressed three *debtaras* (Church erudites who are also healers and magicians), who respectively promised to bring the “Portuguese” tools within a week, a day and an hour. The Muslim holy man happened to overhear the conversation and stepped in to summon the tools to the king’s presence within the blink of an eye. Subsequently, the king’s castle could be built.

The narrative function of the holy sheik in this Muslim story is obviously akin to that of the holy slave woman in the Christian legends. But his origin is a source of controversy: some refer that he was from Wollo, a region to the Southeast of Gondar, others that he was a Yemeni. It would be too speculative to identify him with Abdel Karim, and in effect such identification seems pointless. What matters is that Gondarine Muslims to this day stress the mediating capacity of a Muslim outsider in the erection of the king’s castle, in much the same way as the Christian Amharas invoke the redeeming powers of the saintly slave, either to redress the king’s curse (in the case of Susenyos) or to erect the castle (in the case of Fasiladas). Fasiladas, say the Christian versions, was guided by the saint to tackle the inefficacy of the “Portuguese” builders who couldn’t finish erecting the castle, ultimately because of the king’s impure marriage to the Roman princess. The Muslims, who never mention the slave saint in their versions, endow the foreign sheik with an equivalent

redeeming power of redressing the failures of the “Portuguese” builders.

Oral legends from Gondar do not confirm that there ever was a (Muslim or Banyan) Gujarati mason, trader or holy man active in Northern Ethiopia at the moment of the foundation of Gondar, in the wake of the expulsion of the “Portuguese” (i.e., the Jesuit missionaries), as Ranasinghe proposes. But, when crossed with the solitary and somewhat incongruous reference to a “Banyan mason” in Susenyos’ chronicle and with material remains (pictorial, architectural, decorative), they give indirect testimony that the “Portuguese” (i.e., *Ferenj*, or Westerners) were not the only foreigners whose presence was influential in the Ethiopian royal court in the first half of the 17th century. That an Abdel Bashit is “remembered” by the Muslim minority but not by the Orthodox Christian majority is a clear sign of the workings of deletion as a major factor in the construction of any hegemonic discourse (be it Ethiopian or Portuguese). In the present state of affairs, though, it would be too bold to assert with any certainty that a Gujarati did intervene in the building of the imposing Fasiladas castle in Gondar. But this is a path worth treading in future research on the historic international connexions of the Ethiopian royalty.

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Endnotes:

¹ Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, Arquivo Diplomático, documentos desclassificados: AAA.M.736 (1956).

² The fact that the dispersion of the Goese migrants in Africa and the Arabic peninsula after the 1974 Ethiopian revolution that caused the abdication of King Haile Selassie hasn't helped the authors' tentative efforts at collecting oral testimonies on this community.

³ Manuel Magro is mentioned in Jesuit writings as the introducer of mortar as binding element in the church of Gänätä Iyesus, in Azazo, a royal camp established by Susenyos in the vicinity of Gondar, which preceded the construction of Fasiladas' castle in Gondar in at least fifteen years.

⁴ I.e., the royal compounds of the Abyssinian kings.

⁵ *Ferenj* means both “foreign” and “white”, and is used by Ethiopian storytellers to identify both “Europeans” and “Turks”), within this regional legendary tradition.

⁶ Qemants are an Agaw farmer population, whose theology is a mix of Jewish, Christian and pagan dogmas and eucharistic practices

⁷ There are some indications that *Q'bat* doctrine, which sprang in Gojjam within the Ewostatian convents (followers of the dictum of Saint Ewostatewos) that had been since the 15th century a rival force to that of the Order of Debra Libanos, may be somewhat related to the presence of Western Catholicism in the Ethiopian highlands in the early years of the 17th century (see Bartniki, Mantel-Niecko, 1978), Wion, 2004, 22 ff; Getatchew Haile, 1986). Most conciliary discussions where the Jesuits confronted representatives of the Ethiopian orthodoxy centred around the Christological theme, and the definition of the relation between the Son's humanity and divinity. Dogmatic differences between *Q'bat* and *Tehawedo* may be viewed as having been distilled from such discussions, since what opposed (and opposes) them was precisely the consideration of how Jesus' humanity and divinity came to be united.

⁸ For a detailed reading of the Ethiopian oral accounts that develop these motifs, see Ramos, 2010, 145 ff.