

FEATURES OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE CLERGY

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The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has significantly declined since the disruption of her ally the so-called “Solomonic Line” in 1974, when the last monarch was overthrown; nevertheless, she still exerts strong influence on the lives of millions even without the support of her ally, the State. Neither the divorce of Church-State relations, which culminated with the end of the monarchy and introduction of Communist ideology in the 1970s, nor the trends of pluralistic democracy-based currently flourishing Independent Churches, could remove away her influence in the country. In fact, these events have threatened the position of this archaic Church and made questionable the possibility of her perpetuation, as can be well observed at the turn of the century.

1. Introduction

Features of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Clergy is a topic designed to give a historical overview of the Church, ecclesiastical establishment and the process undertaken to develop Orthodox Christianity within the country. The paper gives an analysis of one part of my on-going Ph.D. dissertation on the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in relation to the country’s state systems.

1.1 Definition of the Terms Orthodox Church and the Clergy

The terms Orthodox Church and the Clergy, in this text, are terms interwaved to refer to one type of Christian religious institution (the Orthodox Church) and the group of ordained persons (clergy) who minister in the Church.

2. The Place of Orthodox Church in Abyssinian Ecclesiastical History

The study of Ethiopian history has clearly indicated, that the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the history of one of the oldest Christian Church-

es in Africa,¹ and is united with the historical development of the whole country.² The Church and empire, though dissimilar institutions, were so united that they were universally respected and feared as true sources of power and authority as well as of the national culture in Ethiopia.³ Churches and monasteries though distinct from each other were often associated, for every monastery housed at least one church, while many churches had monks attached to them.⁴

The number of churches is immense, and their size varies from the little round village churches, usually perched upon a hill, to large rectangular and octagonal buildings or modern cathedrals built in most of the centres of the country. The fact that number of churches is prolific and their frequent placing on tops of hills or higher points, I think, indicates the significant position the Church occupies. The most emphatic aspect which shows the place that the Church holds maybe the monophysite principles. The monophysite doctrine, *tāwahdo*, has been so strongly and passionately defended in Ethiopia over the centuries because it was felt to accord more closely with concepts of Old Testament monotheism⁵ and traces of Semitic culture and civilization which has influenced Ethiopian Christianity and the lives of the people. Thus it well attests the key place the Church holds in the Ethiopian state systems and her crucial role in the process of remoulding the history of what is now known as Ethiopian society.

¹ BAUR John, *2000 years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi, 1992), p. 39; ATIYA Aziz s., *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London, 1968), pp. 146-7; GERSTER Georg, "Searching out Medieval Churches in Ethiopia's Wilds", *National Geography*, vol 138, No. 6, (1970), pp. 861 ff.; also see cf. GERSTER, 1968, 1974. For general accounts of Ethiopian history, culture and church, see O'LEARY D., *The Ethiopian Church Historical Notes on the Church of Abyssinia* (London, 1936); HYATT H.M., *The Church of Abyssinia* (London, 1928); HARDEN J.M., *An Introduction to Ethiopic Christian Literature* (London, 1926); JONES A.H.M. and MONROE Elizabeth, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 1935); TADDESSE Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1570* (Oxford, 1972); Stevan KAPLAN, *The Monastic Holy man and the Christianization of Early Solomonian Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden, 1984); Jean DORESSE, *L'Empire du prêtre-Jean*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1957); *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Abāba, 1963-); HASTINGS Adrian, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford, 1996), see in particular the Bibliography pp. 625-639, 640-644, 647-649.; WONDIMAGEGNEHU Aymfo and MOTOVU Joachim, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Abāba, 1970).

² ULLENDORFF Edward, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London, 1968), p. 15; ISICHEI Elizabeth, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (1992), pp. 5-7; FREND W.H.C., The Christian Period in Mediterranean Africa, c. A.D. 200 to 700, In: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 2, (1978), p. 451 also see PANKHURST Richard, *A social history of Ethiopia* (1992); TADDESSE Tamrat, "Ethiopia, the Red sea and the Horn", In: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 3, (1977), pp. 99-177; RUBENSON Sven, "Ethiopia and the Horn", In: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, (1976); DROZDIKOVÁ Jarmila, *Etiópčania* (Bratislava, 1989).

³ ATIYA, p. 159.

⁴ PANKHURST, p. 29.

⁵ ULLENDORFF, pp. 87, 115.

2.1 Historical Background

Ethiopia is an ancient polyreligious African country that boasts of rich traditions, and affinities of religious habits and culture. More than half its 56.7 million (1996) population follow Christianity, fifty per cent of the inhabitants belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Orthodoxy being identified with the Amhara and Tigray people, who inhabit the highlands of the country. In fact it was later accepted by Christianized Oromos and other groups as well, after the Church gradually expanded southward. Two per cent are Protestant and Roman Catholic combined. About thirty five per cent of its population, who inhabit the lowlands of the southern region, adhere to Islam, i.e. the stream of Sunni Muslim identified with the Ethiopian Somalis, Afars, Islamicized Oromos, Bedjas and others. The remainder of the population in the southern and eastern part of Ethiopia practiced various indigenous religions. They adhere to traditional African religion also known, by others, as 'Animism' which insists that all objects have souls and can connect man with God. The Fälasha who inhabit the area north of Lake Tana, and who remained after the airlifting of 1984-91 to the State of Israel are repositories of a specific form of Judaism and contribute a constituent part to the religious mosaic of the country.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is numerically the largest of the five non-Chalcedonian Eastern Churches – the Coptic, the Ethiopian, the Syrian, the Indian, and the Armenian – which are by the historian Adrian Fortescue called "The Lesser Eastern Churches", but which others prefer to call "The Oriental Orthodox Churches", to distinguish them from the Byzantine Orthodox Churches. These Churches in their description of Jesus Christ, God-Incarnate, do not use the controversial formula "Two natures in one person", but adhere to the older formula "One Incarnate nature of God the Word", and have therefore been accused of the heresy known as "Monophysitism". Like the four other Churches in this group the Ethiopian Church believes in the full Divinity and the true Humanity of Jesus Christ and is, therefore, perfectly Orthodox in its christological teaching as is also confirmed by A. Wondmagegnehu and J. Motovu in their book *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*.

The cross which had been planted in what is now called Ethiopia by Frumentius was the sign of the Church, since 4th century, which proved the early advent of Christianity to this ancient land. Later on, after the coming of Islam, the Church with her cross became the rallying point for desparate and fiercely independent highland people. Around her grew the Ethiopian empire, a Christian island in a Muslim sea. It resisted wave after wave of Islamic assault, to persist into our times.⁶ The Church has, thereafter gradually become fully indigenized and has survived the forces which wiped out Christianity from within and from

⁶ GERSTER, p. 861 ff.

without, in other neighbouring areas.⁷ Hence, Ethiopia preserved its national adherence to Christianity, in a highly distinctive form.⁸

2.2 The Contemporary Image of the Ethiopian Church in Africa and Abroad

The archaic form of Christianity which the Ethiopian Orthodox Church represents, dates back at least to the fourth century AD and is still exerting a powerful influence on the lives of millions. It is a well known fact that this Church has received the spiritual and theological traditions of the Orthodox Church from its earliest days. In the long course of her history, the Church has been indigenized and has made the heritage which it thus received her own and even developed it in a unique way against the cultural and social background of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's uniqueness implies that she is not a copy of either the Coptic (meaning Egyptian) or any other church in the world, but original, i.e. the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. She not only occupies a remarkable place in the country's history. The long history of indigenization of the Church has enabled her to develop unique features which show that she is more African.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church which has been thoroughly indigenized in the course of a nearly two-thousand year long history of Christianity, attained the status known as Ethiopianism, which is almost accepted as a contribution to African cultural nationalism and particularism based on a self-conscious cultivation of African indigenous values and attitudes.

Ethiopianism is regarded as a nationalistic movement which is spreading among African Churches. It was basically not a political but a religious movement, expressing nationalistic aspirations in the Churches. The biblical source of Ethiopianism comes from Psalm 68:31, "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands to God". The prophecy nurtured the hope of all Africans, of future glory for the Negro race, and of a Christian theocracy embracing the entire continent.⁹

African Churches which were founded between 1880 and 1920, established new religious organizations that were run by Africans¹⁰ as religious protest movement based on the idea of Ethiopianism, commonly labelled "separatist". This was in essence an attempt to escape the most glaring aspect of white cultural domination, i.e. religious domination, through the establishment of an African black variant, often assuming the organizational forms of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

One of the chief leaders of such idea was James Johnson (1832-1917), a Yoruba member of the African Methodist Church of Sierra Leone that had been

⁷ NIWAGILA Wilson B., *African Church History and Mission History*, in *Missionsgeschichte Kirchengeschichte Weltgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 1996), p. 51.

⁸ ISICHEI, p. 2 ff.

⁹ BAUR, op. cit. pp. 125-133 ff.

¹⁰ ULLENDORFF, p. 9; BAUR, pp. 125 ff.; ISICHEI, pp. 7-8.

founded by Black American settlers in 1821. He intertwined religion and patriotism as indicated by his motto: "God and my Country". Moreover he attributed the success of Islam to its use of African customs and institutions. Therefore, he advocated the evangelization of Africa by Africans, and if by expatriates, then best by Negroes from America. Finally he was ordained and became a Bishop in west Africa from 1900-1917.¹¹

The other manifestation of Ethiopianism is the rise of Rastafarianism which looked for religious inspiration to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This religious revival of the "rastas" started in the Caribbean island of Jamaica in the 1930s. The name comes from Ras, meaning Lord and Tafari, the family name of the Emperor Haile Selassie I, who ruled Ethiopia between 1930 and 1974.¹² Followers of Rastafarianism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church enjoy common interest in that both stick to the Old Testament rites. The former believe that Selassie is Jah God, even though he died in 1975, and that they will eventually find release from oppression in an African promised land, while the latter insists he is anointed to rule as a King by God.

Repatriation is one of the corner-stones of Rastafarian belief. They insist that they and all Africans in the diaspora are but exiles in Babylon, destined to be delivered out of captivity by a return to Zion, that is Ethiopia, the seat of Jah, or Africa, the land of our ancestors.

In fact, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is unique firstly for its isolation from other Christian centres for quite a good number of centuries (except for loose cooperation with the Church of Alexandria which profoundly shrunk with the advent of Islam to Egypt in the 7th century).¹³ Secondly it preserves many ancient features on one hand and the strong influence of African traditional religion and Judaism on the other.¹⁴ This peculiar trait of religious syncretism which is embodied by the Ethiopian Church offers her remarkable identity.

2.2.1 Efforts to improve the Church

The Church has been trying to come out of its isolation for a long time. Some signs of this effort are its enrolment in the universal family of the World Council of Churches, foundation of an Ethiopian branch of the Church in Amer-

¹¹ Cf. BAUR, op. cit., pp. 130-132.

¹² BRIGHT Martin, "Rastafarianism", in: *BBC English* (London, 1994), p. 7 f; also see D. ALLEN and R.W.J. OHNSON: *African perspectives. Papers in the history, Politics and Economics of Africa. Presented to Thomas Hodgkin*. (Cambridge, 1970). The five essays in the section "Colonial Misfortune and Religious Response" reveal a wide range of interpretations. See specially POST's, "The Bible as ideology: Ethiopianism in Jamaica, 1930-38" (pp. 185-207), cf. Donald CRUMMER, "Shaikh Zākaryas: an Ethiopian Prophet, in: *Journal of Ethiopian Studies vol. IX No 1* (Addis Abāba, 1971), note 6, p. 56.

¹³ HRBEK, I. ed., "Africa in the context of world history" in: *General History of Africa III*. (California, 1988), pp. 8, 12.

¹⁴ ULLENDORFF, p. 15.

ica which was consecrated by Aba Theophilus, archbishop of Harar province in December 1959. Besides this, as the truly Christian outpost in the African continent, a more effective branch was established in Trinidad. Another important aspect of this effort is the translation of the Bible into the more intelligible Amharic which was done at the initiative of Emperor Haile Selassie I, who also encouraged sending of more theological scholars to Coptic institutions in Egypt. The Theological College at Addis Ababa, founded towards the end of 1944, and which has been enlarged under government auspices is part of the signs that show the success of Ethiopian Christian Church.¹⁵ The College was interrupted and it became largely impossible for the Church to expand its educational service throughout the country, after 1974, when Ethiopia was plunged into a socialist revolution,¹⁶ followed by the Marxist military dictatorship known as the *Derg*. With the collapse of the *Derg* towards the beginning of 1991, the country seems to have returned to normality and all the religions in the country seem to have achieved equality based on the pluralistic principles of democracy. It thus seems that dawn is breaking on the Ethiopian horizon, but a great deal of adjustment and labour are still necessary to preserve the custom of friendship between religions in the country in general and to bring this ancient and august Church into line with the swift pace of modern developments in particular.

2.3 Church Buildings

Although the original basilica or rectangular and cruciform styles have been preserved in a multitude of ancient churches, the Ethiopians have developed their own peculiar octagonal or round churches, inspired by their conception of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.¹⁷ On the other hand, it has been asserted that this may have purely a reproduction of the customary southern Ethiopian habitation, which was circular.¹⁸

Style and church construction: three styles can be observed in the structural pattern of Ethiopian church construction. The oldest Ethiopian churches (*Däbrä Damo, Aksum Zion*) not only exhibit rectangular structure but a wood-and-stone “sandwich” style of construction.¹⁹ The latest ones are either circular or octagonal style and are most familiar form of churches in Ethiopia. The countryside is spotted with such churches. These churches are usually built on elevations and with thatched roofs. The third type of Ethiopian churches is the historic rock-hewn group founded by the pious monarch Lalibela (1181-1221) of the Zagwè dynasty. Because of their monolithic character, architectural skill, massive di-

¹⁵ ATIYA, p. 166; BAUR, p. 401 ff.

¹⁶ Cf. BAUR, op .cit., pp. 401 ff.

¹⁷ ATIYA, pp. 59-60; PANKHURST, pp. 37, 38.

¹⁸ ATIYA, p. 160 f.

¹⁹ Cf. GERSTER, p. 865; MEKOURIA, T.T., “The Horn of Africa”: *General History of Africa III*, p. 570.

mensions, carefully carved colonnades, arcades and vaulted ceilings, these churches are considered by archaeologists to rank amongst the finest achievements in ecclesiastical architecture of any age throughout Christendom.²⁰

Individual church status: there are three types of Church status in Ethiopia.²¹ The most common is church of venko (geter). A Farni church (däbr) has a somewhat higher status, a däbr church is often situated around Imperial or Royal capital and enjoyed the Imperial attention more than other churches,²² and married priests can hold service here. The third type of church which possesses the highest status is called gedam. The church service here is carried on by unmarried priests and monks (*menekusewoch*).

Architecture of the Lalibela churches: the churches are sculptured from a single block of tuff. Their exterior imitates the ancient Ethiopian wood-and-stone “sandwich” style of construction.²³

The Lalibela churches, eleven in number, possess the general air of ancient Egyptian temples.

These churches have often been compared in their grandeur to the rock-hewn temples of Abu Simbel in Nubia, of Petra in Jordan, and of Ellora in the Indian state of Hyderabad – all monuments of singular exotic beauty, as they were well portrayed by Atiya. Though carved from the live rock in the mountain side, these monolithic structures were detached from the body of the mountain by excavating deep trenches around each of them.

The roof was gabled or carved flat, cruciform or simple, invariably with an attractive cornice. Afterwards, the craftsmen set themselves to hollow the interior and to design extraordinary forms of architecture which could never have been accomplished by normal building processes and techniques. Some churches had three naves, others five, with rows of impressive columns, capitals. Arches, windows, niches, colossal crosses and swastikas in bas-relief and haut-relief, decorative rock mouldings and friezes of geometrical shapes, apses and domes – all these and other features have truly rendered the Lalibela churches enduring monuments of Christian architecture in the heart of the African continent.²⁴

Däbra Damo monastery: Däbra Damo is a monastery Gedam built probably as early as the seventh century by Emperor Gäbrä Mäskäl and still standing atop a plateau, or rather mountain peak, accessible only by means of the rope. After building it, the emperor ordered the connecting staircase to be demolished. The centre of the monastery is occupied by a church that is a jewel of Abyssinian ecclesiastical architecture. Its stone and wood carving is exquisite. The panels

²⁰ Cf. ATIYA, op. cit., p. 161 f.

²¹ Cf. PANKHURST, pp. 37-38; cf. ATIYA, p. 60; also see POLÁČEK Zdeněk, “Etiopská ortodoxní církev”, in: *Nový Orient*, 6 and 7 /93.

²² Haile Gäbriel DAGNE, “The Gebzena Charter 1894”, in: *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. IX, No 1, (Addis Abäba, 1971), p. 74.

²³ Cf. MEKOURIA, pp. 570, 572-3; cf. GERSTER, 1968, 1970, 1974.

²⁴ Cf. ATIYA, p. 161.

of animal haut-relief and the geometrical friezes are reminiscent of specimens to be found in early Coptic art. Its mural structure has the obelisk patterns of Aksum. The use of massive wooden beams and stone in alternating horizontal tiers lends an unusual charm to its outward appearance. The design of alternating layer of wood and dressed masonry with the distinctive protruding beams called “monkeyhead”, dates from before the dawn of Christianity. Ethiopian architects used the style for more than 1,000 years.²⁵

Round the church, the monastic cells spread out in greater intimacy than in most other monasteries. As a rule, Ethiopian monasticism is marked by severe austerity and a tendency toward eremitism.²⁶ It is estimated that there are about 850 monasteries in the country.²⁷ The famous ones are *Däbrä Libanos*, *Däbrä Damo*, *Däbrä Bizen*, *Zikwala* and the huge Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem called *Däbrä Genet*.²⁸

Cave church architecture: another notable type of Ethiopian mediaeval ecclesiastical architecture is the cave church pattern. Of this type, the most famous examples are Imrahanna Kristos and Jammadu Mariam. The first was built inside a tremendous cave in the Lasta Mountains by the Emperor who imparted his name to it after deciding to retire from the throne to monasticism. He died and was buried in that church about the middle of the twelfth century. The second was built by Emperor Yekuno-Amlak about 1268, also in the Lasta Mountains, to commemorate the restoration of the line of Solomon with the support of the great Ethiopian saint, Täklä Haymanot. All these and other similar monuments were probably built by anonymous monastic architects as an act of faith.²⁹

Church interior: the church building (*bete krstiyān*) in Ethiopia invariably consists of three concentric rings: a square sanctuary (*mäqdäs*) or the Holy of Holies (*qdduse qddusan*) is situated in the middle of the circle and is screened. The Ark (*tabot* or *tsilat*) and its contents with its container or *mämbära tabot* are treasured here. Only priests and the king can enter into this part of the church.³⁰

Next to the *qdduse qddusan* comes the second part of the church (*qddist*). This is an area reserved for those receiving Holy Communion. The rest of the congregation stands in the outer ring, always barefooted, on the floor covered with matting. This is the third part reserved for the choir and is called (*kine mahlet*). Men and women are separated by a partition. Priests circulate in their midst while praying, blessing and swinging their censers until the interior is

²⁵ Cf. MEKOURIA, pp. 569-578; cf. GERSTER, pp. 880-1.

²⁶ Cf. POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93.

²⁷ ULLENDORFF, pp. 91-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁹ Cf. ATIYA, p. 162.

³⁰ Cf. POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93; cf. ATIYA, p. 160; cf. PANKHURST, pp. 37-8.

filled with clouds of incense. The interior is decorated with wall paintings and the usual icons.³¹

The Ark: the Ark and its contents have never been described in an official Christian sources and is kept top secret (*msttir*). Muslim chroniclers tell us that the hidden treasure in the case of the Cathedral of Aksum is a large white stone inlaid with gold³² whereas in other churches the “tabot” appears to be an icon carved from a convenient timber, as confirmed by the famous Ethiopian saying, “a man is chosen for a post a piece of wood is likewise chosen for a “tabot” (*käsaw märtow läshumät käinchät märtow lätabot*)”. The “tabot” is a model of the Ark of the Covenant of the Old Testament. It is a flat block of wood, which is blessed by the Bishop and carried on the head of the priests in important processions wrapped up in coloured clothes. So the “tabot” is a sort of portable altar, which might be described as a model of the tables of the Law which Moses placed inside the Ark, and like them it usually has the Ten Commandments written on it. The “tabot” rests on a cupboard-like container with an open cupola at the top. Many Ethiopians still believe that the Church at Aksum contains the real Ark of the Covenant.

The Cathedral of Aksum: the oldest Ethiopian church is of course the Cathedral of Aksum, dedicated to Our Lady of Zion, in whose sanctuary the Mosaic Ark is enshrined and where the imperial coronation took place.³³ Though the church itself has been burnt to the ground many times and its present structure dates only from 1854, the ancient rectangular form of its building has been preserved. Erected on a raised platform with an impressive facade, three main entrances, some side chapels and a forbidden sanctuary, as scholars confirm, the Cathedral is lavishly decorated with paintings from biblical scenes in the traditional Ethiopian style in which the artist has concentrated on the theme and bright colours rather than on proportion. The central objects are the coming of the Ark, the Virgin and the Infant Jesus, St George and the Dragon, and a pictorial record of the Nine Saints. As a rule, paintings were made on canvas which was then pasted to the walls, in accordance with Abyssinian artistic techniques. During the succession of invasions, the emperors craftily concealed the treasured Ark, or tabot, and later reinstated it. Although all Ethiopian churches are normally open to both sexes, the Cathedral of Aksum is an exception, since women are not permitted to set foot on its floor. This rule dates from the time when a former empress is said to have desecrated the building.³⁴

³¹ PANKHURST, p. 167; LIPSKY, p. 109, quoted in: ATIYA, p. 160.

³² Cf. ATIYA, p. 161; DORESSE, p. 206, quoted in: ATIYA, p. 160; ERIC PAYNE, *Ethiopian Jews* (London, 1995), p. 17 ff., also see Deut. 10:5, 31:26 Heb.9:6 and 7, 2 Sam.6:14 to compare the Ethiopian case with Old Testament rites.

³³ Ibid., p. 160.

³⁴ Cf. ATIYA, p. 160. The number of Ethiopian churches vary from author to author. According to ATIYA they are estimated at 20,000, GERSTER insists 14,000 and POLÁČEK recently reduced the number to 2,000. If all types of churches are taken into account, then the number would reach 12,000, at an average.

Number of churches and ecclesiastics: the country is estimated to have over 12,000 churches. Some villages have more than one church, and each of them must have two ordained priests in addition to numerous *däbteras* and deacons. On this assumption, the number of *ecclesiastics* throughout Ethiopia has been estimated at approximately twenty-five per cent of the whole male Christian population.³⁵

2.4 Church Hierarchy, Priesthood and Administration

The departure from the former obedience to a Coptic abun, the consecration of native Ethiopian bishops since 1959³⁶ and the establishment of a local native synod for Ethiopia are modern nationalist trends which the pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the sea of St Mark honoured with all the concessions which left no room for doctrinal aberrations or dogmatic cleavage between the two great native churches of Africa.³⁷

The Ethiopian Church enjoyed immense prestige and its hierarchy, which had great influence, was held in deep respect at both the national and local level.³⁸

The Holy synod: the Holy Synod (*kiddus sinodos*) is the leading body of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (*ye etiyopia ortodox täwahdo betekrstiyan*). It comprises the highest Church leaders (archbishops and bishops). The synod is responsible for religious matters and is chaired by a Patriarch (*patriyark*), who pastors the Church. His full title is read: His Holiness... the Head of the Archbishops and Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (*bicü wä-kiddus abune... ri-ise likane papasat wä-patriyark zä etiopia, abun...* lit, "our father", is a title used before the name of the patriarch, the archbishops and the bishops who represent the Church in the provinces as well).³⁹

The council of churches is a body responsible for the administration of churches in general.

The Abun (bishop): is the highest post in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church hierarchy. He is the one who ordains those people who need to be ordained from all over the country.⁴⁰ The Abun can conduct every holy service. He is the only authorized churchman to ordain the priests and deacons. He consecrates new churches, altars (*mämbäroch*), and the tabot to give sanctity to the area where

³⁵ Cf. ATIYA, p. 163.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 157, 165.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 165.

³⁸ PANKHURST, p. 202.

³⁹ Cf. POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93. The ge'ez term *Abuna* (Our father) is used as a title before the bishop's name. It is also used with the name of the patriarch and the archbishop. An equivalent term *Abba* or the Amharic word *Abbaté* has a sense of my spiritual father and is used as a title for priests. Also see BAUR, p. 39, cf.

⁴⁰ PANKHURST, p. 34.

the tabot dwells. He also crowned the Emperor on accession until the coronation of the last Ethiopian Monarch in 1930. The Abun's political authority was extensive. He used to be a member of the State Council and the council of Regency. His jurisdiction is over the faithful, the priests, the deacons and all ministers. In accordance with long-established custom, the Abun, or Metropolitan came from Coptic Church of Egypt. The Coptic Abun shared power with two principal Ethiopian ecclesiastics: the *Aqabé säat*, an important churchman attached to the palace, and the *ečägé* (ge'ez for elder) originally the prior of the great monastery of Däbrä Libanons, and latter of the monks in general. The Aqabé säat, or Guardian of the hour – a functionary dating back at least to the fifteenth century reign of Bä'edä Maryam – acted for the Emperor in many matters of state. In Alvares's opinion the "second person" in the kingdom, he was to all intents and purposes "a great lord", and travelled like the *Abun* with a great many tents.

The Ečägé: is head of the monastic communities,⁴¹ or council of Churches.⁴² He ranks next to the Abun in the hierarchy and is peculiar to the Ethiopian Church. According to Alvares, he was almost equally important, and was "the greatest prelate" after the *Abun*.⁴³

The tradition of placing a Coptic monk from Egypt at the head of the Ethiopian Church which had started when Frumentius was consecrated for the new diocese, remained in force as a custom until the agreement of July 1948 liberated the Ethiopians from the bond of an Egyptian abun, and Aba Basileus was consecrated at Cairo on 28 June 1959 by Pope Cyril (Kirolos) VI, as the first Abyssinian patriarch, in the presence of Emperor Haile Selassie.⁴⁴

After getting autocephalous status the latter post is also held by an Ethiopian bishop Abun, patriarch. He is the chief Ethiopian ecclesiastic who is appointed from among, and installed by the laying on of the hands of two or three bishops. The Patriarch in turn ordains the bishops and the priests. Ordination is of two levels, highest and lowest. The highest level is that of the Abun, patriarch, while the lowest level of ordination is that of a priest (*kés*) and deacon (*diyakkon*). They are consecrated by the patriarch.

The priests: the priest can perform all the holy services but he is not authorized to ordain. The way he dresses is also dissimilar from that of the bishop. The priest is dressed in white in daily life, and only the *shämä*, thrown over his shoulder, has an embroidered edge of subdued colours. His turbans are also white, unlike those of bishops, whose robes are identical with those of their Coptic peers in Egypt, which are entirely black. When officiating, however, the Ethiopian bishop uses a snow-white silk turban decorated with crosses in gold thread, whereas the Copt wears a mitre or a jewelled crown.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 35; cf. ATIYA, p. 158.

⁴² Cf. POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93.

⁴³ Cf. PANKHURST, p. 35.

⁴⁴ ATIYA, p. 152.

⁴⁵ Cf. PANKHURST, pp. 36-7; ATIYA, p. 165 cf.

Abunä kēsis is an additional title to a priest who is supposed to evaluate the activities of deacons.

Likā kahnat is the head of all ecclesiastics. He claims he is bestowed upon by the holy spirit the right of observing and judging disciplinary matters of the group.

Archpriest (Gäbāz) appears between the priest and the bishop in the hierarchy. He is more responsible to protect the tabot, the church, and church properties including land.⁴⁶

Nubrāid is an important title offered by the bishop through laying hands on the head of recruits who are supposed to lead the temple of Mary in Aksum and the Church of Addis Alem in Shoa. The latter was founded by Minelik II in 1902 as the “southern” equivalent to the Temple of Aksum.⁴⁷

The *deacon* or *deaconawit* (female) whose main task is assisting all church services comes at the bottom of the hierarchy.

2.4.1 The *däbtära* and their unique position in the hierarchy of Ethiopian Church

The *däbtära* occupy in the Ethiopian Church an intermediate position between the clergy and layman. Though the *däbtära* are not ordained, no service can properly be held without their presence. It is their chief duty to chant the psalms and hymns. The professional class of *däbtära* appear to be very much closer to the duties with which the Levites were charged.

According to Ullendorff the two-fold division of the Israelite priesthood is paralleled in Ethiopia by the categories of *Kahen* and *däbtära*. The office of the latter is in most respects comparable to the tasks entrusted to the Levites, particularly in their role as chantors and choristers.⁴⁸

Similarly the *däbtära* look after the administration of the larger churches and their musical and liturgical requirements. Gerster Georg tells us his experience about the *däbtära*: “...one day I stood through an hour-long service with the *debteras*, and like them, I held a sort of crutch clamped under my arm as a support. The *debteras* are a class of non-priests unique to the Ethiopian Church. They are experts in reading and liturgical song and are administrators of the church’s traditional wisdom. Once, when with aching feet I wondered aloud why the faithful must remove their shoes before entering an Ethiopian church, an elderly *debtera* with the look of a Biblical patriarch countered with the question, and would you tread on the toes of the angels who crowd a church during services?, his turbanlike *temtem*, the standard headpiece of *debteras* and mar-

⁴⁶ Cf. Haile Gäbriel DAGNE, p. 74.

⁴⁷ POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93 cf. The hierarchy is: Patriarch, Archbishop, Bishop (regional), Episcopos, Archimandrite, Priest, Deacon, sub-Deacon and *Debtera*. See WONDIMAGEGNEHU, cf. p. 39.

⁴⁸ ULLENDORFF, pp. 91-2 cf.

ried priests, shadowed his face, I could not see his eyes well enough to know whether he winked".⁴⁹

They are trained in the study of Amharic and Ge'ez, but their attainments in the latter in particular are apt to vary widely. They undergo instruction in poetry, sacred hymns (*kiné*), songs (*zéma*), dancing and rhythmical movement (*akkwakwam*), and at least in theory, also in the Bible, the Fetha Nägäst and canon law.⁵⁰

They study spiritual subjects longer than priests, devoting about 20-30 years of their life time to acquiring religious knowledge. Ritual dances that are conducted by the *däbtära* at times of important religious ceremonies are accompanied with cultural musical instruments such as the drums of different sizes (*käbäro*, *nägarit*), which are made of a hollowed-out tree-trunk, good to indicate rhythm, and sistrum (*sänasel*). The co-conductor of the dancers who stands on the left hand side of the church is known as *gra géta* and on the right hand side stands the main co-ordinator *märi géta*. Out of churches, the *däbtära* also perform magical rituals, astrological activities, and provide amulets and medicines prepared from various herbs to scatter demons and to avert disease.⁵¹ One of the oldest Ethiopian books the *awdänägäst* (a book of astrology and medicine) written in Amharic, whose author is still unknown, is dedicated to such healing practices of the *däbtäras*. These notable survivals of magical practices and prayers in Abyssinian Christianity, after combining a pagan substratum with a hastily and belatedly superimposed layer of divine invocations or references to the Virgin Mary and the Saints, are probably derived from the old Cushitic pagan beliefs or from the ancient East where demonology and magic craft were widespread. This attitude of superstitious and magical practices which is common among the *däbtära* puts them somewhere on the margin of Christianity in the hierarchy of the Ethiopian churches.

2.4.1 Monastery Hierarchy

Besides the Churches, the monasteries which are governed by the rules derived from St Antony and St Pachomius of Egypt,⁵² serve as a centre for religious life and cultural tradition. They are open for people who are not engaged-deacons, widowed priests and all who ignored the worldly life, these are the monks known as *mänäkuséwoch*. They submit a commitment of three standards. Those who belong to the first group possess a girdle (*kinat*), the second holds a hood (*kób*) and the third will have scapulary with twelve crosses (*askema*). Another sign of these monks is the T-shaped crutch (*mäkkwamya*) and a coat made of leather (*daba*). The leader of a monastery is the *mämhir* – *teacher*, and his deputy is the *afä mämhir*. The *mägabi* is responsible for food distribution and

⁴⁹ GERSTER, p. 877.

⁵⁰ Cf. ULLENDORFF, p. 92.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 79; ATIYA, p. 158 cf.

⁵² Cf. ATIYA, p. 152; HYATT, pp. 31-2; DORESSE, pp. 64-81.

for the property of the monastery. The *ardit* is the one who is in charge of the monks. Those monks who did not submit any commitment and live in isolation from the community are called *bahtawiyān*.⁵³

2.5 Doctrines of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

The Ethiopian monophysite Church, like other Eastern Churches, i.e. the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian and Indian Churches, is strictly dedicated to the monophysite doctrine. According to the Ethiopian monophysitic doctrine in the personality of Christ reveals one divine nature (*bahriy*), which arose due to absolute merging (*tāwahido*) of the natures of God and man. The reason for the frequent mention of the word *tāwahido* in the title of the Ethiopian Church is to indicate her monophysite belief.⁵⁴ Although, the Christological doctrines accepted at the council of Chalcedon (451), condemn monophysitism as a heresy, the Ethiopian Church piously acknowledges it with deep devotion.⁵⁵ In fact the traits of Judaism are predominant in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. On the other hand parallels with the Churches in the East are also greatly observable. The Church rather uniquely embodies traits of different Christian areas instead of assuming a single place of origin.

2.5.1 Point of later controversy within the Church

The subject of polemics within the Ethiopian Church over the last three centuries was the way by which Christ was able to become the son of God. The controversy continued over the last three centuries, resulting in the emergence of two different schools of thought. The disciples of the first school known as *tsägawoch* defended the idea of Christ becoming son of God by the Grace (*tsäga*) and the followers of the second school (*kibattoch*) insisted that it became possible by the anointment of the Holy Spirit (*kibat*). This dispute is still continuing.⁵⁶

2.5.2 Church practices

Like her sister Churches of the Orient the Ethiopian Church also recognizes seven sacraments of the Christian Church.⁵⁷ The administration of the sacraments include baptism, confirmation, holy communion, penance, matrimony, unction of the sick and holy order.

⁵³ POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93 cf.

⁵⁴ POLÁČEK, 6 and 7/93 cf.

⁵⁵ ATIYA, p. 153 cf.

⁵⁶ Cf. POLÁČEK.

⁵⁷ WONDMAGENGEHU and MOTOVU, cf. pp. 31-39; POLÁČEK, cf.

Baptism (timkät): is difficult service requiring the presence of several priests and deacons. The process takes place by submerging a person in water three times. The priest says “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, after which he makes the sign of the cross as a blessing.⁵⁸ A male is baptized on the fortieth day of his birth and female on the eightieth. On this occasion the child is given a Christian name according to the synaxar, he or she will also get a God father or mother respective to their gender and a special coloured thread (*mahtäb*) is tied around the neck to announce that the child is baptized.

Confirmation (kib atä méron) takes place immediately after baptism. The majority of members often fail to keep their confirmation principles.

Holy Communion (qurban) is received by ritually clean people, such as small children and a few devoted adults who are strongly related to church activities. The bread and wine (*siga wä dämu, lit. his body and blood*) are prepared by the deacon from dried grapes and water before each service in a separate house called *bétä lihäm*, which is situated near the church. Bells ring and believers, prostrate themselves when the Holy Eucharist is in procession. It is believed that the bread and wine are changed and remain flesh and blood until they are completely consumed. Communion is consecrated and given on the same day. Believers go and communicate in the church. In the case of the very sick, the priest takes communion to those who are near; for those who are far he consecrates communion in a tent.

Penance (nisha) is the Sacrament in which a Christian receives, through the mediation of the priest, forgiveness of sins on repenting and confessing them to the priest. It does not demand the regular attendance of believers. If a member is too weak to see his confessor (*yä-näfs abbat*), the confessor, who is also his priest, will pay him a visit at his residence. The process takes place as persons confessing prostrated themselves at the feet of the priest, who was seated, and accused themselves in general of being “great sinners and having merited hell”, without descending to particular sins they had committed. After this the priest, holding the Gospels in his left hand, and a cross in his right, touches, with the cross, the eyes, ears, noses and mouths of the penitent, recites prayers over him, and makes several signs of the cross over him, gives him penance and dismisses him.⁵⁹

Matrimony (teklil) is the holy service through which a man and a woman are united and given the divine grace that sanctifies their union, makes it perfect and spiritual like the unity of Christ and his Church, and gives them strength to abide by the contract which mutually binds. This is done by the marriage procession ceremony known as *siratä täklil*, held in the presence of both partners, in the church. This church marriage is also called Communion Marriage because the couple are married by communion; they receive Holy Communion

⁵⁸ PANKHURST, pp. 41-2.

⁵⁹ Cf. PANKHURST, pp. 41-2.

during the wedding Mass. The priest takes the man's hand and places it in the hand of the woman, blessing them with the sign of the cross. The bride is reminded that wives are subject to their husbands. The ceremony is completed with a nuptial Mass in which both parties receive the sacrament. According to this principle, which is now-a-days less binding, divorce or remarriage is permitted only if one of the partners departs by death. Otherwise it can be interpreted as adultery. Unlike the civil laws which recognizes customary and civil marriage, the Church recognizes but one marriage, religious marriage, which is solemnized with a nuptial Mass or wedding Eucharist. This tie is binding and should it be broken by divorce excommunication follows automatically, communion is no longer given to the parties either guilty or not, because they are held to be impure. Church marriage generates strong monogamic relations and is known as the "Eighty Bond" with a woman.

Anointing of the Sick (kendil) is a service offered to persons who are on their death bed. It is a process by which sin is cancelled before the person dies. The ceremony takes place either in the church or at the person's home. It is a Sacrament through which the priest anoints the body of the sick asking for divine grace to cure both body and soul. The healing power is not attributed to the oil but to the prayer. The oil with which the sick is anointed is consecrated. Those who consecrate it according to the words of the Gospel and the Apostle James (Epistle 5:14,15), are the ministers. The manner of consecrating this holy oil is contained in the book called "The Book of the Lamp" (Māshafā Quendil) in which there is written a portion of the Gospel and of the Epistle of the Apostle James.

Holy Orders (qdus kehnät) is a sacrament through which an ordinand receives authority to administer the sacraments and conduct other religious services. The bishop by the imposition of hands confers on the fit chosen persons a portion of grace appropriate for the ecclesiastical office to which they are raised. Not ordained man cannot celebrate the Eucharist or perform any office of a priest. Degrees of the Holy Orders include the major and minor orders. The major ones are that of the episcopate, priesthood and diaconate, where as the minor ones include those of subdeacons, deaconesses, anagnostes or masters of ceremony, singers, door-keepers and others. A bishop is consecrated by the laying on of the hands of three bishops or two, saying prayers of consecration.

3. Conclusion

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in which Jewish and Christian traditions are blended into one indissoluble whole is one of the most remarkable features of the syncretic Abyssinian civilization.⁶⁰ The Old and New Testaments and a number of apocryphal books unknown to other Christian Churches are used. Besides these, the *kbrä negäst* (the honour of kings) which is of purely Abyssinian-

⁶⁰ ULLENDORFF, p. 135.

ian origin and was compiled, in 14th century, to lend support to the claims and aspirations of the Solomonic dynasty, is also acknowledged as a repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings.⁶¹ It is obvious that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has retained Judaic elements such as the tabot, hospitality to strangers, circumcision of a boy eight days after birth, priestly dances with drums and the concept of clean and unclean meat. If an Amhara or any orthodox member of the Ethiopian Church wishes to eat meat he will almost certainly slaughter it himself, making sure that all the blood is drained away. Never would he eat what a man of a different faith has slaughtered, nor any meat which the Old Testament calls unclean. The Amharas have never derived these from the Copts of Egypt who eat pork for instance, which suggest that such prejudices must be of Jewish origin earlier than the fourth century. Like the Jews of old an Amhara prefers never to eat with any man who is not a Christian and like them he will also fast twice a week. He will also keep various monthly feasts according to his own calendar, which is based on the ancient Egyptian one, and starts with New Year's Day in September (as with the Jews and Greeks) and with New Year thought and customs which are Jewish in origin. The Coptic Church in Egypt is more Arab than African, and has been for too long subservient to a Muslim Government to do much more than survive. The Ethiopian Church, on the other hand, is clearly African and free, yet ancient and non western in origin. The western sort of Christianity itself has conquered much of Africa south of the Sahara Desert, but its appeal to the people is limited because it has been interpreted to them by western missionaries. It demanded reinterpretation by Africans to give it a deep meaning. A few Judaic elements cannot prove that the Ethiopian Church is not Christian. In spite of a few Jewish similarities she remains quite Christian, indigenized and more African.

The country's considerable adherence to religious and secular education as a solution to the problems of progress did not, however, have enough results, even today as in the past.

Habits on one hand and modern institutions that appear around as a contrast on the other has brought both the Ethiopian Church and the Ethiopian society of a bygone era face to face still with the stark realities of a new and changing world.⁶²

In fact the Church has great merit for resisting both the anti-Christian forces and the colonizing aspect⁶³ of European Christian missions over the last centuries having been able to preserve her identities up to the present time. This has lifted the Church to the position of an example at a regional level bearing the concept of Ethiopianism.

In spite all her achievements, the way of reform always becomes inevitable for the Church. As the result of limitations imposed upon the religious activity

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶² ATIYA, p. 165.

⁶³ ATIYA, pp. 150-151; NIWAGILA, pp. 50-51.

of foreign missionaries, both Protestant and Roman Catholic or other “Independent” Churches of modern times also had no significant impact on the native Church in the past. Their very existence within the country, however, has aroused the request of young Ethiopians for ecclesiastical reform. Of all Ethiopian monarchs in history, Haile Selassie is said to have worked, to educate his people and to cope with the forward march of modernizing influences, though without breaking away from time-honoured tradition.⁶³ He was succeeded by the Marxist military regime in 1974. The communist ideology of the new military government soon resulted in anti-religious pressure exerted on officials and Church leaders: the patriarch and eight bishops were deposed and the extensive lands of the Church nationalized. Individual priests suffered harshness and some churches were closed.⁶⁴ After the downfall of the military government in 1991 the Church seems to enjoy relatively more freedom based on pluralistic democracy. But analysis of the fragile social, political, religious, economic and cultural issues of the country still raises challenging questions to the oldest Ethiopian Church and its future survival as a repository of Ethiopian national culture as we approach the beginning of the twenty-first century.

⁶⁴ Cf. BAUR, *op. cit.*, p. 401; cf. ATIYA, p. 166.