

The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahedo Church in Jerusalem and Its Archives

Paper presented at the Fourth workshop of OJA project, CRFJ April 8, 2014.

Being in Jerusalem only since two days, the title of this presentation is a bit pretentious. In fact this paper aims at first at presenting some facts concerning the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in general, some particularities of its archives in Ethiopia, and then some historical facts concerning its presence in Jerusalem and what we know about its archives here.

General presentation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Its official name: The Orthodox Täwahedo Church of Ethiopia

Orthodox? It is a non-Chalcedonian Church meaning that it rejects the dogmatic definition of the council of Chalcedon held in 451 concerning the natures and person of Christ. Like the Coptic Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, Armenian Apostolic Church and the Malankara Syrian Church (Indian Orthodox Church). This group of Churches is usually called the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Catholics called them also miaphysite churches, but this term is rejected by them.

Täwahedo? This is a ge'ez word meaning “united, union”. The ge'ez language is the liturgical language used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (like Coptic language for Coptic Church). This is a Semitic language linked to sub-arabic languages. The term Täwahedo qualified an Ethiopian theological movement. Between the 17th and the 19th cent., the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was deeply divided: Christological disputes concerning the role of the baptism of Christ in the hypostatic union. In 1878, a council finally declared the doctrine “Täwahedo” as the only one authorized in the kingdom.

Ethiopia? This is the most important element to define the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Today in Ethiopia, all churches are covered with the color of the Ethiopian flag. The link between the Ethiopian Church and the land of Ethiopia is extremely strong.



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An Ethiopian tradition (dated to the ca. 13th cent.) can explain this situation: the Ethiopian tradition concerning King Solomon and Queen of Sheba (ref. to King I, 10, 1-13). According to this tradition, Queen of Sheba was an Ethiopian queen.



Painting of the Story of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba

She came to Israel and met King Solomon. When she came back to Ethiopia, she gave birth to Menelik, son of Solomon. Menelik wanted to meet his father and went to Israel. There, King Solomon proposed him to be his heir. But Menelik decided to go back to Ethiopia. He did not come back alone actually but with all the members of the tribe of Juda. Furthermore, he could steal the Ark of the Covenant. Menelik became the first King of Ethiopia, being the first one of the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty which ended with Haile Sellassie's deposition in 1974. This tradition made of Ethiopian people the new chosen people: they are the descendant of the tribe of Juda, they keep the Ark of the Covenant and they recognize the New Alliance. Thus there was a sanctification of the land of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is so at first the church of the people living in Ethiopia.

General overview of its history in Ethiopia

During the 1st cent. B.C., a powerful kingdom emerged in the north of the actual Ethiopia and in Eritrea: the kingdom of Aksum. During the 4th cent. A.D., the royal court of this kingdom was converted to Christianity by a Syrian scholar, Frumentius, called in Ethiopia "abba Sälama". After having created the first Ethiopian Christian community in Aksum, Frumentius went to Alexandria and asked to the patriarch Athanasius to send there a bishop. Finally Athanasius chose Frumentius, ordained him as metropolitan and sent him to Ethiopia as the first bishop of Ethiopia.



Painting of Frumentius – Abba Sälama

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Since that time, the sole bishop of Ethiopia was always a Coptic monk ordained by the patriarch of Alexandria. The kingdom of Ethiopia was seen as a diocese of the Coptic Church. This situation ended only in 1951 when an Ethiopian monk could be appointed as the first Ethiopian archbishop of Ethiopia.

So the Ethiopian Church was the state religion of the kingdom of Ethiopia. The Church was prosperous and it deeply marked all the highlands of the actual Ethiopia.

And despites some confrontations with Muslim states in the Horn of Africa (particularly during the 16th cent.) and with Portuguese colonial desires (16th-17th cent.), the kingdom of Ethiopia could preserve its independency.

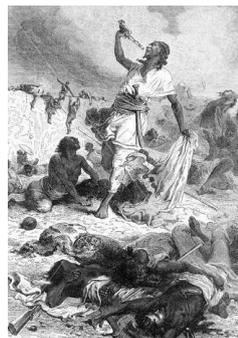
But as already said, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was deeply divided during the 16th-19th centuries.

During the 19th cent. many changes occurred in Ethiopia.

King Tewodros II (1855-1868) started the modernization process of the royal administration: he aimed at centralizing the ecclesiastical and civilian administration but he failed.



King Tewodros II



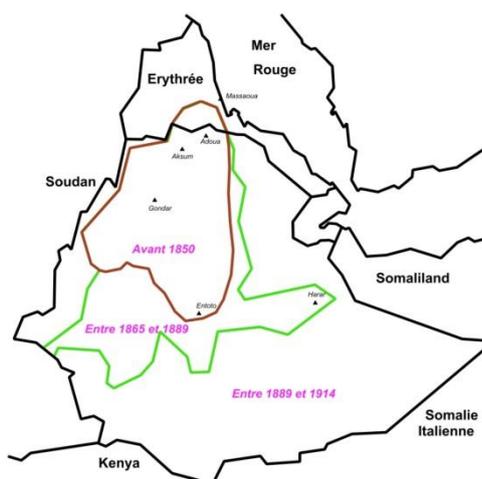
Besides, he was in conflict with Great Britain and finally, when British organized an expedition in Ethiopia against him (and with the support of Ethiopian lords), he committed suicide.

King Yohannes IV (1872-1889) wanted at first to put to an end the division within the Ethiopian Church. In a town called Boru Meda, he convoked a council in 1878. In that council was declared the Tāwahedo Christological doctrine as the sole authorized in the kingdom. And for the first time a King was strong enough to impose this decision in all over the country.

King Yohannes IV
(and his son)

King Menelik II

King Menelik II (1889-1913) provoked maybe the most impressive change in Ethiopia: he conquered very large territories in the west and the south and gave more or less the actual frontiers of Ethiopia. The first consequence of such policy was the incorporation of a very large Muslim population within the Ethiopian frontiers.



During the 20th cent., the administration of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church deeply changed. King Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) negotiated with Coptic authorities: he tried to convince them to allow the appointment of an Ethiopian monk as Metropolitan of Ethiopia and to allow the latter to appoint bishop under him.



King Haile Selassie I and
Archbishop Baselyos

Finally in 1951, the last Coptic Metropolitan of Ethiopia, Qerellos, died and Baselyos, an Ethiopian monk, could be appointed as the first Ethiopian archbishop of Ethiopia. He became in 1959 the first Patriarch of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was officially separated to the Coptic Church.

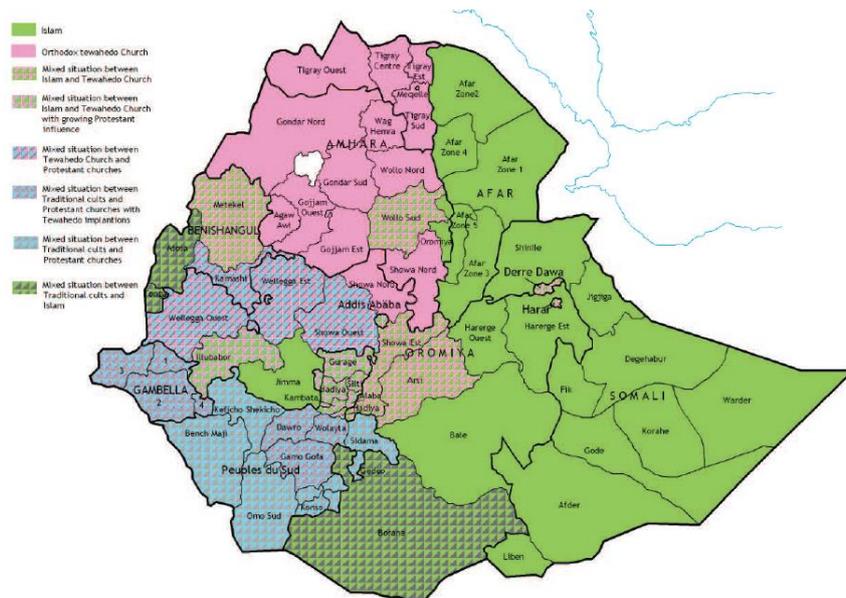
In 1974: This is the Revolution in Ethiopia. A military junta of Marxist obedience took the power. The state and church were officially separated. Ethiopian State became officially a pure secular administration and religious discriminations were abolished.

Religion in Ethiopia in % in 1970, 1994 and 2007:

	1970	1994	2007
Orthodoxs	55.3	50.4	43.5
Muslims	31.4	33.1	33.9
Protestants		10.2	18.5
Catholics	6.2	0.9	0.7
Traditionnal cults	7.4	4.6	2.7
Others		0.9	0.6

Three phenomena can be noticed: the part of the Orthodoxs decreased, the one of the Muslims did not changed really and the part of the Protestants increased. The new position of the Protestants in Ethiopia is really a new challenge for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The higher authorities of the Orthodox Church themselves see Protestants as the main challenge of the Church, much more problematic for them than Muslims.

Another Ethiopian characteristic concerning religion: the geographic distribution of religion in Ethiopia is extremely stable.



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The main part of Orthodox stays into the frontiers of the old Christian kingdom (the highlands) while Muslims stay in the regions conquered by Menelik.

But still, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the most important religious institution in Ethiopia with at least 38 million of faithful and the widest administration (after the one of the State).

Some facts concerning religious practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox.

Circumcision: 8 days after birth.

Baptism: 40 days after birth for a boy, 80 days after birth for a girl.

Fasting: 2 days of fasting during the week: Wednesday (commemoration of the trial of Christ), Friday (commemoration of the Passion of Christ). The Great Fast before Easter represents 55 days (and not only 40 days as usual). Ethiopians add 15 days for the commemoration of the actions of Roman Emperor Heracleius.

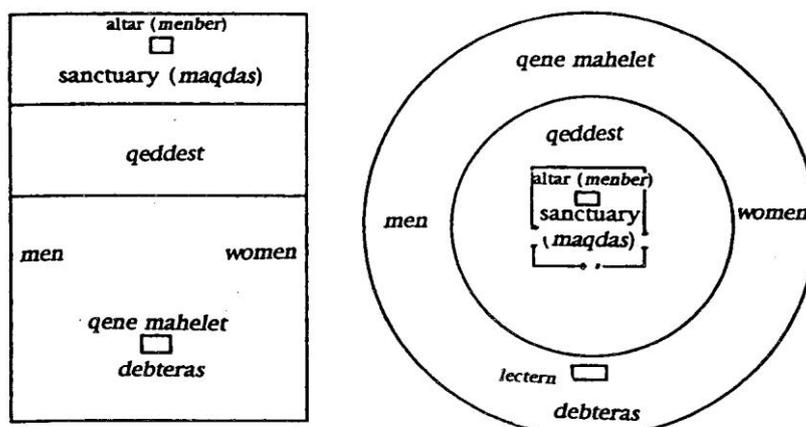
Holy Communion: Ethiopians receive the Eucharist through consecrated bread and wine. But the access to the Eucharist liturgy is extremely limited and highly controlled. Only the ones pure enough can receive the Eucharist. To be allowed to participate, one can observe usually many rules aiming at purify his soul. So usually, only few people can participate to the Eucharist liturgy (children, old peoples, priests and monks). The main part of the audience during the mass stays outside the church, in the compound.



Ethiopian Churches: The Ethiopian orthodox churches propose different shapes for churches. Since the 16th century ca., in Ethiopia, we can find round churches and rectangular churches.

The round-shaped churches represent the more common form. This is a circular church. Inside, two concentric aisles encircle the central square sanctuary, the central part of the church. These different parts of the churches reflect different steps from the profane space toward the more sacred space.

Shapes of Ethiopian Churches¹:



In fact, an Ethiopian church starts with the wall of the compound of the church. People who have blood on them cannot enter into the compound of the church. Basically, it concerns the menstruated women. After, people who want to enter the church have to be spiritually prepared and pure enough. If you enter in a church for the mass, you will receive the Eucharist and so you have to be pure. That why the majority of the faithful stays outside, in the compound of the church during the mass. If you are pure enough, you have to stay in the gene mahlet (place for the singers): The outer aisle; The inner aisle, called the qeddest (the holy), is the place where the priests distribute the Eucharist to the faithful. Only the priests are allowed to enter in the mäqdäs (sanctuary).

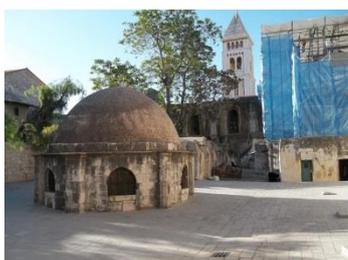
¹ From: Chaillot, C., 2002, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition*, Paris, p. 207.

The rectangular churches are more common in the northern part of Ethiopia. This is the rectangular version of the circular plan. The mäqdäs is located at the east end of the rectangular space and the qeddest and the qene mahlet are located beyond. Also, many times, there is a raised part of the roof create a lantern for the sanctuary. Here again the nave does not exist really.

In the sanctuary is located the most sacred thing you can find in Christian Ethiopia: the tabot. The tabot is a tablet made of wood or stone on which is engraved the name of the saint to whom the church is dedicated. The Eucharist is consecrated on this tablet. The tabot is a reflection of the tablet found in the Ark of the Covenant. For several ceremonies, the tabot of the churches are carried in procession.

The sites belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem

Dar es-Sultan monastery: located on the roof of the Armenian chapel dedicated to St. Helena, Holy Sepulcher. This is the older Ethiopian settlement in Jerusalem, from the 13th cent. at the latest.



It consists of about 20 small monastic cells, a refectory, a sacristy, and a betä lehem, where bread for the Eucharist is prepared. In the middle of the monastery courtyard stands the dome of the St. Helena Chapel, around which the liturgical processions take place.

The ownership right of Ethiopians over Dar es-Sultan monastery is contested by Coptic authorities, such as the right to use the two chapels attached to it: Chapel of the Four Living Creatures, and the Chapel of St. Michael.

The archbishop's residence located in Ethiopian monastery street, Old City. This house was bought in 1876 by the German Johann Frutiger and he gave it to the Ethiopians as waqf property. But this house was rented by the Ethiopians to other institutions like the Sisters of Charity until 1891. The inscription above the entrance door to the chapel in the house states in fact that the Ethiopians did not take possession of the house until 1891:



“This property was bought by King Yohannes of Ethiopia, with his own money and he gave it to the Ethiopian monks who are living in Jerusalem, let him be guided to the kingdom of skies, Amen, 1883 Year of Mercy”.

Däbrä Gännät monastery: located in Jerusalem West, so-called Ethiopian Compound. The plot was bought in 1880 by King Yohannes IV. The building process started in 1884 and was finished in 1896 during the time of King Menelik II. The inscription in ge'ez on the gate of the church reads:

“The Lion of Juda hath conquered, Menelik II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, 1889”.



The church is a round-shaped church, dedicated to Mary (under the name Kidanä Mehrät, “Pact of Mercy”). The monastery itself is called Däbrä Gännät, Mount Paradise. Between 30 and 40 monks are living there today.

General overview of the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem

Oldest mention of Ethiopians in Jerusalem: 13th century (sources: Pilgrims’ narratives)

From the 16th to the 19th cent.: the Ethiopian community declined and conflict with Coptic authorities concerning the ownership of Dar es-Sultan.

In middle 19th cent.: The Ethiopian community was not considered as an independent community, so it was under the authority of other communities: Coptic or/and Armenian.

- Few Ethiopian in Dar es-Sultan
- Poor economic situation: food given by Armenian authorities
- Coptic authorities kept the keys of the monastery of Dar es-Sultan and locked Ethiopians there during the night.
- Plague of 1838 killed all Ethiopians

1850-1900: Ethiopian rulers attempts to find a “protector” in Jerusalem: British, French, Russian and Italian are approached. But it is not clear yet by whom Ethiopian were protected during the investigated period.

1880-1900: Building process in Jerusalem

1890-1970: Coptic authorities definitively locked the two chapels of Dar es-Sultan and forbade to Ethiopians for using them.

1929-30: Creation of an Ethiopian consulate.

All previous studies concerning the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem focus on the Dar es-Sultan problem. There is a great lack of information concerning the community, its size, its legal status and its involvement in Jerusalem life for the period 1840-1940.

Ethiopian archives in Ethiopia

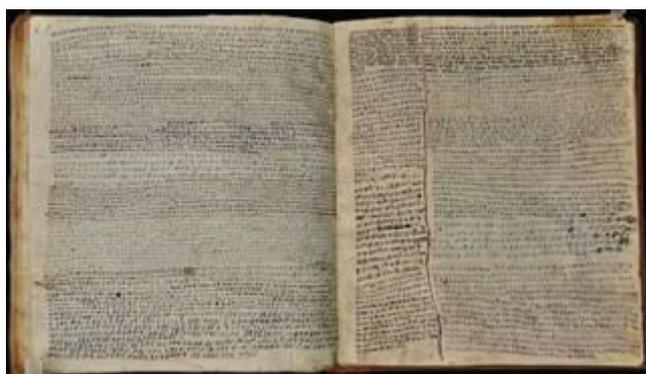
My work in Hamburg: researcher for the ERC-funded project called “Ethio-SPaRe”. This project aims at registering, photographing and cataloguing the Ethiopian parchment manuscripts found in churches in Ethiopia. Still today, the main part of the parchment manuscripts in Ethiopia is kept by the clergy in each parish church and monastery. We do not know yet how many are they. In focusing on one region only, during four years, we could photograph more than 2 000 manuscripts totally unknown.



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In Ethiopia, parchment manuscripts have been replaced by printed books only during the second half of the 20th century. The first printing press appeared in Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century (in a Catholic institution). For example King Menelik II (1889-1913) still used a royal scriptorium for the production of administrative documents.

In each Orthodox church present in Ethiopia one can find manuscript parchments produced during the 19th and the 20th centuries. These codices have a particularity: on the blank leaves, information concerning the parish life can be found. All legal documents were copied on the blank leaves of the parchment manuscripts: it was the way how to register different types of documents like contracts, land charters, rents, letters, etc.



Example of marginalias written on the blank leaves of a parchment manuscript (Gospels)

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Example of a contract written on the blank leaf of a manuscript (see finger prints)



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A letter of 1905 copied on a blank leaf of a Gospel book

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So the registration of documents or events in specific books or files did not exist in Ethiopia at the beginning of the 20th century. That is why the Ethiopian archives are usually in very poor condition.

Ethiopian archives in Jerusalem

The archives of the Ethiopian community pose specific questions. At first, we can consider that the clergy continues to copy on the blank leaves of the codices all types of documents concerning the community. But, we can also think that they were influenced by other communities and established a new way of registration of documents and information. For example, the registers of baptism have been not used in Ethiopia until the second half of the 20th century. But in Jerusalem, all the communities used them as a way to show to the municipality the number of their members.

Unfortunately, we have only few information concerning archives of the Ethiopian community of Jerusalem, and all concern only the parchment manuscripts:

According to a survey done during the 1970's:

In Däbrä Gännät monastery: 162 manuscripts can be found.

Dar es-Sultan monastery: 33 manuscripts

Ethiopian Patriarchate: 569 manuscripts. A part of them was microfilmed and shortly described in 1990.

Armenian Patriarchate: 11 manuscripts.

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate: 19 manuscripts.

Except this, we have for the moment no information concerning the Ethiopian archives in Jerusalem: where are they? Which types of documents are present?