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ETHIOPIAN MONASTICISM

1. Introduction

Man is a religious creature from the beginning of his existence. I have purposely used the term creature and not being in order to emphasize man's godly origin which is the essence of christian doctrine. It is this monoteistic religion which has played the most significant role in forming this unique culture, not only of the African continent but the whole christian world. In Ethiopia – one of the first christian countries in the world – the place of St. Matthew's martyrdom, testified by Church¹ tradition, this faith has remained in its primordial form as the dominating one in this area of the African continent, not submitting to the destructive force of the Moslem invasion of VII and XVI century. This phenomenon can be associated with the fact, that unlike the other ancient christian countries of the Black Continent: Roman North Africa, Egipt or Nubia, christianity was strongly rooted in the Ethiopian people. The cause of this may be found in the powerful monastic movement, whose remnants can be traced back to the second half of IV century and are found in the inaccessible mountainous region of Met'era² of the then Axum Kingdom – at the present in Eritrea. The powerfulness of the movement is asserted by historical facts such as: the rule of emperors Ell Amīd, Kalēb and Gebre Mesk'el³ – V-VI c., the restoring of the Salomonian Dynasty in XIII c. – when monks raised to enthroned Yikunno Amalak of Shewa, heroic defence of faith during the jihad against the christian empire in XIVc. – dethroning of Emperor Susiniyos atested by numerous cases of martyrdom of monks and the dislodging of catholic misiionary men in XVIIc. And the ousting of Emperor Lij Iyasu⁴ famous for his promoslem empathy. Monasticism in Ethipia is widely respected in modern times and reveals itself in many callings among all social classes, which I witnessed in person during my six-month stay on the turn of 1998.

¹ The Acts of the Apostles 8, 26-40 assert the fact of the coming of this religion here

² The rules of transcription according to Normalization Gud. Transliteration System for Amharic BGN/PCGN 1967 System..., Dept. Of State and the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, April 1, 1972.

³ During his rule sacral music emerged, created by St. Yarēd – a great hymnographer and the inventor of the first musical notation in the world

⁴ He was dethroned and excommunicated by Abuna on 27th September 1916. It was a result of great discontent of monks and clergy, ready to start an uprising in order to remove him from throne.

2. Monasticism

The term monasticism is derived from the Greek word *monos* – single. It is a form of leaving the world, in order to discard in solitude all desires and their temptations and then devote oneself to pursuing inner perfection. This type of withdrawal from society is not exceptionally particular of christianity, one can also find it in other religions for instance hinduism, buddism and judaism. However the peculiarity of christian monasticism differs it in a distinctive way from this form in other religions. Father Marian Kanior of the Benedictinian Order convent in Tyniec gives a very intelligible description of this phenomenon in his book⁵. According to him "monasticism is a specific form of inner life, emerging spontaneously, and not in the way of gradual development from some prior, more general form of spiritual life. ...[It] is a prime form of monastic life in Church and up to now the only form of living sacrificed to God and hails back to the early centuries of christianity. the basic principles of such living formed in the Patristic period [...] ...[In depth] studies show that monasticism, up to a certain point, is the continuation of the living of the first christian community, known to us from the Acts of the Apostles."⁶ The idea of monasticism stemmed from asceticism, practiced by the members of first christian communities. Numerous evidence of this is provided by the Acts of the Apostles and Letters of St. Paul. The first christians "spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and prayers. All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts."⁷ "The group of believers was one in mind and heart. No one said that any of his belongings was his own, but they all shared with one another everything they had. There was no one in the group who was in need. Those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale, and hand it over to the apostles, and the money was distributed to each one according to his need."⁸ Apostles' idea, their disciples', first believers', ascetics' and then monks' was to propagate the godliness and teachings of Christ with reference to the scriptures of the Old Testament, as the ones which testified about Him long before his coming. And such prophets as Moses⁹, Samuel¹⁰, Elijah¹¹,

⁵ M. KANIOR, *Historia monastycyzmu chrześcijańskiego*. T. 1: *Starożytność (wiek III-VIII)*, Kraków: Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne - UNUM, 1993.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

⁷ Acts 2, 42 and 44-46

⁸ Acts 4, 32 and 34-35

⁹ He abided in the divine presence on various mountains, experienced the desert, persisted in prayer and God gave the law pertaining to the vow of nasireat – it became a model for ascetics and later monks: I Moses 3, 1-22; I Moses 16, 10; I Moses 17, 4-6; I Moses 19, 1-25; I Moses 24, 1-18; I Moses 33, 18-23; I Moses 34, 2-9; IV Moses 1,1; IV Moses 6, 1-21; IV Moses 20, 1-13 and 22-29; V Moses 1, 1-8; V Moses 2, 1; V Moses 4, 10-14; V Moses 5, 1-6; V Moses 19, 15-16; V Moses 27, 11-13; V Moses 32, 48-52 and V Moses 34, 1.

Eleazar¹², as well as John the Babtist¹³ (of the New Testament) were examples to follow. However the highest example to follow was Jesus. His followers try to presist in a 40 day fast¹⁴, in prayer in isolation¹⁵ and implement His evangelic words calling for purity of the heart¹⁶, poverty¹⁷, acceptance of discrimination against and suffering¹⁸, renouncement of those near and dear¹⁹ and love of one's neighbour²⁰. The device of this type of life were the words of Christ: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life. But many who know are first will be last, and many who know are last will be first."²¹; "... Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me."²²; "... Love your enemias and do good to them; lend and expect nothing back. You will then have a great reward, and you will be sons of the Most High God. For he is good to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your father is merciful."²³ and "... And so I tell you not to worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is much more important than food, and the body much more important than the clothes. So don't be all upset, always concerned what you will eat and drink. (For the pagans of this world are always concerned about all these things.) Your Father knows that you need these things."²⁴. Paul the Apostle encouraged first christians to live in celibacy²⁵, presistence in

¹⁰ He was dedicated to God from the moment of his birth by Hannah – his mother: I Sam. 1, 1-20; dedicated to Lord's service: I Sam. 21-27; he was a Nazarethian from the moment of his birth: I Sam. 1, 11b; God appeared to him and made him his prophet; Sam. 3, 1-21

¹¹ He was God's prophet – the most unusual of all the prophets who was fed by ravens: I Kgs 17, 37; because of who God judged the prophets of Baal: 18, 20-40; who took shelter in the desert; I Kgs 19, 1-7; who climbed Mount Horeb, where he received Lord's instructions: 19, 8-14; who called Elijah to be his disciple and successor: I Kgs 19, 19-21; who, most likely, was a Nazarethian: II Kgs 1, 8; and who was taken to heaven: II Kgs 2, 1-12.

¹² Who continues the glorious work of Elijah, who he succeeded: II Kgs 2, 13-8, 14.

¹³ Mt 3, 1-17; Mt 11, 2-19; Mk 1, 1-13; Lk 3, 1-22; Lk 7, 18-35 and Jn 1, 15 i 19-34, and 3, 22-30.

¹⁴ Mt 4, 2; Mk. 1, 13 i Lk. 4, 1.

¹⁵ Mt. 6, 6; Mt. 14, 13 i 23; Mt. 15,29; Mt. 17, 1-13; Mt. 26, 36-46; Mk. 6, 46; Mr. 9, 2-13; Mr. 14, 32-42; Lk. 9, 28-36 i Lk. 22, 39-46.

¹⁶ Mt. 5, 8.

¹⁷ Mt. 5, 3 i 42; Mt. 6, 19-20 i 34; Mt. 19, 21; Lk. 11, 33-34; Lk. 12,33; Jn 6, 27 i Jn 12, 25

¹⁸ Mt. 5, 10-12; Mt. 10, 17-25 i 28; Mt. 24, 3-31; Mk. 13, 3-27; Lk. 21, 728 i Jn 16, 1-15.

¹⁹ Mt. 10, 37; Mt. 19, 29; Lk. 14, 16-17, 20 i 24; Lk. 14, 26 i Lk. 18, 29-30.

²⁰ Mt. 5, 43-48; Mt. 19, 19; Mt. 22, 34-40; Mk. 12, 28-34; Lk. 6, 27-36; Jn 13, 34-35 i Jn 15, 9 i 17.

²¹ Mt. 19, 29-30

²² Mk. 10, 21b

²³ Lk. 6, 35-36

²⁴ Lk. 12, 22-23 i 29-30

²⁵ I Cor. 7, 1, 29, 33-34 i 38-40

prayer²⁶ and contemplation of the Scriptures²⁷. When in 313 the Milano Edict was announced by Constantine, and many superficially converted, self-interested people entered Church, while the clergy began to pay less attention to living in accordance with the strict teachings of the apostles and martyrs, often preoccupied with strengthening the new position of the Church in the contemporary world, a powerful social movement was born encompassing, above all, laymen assuming the way of extremely radical following of Christ through renouncing material goods, withdrawal into seclusion to contemplate the Word of God and prayer, following the humility and the cross of Christ and making expiatory sacrifice. A movement which I would describe as reforming and introducing new quality into Church. This new quality was the so called "bloodless martyrdom" That spiritual martyrdom, being the fruit of christian asceticism through poverty, fast, voluntary renouncement of the world, patient bearing of hardships and humiliations, sacrifice for one's brothers and constant prayer could be put at par with martyrdom. In contrast with martyrs, who shed their blood for their faith, those people, without this sacrifice, faithfully fulfilled Lord's Commandments, sustaining their renouncement in the isolation of the desert throughout their lives.²⁸ Egypt is generally recognised as the birthplace of monasticism, but its oldest traces dated at IVc. Are also found in Palestine²⁹, Syria³⁰, Asia Minor³¹, Armenia³², Georgia³³, Constantinople³⁴, Greece³⁵, Mesopotamia³⁶ and Ethiopia³⁷

²⁶ Rom. 12, 12; Eph. 6, 18; Phil. 4, 6; Col. 4, 2; I Thes. 2, 8 i I Thes. 5, 17

²⁷ Rom. 15, 4 i Eph. 6, 17;

²⁸ See T. KACZMAREK, "Idealy życia pustelniczego w IV wieku", in: *Wczesnochrześcijańska asceza. Zagadnienia wybrane*, edited by: F. Drączkowski, J. Pałucki, Lublin: KUL 1993, 59-71.

²⁹ St. Hilarion of Gaza (291-371) and St. Chariton (+ approx. 350). Information taken from M. KANIOR, *Historia monastycyzmu chrześcijańskiego*, op. cit., 105-106.

³⁰ "from the beginning of IVth c. anchorite life emerged and developed"; "According to the historian Sozomen, already at the beginning of IVth c. a group of monks lived near Edessa. Monk Julian was their superior. Other historians relate, that a man by the name of Eugene was the first founder of monastic life in Syria." – see as above p. 116 and 124-125.

³¹ "Thanks to monks' work monastic life and monasteries emerged in Kurdistan where Christianity developed." – *ibid.*, 131

³² "In the period of the expansion of monasticism and intensive activity of the monks Christianity and monasticism reached Armenia, Georgia and even India." – *ibid.* 131

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ "In the area of Constantinople monastic life emerged in 351-360 together with the heresy of Macedonians claiming that the Holy Ghost was created by the Holy Son." – *ibid.* 139.

³⁵ Proper Greece from IVth c. was influenced by Constantinople, Cappadocia and Asia Minor.

³⁶ "In North-West Mesopotamia (Osroene) the first known monk, who sought communal life was Julian Saba" – *ibid.*, 116-117 and 130.

³⁷ Monasteries of the Met'rea region – information: HAGOS GÄBRÄ MARYAM, *Monastic life in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, typescript B.Th. 39 p., Addis Ababa University.

3. A Short Historical Sketch of Ethiopian Monasticism

According to Hagos Gäbrä Maryam³⁸ Ethiopian monasticism is not a faithful image of the style of living of Egyptian eremites, for it has reached Ethiopia through Syrian and Greek monks. Yet it remains an indisputable truth that Egyptian influence has been strongly affecting Ethiopian monasticism.

The movement appeared in Ethiopia suddenly and already in V c. A significant number of hermits were present, living according to much stricter rules than their Egyptian counterparts. Those rigorous principles have formed the individual character of this monastic movement, whose evolution process was slow and long lasting.

In Ethiopia this Christian lifestyle, constituting of a peculiar combination of Syrian, Greek and Egyptian patterns possesses its own character. Despite the fact that we can locate all three forms of monasticism: anachoretic, eremitic and coenobitic the latter two have been playing the most significant role.

Almost all our knowledge on this movement comes from the lives of the indigenous monks and oral monastic tradition, which are still meticulously nursed by monastic congregations. I myself recorded them on tape while visiting Ethiopian monasteries³⁹

According to the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the first group of monks who arrived in the Axum Kingdom were Tsadik'an⁴⁰ – holy men from the territory of the East Roman Empire – Byzantium. They settled in the region of Met'era, presently part of Eritrea. An area characterised by virtual inaccessibility for outsiders. We ought to remember that Ethiopian territory was a perfect location for future monasteries for monks who sought locus where they could dedicate themselves to undisturbed contemplation. Additionally, mountains' nature was regarded by monks – in accordance with the message of the Old and New Testament⁴¹ as a place of God's presence. Church tradition ascribes those Men of God the founding of the Maryam Debretsina monastery⁴² in Eritrea. Although these monks lived in total isolation they conducted missionary work among the pagan people of Benamir, living in the vicinity of their monastery. According to Hagos Gäbrä Maryam, the monastery keeps manuscripts mentioning the names of some of those monks, who are deemed as the founders of the earliest monasteries in Ethiopia, long before the arrival of the nine saints. And so Abba Yohannis was the founder of the Atsgede

³⁸ HAGOS GÄBRÄ MARYAM, *op. cit.*

³⁹ I have personally recorded the history of the Debre Libanos, Istifanos, Zur Amba monasteries and the churches in Ankober.

⁴⁰ Just, blessed. A quite different opinion on those just ones is presented by Tadesse Tamrat, who in his book titled *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (Oxford : University Press 1972) on p. 5 relates the Guidi, Kramer and Conti Rossini's opinion that they allegedly came together with the nine saints at the end of Vth c. from Syria in the result of the persecution of Monophysites.

⁴¹ The following mountains appear in the Old Testament: Horeb, Sinai, Ebal, Carmel, Nebo and Zion, the New Testament mentions: Tabor, Mount of Olives and Golgota.

⁴² According to Hagos Gäbrä Maryam it is a cave type church – washä bêtékristīyan – chiselled in rock and consisting of three parts. The monastery exists till today, and in the times of the Empire was deemed the second well-organised monastery.

Bek'la monastery⁴³ Another one of the saints – Abba Lībanos, the contemporary of St. Pachomius, came from Egypt to Ethiopia with a letter of credentials deposing him to monastic life in solitude. He founded the Debre Lībanos monastery in the region of Ham. His fellow monks were supposed to convert the pagans of Tigrē. Debre Lībanos was the cradle of many scholars of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It was built on the foundations of a pre-Christian temple. The convent was famous for its miraculous spring, which attracted in the medieval times an uncounted mass of pilgrims. It enjoyed a privileged position in Ethiopia until the end of XIII c.. The rulers from the Zagwe dynasty supported the monastery with numerous donations. When during the rivalry between a ruler of the Zagwe dynasty and Yikunno Amlak the monks took the side of the former and soon Yikunno Amlak restored the "Solomon" dynasty, it lost its privileged position to the benefit of the Debre Damo monastery, which supported the side of the Shewan king in this conflict.

Nine saints came to Ethiopia from the territory of Byzantine Empire. And so, according to the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is based upon the oral tradition of the lives of the saints Abba Alēf hailed from Cesaria, Abba Aregawī (Zemīkaēl) from Constantinople, Abba Aftsē from Asia Minor, Abba Līk'anos from Constantinople, Abba Gerīma from Constantinople, Abba Gubba from Cylitia, Abba Yimatta from Cosia, Abba P'ent'elēwon from Constantinople and Abba Tishima from Antioch. They founded numerous monasteries existing up to the present day. Abba Aftsē took shelter in an old pagan temple in Yeha, which he converted into a Christian church⁴⁴ Abba P'ent'elēwon, who lived in the outskirts of the city of Axum, established a small church built of stone surviving to the present. It is located on a mountain top near the road from Adwa to Axum. Abba Līk'anos founded a small stone church also in the suburbs of Axum which is situated on a hill in a close distance from the "Queen Saba's swimming pool". There is the Abba Gerīma monastery in the neighbourhood of Adwa, which assumed the name of its founder. The walls of this monastery protect two manuscripts of the Gospel written in unknown alphabet. According to the lives of the saints dedicated to this holyman, both the books were written by the holy monk in one day. In order to achieve this Abba Gerīma performed the miracle of stopping the sun to be able to accomplish the task in peace. Abba Yimatta was supposed to be the founder of a cave church in the vicinity of the town of Guh in the Ger'alta mountains in the Tigray province. The church bore the name of its founder. Abba Aregawī established the most renowned monastery of the period, which is widely respected even today. Before his coming to Ethiopia, he was a monk of the Pachomian monastery in Thebes. When he reached the Axum Kingdom he walked across the most inaccessible regions around Axum and Yeha before he found a place fitting his requirements. Yet the plateau he chose for establishing the monastery was beyond reach for humans, God sent him a gigantic snake, on whose back he managed to climb the height of Debre Damo where one of the most important monastic abodes was erected. The monastery remained a large centre of Church studies throughout the Middle Ages. Debre Damo has one of the richest Church libraries and its

⁴³ The monastery – as the monks claim – was supposed to be established as the second in Ethiopia. It was destroyed in the second half of XVIIth c. during a Moslem invasion.

⁴⁴ A certain hypothesis comes to my mind whether those ruins of a monolithic church in Yeha described in the article A.F. MATTHEW (*The Monolithic Church of Yekka, Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, VII, 1969, no. 2) do not refer to this very church. The monuments of this period are mainly monolithic and cave churches.

monks were widely known as excellent copyists preparing manuscripts of outstanding beauty with rich illuminations. The monks of this monastery played a key role in the struggle against heretics during internal dispute. Nowadays it is the most frequently visited by tourists monastery in Ethiopia. The arrival of those saints contributed to the development of liturgy and literature in the classical Ethiopian language – gi'iz. The greatest contribution made by them was the translating of the Bible into the Ethiopian language. Most probably it was translated from Greek and the base used to translate the books of the Old Testament was Septuaginta. According to Church tradition the work was started by Frumentius – the first metropolitan of Ethiopia. The translating of the collection of dogmatic treatises and the sermons of the Fathers of the Church by St. Cyril – the Patriarch of Alexandria, which is known as K'irilos after his name. Their other translations include: *The Life of St. Anthony* by St. Atanasius and *Ascetic Rules* by Pachomius. The latter became a constituting element for many a monastic congregation in Ethiopia. It is worthwhile to mention that their arrival in hugely influenced sacral art and architecture. Syrian architectural patterns can be traced in the ruins of the churches hailing from the period in Axum, Adulis and Hawilti.

VI century signifies not only the development of the monastic movement in Ethiopia but also sacral music. St. Yarēd (505-571?)⁴⁵ is deemed to be the first composer, church hymnographer and the creator of the notation consisting of eight notes: ይዘት, ደረት, ርከርከ, ድፋት, ጭረት, ቅናት, ሂደት and ቁርጥ and introduced the use of musical instruments during services. According to Sergew Hable Selassie, Yarēd was allegedly a disciple of Abba Aregawi⁴⁶. After having composed his musical pieces he was supposed to wander for 11 years stopping at churches to teach music and sacral singing. He spent the remaining part of his life as a hermit, living in a secluded cave. The foundations of sacral music laid by St. Yarēd were a representation of the tradition of the Old Testament. If we carefully listen to synagogical songs and scrutinize the kinds of instruments⁴⁷ used by the most prominent hymnographer of the Old Testament – King David, the resemblance will become obvious.

During the rule of emperors Kalēba and Gebre Mesk'ela monasticism is not only gaining strength within the area of today's Eritrea and Tigray, but through the monks of the Axum Kingdom it is spread into the hilly area of Lasta, the Western bank of the Lake T'ana, Angot and, most probably, in the Nubian Kingdom of Aola⁴⁸. Numerous monasteries are established in Agamē and Tembēn⁴⁹, the renown Zur Amba monastery – located on the boundary of the Gonder province – Wello, where, behind the walls, church scholarship is developed.

⁴⁵ According to the article ግህሌተደ ያሬድ የፈጠራ ሰው 505-571, the title and the date of issue of this article are unknown to me as I only have a photocopy of it.

⁴⁶ See SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE, "The Expansion and Consolidation of Christianity", in: *The Church of Ethiopia. A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*, (A Publication of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), AddisAbaba 1997, 9.

⁴⁷ Harp -በገና, zither - ከራር, drum -ከበር, sistrum - ጸናጽል, flute - ዋሽንት and cymbals. These instruments are mentioned in the fragments of the Old Testament: Ps. 150

⁴⁸ See TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia, op. cit.*, 30

⁴⁹ One of the founders of monasteries in this region was Abba Kīros, who lived in Vith c. hailing from the city of Rome – most likely it was Constantinople because the name Romē – Rome is used to describe the capital city of the Western Roman Empire by some of the Ethiopian manuscripts. These information was taken from *Gedle Abba Kīros* and is part of local tradition, which I overheard during my stay in Ethiopia.

We have very few preserved accounts regarding the spreading of Christianity in Ethiopia, whose most dedicated propagators were monks supported by Axum rulers and the metropolitan together with the clergy. This is caused by the scarcity of sources hailing from that period along with the chronological conflict of reports of the church tradition, later manuscripts and Moslem writings. The accounts mention the construction of monumental Christian temples such as the famous Debre Igziābhēr Church. It was supposed to be located in the southeast of Lake Hayk'. And the magnificent city of Kubar may have become the new capital of the Axum State at the end of VIII c. Since it is mentioned in the Arabic writings of IX c. The Christian tradition locates this city somewhere in the Agnot region, north of Lake Hayk'.⁵⁰

I am ready to risk putting forward a new hypothesis on the subject of this period, according to which there must have existed a well-organised education system in the prominent monastic centres at that time, which produced a significant number of missionary men who ventured not only to the boundary areas within the kingdom but also beyond it. This led in the following centuries to the arising of appropriate climate among the competing rulers of the Zagwe dynasty in the Lasta region and Shewan princes for the hegemony in Ethiopia. In order for the conflict to take place Christianity must have already had its supporters among the elites of the local power. The Ethiopian tradition, which the rulers of the Shewan dynasty based in XIII or XIV c. On the most significant work of the Ethiopian literature – *Kibre Negest*, speaks in support of this hypothesis. I suppose that a definite answer to this question could be given only after an in depth archaeological research and a detailed analysis of the Ethiopian monastic writings, which at the present level of knowledge and abilities will not take place in near future. In order for this to happen, a broad cooperation among the ethiopists, preoccupied with this matter from the side of the Ethiopian Government as well as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is needed. The Church and State authorities must realise that opening in this matter may lead to great enriching of our common European – Ethiopian Christian tradition.

The rulers of the Zagwe dynasty (XII – XIII c.)⁵¹ substantially contributed to the development and spreading of monasticism. Some of them were canonized⁵² by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The ruler of this dynasty who initiated the building of monolithic churches of this period was supposed to be Yimirha Kristos, who was ordained priest before his coronation. At that time a large number of monks from outside of the kingdom come to Ethiopia, they are called Romans by *Gedle Yimirha Kristos*. After the triumphant capturing of Jerusalem in 1189 by Salah-al-Din, Ethiopians ruled over many holy places⁵³ From that time the number of Ethiopian pilgrims to the Holy Ground increased. Most likely the majority of them were monks. This fact is asserted by the Ethiopian lives of the saints. The most powerful ruler of the time – Lalibela is credited with the founding of 11 monolithic churches in the then capital of the country – Roha, now called – after his

⁵⁰ See TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 35-37.

⁵¹ Dating according to *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 53-68. X-XIIIth c. is more often assumed to be the period of rule of this dynasty.

⁵² Yimirha Kristos, Lalibela, Ne'akuto Le'ab and Yitbarek. The chronicles were devoted to their lives. Compare with TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, p. 54 footnote 3.

⁵³ See TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 58.

name – Lalībela. As the XIXth. century author of the account of his life writes, he was supposed to be taken to heaven in his sleep by an angel and show him those temples whose faithful replicas he was to erect on Earth by the order of God himself. The first church was supposed to be Bēte Medhane Alem – the largest church with 72 columns. The group of churches chiselled from single blocks of rock consisted of: Bēte Maryam, Bēte Sina (Bēte Mīkaēl), Bēte Golgota, Bēte Mesk'el and Bēte Dingil. Another group was: Bēte Gabriēl and Bēte Abba Metai⁵⁴. The next group was: Bēte Merk'uryos and Bēte Ēmanuēl. The last church, which stood away from this group, was Bēte Gīyorgīs.⁵⁵ Lalībela's son – Yitbarek may have been the founder of the monastery bearing his name and located in Mekane Setwa in Tigray⁵⁶. The first church built on the height of Gishen, which is in the shape of an even-armed cross, had been already built in XII c. by Lalībela and the prison for royal-blooded princes was established therein by Yimirha Kristos⁵⁷.

After Yikunno Amlak came to power, a special period of magnificence of the monastic movement started. Around 1270 he made a pact with the clergy known as the Year of the Holy Covenant, it took place shortly before his coronation. In result of this treaty the Church gained ownership over 1/3 of the land of the empire. These land endowments were a token of gratitude for the broad support that he received from the clergy – especially monastic one. Tekle Haymanot together with the monks of the Debre Asbo⁵⁸ monastery established by him in Shewa, Iyesus Moa together with the monks from the Ist'īfanos⁵⁹ monastery established by him in the Lake Hayk', monks from Debre Damo (which I have mentioned before) and Abune Ciril himself all had a substantial share in this field. In this period monasteries emerge in the south of the Shewa province which was, most probably, caused by the shift of the centre of power from Lasta to Shewa⁶⁰. The XIIIth century monastery on the mountain of Zik'wala established by Abba Gebre Menfes K'iddus, a place of annual pilgrimages (on the saint's day) is a good example. I took part in person in the celebrations there 15th October 1998. In the same period new titles are created: Ichegē⁶¹, whose adobe becomes the Debre Asbo monastery and Akabē seat⁶² hailing from the Ist'īfanos monastery. Both the titles were reserved for Ethiopian monks

⁵⁴ Most likely the person in question is Abba Lībanos, although I have come across this name for the first time despite spending 10 days in Lalībela and its surroundings.

⁵⁵ See R.K.P. PANKHURST, *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, Oxford University Press, 1967, 8-12.

⁵⁶ Compare TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 63, footnote 4.

⁵⁷ See *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 275, footnote 3.

⁵⁸ Later named Debre Lībanos

⁵⁹ In Tadesse Tamrat's *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 67, 72-73, 158-168, 203, 215, 223-225 and 272 he is called Debre Hayk'

⁶⁰ The north part of the Shewa region - Tegulet becomes the adobe of the monarch - A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii*, second edition (corrected and supplemented), Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1987, 47.

⁶¹ The head of Ethiopian monks, position always occupied by the abbot of the Debre Asbo monastery – later named Debre Libasos. Tekle Haymanot was the first Ichegē.

⁶² The priest yielding this authority had the right of settling religious disputes in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, issuing legal verdicts and regulated schedule of the day in the Emperor's court. The title belonged to the monks of the Ist'īfanos monastery on Lake Hayk' Iyesus Moa was the first Akabe seat.

unlike the title of Metropolitan who was a Copt. It is worthwhile to mention here that from that time the Debre Asbo monastery begins to play a leading role in Ethiopia, here, the most important doctrine of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – tewahido⁶³ was created.

According to Getachew Haile Ethiopian Church was never doctrinally homogeneous and the person, whose authority united all monastic congregations into one organism was the Metropolitan. The authority of Abuna was derived from the fact, that he held the highest and undisputable office within the Church, which ordained priest and deacon emphasizing the apostolic continuity. Also the authority of the emperor in this matter played an important role. This was due to the fact, that under his shelter and protection monks of various rules could act without obstacles from the non-Christian peoples and count on support and subsidy from him and his magnates, who, in order to gain their goodwill, multiplied their land property⁶⁴

Omitting small monastic groups living according to their rules, from XIVth c. starts the rivalry between the main groupings representing the following orders: the Ist'ifanos monastery from the island on Lake Hayk', the Debre Asbo monastery, the Debre Lībanos monastery of Ham and Debre Bīzen⁶⁵ monastery in Eritrea. These groupings of monks often plotted against each other, in the result of which Emperor Dawīt I (1328-1414) lost throne, as he strongly supported the monks of the Eustachian rule from Debre Bīzen⁶⁶. The device of these monks was to live in hardship and hard work. Thank to these qualities those monks were rich, obedient and well disciplined. They were renown for the art of smelting iron for the needs of construction and pottery⁶⁷. " From the beginning of its existence the monastery has gained fame for the struggle with the Moslems from the coast. Later, thanks to friendly relations, which it maintained with the Moslem governors of the islands of Dhalak, Debre Bīzen [became] for Ethiopia a very important point in maintaining contacts with the coast"⁶⁸. This rivalry had its positive aspects. And so the monks of the Ist'ifanos monastery of Lake Hayk' conducted the task of evangelism of the peoples living to the west of the lake up to the surroundings of Lake T'ana. At the beginning of XIVth c. Ichegē Filip of the Debre Asbo monastery, together with the then Abune Jacob and twelve monks conducted missionary work at large scale. In its course they converted the folk and established monasteries in the regions of Gafat, Damot, Inarīt, Wereb, Lake Zway, reaching the province of Kefa

⁶³ Literally – union – is nowadays the description of the official denomination of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Its followers claim that the two natures of Christ – the divine and the human – has come into being through union, the unanimity of Word and Body, and not through the anointment of Christ with the Holy Ghost. The names of sects – Sost Lidet and Tsega most probably are derived from tewahido – compare A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii*, second edition (corrected and supplemented), Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1987, 486-487.

⁶⁴ GETACHEW HAILE, "The Cause of the Estifanosites: A fundamentalist Sect in the Church of Ethiopia", *Paideuma*, 1983, nr 29, 94-95.

⁶⁵ The founder of which was a disciple of Abba Eustach (1273-1352) of Geralta – Abba Filip (1319-1403) – A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii, op. cit.*, 55

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Information from: HAGOS GÄBRÄ MARYAM, *Monastic life in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, op. cit.*

⁶⁸ *Op. cit.* A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii, op. cit.*, 55

and Balē⁶⁹ One of those twelve monks – Abba Anorēwos was supposed to be the founder of monastic centre in the Wereb region⁷⁰, before that he established the Debre Gol⁷¹ monastery among the small monastic communities in the Amhara which were left behind by Tekle Haymanot. During the feud between Emperor Tsiyon I and Ichege Philip, the latter was banished to Gishen and his fellow monks to Tigray, Dembīya and Begemidir. The outcast monks of Debre Asbo established monasteries in the island of Lake T'ana and the region of Weldibba⁷² The most renowned monastic community for its rigorous rules in Weldibba was Abba Smuel Halleluya's monastery. According to Hagos Gābrā Maryam ascetic life is practiced till today in a few ways. The monks do not eat any other food except dried banana and plant roots. The members of the community are famous for the extreme forms of asceticism. Apart from strict and long lasting fasts, endless prayer coupled with resisting of sleep, he came across a monk who had refrained from conversation for 35 years. The practice of spending time on pillars or sleeping on trees is a widely practised form of asceticism. Meetings for prayer, liturgy and teachings of the abbot are secondary to asceticism. It is characteristic of this monastery that the only newcomers accepted inside are educated and of age. In this period i.e. during the rule of Dawīd I, the Debre Werk' monastery is established by Abba Sertse Pēt'ros in Gojam. However the local monks maintain that the monastery hails from the Axum times and Abba Sertse Pēt'ros was only a restorer⁷³ The monastery was the centre of the doctrine known as kibat⁷⁴

The number of factions and sects begins to increase during the rule of Emperor Isaac (1414-1429) and his successors. This process continues until Zera Yaik'ob (1434-1468)⁷⁵ is enthroned. However, according to Getachew Haile, starting from the rule of Yikunno Amlak's son – Yagbi Tsiyon (Salomon) (1285-1294) a great conflict in the Ethiopian Church took place, in result of which emerged anarchistic monks, who did not want to pay heed to the cross nor the image of Mary maintaining that the painting is only a memorial tablet and the cross – a piece of wood from Golgota. Emperor David was disturbed by the Abba Samuel's movement of the Halleluya monastery. The reason being the rigorous observation of the rules of monastic life and resisting superior power. Finally, as a result of Emperor's crafty manipulation the movement was assimilated with the main stream of Ethiopian monasticism⁷⁶

⁶⁹ See: A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *op. cit.*, 52 and TADDESSE TAMRAT's *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 176-177

⁷⁰ Compare TADDESSE TAMRAT's *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 180-181.

⁷¹ See TADDESSE TAMRAT's, *op. cit.*, 177-178.

⁷² See A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *Historia Etiopii*, *op. cit.*, 54

⁷³ See TADDESSE TAMRAT's *Church and State in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 202-203, footnote 5.

⁷⁴ Literally anointing – description of a denomination of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also called *hulet lidet*, whose centre was the Debre Werk' monastery in Gojama. The monks of that monastery claimed that the unification of the divine and the human nature of Christ took place as a result of anointing, and not the unanimity of both natures. Since XVIIIth c. this sect started playing a significant role in the political arena - See A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *op. cit.*, 484

⁷⁵ See A. BARTNICKI, J. MANTEL-NIEĆKO, *op. cit.*, 484

⁷⁶ See GETACHEW HAILE, "The Cause of the Estifanosites", *op. cit.*, 102.

It is likely that there were other movements within the pale of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but we are not able to reproduce their exact or even approximate number. From among these monastic communities the gnostic Michaelites⁷⁷ and Stephenians⁷⁸ of the Gunda-Gundī monastery. During the rule of Zera Yaik'ob these two "sects" undergo repressions. Apart from them, the emperor openly condemns such teachers of the epoch as ZeMīkaēla and Gamalyala for their pronouncement that *if a man is a murderer, an adulterer, a thief and a sinner then his sins cannot be absolved through worship of any solemn day sacrificed to Our Lady Maria*⁷⁹

In XVth c. Emperor Zera Yaik'ob changes the name of the Debre Asbo monastery to Debre Libanos, erects new churches for instance Debre Birhan and Gishen where he places a relic of the Holy Cross brought from Jerusalem.

Many monasteries are destroyed during the Moslem invasion in XVIth c.

The second half of XVIth c. and the next two centuries (the gonderian period) are the time of full bloom of monastic writing and iconography. In the same time the famous disputes between Ethiopian monks and the Jesuits take place. Emperor Susinios enters a conflict with the clergy depriving them of land and granting it to the Oromo people with

⁷⁷ Most likely they emerged around 1400 and existed till the end of XVIth c. The knowledge about them comes from their own treatises. Most information on Michaelites comes from XV and XVI/XVIIth c. – the period of theological disputes with Portuguese Jesuits. Michaelites as a sect of the gnostic type in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church pronounced the incognizance of God.

⁷⁸ The name Stephanian Movement comes from its founder's name Abbot Stephen (+1438). The Gunda-Gundī monastery was their abode, it was established around 1421, it appears under the names of Keswa (Debre Keswa) and Gerzēn (Debre Gerzēn). The names Gunda Gundī and Keswa come from the names of spring running around the rocky promontory on which the monastery is situated. It is located 1450m above the sea level, 70 km away from the town of Addigrat in the Tigray province. The Stephanians' abode has a very precious library where around 1000 manuscripts are kept in majority uncatalogued and undescribed but extremely important for the study of this religious movement. Information from the Ethiopian sources which pertain to Stephanians and which are derived from outside their circles are: *Old Amharan Royal Songs*, *The Book of Maria's Miracles*, *The life of Zar Abreham*, K'ine written during the rule of Emperor Alexander (1478-1494), *Shortened Chronicles* and a certain document from XVIIIth c. regarding the pilgrimage of Stephanians to Jerusalem. All the breports from outside the Stephanian circle accuse them of not paying heed to Mary, negation of the Cross, repudiation of the Eucharist, a heretic view on the Trinity and embodiment of Christ. They were known as the adversaries of Mary (tsara maryam). The conclusions of researchers who have examined this monastic rule so far are equally inaccurate. The writings of this movement such as: *The Life of Gebre Mesih I*, *The Life of Habte Sillase I*, *The Life of Isaiah* and *The life of GebreKristos* – with which I am familiar, the latter having been translated by me into Polish was the subject of my M.A. dissertation – do not support the accusations and researchers' opinions. According to me – this opinion being based on the writings mentioned above – stephanians opposed the reforms of Emperor Zera Yaik'ob, who intended to unify the doctrinal Ethiopian Church, and meddle with the internal monastic rules, which could be freely formulated and observed before his reign. However they never abolished the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, recognising the superiority of Abune, who ordained them priest expressing apostolic continuity. The persecution which they experienced were most likely caused by the fact that they refused to pay heed to the ruler reserving it exclusively for God and the unfavourable attitude of the fast becoming rich clergy for their reforming activities such as: living from the work of one's own hands, sharing the crops with the ones in need, emphasis on study and observation of the laws of the Holy Scriptures, propagating their ideas beyond the walls of the monastery and charismatic personalities endowed upon them.

⁷⁹ See GETACHEW HAILE, "The Cause of the Estifanosites", *op. cit.*, 97.

intention to gain their support and later converting to Catholicism. Monks along with the rest of the clergy revolt, finally driving him to abdication in 1632 and banishing of catholic missionary men. From that moment the conflict between the two doctrines of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: tewahido and kibat started. It lasts, with no clear outcome, till the end of the second half of XIXth c. when Emperor Menilik II introduces tewahido as the official denomination at the same time allowing the liberty of kibat.

The second half of XIXth c. an the first half of XXth c. is the period of missionary activity of the Ethiopian clergy in the areas annexed to the empire by Minilik II⁸⁰

4. Monastic hierarchy

The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been the head of all the monks since 1959. Before this date this role was assumed by Ichegē – the abbot of the Debre Libanos monastery in Shewa.

The highest title in a monastery is the abbot (*memhir*), who like monks is obliged to observe the monastic rule. He represents the local monastic community before the authorities of the Church as well as the outside world. He serves the monks with teachings, advice and protection and the monks are obliged to take vows of obedience with regards to his person, without the possibility of questioning his authority. The abbot may be forced to justify his decisions before the congregation by the Patriarch or the Bishop of the diocese. He is elected in a totally free way by all the brothers representing the given rule in the area. When the abbey is left without the position of the abbot, the monks gather at a set time for prayer and meditation at the main priory (*bētemahber*). Then they elect the candidate by the majority of votes. This form is most widely spread. The other forms of elections are either by appointing a small commission – three monks, who elect the abbot in the name of the whole community or by appointment of a successor by the retiring abbot as it used to be practised by Stephanians of Gunda-Gundī. The next day after the election a solemn ceremony takes place. The new abbot celebrates Mass in the early morning during which special prayers are said with regards to his position. At the end of the ceremony each monk kneels before the abbot receiving a kiss of peace from him. Stephanians practised crowning of the newly elected abbot during this ceremony.

The second person after the abbot is *megabī* – he is responsible for the internal administration of the monastery and is preoccupied with its economic affairs. He is elected in the way of general election.

The third person is *gual megabī* – he deputizes for *megabi* during his absence.

Gebez (cellarman) – is responsible for food and drink supplies and boarding of the brothers.

Wedīmegabī – cares for the ill and the weak.

⁸⁰ See NEGASO GIDADA, D. CRUMMEY, "The Introduction and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity In Qelem Awraja, Western Wällāga, From About 1886 to 1941", *JES*, X, 1972, no.1, 103-112.

Like khanat (high-priests) – are responsible for conducting Holy Mass and other ceremonies.

Ikabēt (librarian) – is responsible for the maintenance of manuscripts kept inside the church.

Memhran (teachers) – are responsible for teaching the aspiring freshmen.

At the end of this hierarchy are monks – brothers and students – remaining in three-year novitiate.

A separate group of monks are hermits (bahtawyan) – they live in caves (washa) in the vicinity of the monasteries.

5. Everyday Life of the Monastic Community

The most widespread monastic rule in Ethiopian monasticism is the rule of St. Pachomius – an Egyptian monk, who is commonly deemed as the creator of coenobite rule and the author of the first monastic rule⁸¹. Other monastic rules of Ethiopia are based on it.

The everyday garment worn by monks is a yellow robe (megwonatseftya), which is covered by a coat of the same colour (gabī), the head is clad in a cap of the same colour (kofīya). Almost all the monks have a hand cross (usually a wooden one) for blessing the believers, a rosary (mek'ut'irīya) consisting of 41 beads and a prayer book placed in a leather sheath hung over the shoulder.

It is every monk's every day's duty to take part in church ceremonies starting from canonical hours (Seatat) and ending with Congregation Prayer (Tselote Mahber).

The canonical hours start at midnight and lasts till 2 a.m. The whole is sung, only at breaks fragments from *Melkas* and *Maria's Miracles* (*Tamrat Maryam*) are read.

After canonical hours, two priests recite *Prayer of the Myrrah* (*Tselote It'an*), then the *Lord's Prayer* takes place and the recitation of *Apostles' Creed*. Then *Psalms* and *Sinak-sarius* are read. At the end of *Officium* one of the senior monks recites the *Prayer of the Congregation* which consists of prayers for the monastery, the Church, Diocese, government and the country.

Around 6 a.m. each monk indulge to meditation in his own cell. Students are scrutinized by their teachers at that time.

At 9 a.m. each monk preoccupies himself with his daily duties: work in the field, handicraft or reading of manuscripts (this usually pertains to monks of age).

At noon all the monks gather in the churchyard where they devote themselves to rosary and mehlela in absolute silence. The rosary consists of three prayer formulae: 1) እግዚአ ግሥረን ከርሰቶሰ, 2) በእንተ ማርያም ማህረን ከርሰቶሰ and 3) ኢሉሂ. Each one is said 41 times.

⁸¹ In Ethiopia this rule was enriched with the indigenous monastic tradition, which is deemed as later.

Around 2 p.m. the second most important ceremony of the day starts – *the Prayer of the Congregation*. During this ceremony a mass confession takes place and the abbot calls the guilty to repent for their sins.

At 3 p.m. the bell calls all the monks for the only meal of the day. After receiving food everybody goes to his cell to eat it in peace.

The last hours of the monastery day are passed at individual prayer or work in complete silence.

Around 6 p.m. the bell call the monks for the last collective prayer of the day. It consists of reading of the Bible, collective singing and a blessing from the abbot.

After that night quiet starts, ordered by the rule of St. Pachomius and the church door remains locked until the ceremony starting the next day.

6. Epilogue

Ethiopian monasticism throughout ages has been the greatest culture-creating factor of this country. It was mainly the monastery schools where young boys learned to read and write. It was the place where theological knowledge could be received, the skill of painting holy icons was acquired, the principles of dance and singing were revealed and the debter's dance could be learnt.

But above all this monks living at emperors' and magnates' courts wrote down historical chronicles, poetry and educated the upper classes.

Also today the Ethiopian Orthodox Church runs orphanages and schools and vocational studies for the young. The Giyorgis Church in Addis Ababa may serve as the best example.

The skill of adjusting to ever-new tasks and challenges that the Church faces causes its authority to enjoy great respect from the Ethiopian society.

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