

Saints, Biographies and History in Africa  
Saints, biographies et histoire en Afrique  
Heilige, Biographien und Geschichte in Afrika

# NORDOSTAFRIKANISCH/ WESTASIATISCHE STUDIEN

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## HOLY WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA

*Verena Böll*

*When ʾĪtāye Azeb got notice of the healing power of Solomon she travelled together with her minister to Jerusalem, both in clothes of men. Solomon recognized them as women and seduced them. Pregnant, they returned to Tigre and gave life to two sons. The son of ʾĪtāye Azeb, Mānilək, inherited from his mother the wisdom and become known as the founder of the Solomonide dynasty.<sup>1</sup>*

This article deals with holy women and female saints in Ethiopia, showing that the religions in Ethiopia have different forms and structures of holiness. The article does not focus on a holy life particularly for females, but describes the well-known women which are regarded as saints or are venerated as something special by their followers. The terms “holy” and “saint” are understood in the sense determined by this conference: the person in question has a special function as mediator to the God/Goddess or spiritual realm. This paper also attempts to show that some of these women played a significant role in Ethiopian history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> LITTMANN, E. 1904. *The Legend of the Queen of Sheba in the Tradition of Axum*. (Bibliotheca Abessinica 1). Leyden: 5.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the monographs about religion were written from the male point of view and contain, if anything, a small excursus about women under the title: “The role of the woman”. More recently the gender-studies are establishing more detailed research analyzing the ambiguous relationship between society and religion. See HIRUT TEREFE. 1997. „Gender and Cross Cultural Dynamics in Ethiopia with particular reference to property rights, and the role and social status of women“. *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* 3. Kyoto: 541-568; ALMAZ ESHETE. 1997. „Issues of Gender and Sexuality in the Context of cross-cultural dynamics of Ethiopia-challenging traditional pervasives“. *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* 3. Kyoto: 569-584; ROSENFELD, C.P. 1979. „Eight Ethiopian Women of the Zemene Mesafint (c. 1769-1855)“. *Northeast African Studies* 1, 2: 63-85; MILES, M. 1989. *Carnal Knowledge. Female and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*. Boston; ARVIND SHARMA (Ed.). 1994. *Religion and Women*. New York. See in general WILSON, S. (Ed.). 1983. *Saints and their cult*. Cambridge.

### The ancestress

The most important figure of the Ethiopian hagiography is the Queen of Sheba, named Makeda, Bilqīs or, as mentioned above, ʾĪṭaye Azeb. Through her life-story Judaism, Christianity and Islam are united.<sup>3</sup> The Christians in Ethiopia regarded her as the first ruler of Ethiopia and as progenitrix of their rulers; the Moslems as an important queen in Jemen or Arabia. The story of the Queen of Sheba is well-documented in such texts as the *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* (Glory of the Kings) or in the numerous portrayals of her life in pictures and other art.<sup>4</sup> The Queen of Sheba is regarded as the founder of the *House of Israel* (Solomonic dynasty) in Ethiopia and thus as representative of the divine. Her history is literally an “histoire de longue durée”. Even today, half a century after the end of the established monarchy, the Queen of Sheba or Makeda is a crucial figure in terms of Christian self-awareness. She is the person who brought the monotheistic creed to Ethiopia. A resolution of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the year 1990 reads:

“It is historically believed that the Queen of Sheba or Azeb was the queen of today’s Ethiopia and that she accepted a monotheistic creed... The Queen also brought the Old Testament with her... Ethiopia was thus one of the first countries to receive the creed among other ancient states and its people were termed as “The land of God”. Moreover she became the first country to receive Christianity.”<sup>5</sup>

Although it is doubtful that the Queen of Sheba is of Ethiopian origin, she is the female saint who gave Ethiopians their identity and who, besides Mary, is the most venerated person in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers two other biblical women as holy. Tharbis, the Ethiopian wife of Moses, mentioned in the Old Testament in Numbers 12: 1 and Candace of the New Testament, men-

<sup>3</sup> The Qur’an refers to her in Sura 27: 22-54 and 34: 15-16 and the Bible in 1 King 10: 1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1-12. Candace was later identified with the Queen of Sheba.

<sup>4</sup> See LEVINE, D. 1974. *Greater Ethiopia. The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: 100. Even recently in Addis Ababa there has been the new performance of Ariane Baghai, entitled “Sheba’s door”, see BAGHAI, A. 1996. *Sheba’s door*. Addis Ababa.

<sup>5</sup> Resolution of the HOLY SYNOD OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHDO CHURCH 1990. *Today’s Ethiopia is Ethiopia of the Holy Scriptures, History and Antiquity*. Addis Ababa: 52-53.



tioned in Acts 8: 27.<sup>6</sup> As proof that Candace is Ethiopian, the above mentioned resolution quotes Eusebius:

“Therefore, as ancient religious writers like Eusebius indicated, the eunuch of Queen Candace was the first man to be baptized after the Apostles, and Ethiopia was the first country to be christianized after Jerusalem”.<sup>7</sup>

Other women of the Old Testament, venerated as saints, include: Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, and Miriam. Miriam, the sister of Moses is considered to be a great model for the women - *läsetoč təlləq məsale nat.*<sup>8</sup> The same is true for Hannah (Anne), the mother of Mary, the first woman to receive the white pearl, a symbol of the immaculate conception of Mary.<sup>9</sup> Hannah is well-known among Christians and is a model for women - especially for childless women.<sup>10</sup>

Due to her widespread veneration in Ethiopia, the Holy Virgin and Mother of God, Mary, although by origin not an Ethiopian woman, can be considered as becoming an Ethiopian; she is “ethiopianized”.<sup>11</sup> It is said that she was personally in Ethiopia, when, fleeing Herod she con-

<sup>6</sup> See ULLENDORFF, E. 1971. „Ethiopia and the Bible”. *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Problemi attuali di Scienza e di Cultura* 155. Roma: 7.

<sup>7</sup> Resolution of the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church 1990: 53

<sup>8</sup> See the brochure of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: QĀSIS KĀFEYALĀW MĀRAH (Ed.). 1983 Eth. Cal. *Yäsetoč Mänfäsawi Həywät*. Addis Ababa: 13. This brochure lists the holy biblical and Ethiopian Christian women with some details of their lives.

<sup>9</sup> See “The Life of Hanna” in BUDGE, E.A.W. 1900. *The miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the life of Hannā (Saint Anne) and the magical prayers of 'Ahetā Mikā'él*. London: 160. The book contains the history of the pearl (Perlen-theorie), Mary was as a white pearl in Adam and was not touched by the fall of man. The white pearl wandered from patriarch to patriarch, from Adam to Seth, from Seth to Enos etc. See also BUDGE, E.A.W. 1922. *Legends of Our Lady Mary, the perpetual virgin and her mother Hannā*. London; BUDGE, E.A.W. 1923. *One hundred and ten miracles of Our Lady Mary*. London. The story is also told in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, see HUBBARD, A. 1956. *The Literary Sources of the Kebra Nagast*. Ph.D. thesis. University of St. Andrews: 170; BEZOLD, C. 1905. *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*. (Abhandlungen der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 23). München.

<sup>10</sup> See MAYBERRY, N. 1991. „The controversy over the Immaculate Conception in Medieval and Renaissance art, literature, and society”. *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21: 207-224.

<sup>11</sup> See in general GROHMANN, A. 1919. *Aethiopische Marienhymnen*. Leipzig; HAYOZ, C. 1958. *Portrait de Marie, Complainte de la Vièrge*. Fribourg; GETATCHEW HAILE. 1992. *The Mariology of Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia*. (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 242). Rom.

cealed herself with her family in Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup> Mary is ever-present in Ethiopia; her life and her miracles being remembered everyday.<sup>13</sup> The Holy Virgin and Mother Mary holds a special place in the life of an Ethiopian woman; she is the one to whom they turn for help in time of neediness and danger.<sup>14</sup>

Another non-Ethiopian Christian woman is donor of one of the greatest feasts in Ethiopia: Mäsqäl, the feast of the cross. It dates back to Empress Helena of Constantinople (\*257, †336).<sup>15</sup> When she was looking for the true cross, she found a big piece of it and immediately lighted a torch so that all enemies could see her and the piece of the holy cross. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church honours Empress Helena by celebrating the feast of the cross every year in September.<sup>16</sup>

Another unforgettable figure in Ethiopian history is a woman who provokes ambivalent feelings: the ruler Judith, also named Gudit or *Esato*. She is thought to have lived in the 10th century.<sup>17</sup> She reigned forty years and is known as the founder of the Zagwe Dynasty.<sup>18</sup> The Christian sources condemn her as the one who burnt the holy church Zion of Aksum.<sup>19</sup> In some sources she is said to be Jewish or she called

<sup>12</sup> See CONTI ROSSINI, C. 1912. „Il Discorso su monte Coscam attribuito a Teofilo d'Allesandria nella versione etiopica". *Atti dell' Accademia nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche. Rendiconti* 5, 21: 395-471; GRÉBAUT, S. 1985-1990. „Les miracles de Jésus". *PO* 12, 4 (1985); 17, 4 (1989); 14, 5 (1990); CULLMANN, O. 1990. *Kindheitsevangelien*. SCHNEEMELCHER, W. (Ed.), Neutestamentliche Apokryphen 1. Tübingen: 330-372.

<sup>13</sup> See especially GROHMANN 1919; CERULLI, E. 1943. *Il libro etiopico dei miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nella letteratura del Medio Evo latino*. Roma; *Tä'amrä Maryam*. 1972. Addis Ababa.

<sup>14</sup> See PANKHURST, H. 1992. *Gender, Development and Identity. An Ethiopian Study*. London: 150; OPITZ, C., RÖCKELEIN, H., SIGNORI, G., MARCHAL, G.P. (Eds.). 1993. *Maria in der Welt. Marienverehrung im Kontext der Sozialgeschichte 10.-18. Jahrhundert*. (Clio Lucernensis 2). Zürich.

<sup>15</sup> STRAUBINGER, J. 1912. *Die Kreuzauffindungslegende. Untersuchungen über ihre altchristliche Fassungen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der syrischen Texte*. (Forschungen zur christlichen Literatur- und Dogmengeschichte 11, 3). Paderborn.

<sup>16</sup> See PANKHURST 1992: 172. SHACK, W.A. 1968. „The Mäsqäl-pole: Religious Conflict and Social Change in Gurageland". *Africa* 38: 458; WADILLO, J. 1985. *The Impact of Maskal Celebration and Marriage on the Socio-Economic System of Wolaita*. Senior Essay in Sociology. Addis Ababa University (IES).

<sup>17</sup> See SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE. 1972. „The Problem of Gudit". *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, 1: 113.

<sup>18</sup> CONTI ROSSINI, C. 1922. „La caduta della dinastia Zagwe e la versione amarica del Be'ela Nägäst". *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei* 21.

<sup>19</sup> See SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE 1972: 113. LITTMANN, E. 1913. *Deutsche Aksum Expedition 1*. Berlin.

herself a Jewess;<sup>20</sup> other sources claim she is *əm-nägädä* 'əlwān, from the tribe of the Unbelievers<sup>21</sup>, and Arabic sources identify her with the Queen of Banī al-Ḥamwiyyah.<sup>22</sup> Judith, like the Queen of Sheba, is a key figure for the different peoples of Ethiopia; she will always be remembered as an integral part of their history.

### Christian women

In addition to the saints mentioned above, who all played a significant role in Ethiopian history, and who are highly honoured by the Ethiopians - especially by women - the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also canonized some Ethiopian women. They can be grouped into two categories: the queens and the nuns.<sup>23</sup> The first queen of note is another Helena, the Empress Eleni (d. 1522), who was a significant figure in Ethiopian history.<sup>24</sup> Eleni was a Moslem princess from Hadiya in the southwest of Ethiopia. She converted to Christianity when she was married to Zār'a Ya'əqob (1434-1468).<sup>25</sup> She was engaged in high-level activities to spread and defend her new belief. She sent letters to Portugal asking for support for her country and people against the attacks of the Moslems. Tradition attributes two religious documents to her.<sup>26</sup> In the

<sup>20</sup> See SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE 1972: 117.

<sup>21</sup> See PERRUCHON, J.F.C. 1893. „Note pour l'histoire d'Éthiopie, lettre adressée par le roi d'Éthiopie“. *Revue sémitique* 1: 370; SERGEW HABLE SELASSIE 1972: 117.

<sup>22</sup> PERRUCHON 1893: 71; TRIMINGHAM, J.S. 1952. *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: 52; TADDESSE TAMRAT. 1972. „A Short Note on the Traditions of Pagan Resistance to the Ethiopian Church (14th and 15th Centuries)“. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, 1: 137.

<sup>23</sup> Until recently no detailed research about the unknown Ethiopian saints had been carried out, in particular about the female saints. The question of whether the hagiography (*gädl*) of the female saints follows the same structure as that of the male saints, is open for more research. See KAPLAN, S. 1984. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonian Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden; HEYER, F. 1998. *Die Heiligen der Äthiopischen Erde*. (Oikonomia 37). Erlangen; ANGENENDT, A. 1994. *Heilige und Reliquien*. München; OPITZ, C. 1990. *Evatöchter und Bräute Christi. Weiblicher Lebenszusammenhang und Frauenkultur im Mittelalter*. Weinheim: 19.

<sup>24</sup> See MERID WOLDE AREGAY. 1977. „Eleni“. *Dictionary of African Biography* 1, 63.

<sup>25</sup> See TADDESSE TAMRAT. 1972. *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*. Oxford: 288.

<sup>26</sup> See VAN DEN OUDENRIJN, M. 1960-61. *Helenaë Aethiopum reginae quae feruntur preces et carmina*. (CSCO 208/11 = Script. Aet. 39/40); SERGEW HABLE-SELASSIE.

introduction to both treaties she is explicitly named as the author. One of the two documents deals with the dogma of the Orthodox Church; the other is a hymn of praise for the Trinity and Mary. Despite the fact that according to scientific research the authorship of Eleni is more than doubtful, we have to keep in mind that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and clergy consider Eleni to be the author. Both writings are highly esteemed and often quoted. The church showed no reservation in accepting these writings, even though they were written by a woman. This implies that Eleni was considered to be a very educated woman; she could be called a "Father of the Church" (Kirchenlehrerin).

With the Empress Eleni, we open the chapter on female queens or rulers<sup>27</sup> who are considered to be holy. Another empress, who is explicitly listed among the saints of the Ethiopian Church, is Mäsqäl Kəbrä.<sup>28</sup> She lived at the end of the 12th century. Mäsqäl Kəbrä is known in Ethiopia as having built the Abba Libanos Church in Lalibela. She was the wife of Lalibela; her life is described in her *gädl* (hagiography). The fact that she, as a woman, founded a church is not considered by the Orthodox Church to be something extraordinary - a lot of rich women did so. Mäsqäl Kəbrä became a saint because she built this church and because she lived a very pious life. She supported the church and the clergy. Other female rulers<sup>29</sup> could be named, but they are not officially recognized by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Another category of holy women typical for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are the nuns.<sup>30</sup>

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1974: "The Ge'ez letters of queen Eleni and Libne Dingil to John, King of Portugal". *IV. Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*. (Quaderno 191). Roma: 547-566.

<sup>27</sup> See in general HAY, J. 1988. *Queens, Prostitutes and Peasants: Historical Perspectives on African Women, 1971-1986*. (Working Papers in African Studies 130). Boston.

<sup>28</sup> See SAMUEL WOLDE YOHANNES. 1996. *Il Fondo umanistico dei modelli e degli ideali dei Gadl. Ricerca linguistico-filosofica su alcuni testi del XV secolo etiopico*. (Excerpta). (Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana). Rom: 20. Mäsqäl Kəbrä is the unique empress among the group of holy rulers. Two unpublished manuscripts of her life are preserved; one at the Gännätä Maryam Church near Lalibäla and one at Aksum. See KINEFE-RIGB ZELLEKE. 1975. „Bibliography of the Ethiopic Hagiographical Traditions". *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, 2: 84.

<sup>29</sup> Like Berhan Mogäs Mentewabb, d. 1773, married to the Emperor Bäkäffa. She succeeded in reconciling the followers of the two major monastic orders.

<sup>30</sup> See in general NICHOLS, J.A., SHANK, L.T. (Eds.). 1987. *Peace Weavers*. (Medieval Religious Women 2). Michigan.

## The holy nuns

In 1990 the Ethiopian Orthodox Church published a booklet in Amharic entitled: „Yäsetoč mämfäsawi Höywät- The Religious Life of Women”. In this booklet three holy nuns are listed: Krəstos Šəmra, Fəqərtä Krəstos and Wälättä Peṭros. Krəstos Šəmra, supposed to have lived in the 15th century, was born in Shāwa. Having taken a vow, she abandoned her husband and her nine children and became a nun in Däbrä Libanos.<sup>31</sup> Later, she went to Lake Ṭana and founded a convent on the island called *Gwagut*. After her death, her grave became a place of pilgrimage, especially on her commemoration day, the 24th of Nāhase (30 August). Pilgrims commemorate her and childless women return with a piece of earth from her grave in the hopes of becoming pregnant.<sup>32</sup> The other nun of aristocratic origin, Wälättä Peṭros (1594-1644), is regarded as the defender of the orthodox belief and as a martyr. She fought against Susenyos' attempts to establish the Catholic faith as the official religion of the country.<sup>33</sup> Wälättä Peṭros openly acted against the installation of the Catholic faith. Susenyos seized her at his court, where she was daily visited by two Jesuits, who tried to persuade her to accept the Catholic faith as the official religion. They failed, and she fought indefatigably for her orthodox belief.<sup>34</sup> She was supported by other noble women and nuns, including Eḥətä Krəstos<sup>35</sup> and Wälättä Paḥlos.<sup>36</sup> Wälättä Peṭros was the first who tried to organize the life of the nuns systematically; she was an advocate of women monasteries similar to that of men and was

<sup>31</sup> To leave the children alone was a model followed by female saints, see OPITZ 1990: 73.

<sup>32</sup> See CERULLI, E. 1956. *Atti di Krestos Samrä*. (CSCO 163/164 = Script. Aeth. 33/34). Louvain. EMMML 1211; EMMML 2949 contains the life of Krəstos Šəmra in Amharic. It is not a direct translation from the Gə'əz version. See also KRISS, R. and KRISS-HEINRICH, H. 1975. *Volkskundliche Anteile in Kult und Legende äthiopischer Heiliger*. Wiesbaden; KINEFE-RIGB ZELLEKE 1975.

<sup>33</sup> SAMUEL WOLDE YOHANNES (1996: 19) states that, due to the structure of the Ethiopian hagiography, the saint has to fight for justice in the court and with the emperor and that there is always a conflict between the saint and the emperor. This is also true for Wälättä Peṭros.

<sup>34</sup> See CONTI ROSSINI, C. 1912. *Gadla emna Walatta Petros, seu Acta Sanctae Walatta Petros*. (CSCO 68 = Script. Aeth. 30). Rom: 46; RICCI, L. 1970. *Vita di Walatta Pietros*. (CSCO 316 = Script. Aeth. 61); KINEFE-RIGB ZELLEKE 1975: 94.

<sup>35</sup> The *gädl* of Eḥətä Krestos was published by NOLLET, G. 1909. *Acta S. Ehta-Krestos*, (CSCO = Script. Aeth.). KINEFE-RIGB ZELLEKE (1975: 68) mentions another friend of Wälättä Peṭros, Ehetä-Peṭros, who also got her own *gädl*.

<sup>36</sup> See CHERNETSOV, S.B. 1994. „The Role of Catholicism in the History of Ethiopia of the first half of the 17th century”. *Études éthiopiennes, Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> JCEtSt 1*. Paris: 210.

able to make those monasteries self-supporting.<sup>37</sup> She founded seven monasteries. The hagiography of Wälätta Peṭros is, like that of Krəstos Šəmra, edited and translated into European languages.<sup>38</sup> The third holy nun, Fəqərtä Krəstos (Əmä Məuz), was also a defender of the Orthodox faith during the 15th century and founded a convent in Lasta.<sup>39</sup> Surely there have been, however, more holy women and nuns, such as Zena Maryam of Ənfraz.<sup>40</sup>

Since the end of the 16th century, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has abandoned the canonization of saints.<sup>41</sup> Obviously, canonization stopped with the completion of the Synaxarion of the church (Sənkəssar), which ended in the 17th century.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps in the future there will be some kind of canonization such as that which exists in the Catholic Church. Surely there are some women who would be candidates; the Empress Ṭaitu Bəṭul (1853-1918), for example. She was a learned woman and generously supported the church. She is already venerated by the Ethiopian people for all her deeds.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See CERULLI, E. 1958. „Il monachismo in Ethiopia”. *Il monachismo orientale*. (Atti del Convegno di Studi Orientali che sul predetto tema si tenne a Roma). Roma: 259-278. PEDERSEN, K. 1994. „Les moniales éthiopiennes à Jérusalem. Mahbār et Qurit”. *Études éthiopiennes* 1. Paris: 383-390.

<sup>38</sup> Her *gād* (Vita) was already written in 1672 by a monk of the monastery of Qorata. Wälätta Peṭros became a nun on the island of Zäge, but was brought back to the court of Susneyos and then exiled. She had to flee to Aksum, where she preached against the Catholics. See CONTI ROSSINI 1912.

<sup>39</sup> See KINEFE-RIGB ZELLEKE 1975: 71. Many nuns and even female eremites presently live in Ethiopia and Eritrea; there are also some female convents, such as Sabata near Addis Ababa.

<sup>40</sup> CERULLI, E. 1962. *Gli Atti di Zena Maryam*. (Collectanea Vaticana in honorem Anselmi Card. Albareda, a Bibliotheca Apostolica edita). Città del Vaticano; CERULLI, E. 1946. „Gli atti di Zena Maryam, monaco etiopico del secolo XIV”. *RSO* 21: 121-156.

<sup>41</sup> The Coptic church canonized some saints after the 17th century, but only bishops, see HEYER, F. „Die Kanonisierung der Heiligen in den orthodoxen Kirchen im katholisch-evangelischen Vergleich”. SCHNEIDER, M., BERSCHIN, W. (Eds.), *Kirche aus Ost und West. Gedenkschrift für Wilhelm Nyssen*: 196. HEYER, F. 1994. „Die Kanonisierung der Heiligen in den orthodoxen Kirchen”. COPELLA, R. (Ed.), *Atti del congresso internazionale „Incontro fra canonici d'oriente e d'occidente”*. Bari: 273-283.

<sup>42</sup> Even today the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has no institution for the canonization of saints.

<sup>43</sup> Ṭaitu Bəṭul was Queen of Shāwa (since 1883) when she married Mənilək II. She could read and write Amharic and Gə'əz and had studied Orthodox theology. She composed religious poetry in Gə'əz. See PROUTY, C. 1986. *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1883-1910*. London; TADDESSE TEWOLDE. 1981. *Yä-Ītege Ṭaitu Bəṭul*. Addis Ababa; SALBUCCI, S. 1961. *Taitu*. New York. SMITH, D. 1989.

The other Christian denominations in Ethiopia, such as the Catholic Church, *Mākanā Yāsus* (Mekane Yesus) and the *Qalā Həywāt* (Kale Hiwot) Church have martyrs and highly venerated women, but as yet no female saints or holy persons. Further investigation of the oral traditions has to be carried out in this field.<sup>44</sup>

## Islam

The sources for the Christian holy women in Ethiopia are, to some extent, informative. The contrary is true of the female saints of Islam. One reason for the lack of written material concerning women biographies may lie in the fact that men were and are the ones who write these documents. Normally, the disciples of a saint write down his story, but nobody wrote down the life of the women. More research in this field may reveal some hagiographies of exceptional women from the early seventh century, two of whom are Umm Ḥabība Bint Abī Sufyān and Umm Salmā Bint Abī Umayya. Although they are from Arabia, they fled with the first Muslims to the Aksumite Empire. Both were the earliest female disciples of the prophet Mohammed, and after the death of their husbands they married the prophet and returned to Arabia. It is recorded that they told their husband about the wonders of Aksum. As disciples of the prophet, and because they had been to Aksum, they serve as women after whom one could model her life, especially the *jābārti* (Ethiopian Muslim) women.

Another famous and venerated woman, a native Ethiopian, is Batī Del Wāmbāra, the daughter of Imām Maḥfūz, the Governor of Zayla. She was the wife of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ibrahīm, named Graññ. Batī Del Wāmbāra accompanied her husband to the battlefield in the war against the Christian emperor. When her husband died on the battlefield, she succeeded in returning to Harar and setting free the Moslem leaders who were captured by the Christians. Even if Batī Del Wāmbāra is not considered to be a holy woman by the Ethiopian Muslims, she was very powerful and ready to die for her belief. People held her in high esteem and she is remembered for her role in the history of Ethiopia. Unlike Umm Ḥabība and Umm Salmā, she had no direct contact to the sacred areas. Other women have had this close relationship with God or

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„My name is woman“. *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* 2. Addis Ababa: 469-480.

<sup>44</sup> See LASS-WESTPHAL, I. 1972. „Protestant Missions During and After the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1937“. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, 1: 89-101. SBACCHI, A. 1994. „The Seventh-Day Adventist Mission in Ethiopia 1906-1940: A Preliminary Report“. *Études éthiopiennes* 1. Paris: 633-640.

the holy realm. There had been no resistance when Sharīfa ʿAlawiyya (died 1940) succeeded her father Sayyid Hāshīm al-Mirghānī as leader or *shaykh* of the Mirghāniyya order in Keren. She had the *bārāka*, the blessing or holiness in her. Besides this, we also find shrines of pious women in Harar.<sup>45</sup>

### Zar cult and other indigenous beliefs

Concerning *Zar*, most scholars consider this cult as representing the feminine side of the Amhara society or generally as something of the womenfolk, because most of the adherents are women. This was usually interpreted in a functional way, saying that women who are normally oppressed in their daily life have the possibility of expressing themselves through this religious system and of performing some kind of act of power.<sup>46</sup> This interpretation, however, is too one-sided and judges from the perspective of the established religions. Although the belief system of the *Zar* and other traditional practises exhibiting the phenomenon of possession need detailed studies, it can be said of the *shaman* or healer that he serves the same purpose as a priest or an Imām. The priestess or healer of the *Zar*, mostly possessed with one or more spirits, heals the person who comes to her and participates in the ritual ceremonies. She possesses a deep knowledge of herbal medicine, like the Christian *Dāb-tāra*, and has close contact with the spirits and the divine realm.<sup>47</sup> In some Ethiopian cultures she is even the embodiment of the religious values of the people; she is also the one who guarantees for the continuation of the myth of the origin of this group.<sup>48</sup> A distinction can be made between legendary figures and real persons whose lives can be authenticated, but this is not a decisive factor in terms of judging their sanctity.

Included in the category of legendary figures are the 'holy' ancestors or (Stammütter) progenitrix as with the Queen of Sheba. The Haso-Toroa of the Saho people, for example, have a legendary figure who is

<sup>45</sup> See WAGNER, E. 1973. „Eine Liste der Heiligen von Harar”. *ZDMG* 123: 269-292.

<sup>46</sup> Some scientist have argued that the *Zar* cult and other possession cults represent the feminine side of the Ethiopian culture, like MESSING, S.D. 1957. *The highland plateau Amhara of Ethiopia*. Univ. of Pennsylvania: 64.

<sup>47</sup> See MEKONNEN BISHAW. 1991. „The Role and Status of Women in Traditional Health Care Services in Ethiopia”. TSEHAI BERHANE-SELASSIE (Ed.), *Gender Issues in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: 61.

<sup>48</sup> See SHACK, W.A. 1966. *The Gurage. A People of the Ensete Culture*. London: 183.



said to be the offspring of the union between a male corpse and a living girl, to whom a prophet promised paradise.<sup>49</sup> Due to the repeated telling of this story, this girl is always remembered and considered to be holy.<sup>50</sup>

Another Ethiopian woman, a famous prophetess and healer from Arussi, lived at the beginning of this century. *Yarussi Emmäbet*, Our Lady from Arussi, also known as Shebbas, is well-known in Ethiopia.<sup>51</sup> Every year in Arussi there is a great festival and believers of all religions make pilgrimages to her place and hold a ceremony there.<sup>52</sup>

Besides these legendary or historical figures, the *Zar* and the other religious systems do have famous priestesses, shamans and healers. The researcher and ethnologist, Michel Leiris, describes in his books his stay with the famous female healer Mälkam Ayyahu from Gondär.<sup>53</sup> Mälkam Ayyahu had direct contact with the spiritual realm; with her power over the spirits, she could handle them safely. During her *Wädağa*, the ritual meetings, she healed the possessed or sick women. Michel Leiris regarded this woman as a kind of high priestess,<sup>54</sup> and thanks to his publications, he made Mälkam Ayyahu known to the academic world. Concerning these so-called traditional religions, we usually intend an oral tradition with no written documentation. It would be interesting to investigate whether Mälkam Ayyahu is still known today in Gondär and whether she is remembered even after her death, as with other saints or holy persons.

As with Christians, Ethiopian Moslems have *Zar* groups which celebrate all the major Islamic festivals. The leader of the women's *Zar* group - mostly widows or divorced wives - are called *shaykhas*. People consider them to be "ones who know the way", the way that the faithful should follow.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See CONTI ROSSINI, C. 1914. „Studi su popolazioni dell'Etiopia: Gli Irob e le loro tradizioni”. *RSO* 3: 849-900.

<sup>50</sup> See WORKU NIDA. 1990. „The Traditional Beliefs of the Sebat-Bet Gurage, with a Particular Emphasis on the Bozha Cult“. *Proceedings of the First National Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Addis Ababa: 112; HAMER, J. & I. 1966. „Spirit Possession and its Socio-Psychological Implications among the Sidamo of Southwest Ethiopia”. *Ethnology* 5: 405.

<sup>51</sup> See LEIRIS, M. 1989. *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*. Paris: 131.

<sup>52</sup> It would be interesting to research her life. As far as I know, an excursion group from the ethnology department of the A.A.U. has made a film of the ceremony conducted there.

<sup>53</sup> See LEIRIS 1989: 11.

<sup>54</sup> See LEIRIS 1989: 130.

<sup>55</sup> See LEWIS, I.M. 1986. *Religion in Context. Cults and Charisma*. Cambridge: 102. The *shaykhas* go regularly on pilgrimages to Mecca.

According to the description of the ethnologist William Shack, the tribe of the Gurage venerates mainly two deities, the Sky-God *Waq* and the female deity *Dām<sup>w</sup>am<sup>w</sup>it*.<sup>56</sup> The goddess *Dām<sup>w</sup>am<sup>w</sup>it* is exclusively worshipped by women and *Waq* by men. Interestingly, *Dām<sup>w</sup>am<sup>w</sup>it* is represented through a priest and *Waq* through a priestess. The myth of *Waq* reveals a configuration of themes on the conflicts between him and Gurage women. *Waq* is worshipped in his holy shrine. As custodian of the shrine, he choose a woman known as *Yogāphāča dāman*, that is, the master of the place of *Wāgāphāča*. The principal function of the priestess is that of conducting the annual ceremony in honour of the Sky-God *Waq*, the Cest Ceremony, in which only men participate. At other times of the year she appeases the God *Waq* depending upon special requests, for which tribute has been brought. As Shack describes it:

“The priestess *Yogāphāča dāman* is as the chief custodian of the shrine the embodiment of the Gurage religious values, conceptually, and on the ground, *Yogāphāča* validates the myth of Gurage ritual structure.”

The institution of the custodian of the holy shrine is holy; accordingly the priestess must abide by special rules, which are to be strictly observed. She is regarded as mediator to God, based on her role as custodian of a shrine, but not because her personality. Nevertheless, in the past there have been very famous *Yogāphāča dāman*, whose names are told from generation to generation.

### General Consideration

Even if only a few women are regarded as holy or saints, it is significant that they succeeded in transgressing the norms of the patriarchal and hierarchical society of Ethiopia. It seems that it was the duty of the female saints to break with the social order; they could leave their husbands and families and be autonomous, not the norm for a woman. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has an established structure which normally excludes women not only from all offices, but also from becoming holy.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See SHACK, W.A. 1971. „Hunger, Anxiety, and Ritual”. *Man* 6: 30-43: 37; SHACK 1966: 177.

<sup>57</sup> See BUBMANN, H., HOF, R. (Eds.). 1995. *Genus. Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Stuttgart.

Consequently all the above mentioned women have had a strong character and a strong belief in their aims, according to different traditions.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church prescribes the requirements for becoming a saint. The writings of the church refer only to male saints, but the same is probably valid for women. Four main requirements must be fulfilled:

1. Teaching and good deeds.
2. The sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of Christ and his church, and mortification.
3. The provision of Christian knowledge by means of writings and exhortations.
4. The denial of worldly comfort, living a life in the desert and monastery.

The female saints do not fulfil all these qualifications, but surely they were very strict in the observance of some of these qualifications; Krəstos Səmrā, for example, gave away her little son upon entering the monastery because it was forbidden for men to enter. The fourth point, the denial of worldly comfort is not as strictly adhered to. Sources recount tales of slaves in the monasteries and convents who helped the noble nuns with activities of daily life.

The Italian researcher, Paolo Marrassini, listed more criteria which are typical in the hagiographies, especially concerning female saints.<sup>58</sup> The main criteria were: origin from a wealthy family, a barren woman, the vision of the woman becoming pregnant with a child, a special child, the difference between the child and other children, the founding of a monastery and the naming of the successor. Characteristically, the above mentioned holy women became nuns only after having been married and after having become a mother; they all have had children.<sup>59</sup> Virginity does not play any role in becoming holy; it was unusual for a woman to become a nun without having married.

Interestingly, biology or human nature does not play any role in the biographies of the holy women, especially for the Christian saints. Contrary to the hagiographies of male saints, the question of the temptations common to human nature is not mentioned in their *gād*.<sup>60</sup>

After their death, saints are to mediate between God and the believers. The hagiographies usually describe a pact between the holy women and Jesus, like that of Mary with her Son (*Kidanā Məḥərāt*).<sup>61</sup> The role

<sup>58</sup> See MARRASSINI, P. 1981. *Gadla Yohannes Mesraqawi. Vita di Yohannes l'Orientale. Firenze.* (Quaderni di Semitistica 10): 57.

<sup>59</sup> See MARRASSINI 1981: 88, where he distinguishes between the life of male and female saints.

<sup>60</sup> See in general OPITZ 1990: 92.

<sup>61</sup> See EURINGER, S. 1938-41. „Das Hohelied des 'Bundes der Erbarmung'". *Oriens Christianus* 35. (1938): 71-107, 192-213; 36. (1941): 68-73.

as mediator for the believers is an integral part of the duty of all saints.<sup>62</sup> In the words of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church:

“Since it is the creator that sanctified the saints, it is believed that God favours their mediation and their prayers more.”<sup>63</sup>

The way of veneration differs from religion to religion. All holy women have a special date of the month and year on which they are commemorated.<sup>64</sup> The special time<sup>65</sup> of commemoration is normally combined with a holy place such as the grave, a place of pilgrimage. Furthermore, believers gather together every month on the day of the remembrance, and after praying, they recount a part of her Vita. Then they sing, eat and drink together. Almost every Ethiopian Christian is a member of such a *Zəkərt*.<sup>66</sup> The special time of commemoration is valid for female saints, but also for the priestess of the *Zar* Cult, or of the *Yogāphāčā dāman*. All religions have special hymns and songs composed for annual celebrations and festivals especially as praise on holy and Saints' days. The composing of literature, such as the *gādī*, or other hagiographical works, that testify to the good deeds of the saint is, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a structural sign of sanctity.

## Conclusion

It has been the aim of this paper to show that holy women can be discovered in different religions of Ethiopia. Some female saints or holy women are well-known, others are only venerated at a regional level.

<sup>62</sup> The question of whether the female saints are called upon mainly by women and the question of whether women are more involved in the belief systems on both sides, as worshippers and as embodiments of the spirits needs further research, see PANKHURST 1992: 156; TSEHAI BERHANE-SELASSIE 1991.

<sup>63</sup> HABTE MARYAM WORKINEH. 1989. *Saints as spiritual guides of the Ethiopian Christians*. Unpublished manuscript. Addis Ababa: 5.

<sup>64</sup> See HABTE MARYAM WORKINEH: 4.

<sup>65</sup> The great efficacy of the saints can be seen by the behaviour of the believers on the commemoration day. On the 1st *Gənbət* (9th May), the birthday of Mary, all rules are symbolically set out of order. Those women who belong to the *mahəbār* of Mary can behave freely on this day. See KEMINK, F. 1991. *Die Tegrēñña-Frauen in Eritrea*. (Studien zur Kulturkunde 101). Stuttgart: 161.

<sup>66</sup> See HEYER 1998: 20.

The holy women in Ethiopia can be categorized according to their role and function, irrespective of religious boundaries. One category is the one of the legendary or historic woman, such as the Queen of Sheba. They are the basis of the monotheistic creed or the Christian history in Ethiopia; with them the history and the self-awareness of a folk begin. Another category is the one of the real rulers, such as the empresses Mäsqäl Kəbrä or Batī del Wämbära. They influenced a certain period of the Ethiopian history greatly. The prophetesses of Arussi, *Yarussi Emmäbet*, have been an example for another category; they are even respected by followers of different religions. The fourth category is the one of the leader of a religious community, such as the abbess Krəstos Šemra, the priestess of a *Zar* group, or such as Sharīfa ʿAlawiyya of the sufi order in Keren. The category of the nuns and martyrs who lived a very pious life and fought for their belief is probably only valid for the Christian denominations.

Further research on holy women must take into consideration the importance of oral traditions.<sup>67</sup> The origin of the sources is decisive; they must always be taken in context and be read in a critical way.<sup>68</sup> Investigations within the gender studies in particular can, hopefully, provide more evidence about female saints in Ethiopia.

<sup>67</sup> See VAN DE CASTEELE-SCHWEITZER, VOLDMANN, D. 1989. „Die mündlichen Quellen der Frauenforschung“. CORBIN, A., et al. (Eds.), *Geschlecht und Geschichte. Ist eine weibliche Geschichtsschreibung möglich?* Frankfurt a.M.: 135-146.

<sup>68</sup> See JONES, A. (Ed.). 1990. *Außereuropäische Frauengeschichte. Probleme der Forschung*. (Frauen in Geschichte und Gesellschaft 25). Pfaffenweiler. This book also contains an excellent example for a critical dealing of sources, KEMINK, F. „Dem Sohn das resti, der Tochter die Mitgift“. Die Kodizes des Gewohnheitsrechts als Quellen zur Geschichte der Tegraña-Frauen in Eritrea (1890-1941) - Möglichkeiten und Grenzen“. (JONES 1990: 67-103).