A Visit to the Craftsmen's *Gädam*, or Monastery, of Mänteq, near Ankobär, Shäwa

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Tradition holds that the craftsmen's gädam, or monastery, at Mantek, near Ankobär, in Shäwa, like others in the region, was established by craft workers. Like the Falasha, to whom they were probably once affiliated, they consisted of blacksmiths, weavers and potters, and formerly inhabited the Gondar region of north-west Ethiopia, but settled in Shäwa after Abeto Nagassi (1607–1703) founded a dynasty, and needed tools to clear the land for agriculture.

Little of the monastery's history is known until the early 19th century, when the establishment was visited by European travellers. They indicate that the craftsmen were deeply religious, and apparently much influenced by the Judaic Old Testament. They kept the Sabbath on Saturday, as well as on Sunday. The travellers concluded that the community, though outwardly Chritian, belonged to a heretical, possibly Judaic, sect.

Present investigation shows that the inhabitants today practice the same crafts as formerly. Their establishment consists of (1) a place of worship, with a central mekrab, i.e. pillar, or sanctuary; (2) huts, and caves, in which the monks and nuns live rigidly apart; (3) shacks for bread-baking and beer-brewing; (4) craftsmen's workshops; (5) a guest-room; and (6) two isolated teketo, i.e. menstruation houses, reminiscent of the Falasha.

Key words: handicrafts, craftsmen, blacksmiths, monasteries, Christianity, Judaism.

The *Ballä Ejj gäddam*, or craftsmen's monastery, of Mänteq, is situated, like many other Shäwan artisans' communities, in a deep ravine. The monastery is located below the former Shäwan capital, Ankobär, and was probably established there because that town in the old days afforded craftsmen with an extensive market for their wares. Though accessible only by a three or four hour descent by foot into the lowlands the monastery can in fact be seen from the Däbrä Berhan-Ankobär road. When one reaches Tamqé, shortly before Ankobär, the corrugated iron roofing of the monastic buildings becomes visible on the left, hundreds of metres below.(See map in L. De Castro 1915: II, opposite p. 240).

My companion Gerald Gotzen and I visited Mänteq in April 1994. We followed a steep, stony road running down from Tamqé to Let Märefeya, once the site of an important research station established there by the Italian Geographical Society in the 1880's. Let Märefeya itself was also formerly the location of a *Ballä Ejj gädam*. It was visited early in the present century by the French scholar Jacques Faïtlovitch and later by the Italian physician Lincoln De Castro. Both reported that the monastery was by then largely abandoned, and inhabited almost entirely by the elderly, because most of the able-bodied craftsmen had apparently migrated to obtain work in Addis Ababa. (Faitlovitch 1910: 136–8; De Castro 1915: II, 244–6; Cohen 1912: 35–8)

In 1994 only two large trees marked the site of the former monastery—but informants

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remembered that it was once there, and said that it was originally known as Askenela. The monastery's Azaj, or intendant, was reportedly a certain Abba Tägäñ, whose daughter Wäyzäro Achané subsequently inherited the area where it had formerly stood. What had once been monastic land was thus transformed into private property.

Incidentally the Italian geographical station at Let Märefeya has also long since disappeared without visible trace. The local peasants showed us a large tree, beside which the stone grave of the leader of the Italian mission, Count Antinori (Traversi 1931: 93) had been erected, but of it nothing remains. They recall that the mission headquarters, which they referred to as a *gebbi*, or palace, was a reputedly fine building located above a tree on the nearby hillock, but of that too nothing remains.

1. MANTEQ

Continuing our journey from Let Märafeya we descended into a thick forest (see photo in Traversi 1931: opposite 241) consisting largely of *zegba*, or *Podocapus gracilior* trees. This wood in former days was very extensive, and virtually surrounded the monastery, largely isolating it form outside contacts, and affording it a considerable measure of security against attack from enemies. Numerous trees, however, have been cut down since then, with the result that the forest now occupies only a fraction of its former area. This is evident from the writings of the early nineteenth century German Protestant missionary J. L. Krapf, who reported that the monastery, which today stands at the edge of the forest, was in his day situated completely within it. Present-day informants confirm that huge stretches of land in the area have in recent decades been deforested to make room for agriculture. Several small strips of land near the monastery itself were also brought under cultivation by the monks, who acquired legal use of them after the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, when legislation was introduced granting "Land to the Tiller".

After passing through what is left of the forest we reached a clean and fast-flowing little river or stream, the Let Märefeya. This rivulet was, and is, of considerable importance, for the old Let Märefeya *gädam* and the nearby Italian geographical station both depended on it for their water, as does the monastery of Mänteq to this day. *Ballä Ejj* monasteries were in fact always located in the vicinity of streams or rivers, for the craftsmen needed a significant amount of water, not only for drinking and cooking, but also for pottery work, in which the womenfolk were largely occupied, and some tanning, in which the men excelled.

Leaving the Let Märefeya river we proceeded to climb a fairly steep track, and before long reached our final destination, the Mänteq monastery, the abode today of over a hundred pious *Ballä Ejj* monks and nuns. The men are for the most part blacksmiths and weavers, and the women, potters. All, irrespective of their sex, have chosen an austere and ascetic life, faithfully celebrating a Saturday and Sunday Sabbath, and throughout the week eating only once a day, at which time they partake of only an extremely frugal supper.

2. HISTORY

Mänteq monastery, according to its most scholarly inmates, whom we were privileged to interview, but who prefer to remain anonymous, was founded "over two centuriesago". The prevailing view in the monastery is that the ancestors of the *Ballä Ejj* of Shäwa came from the Gondär region (where such craftsmen, it may be recalled, were mainly Fälashas, or Judaic Ethiopians), and later moved south (for reasons no longer remembered) to Shäwa, where they established themselves, and have remained to this day. They are said to have settled in Shäwa at about the time that its ruler Abéto Nägassi (1697–1703) was founding his dynasty, and establishing a new state (which, we may assume, would have involved considerable employment of handicraft workers). (See Levine 1965: 32–4 for Shäwan chronology).

As for the monastery itself, its present Azaj, or intendant, Abba Kidanä Maryam, believes that it was established during the reign of a subsequent Shäwan ruler, Märadazmach Abbiyé (1720–1745), and that one of the latter's chiefs, a man named Abaya, gave the land on which it now stands to a potter woman called Mogosé. The monastery's first head is therefore

reputed to have been a woman. No information, unfortunately, seems to be available on her successors. They could have been of either sex, for *Ballä Ejj* monasteries, as we shall see, are composed of both monks and nuns. Each group, male and female, have their own individual *azaj*, who could be in overall command of the entire monastery. Almost all heads of *Ballä Ejj* monasteries at the present time are in fact men, and it may be assumed that women heads have been rare in monastic history. However, Yelema, one of the oldest and largest *Ballä Ejj* monasteries, did until recently have a woman Azaj , by name Nugagén. When she became too old to serve in that capacity, she withdrew from Yelema, and was living at Mänteq at the time of our visit.

Apparently nothing more is known of Mänteq monastery in the first century or so of its existence, but in the 1840s several foreign diplomatic and other missions arrived in the area to visit the then ruler of Shäwa, King Sahlä Sellasé. As a result of their coming Mänteq was visited by three important foreign travellers: the missionary J. L. Krapf (Isenberg and Krapf, 1843: 74, 88–9, 138–40, 142, 238–40), a British envoy Captain William Cornwallis Harris (1844: II. 371), and a British naval surgeon Charles Johnston (1844: II. 244, 330–32). These were the first foreign observers ever to write specifically on the *Ballä Ejj*.

Mänteq, because of its proximity to Ankobär, the capital of King Sahlä Sellasé, the greatest of the early Shäwan kings, was at that time almost certainly in its heyday, and the *Ballä Ejj*, who seem to have been favoured by the ruler, appear for that reason to have been relatively prosperous.

Krapf (II. 239–40) describes the monastery as remote, isolated and almost mysteriously lost, as we have seen, in a thick forest. Its principal building, or house of prayer, was "better constructed" than any such structure he had seen anywhere else in Ethiopia. He states that it was "very dark", and surrounded by "raised banks of clay". Men and women, he notes, occupied separate parts of the building, and "no unnecessary communication" between them was allowed. Monks and nuns often slept within the house of prayer in an upright position, and were prevented from falling by straps fastened to the walls. Members of the monastery wore *mätäbs*, or neck-cords, like other Christians, and one man actually wore iron bands around his body and loins as a means of self-mortification. They possessed a number of Ge'ez manuscripts, among them "some parts of the Bible", and such devotional literature as the *Organona Maryam*, or Harp of Mary, and the *Melka Maryam*, or the Image of Mary.

The monastery's rigid acceptance of Old Testament writ left a deep impact on Harris. He noted (II. 371) that no fire was kindled on either Saturdays or Sundays, that throughout the week the monks and nuns ate only once a day, that they kept their fasts with the utmost strictness, and that some on occasion mortified their naked bodies with rods of sharp thorns. The community's austerities were all in all "perhaps as severe as any recorded in monkish annals".

The travellers to Mänteq of this time, as later, found the monks extremely reluctant to reveal anything about their religious beliefs, which seemed to be at odds with those of other Orthodox Christians. Krapf claims that one of the monks was apparently so frightened of revealing anything that he trembled all over, and tried to flee. Johnston, who succeeded in befriending one, was left with the impression (II, 331) that the monastery's inmates were Christians, but did "not pray to the Virgin Mary", and believed that "Christ had no father", but was "a man like ourselves". Krapf was likewise convinced that the sect was somehow heretical, for he wrote (II,240): "Outwardly they are Christians, as they go to the churches of the Christians; their children are baptized, and they have the [Christian] books of the Abyssinians; but they are strongly suspected of being Jews".

To place such remarks in context one should recall that several of the most striking customs associated with Mänteq monastery, namely Sabbath observance, rigid fasting, and the use of separate pots for fasting and non-fasting food, were also practised by the Christian population at large. This is well documented by Harris, who always highly critical of all things Ethiopian, remarks (III. 148) of early nineteenth century Shäwa that:

"The Jewish sabbath is strictly observed throughout the kingdom. The ox and the ass are at rest. Agricultural pursuits are suspended. Household avocations must be laid aside, and

the spirit of idleness reigns throughout the day... when, a few years ago, one daring spirit presumed, in advance of the age, to burst the fetters of superstition, His Majesty the King of Shoa, stimulated by the advice of besotted monks, delegated his wardens throughout the land, and issued a proclamation, that whoso disturbed the original dreamy stillness of the Jewish sabbath should forfeit his property to the royal treasury, and be consigned to the state dungeon".

Quoting the seventeenth century German scholar Hiob Ludolf he declared that "there is no nation upon earth which fasts so strictly as the Abyssinians; and that they would rather commit a great crime than touch food on the day of abstinence". Harris added, of the Christian monks (III, 149), that"the haughty and self-sufficient monk vaunts his meagre diet as the only means of expiation from sin and evil desire".

"According to the Jewish practice, all culinary utensils must be thoroughly cleansed and polished, to the end that no particle of meat or prohibited food may remain to pollute the pious intention. Journeys and travel are strictly interdicted" (Harris 1844: III, 149).

Though presented in his usual bigoted fashion, Harris's testimony is important in emphasising the basic "Jewishness" which the *Ballä Ejj* had in common with the rest of the Christian population. This found supreme expression in the acceptance of the dual Saturday-Sunday Sabbath, which was long afterwards ably expressed by the Lazarist missionary linguist Joseph Baeteman, when he observed that "the Ethiopians preserve a part of the Mosaic law jointly with Christian law. The have kept the two *sänbats*" (Baeteman 1929: 212).

The subsequent southwards move of the Shäwan capital in the early 1880s from Ankobär to Entoto, and later to Addis Ababa, appears to have resulted in a major fall in the demand for Mänteq handicrafts. This led in turn to migration from the monastery, largely, we may assume, to the new capital's artisan quarter at Qächäné. The decline of Ankobär also led to decreasing interest in Mänteq, with the result that foreign travellers of the twentieth century no longer visited its monastery, and confined their travels to Let Märafeya, which was much more accessible.

Mänteq nevertheless successfully weathered the passage of time. It remained throughout the years a closely knit, largely inward looking, and as far as the outside world was concerned, a highly secretive community. Its members looked after their own affairs, remained loyal to their beliefs and unique customs, and gave unquestioning obedience to their Azaj, or monastic leader. The latter played a major role in *gädam* life: he (or she, for some chiefs were in fact women) led their flock, and each day gave orders to each member as to his or her day's duties.

The present Azaj, Abba Kidanä Maryam, grew up in the monastery, and was chosen as its leader while still little more than a youth. He has served for some twenty years, but is still visibly much younger, and stronger, than most of the other monks. His predecessor, Abba Wäldä Mäsqäl, also gave dedicated service, for some thirty years, until his death in office, whereupon Abba Kidanä Maryam succeeded him.

3. MÄNTEQ TODAY

As a result of its declining fortunes Mänteq monastery today has considerably fewer members than in the past. In the early 1990s they numbered about 240, but by the Spring of 1994 there were only about half that number. At the time of our visit in mid-April there were only thirty-five monks, for the most part old men. Some of them were in their eighties and one, Ato Mängesté Täbala, a former member of Emperor Haile Sellasé's parliament, was in his nineties. The nuns by contrast were sixty-six strong, and on the whole somewhat younger and less enfeebled than the monks. There were in addition twenty boys or youths, known as *yämähabär lejoch*, or "children of the society". Their duty is to serve their elders, and, if all goes well, they may be expected in due course to become monks. The monastery's residential population is constantly varying, however, for monks are frequently on the move

from one craftsman's monastery to another, in many cases in search of better employment opportunity.

Mänteq *gädam*, though fallen on hard times, has preserved much of its old economic and spiritual role. It remains an impressive, though by no means affluent establishment. Like all *Ballä Ejj* monasteries it comprises a large and relatively imposing prayer-house; a variety of simple accommodation for the monks and nuns; several huts in which to bake bread and brew beer; one or two dwellings set apart for women during menstruation; and a few shacks or workshops for the artisans, mainly blacksmiths, weavers and potters, who constitute the *gädam*'s productive force. Mänteq also has a guest room, in which the monks most graciously made us welcome.

The monks, as in the past, serve mainly as weavers or blacksmiths (and can easily move from one of these occupations to the other), while the nuns are chiefly potters. Some of the monks, making use of the water of the Let Märefeya river, also fashion excellent tanned hides, on which we spent a comfortable night in the monastery. There is, however, much more to it than that. The *Ballä Ejj* community in the twentieth century has become geographically and economically much more mobile than in the past. A significant proportion of the Mänteq monks, it transpires, are not from the area, but have come from other *gädams*, or from Addis Ababa's large *Ballä Ejj* settlement at Qächäné. For the capital's craftsmen Mänteq serves both as a kind of old person's retirement home and as a haven of spiritual repose. Relatively wealthy persons, such as the coffee merchant Ato Mängesté Täbala, who has a fine house in Addis Ababa, are therefore content to leave the luxuries of life in the capital for the frugal existence of Mänteq.

To correctly describe the *Ballä Ejj* employment pattern (see also Pankhurst. 1994. 49–60, and 1995, 131–52) one must emphasise that the community has long since moved beyond its three classic occupations of weaving, blacksmithing and potting, and moved into trade and other professions. This development has resulted in large measure from the *Ballä Ejj*'s historic involvement in weaving. This occupation was essentially commercial, for, unlike the work of the peasantry, it necessitated both the purchase of the raw material and the sale of virtually all the product. The peasants could, and often did, practice subsistence agriculture, but there could not be any such thing as subsistence weaving. Weavers, often travelling widely to purchase cotton, as well as to sell their cloth, were forced willy-nilly into the market economy. They often expanded into other fields of trade, including coffee. Such was the background of the afore-mentioned Ato Mängesté Täbala, a retired coffee merchant. One of Mänteq's richest members, with a house in Addis Ababa which he still sometimes visits, he is nevertheless a loyal member of the monastery, and with a view to ameliorating the lot of his fellows, a decade or so ago, installed a simple water-operated grinding-mill by the Let Märefeya river.

The *Ballä Ejj* in Addis Ababa have meanwhile been advancing into other fields of activity. Several hundred weavers, making use of *equb*, or rotating savings schemes, have succeeded in purchasing cars, and becoming taxi-drivers. Dozens of their vehicles can be seen parked at night at Qächäné.

Notwithstanding such dynamic responses to economic change, and the resultant emergence of the *Ballä Ejj* into the expanding world of private enterprise, there can be no denying that Mänteq monastery remains an extremely poor community, struggling hard to make ends meet. The monastery, being far away from other settlements, has to take most of its wares, knives, sickle-blades, plough-shares, cloth and pottery, to neighbouring towns or markets. These include not only the old capital of Ankobär , but also the more important Muslim market-towns of Aleyu Amba, Hamus Gäbäya, literally "Thursday market", and Géna Mämcha.

4. LINKS WITH THE CHURCH

The monastery has another interesting link with the outside world. This springs from the fact that, like all *Ballä Ejj gädam*, it has a special relationship with a nearby Orthodox Christian church, which plays a significant, if at the same time remote, role in the monastery's religious

life. The monks are spiritually self-sufficient, and almost entirely independent of the church. A number of monks and nuns nevertheless attend some of the principal Church festivals, such as *Mäsqäl* or the Feast of the Cross, Christmas, the Epiphany and Easter, and, perhaps more importantly, are taken there for burial when they die. Mänteq monastery thus has a special relationship with the nearby Orthodox church of Hanna Maryam, about an hour's walk away. In this connection it is interesting to note that one of the church's principal priests, Abba Täklä Wäld, who was responsible for rebuilding its structure some years ago, has recently become a monk at Mänteq, though he resides there only partially. He it was who conducted the service at the time of our visit, which was in a sense unfortunate as it prevented us from witnessing the more traditional proceedings as carried out by the monks and nuns on their own.

For this and other reasons, discussion of *Ballä Ejj* beliefs will be deferred to a later article. It may, however, be mentioned that the monks, when referring to God, often call him *Andeyé*, literally "my [only] one", in the sense of a single God, to be honoured and obeyed.

The *gädam*, we are informed, no longer possesses manuscripts, as reported a century and a half ago by Krapf. Reportedly only a minority of the monks are now literate. Some of the latter own *Dawits*, or Psalms of David, and a few other common Ge'ez texts. One monk we met was in possession of Ato Täklä Sadeq Mekuria's History of Ethiopia from Lebnä Dengel to Téwodros, and consulted it while answering our queries.

5. THE PRAYER HOUSE AND MENSTRUATION HOUSES

The prayer-house which is of central importance in every *Ballä Ejj* monastery, is a circular stone building which today has a corrugated iron roof. This is surmounted, as in the case of so many Ethiopian Orthodox churches, by a *gullelat*, or circular roof-top, supporting a cross. The latter consists of two vertical and two horizontal arms, separated by four slimmer diagonal stems, all of them framed by a circle.

The interior of the building, which is about ten metres in diameter, is edged by a *mädäb*, or low stone bench. The most significant feature of the house, and one which it shares with all *Ballä Ejj* places of worship, is the central *mekrab*, or sanctuary (Leslau 1987: 341). At Mänteq this comprises a stone base less than a metre wide and high, supporting a ten metre high upright post, which rises to the centre of the roof. On either side of this post, and a few inches away from it, are two slimmer vertical poles. Attached to all three poles, fairly high up, are seven, or in places nine, long horizontal side poles which stretch to the wall at the back of the building. They serve to stabilise the central structure, and constitute a kind of shelf upon which wooden chairs and prayer-sticks are stacked when not in use.

Also attached to the *mekrab* at the time of our visit were two small imported European prints of the Virgin and Child, both framed. Similar pictures could be seen on *mekrabs* at other *Ballä Ejj* monasteries we have visited. These two pictures represented the sole decorative element in the entire Mänteq establishment.

Having closely inspected the prayer-house in the daytime, we returned to visit it for the regular evening gathering, on a Monday evening in Lent. The monks and nuns, who in accordance with custom had not eaten or drunk all day, sat in dignified silence on either side of the hall. They were in almost complete darkness, reminiscent of that described by Krapf a century and a half ago. The surrounding gloom was lit only by a fire at one side of the room, a few wax tapers and the occasional candle. After the first of several prayers was said the attendants, or *yämähaber lejoch*, distributed a small piece of *dabbé*, a special type of bread spoken of at this ceremony as *sadéq* (from the Ge'ez word *sadeqa*, to "be just, be righteous, be faithful") (Leslau 1987: 548), and a *sewa*, or earthenware cup of beer, to everyone breaking the fast. The beer was dispensed from the largest *gan*, or earthenware jar, I have ever seen, and which, when empty, required two persons to carry it out. During the proceedings there were several public enquiries to ensure that no one in the dark had failed to receive their allotted bread and beer. Sinners like ourselves, who had enjoyed the *gädam*'s hospitality all day, naturally had no place in this ritualised evening breakfast.

Only a few metres away from this place of worship, and at a slightly lower elevation, were

two other ritually important structures, each surrounded by a rough wooden fence for demarcation. These were the *teketo* houses, in which nuns, or women preparing to be nuns, are expected to remain during their periods of menstruation. The word is derived from *täkätä*, i.e. the Ge'ez term for "menstruate" (Leslau 1987: 574).

At the time of our visit one young woman was sitting outside the first house, but within its compound. She was fashioning earthenware pots, with several completed vessels laid out beside her. Women in the first four days of menstruation, when bleeding copiously, are relegated to this hut, and are not allowed to leave its compound. During this time they are fed by people who bring food to them but are not allowed under any circumstances to touch them or even to enter the *teketo* compound. For the remaining three days they are still considered impure. They are therefore not allowed to enter other people's' houses, let alone to visit the house of prayer, but are free to walk around the wider monastery compound, or proceed to the nearby fields or forest. On the conclusion of their menstrual period the women are expected to wash themselves ritually, after which they place themselves near a fire to complete the act of cleansing.

The second structure, known as *yägäzät bét*, or house of exclusion, is assigned to women whose menstruation lasts for an abnormally long time. They are not allowed to leave the hut until bleeding stops, and it is popularly held that if menstruation continued indefinitely they could never leave.

Ritual cleansing, and the concepts of ritual purity and impurity, play an important role in *Ballä Ejj* monastic life. The Sabbath, on which no one may work, walk or light a fire, is so highly regarded that no one is allowed to break it. Food for consumption on the Sabbath must therefore be prepared before the Sabbath. Anyone entering the house of worship for the Sabbath service may not leave until the Sabbath has passed. Plates and dishes for not-fasting food must not be used during the period of fasting, etc. Dead bodies are likewise considered unclean. Their burial shrouds for example have to be left in the open for seven days before they can be used again.

The idea of purity and impurity at Mänteq, and in traditional *Ballä Ejj* society, extends even to the animal world. The dog, known to the community in Ge'ez as *kälb*, is considered unclean, and denied entry into the *gädam*. After touching the mules used to transport guests some of the *Ballä Ejj* clensed themselves with water and then fire. This practice has its roots in Leviticus, 11, 27, which declares, "every one among all the wild beasts that moves upon its fore feet, which goes on all fours, is unclean to you..."

The dwellings of the monks and nuns, which are on different sides of the monastery, are of the simplest possible description. Each inmate sleeps alone, in his or her tiny individual chamber, with a minimum of comfort, in keeping with the spiritual ideals and ascetic life of this remarkable old community.

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