

THE MUTUAL EFFECT OF RELIGION AND CULTURE IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is an ancient country located in north-east Africa, or as it is known, the Horn of Africa, called so because of the Horn Shaped tip of the continent that marks off the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean

To the outside world, it has long been known by the name of Abyssinia. This appellation apparently drove from "Habesha", one of the tribes that inhabited the Ethiopian region in the pre-Christian era.

The term Ethiopia is of Greek origin, and in classical times was used as a generic and rather diffuse designation for the African land mass to the south of Egypt. The first known specific application of the term to the Ethiopian region is found in the Greek version of a trilingual inscription of the time of Ezana, the Axumite king who introduced Christianity into Ethiopia towards the middle of the fourth century AD.

This adoption of the term continued with the subsequent translation of the Bible into Ge-ez, the old literary language.

About 10,000 years ago Hamitic (cushitic speaking), peoples came into north-eastern Africa from western Asia. They spread all over what is now Ethiopia. The cushitic speakers can be divided into two groups: the lowland group and the highland group. Examples of the lowland once are the Oromo and Somali. Modern research has shown that the later home of these lowland peoples was probably southern Ethiopia around the lake Abaya, and that they moved to their present homes during the last 1,000 years. Examples of the highland cushites are the Agau and the Sidamo tribes.

Later some Nilotic peoples from the Nile Valley penetrated into the western border areas of Ethiopia. In addition Northern Ethiopia was strongly influenced by a movement across the Red Sea. The people of Saba and other areas of Yemen set up kingdoms in northern Ethiopia from the quite early times. The earliest influence so far discovered dates from 7th or 8th century BC. This influence on the local peoples of the northern Ethiopia caused a change of culture,

and from the mixture of foreign and local cultures grew up eventually the civilisation of Axum. The people of Ethiopia then are basically Cushite (Hamitic) with a large mixture of Sabean (Semitic).

Like many other African societies Ethiopia presents a mosaic of nationalities speaking a multiplicity of languages. Linguists have divided these languages into four groups, three of them tracing a common ancestry to a present language called Proto-Afroasiatic. From this parent language not only the languages spoken in Ethiopia developed but also a number of languages spoken in the northern half of Africa and in south-western Asia.

Ethiopia has been called an Ethnic Museum, and this is in many ways an apt description. An estimated total of seventy languages and over two major faiths and subscribe to a multitude of widely differing local religious systems. The peoples are further distinguished by separate origins, histories, and political organisations by variations in physical appearance, dress, and customs, and by diverse sources of self-identification and loyalty. While many of these groups are small in proportion to the total population, often concentration of their members within a limited geographic or administrative area will transform a minority group into the majority ethnic group, and therefore these smaller groups cannot be overlooked simply because of their numbers.

The ethnic groups that dominate the country politically and culturally - are the Amharas and the closely related Tigrians, who together constitute about one-third of the population. The Tigrians are concentrated in Northern Eritrea and Tigray, the Amharas in Begemider, Gojam, and Shoa. Thus these two peoples continue to occupy the highland provinces which are the core of historic Ethiopia. The Amharas and Tigrians are Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who, though often rivals in the past for political supremacy, have maintained awareness of their common religion and their descent from common Semitic forebears.

The Galla (Oromo) peoples are the largest ethnic groups in the country, comprising to some estimates approximately 40 per cent of the population. Formerly a nomadic people in southern Ethiopia, Somalia, and northern Kenya, bound by a common language Oromigna (Orominya) with mutually intelligible dialects, the Oromo in the sixteenth century swept into the Ethiopian plateau and areas south and west of it. From that time forward, the Oromo peoples gradually adopted agriculture and became isolated from one another, so that at present their loyalties are more regional and tribal than ethnic. Indeed, many Oromos who came early under the Amharas aided them in their conquest of

other oromo peoples. Those who came to reside close to Moslem peoples adopted Islam as an overlay on their own local (pagan) religion, those in constant contact with the Amharas particularly the Oromos of Shoa became Christian, though retaining many of their pre-Christian beliefs and customs. The remaining significant groups in the population are the Somalis, the Sidamos, the Danakils or Afars, the Shankilla and the Gurage peoples along the Sudan border and scattered throughout the country. There undoubtedly was a great deal of mixture between the successive waves of Semites and the northern Cushitic peoples. Other Cushites are today represented by the Sidamo peoples, the Oromo, Somalis, Danakil, and Sahos. Where there has been relatively little contact and mixing between peoples, the extreme representatives of the various Semitic and Cushitic peoples are clearly identifiable to each other on the basis of physical type. But the average Amhara also uses, where applicable, dress, language, religious affiliation, and residential areas to classify the various peoples he meets. Classification is always easy. Intermarriage and the acquisition of Amhara cultural characteristics, for example, make it extremely difficult to differentiate between Shoa Oromos and Amharas.

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

The history of religion is as old as the history of man himself. That is what archaeologists and anthropologists stated. Scholars have discovered that there has never existed any people, anywhere, at any time who were not in some sense religious.

During the thousands of years of mankind's history, man's search for God has led down many pathways. For many people, religion is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practices, and worship that centers one supreme God. Religion gives many people a feeling of security because they believe that a divine power watches over them. These people often ask the power for help or protection. Numerous people follow religion because it promises them salvation and either happiness or the chance to improve themselves in a life after death. Because the positive fruitage of spirit is described as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, mildness, and self-control. Thus religion brings a sense of individual fulfillment, and gives meaning to life.

People practice religion for several reasons. Many people throughout the world follow a religion simply because it is part of the heritage of their culture,

tribe, or family determined by geographical accident of the locality of their birth place. Example: if someone was born in Italy or South America, then without any choice, he was probably raised a Catholic. If he was born in India, then probably he automatically became a Hindu. If his parents were from Pakistan, then he would obviously be a Muslim. Thus religion has become almost a matter of family tradition.

Out of a total population of 80 million in the Horn of Africa, the majority are Muslims. In some of the countries like Somalia, Somaliland, and Djibuti, only a small minority belongs to the other religions. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, Christians and Muslims share the realities of life on approximately a 60 and 40 per cent basis. In Sudan, two thirds are Muslims and one third constitutes an important minority of Christians and Animists. On a local level, there have been many good examples in the Horn of how the peoples have accepted their differences and have learned to live together, sharing the conditions and the meager resources that their countries provide for them. There are also examples of how they are working together in the struggle for justice and survival, both in local committee for emergency assistance and development aid programs and trying to change unjust conditions. Respect and understanding for each other have been their guiding principles. But there are also sad examples of how religion has been exploited and misused by individuals and groups in their struggle for power and dominance over people and land. Religion in the Horn of Africa has always been a vital and dynamic factor and is thoroughly determining the day to day life of the people.

Religion is important in people's search for a fair and just world. As the Horn of Africa is a meeting point between the Arab world and Africa, as well as between Islam, Christianity and African religions, it could become an example of how religion is a unifying and stabilizing factor in the region.

Tradition tells us that Christianity came to Ethiopia very soon after Christ's resurrection. The pre-Axumite state began to decline in the third century BC. About the beginning of the Christian era a new power, based on different cities and almost wholly independent of South-Arabian influence, began to dominate the scene. Among the new cities Axum was chief which became the seat of the Abyssinian Kings and the fountain - head of a new civilisation.

Modern Ethiopia is directly descended from the Axumite Kingdom. Even when, after a thousand years, the seat of government moved elsewhere, Axum, which by then had powerful Christian associations, remained for all time a holy place to the Ethiopians. This kingdom, destined ultimately to an extreme degree

of isolation, was a well-known power of classical times. Its link with the outer (outside) world was the port of Adulis on the Gulf of Zula, a sheltered inlet of the Red Sea south of Massawa. Through this port, though its architecture remained purely Axumite, a whiff of Greek culture reached Axum, and a number of Greek inscriptions are known. Many early Axumite coins also have legends in Greek characters and the coins as a whole are similar in design to those of the Greco-Roman world and evidently inspired by them. In exchange for the Ivory exported through Adulis, foreign wares, including amphorae and glass vessels from the Mediterranean, were carried up to the Axumite cities. Through Adulis, Axum had trading links, of sporadic, with other distant countries, including Persia and India. The military exploits of the kings of Axum were recorded in inscriptions which reveal them as great empire-builders. A notable monarch of the third century AD. Aphilas, not only enlarged his own kingdom but crossed the Red Sea and conquered parts of south-west Arabia which had been the home-land of his Semitic ancestors. The Greek inscription at Adulis which recorded these events was transcribed by Cosmas Indico, an Alexandrian merchant, in his *Christian Cosmography* (early sixth century AD.) - a work which describes the coasts and cities of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

A great king of the fourth century, Ezana, left a number of inscriptions of which the first had parallel texts in three languages: Greek, South-Arabia, and Ge-ez. But his later inscriptions are in Ge-ez only, which shows how its prestige was increasing, rendering the use of foreign languages superfluous. Ezana still claimed sovereignty over parts of south-west Arabia, but his recorded campaigns were directed against insurgent peoples within, or bordering upon, his own kingdom.

His latest inscription records his conquest of the Nubian kingdom of Meroe on the upper Nile whose great days coincided with those of Axum, though these neighbouring kingdoms had almost nothing in common and their contacts were apparently scanty.

The same inscription is of very exceptional interest in that Ezana attributes his success in battle not, as hitherto, to his household God, the "unconquered Mahrem", but to the "Lord of Heaven" and Lord of the Earth. This important change in the tenor of a royal inscription indicated, albeit ambiguously, the king's conversion to the Christian faith.

It may be that Ezana, in his prudence, thought the time not yet right for publicising his recent change of faith throughout the kingdom, where the old gods were still honoured. But Ezana's conversion is attested by the coins of his

reign: the earlier ones bear the crescent and disk, the later ones the cross - they were in fact among the earliest coins of any country to carry this Christian symbol. The manner of the conversion is told by Rufinus, a near - contemporary Roman historian, and there is every reason to believe that his story is true in its essentials. One Meropius, a Christian philosopher of Tyre, went voyaging to improve - his mind, "taking with him two small boys who were related to him and whom he was educating in human studies". When, on the return voyage the ship put in at some Red Sea port, Meropius and the whole ship's company were massacred by the coastal tribesmen. The account continues: The boys were found studying under a tree and preparing their lessons, and, preserved by the mercy of the Barbarians, were taken to the king. He made one of them, Aedesius, his cup-bearer. Frumentius, whom he had perceived to be sagacious and prudent, he made his treasure and secretary. Thereafter they were held in great honour and affection by the king. Frumentius gradually rose to a position of great influence and when the king, Ella Amida, died prematurely, leaving an infant son (who was Ezana) he was asked to assume the functions of Regent. At the same time he did all in his power to encourage the spread of the Christian religion, which was not unknown among foreign trades already resident in the country. When the young Ezana was of age to take over the government the two brothers left the kingdom, Aedesius returning home to Syria where Rufinus heard the whole extraordinary story from his own lips. Frumentius, however, made for Alexandria so as to inform the patriarchal of the Christian flock awaiting a shepherd in the distant kingdom of Axum. Athanasius, lately appointed patriarch, chose Frumentius himself - though he cannot yet have been a priest - to return as bishop to his adopted country. There he continued his missionary endeavours which were rewarded eventually by the conversion of the king himself.

The Abyssinians call their apostle Abba Salama (father of peace.) The name of their first Christian ruler, Ezana, has dropped out of the popular memory, being replaced by those of the legendary twin kings, Abreha and Atsbeha, but there is no serious conflict between history and legend.

The consecration of Frumentius by the patriarch of Alexandria resulted naturally in the Ethiopian Church becoming a dependency of the Monophysite Church of Egypt, a relationship not finally broken until 1958.

The third and fourth centuries seem to have been most prosperous and most productive period, especially just before the conversion (AD. 340), the modest beginnings of a new Christian architecture are not seen until two centu-

ries later. No doubt there was literary activity as well (though nothing survives except inscriptions on stone), for the old South-Arabian syllabary had been reformed and greatly improved by the middle of the fourth century, probably under Ezana. This was a most important step forward, and the alphabet so modified has stood the test of time, for it is still in use, with some additions, today. An outstanding event in Abyssinia's Christian history was the arrival, towards the end of fifth century, of the "Nine Saint ". They are thought to have been learned Syrian monophysites expelled from their native land after the council of Chalcedon and seeking refuge in a country whose religious beliefs did not conflict with their own. It was them who brought monasticism to Abyssinia, and they were probably the first to translate the Greek scriptures into Ge-ez. They loam large in local hagiography and some of their names are associated with specific monasteries. Thus Abuna Za-Mikael Aragawi was the founder of Debre Damo, which inaccessible mountain he is said to have first ascended with the aid of a monastery serpent.

The Axumite were now firm Christians. The sixth - century kings, Kaleb and his son Gebra Mesqal, have gone down in history as outstanding Champions of the faith and the remains of their supposed tomb-chaples are to be seen on hill-top near Axum.

The Abyssinians' Arabian dominions were lost and, with them, their command of the Sea. Kaleb, in AD. 524, launched a campaign to succour them, a Greek fleet helping to transport his forces across the Red Sea. The campaign was successful. It led to the temporary re-establishment of Abyssinian rule in the Yemen (where a number of churches were built), and even to an attempted raid on Mecca, involving elephants, which is mentioned in the Koran. However, after the Persian conquest of Arabia, followed almost at once by the rise of Mohammed, the Axumites gave up any attempt to retain their footing there.

Early in the seventh century a king of Axum, Armah (well known for his coins, which are very common) gave sanctuary to some of the first followers of Mohammed who had been driven from Mecca, then till a pagan sanctuary. This gesture of tolerance and hospitality for a time exempted Abyssinia from the Jihad, the "holy war" to which all those who resisted Islam were subject.

On the other hand the Arabs were sometimes provoked by the depredations of supposedly Abyssinian pirates in the Red Sea, who even sacked Jidda. In the end Mohammadans, and especially the nomads of the coastal plains on the African side, who were early converts, became a perennial menace to the Abyssinians' Christian Kingdom.

☛ The cycle of the year: It has been well said that religious and secular life are inseparable among the peoples of Semitic culture. Abyssinians' yearly round is marked out by the succession of feasts and fasts ordained by the Church, and ordered according to the ancient calendar which survives nowhere else in the modern world. It must be remembered, however, that every week also has its rhythm. A Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days when no food or drink may be touched before noon and none but strictly vegetarian food for the rest of the day. Moreover, Saturdays as well as Sundays are regarded as holy days when no heavy work should be done either at home or in the fields (the same being true of all the more important festivals of the Church.)

There are therefore a great number of workless days, and also a great number of fast days, in the course of the year. New Year's Day, the first of Meskerem (September 11) comes at the close of the dreary season of the heavy rains, when flowers begin to come out in millions. It is followed on the seventeenth of Meskerem (Sept. 24.) by the favourite festival of Meskal which commemorates the finding of the true Cross by St Helena. It is as much a secular as a religious feast and a great occasion for merry-making, when warriors sing boastful chants, horsemen parade in their finest attire, and the equestrian game of guks may be played. On Meskal eve, in every town, a tall pole (damera) is set up in some open space, and later in the day men and boys bring other long, thin poles to lean against it, this pyramid of poles is encircled three times by processions, civil and ecclesiastical. In the evening the whole great pile is set alight. Since every village or hamlet has its own Meskal bonfire the countryside that evening is full of points of twinkling light.

In the Tigray region the annual festival of Gabra Menfes Qiddus, on the fifth of Tikimt, has always been observed by an enthusiastic multitude. All the Churches of "Abo" are charmingly situated in a grove of trees near the Church or nearest to its "tebel" or (holy water) - a waterfall in an area of the given town or village. As happened at any of these festivals the congregation came and went as they pleased, but for the most part stood outside the Church while the holy mysteries were conducted inside. To the uninstructed onlooker the climax of the service came at the end, when the "tabot" or ark was brought out, wrapped in coloured cloths, carried on the head of a priest. As it appeared in the doorway the women raised the "ilil", a prolonged and piercing cry of joy. At first the "tabot" remained motionless, accompanied by several processional Crosses and their attendant brightly coloured canopies, while a group of cantors (dabtera) performed the liturgical dance so beloved of the Abyssinians. The

dancing over, a procession formed up, headed by the "tabot" or ark, and slowly circled the Church three times in a counter-clockwise direction. Finally the "tabot" or ark was carried back into sanctuary, always over and the assembly broke up.

During the normally rainless months of Tikimt, Hidar, Tahisas and Tir (October to January) the Tigray landscape gradually dries up, except some strips and patches of bright green reveal the presence of an irrigation system. This is the harvest season, and the landscape is dotted with yellow patches, which are the threshing and winnowing grounds. At this time of year the farmers are laboriously breaking in fallow land for planting when the rains come. The matted turf is first dislodged by ploughing this way and that, then piled in small heaps to dry, and finally set alight so that it smoulders for days or weeks. This procedure kills off weeds and provides ash as a fertiliser for the next season's crops.

The great religious - and social - events of this season are the annual festivals of St Michael the Archangel on the twelfth of Hidar, and of the Virgin Mary on the twenty first of the month. On these red-letter days no work is ever done, instead, all repair in newly washed shammas to the local Michael or Mariam Church as the case may be. When the service is over, the "tabot" duly reveal and the "dabtaras" dance concluded in a frenzy of emotion, many tend to linger for hours to exchange the news of the day. Meanwhile the beggars and indigent students implore, in the Saint's name, the worshippers' generosity and occasionally a wandering monk or hermit will assail the laxity of the age in impassioned words and call every backslider to repentance. About a fortnight after the western Christians on the twenty-ninth of Tahisas /december/ the Abyssinian Christmas is celebrated. While not a major event of the Church calendar it makes a special appeal to young people as the occasion for a sort of inter-village hockey game known as "genna"- the name being also applied to the festival itself.

On the eleventh day of Tir /January/ the following month, the festival of "Timket" commemorates at once the Epiphany and the Baptism. On the previous evening the "tabot" /the picture of God/ of every Church is brought out and carried in priestly procession, with much trumpet - blowing and ringing of bells, to the local stream or pool traditionally used on this special occasion. Here the "tabot" /the picture of God/ spend the night in a tent, as they used to do when carried to the wars to bring victory in battle. Other tents are set up for the accompanying clergy, and some villagers piously remain all night in atten-

dance, braving a hard couch of earth and a possible frost at that coldest season of the year. Very early next morning crowds begin to flock in from all sides, the Timket water is blessed and sprinkled over all and sundry, some even go and splash in the stream. As the "tabot" progresses slowly back to the Church on the head of a priest, crosses and canopies clustered around, the dabtaras keep in front, dancing as they go, with attendant drummers beating out a rousing rhythm. On the way the procession halts on some open stretch of grassland, then horsemen appear and do homage to the tabot by riding round it three times. This is the prelude to the dangerous and exciting sport of guks in which pairs of horsemen pursue each other at a frantic gallop. The leading horseman holds his shield at arm's length, the pursuer seeks to overtake him and as he does so hurls a long straight stick at the outstretched shield. Some time during the months of Yekatit, Megabit, and Miaziya (early spring in Europe) there may be light rains to mitigate the excessive dryness of the season : they rarely fail entirely in the uplands of the country but are less reliable further north. In a favourable season there will be some ploughing and planting. This time of year, however, is chiefly marked by the beginning of the eight - week Lenten fast - the longest and most rigorous prescribed by any Christian Church.

Fasting is regarded in Ethiopia as an absolutely fundamental Christian observance and fast days, even for the ordinary layman, amount to nearly half the year. Not only is every Wednesday and Friday kept as a fast with complete abstinence until mid-day, but throughout Lent this applies to all week-days, though on Saturdays and Sundays eating is allowed (subject to the prohibitions of the fast) before noon. Breaking of the fast is regarded as a very serious offence, to be expiated only by appropriate penance's. Even the sick cannot be exempted, when the strict attitude of the Church is upheld.

The climax of the fast comes at the end, when some people will abstain altogether from food and drink on the Friday and Saturday before Easter, formerly there were those who abstained for three whole days and who believed that their fasting would otherwise be unacceptable to God. On Saturday night a mid-night mass is held in some churches, lasting, on occasion, well into the small hours of the morning, and pious people remain all night at Church, making hundreds of prostration's as the tedious hours go by. Some time before dawn the end of the fast is made known by a signal, which may be a cannon shot in larger places, echoed by rifle fire all round the town or the village. Now feasting begins forthwith, and for the next eight weeks until pentecost the Wednesday and Friday fasts are not observed.

Easter, as in most Christian Churches, is considered the prime festival of the religious year. Just as palm leaves - or some local substitute - are passed round in Western Churches on Easter Day, so in Ethiopia reeds are gathered and distributed round the town or village by the priests in Solemn procession, or handed out to those who come to church, and many of the clergy and people bind them in an ingenious manner round their heads.

The first day of Ginbot (May 9) the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, Lideta Maryam, is the occasion for yet another special celebration. The villagers would assemble on this day on convenient hillocks or rocky ridges for a sort of village picnic - an occasion vastly enjoyed by young and old. After a general sharing round of food and drink the elders of the village gathered together, stood on the ridge facing eastwards, and one after another uttered prayers and supplications to "Our Lady Mary" for the welfare of the village or town. Later in the same month the annual festival of Tekle Haymanot comes round, not long after which thunderstorms and an occasional whirl wind herald the approach of the rainy season. During the three months of the rains ploughmen are out constantly in the fields. The wide-spread mud and swollen streams make travel difficult or impossible, and the habit of attending festivals at distant churches must be suspended for a while. Nevertheless the rainy season is enlivened by its own characteristic event, the feast of the Transfiguration (Buhei) which falls during the fortnight's fast commemorating the Death and Assumption of the Virgin. On this occasion the cracking of their whips by which Abyssinian boys and youths recall the night of the Transfiguration pierces the dank and misty air like so many pistol shots.

The final month of the year - if so brief a period can be called a month - is Pagumen /leap year/, which accommodates the five left - over days, or six in the year of Luke. The ending of the rains - which may be very abrupt - comes at about this time, and is greeted with general relief. So the last day of the year, the feast of St John, comes round again, whence the phrase from St John to St John, i.e. from "year to year".

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Every Ethiopian Christian has a soul-father or confessor who must be a priest, probably from a neighbouring Church, he may know the family well and this relationship can be a very close one. The confessor's soul-children often

turn to him for advice and will give him presents from time to time. He must be available for many and various services at the crucial moments of life, and, on occasion, he will indeed adopt the role of the confessor. If his soul.child is guilty of working on a feast day or breaking a feast, of some unworthy behaviour towards neighbour or kin, he may prescribe extra days' fasting, or some hundreds of prostration's, and require donations to the Church or alms for the poor. The confessor's services are first called upon a week after a new birth, when the baby's father asks him to sprinkle the hut with Holy Water. If the infant is male, this ceremony of purification coincides with his circumcision. The confessor, again, will arrange for the infant's baptism - boys forty days and girls eighty days after birth - and ensure that god-parents are found to play their part on this occasion.

Baptism is the most complicated ceremony requiring the presence of several priests and deacons. The tying-on of the short neck-cord (mateb) is an indispensable part of the procedure, for this cord, from which a small cross will later be hanging, is the symbol which distinguishes an Ethiopian Christian from the Moslem and the heathen.

At the baptismal service a Christian name will be given to the infant, taken from the passage of the (synaxarium) for that particular days, but it will normally be the secular name already chosen by his parents. His second name will be that of his father, family names being unknown in Ethiopia. After being baptised, the infants (often several will be raised up to Christianity on the same day) are taken to the Church to be confirmed and to receive communion for the first, and usually the last, time in their lives. For only the priests themselves, and those few other people who have been married by the Eucharist, may partake of the sacrament in adult life. Marriage may take several different forms. Traditionally, it was regarded as a matter for negotiation between parents who would act through a go - between, and the principal matter negotiated was the marriage gift or bride price. The appointed young couple were not consulted and might not see each other before the wedding day. Girls were considered eligible for marriage at sixteen or seventeen or even younger, they were expected to resist their husbands on the wedding night and this resistance was commonly overcome by force, the bridegroom's best man or mizé assisting. To a great extent these conditions still hold good in country districts. It is perhaps surprising that the Church, so deeply involved in most of the affairs of life, concerns itself very little with marriage. This is usually a civil contract based on the legal declaration known as the 80 Band made before a judge and wit-

nesses. However, the confessors to the families do not dissociate themselves from such marriages, nor do they disapprove of them. A religious Oath may supplement the brief civil ceremony, and priests are honoured guests at the long-drawn-out feasting and time-honoured buffoonery of the wedding day or days. These civil marriages can easily be, and frequently are, dissolved. In that case any land owned by either party, or since acquired, remains the personal property of the husband or wife the as the case may be, and children (as well as household goods) are shared between them. The equal rights of man and wife in these circumstances reflect the high status of women in Ethiopian society. Very few couples desire a permanent union blessed by the Church, and the priests themselves will advise caution in taking this irrevocable step, even after years of civil marriage.

 If they have taken the communion together and have become qworabi, there is noone who can loose the bond save death, therefore few will take the communion with a woman...

 When a husband and a wife think in their hearts to take the Qwurban together they will speak with the confessor who will say to them, 'Nay, wait! search in your soul morning and night and see if it be possible! so they may wait more than a year.

 The Church marriage when it comes is a solemn occasion. Though the couple must enter the church by their respective doors, they meet inside and, for this once only, take communion standing together under the same shamma /candle/, held by the husband. Thereafter, whenever they came to communion, the couple must take their places separately on the men's and women's side of the Church, respectively. While marriage sanctified by the Qwurban is rare and greatly honoured, and marriage by the 80 Band, (samanya) is normal and respectable, there are inferior degrees of matrimony. Thus a trader or soldier will usually take a kitir or bond-wife, the agreement being made before a judge and witnesses, such a union is readily dissolved and the property is not then shared out. A form of marriage by abduction is said also to be recognised. There is nothing to prevent a man already married by the samanya from hiring a servant-girl (gered) when he has business in another part of the country and she may become his wife or concubine on a temporary basis. But if he gets married for the second time by the semanya the first wife has a legitimate grievance, if she complains to the court a penalty may be inflicted.

 The clergy, so little concerned with the ordinary forms of matrimony, are needed again at death and after death. Dying men send for their confessor and

ask for absolution. As soon as someone dies the women of his own and neighbouring households break in to a prolonged wail. If possible the burial service takes place on the same day and this service - if carried throughout in its entirety - includes a long series of absolutions. But if death occurs in the evening burial will be delayed until next day. (It is noteworthy too, that when a person dies away from home, news of the death must not be given to the relations in the evening, but withheld until the following morning.)

A variable period of mourning follows, marked by the clothes being dyed some uniform colour - any colour but white - or simply dirtied and darkened with mud, and the women shaving off their hair. But the dead are chiefly honoured by means of the so-called commemorations (*tezkar*) held for the drying of tears' at various intervals up to seven years after death. At the very important and obligatory commemoration held after forty days the confessor arranges for a mass to be held, there is an intercession for the soul of the departed, and renewed absolutions are pronounced. Afterwards a great feast is held. As at funerals, shares of food and drink go to the priests and to officers of the church, and the poor are not forgotten. There is one social institution deeply rooted among the Ethiopians, which finds no exact counterpart in other Christian societies. This is the *mahber*, which has been defined as a religious fraternal association. Most *mahbers* meet once a month on one of the recurrent monthly festivals, though there are some that meet at longer or shorter intervals. Numbering from a dozen up to thirty or forty, members are chosen with care from "men of prudent age - those who work not evil, whose nature is beautiful and calm, who anger not swiftly." A president and a deputy president are chosen by lot, and they meet in different members' hut in turn. These meetings both open and close with religious ceremonial. The host's confessor sprinkles the hut with Holy Water, recites prayers and blesses the food and drink provided, passing his cross around and over them to the four quarters'. Members on arrival prostrate themselves before the special earthenware cup or chalice, later, while all stand, each in turn will drink from it. *Mahber* meetings are, more than anything, social occasions, to which visitors, including foreign residents, are often asked. (Women may be invited, but many women have their own *mahbers*.) The bond between members is very strong and they seldom fail to help each other in times of difficulty or distress.

CHURCH AND CLERGY

From the earliest times until the final break in 1958, the Ethiopian Church formed a dependency of the coptic Church of Egypt, though it became far longer than the parent body. Its single bishop, commonly known as the Abun or Abbatachin (our father) was a monk chosen by the patriarch of Alexandria from one of the monasteries of the Egyptian desert. After a journey always long and exhausting, and usually perilous, he was obliged to spend the rest of his life, honoured but isolated and lonely, in the land of his exile. He alone could consecrate tabots and ordain priests. In times when the hazards of travel resulted in long periods without an Abun, an ageing incumbent was asked to ordain hundreds of partly - trained youths, even young boys and infants, so as to provide a pool of priests for years to come.

The administrative head of the Church whose control extends also to all monastic communities, has been the abbot of the great Ethiopian monasteries since the fifteenth century. Apart from the special powers reserved to the Abun, he exercises supreme control over all the churches and monasteries of the country. He heads a complicated ecclesiastical hierarchy among whom the provincial officers known as "like-kahnat" /chief of the clergy/ are pre-eminent. Of local church dignitaries, the Nebura 'ed, ecclesiastical head of Axum and the holy places of the northern occupies a position of particular honour. But every major Church or important monastery has an "alaka" as head, some of them are wealthy and live in considerable splendour. On the other hand the ordinary priest (kes), while he enjoys great reverence, lives modestly and is usually a working farmer. It has already been shown that the highland Christian community leans heavily on the Church. The clergy are indispensable to the way of life of this community and some early writers were quite mistaken in accusing them of an idle, parasitic existence. However, since every church requires a minimum of two priests and three deacons, besides a sacristan (gabaz), a chamberlain (aggafari), and a leader in singing (Merie geta), they and their dependants are certainly from a rather high proportion of the population - probably up to ten per cent in some areas. And it has been estimated that the lands held by the Church, and used for the support of the clergy, amount to some fifteen per cent of the arable acreage of the whole country.

The boy who aspires to the priesthood will go to a Church School to be taught by a priest, a monk or a (dabtara). Many of these students have no means of support but sleep in little grass huts erected by themselves and subsist by

begging. Teaching begins with the alphabet and proceeds to a study of the principal scriptures, including the psalms, the Gospels and the Miracles of the Virgin Mary, all studied from manuscripts written in the dead language, Gé-ez. There is also instruction in the liturgy, and the wording of the Mass and other services must be committed to memory. At the age of about seventeen the young man is sent to the Abun (nowadays always resident at Addis Ababa) to receive his ordination as a deacon. If he still aims at the priesthood (but does not intend to become a monk) he must marry a maiden wife by the civil ceremony - the 80 bond - a tie which can yet be undone. But after forty days the marriage is confirmed and rendered indissoluble in church, the couple wearing the crown (aklil) and taking communion together under one shamma.

After some years as a married deacon the would-be priest will travel again to receive his final ordination from the Abun, after which he can wear the turban of the priest. Only then can he serve in the (makdes), the "Holy of Hollies" of the Church, and handle the tabot - the consecrated Slab which alone confers sanctity upon the building. As a priest he will now be expert in all matters of the Church calendar and the complex ceremonial appropriate to every occasion. He will enjoy enormous respect and devotion from the public, most of whom will stop to kiss his cross on any casual meeting. He must also submit to the more rigorous discipline of the Church by observing many more fasts than the lay community - all together some 250 days in the year.

If a priest's wife dies he is precluded from marrying again - unless he quits the priesthood and becomes a (dabtara) or as sometimes happens, takes up some lay occupation. Normally he will go once again to the Abun or to one of his deputies, for permission to become a monk (moneksé). If this is granted he assumes the characteristic headgear of the monk, the (kob). Some monks, therefore, are recruited from deacons who did not marry or from widowed priests, and these latter can still celebrate the mass like other priests. But the monastic state attracts many other categories: it is even alleged to be a refuge for a debtors since a monk ceases to have any legal existence, so that his creditors can obtain no satisfaction through, the courts. Some old men assume the "kob" when they begin to tire of life. An old man, who has married many wives and divorced them one by one, may say, "Henceforth it suffices me! Let the world remain last to me! I am to turn my face to God! " and will beg the Qomos to make him a son of the "kob", and the Qomos, sewing it up, will give it to him with a blessing.

Similarly many old women become nuns and wear the monastic (kob): she "being obliterated for God, rejects the things of the flesh and works only the

work of her soul." The great monasteries, like those of medieval Europe, have been centres of art and learning throughout Ethiopian Christian history. There are two principal monastic orders, divided by doctrinal differences: these of Tekle Haymanot and Ewostatewos (Eustathius). The most famous of these monasteries are perhaps Debre-Damo in the far north (accessible only by a rope up the rock face) and Debre-Libanos in Shoa. There are, besides, various districts - Waldebba in Begemdir, the Lake Tana islands, and Tembien in Tigray are examples - renowned for their numerous monasteries. Most of these are to be described as loosely - knit groups of individuals rather than organised communities, for each monk pursues the ascetic ideal in his own way and is subjected to little institutional discipline, some belong in fact to no community at all. In these respects they seem to maintain an early Christian tradition, unaffected by the great monastic movements of the Middle Ages. In any case they enjoy high esteem with the public who admire asceticism above all other Christian Virtues. Many of the monks do indeed devote themselves to fasting of a severity beyond the dreams of the ordinary mortal.

From the way of life of the non-institutional monk it is a further step to the more extreme withdrawal of the hermit or anchorite (bahtawi). In recent years there were still hermits living on a little-frequented hilltops. Probably they still build their minute huts in lonely forest glades or among the tumbled rocks of the northern mountains. Others settle nearer to the haunts of men, using may be a tomb-hut close to a church. For sustenance they chew roots and herbs. The hermit is the messenger of God, and at times will appear by night to cry aloud, "A mighty tribulation is coming upon you! Repent!" and will disappear like a puff of smoke. He may be known by his hair, which is uncut and shaggy with butter rubbed upon it. If God shows him aught in a dream, he will cry it aloud to an officer, saying, "such-and-such a dream have I seen! Take heed and give alms to the poor and set prisoners free! "

Lastly, a very important and peculiarly Ethiopian class of ecclesiastic are the dabtaras or scribes. With its characteristic forbearance towards human frailty, the culture has established in the (dabtara) a religious vocation in which special knowledge is required but holiness is not expected. The vocation is thus sought by these who do not care to be bound by strict conditions of the priesthood, or by priests who have found these conditions too much to live with, so have been divorced and remarried. The dabtara, as this quotation makes clear, is not a priest. He is not formally appointed to his office, nor does he occupy any well-defined position in the hierarchy of the Church. But, unlike many

priests, he is a learned man, familiar with Gé-éz as medieval scholars in West were familiar with Latin, and well acquainted with the scriptures. He may be a teacher in one of the Church Schools. Though barred from the (mekdes), the (dabtara) reigns supreme in the (kinje-mahlet) or choir, for he is the expert in ecclesiastical chant (zema), and in the esoteric poetry (kinje) which may also be using in Church. Furthermore, it is the (dabtaras) who perform the liturgical dance, to the rhythmic accompaniment of drums and sistra, without which no festival is complete.

They are also scribes, possibly expert calligraphers who add to their earnings by copying out sacred manuscripts, in which case they will also know how to prepare their own parchment, pens, and ink. Some of them, too, compose amulets or spells for sale to the public, often ordered by an individual whose name will be cited in the text. They take the form of narrow parchment strips about two metres long which may be tightly rolled (and worn in decorative metal cylinders made for the purpose) or folded in zigzag fashion with wooden covers like a small book. These amulets, which protect their owner against the evil eye, blindness and various diseases, contain magico-religious prayers invoking the deity: ostensibly Christian, they clearly have a pagan background. Other dabtaras are expert herbalists, willing to prescribe natural drugs against various ills. Still others make a reputation as soothsayers and sorcerers trafficking, it is sometimes said, with the powers of darkness.

The dabtaras then, with their erudition, their wide knowledge and special skills, but lacking as they do the mystic and unworldly office of the ordained priest, form a kind of link between laity and clergy in this religiously ordered society. Whatever magic arts they may be thought to practice, they are highly respected citizens, whose multifarious services are indispensable to Church and people alike.