Encounters at dawn. Portraits of the Ethiopian Highlands

Sohier, Estelle

Encounters at dawn.
Portraits of the Ethiopian Highlands

Across history, Ethiopia has aroused a range of sentiments, from fraternity, to passionate love, to pity. It is a land that fascinates and intrigues, and the country has served for the projection of many fantasies. One thing that is certain, however—Ethiopia, in every aspect, is a place of contrasts: contrasts of cultures and languages, where inhabitants share a common border, yet belong to a "mosaic of nationalities" (Bahru Zewde, 2001); contrasts of geography and climate, which range from the arid lowlands of the Ogaden region, with its semi-desert, to the tall peaks of the highlands, rising to over 4,600 meters; and then, contrasts in the ways foreigners have gazed upon the country for centuries. In the Middle Ages, Crusaders imagined Ethiopia to be a bastion of Christian faith under the reign of the mythic Prester John. Several centuries later, during the colonial period, the country became a symbol of resistance to European colonization following the resounding victory of the armies of Menelik II in Adwa, in 1896. In recent times, Ethiopia has gained the image of extreme poverty, and has become the principal recipient of international aid. But other visions coexist: for ancient Greeks and 20th-century archeologists alike, Ethiopia was the birthplace of humanity. Seen as a three thousand year-old civilization, the heir to the Queen of Sheba, Ethiopia embodies also the motherland for Rastafarians the world over.

The images captured by Lizy Manola reflect this fascination with Ethiopian culture. They demonstrate as well why Ethiopia has attracted such attention, inviting us to discover an exceptional patrimony and an unusual religiosity surrounding a vibrant Christianity. And some images bring us to the heart of myths which have bound Ethiopia to the rest of the world.

Lizy Manola was surprised by the warm and enthusiastic welcome she received from Ethiopian priests when she mentioned her Greek nationality. The intimacy evident in many of her scenes attests to both the depth of their encounter and her sensibility as a photographer. The connection also may reflect, implicitly, a shared awareness of ancient imaginaries that links Ethiopia to Greek culture and history. This dimension provides an entry for discovering both the Ethiopian highlands and Lizy's photographic work.

Greece/Ethiopia, intersecting imaginaries

This shared imaginary dates back to antiquity and can be traced in some elements of the long history of the word "Ethiopia." Present in Homeric accounts, the word was used by Greek geographers to refer to certain distant lands. Their knowledge was more mythic than empirical, and their writings placed the "Ethiopians," dark-skinned populations, alongside the oceans on either side of the inhabited world. The conquests of Alexander the Great, the occupation of Egypt by the Greeks, and the expansion of trade in the region brought both a deepening of geographical knowledge and the spread of myths. Diodorus of Sicily summarized as follows the diffuse knowledge about Ethiopia in the Greek world of the first century before Christ. Ethiopians were deemed the first human beings, and Diodorus explained why:

> Now the Ethiopians, as historians relate, were the first of all men and the proofs of this statement, they say, are manifest. (…) [T]hat those who dwell beneath the noon-day sun were, in all likelihood, the first to be generated by the earth, is clear to all; since, inasmuch as it was the warmth of the sun which, at the generation of the universe, dried up the earth when it was still wet and impregnated it with life, it is reasonable to suppose that the region which was nearest the sun was the first to bring forth living creatures. And they say that they were the first to be taught to honour the gods and to hold sacrifices and processions and festivals and the other rites by which men honour the deity; and that in consequence their piety has been published abroad among all men, and it is generally held that the sacrifices practised among the Ethiopians are those which are the most pleasing to heaven. As witness to this they call upon the poet who is perhaps the oldest and certainly the most

venerated among the Greeks; for in the *Iliad* he represents both Zeus and the rest of the gods with him as absent on a visit to Ethiopia to share in the sacrifices and the banquet which were given annually by the Ethiopians for all the gods together:

> For Zeus had yesterday to Ocean's bounds
> Set forth to feast with Ethiop's faultless men,
> And he was followed there by all the gods.

And they state that, by reason of their piety towards the deity, they manifestly enjoy the favour of the gods, inasmuch as they have never experienced the rule of an invader from abroad; for from all time they have enjoyed a state of freedom and of peace one with another, and although many and powerful rulers have made war upon them, not one of these has succeeded in his undertaking[1].

The writer had travelled to Egypt where he heard about the Aksumite Empire to the south, which had developed along the African coasts of the Red Sea beginning in the 3rd century B.C. The Aksumite kingdom sat along trade routes between the Mediterranean world, Ceylon and India, and commerce across the region allowed the Greeks to learn of it both by word of mouth, as with Diodorus of Sicily, and directly through some voyagers. It was the forerunner to the Ethiopian kingdom.

Journeys of texts, images and a new faith. Emergence of a Christian kingdom

According to Ethiopian tradition, during the 4th century A.D., two Greek traders from Tyre, *Frumentius* and *Aedesius*, reached Aksum, the center of the Empire, after having surviving a shipwreck. There, they converted the king, Ezana, to Christianity, such that the Aksumite Empire became the second Christian kingdom in the world, after Armenia. This conversion was decisive for the formation of the artistic, architectural and literary heritage of Ethiopia, as well as for the history of the kingdom for which the Church became its foundation. The Greek name *Aithiopia* had been adopted by various cultures since Homer. Mentioned several times in the Bible, it became a holy place-name

[1] Diodorus of Sicily, translated by C.H. Oldfather, London, W. Heinemann, 1967, vol. 2, pp. 89-93.

in the Horn of Africa, and the psalm "Let Ethiopia stretch out its hands to God" (Psalm 68, 32), became a programmatic phrase.

After the conversion of Ezana, Frumentius is said to have gone to Alexandria to visit the Copt Metropolitan, Athanase, who ordained the traveler the first patriarch of the Ethiopian Church. Back in Aksum, he received the name Salama, "the Illuminator," and he preached throughout the land. During the sixteen centuries that followed, until 1959[2], the Metropolitans of Alexandria consecrated Egyptian monks and sent them to Ethiopia, where they receive the title *Abun*, "our father." Their role was to ordain priests and to crown Ethiopian kings. When an *Abun* died, the Ethiopian King was obligated to send a delegation to Alexandria, by way of the Muslim sultanates, to request a new patriarch.

In the 7th century, a shock along the coasts of the Red Sea would have lasting repercussions for the history of Aksum: the Persians put an end to the gold and spice trade, depriving the Aksumite kings of their control over ships and merchandise, and its port, Adulis, was destroyed. The holy war launched by the Arabs afterward definitively ended Aksum's role in maritime trade, and was to isolate it for more than a millennium. Whereas a great part of the Near and Middle East became Islamic, the kingdom withdrew to the highlands, a geographically strategic placement which allowed the Christian faith to endure. Largely cut off from the rest of Christendom, it developed an original form, yet remained aligned with a universal perspective despite its isolation. Ethiopians maintained a permanent link with Egypt, thanks to the presence of the *Abun*, and with the Mediterranean world, by way of pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The circulation of works of art and of texts also permitted this culture to remain connected to the rest of the world and to enrich itself. Greek culture, among others, particularly nourished the spiritual patrimony of the Ethiopian Christians.

For several centuries following the conversion of the kingdom, the Bible and other religious texts written in Greek were brought to Ethiopia where they were copied, and later translated into *Ge'ez*, which to this day remains the liturgical language of the country (photos...). Beginning in the 14th century, the Metropolitans of Alexandria also

[2] The date when the Ethiopian Church became independent of external ecclesiastical authority.

bore texts written in Arabic, but even some of these contributed to the prestige of Greek history, in particular the *History of Alexander*. Imbued with a religious air, this text established the king of Macedonia as a model sovereign, chaste and virtuous, an adherent of monastic asceticism, all while describing him as an invincible warrior, implacable adversary of magicians, and protector of the poor (Colin, 2007). These qualities assured Alexander the Great a popularity still current among Ethiopian Christians, who know him under the name of *Eskender*.

Geography of a photographic journey, sites of Ethiopian history

If Ethiopia today extends over a territory of more than a million square kilometers, for most of its history the Christian kingdom was perched on the highlands of the northern half of the country, at an altitude varying between 1,800 and 3,000 meters (see map). Lizy Manola's photographs invite us on a journey through these regions where Christianity blossomed, at times under conditions of retreat, in the face of Muslim invasions, at times of expansion, as during the conquest of surrounding lands. Ethiopia's best known monuments of architectural heritage were built there, foremost in the region of Tigray, where during the 6th century, Syrian and other foreign missionaries (known by tradition as "new saints") founded a series of monasteries, leading to the development of monastic communities and the expansion of Christianity. Some of their creations are still among the most celebrated in the country (photo...). During subsequent centuries, the kingdom experienced a unique architectural development, based on Aksumite art and architecture, and on expertise imported from Palestine and Egypt. Numerous buildings were hewn directly from rock monoliths, reflecting the great skill that had been attained at sculpting rock and wood. Churches were constructed on plains, the sides of hills, or perched on *amba*, flat-topped mountains, where they could be reached only after surmounting vertical walls, such as the Church of Mikaél *Amba* (photo...), constructed at 2,500 meters of altitude (Lepage, Mercier, 2005).

One of the principal tasks of the Ethiopian kings was to sponsor and protect the Church. As the center of the kingdom moved toward the south, they had churches established in different regions. Around 1200, a king of the Zagwe dynasty, resolved to found a new Jerusalem in the country, so as to spare pilgrims the difficulties of traveling to the Holy Land. In this endeavor he gave the Church some of its most beautiful monumental works: eleven monolithic and semi-monolithic rock-hewn churches arrayed on a site that bears his name, Lalibela (photo...). Unique in the Christian world, this complex became an essential pilgrimage site and the second most holy site in Ethiopia after Aksum. Europeans discovered it by way of the marveling account of a member of a delegation sent by the King of Portugal to the Ethiopian court in 1515, seeking an alliance with the kingdom of the mythic "Prester John" (Mercier, Lepage, 2012). Today, the locale is recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and it constitutes one of the principal places of tourism in the country.

Just a few hours by road to the west of Lalibela is the region of Lake Tana, a reservoir of the Blue Nile, which also shelters exceptional heritage (photo...). It was the heart of the kingdom during the 16th and 17th centuries. The city of Gondar, created nearby later, is also celebrated for its palaces, and for its churches (photos...).

Closer to our time, at the end of the 19th century, the Ethiopian kings joined the race to colonize the Horn of Africa begun by France, England and Italy, using the high plateaus as a starting point for the conquest of surrounding lands. In the South, a new capital was founded by king Menelik II under the name of Addis Abeba. The city was complemented with churches, so as to assure the king the protection of God, especially in his struggle against the Italians (photos...).

Even if there is a profound link between Ethiopian identity and Orthodox Christianity, Addis Abeba today is the geographical and political center of a multiethnic and religiously-diverse country, where Muslims are at least as numerous as Christians. In the capital, churches and mosques are often constructed side-by-side, competing for control of the auditory space of their surroundings… They coexist with animist and

Catholic minorities, and for some years the country has seen as well a rise in new forms of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity, known as "*Penté*."

Beta Kristyan. The house of Ethiopian Christians

Throughout the different regions, Lizy Manola's photographs draw us into the sacred space of the churches. Ethiopians call their Church *Beta Kristyan*, "the house of Christians"[3], a community that gathers around pilgrimage sites (such as Lalibela), and churches. Regardless of their individual form or style, the churches share a strictly hierarchical spatial organization, delineating a geography of the sacred. Entry in the buildings is authorized only in early morning, and is ritualized and highly codified. Shoes must be left behind, and men, women, and priests are each assigned a place. Women cover their hair with a white veil (a *shamma*) and must dress modestly; pants are theoretically prohibited—even though young women of the capital sometimes combine the veil of prayer with blue jeans...

Whether the churches take round or rectangular form, they are invariably constructed around a *tabot*, an altar stone replicating the Tablets of the Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai—the originals of which are said to still be conserved in the Church of Zion, in Aksum, where only the Patriarch is allowed to view them. In churches formed in the round, the *tabot* is protected from view within the *maqdas*, the most sacred place at the center of the building, where only priests can enter. Moving away from this space, the degree of sanctity progressively decreases. The outer walls of the *maqdas* are covered with paintings, before which the faithful receive the Eucharist

[3] The Ethiopian Church is named *Ityopia ortodoks täwahedo béta krestiyan*, translated as the "Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahedo* Church". The term *täwahedo* means "unified," referring to the adherence of Ethiopians to the Christological doctrine of monophysitism, according to which the human and divine essences of Christ are intermixed, as held by other Eastern Orthodox Churches (Armenian, Coptic, Syriac).

and other sacraments[4] (photo…). This space is imbued with such an aura of sanctity, and demands such a state of purity, that believers enter it only rarely.

Entry to the church altogether is relatively infrequent, as the faithful attend Mass from outside the building. Surrounded by a wall, however, the enclosure of the church is also a sacred and protected place, where ancient and rare trees (olives, sycamores, acacias) are often sheltered. Conducive to reverence, it is a space both of collective prayer and individual piety, where people come to read, genuflect, and pray. For all who come, it is a place of refuge for facing the challenges of everyday life. These may relate to the difficult climate and sanitary situation, but also to the lack of political freedoms and to an unprecedented economic boom that benefits but a small minority, deepening the gap between the poorest and wealthiest inhabitants of the country.

A unique cultural heritage

The photographs show the wealth of artistic forms supporting Christian faith. Gold and silverwork dating back to the earliest times of Christianity have contributed to an art of crucifixes in distinct forms, many exclusive to Ethiopia (photos...). All Christians bear the *mateb*, a small cross received on the day of their baptism, and which remains the mark of distinction between Christians and Muslims (photos...). The image of the cross (*maskal*) may also be engraved directly on the skin as a tattoo—though the practice has long become uncommon in urban centers —or outlined with soot on certain religious holidays (photo...).

The development of Ethiopian religious music also dates to the Aksumite era. During the 6th century, a priest named Yared established the main principals of religious song, and these remain the base of liturgical music today. Priests and *debtera* (Ethiopian cantors) remain standing when performing these long chants, their voices accompanied

[4] There are seven sacraments in Ethiopian Christianity. Among these, Baptism takes place 40 days after birth for a newborn boy, and after 80 days for a newborn girl.

with movements of the body. Each wields a prayer stick and a sistrum to mark the beat (photos...).

The images give a glimpse of the richness of the pictorial art developed on the walls of the churches, in ornately decorated texts**,** and on portable icons. This art is proper to Ethiopia, even if its iconographic repertoire was enriched over centuries by painters who came from "beyond the seas" and through the imitation of imported foreign works. Certain pigments also became available for use with the rise of world trade and the movement of goods through the Mediterranean and the ports of the Red Sea, arriving in the region from Europe (Greece, Italy, Holland), the Middle East and India (Bosc-Tiessé, Wion, 2005). The icons are invested with varying degrees of sacredness, and the photographs reveal some of the gestures, and reverence, that surround them. Some sacred icons may be brought out to view but once a year; they are handled with great care, as they are attributed formidable power. The rest of the time, they are guarded in the *maqdas*, or the church's treasure house, in front of which the faithful prostrate themselves before leaving the church (photo...). As a general rule, the context for viewing all the paintings is marked by solemnity. The walls of the *maqdas* are covered with curtains; these are withdrawn only during rites. During Saint's days, images can also be displayed to collect alms.

In some of the photographs there are few elements evoking our own era. They appear suspended in time, carrying our imagination to Biblical scenes. They reflect a facet of this Christianity which privileges asceticism and the transcendence of this world, as with other Eastern Christianities. It can surprise in many ways. Certain rules set out in the Old Testament are scrupulously observed—such as the circumcision of young boys eight days after birth, dietary prohibitions, and the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday. The number of fast days demanded by the Church is especially large (comprising more than half of the days of the year), and religious festivals are spectacular. These can be occasions for taking out the *tabot*, and for long, nighttime vigils and prayer, and include annual and monthly celebrations of saints; *Fasika* (Easter); *Maskal*, a celebration of the Cross held in Ethiopian springtime; *Gena* (Christmas); and *Timkat*, the celebration of the Epiphany.

These celebrations at times provide occasion for the emergence of the *bahtawi*, hermits who may be charismatic preachers and who hold great esteem in the country (photo...). Their importance is one of the characteristics of Ethiopian monasticism since its origins, a phenomenon inspired by the Old Testament. These recluses live cut off from the world, subject to a period of strict asceticism intended to allow them to form a privileged link to the divine, prior to serving the community as exorcists, healers, or mediators in cases of conflict. Clothed in distinct, even unique ways (a yellow garment, a cover of animal skins, or sometimes undressed), they can perform spectacular mortifications, enacting a desire to transcend the world and escape its corruption, including the body which pertains to the temporal world (Hermann, 2012).

Holy water, called *tebel*, in Amharic, is highly esteemed by the faithful, who attribute to it miraculous power instilled directly by God. Clerics use Holy Water principally for the sacrament of Baptism, yet many Ethiopians resort to it to treat both minor ills and more grave illnesses, such as AIDS. The sites with Holy water are sacred spaces, and its taking is akin to a purification rite which imposes strict rules on those who participate (photo...). As with pilgrimages, another important aspect of Ethiopian Christian religiosity, these are spaces and moments reserved for abnegation and worship, other-worldly and suspended in time, in the space of a visit.

Ethiopia occupies a very special place in the history of Christianity. At the beginning of the 21th century, it is also a country fully embedded in globalization, with growing commercial exchanges and ties with the rest of the world, especially with China, India, and the Arabian Peninsula. Its cities are sprawling under rapid urbanization, new means of communication multiply, and universities are opening (now 31) throughout the country. But that is another portrait of this multifaceted land.

Estelle Sohier

Translator in English: Daniel Hoffman

Selected Bibliography

BAHRU ZEWDE, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, London-Athens-Addis Abeba, James Currey-Ohio University Press, Addis-Abeba University Press, 1991.

BERHANOU ABEBE, *Histoire de l'Éthiopie d'Axoum à la révolution*, Paris, Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1998.

Claire BOSC-TIESSE, Anaïs WION, *Peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie : collection de la mission Dakar-Djibouti*, Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, éditions Sépia, 2005.

Christine CHAILLOT, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition. A brief Introduction to Its Life and Spirituality*, Paris, Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, 2002.

Stanislaw CHOJNACKI, Carolyn GOSSAGE, *Ethiopian Crosses: a Cultural History and Chronology*, Milano, Skira, 2006.

Stanislaw CHOJNACKI, Carolyn GOSSAGE, *Ethiopian Icons: Catalogue of the Collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa University, Milano, Skira, 2000.

Gérard COLIN, *Alexandre le Grand. Héros chrétien en Ethiopie*, Leuven, Peeters, 2007.

Donald CRUMMEY, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the 13th to the 20th Century*, Urbana-Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, Siegbert UHLIG (ed.), Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, vol. 1, 2003; vol. 2, 2005; vol. 3, 2007; vol. 4, 2010.

Emmanuel FRITSCH, *The Liturgical Year of the Ethiopian Church*, Addis-Abeba, *Ethiopian Review of Culture*, Special issue, vol. IX-X, 2001.

Marilyn HELDMAN, *African Zion, the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, New-Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1993.

Judith HERMANN-MESFEN, *L'implication du christianisme éthiopien dans la lutte contre le sida : une socio-anthropologie de la « guérison »*, thèse de doctorat en anthropologie, université de Provence, 2012.

Steven KAPLAN, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, Wiesbaden, F. Steiner, 1984.

Claude LEPAGE, Jacques MERCIER, *The Ancient Churches of Tigrai: Ethiopian Art*, Paris, éd. Recherches sur les civilisations, 2005.

Claude LEPAGE, Jacques MERCIER, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia: the Monolithic Churches and Their Treasures*, London, Paul Holberton Publ., 2012.

Jacques MERCIER, *Art that Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*, The Museum for African Art, Munich; New York, NY, Prestel, 1997.

Richard PANKHURST, *The Ethiopians: A History (Peoples of Africa)*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2001.

Gérard PRUNIER (ed.), *L'Ethiopie contemporaine*, Khartala/CFEE, Paris, Addis Ababa, 2007.

Edward ULLENDORFF, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London, Publ. for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1968.