

Negus and the culture of Abbay-Ethiopian Region

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The paper discusses the relationship of the headband of priests on a historical painting to similar relics and argues that what Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Rastafarians etc. wear on the head as a symbol of their respective religion is an extension of the prehistoric belief and practice involving the placing of a snake on the head to invoke fertility and order in some communities. It appears to have originated in part of Africa that Japanese scholars identify as the Nilo-Ethiopian Region. The basis for the office of the *Negus* and the conceptual reason to place the *Tabot* on the head are offshoots of the prehistoric practise.

General Introduction

In the 1950s an Ethiopian presented a painting to a London hospital. Its title in *Amharic* and in translation is:

አፄ ዮሐንስ ንጉሠ ነገሥት ዘኢትዮጵያ በጣና ባህር ላይ ባለው
ቤተክርስቲያን ለመሳለም ከሕዝባቸውና ከመኪንታቸው ጋር ታጅበው
ሲገዙ በሰፊው ያሳያል። ነጋዴዎችም ከአንዱ ደሴት ወደ አንዱ ደሴት ይሄዳሉ።

The painting comprehensively shows Atse Yohannes Emperor of Ethiopia [reigned 1872-1889] accompanied by his people and his dignitaries on the way to pray at a church [on an island] in Lake Ttana. Traders travel from one island to the other.

Abbay-Ethiopian region as a name and its cultural traits, are partly taken from Japanese scholars, who since 1992, identify this part of Africa as the *Nilo-Ethiopian region* and from work of the organisation *Nilo-Ethiopian*, established in London in 1998, that, as of July 2005, was, on advice, renamed *Abbay-Ethiopian*. (Leikun Birhanu 2004: 16-17) The consideration is that *Abbay/Blue Nile*, (85%) with the other tributaries from the Ethiopian highlands(1%), contributes 86% of the water that reaches Egypt every year, where as the *White Nile* also called *Kos* at its origin or *Kier* as it nears Khartoum contributes 14%. An additional fact worth considering is that the *White Nile* was blocked by sand dunes between 20000 and 12000 BC. The name *Abbay* is nearly similar in the major languages of the Region: Afar, Amharic, Oromic and Tigre.

The central thesis of a paper: *Negus & Serpent cult in Ethiopia, India, and the Far East* (Girma Moges: 1997) is that the *ethiopic* verb *neggesse* - 'became king' - originally meant 'took the place of the serpent'. It appears to be related to the concept of fertility and prosperity people in Southern Ethiopia/ Uganda traditionally associate with snake cult. That is considered in conjunction with the African 'rain-maker-king' such as *Nyakang* -the dead ruler of the Shilluk who, they believe, sends them rain and crops and *Ningishzida*, the ophidian agricultural fertility cult of Mesopotamia. The broad similarities of the concepts and practices are discussed in the context of what Egyptologists assert that, more than 6000 years ago '...there was a cult of [an unknown] god of the Min type over a wide belt of East Africa, including [Southern] Egypt...' (Chassinat Martin Bernal 1991:170)

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The conclusion is: The headband of priests that is represented as an element in the painting referred to above, Negus, and the concept of African 'rain-maker-king' are interlinked with the rudimentary reptile related culture that, more than 6000 years ago, covered most parts of *Abbay-Ethiopian region*.

History of the painting

The approximately two by one metre traditional painting on canvas was hung in its staff dining room at the ground floor level on a wall facing the street and was in perfect view from the street when the vertically sliding windows are open during the day or the hall is lit at night. It was on one such occasion, some time in early 1983 that an amateur artist, reasonably versed in Ethiopian art, saw it. He entered the building and requested if he could look at it from close up. The person at the reception asked the matron. Permission was granted right away.

The distinctly Ethiopian characteristics of the theme, the style, the composition and the proportion of the figures, in general the expressive power of the painting, matters that will be discussed in more detail later on, and the fact that such a painting exists and it did not come to the attention of specialists in the field was such that the visitor right away wanted to make another request. Would copying it be allowed? Once again permission was granted. In the following weeks he visited occasionally and, making use of the dining table as a drawing board, made a linear copy on a canvas. It measured.....

As an in situ copying of the colours of the whole painting could not be undertaken without inconveniencing the Hospital Staff, indeed without turning the clean and orderly dining room into untidy and disorderly studio, the amateur artist decided to make a separate coloured copy of each of more than thirty characters in the painting on drawing paper. Unfortunately, due to other pressing matters, the first and last he did, was of the central subject: *Emperor Yohannes and those ridding a boat with him*.

The amateur artist did not record the name of the artist or of the patient. who presented it to the hospital. He does not recall if the names were given there or not.

In the early part of 2006 the copy came to the attention of a cultural research and study unit of Abbay-Ethiopian Region: *Abbay-Ethiopian*. Inquiries were made to locate the original to take pictures, and to establish the name of the artist and the person who presented it. The objective was on one hand to prepare a paper for the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies that was to be held in Norway in July 2007 and on the other hand to exhibit it on the occasion of the Ethiopian Millennium 2000 that fell on 11th September 2007. It was established that the Hospital was closed down in the concluding part of 1989 and that its properties were transferred to other hospitals.

After over two years of informal and formal contact, inquiry and supplying of information, neither the original painting is located, nor is the name of the sponsor who commissioned it identified. It was the same with the name of the artist *Belatchewu Yimer* whose identity was tentatively established -mainly on stylistic grounds- as a result of informal discussion during and soon after ICES 2007.

The difficulty to get information about the where about of the painting at present, is, as shown above, in complete contrast to its easy accessibility about quarter of a century ago. The amateur artist was allowed repeated visits. Even though the copy did not include the colouring, it is believed to be a good reflection of the original in the sense of the main characteristic of traditional Ethiopian art: the head is proportionately greater than the rest of the body, the eyes than the head and the pupils than the eyes. Those

were the characteristics that attracted the Ethiopian amateur artist in the first place. But before examining the drawing, we discuss the cultural milieu of the wider region and the name given to it by Japanese scholars.

Nilo-Ethiopian Region

The Japan Association for Nilo-Ethiopian Studies (JANES) was the main sponsor of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies held between 12 and 17 December 1997 in Kyoto, Japan. On the first circular of 1st September 1996 and sent to prospective participants, the Chair of the Conference and the President of JANES, Masao Kawai who is also Professor Emeritus of Kyoto University explains that the association, founded in 1992, has members numbering about 300, organizes annual conferences, public symposia and lectures, and has a *Journal of Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*. He also stated that JANES has been 'trying to promote studies on the Nilo-Ethiopian region'.

The name of the region tallies with the finding and tentative conclusion of a paper: *Negus & Serpent cult in Ethiopia, India, and the Far East*. (Girma Moges: 1997) It was presented at the 13th ICES at Kyoto, Japan. One of the evidence for the tentative conclusion regards an unknown but once upon a time extant religion, hence a culture, that Egyptologists and other scholars assert to have existed more than 6000 years ago, and to have covered the whole region. In 1998, a group of Ethiopian scholars and Britain's of Ethiopian origin decided to adopt *Nilo-Ethiopian* as the name of a cultural and research organization based in London.²

The initial activities of the organisation included small scale exhibitions, literary discussions etc. Works exhibited and parts of it discussed in Hamburg at 15th ICES held in 2003, included that of the painter of Artist Alemayehu Tefera. The name *Nilo-ethiopian* was also used and publicized as one out of the over three hundred paper abstracts published by Hamburg University for the occasion. It was titled:

Lalibela: Selected artistic motifs are compared with those outside the nilo-ethiopian region* and indigenous themes / styles are discussed in the context of a macro-culture of high age.

The footnote states:

* The Japanese Association of Nilo-Ethiopian Studies identifies this part of Africa as the Nilo-Ethiopian Region.

To what extent the results of ICES impact on scholarship on Ethiopia has not been quantified empirically. But the fact that, soon after the Conference, in 2004, a small book, titled in the church language of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, Geez, was published criticising the adoption of the name Nilo-Ethiopian. Even if the readership appears to be limited to the scholarly public indicates a world wide reach. It could be due to the internet,.

In አንገሉን አህዛብ Angelegu ahzab (Why the heathen conspire?) the author, under a subtitle: ልዩ ማሳሰቢያ (Special notice), raised relevant issues and addressed it 'to all Ethiopians.' (Leikun Birhanou 2004: 16-17) According to him one of the cultural markers lost to Ethiopians, a matter of particular relevance here, is: የግድን ወይም የአባይ ስም ተለውጦ ናይል መባል:: the change of 'Ghion' or 'Abbay' to 'Nile'...

² I take this opportunity to thank Yohannes Petros for securing a venue at the School of Oriental and African Studies, for the launch of *Abbay-Ethiopian* on 8th December 1998. It was initially called *Nilo-Ethiopian Institute*.

Elaborating further he comments: ግዮን የታላቁ ወንዞችን መጠሪያ ዋና ስም ነው። ታላቅነቱንና ረዥምነቱን ለመግለፅ ደግሞ አባይም ይባላል። አሁን ግን እነ ግፍ አይፈሬ ደንበኛ ስሙን፤ በመፅሐፍ ቅዱስ እንኳን ሳይቀር የሚታወቅበትን መጠሪያ ግዮንን ለውጠው ናይል አሉት።' Gihon is the name of our largest river. To reflect its size and length it is also called Abbay. However, those who are bent on malice have changed its name, even the one given it in the Holy Bible, and started calling it Nile.'

Additionally, It almost seems certain that it was Nilo-Ethiopian Leykun had in mind when he wrote the following:

አለሙም ተባብሯቸው ናይል በመባል እየተጠራ ነው። እነኳን ባዳዎቹ ቀርቶ የኛዎቹ ኢትዮጵያውያንም የድርጅቶቻቸው መጠሪያና መታወቂያ አድረገውታል። በዚህ ከቀጠለ ነገ ተነገዱ ደግሞ የልጆቻቸው መጠሪያ ሊሆን ነው። ይህን የመሳሰለውን እንኳን የሚጠበቅላት የምሁራን ድርጅት፤ የጥናትና የምርምር ተቋም የሌላት ሀገር ሆነች። The rest of the world is also collaborating with them by calling it "Nile". However, it is not limited to them. Even compatriot Ethiopians have adopted it as the name of their respective organisations. If the practise continues, the name is likely to be adopted as that of their children in the near future. Leykun then concluded on what specifically applies to the kind of organisation the initial Nilo-Ethiopian was aspiring to be: It is lamentable, he writes. that Ethiopia has become a country that does not have research and study organisations taking care even of basic matters as this.

For those who accepted Nilo-Ethiopian on the conviction of its positive contribution to understand the culture of the region Leykun's argument is a challenge that called for a response.

From Nilo-Ethiopian to Abbay-Ethiopian

In adopting '*Nilo-Ethiopia*', rather than, for instance, the anthropologist and biologist, Jonathan Kingdon's '*The Ethiopian Region*' - (Kingdon 1993:..) that, incidentally, includes South Western part of Arabia, the reasoning was that adoption of the conclusion of an organisation such as that of Japanese scholars was better than that of an individual however prominent or independent. In the light of Leykun's comment, however, continuing with the name was untenable and re-examining the decision was necessary.

On reflection, *Nile* was adopted not from any African language but Arabic. The various indigenous names of the *White Nile* - *Kos* (Hagos Alemayehou 2005: 81) in its initial stages or *Kiir*³ and *el bahr el Abyad*⁴ as it nears Khartoum - can not reasonably be accepted as an overall name. If the name is to be based on a quantifiable criterion, *Ttiqur Abbay* - formally translated to *Blue Nile*, the literal translation being *Black Nile* - contributes 85% of the water that reaches Egypt every year. Another 1% from other rivers from the Ethiopian Highlands makes it 86%. The *White Nile* / *Nech Abbay* in *Amharic*, accounts for the overall 4145 miles length making it the longest river on Earth, contributes 14%.

Regarding which river is the main one and which secondary, at the outset it seems obvious that it is the *White Nile*. It should be noted, however that, it is not the Blue Nile that is tributary to the White Nile but the other way round. As the records show '*Between 20000 and 12,500 BC. [The white Nile] was blocked by sand dunes in southern Sudan and contributed no water to the main river at all.*' The situation in the case of the Blue Nile is that it has always been there, be it in less quantity than it came

³ Based on information from Henry Omai an Annuaik scholar in London.

⁴ Reader Digest's Great Atlas / not dated directed by Frank Debenham OBE

to be: '.. *the wet season between 20,000 and 12,500BC was much shorter than that of today and so there was far less water for the River Nile to carry.*' (Mithen 2006 :451)

An additional factor in favour of *Abbay* is that the name is almost similar in the three major languages of the region: Afar, Amharic, Oromic (Hinsene Mekuria 2005: 6) and Tigre. It was on that basis that, in July 2005, the registered name of the organisation was revised to *Abbay-Ethiopian*. The full title of the organisation being: *Cultural Research & Study Unit of Abbay-Ethiopian Region / የአባይ ኢትዮጵያ ክፍለ አህጉር ባህል ምርምርና ጥናት ተቋም*

Bull & Serpent Veneration in the Abbay-Ethiopian region

The central thesis of the paper: *Negus & Serpent cult in Ethiopia, [Egypt], India, and the Far East*, referred to above, is that the *ethiopic* verb ነገሠ *neggesse* - conventionally meaning 'became king' - originally meant 'took the place of the serpent'. To what extent the word, in its prehistoric sense, may have evolved from what appears to be its cognate *nekesse* - that is 'bite' in *Amharic* and *Tigrigna*- is a matter for reflection.

In the paper it is also argued that *neggesse* is related to the concept of fertility that the people in Southern Ethiopia and in Uganda and in general, in all parts of *Abbay-Ethiopian Region* - as we now realise, associate with snake cult. There is the possibility that the African 'rain-maker-king' such as *Nyakang* -the dead ruler of the Shilluk who, they believe, sends them rain and crops (Frankfort 1970: 75) may be associated with serpent veneration. To the present day the Nuer, neighbours of the Shilluk, decorate their houses with snake relief to invite goodwill.⁵

At this point a potentially fundamental thesis is postulated. The practise could be directly associated with what Egyptologists assert that, more than 6000 years ago '...there was a cult of [an unknown] god of the *Min* type over a wide belt of East Africa, including [Southern] *Egypt*...' (Chassinat 1968 : 684; Bernal 1991:170)

In the paper it was also argued: 'If detection [into the past of serpent veneration or worship] is possible on the basis of the respect and reverence serpents generate, it may be possible to work out where Serpent worship/the concept of *Divine Kingship* begun.' The basis for that was, 'Since the *Negus* of Ethiopia, the *Nagas*⁶ of India and the *Lung Wang* of China have similarity in word, concept and practice it is unlikely that they have been invented independent of each other.' (Girma Moges: 1997)

The 'Nilo' suffix was added at a time when, the long held almost '*hypnotic influence*' Ethiopia had on history, the fabled glory retained by the imagination of blacks in the Diaspora to which they in the 19th century appealed, when the defenders of slavery tried to divest them of every dignity of humanity and civilization is, in the perception of the general public, increasingly tarnished by famine, internecine conflict and backwardness. The identity and essence of Ethiopians needs to be redefined. As Tsegaye Tegenju in a paper: '*Ethiopia: What is in a name?*' writes, '*...definitions of Ethiopia have become a subject of public debate and academic research*'. The upshot of Tsegaye's research is that there are five categories of scholars for whom Ethiopia is variously:

A culturally complex entity / An ancient polity / Museum of people / Manifestation of the culture and state of one ethnic group / and finally, a product of colonialism.

⁵ For good omen local woman in southern Sudan decorated the house of a British aid worker with mud relief of snakes when she married a Nuer chief in 1991. (Scroggins 2002 : picture facing page 182)

⁶ *Naga* in Indian has no plural form. 's' is added by writers in English.

Scholars representing the first school, according to Tsegaye, include:

Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, - the late poet laureate who argues the strong connection of the Ethiopian and Egyptian cultures

Professor Issac Ephrem who according to the records at Harvard University speaks fifteen languages, is the author of *A History of Religion in Africa*, (1990?) still plays a positive role on developments in Ethiopia

Aba Tesfa Sellassie Moges whose argument in a video production disseminated in the late 1990s that the varied skin colours of Ethiopians is indicative of their antiquity is increasingly being proven to be right being as shown below.

Their perception of Ethiopia, based on a thorough study of languages, '*stems partly from the long Ethiopian tradition of script and writing system, the plough cultivation system, and the practice of the two monophysite [sic] religions, Christianity and Islam.*' The generalisation Tsegaye arrived at, of particular interest for the purpose here is that if view of this school of thought is presented '*on solid empirical evidence and through critical examination of sources*' it could have '*a profound effect not only on Ethiopia but on the knowledge of ancient world history.*' (Tsegaye Tegenju: 1997)

Origin of Culture and Abbay-Ethiopian region

The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as: The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. Since it is accepted that Ethiopia is a 'Culturally Complex' country with an 'ancient polity' its study requires that we have to re-examine prehistory and start from the origin of society, when Anatomically Modern Humans became organised communities.

An article in the magazine *New Scientist* (27 October 2007) states: "It is looking likely that our species appeared far earlier than previously suspected and remained in Africa for tens of thousands of years before going global." The significance of the statement for the purpose here is that, on the basis of the evidence from Herto and Omo Kibish in Ethiopia and Sanga in Southern Sudan, and subsequent prehistoric demographic patterns based on cumulative relics of distinctively human remains and activity, the hub/ cultural cauldron in Africa where Anatomically Modern Humans first appeared and lived from about 200 000 to 50-60000 years ago and as an archaeologist puts it, were 'All dressed up and going nowhere', they were mainly living and operating in what we here call the Abbay-Ethiopian Region.

It must be noted that the archaeological sites of Omo Kibish, Herto in Ethiopia and Singa in Sudan where the earliest distinctly human remains are respectively dated to 195k, 160k, 150k years ago, where k = 1000 yrs, approximate the area where AMHs originated.

The significance of the finding is that the facts contradict the sequence of events accepted to the present. Statements such as: The earliest of what might be termed 'cultural' objects were fashioned in those parts of the Rift Valley that run from the Olduvian Gorge in Tanzania to lake Turkana in Kenya, including its extension into neighbouring Ethiopia (Mack; 1995-96) has to be revised. It has to read from present day Ethiopia and Sudan towards Tanzania, South Africa on one side and to Egypt, North West Africa on the other.

Again, according to *New Scientist* it is also mainly from there, via what came to be known as the Bab El-Mandeb Straight, now around 30 kilometres wide and one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, believed to have been 'a narrow, shallow channel' during

the last ice age between 80000 to 11000 years ago, that AMHs, around 50-60000 years ago started crossing into Asia (Dan Jones 2007) (Lockwood 2007)

The human 'hub/ cultural cauldron' concept becomes clearer from a diagram in a recent publication of the British Natural History Museum as well. It is from Abbay Ethiopian Region that out ward movement is shown to the South, North West, North and East. There was no movement in the direction of the immediate West. The cause may be the inhabitable swampy marshland where the water of the future White Nile drained. (Lockwood 2007: 105) As regards the passage into Asia, the diagram from New Scientist gives almost exclusive prominence to the primacy of the Bab El-Mandeb Straight crossing. (Dan Jones 2007: 38)

The reason that they were 'all dressed up and going no where' for so long was not because AMHs were, in anyway different from Modern Humans physically, but that, they were so, mentally. Their reasoning power was limited. The compartments in their brain for social, natural history, technical intelligence and language, basically, elements the interrelationship of which were the basis for art and religion, were not adequately interrelated. When that situation changed and interaction started in what scientists call cognitive fluidity / cognitive modules the result was a 'big bang'. In a chapter titled: The big bang of human culture: the origins of art and religion, the author of The Prehistory of the Mind Stephen Mithen asserts: 'There was a cultural explosion in the fourth and final act of our past. This happened in the time period 60,000 - 30,000 years ago,...' (Mithen 1996: 151; Carruthers) It must be noted that it is about the same period - 50 to 60000 years ago - that they started coming out of Africa. It may be the new mental capacity after about 150000 years stay in Africa - mainly in the Abbay-Ethiopian Region - that equipped them with the imaginative foresight to cross into Asia and cover the globe in relatively short period. The abruptness and completeness of cognitive fluidity was such that, if we take the case for art, 'the very first pieces that we find can be compared in quality with those produced by the great artists of the Renaissance.' (Mithen 1996: 162-163) Cases in point are the cave paintings in South Africa and those at Lascaux in France (20000 yrs ago).

On the basis of the argument established above regarding the abruptness and completeness of cognitive fluidity, the artistic merit of a relatively recent work of art can be evaluated and be compared with another regardless of the historical time gap between them. In that sense the expressive power and the artistic merit in the best of indigenous cultures needs examination.

The conclusion of a paper with a self explanatory title African Characteristics in Traditional Ethiopian Art states: ..when the veneer of what is clearly non-African influence is discarded, there appears to be a case for considering at least aspects of its proportionality and to a lesser degree the overall perceptual rather than strictly visual representation as representing principles drawn from, or shared with, the main stream of African tradition. (Girma Moges 1993)

The 'drawn from, or shared with' phrase of about two decades ago (the paper was presented in 1990) is indicative of the doubt that prevailed at the time regarding the approximate area or region where the initial impetus for African culture could have originated and figurative art mainly sculpture developed. On one had it was by then generally accepted that Eastern Africa is the origin of Anatomically Modern Humans consequently of culture. On the other hand scholarly works on African Art, especially in the English speaking world, had mainly been concentrated in Western Africa such as Yoruba, Ibo etc sculptures of Nigeria due to scholars such as Murry and Fagg. Indeed

when Fagg stated, ' The fact that the affinities of African sculpture are more with Pre-Dynastic than Dynastic Egypt suggests rather that Egyptian Art developed from African Art under the stimulus of Near Eastern civilisation' the implication favoured developments in Western Africa.

Cases in point are the funerary sculptures of the Gato, Konso etc. where a notable feature of their art is the fertility symbol on head of effigies. and the design of the huts of the Dorze(Fig....) in Southern Ethiopia, who incidentally inhabit the area near Omo Kibish. In other words it can be argued that their best work can represent the best of the artistic attainment of the people in the region.

Abbay-Ethiopian region and Pharaonic Egypt

According to Sir James Frazer, Charles Seligman and G .A. Reisner, referred to in George Frankl's *The Social History of the Unconscious*: In the period 4000 to 3500BC, the cultural development of Egypt was closely linked with that part of the region that was south of it. At that time *'The culture of Nubia, Ethiopia and the Sudan considered the king to be the bearer of the divine spirit, the living representative of the divine ancestor whose offspring they felt themselves to be and from whom they derived their identity.'*⁷

A common practise to all of them, possibly including pre-dynastic Egyptians, was the ritual killing of kings. The most widely accepted explanation is that given by James Frazer: *' [Pre-historic] peoples believed that their safety and even that of the world is bound up with the life of one of these god-men...therefore they take the utmost care of his life out of a regard for their own'*. But what are they to do if he is about to die and bring about calamity to the world of his believers? They avert that by killing him and transferring his soul to a vigorous successor. If they do not do that and he dies a natural death they believed that his soul would wander off and be lost to them. The significance of this - on the face of it - simple idea of holding on to the king's soul, is that, after it passed into Egypt it was transformed and became the corner stone, in fact the *raison d'etre*, of Pharaoh-nic Civilization around 3400BC. (Frankl 1989: 182-184) One of its central symbols from its very beginning to its very end, even if its nature and the path it took to reach Egypt is uncertain, is the serpent.

If the result in Egypt of an aspect of the cultural phenomenon that took place in the *Abbay Ethiopian Region(AER)* is, ultimately, the Pharaonic Civilization, there is a possibility that an aspect of the culture has been passed to Mesopotamia and has a residue in *AER* itself as well.

In *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* Wallis Budge, the one time keeper of the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian relics in the British Museum reflects on the religion of both Civilisations:

We may note in passing that the Nine gods of Creation in Egyptian have very much in common with the Creation gods of the SUMERIANS. The similarity between the two Companies of gods is too close to be accidental. It would be wrong to say that the EGYPTIANS borrowed from the SUMERIANS or the SUMERIANS from the

⁷ I shared a similar experience and sentiment of another Ethiopian Birru Itissa who wrote:አጼ ኃይለ ሥላሴ አልፎ አልፎ እሁድ እሁድአዘውትረው ሰበታ ቤተመንግሥት...ይመጡ ስለነበር እሳቸውን እስክቻለኩ ድረስ (እየሮጥኩ)ማጅብ ደስይለኝ ነበር(ብሩ ኢ.ቲሳ/የዊንጌት ትዝታ1998ዓም)

⁸ The original word is 'Primitive'. Since we are dealing with religion that is a mechanism to rationalize the irrational there by manage an available resource for the benefit of a given community , the difference as there is does not warranty the label 'primitive'.

EGYPTIANS, but it may be submitted that the literati of both peoples borrowed their theological systems from some common but exceedingly ancient source. (Budge 1988: 155)

In the light of the subject matter and the period we are dealing with, the phrase, 'exceedingly ancient source' is significant. One of the unanswered questions to date, sometime attributed to the Sumerians, is the origin of the fundamental element of Civilization: The *script*.

That is an indirect reason why we should ask that question. There is a direct one as well. It is perhaps not by mere coincidence that the starting letter of *Negus* in Ethiopic is more or less identical with the hieroglyphic for the same sound that is represented by a snake.

If such is the case we have to start looking at all evidence in a new light and from a different perspective. An aspect of the childhood experience of one of the two authors discussed at ICES 2007 is a case in point.

The author recounts how he, as a child in the 1940's, from a relatively rich family in *Cheha* South Western part of Shoa / central Ethiopia, was first sent to a traditional school in *Aklill* - a small town. The open school is under a tree. The pupil was instructed by the teacher priest to tell his relatives how to prepare a writing material. A thorn blunted by fire and a false banana leaf singed by flame:

በማግስቱ ጠዋት የኮባ ቅጠል በእሳት ተለብልቦ፤ ተጠቅሎ፤ የአጋም እሾህ እንዳይጠፋብኝ በክር ታስሮ አንገቱ ላይ ተጠልቆልኝ ወደ ትምህርት ቤት ሄድኩ። ት/ቤት ስደርስ ቁሱ ኮባዬ ላይ ለኔ የማይገቡኝ ነገሮች ሞነጫጨፍና አስመስለህ ዓፍ ብለው መልሰው ሰጡኝ። የቻልኩትን ያህል ሞነጫጭሬ መልሼ ለቁሱ ሰጠኳቸው። በዚህ አይነት ለተወሰኑ ወራት ቁስ ት/ቤት ስመላለስ ቆየሁ። (ተስፋዬ ሀብተ ማርያም 1997 ዓም: 2-3)⁹

(On the next day the false banana leaf was singed and folded. I went to school with the thorn pen slung from my neck such that I do not lose it. As I got there the teacher scribbled on the flame treated false banana leaf something I had no idea what it was. He gave it back to me saying that I was supposed to do what he did. I scribbled something as much as I can and gave it back. For some months I passed my time in school in that manner.(Tesfaye Habte Mariam 1997 EC: 2-3)

The question is how far back did that practise go? Where did the idea of writing start? Could the initial impetus be the social and the environmental interaction that took place in the *Abbay Ethiopian Region*? The suggestion is not as improbable as it at first hand appears. One of the contributors to an authoritative publication of the British Museum: *Reading the Past - Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet* concluded:

The alphabetic order of Ethiopic is similar to that of South Arabian(h,l,h,m....) and the names of the letter, thought until recently to be modern intrusion from the Hebrew tradition,[another impact of the Saba - Solomon legend] may in fact be very ancient. It can be argued that their form is such as to suggest an origin before 1000 BC, which might bring these names right back to the origins of the alphabet itself. (Healey 1996 : 242)

The proposal is reinforced by the finding that the long held belief that the Sumerians are the originators of the Alphabet is increasingly becoming untenable. The relatively recent conclusion arrived at in the same publication states:

⁹ በኢትዮጵያ ሠራዊት ውስጥ የመጨረሻ የጀገና ሜዳይ ተሸላሚ(1972 ዓም)
He is the recipient of the highest valour medal in the Ethiopian Army.(1979)
His autobiography was one of the books discussed at ICES 2007.

Study of early Uruk texts themselves has also suggested that they are dependent on an earlier tradition of pictography which has not yet been found or identified. Thus it is beginning to look as if we should think in terms of the invention of writing as being a gradual process, accomplished over a wide area, rather than the product of a single Sumerian genius. (Walker 1996: 19)

The purpose of this paper is four fold:

Firstly to call for the acceptance of the thesis that there is a direct connection between the Ethiopian Negus and serpent veneration.

Secondly that there is a connection between the phenomena that is known to have taken place in the *Abbay-Ethiopian region* more than 6000 years ago and the civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and Ethiopia.

Thirdly that the *Abbay Ethiopian Region* is, not only the heart of Africa, but the oldest inhabited region in the world from where the elements of civilization if not its seed separately passed to Egypt, Mesopotamia and probably India, and that, to the extent religion is the carrier of culture, serpent veneration/manipulation is central to it.

Fourthly to call for an inter-disciplinary consensus on the persisting anomalies regarding the *Ethiopian Civilization*.

It is to help in that inter-disciplinary effort that the following painting of *Atse Yohannes and his entourage...* by *Belachewu Yimer* is discussed.

The Painting

Emperor Johannes of Ethiopia reigned from 1872 to 1889. The seat of his administration was Mekele the Capital of Tigre. The painter or the sponsor who chose the subject for the painting had a wider outlook. He or she not only chose Lake Tana, located in the southern part of Gondar / the northern part of Godjam, as the setting of the painting, but shows the Emperor and his entourage engaged in a traditional at the same time novel activity: A journey on boats. The overall concept along with the simple but expressive style enhances the dynamism in the painting.

On the left side of the painting there is a stylized land route. There are houses on either side. It ends at the edge of the lake. It is the route the Emperor and his entourage took before embarking on the boat journey. Two bystanders at the shore, one male and one female, carrying firewood, express their curiosity by looking at the Emperor and his entourage.

Various activities of ordinary people are shown at the lower end of the drawing. A peasant has two oxen pull the plough. He coaxes them with a *jiraf* (whip). A woman has brought his meal. She is waiting under a tree. Two women are busy in front of a house. They alternate in pounding grain in a mortar. A woman carrying fire wood is shown frontally. A prominent cross is suspended from her neck lace. A man on a boat is engaged in a trade transaction with a man on the shore who, possibly a farmer selling his grain, carries a *silicha*-bag on his head. A woman, with a *jantila* -traditional parasol- in her hand, carries a lighter load on her back. A priest, possibly a *nefs abat* - soul father- accompanies a husband and wife on the way to the church as also indicated by letters. The boat that they have vacated, visible only partly, is moored to a tree at the rid sprinkled shore. From another tree in the church compound hangs a bell. A rope is dangling from its clapper.

The work, as a whole, represents up to thirty characteristic groups that, along with *Atse Yohannes*, *Itege*-Empress and their immediate entourage on their respective boats,

include, again on boats: *negarit mech* (drummers), *tirumbenja* (trumpeter) *seyfenjoch*(sword holders) *kesawust* (priests). *negadewoch*(traders)) etc.

People in boats and African proportion

A notable feature of the figures in the painting is the prominence of the head in proportion to the rest of the body, where, as much as one third is devoted to head. That is in accordance with what William Fagg, in the context of West African sculpture, specifically of the Yoruba, terms 'the canons of African proportion'.(Fagg: 1966) In view of the fact established in this paper that *Abbay Ethiopian Region* is in fact the overall centre of African culture the '*cannon of African proportion*' must have originated from it. The riders in boats have come handy to the painter. The proportion of the head to the rest of the body mostly is one to two. (Some Konso, Gato sculptures also have one to two proportions.) In the case of those on rafts that are standing or those who are on land it varies between, one to three, one to four and one to five. These proportions have been argued to be well within 'the canon' as the natural proportion is one to eight. (Girma Moges 1993)

The swimmers and perceptual representation

In the lower right corner of the painting near the shore two men are swimming *wanetenjoch*. A remarkable aspect of the drawing is the simplicity of the lines, but at the same time the powerful way in which the essence of the intended action is expressed. For that, perceptual representation in Ethiopian Art plays a significant part. The swimmers are good example.

But before going further a word or two about perceptual rather than realistic representation in Ethiopian Art is in order. In addressing the subject Messay Kebede refers to the similarity of African Art and Ethiopian art in that, '*the purpose of art is not so much to reproduce reality as to suggest spiritual meanings through distorted and dramatised forms*'. He then comments that Byzantine art had a similar propensity, an art developed further in Ethiopian paintings. The effect being that Ethiopian art has become puzzling for those trained in the criteria of western ascetics. In the words of Jules Leroy as quoted by Messay:

'confronted with outlines and volumes which are neither entirely African nor entirely Byzantine or Western, scholars who have been trained according to different aesthetic assumption, as propounded in universities, have found it impossible to assign to Ethiopian art an appropriate place in the categories with which they are familiar.'(Messay Kebede 1999: 229-230)

Thus, one aspect of Ethiopian art that draws its essence from the general African aesthetics or rather from that of *Abbay Ethiopian Region* is the method of fusing different perspectives in one representation. In the case of the arms that is the case in this painting too. But the head and the face is a different matter. In full frontal view, it is in a completely unnatural position to the horizontal body represented by the position of the arms. That said it is that same incongruity that enables it to express and impress.

Conclusion

The painting, even if the original is not located for closer examination, is no doubt an opus. If it was a music composition it would have been a symphony. The parts are well executed. But the whole, like a symphony, is greater than the sum total of the parts. Like

the Solomon and Sheba cartoons, battle of Adowa scenes, etc. the painting, well publicised, has the potential to be a trend setter for traditional paintings and an original one at that.

In terms of the relationship of *Negus* and *Serpent veneration*, the head cloth of the *kesawust* (priests) is of particular interest. For instance the Mesopotamian ancient cult of *Ningishzida* is represented by the serpent. Along with the phonetic similarity with the Ethiopian *Negus*, in Balaji Mundkur's *The Cult of the Serpent*, Figure 60b, *Ningishzida* is shown on the Sumerian stele of 2200BC with a serpent motive on the head. The note by Mundkur below the figure is: '*the agricultural fertility god Ningishzida and his ophidian attributes*'. (Mundkur 1983: 124) It must be noted that, not only is *Negus* as a traditional title in Ethiopia above *Ras* (Head), it is also originally associated with the surrounding of the region near lake Tana, the source of *Abbay*, where agriculture in the African continent is believed to have started. (Wossene Yifru 1990:78) Another consideration is the fact that *negese* is also the verb for the placing of the *Tabot* on the head, it becomes obvious that symbolism of the band of head cloth of Ethiopian priests etc, was originally related to serpent veneration/manipulation. The saying ከመጠምጠም መግር ይቅደም *kemetemtem memar yiqdem* (learning should precede the wearing of *timtim* - headband) is associated with serpent worship and, as the quoted saying implies, appears to be related to the concept of the knowledgeable African 'rain-maker king'. But, while the origin as argued in general terms is the *Abbay Ethiopian Region*, the specific location and the path of outward expansion to Egypt, Mesopotamia, or India is a subject for future discussion. One point that could be made here is that: A developed culture such as in Egypt or Mesopotamia in comparison to other less developed but ancient cultures need not necessarily be, source as well. In fact, when it is established that there is a connection between an advanced culture and another that has ambiguous but ancient practises, the balance of probability as source should favour the latter.

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