



Aethiopica 11 (2008)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Miscellaneous

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Aethiopica 11 (2008), 206–209

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Remembering *Abunä* Ya'eqob Gäbrä Iyäsus (1889–1969)

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Among the most controversial, yet least known, personalities of the Eritrean Catholic Church is Bishop Ya'eqob Gäbrä Iyäsus – a distinguished scholar, as well as a protagonist of the obscure years between the end of the Italian colonial power and the annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia in 1962.

Like his predecessor in the Eritrean episcopal chair, *abunä* Kidanä Maryam Kassa, Ya'eqob Gäbrä Iyäsus was born in Hebo (same area as the first ever Abissinian cardinal and high caliber scholar, Pawlos Šadwa), a village in the Šän'adäglä district of the Akkälä Guzay region of Eritrea, on 11 April, 1889, to *ato* Gäbrä Iyäsus, the son of *qäši* Gäbrä-Mädhən, and to *wäyzäro* Šallas Žäggär (later nun Ĥnnate Šallas). His grandfather *qäši* Gäbrä Mädhən, an Orthodox priest, was from a noble family of G^wäl'a (in the °Agamä district of Ethiopia), related to Emperor Yoħannəs IV and *däggazmač* Subagadəs of °Addi Gərat. Converted to Catholicism by *abunä* Giustino de Jacobis (1800–60), *qäši* Gäbrä Mädhən left his hamlet with his family, and carried on his priestly duties in Hebo for around 30 years.

Ya'eqob Gäbrä Iyäsus felt the call to priesthood early in his life, and received his education accordingly, first in Akrur, then in Kärän. Ordained priest by Bishop Camillo Francesco Carrara on 30 April 1913, he started working as pastor in the parishes of Bäraqit, Ginda'ə, Akrur, Säganäyti. In 1918, when the priest and intellectual *abba* Jerôme (1880–1983), was pushed out of Eritrea in a situation of unbearable humiliations and left for Ethiopia (thereafter *abba* Jerôme broke off from the Catholic Church and died in self imposed exile in France), *abba* Ya'eqob replaced him as translator and advisor to Bishop Carrara for three years. In the meantime, he was deeply engaged in pastoral ministry and teaching, as well as charged of censoring the publications issued at the Franciscana Printing Press. At the end of the three years term, he was appointed parish priest of the Kidanä Məhrät church in Asmara. He performed his pastoral ministry with zeal and attention for each member of the community, and is credited with thoroughly restoring the church building thanks to the support of the faithful, as well as with founding several *maħəbärat* ('confraternities, [spiritual] brotherhoods').

Especially interested in grammar and lexicography, *abba* Ya'eqob was devoting much of his time to writing books and teaching Gə'əz, Amharic and Təgrəñña at the Italian school Vittorio Emanuele. Ya'eqob was also –

together with Edward Ullendorff, Wäldä Ab Wäldä Maryam and others – a member of the committee for the standardization of Təgräñña writing. As the Eritrean local clergy gradually gained juridical autonomy, and Kidanä Maryam Kasa became the first native bishop on 25 April 1928, *abba* Ya'eqob was appointed as one of the five vicar foranes, with responsibility for the Ḥamasen region. At that time, the churches of ʿAmäši and Wara were also built. From October 1934 to 1942, he served as parish priest of Sägänäyti and vicar forane for the Akkälä Guzay region. During his tenure as parish priest of Sägänäyti, his greatest achievement is the construction of the beautiful parish church dedicated to St. Michael, which is to date one of the most exquisite sites of the town. He was subsequently assigned to Ma'äräba, where he had more time for studying and writing, being also able to visit several Orthodox monasteries of Eritrea in search of manuscripts. After a four years stay in Ma'äräba, he was called back to Asmara to teach at the newly instituted Comboni school from 1946 to 1950. On 7 November 1950, Pope Pius XII promoted him to Apostolic Administrator of Eritrea.

Elected bishop on 8 February 1951, he was consecrated on May 1 in the Vatican, together with *abba* Ḥaylä Maryam Kaḥsay, by the Prefect of the Congregation of the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Eugène Gabriel Tisserant, and became Apostolic Exarch of Eritrea on the following 26 October. Soon after his consecration, however, he was in trouble.

He was known as a dynamic, hard working, and strict man. While these aspects of his personality were an asset when he was a simple pastor, in his new, high profile role, they proved to be mainly a liability. As the communication gap between him and his priests widened, his relationships with them rapidly deteriorated. He was accused of being domineering, nepotistic and partial. Moreover, from the previous administration, he inherited a rebellion from some members of the clergy that resulted in the closure of parishes by the protesting priests. The old, controversial issue of the transfer of the Seminary from Kärän to Asmara, which was probably an outlet for deeper and longstanding grudges, was lingering on. Thus, the position of the bishop became increasingly divisive and untenable.

As a result, in November 1955, the Holy See sent the archbishop of Madras, the Salesian Lodovicus Mathias, as an “apostolic visitor” to the Catholic exarchate of Eritrea. The visitor held a two months long, extensive consultation with all the local priests. On 13 February 1956, he presided over a meeting in which the bishop for the Latin Rite in Eritrea, Luigi Marinoni, and others took part. The day after, at the end of his visitation, Archbishop Mathias addressed a circular letter to the clergy and to the faithful of the exarchate. Irenic on the surface, the one-page document repeatedly called for

obedience and even for submission, thus reflecting all the tensions the exarchate was going through. Originally written in Italian and then translated into Təgrəñña, his letter had to be read in all the churches of the exarchate on the Sunday following its publication. As a temporary measure, the appointments of *abba* Abraha François and of *abba* Täsfağiyorgis Təğar as vicars delegate for the exarchate and the Kärän area respectively, were announced therein. By this decision, the exarchate was practically split into two (Mekonnen Amanuel 1996:44). The addressees were asked to be patient, “to accept with submission the two new superiors and to alleviate their cross”, until further provisions be made by the higher authorities in Rome.

Bishop Yaʿəqob was neither mentioned in the letter nor thanked for anything positive he could have done during his tenure. He was instead asked to step down and leave Eritrea as soon as possible. It seems that, at the beginning, he was hesitant to quit immediately, and this further annoyed the apostolic visitor. There are oral accounts that tell about Bishop Yaʿəqob’s desperate attempts, which would have sought the intervention of secular power to prevent his unseating. However, there is no written available documentation proving the case. Eventually, *abunä* Yaʿəqob Gäbrä Iyäsus resigned as bishop, and in 1957 went to Rome, to stay at the Collegio Damasceno as “ordaining bishop”. He returned home in 1967 and died in Asmara on January 22, 1969. He was buried at his birth place, Hebo, three days later.

Considering the experiences of the Catholic bishops of Ethiopian Rite who succeeded him up to 1995, that is *abunä* Asratä Maryam Yämərru (1958–61), *abunä* Abraha François (1961–84) and *abunä* Zäkkaryas Yoħannəs (1984–2004), it is clear that the Catholic Church in Eritrea is a complex reality. Even though chosen on the presupposition that they were *super partes*, none of those three bishops who followed *abunä* Yaʿəqob Gäbrä Iyäsus had an easy life. This can help to put the events surrounding the brief and turbulent period of Yaʿəqob Gäbrä Iyäsus’s episcopal ministry into proper context. He is remembered as a gifted man of learning and as a prolific writer who issued several works; but it is believed that there are many more unpublished (Puglisi 1952:172). In the monthly newspaper of the Cistercian monks, *Bərhan*, 1943 (AM), p. 7, and 1961 (AM), p. 2, it is claimed that he wrote 43 books, 32 of which still to be printed. An enviable record, especially for that time. Bishop Yaʿəqob Gäbrä Iyäsus and his less confrontational predecessor, *abunä* Kidanä Maryam Kassa, are key historical figures who help to understand the evolution of the Catholic Church in Eritrea, which had its climax in the creation of three dioceses in 1996; three ecclesiastical jurisdictions, for less than one hundred thousand catholic souls.

Publications by Ya'eqob Gäbrä Iyäsus:

- መጽሐፍ ፡ ሰዋሰው** ('Book of Grammar'). Asmara, Tipografia Francescana, 1923 (AM) = 1931, 47 pp.; 2nd rev. ed., with additional 22 practical exercises, 1926 (AM) = 1934, 96 pp. [repr. 1940 (AM) = 1948].
- ዝናን ፡ ተረትን ፡ ምስላን ፡ ናይ ፡ ቀዳሞት** ('Epic, tales and proverbs of the elders'). Asmara, Comboni College, 1941 (AM) = 1948/49, 136 pp. [with 3.300 proverbs].
- ሐዋርያዊ ፡ መልእኽትን ፡ ናይ ፡ ኢየሱስ ፡ ጸሎታትን** ('Pastoral message and prayers for the Jubilee'). Asmara, Tipografia Silla, 1943 (EC) = 1951, 21 pp.
- ሰዋሰው ፡ ጽድቅ ፡ ዘካህን** ('Ladder of sanctity of the priest'). Roma, Tipografia Pio X, 1952 (AM) = 1959, 424 pp.
- ገጽር ፡ ዝበለ ፡ ሰብከተ ፡ ወንግል** ('A Concise Gospel Preaching'). Asmara, Tipografia Francescana, 1912 (AM) = 1919, 332 pp.
- ንኡስ ፡ ትምህርት ፡ ክርስቶስ** ('Small catechism'). Asmara, Tipografia M. Fioretti, 1944 (AM) = 1952, 36 pp. [textbk. for elementary schools, grades 1 to 3].
- ዐቢይ ፡ ትምህርት ፡ ክርስቶስ** ('Large catechism'). Asmara, Tipografia Arti Grafiche, s.d., 80 pp. [textbk. for grades 4 to 7].
- ዕቅድ ፡ ጊዜ ፡ ዘውእቲ ፡ መዳልወ ፡ ሰዓታት ፡ ወዕለታት** ('Keeping time, that is the scales of hours and days'). Asmara, Tipografia P. Silla, 1938 (AM) = 1946, 146 pp.
- ጸሎት ፡ ታስዕቲ ፡ ናብ ፡ ጽዕ ፡ አባ ፡ ገብረሚካኤል ፡ ሰማዕት** ('Prayers for the novena of Blessed Gäbrä Mika'el'), n.d., 26 pp.
- ጥንታዊ ፡ ወግዕን ፡ ሥነ ፡ ሥርዓትን ፡ ናይ ፡ ሕዝቢ ፡ ኢትዮጵያ** ('Old tradition and behaviour of the people of Ethiopia'). Asmara, Tipografia Francescana, 1964 (AM) = 1972, 54 pp.; other edition with **ባህልና ፡ ክዝክር** ('That our tradition may be remembered') added to the original title, 1977 (GC) [both works ed. by the Cistercian monks].

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- Asmara, Diocesan Archives; *Bərhan*, Mäskäräm 1941 (AM)–Gənbot 1943 (AM), 1; Ḥamle 1943 (AM), 1–7; Yäkkatit 1961 (AM), 1–3; LUDOVICO MATHIAS, *Al Clero e ai Fedeli dell'Esarcato*, Asmara, 14 February 1956, 2 pp.; interview to H.E. *abunä Zäkkaryas Yoḥannəs*, bishop emeritus of Asmara (Asmara 14. 08. 06).

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