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Two Visits to Mugär Gädam, Šäwa

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Mugär Gädam, or Mugär monastery, is one of the principal *Balä Eḡḡ* or craftsmen's monasteries, in northern Šäwa. Situated in the Dalite area 30 kilometres west of Däbrä Şəge (and 135 kilometers north of Addis Abäba) it consists of a complex of subterranean caves and half a dozen traditional rectangular Ethiopian-style houses. These caves and structures are located in the vicinity of two large crevices in the cliff overlooking the Mugär River, one of tributaries of the Blue Nile. The monastery is headed by an Azaḡ, or Superior, Abbe Bälaynäḥ. The nuns have their own head, termed a Set-Azaḡ, literally "woman Azaḡ", who is, however subordinate to the male Azaj.

The monastery currently has an enrolment of about 130 monks, or *mänäkuse*, and almost a hundred nuns, or *set mänäkuse* literally "women monks". We were told, however, that the establishment had within living memory been some three hundred strong.¹ The monks and nuns of Mugär Gädam are dressed in the characteristic white Ethiopian cotton clothing of Ethiopian Orthodox monks and nuns. A significant proportion of them are elderly men and women, who came to the monastery to spend their last days in dignity and spiritual serenity. One monk was reported not to have left his chamber for about three years. Monks and nuns practice strict fasting. They abstain, like ordinary Orthodox Ethiopian Christians, from all animal foods, including meat, milk, butter, yoghurt, and eggs, on both Wednesdays and Fridays. They nevertheless carry their frugality still further, for members of the community eat only once a day, when they partake communally of an evening supper. They eat thrice a day only on Saturdays and Sundays.

Services are carried out throughout the greater part of their Sabbath Eve. This runs in the Judaic manner for twenty-four hours from Friday night to

¹ This article is based on two visits to the Mugär monastery, the first, with Alula Pankhurst, in 1998; the second, with Gerald Gotzen, in 2000.

Saturday morning. These celebrations involve chanting, bowing, clapping, and drumming. Ritual ceremony also involves the sacrifice of an ox or smaller animal, the eating of *dabbo*, or bread, the drinking of *ṭalla*, or beer, and the use of lighted tapers. The above type of bread is called *ṣādeq*, from the Gəʿəz word *ṣādqä*, “be just, be righteous, be faithful”². Prayers are held seven times a day. Members of the monastery, like the Fälaša (and many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians of medieval times³), refrain from all work, travel, and cooking, on their Sabbath.

Though the Dalite area is almost entirely Oromefa-, or Afan Oromo-speaking, members of Mugär Gädam differ from their neighbours in using Amharic among themselves. They nevertheless speak Oromefa with the surrounding population. Many of them also have knowledge of Gəʿəz, which they read and use in prayer.

The site of the monastery is most conveniently reached by taking the “Campo” turn-off to Dalite at Däbrä Şəge, on the Addis Abäba-Fäčče road, driving 40 kilometres to the end of the track, and then clambering down the rugged hill-land in the direction of the Mugär river several hundred metres below, with the post-war Mugär cement factory visibly pouring forth powder in the far distance.

The history of Mugär Gädam is virtually undocumented. Like other craftsmen’s monasteries in Šäwa described by the present writer elsewhere,⁴ the establishment does not appear to possess any historical records telling for example how, when and why it was established. Tradition, recalled by Abbe Bälaynäḥ, nevertheless provides some important clues. The *gädam* came into existence, he believes, during the reign of Abeto Nägassi (169?–1703), the founder of the Šäwan dynasty. Support for this dating is found in the memoirs of Jacques Faitlovitch, the Polish scholar of Fälaša, or Betä ʿEsra’el affairs. Basing himself on information he collected in 1908, he claims that members of that community, “appear to have settled in Šäwa with Nägassi”, and that the latter had “taken them into his service”, and had

² WOLF LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez*, Wiesbaden 1987, p. 548.

³ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford 1972, pp. 207–9, 222, 224–39, 291.

⁴ On these monasteries see RICHARD PANKHURST, *The Ballä Ejj Community of Šäwa*, in: STEVEN KAPLAN, TUDOR PARFITT, and AMANUELA TREVISAN SEMI (eds.), *Between Africa and Zion*, Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 130–52, and IDEM, *The Craftsmen’s Monasteries of Šäwa and Their Judaeo-Christian Customs: A Review of Literature*, in MICHAEL KOHLBACHER und MARCUS LESINSKI, *Horizonte der Christenheit. Festschrift für Friedrich Heyer*, Erlangen, 1994, pp. 49–60.

“given them many pieces of land in the area”. They had then, he asserts, gradually lost contact with the country from which they had come.⁵ A slightly later dating for this supposed Fälaša migration to Šäwa has, however, been given by the Ethiopian historian Aläqa Ašme. Writing of the reign of Nägassi’s grandson, Abeto Abbiye (1720–1745), and throwing considerable light on the activities of the Fälaša migrants, he observes:

“Many Fälaša, Jews, entered his service during this time; and he received them respectfully. No one served him as much as they did. They made him axes, chisels, and sickles with which he exploited the forests of Yifat. They made ploughshares, hoes and Wägal”,⁶ i.e. iron rings used to fasten the ploughshare to the plough. The result of this Fälaša migration to Šäwa from the north, and the isolation of the migrants from their earlier homeland postulated by Faitlovitch, was, we may suppose, twofold: On the one hand the migrants abandoned their earlier Fälaša faith, and accepted Christianity, the dominant religion of their new homeland, Šäwa. On the other hand the retention, as we shall see, of Fälaša handicraft skills, particularly as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, as well as the retention of certain Fälaša social customs.⁷

The main geographical features of Mugär Gädam, which presumably led to its establishment, are the two above-mentioned large adjacent crevices in the rock face, and above them a nearby spring. Both crevices are some fifteen metres wide and deep, and three or four metres high. One is occupied by the monastery’s *Šälot Bet*, or House of Prayer; the other by the combined Kitchen und Nuns’ Quarters. Use of the spring, which is to this day the community’s source of water, has been facilitated in recent years by the installation of pipes, provided through the generosity of Ato Wäflän, a *Balä Īgğ* trader living in Addis Ababa.

The House of Prayer is roughly squarish-oval in shape. Though a small portion of the ceiling is now open to the sky, the interior, when not lit by candles, is inevitably gloomy, if not dark. This chamber is arranged on a north-south axis, with two entrances: that for men on the east, and that for women on the west. The room is surrounded by a *mäddäb*, or long low

⁵ JACQUES FAITLOVITCH, *Quer durch Abessinien. Meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas*, Berlin 1910, p. 138.

⁶ BAIRU TAFLA, *Ašma Giyorgis and His Work: “History of the Gällä and the Kingdom of Šawä”*, Stuttgart 1987, p. 513.

⁷ On these occupations see PANKHURST, *The Ballä Ejj Community of Šäwa*, pp. 130–52.

seat, made of mud and stone, which runs around the wall, beside the wall. Before entering the chamber, persons remove their shoes, a deferential practice universal in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Churches, and for the matter mosques. The main entrance is on the west, or north-west, for priests and ordinary men, and is called the *Yäwändoč*, i.e. Men's, Door. The entrance for priests and deacons coming for Mass is on north-east, and is called *Məsraq*, i.e. East, Door, also called the *Şähay* or *YäSällase*, i.e. Sun or Trinity, Door. The southern entrance is for women, called the *Yäsetoč*, or Women's, Door.⁸

The principal feature of Mugär Gädam's House of Prayer, as of other craftsmen's monasteries, is the central *məkrab*. This is an altar-like structure, referred to by the traditional Gə'əz word for shrine or sanctuary.⁹ It serves in a sense as an alternative to the *tabot*, or altar slab, of Orthodox churches. The *məkrab*, the shape of which varies slightly from one monastery to another, is invariably erected in the centre of the chamber, and is the holiest object in the Gädam, and indeed all important for worship. It consists, at Mugär, of a hollow cubical structure, made of wood, about a metre tall and wide. It is surmounted by straight upright poles which stretch almost to the ceiling. Attached to these poles at man height on all four sides are half a dozen imported religious prints, each around 15 to 20 centimetres high and 10 centimetres wide, and framed. They depict the Virgin and Child, an Ethiopian-style Trinity, and the figure of Christ standing. Such prints seem to have become common in Ethiopia only in the last half century or so. From this we may conclude that they would have been unknown in the monastery in earlier times. There is, however, no way of telling whether it ever possessed any paintings. Also attached to the *məkrab*, but a metre or so higher up, are a number of horizontal poles, stretching between it and the outer walls, thus forming, near the ceiling, a kind of shelf. On it, we saw a number of wooden and thong chairs, and a bundle of some fifty brass-topped *mäqwamiya* or taw-sticks. These are used to support members of the congregation during their long services, which last far into the night. Two drums, used in religious ceremonial, lay on the stone floor nearby.

⁸ Compare the arrangement of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Churches, where AY-MERO WONDIMAGEGNEHU and J. MOTOVU, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa, p. 46 describe the entrance of women looking towards the south, and that of men towards north.

⁹ LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez*, p. 34.

A smallish pile of cinders on the floor, to the north of the *məkrab*, indicates the place where the ritual fire is lit, during Friday evening, or Sabbath, services, and on important annual celebrative occasions.¹⁰ Such fires consume considerable quantities of fire-wood, which is taken as required from a sizable pile of upright sticks, which can be seen stacked outside the cave for future use beside a wall in the open air nearby.

Balä Äğğ monks, according to the early nineteenth century German Protestant missionary J.L. Krapf, were in possession, in 1840, of at least two Christian manuscripts, the *Arganonä Wəddase* or Praise of the Virgin Mary, and the *Mälkä Maryam*, or Image of Mary, as well as “some parts of the Bible”, all of which were “written in Aethiopic”, i.e. Gəʿəz.¹¹ Manuscripts, as a result of the introduction of printing in twentieth century Ethiopia, are giving way at Mugär Gädam, as elsewhere in the country, to printed texts. A few monks, several of whom wore crosses, and in two cases large crucifixes, possess a number of religious texts written on parchment, and carried them in the traditional Ethiopian Christian manner in leather cases round their necks. Other monks, particularly on our second visit, were in possession of a not insignificant number of printed works in Gəʿəz. Beside the Old and New Testaments, these included the *Mälkä Iyäsus* and *Mälkä Maryam*, or Images respectively of Jesus and Mary, the *Täʿamrä Maryam*, or Miracles of the Virgin Mary, the *Dərsanä Mikaʿel*, and *Dərsanä Rufaʿel*, or Homilies of the Archangels Michael and Raphael, the *Gädlä Hawaryat*, or Acts of the Apostles, and the *Gädlä Täklä Haymanot*, or Acts of Saint Täklä Haymanot. To the left of the House of Prayer, as we face it, lies the second cave, which contains the Monastic Kitchen and the Nuns’ Quarters. This is an inter-connected L-shaped area, with two separate doorways opening on to the cliff face. One of these doors leads to a wooden structure, which serves as a kind of communal bedroom. Its front has been decoratively cut in the shape of a large Cross. The other side of the cave, which is more open to the outside, contains three large circular holes, or troughs, in which, at the times of our visits, *ṭälla*, or traditional Ethiopian beer, was being prepared. Nearby, on the ground, stood a score of large covered

¹⁰ On such fires see RICHARD PANKHURST, A Visit to the Craftsmen’s *Gädäm*, or Monastery, at Mänteq, near Ankobär, Shäwa = *Africa* 53, 1998, 594.

¹¹ CHARLES WILLIAM ISENBERG and JOHANN LUDWIG KRAPF, *Journals of the Rev. Messrs Isenberg and Krapf*, London, 1843, pp. 238–40. See also PANKHURST, *The Craftsmen’s Monasteries of Shäwa and Their Judaeo-Christian Customs: A Review of Literature*, pp. 49–60.

gambos, or earthenware pots, containing the already-made brew, as well as several sacks and other containers full of grain. Some of the walls and partitions in the vicinity were made of wood; some of thin bamboo; and others of earth; or of a combination of two or more of these materials. The charcoal fires used for cooking, including the baking of bread, produce a pervasive acrid smoke. Though common in traditional houses throughout Ethiopia, this smoke is irritating, and doubtless harmful, to the eyes. The assistance of a friendly Non-governmental Organization has therefore been solicited, to construct a modern, better ventilated, kitchen. The steel-reinforcements for this structure, to be built of concrete below the present kitchen, are already on site. The work, as well as the construction of new sanitary installations, should be completed within a year.

Most of the monks, and nuns, live in individual caves. Some of the latter are so small as to provide room only in which to lie. The flattish land above the caves is occupied by half a dozen rectangular “wattle and daub” houses, devoted mainly to the monastery’s traditional handicrafts: ironwork and weaving, both traditionally men’s occupations, and pottery, that of women. The smithy is an open structure consisting merely of a roof to shelter the blacksmiths from sun and rain. The establishment was manned, at the time of our visits, by only two smiths. One man fashioned artifacts from the red-hot, near-molten metal, while the other, to achieve maximum heat, fanned the charcoal fire with a traditional bellows, made from a sheep or goatskin. The smith, who was remarkably dexterous, employed locally produced, but rather crude implements: a hammer, a pair of pincers (which he had himself made), and a hard block of iron stuck in the ground, to serve as an anvil. For his work he made use of ready-made scrap-iron acquired in Fäčče or Addis Abäba, rather than iron-ore mined in the locality as would almost certainly have been the case a century or so earlier. Articles produced at the smithy consisted mainly of agricultural instruments, such as ploughshares and the iron parts of hatchets and sickles, as well as knife-blades, and stirrups and other gear for mules and horses, but in former days might well also have included spears. The weavers’ shed was occupied, during our visits, by three looms, only two of which were, however, actually manned. Two weavers sat, as is traditional in Ethiopia (and also India), in holes dug in the ground, with their two looms in front of them, and their two sets of brilliantly white thread stretched out across the greater part of the shed. Produce of the monastery included the thick cotton *gabi*, or wrap, which affords much needed protection from the cold weather of highland Ethio-

pia, and various kinds of *šamma*, or thin white cotton togas, some of which are adorned with beautifully woven coloured borders. The potter women, several of whom wore neck-crosses, worked in two separate houses. They made use, for their work, of water from the nearby spring, and clay carried up from the lowlands some half an hour's walk or more away. The articles they produced, with the help of a potter's wheel, were for the most part fired a beautiful jet black. These included drinking jars and bowls of all kinds; *särägälla*¹² (water-pots which can be filled, as if by magic, only from the bottom, and are therefore protected against flies); and the large semi-cylindrical bodies of *käbäro*, or drums, half a metre or so in diameter.

No less interesting — but almost certainly a recent innovation — are attractively painted figurines, also made of earthenware. Two of them represented seated monks and nuns holding a Bible or other book, made of red leather; two others, women, one carrying a baby in her arms, the other a pot of water on her back; yet another, a very realistic zebu cow, painted white, with hump and horns. These and other figurines, not a few of them the handiwork of Yənəneš Wäldä Səllase, were reminiscent, though considerably larger, and, I would judge, much finer, than those formerly produced by the Fälaša potters of northern Ethiopia.¹³ The above and other articles, smelted, woven, or of pottery, are either ordered by potential customers in advance; or exposed for sale, and purchased, at the nearby *Hamus Gäböya*, or Thursday Market, held an hour or so's walk away, on flat land overlooking the Mugär river valley below. This fair, as its name suggests, takes place every Thursday. Market day in the past was on Saturdays, and later on Fridays, but was later changed to Thursdays in deference to the craftsmen, who in accordance with Biblical writ refrain from all work, travel, and cooking, on their Saturday Sabbath, which begins, as already noted, at dusk on Friday.

In addition to the above structures there is a guest house, at times occupied by pilgrims, and, as in other craftsmen's monasteries, a dwelling reserved for women during menstruation. The existence of this house, known as a *täkäto-bet*, from the Gə'əz word *täkätä*¹⁴, or menstruate, is one of the culturally most distinctive, features of a *Balä Ägğ gädam*. Members of the

¹² LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez*, p. 512.

¹³ For photographs of such Fälaša pottery see *Ethiopia Observer*, 8, 1964, 235.

¹⁴ LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez*, p. 574.

gädam share the practice of the Fälaša¹⁵ (and Qəmant)¹⁶ whereby women during their periods of menstruation are isolated from the rest of the community. This they do by moving into a separate “house of blood”, where they are not allowed to touch, or be touched by, any other person. This custom, shared by all *Balä Eḡḡ* communities, is based on the Biblical injunction: “And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be seven days in her menstrual separation: and whoever touches her shall he unclean” (Leviticus, 15:19). On the fourth day after the end of menstruation, women carry out their first ritual cleansing, and are allowed to leave the “house of blood”, but cannot go out of its compound. This happens only three days later.

Though primarily craftsmen, the inhabitants of the Gädam are also to some extent farmers, and practice a limited amount of agriculture.

Mugär Gädam, like other craftsmen’s monasteries, is little known to the scholarly world, and has indeed never hitherto been described by any foreign observer. Its inhabitants, like those of other such monasteries, live in a relatively remote locality, and devote themselves extensively to prayer. They are nevertheless linked to the world beyond the Gädam by remarkably close inter-monastic, market, and church contacts.

The monastery is part of a network of over a score of similar institutions in northern Šäwa and southern Wällo. Their leaders, when necessary, communicate among each other and with two related craftsmen’s *gädam* in the Qäčäne area of Addis Ababa by messengers. Monastic blacksmiths and weavers, who are generally familiar with each others’ work, and can switch between the two occupations more or less at will, can find employment and lodging, as well as a warm welcome, in almost any other craftsmen’s monastery in the Šäwa-Wällo region. There is as a result a high degree of inter-monastic mobility. Many inhabitants of a monastery will thus have visited, and be familiar with other monasteries, and may indeed have close relatives living therein.

Members of the *gädam* are likewise linked, commercially, both with the sources of their raw materials and the markets for their finished goods. The blacksmiths purchase scrap iron and the weavers cotton thread, from out-

¹⁵ WOLF LESLAU, *Coutumes et croyances des Falachas (Juifs d’Abyssinie)*, Paris, 1957, pp. 73; ERIC PAYNE, *Ethiopian Jews*, London, 1972, p. 26; HAGAR SALAMON, *The Hyena People. Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*, Berkeley, California, 1999, pp. 97–100.

¹⁶ FREDERICK C. GAMST, *The Qemant. A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry in Ethiopia*, New York, 1969, pp. 99–100.

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Fig. 1: Clay figurines produced in the monastery (Photo: Ian Campbell)

side their community, while both of them, as well as the potter-women, produce primarily for sale, beyond the community. Though living in ritually sanctioned isolation from the outside world the craftsmen are thus related to the local, and to some extent even the national, Ethiopian economy.



Fig. 2: Cattle figurines (Photo: Ian Campbell)

One of the results of the mobility among the *Balä Īğğ* community is that many of the members have in recent years entered a variety of other occupations. Several have become restaurant and hotel owners, in Fəčče, as well as Addis Abäba, and not a few inhabitants of Qäčäne are taxi- and bus-drivers. A remarkable number of their vehicles may be seen parked in the area at night.

Another of the Gädam's contacts arises from the community's relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Through their own monastic hierarchy, and their own House of Prayer, members of the community are spiritually self-sufficient, and thus independent of the Orthodox Church for their spiritual guidance and ordinary day-to-day services. The monastery's inhabitants are, however, highly religious, and attend major festivals at neighbouring churches, notably for Christmas, *Ṭəmḳät*, or Epiphany, Easter, and *Mäsḳäl*, or Feast of the Cross, as well as major Saints' days. Members of the Gädam are likewise baptised in church, have baptismal names, and follow the Lenten fast and other fasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as well as the abstinence prescribed by that Church for Wednesdays and Fridays.

The *Balä Īğğ* unlike the Fälaša, to whom they have been likened, have moreover no burial grounds of their own. They are buried in the sanctified lands of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

For such reasons every craftsman's *gädam* is linked to one or more Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The inhabitants of Mugär Gädam are in contact with two Orthodox places of worship: Mika'el, which lies in the lowlands below their monastery, and Giyorgis on elevated land further away. The monastery's relationship with Mika'el church is symbolised by a large wooden cross placed, within the confines of the monastery on the nearby roadside. This cross, as is general in Ethiopia, indicates the location of a distant church, and hence the direction to which people should bow.

Summary

The article describes two field trips to a little-known craftsman's *gädam*, or monastery, in northern Šäwa. This institution, which, like other such monasteries in the region, probably dates from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, seems to have come into existence as a result of the rise of the Šäwan state. This development apparently attracted Fälaša, or Judaic, craftsmen — weavers, blacksmiths and potters — from the Gondär area, who at some uncertain stage were converted to Christianity.

The *gädam* today consists of monks and nuns, who practice the traditionally "marginalised occupations" of blacksmith, weaver, and potter. Though nominally Christian, they have retained several traits which seem more "Judaic" than those of the highland Christian population at large.