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The Missionary Strategies  
of the Jesuits in Ethiopia  
(1555–1632)

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## Preface

This study examines processes of religious dissemination and conversion in Ethiopia in the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> centuries within the context of the intricate relationship between Catholic and Ethiopian Christianity. In 1520, the first Portuguese delegation reached Ethiopia, which became a center to a most interesting encounter between religions and cultures. At the time, the Christian Ethiopian Empire was attempting to halt state disintegration. The Empire was eventually conquered in 1528 by incoming Muslim armies from neighboring principalities and was liberated 13 years later with the help of Portuguese military forces.

In 1555 the Jesuit mission began operating in Ethiopia and struggled to unite Churches under papal authority while Oromo invasions from the south gradually, throughout the century, advanced toward the heart of the country. As a result, Ethiopia became a tapestry of religions and cultures over the century whose interactions resulted in violence on more than one occasion. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Zä Dəngəl, and his later successor Susənyos, began showing great interest in the religion brought by the missionaries and developed aspirations to replace official state religion, namely Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, with Catholic Christianity. In 1622 Susənyos took the sacrament from Jesuit Pedro Paez and in 1624 publicly severed his connections with the Alexandrine Church. In the years that followed, Catholicism became the official religion of Ethiopia.

Between 1624 and 1632 Ethiopia suffered political instability. Imperial decisions were met with strong opposition on the part of the nobility, monks and clergymen. Processes of cultural, intellectual and religious change, exchange and conversion in multiple directions took place against this backdrop of political conflict. This study examines processes pertinent to the Ethiopian context from the establishment of the Jesuit mission in 1555 until its expulsion in 1632, when the Ethiopian Empire reverted to Orthodox Christianity under the leadership of the new Emperor Fasiladäs.

This study is based mainly on two types of primary sources: a). Portuguese and Jesuit sources which include letters and tractates, and b) Ethiopian sources which include chronicles of emperors, theological works and hagiographic texts. This study of a chapter in the history of Ethiopia is innovative in its attempt to understand the reaction of the various strata of Ethiopian society to Catholic missionary efforts. As such, this study deals with the religious history of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia. Scholarship has dealt with the adoption of Catholicism by Ethiopian royalty within a broad historical context, focusing mainly on what the adoption of a new religion signified politically and the ensuing cultural war between missionaries and Ethiopians. However, this study investigates in detail

the methods by which the missionaries sought to spread Catholicism and Ethiopian society's response to these efforts.

This work sheds light on Jesuit preference to disseminate Catholicism from top to bottom. On the one hand the Jesuits worked intensively amongst the Ethiopian nobility, attempting to form alliances with emperors and governors, providing them with religious services and serving as mediators and messengers in negotiations with hostile populations. On the other hand, the missionaries aspired to overtake the Ethiopian ecclesiastical hierarchy, to sever the traditional connection to the Alexandrian Coptic Church and replace it with ties to the Roman Catholic Church. To that end the Jesuits, not always successfully, sought to replace the leadership of the powerful monasteries, influential in internal ecclesiastical politics, with leaders who acted in favor of Catholicism. Furthermore, as of 1624, upon the arrival of Catholic Patriarch Afonso Mendes to Ethiopia, local Catholic clergy began to be appointed in order to propagate the new religion more effectively. The Jesuits believed that gaining control over key positions of power was the right formula for success.

Seeking collaboration with local governors and the nobility constituted an important element of the worldwide Jesuit missionary conception. However, the actual mode of missionary activity was determined by the grave Ethiopian political crisis of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in which power accumulated by local governors challenged the power of the Monarchy. Hence, emperors like Zä Dəngəl and Susənyos found it useful to collaborate with the missionaries, for Jesuit political ideas and absolutist view of government strengthened their position. Conversely, the missionaries came to depend, to a certain extent, on the masters they served and gradually started to fill the roles previously served by Ethiopian holy men during the Middle Ages; missionaries became healers, land owners and dispute settlers.

As foreigners, the Jesuits lacked a broad social base of support that would have allowed them the necessary freedom of action to perform the above-mentioned functions. Furthermore, it also resulted in their dependence on people of power and authority. Finally, uprisings of noblemen and women who refused to submit to the ruler, along with rebellion and opposition on the part of large groups of priests and monks, made Emperor Susənyos withdraw from some of his previously held positions. He proclaimed freedom of religion in the Empire and later on abdicated on behalf of his son.

Still, as a new force in the Ethiopian arena, Catholicism played more than a mere political role. This study sheds new light on other aspects that stemmed from the encounter and conflict between the two Christian Churches. The Jesuits tried to develop an Ethiopian Catholic culture and for that purpose they preached sermons, held debates, argued with Ethiopian clergymen and translated Catholic texts into Ethiopian. This study also breaks new ground in discussing the use of rhetoric by missionaries in order to persuade, disprove and arouse in their audience emotions such as joy, sadness and excitement. The Jesuits believed it was necessary to develop

consistent arguments in order to grapple with the Christological and theological truths of Ethiopian Christianity, but, by the same token, they felt an outburst of emotion was needed to convince potential converts. Preaching served as a means to that end along with painting, music and drama, arts to whose development the missionaries contributed.

Theological debates were held in both oral and written forms. The missionaries translated considerable amount of theological studies to Gəʿəz (Classical Ethiopic). The Jesuits also engaged in the translation of Masses and interpretation books written by the great Catholic reformers, as well as that of simpler texts intended to enable children and adults to learn about the ‘truths’ of Catholicism. In addition, the Jesuits composed original texts to refute the theological tenets of Ethiopian Christianity and translated them with the help of Catholic Ethiopians and Portuguese nationals who had spent many years in the country. The Ethiopian response to Catholic missionary endeavors was the translation of Coptic Christian texts from Arabic into Gəʿəz. These translations joined a series of Ethiopian original essays in providing a response to Catholic arguments and Jesuit accusations against Ethiopian Christianity. Thus, from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, theological essays that dealt with questions the Jesuits posed for the first time in the country. Those questions compelled the Ethiopian Church to develop clear positions on pertinent issues, such as the Monophysite Question (whether the Son has one nature or two, after incarnation), the issue of *Filioque* (the question of the relation between the Son and the Holy Ghost), the origin of souls, the question of the corporeality of God, and so on.

The Christological debates were held within the narrow circled of lettered men, the Emperor and the Court. Through these debates, the Jesuits sought not only to persuade the clergy and nobility of the truth of their claim, but also intended to strengthen their position and earn legitimacy in the Emperor’s court in order to place Ethiopian Christianity outside the boundaries of the ‘correct doctrine.’ The Emperor acted as referee in these debates, although he did not hid his partiality to Catholic views, and in certain cases was even ready to issue threats and exert physical force to deter groups of rebellious monks.

It is important to note that the argument between Catholics and the Orthodox created a new, self-renewing Christological thinking amongst Ethiopian monks. New theological streams evolved that bore long-term consequences for the history of religion in Ethiopia, even after the Jesuits were expelled from the country. Despite persistent efforts to retain their Alexandrian views and defend the traditional tenets of the Ethiopian Church, groups of Ethiopian monks developed new Christological formulations as a consequence of the Catholic influence. This phenomenon of mimicry is apparent in the development of the new theological streams appearing as ‘heretical’ alternatives, from the points of view of both the Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine and that of the Catholic Church. The most prominent of all those streams was the “Anointment Theology” (*Qabat*), which gathered its power mainly in the northern district of Təgray. The Anointment theology came to occupy the vacancy

between the Monophysites and the Duophysites. It argued that the anointment, in addition to making Jesus a king and high priest, also transformed him into the natural son of God, even in his human state. The phrasing of the creed was: "Jesus is the natural son of the Lord by means of anointment of the Holy Ghost".

However, the Jesuit struggle against Ethiopian Christianity was conducted not only in the realm of beliefs and opinions, but also in that of practices and ceremonies. The Jesuit mission in Ethiopia represents a unique case in the world Jesuit history since it concerns a mission addressed at Christians. Both traditions, the Catholic and the Ethiopian Orthodox, were based on the same sources and held an array of common ceremonies. Evidently the Christian sacraments, including baptism and the Eucharist, were cardinal in the Catholic as well as in the Orthodox experience. Therefore questions regarding the understanding and practice of sacraments became highly significant in the debates between the two Churches. The missionaries criticized the Orthodox Ethiopian practice of baptism and Eucharist, and opposed to the multiplicity of ritual forms of Orthodox Ethiopian sacraments. If the Jesuits had recognized the Ethiopian sacraments as legitimate and effective in achieving salvation, it would have begged the question whether there was even a need to impose Catholicism. How is culture to be distinguished from religion in such cases? Did the Ethiopian priest have the authority to give the sacrament? Was a sacrament administered by an Orthodox Ethiopian priest capable of granting grace? The Jesuits had to distinguish between the cultural and essential religious elements; that means, to distinguish between elements that were crucial for the consecration and those of secondary importance.

The distinction between 'cultural' and 'religious' characteristics, held by the missionaries with respect to the Ethiopian Church sacraments, did not apply to rituals such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, since the Jesuits regarded those as elements of the 'Jewish' heritage which they claimed polluted Ethiopian Christianity. For that reason the Jesuits relentlessly fought against those practices, preached against them at all opportunity, and refused to accept them both a religious and a cultural sense.

Hence we conclude that the main cause of failure of Catholicism in Ethiopia was the Jesuit missionaries' attempt to create a religious system which would be homogeneous in terms of creed and theology as well as in terms of rituals. As in the case of the Catholic Reformation in Europe, the Jesuits wished to sacrifice the local religious expressions for the benefit of a uniform homogeneous religion with versions clear and acceptable to the entire Catholic public. It is true that the Jesuits assimilated many local traditions and managed, with some success, to integrate European-Catholic and Ethiopian elements; that was done for example in Masses, processions and displays. However, the aspiration for coherent Catholicism with ritual and theological uniformity met a society consisting of numerous peripheral circles; the latter refused to absorb the centralism which the Jesuits represented in political terms as well as in respect of religion, rituals and creeds.