

# JESUIT PATRIARCHES IN ETHIOPIA (1557-1632)

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## *Abstract*

*The Jesuit missionaries came to Ethiopia in the mid-sixteenth century following the footsteps of the Portuguese mercenaries who came to the support of the Ethiopian Christian state against the Muslim lowlanders. The Jesuits' presence in the country was brief, but their impact was noticeable enduring for centuries. The primary objective of this essay is to reexamine the missionary activities of the Jesuit Patriarchs and their relationship with the Ethiopian kings. To do so, the activities of the four patriarchs were surveyed in view of their missionary methods and their relations with the state.*

## INTRODUCTION

On April 10, 1520, a Portuguese embassy arrived at Massawa headed by Don Rodrigo de Lima.<sup>1</sup> Significant members of De Lima's mission include João Bermudez and Francisco Alvarez—the former was later sent as a messenger of the Ethiopian king to Portugal in 1635, while the later left us a significant account of the embassy and the first eyewitness account of its kind. For reasons unclear, the reception of this Portuguese embassy was belated. Late though, their audience with the king was extensive followed by prolonged interviews about the way of life, political and military strength of Portugal, and, more importantly, Alvarez was interrogated on religious matters.<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese embassy was delayed until 1526. During these years, Libna Dingil (r. 1508-40) wrote letters to Pope Clement VII and entrusted Alvarez as his envoy to the Pope.<sup>3</sup> In the same way, letters were written addressed to King Manuel I, and following his death, to his son King John III (r. 1521-1557), (also known in Portuguese as João III, the Pious), and the Portuguese Governor of India (at that time, Duarte de Menzes).

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<sup>1</sup> Father Francisco Alvarez, *Narratives of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the Years 1520-1527*, No. LXIV, edited & translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley, London, the Hakluyt Society. In chapters one and two Alvarez describes the early encounter of the Portuguese embassy with the coastal subjects of the Prester.

<sup>2</sup> For a better understanding of the meeting of the Portuguese embassy in 1520 with Libna Dingil, it is significant to consult the full account of Alvarez's work where he made discussions, not only about their first meeting with the king but also on the whole story of their stay and the understandings they had to each other.

<sup>3</sup> The message in the letter was taken by Rome and by some scholars as if Libna Dingil had submitted himself to the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the letter is believed to have been written with the support of Alvarez, and the expressions used in the letter reflect the feelings of obedience towards the Pope of a Catholic type.

In 1535 pressed by the incessant wars and loss of hope in the war with Ahmed b. Ibrahim Al-Gazi's force, better known by Ahmed Gagn, Libna Dingil sent João Bermudez as his envoy to Portugal.<sup>4</sup> The mission had succeeded to bring to the attention of Rome and the Portuguese monarch Islam as a real threat in Ethiopia. Throughout the reign of Libna Dingil war was endemic and the king was forced to save his life from the sword of Gagn hiding himself at the monastery of Debre Damo (where he stayed the last days of his life). Some writers also assume that, desperate by the ceaseless wars and hoping for Portuguese military support, Libna Dingil not only promised to submit to the Roman Church but also made Bermudez Patriarch of the Ethiopian Church.<sup>5</sup> Even if both these claims are doubtful, Bermudez succeeded to address the Pope and the Portuguese monarch about the desperate situation of the Ethiopian king and his plea for military support.

## JOÃO BERMUDEZ

It has been suggested that the coming of the Jesuit missionaries is related with the arrival of Portuguese soldiers (1541) following the war of the Ethiopian Christian state against Gagn's Muslim forces. Initiated with a politico-military alliance, the Ethio-Portuguese relations took different character after the end of the war in February 1543. Owing to their service, King Gelawdewos (r. 1540-59) allowed the Portuguese soldiers, who came for the help of the Ethiopian Christian state to stay in the country, marry Ethiopian women and freely practice their religion. He also granted them lands for their settlement. Nevertheless, unlike Lebne Dengel (r. 1508-40) who is believed to have promised to accept Catholicism in return for Portuguese military support, Gelawdewos had no interest in the new religion.

The period of commendation and buoyancy, thus, happened to be short-lived; in due course, they came to be discontented one another. In the early years of his victory, the king was busy in reorganizing the state machinery and the Church. Territories that had been taken out of the Christian control were restored. Recovery of the churches demolished and replacing the priests and deacons who perished during the war was of his ultimate priorities. Hence, almost immediately after his victory against Gagn, Gelawdewos brought two bishops.<sup>6</sup> The move of the king apparently had disappointed such persons like Bermudez who pressed the king to fulfill what his father's promise by submitting to Catholicism. The disagreement between the king and some of the Portuguese was aggravated by their involvement in religious controversies of the Ethiopian Church and their intolerance and harsh criticisms towards the local traditions. The controversy that Bermudez and his fellows began was intensified a decade or so later with the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries. Thus, annoyed by his religious intolerance Gelawdewos forced Bermudez to exile (to Gafat). Moreover, Gelawdewos declared his religious attitude in what is widely known as the *Confession of Faith*, or *Confession of Gelawdewos*, that he composed on 23 June 1555.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Ethio-Portuguese relations that had opened with the aim of

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 138; Abir Mordochai, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim European Rivalry in the Region*, New York: Frank Cass, 1968, p. 97; Hailu Kifle-Egzi, "Western Relation with Ethiopia During the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period", MA Thesis, McGill University, Department of History, Montreal, 1962, pp. 157-158.

<sup>5</sup> R. S. Whiteway (trans. & ed.), *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543, as Narrated by Castanhoso with Some Contemporary Letters, the Short Account of Bermudez, and Certain Extracts from CORRES*, Second Series, No. X, London: The Hakluyt Society, xxxviii-xxxix; Abir, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Abir, pp. 103-104.

<sup>7</sup> Sevir Chernestov, "Ethiopian Theological Response to European Missionary Proselytizing in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries", in Verena Boll, et. al (eds.), *Ethiopia and the Missions: Historical and Anthropological Insights*, LIT Verlag Munchen, 2005, pp. 54-55; Abir, p. 105; Hastings, 141; Charles F. Rey, *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia: An Account of the Adventurous Journey of the Portuguese to the Empire of Prester John, their Assistance to Ethiopia in Its Struggle Against Islam and their Subsequent Efforts to Impose their Own Influence and Religion, 1490-1633*, London: H. F. & G. Witherby, ND, pp. 200-201.

Christian solidarity against Islam entered a new phase when doctrinal difference between the two churches came to front matters.

The continued demand of the Portuguese for the recognition of João Bermudez as a patriarch and conversion of the Ethiopian Church into the Latin rite came to no effect. Gelawdewos challenged the role of Bermudez that he is not his and his Christian subjects' *Abun* (patriarch). He contends, "You are not our *Abun*, nor prelate of ours ... only Patriarch of the Franks."<sup>8</sup> What's more, due to his intolerance to the Orthodox traditions, Bermudez was forced to confine his services only to the Portuguese settlers and their families and in 1546 Gelawdewos sent a letter to king João III complaining "I am displeased ... with the doings of João Bermudez whom your father sent me as ambassador."<sup>9</sup> What is also important in this letter is that, the king referred Bermudez as ambassador, not a patriarch. In his reply to the letter of Gelawdewos, on March 13, 1546 king João III wrote "... nor do I know more of him than that he is a mere priest (*Cleriguo Simpres*). Of the power which he says the Holy Father granted him I know nothing; from the letters of His Holiness you will learn better what has passed in the matter."<sup>10</sup> These exchanges of letters between Gelawdewos and João strengthen the skepticism and doubt we have concerning Libna Dingil's recognition of Bermudez as a Patriarch of Ethiopia. On the other hand, if the claim of Bermudez ever had any truth in it, the king's expressions may also imply his unwillingness to recognize him as a patriarch of his land. Whatsoever, Bermudez failed to get acceptance in front of the king. Yet, the king did not withdraw his pledge and protection to the settlers. In spite of everything, the Portuguese were allowed, confined though to small localities, to practice their religion. João Bermudez thus played nothing in the Jesuits' history other than distorting the Ethio-Portuguese, or, rather, Rome-Ethiopia relationship in the accounts that he compiled nostalgically after his banishment to Europe.

## ANDRÉ DE OVIEDO

Uninformed about the situation in Ethiopia, Rome and Lisbon reckoned in sending a Catholic mission to Ethiopia. Even in his letter of 1546, João III pledged to send a patriarch to Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> Plans were hatched both in Lisbon and Rome to dispatch an organized missionary group and the newly born Jesuit order (founded in 1540) grab the opportunity to send missionaries. In the beginning, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the order, had volunteered. But, for obvious reasons of his old age, his proposal was rejected. In 1555, Loyola chose João Nunez Barreto consecrated patriarch to lead the Jesuit mission to Ethiopia. Accompanied by André de Oviedo and Melchoir Carneyro, as assistant bishops, and other missionaries, João Nunez Barreto headed his way to India. However, after reaching Goa, the patriarch remained behind. Led by the Spaniard André de Oviedo the other five Jesuits were dispatched to Ethiopia to prepare ground for the arrival of the patriarch. The mission arrived in Ethiopia on March 25, 1557.<sup>12</sup> Upon their arrival at the court, Gelawdewos gave them good reception; nevertheless, he made it clear his indifference to Catholicism and their mission.

André de Oviedo, of a bigoted personality and disillusioned by the firm religious position of Gelawdewos shortly came to quarrel with the king. Failed to obtain submission of the king and observing his determination towards Orthodox Christianity, Oviedo began to attack the king and the religious tradition of his subjects. Like

<sup>8</sup> Elaine Sanceau, *Portugal in Quest of Prester John*, London: Hutchinson & Co., p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Whiteway, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>12</sup> Matteo Salvatore, "Faith Over Color: Ethio-European Encounter and Discourses in the Early-Modern Era", PhD Dissertation, Temple University, 2010, pp. 184-186; Philip Caraman, *The Lost Empire: The Story of the Jesuits in Ethiopia 1555-1634*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985, pp. 10-13; Rey, p. 210; Abir, pp. 105-106;.

João Bermudez, due to his arrogance and intolerance to the traditions of the people, he was alienated from the court and went into exile to live in the territories of the Bahre Negash.<sup>13</sup> However, his exile does not improve the condition for the Jesuits and fellow Portuguese. The disagreement with the king go from bad to worse and old religious controversies came into replay due to the teachings of the Jesuits, such as over Sabbath, which in turn further put the Jesuits at odds with the populace. In 1556, on his return from Ethiopia, Gonçalo Rodrigues<sup>14</sup> warned, as Beccari (1969), quoted by Salvadore, wrote, “the nobles of the empire would prefer to be subject to Muslim rule rather than replace their custom with ours.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, this is an exaggerated commentary. Nevertheless, the precaution forwarded by Rodrigues received a deaf ear from Oviedo who disregarding the warnings acted arrogantly.

It is often asserted that, the Jesuits came to Ethiopia with the objective of, in the words of Salvadore, “establishing a *province* under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese *assistancy*”.<sup>16</sup> The Ethiopian Church that had been a long-sought ally now is found corrupted with non-Christian (Jewish) practices.<sup>17</sup> The Portuguese enterprises for Christian alliance eventually turned into converting the Ethiopian Church to Catholicism. The Jesuits sought not only to simply correct the ‘errors’ of the Ethiopian Church, but also to bring it to their own fold—Catholic rite. These turn of events, as Salvadore wrote, impinge on the entire relations of the two states: “...By treating Christian Ethiopians as non-believers, the Jesuits started to chip away at the idea of Ethiopian-European commonality and shaped a new discourse of otherness: no longer were Ethiopians Christian brothers to be respected, but rather heretics to be converted.”<sup>18</sup>

Even though it looks overstated, Salvadore’s argument holds a good grain. Similar to Bermudez, Oviedo insisted on a quick conversion of the king and submission of the Church to Rome. Immediately after their arrival, the Jesuits were engaged in theological controversies and criticized the ‘errors’ of the Ethiopian Church. By opening the office of Catholic patriarchy, it was hoped to separate the Ethiopian Church from Alexandria, and make it a province of Rome.<sup>19</sup> The formality of beginning of the mission to Ethiopia indicates something: Rome and Lisbon gave priority to an Ethiopian affair and want to start the mission with a patriarch of its own in an attempt to lay ground for its permanency. Nevertheless, the bigoted approaches of Oviedo and his fellow Jesuits damaged the reputation of the mission. Indeed, some believe that, these egocentric approach of the Jesuits were shared by their superior, Loyola, as well. In 1555, Loyola is reported to have said, “There is one Catholic Church in the world and it can only be one under the Roman Pontiff and not under that of Alexandria.”<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, some writers hold that Loyola hinted that correcting the major errors of the Ethiopian Church would be sufficient and the minor Jewish traditions that infiltrate into the Christian practices

<sup>13</sup> Andreu Martinez Alòs-Moner, *Envoys of a Human God: The Jesuit Mission to Christian Ethiopia, 1557-1632*, Leiden: Brill, p. 85; Abir, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> In 1555 Gonzalo Rodrigues and another brother were sent from Goa to Ethiopia with Dr Diego Diaz to prepare the ground for the reception of the patriarch and the Jesuit missionaries. However, this embassy found Gelawdewos stubborn against any attempt at converting his Church. It was to this end that the embassy advised on the precautions needed to be taken while dealing with the Ethiopian Church.

<sup>15</sup> Salvadore, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Andreu Martinez Alòs-Moner, “The Birth of a Mission: The Jesuit Patriarchate in Ethiopia,” in *Portuguese Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2002, pp. 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Salvadore, p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> Martinez, “The Birth of a Mission...”, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Salvadore, p. 184.

could be tolerated, at least at the early stages. However, circumcision, the Sabbath and rebaptism were openly criticized.<sup>21</sup>

Be it as it may, Oviedo's intolerance shattered the Jesuits' contact with the court. Sources suggest that Oviedo went to an extent of excommunicating the king and prohibiting his followers from any form of social contact with non-Catholics.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the king, in turn, forbade the Jesuits' preaching and limited their movement to some peripheral areas. Accordingly, by the end of Gelawdewos' period, the missionaries were confined to limited localities. Gelawdewos who had been looked as great protector of the Portuguese (in spite of the suspicion and criticisms by some of the nobilities against his tolerance to the Catholics) eventually ended in odds with the Jesuits and their Portuguese supporters. Oviedo took the death of the king as piece of good fortune to save the mission from complete end that seemed probable due to the growing intolerance of the Jesuits. Albeit, the death of Gelawdewos does not seem to have improved the condition of the mission and in February 1559, the short-tempered Minas (r. 1559-1563) succeeded Gelawdewos. Minas, also known by his throne name Admas Seged, lacked the tolerance and patience of his brother and soon come into conflict with the Jesuits.

The relations of the Jesuit missionaries do not seem cordial not only under Minas' reign, but also until the reign of Za Dengel (1603-04). All the successors of Gelawdewos—Minas (1559-63), Sarsa Dengel (1563-97) and Yaacob (1597-1603)—appear to have continued the religious policy of their predecessor. Yet, making a brief assessment of the condition of the Catholics under the reign of Minas is worth of note to understand the early relations of the Jesuits. The failure of Andre de Oviedo to establish a smooth relationship with both Gelawdewos and Minas and, more importantly, his involvement in the court conspiracy against Minas had played a profound effect on the works of the Jesuits missionaries and the lives of the Portuguese settlers. As a result, the Jesuits and the Catholics had to suffer from persecution during the reign of Minas. Ethiopian converts (particularly, wives, children and servants of the Portuguese) had faced the indignation and punishment of the emperor. In fact, it is suggested that at the beginning of his reign Minas was liberal and opened his doors for the Jesuits.<sup>23</sup> Merid noted that, the conflict between the two parties began during the religious discussion between the Jesuits and the Orthodox clergy that the king himself organized. He goes on to say, "The trouble arose because of Minas's weak character. He took part in the discussions, but as his education in general and his knowledge of the Christian religion in particular was very inadequate, he found his arguments easily refuted by Oviedo."<sup>24</sup>

However, a major cause of the enmity between Minas and Oviedo was the involvement of the latter in a conspiracy against the king. He supported the conspirators who planned to crown a nephew of the king (Teskare Qal) by recruiting Portuguese soldiers. His involvement in this palace plot aroused public outrage against and totally damaged to the reputation of Oviedo and the Jesuits in general. Even Oviedo was taken prisoner for his acts.<sup>25</sup> Ever since, the Jesuits activities were restricted around Tigre (Tigray), mainly at

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<sup>21</sup> Martinez, "The Birth of a Mission...", pp. 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> Merid Wolde Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508-1708, with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences", PhD Thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1971, p. 188, note no. 1; Caraman, pp. 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Merid, pp. 183-185.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 183, 189.

Fremona with the support, though with no consequence, of the *Bahre Negash*, who was also at odds with Minas. This condition remained unhealed until the death of Minas in 1563.

Minas was succeeded by his son Sarsa Dengel (r. 1563-97) (known by his regnal name—Melak Seged) at age of fourteen.<sup>26</sup> The relationship of the Jesuits and the new king appear somewhat cordial at the beginning as Sarsa Dengel was in need of Portuguese military support against the Turkish incursion in the northern part of Ethiopia (especially, Dabarwa). To achieve this, he attempted to break the alliance between Oviedo and the *Bahre Negash* and attempted to use Oviedo to channel his communication with Europe.<sup>27</sup> However, the king's hope proved futile in attracting Portuguese support. Let alone influencing a fresh military support to come from Portugal/Goa/, at that time the Jesuits were not in a position of strengthening their mission.

Needless to say, as the Turks blocked their contact with Goa and Lisbon, in the last two decades of their presence in Ethiopia no fresh missionaries were sent to replace the pioneer Jesuits fathers. Thus, before his death in 1577, Oviedo did an important, but unusual, step to save his mission by ordaining Francis Lopez (d. 1596/7) a priest—the last Jesuit priest before the arrival of Paez. Lopez and Emmanuel Fernandez (d. 1583) continued to give pastoral services to the Portuguese communities. Following the death of Lopez, a certain Indian priest Belchior da Silva was sent from Goa to succeed Lopez. In view of the viable danger in trespassing European priests via the Turks controlled area, it is believed that his dark color made him a good choice for this purpose.<sup>28</sup> Da Silva served the Portuguese community (especially, around Fremona), up until Jesuit mission was finally rescued from complete collapse with the arrival of Pedro Paez, an ingenious missionary of his time.

## PEDRO PAEZ

The final days of Sarsa Dengel (r. 1563-97) were troubled by succession problems. It is assumed that, Sarsa Dengel designated his nephew (the son of his brother Lessane Christos) Za Dengel, as heir to the throne. But, right before his death he changed his mind and chose his second son, Yaacob (from Harego of Semien, a Bete-Israeli woman).<sup>29</sup> Actually, in the eyes of the nobility, his young age had made Yaacob preferable than Za Dengel. Hence, following the death of his father, Yaeco (r. 1597-1603) ascended to the throne at age of seven. Regency was then setup comprising the influential nobilities. Following the crowning of Yaacob, the twenty years old Za-Dengel, a competing candidate to the throne, was exiled (for fear of palace conspiracy) to an island in Lake Tana.<sup>30</sup> However, after seven years of reigning, Yaacob's reckless attempt at ending the regency called him resentment from the nobility who organized a successful *coup d'état*. The *coup d'état* not only ended Yaacob's reign and resulted in his exile (to Enarya), but also in bringing to the throne the old competing candidate, Za Dingil. Za Dingil (r. c. September 1603-October 1604) was crowned in his place at the age of twenty-six and took Gelawdewos as his crown name (also Atsnaf Seged). Za Dingil was well educated and of good character. Due to his church education and experience, he was endowed with good understanding of the politics;<sup>31</sup> though his impatience and hasty resolutions later proved his fatal weaknesses.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 245-246.

<sup>28</sup> Caraman, pp. 15-16; Hastings, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> Merid, pp. 355-357.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 359-360.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 367-371; Abir, pp. 180-182.

This period of changeovers in the court was paralleled by an interim vacancy in the Jesuits presence in Ethiopia—after the death of Lopez in 1596/97, the Jesuits presence in Ethiopia was absent for a brief period. Fortunately, the Indian priest Belchior da Sylva and the half-casted or Luso-Ethiopians sustained the mission. However, da Sylva's service was limited simply to the day-to-day services of a parish priest. The Catholic missionary spirit was revitalized only with the arrival of Pedro Paez. On May 15, 1603, Paez arrived at Fremona “the much desired journey's end”, as he referred it.<sup>32</sup> Fremona was the main base for the Catholic presence where the last Jesuits and Catholics sheltered in time of persecution. Euphoric Catholics who expressed their happiness over his safe arrival with tears and kissing the ground received Paez. It must be a blissful moment for the Catholic mission in Ethiopia to witness the arrival of a fresh missionary to replace the deceased pioneer Jesuits.

Then, without any delay, Paez send a message to the then king, Yaacob, reporting his arrival and demanding permission for his visit, which he provided him solemnly. Sadly, however, Yaacob was dethroned shortly and Za Dingil took the throne. Although, the Catholics were at first doubtful of and afraid of Za Dingil's action against them, it was Za Dingil whom Paez had to meet at the court. Hearing his arrival, Za Dingil invited him to his court expressing, as Paez wrote it, “We greatly desire that you come here at once and bring the books of justice of the kings of Portugal, if you have them, because we should like to see them”. Though he responded that he does not have the book requested by the king, Paez arrived at the court in Dembia on June 1604. The king warmly received him. Though Paez attribute the invitation and warm welcome to the king's admiration about the religious teachings of him,<sup>33</sup> it is very unlikely to believe that the King had any interest in the religion at that time.

Nevertheless, soon after his arrival in the court, Paez entered into theological discussions with monks and prominent figures of the court. He also said Mass in the presence of the king and dignitaries of the court.<sup>34</sup> Za Dengel had good knowledge of the Book due to his church background, thus, he was prudent to engage himself in the theological dialogues. On the other hand, it has been suggested that Paez was a missionary with an extraordinary ability and tact. In the theological dialogues at the court, it is believed that Paez impressed the king with his arguments and discipline. Some also believed, soon Za Dengel gave his word to his reception into the Catholic faith and shortly wrote letters to the Pope Clement VIII and King Philip III of Spain.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it appears from Paez's statement that, to show his eagerness to establish a regular contact with Portugal, he proposed a marriage alliance (between his son and the daughter of Philip III), that Paez claimed, straightforwardly responded to it as unrealistic proposal in view of her young age and the danger on the route to Ethiopia.<sup>36</sup> It is obvious that, such easy success had overwhelmed Paez's expectation that he once commented that he was surprised and did not expect such an easy submission of the king.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, Paez's success went short. The king was impatient to keep his religion in secret that he makes his acceptance of the Roman church open and forced his people to abandon their practices; most important of which was the observance of Sabbath. Consequently, the discontented nobilities who had been indifferent with

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<sup>32</sup> Paez II, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 156, 158-159, 165.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, the letter appears to have been either outlined or edited by Paez. Besides, the king is supposed to have denounced the observance of Sabbath even though Paez advice him for a slow and thorough action—Paez, Op. cit, pp. 171-174.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

the king made an open attack led by prominent nobilities and the patriarch of the Ethiopian Church, *Abuna Petros* who also announced an excommunication against *Za Dingil*. Indeed, the motive of *Za Dingil*'s acceptance of the teaching of the Roman Church is obscure. Unlike *Paez*'s statements, the king's motives seem to be political—to get military aid amidst the political upheaval. It is very improbable that the 'learned' *Za Dingil* was received to the Roman Church because of the brief theological conversations he made with *Paez* that lasted only for few days. Rather, one must look for other reasons to explain: probably, *Za Dengel* must have taken submission to Catholicism a preconditioned for the military aid he sought from Portugal, or, he might have been advised to do so. *Merid* also maintain that either *Paez* or the Portuguese captain might have advised *Za Dingil* to accept Catholicism in order to get soldiers.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever the circumstances of the writings of the letters to the Pope and the king of Spain were, the expressed conversion of the king undoubtedly was overstated as a stirring factor of the rebellions. According to *Merid*, the fundamental cause of the rebellion was not *Za Dingil*'s religious policy—rather the dissatisfaction of the nobility and military against his reforms.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the immediate political developments were largely the product of his political actions. Yet, *Za Dengel*'s religious measures without doubt had added flame to the public discontent and it served as provoking factor for the open rebellion that ultimately consumed his life. These sagas of events ended in restoring *Yaacob* to the throne. To what extent religion aggravated the situation is hard to say—but, it is evident that the prominent nobilities, among which was *Za Sillase*, and the *Abun* use this cause to rally support against the king. Thus, in October 1604, the king's army was easily subdued and *Za Dengel* was killed. With the reinstatement of *Yaacob* to the throne, the Catholics went into a precarious situation. The Jesuits were isolated to their settlement areas in the mountains until the enthronement of *Susenyos* (r. 1607-1632). Fortunately, the reign of *Yaacob* was short and inconsequential. His period was unstable because of the power struggle among the powerful aristocracy. He was finally killed while fighting against *Susenyos*. *Abuna Petros* was also killed in the battle.<sup>40</sup>

Even though *Paez* was able to befriend *Yaacob*, the position of the Jesuits and the Catholics during his period was perhaps precarious. Yet, the Jesuits succeed to sustain themselves in hiding. Undoubtedly, the two Jesuit priests—*Antonio Fernandez*, a Portuguese and *Francisco Antonio de Angelis*, a Neoplolitan—who joined the mission at *Fremona* on July 13, 1604<sup>41</sup> gave a new vigor to the Jesuits' presence in the country. However, it was only after the coming of *Susenyos* (*Seltan Seged*) (r. 1607-1632) that the Catholic presence in the country deeply felt. Learning from *Za Dingil*'s experience and using his natural gifts, *Paez* succeed to cultivate the support of the court. *Susenyos* opened his doors to the Jesuits possibly due to his indifference towards the Orthodox Church because of the participation of *Abuna Petros* and other clergy against him during the war with *Yaacob*. His interest for Portuguese military assistance in view his unsecured position must have plaid a lot in befriending the missionaries.

It appears safe to argue that, the reign of *Susnyos* was the happiest moment for the Jesuit missionaries owing to the close relationship they were able to forge with the court. Particularly, the king and his brother-in-law *Seala Kristos*, the provincial governor of *Tigre* and later *Gojjam* (in 1611), were the powerful supporters of the Catholic missionaries. Theological dialogues were frequented at the court between the Orthodox priests and the Jesuits preceded by the king and engaging the royal family. In these theological dialogues, *Paez*'s theological

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<sup>38</sup> *Merid*, p. 382.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 386ff.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 394; *Abir*, p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> *Paez*, p. 187.

knowledge and eloquent speeches seem to have impressed the attendants of the theological discussions.<sup>42</sup> Albeit, until 1611 the progress of the Jesuits was very slow. However, the conversion of Seala Kristos in 1611/12 brought the much-devoted governor into the scene as a main actor in the process of catholicization. Hence, his conversion made Catholicism a public concern. Few noblemen followed his example. Nevertheless, Paez advised the king not to do the same; accordingly, Susenyos waited a decade before he made his reception into Catholicism public. Obviously, Paez took a lesson from Za Dingil's experience and thus avoided any sort of open confrontation on religious matters. Martinez argues that until 1617, the missionaries avoided any public religious debate.<sup>43</sup> The religious discussions were confined in the court; even at times, the ardent converts carried the debates in the absence of the missionaries. Yet, this does not mean that the Jesuit priests were passive in public proselytism; rather, by way of converting the royal circle they hoped to convert the whole of the country into the Roman-fold,—a top-down approach. It was to this end a focus was given to the royal family and dignitaries of the court.

In the theological discussions at the court, in the words of Merid, “he [Susenyos] permitted the majesty of the emperor to be demeaned, not only by taking part in the argument or by tolerating the explosion of tempers, but also by encouraging the hot-headed Catholics to draw swords and threaten their opponents with death.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Susenyos issued successive proclamations though his attempt at executing them using coercion were received by public out-roar and resistance. For instance, Paez left us a record that, Susenyos' proclamation of June 1620 over the abandonment of Sabbath was followed by public out-roar, and plots and insurgencies against him.<sup>45</sup> In different parts of the country churches and monasteries were closed and priests and lay followers were imprisoned and flogged.<sup>46</sup> The ease with which he pacified the revolts and the support of strong men such as his brother in-law made Susenyos to continue overconfidently with the forced Catholicization scheme. By that time, Susenyos appear to have been convinced by the superiority of the moral and knowledge of Paez and his companions, and the technological advance of Europe. In front of the king and the royal magistrates, Paez already proved himself an excellent teacher and an eloquent arguer. Moreover, in addition to his theological knowledge and wit, Paez also attracted the King with his masonry and architectural skills and his interest in learning the local language (Geez and Amharic). He built a one-storey stone palace for the king and a bridge.<sup>47</sup>

Obviously, it is difficult to establish that the motive of Susenyos' conversion was purely religious. Merid maintain that “For the emperor's interest in Catholicism was largely motivated by his concern for the security of his throne. He had first approached Paez with the intention of using him as Zadengel and Ya'eqob had hoped to use the missionary.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, politics played a role as the political situation of the state and the position of the monarch was always threatened in view of the presence of political contenders, especially during the first two or three years of his reign. Even in his early encounters with Paez, Susenyos hinted his ardent desire for

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<sup>42</sup> Paez, p. 302; Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde-Aregay, *The Question of the Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations 1500-1632*. Lisbon: Junta De Investigacoes Do Ultramar and Centro De Estudos Historicos Ultramarinos, 1964, pp. 75-76

<sup>43</sup> Martinez, *Envoys...*, p. 107.

<sup>44</sup> Merid, p. 455.

<sup>45</sup> Paez, II, pp. 261-265.

<sup>46</sup> Merid, p. 465.

<sup>47</sup> Hastings, 152-154; Dale H. Moore, “Christianity in Ethiopia”, in *Church History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1936, p. 279.

<sup>48</sup> Merid, p. 461.

Portuguese soldiers. Paez himself made it clear that, he and his companions advised the king to submit for “the reduction of this empire to the holy Roman Church” and write letters to the Pontiff, King Philip and the Viceroy of India to get Portuguese aid.<sup>49</sup> Thus, in his letter of January 13, 1613 to Philip, it is reported that he requested for about 1,000 soldiers.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, as his conversion became public much later when the major plotters were soothed and in the absence the promised assistance from Europe, the role of politics appear to be relatively minimal compared to his predecessors. By the time of the proclamation of his reception to the Roman Church, he was already the strongest authority backed by strong men like Seala Kristos.

Despite the fact that he declared his obedience to Rome in his letter to the Pope on January 31, 1613,<sup>51</sup> Susenyos proclaimed publicly his acceptance of the Catholic faith only in 1622 at age of 45—(in 1607 Páez said the king was at his 33) and demanded the people to follow his example. His proclamation was backed by forceful conversion of his subjects. Nevertheless, his actions could not go without repercussion; it resulted in a religiously provoked civil war and bloodshed, probably the first one of its kind, which ultimately led to his abdication from the throne in favor of his son Fasiledes. The opposition to Susenyos’ forceful conversion and ruthless murder of the revolted came primary from the royal family. Unlike the endless revolts, particularly following the proclamation of his conversion, and the excommunication of *Abuna* Simon, he came out victorious in the wars. *Abuna* Simon and several of leaders of the rebellion were killed.<sup>52</sup> Notwithstanding, this could not end the grief and agony of his people. Hence, no façade of tranquility was secured; civil war reigned in every corner of the country. This was worsened with the arrival of Mendez, uncompromising and intolerant patriarch.

## ALFONSO MENDEZ

Páez died in May 1622, (about a month after Susenyos made his conversion public) and was buried at Gorgora.<sup>53</sup> It has been suggested that, he was a skillful theologian and unwearied of the local tradition. However, his successor Alfonso Méndez was an opposite character of him. Méndez came to Ethiopia in 1625 as a patriarch. However, his appointment proved unsuitable for the Ethiopian mission, at least at this time when tensions were growing due to the revolts against the forceful conversion to Catholicism. It is very improbable to claim that Mendez stirred them. As has already been pointed out earlier, Paez and his companions had already begun to refute the ‘errors’ of and confront the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Yet, it was dealt quite strategically, at times, agented by new converted Catholics, such as the ardent Seala Kristos. Thus, what Mendez did was to follow what his predecessors had been doing—harsh though his strategy was. Nevertheless, the corps of literature on the area put the blame on Méndez. Indeed, he was intolerant to the traditions of the EOC and violently worked to ruin it. He criticized all what he thought were ‘Judaic’ practices; thus, ended in unforgiving enmity with the EOC. Yet, to put all the blames for the failure of the Jesuits on him is illogical.

It is well to note that, Christianity was known to the Ethiopians since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD,<sup>54</sup> and especially since its adoption as an official religion of the state in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Christianity was indigenized and

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<sup>49</sup> Paez, II, pp. 281-286.

<sup>50</sup> Paez II, p. 308.

<sup>51</sup> Paez, II, 307-308. This letter was sent in the hand of the Jesuit Antonio Fernandez and his ambassador Fekur-Egzi. In this letter, Susenyos not only announced his obedience to the Roman Pope, but also made a request to King Philip’s support to further the Catholic project in the country. Indeed, a letter was also sent to King Philip dated January 13, 1613.

<sup>52</sup> Martinez, *Envoys...*, p. 115.

<sup>53</sup> Caraman, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> Sergew Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa, 1972, p. 79.

blended itself with the life and customs of the people, especially in the northern parts. Thus, the new patriarch's intolerance to the religious customs and beliefs of the people was unbearable. Upon his arrival, he ordered the abandonment of the Sabbath, Circumcision, the Ethiopian calendar, ..., and he re-baptized Orthodox Christians, re-ordained Orthodox priests, changed the calendar of the Church and he further attempted to replace all the church services with the Latin rite.<sup>55</sup> Such prejudice was actually shared by his predecessors as well, including Paez; although, implemented moderately. The year 1617/18 seems to be a turning point for the Jesuits' missionary strategy as Susenyos' ability to check the rebellion of 1617 gave him confidence to protect Jesuits' proselytization activities. Moreover, in 1618, Antonio Fernandes virtually assume Paez's role as a leader of the mission and pushed it towards open confrontation with the EOC.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Mendez's open attack against the traditions of the EOC simply added a fuel to the already ignited rebellions and the anguish that the people had been bearing from it. Most importantly, under the pressure of the patriarch in 1626, Catholicism was made an officially recognized religion.<sup>57</sup> Churches and monasteries of the EOC continued to be closed and those who utterly oppose were severely punished.

Notwithstanding, the number of missionaries was very few to replace the Orthodox priests. Including Antonio Bruno and Diogo de Mattos who came in 1620, there were not more than five Jesuits in the country.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the death of Páez in particular was disastrous to the Catholic mission in Ethiopia. The mission was relieved only after the coming of four missionaries in 1624 (including the renowned Manoel de Almeida) and, more importantly, with arrival in 1625 of Méndez and other six Jesuits. Quite the opposite of the expectation, however, the arrival of the patriarch does not improve the condition of the mission. Rather, his arrogance and intolerant views towards the traditions of the EOC turned the status of the mission from bad to worse. Between 1624 and 1630, about twenty missionaries joined the mission and the number of Jesuit centers grew to about thirteen.<sup>59</sup> In spite of the numerical and physical growth of the mission, animosity towards the missionaries multiplied from both the royal circle and the masses. The intolerant measures of the patriarch and the merciless punishment of the monarch ultimately led to the desertion of supporters of the king. While there is no concrete evidence to substantiate the claim, it is assumed that unlike the patriarch, who was not ready to revoke his decisions, the king withdrew his proclamation that imposed Catholicism as an official religion of the state; and on June 24, 1632, he declared freedom of religion.<sup>60</sup> However, it was too late to restore peace. Hence, frustrated with the incessant rebellions, weary of the sorrow, and anguish that he afflicted upon his people, Susenyos ultimately resolved to abdicate his throne in favor of his son Fasiledes (r. 1632-67). With this, the Jesuits Patriarchal presence in Ethiopia came to end: the new monarch banished all Jesuits and for more than a century and half, the country was closed for any missionary work.

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<sup>55</sup> Hastings, p. 154; Martinez, *Envoys...*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>56</sup> Martinez, *Op. Cit*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>57</sup> Merid, p. 469.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 490; Martinez, *Envoys...*, 107.

<sup>59</sup> Martinez *Op. Cit*, pp. 121-125, 170-171.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 308-309; Hastings, pp. 154-156.