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PROCESSES OF ETHNIC INTERACTION AND INTEGRATION IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY: THE CASE OF THE AGAW¹

BY TADDESSE TAMRAT

EVER since its emergence into the annals of history, Ethiopian society has been a rich conglomeration of different ethnic and linguistic communities. The references to 'red' and 'black' peoples in some of the ancient inscriptions of Ethiopia² have been variously interpreted.³ Yet it is clear that the terms were used in a context of ethnic diversity; and they seem to indicate that, already in those early days, our region straddled a major ethnic frontier, the distinction between 'red' and 'black' most probably alluding to the Cushitic/Semitic speakers on the one hand and the Nilo-Saharanans on the other.⁴ In the second half of the third century A.D., the Adulis inscription, the first substantial historical document of the area,⁵ gives a long list of peoples many of whom are mentioned again in the further long list provided by Ezana's victory proclamations about a hundred years later.⁶ The general picture that emerges from these crucial documents is one of considerable ethnic diversity in the area of the present regions of Eritrea, Tigray, parts of Wollo and Gondar, with the river Tekeze and the Simen mountains being clearly cited as important landmarks.

For at least five hundred years before the days of Ezana, this part of Ethiopia had undergone significant political and economic changes, with the city of Aksum and the port of Adulis becoming the two major focal points in the interior and on the Red Sea coast. The ancient traffic with South Arabia had been intensified, with the Ethiopians assuming an increasingly dominant role; and contacts with Hellenic Egypt and later with the Roman Empire had culminated in the appearance of Christianity at Aksum, not long after it became the state religion of Rome. It is clear that political leadership was mainly in the hands of Semitic speakers, especially those who spoke Ge'ez or some other language directly ancestral to Ge'ez, which was used in the early inscriptions and later became the literary language of the country. Speakers of other dialects which later developed into Tigre, Tigrigna, Amharic, Argobba, Harari, Gafat and Gurage probably formed integral parts of this nuclear Semitic-speaking population, spreading originally over a continuous territory

¹ This is the first of a series of studies on this theme, covering other areas as well, and aimed at providing some historical perspective to the 'Ethnographic Survey of Ethiopia', a multi-disciplinary project being developed jointly by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the College of Social Sciences of Addis Ababa University.

² For instance, JE 1370 at the National Museum, Addis Ababa; and *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* (hereafter cited as DAE) (Berlin, 1913), IV, inscription no. 11.

³ A. J. Drewes, *Inscriptions de l'Ethiopie antique* (Leiden, 1962), 98.

⁴ The antiquity of the existence of these two groups in northern Ethiopia is attested by, for example, DAE, IV, inscription no. 11, where the Barya are mentioned.

⁵ J. W. McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas* (London, 1897), 57-66.

⁶ DAE, IV, inscriptions nos. 4, 6, 7, 10, 11.

extending from the coastal and central parts of Eritrea to the Tigrean plateau.

While intensifying their economic and cultural contacts with their neighbours in the Red Sea region and the East Mediterranean, the task of the rulers of Aksum on the home front was to create a strong unified state, ensuring peace and order throughout their domains. The campaigns of the anonymous king of the Adulis inscription and of Ezana are of particular interest, because both were trying to bring about some degree of unity among the highly diversified populations of the area, and to ensure safe communications across their frontiers, along the caravan routes and on the Red Sea coast. After Ezana's victories over Meroe, Aksum became the only strong power in the region, unchallenged until the beginning of the eighth century; and its centralizing effect was felt throughout the area. Many of the peoples incorporated into the empire long maintained their own identities, but were gradually brought into the administrative, socio-economic and cultural ambience of the Aksumite kingdom. Even remote populations not directly brought under Aksumite rule were attracted by its riches, and brought their local products for barter wherever they could be reached by caravan merchants. In areas which became vassal dependencies, locally administered by traditional chiefs, the chiefly families were drawn into the complex relationships of the court at Aksum through recruitment for higher office and through marriage alliances. Those who rebelled against Aksum, on the other hand, were treated very harshly. More and more vigorous campaigns against them led to heavy casualties to life and property. If they still persisted, they were either resettled *en masse* in other more pacific areas, or reduced to slavery, thus being dispersed throughout the kingdom to be eventually absorbed by the recipient communities.

These historic processes, which characterized the emergence of Aksumite power in the region, cannot be exactly reconstructed for those early days. Policies of centralization and assimilation, however, continued to shape the developments of later periods of Ethiopian history. The Aksumite king of the Adulis inscription, and Ezana, both had their counterparts in Amde Siyon (1314–44), Yishaq (1413–30), Zer'a Yaqob (1434–68), Serse Dingil (1563–97), Susenyos (1607–32), Fasiledes (1632–67), Yohannes I (1667–82), and Iyasu I (1682–1706). In the same way as the inscriptions of their predecessors, the chronicles of these monarchs also abound in references to a variety of ethnic and linguistic communities of which many have not yet been satisfactorily identified, let alone studied. Further information on such groups is to be found in the major hagiographies, together with valuable cultural and ethnographic data. These sources make possible the attempt to understand the historic interaction of these communities with the Ethiopian state, and their gradual integration into its society and culture, through the study of the more recent past. It is particularly important to do so in the case of the Agaw.

Among the many peoples of Ethiopia referred to in the documents, the Agaw stand out as some of the most ancient inhabitants of the region. Their tenacity is such that, despite what must have been the most intensive onslaughts on their institutions and culture by the central state and neighbouring communities for over twenty-four centuries, they have managed to retain at least their linguistic identity in some isolated – even if dwindling – islands dispersed unevenly from Keren in the region of Eritrea to Agawmidir in Gojjam. But they are more than mere survivors. The Agaw are of crucial importance because they are the very basis on which the whole edifice of Aksumite

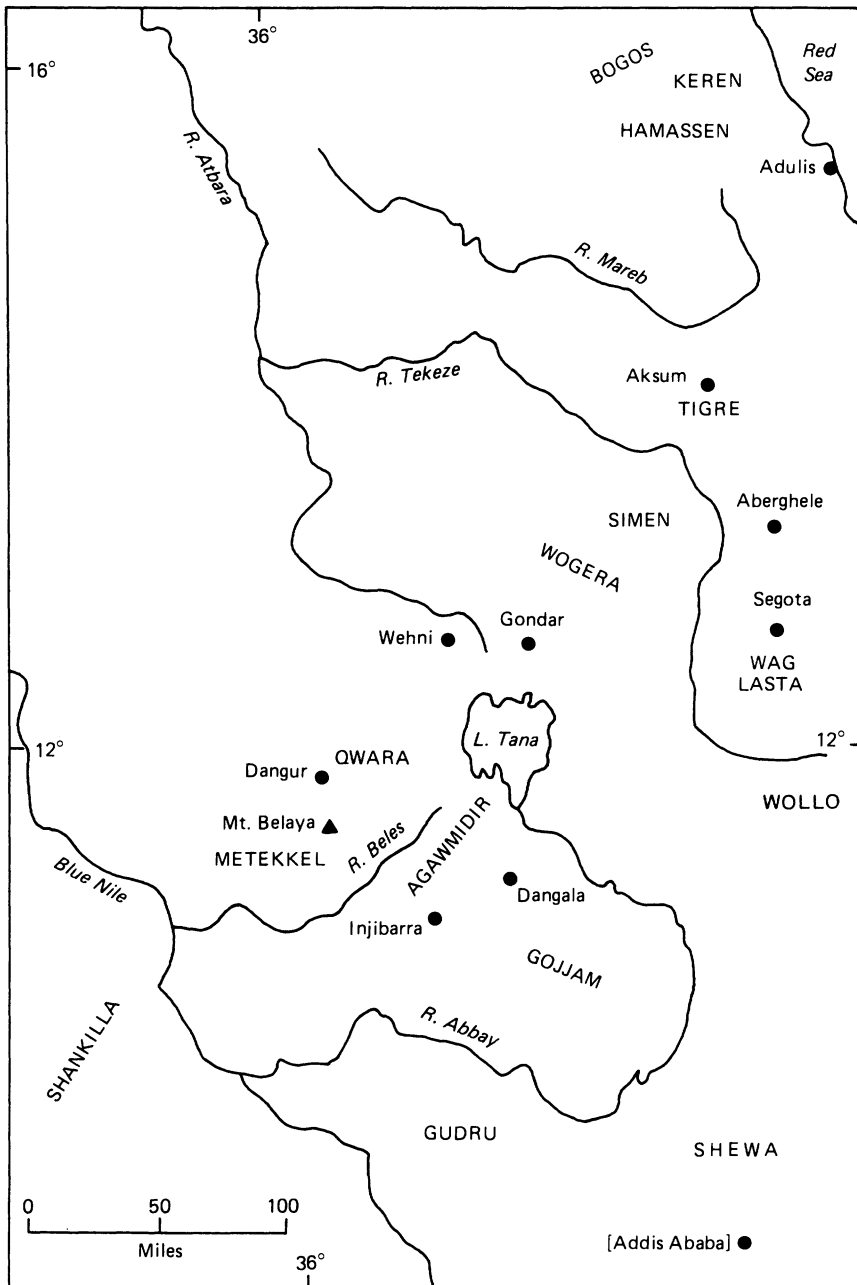


Fig. 1

civilization was constructed. As Edward Ullendorff has so aptly summarized it, 'The substrate population par excellence are the Agaw, who inhabit the northern and central Abyssinian plateau'.⁷ The intimate relationship between the Agaw and Aksumite civilization is perhaps best symbolized by the very

⁷ E. Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1965), 39.

name of Aksum,⁸ which is said to consist of two words: the Agaw *Ah^w* for 'water',⁹ and the Semitic *Sīyyum*, for 'chief'. Of all the folk etymologies reported, most of which smack of the usual rationalizations by relatively recent Christian literati, this one seems most authentic. It seems quite plausible for the Agaw to have provided the basic term for 'water' while the politically dominant Semitic speakers supplied the institutional and administrative term for 'chief'. It may also be that, in its first beginnings, Aksum served as a watering station on the crucial trade route from the coast up to and beyond the Tekeze, on which its future prosperity would depend. In such circumstances, one can easily envisage the need for a 'water-chief', who would have been a Semitic-speaker with the Semitic title of *Sīyyum*. And it would not be surprising if the numerically dominant Agaw referred to this new officer by the hybrid title of *Ah^wS[iyy]um*, 'water-chief', a name easily extended to refer to the seat of his power.¹⁰ This would be quite in keeping with the predominance of Agaw in the cultural milieu within which the early Semitic expansion took place in northern Ethiopia throughout the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite periods.¹¹

The first record of the name 'Agaw' is in the Adulis inscription, which refers to the 'Athagaüs and Kalaa and the Semenoi, a people who live beyond the Nile [Tekeze] on mountains difficult of access and covered with snow...'.¹² In view of the later history of the Agaw, it is interesting that they are mentioned so early in close association with the river Tekeze and the Simen mountains. Ezana also seems to mention them in one of his early inscriptions, in which he speaks of 'ALYA, a resting-place on the frontiers of the Atagau...'.¹³ In the Adulis inscription, they are mentioned in the context of a campaign conducted against them in which they were the losers. In the Ezana inscription, however, their region seems already to have been relatively pacified. It was within the confines of their territory that the king decided to keep for twenty days 'the camels, the pack animals, the men, the women and the provisions...', which probably constituted the booty collected during the earlier days of the campaign.¹⁴

The next time we see the Agaw, in the sixth-century work of Cosmas, their status had considerably changed. They – or at least an important section of their population – had become an integral part of the Aksumite empire. It was to 'the governor of the Agaw' that the protection and direction of the

⁸ Sergew H. Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1972), 68.

⁹ C. Conti Rossini, *La langue des Kemants en Abyssinie* (Vienna, 1912), 286; R. Cowley, 'The Kunfāl people and their language', *Ethiopian Studies*, IX, 2 (1971), 102. The Amharic *wiha* for 'water' is of the same origin.

¹⁰ Sergew reports the existence of a well to the north-east of Aksum, also called Mayshum ('water-chief'). This term is completely Semitic, though with the same meaning as that proposed for Aksum, which is probably older. *Ancient and Medieval History*, 68.

¹¹ For the considerable time-depth of Agaw history in this area, see Christopher Ehret's seminal study, 'Cushitic prehistory', in the *Non-Semitic Languages of Ethiopia*, ed. L. M. Bender (MSU, 1976), 85–96.

¹² McCrindle, *Christian Topography*, 61–2. Cf. also C. Conti Rossini, 'Appunti sulla lingua Khamta dell' Averghelle', *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*, XVII, 2 (1905), 183, n. 1.

¹³ DAE, IV, inscription no. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 6–8.

important long-distance gold trade was entrusted by the king of Aksum.¹⁵ Here again it is interesting to note that, just as in the Adulis inscription, there is a close association between the Agaw, the Tekeze river and the area to the west of it. The trade route which was placed under the protection of the Agaw ran from Aksum southwards across the Tekeze and passed through the region where, Cosmas was told, the sources of the Nile were to be found. However, although the presence of the Agaw in those parts of Ethiopia at that time seems well-established, it was mainly the Agaw living east of the Tekeze who had, over a long period, directly encountered the innovative forces of the Aksumite state. By the sixth century, the inroads of those forces upon Agaw life were considerable. Aksum had not only brought the population concerned under its political domination, but had also succeeded in converting it to its Christian faith.¹⁶ It is most probable that an increasing number of Agaw had been made to adopt Semitic speech as well as to participate actively in the economic, administrative, political and military affairs of the state. The significance of this is so far-reaching that, in the darkest days of the history of Aksum, it was essentially in Agaw country that state and church found refuge for over three hundred years. By the end of that period, the Agaw had salvaged the situation by taking over the political leadership and establishing a dynasty of their own.¹⁷ In so doing, they not only maintained the basic traits of the political and religious tradition of Aksum; they gave them new life and passed them on, almost intact, to later generations of Ethiopians.¹⁸

We will probably never know exactly how this process of integration which culminated in the Zagwe, an Agaw dynasty at the head of the Ethiopian state, was effected. One means left to us is to try to approach the issue from our end of the history of Ethiopia, through case studies of the more recent past. Obviously, the exercise would be more fruitful if one were to choose for the purpose studies for which one could have access to the living oral traditions of the people as well as to a body of relevant written material with some time-depth. Such studies could probably be made in a number of cases in Ethiopia. But over the last couple of years, we have started to work on Agawmidir and Metekkel.¹⁹ Similar work will have to be done on Bogos; on Aberghele/Wag/Lasta; and on Simen/Qimant/Qwara, to have a complete picture.

The choice of Agawmidir and Metekkel is important. It is clear that not all Agaw areas were equally, or simultaneously, affected by the process of integration. Of the vast Agaw territory which, in ancient times, probably covered the whole area north of Shewa²⁰ and much of the highland areas of Gojjam and Gondar, only the most easily accessible regions east of the Tekeze and north of the Mereb rivers were open to the direct and intensive influences

¹⁵ McCrindle, *Christian Topography*, 52-3

¹⁶ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford, 1972), 25-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53-4.

¹⁸ Tadesse Tamrat, 'Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn', in Roland Oliver (ed.), *Cambridge History of Africa*, III (Cambridge, 1977), 112-22.

¹⁹ This has consisted of visits to the area, conversing with Agaw elders, thus collecting relevant and accessible oral and written materials, as well as rechecking earlier published data.

²⁰ Cf. Ehret's interesting suggestion of ancient Agaw occupancy even in the Danakil lowlands: 'Cushitic prehistory', 89-90, 93.

of Aksum and its central institutions.²¹ It seems precisely in this highland region, consisting of the long north-south corridor between Hamassen and Shewa that the early development and further spread of the Ethio-Semitic languages took place, with Agaw as their major ancient substratum.²² Yet, even in the region to the east of the Tekeze river, there seem to have been significant corners, such as Bora, Selo, Aberghele and parts of Wag and Lasta, which resisted the process of cultural assimilation for a long time. It is reported that there are still today some pockets in Seqota and Dahna Weredas speaking Agaw. The same language is also reported as being spoken especially in villages on both sides of the Tekeze as well as in the Simen and Wogera districts.²³ West of the Tekeze river, however, around Lake Tana and in Agawmidir, it was only relatively recently, from the end of the sixteenth century onwards, that the great majority of Agaw speakers today began to feel the direct impact of the central state and its institutions. David Appleyard's recent comparative language study seems to offer linguistic evidence for this conclusion through its findings on the subject of Qimant, the Agaw language spoken around Gondar, and especially of Awgni, a language which 'stands well apart from the rest of Agaw'.²⁴ Awgni is the form spoken in Agawmidir and Metekkel, and its distinct, separate position helps to place its speakers more realistically in historical perspective.

This is important, for unlike their language, which has maintained its distinctive characteristics, the historical traditions of the people, like all oral traditions, have undergone considerable changes through the passage of time. Although it is only since the centre of the Ethiopian state shifted to the area of Gondar and Lake Tana in the last quarter of the sixteenth century that the most intensive attempts to incorporate the region were undertaken, the events of these four hundred years weigh heavily on the historical traditions of the people. Today, the Agaw of Agawmidir and Metekkel are for all practical purposes indistinguishable from their Amhara neighbours. Most of them seem to be bilingual, and the names of even those who speak only Awgni are completely Amharized. One has to go back many generations to come across an original Agaw name. Only in the lists of founding fathers with ancient *rist* (land inheritance) or *gult* (land tax) rights do we almost invariably come across such names. The Agaw are now devoted Christians, and have developed a profound Christian identity. So deep-seated has this become, that even some of their ancestor-heroes who are known violently to have resisted the early evangelization of their people have been divested of their authentic pagan characters and canonized as Christian martyrs.

Their whole self-image is so affected by this new Christian identity that they

²¹ See my 'Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn', 125-8.

²² Conti Rossini, 'Appunti sulla lingua Khamta', 183-242. I still maintain the reservations expressed in *Church and State*, 28, n. 3.

²³ This apparently includes what Professor Tubiana once called Kaylagna in his 'Note sur la distribution géographique de dialects Agaw', in Albospeyre *et al.* (eds.), *Mer Rouge-Afrique Orientale* (Paris, 1959), 304-5. It probably suggests a long and continuous interaction in the direction of Simen and Wogera between Agaw speakers living on the two sides of the river. Cf. the recent study by D. Appleyard, 'A grammatical sketch of Khamtanga', pt. I, *Bull. S.O.A.S.*, L, 2 (1987), 241-66; pt. II, *ibid.*, 3 (1987), 470-507.

²⁴ See D. Appleyard, 'The Agaw languages: a comparative morphological perspective', *Eighth Int. Conf. Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, 1984), 20-1.

seem to have lost their traditions of unity with the wider Agaw world, except with the Agaw of Lasta/Seqota and Bogos whose Christian credentials are well-known among them. Most of them reject automatically any linguistic affinities, close or remote, with the Falasha, the Qimant, or even the Kunfel, who are, at least linguistically, very closely related to them.²⁵ It is apparent that this rejection basically emanates from their strong self-identification with the overall socio-cultural values of the Christian Amhara.²⁶ More important still, in the course of this identification they have developed elaborate traditions which enable them to share in the Ethio-Christian saga of the Queen of Sheba legend so well enshrined in the *Kibre-Neghest*, 'The Glory of the Kings'. It is not only that their first ancestor has been made a grandson of King David of Israel; impressive genealogies have been constructed deriving some of their ancestor-heroes from important figures of Ethiopia's 'Solomonic' Dynasty. In all this we can no doubt see the very positive historic processes of socio-cultural integration at work, and must bear the fact in mind when we make an attempt at reconstructing the history of this particular people.

The Agaw of Agawmidir and Metekkel have the tradition that their ancestors – seven 'brothers' – came from Lasta/Seqota to constitute what are known as the LaNeta Awiya or the 'Seven House Agaw'.²⁷ The seven 'houses' are called after the seven 'brothers': Banja, Ankasha, Kwakwra, Chara, Metekkel, Zigem and Azena. Other minor groups like Tumha, Dangizh (Dangla), Bil (Belaya) and Gwagwsa are said to be either late-comers or descendants of the original seven. There are some variations in the listing of these names and especially in the reckoning of which group is minor or a late-comer. All the names, however, are still used as appellations of administrative units – districts or subdistricts, or an *Awraja* in the case of Metekkel – in those places where the original ancestors are believed to have settled.²⁸ The original migration is connected in one tradition with an unhappy transfer of power during the Zagwe period. There was a problem, it is related, between two brothers of the Zagwe royal house. Harbe, the elder, was not particularly clever, while the younger, Lalibela, was intelligent and resourceful. Harbe at first inherited the throne because of his age, but later had to yield power in favour of Lalibela. He then migrated to Gojjam together with his seven children, who became the founding fathers of Agawmidir.²⁹ But the Agaw

²⁵ Cowley, 'Kunfāl', 99–106.

²⁶ The Falasha were rejected for being skilled artisans and for their Judaism; the Qimant, for their renown as idolators; and the Kunfel, for living and intermarrying with the Shankilla. Both 'Qimant' and 'Kunfel' have pejorative connotations.

²⁷ Tadesse Menghistu, 'The noun phrase in Awgni' (M.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa, 1984), 3. Aleqa Taye has recorded this tradition in his *The History of the Ethiopian People* (Asmara, 1921), in Amharic. It seems that many of our informants had access, direct or indirect, to this work. It is here, and in conversation with Agaw elders, that their first ancestor is called Adil, son of Yitrham and grandson of King David of Israel. He accompanied his cousin, Menelik I, on his way back from Jerusalem, and was assigned to settle in and rule over Lasta. It is from there, they say, that all the Agaw dispersed, in various directions.

²⁸ Most informants say that these names have been somewhat deformed by Amharic speakers, and attempt to give slightly different versions. They also give folk etymologies for most of these names, and suggest that the meanings indicate developments in Agaw history.

²⁹ This is almost certainly derived from *Gedle Lalibela* (Life of Lalibela), which does not, however, talk of Harbe's migration to Gojjam! Cf. also my *Church and State*, 61.

presence in Gojjam is clearly of much greater antiquity than the thirteenth century, and it is impossible to take this tradition of Zagwe origin as reflecting the history of the whole of the Agaw population there.

The first time the Agaw of Gojjam are mentioned as such is in the tradition about the first attempt to evangelize the area immediately to the south of Lake Tana, in the reign of Amde Siyon (1314-44). The founder of the island monastery of Kebran in Lake Tana, Zehoyannes, is said to have come into conflict with the Agaw when he started preaching on the southern shore of the lake. They arrested Zehoyannes and detained him on Mt Amadamit in central Gojjam, until Christian troops were sent to the area and had him released. The ruler of the Agaw, Jan Chuhay, lost his life in the hostilities.³⁰ In this tradition of the fourteenth century, the territories of the Agaw were vast, extending from the southern shore of the lake as far inland as Mt Amadamit, and indefinitely beyond. Despite this early attempt at incorporation, it is apparent that Agaw resistance to annexation by the Christian empire continued unabated. In a clear reference to a campaign in the region a hundred years later by King Yishaq (1413-30), one of the king's courtiers sang as follows in his praise: '[The vastness of] Metekkel was not large enough for [the multitude of] his mules'.³¹ However, while eastern Gojjam was brought into the empire from the fourteenth century onwards, thus gradually becoming Christian and Semitic-speaking, continued efforts to extend the conquest westwards failed, and Agawmidir and Metekkel remained outside for more than two hundred years. A contemporary writer during the invasions of Ahmed Grag (d. 1543) complains that the still predominantly pagan Agaw were helping the Muslim forces, molesting Christian refugees, taking their possessions and killing them.³² A few decades after Grag's death, however, military pressures by the central state on the region of Agawmidir and Metekkel were intensified.

Vivid, nostalgic traditions of the inexhaustible riches of Agawmidir and Metekkel are transmitted in the accounts of Agaw elders when they narrate the reasons why their ancestors chose to settle there. It was a vast, heavily wooded area, teeming with all kinds of wild game, and full of other natural resources. This idyllic picture of a land of 'milk and honey' is largely confirmed by the accounts of royal chroniclers and foreign visitors to the region since the seventeenth century. The special importance of its untapped wealth was brought home to the state when in the course of that century it shifted its centre to the region around Lake Tana. Agawmidir was then no longer the remote frontier area that it had been when the 'Solomonic' kings had their residence on the Shewan plateau. It now came suddenly and inexorably into the limelight; and the struggle to bring it to heel was desperate and destructive. But when the conquest was achieved, Agawmidir became a veritable bread-basket for the royal court in Gondar. Testifying at first hand to the anxieties felt at court when it was reported that Agawmidir was being molested by a

³⁰ See my 'A short note on the traditions of pagan resistance to the Ethiopian Church', *Ethiopian Studies*, x, 1 (1972), 141-5. Chuhay is nowadays canonized as a Christian martyr who died for the faith, in the traditions of the Christian Agaw. One informant actually reported the existence of a *Gedle Chuhay* (Life of Chuhay), which we are still trying to locate!

³¹ I. Guidi, 'Le canzoni Ge'ez-Amarina in onore di re abissini', *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, ser. 4, IV (1889), 55.

³² E. Cerulli, *Gli atti di Tekle Alfa*, ed. and trans. in *Annali*, II (1943), 37.

rebellious army, James Bruce laconically commented: 'The cause of the Agaw was the cause of Gondar or famine would else immediately follow'.³³ It was this intimate economic relationship of the state with the province that underlay the multifaceted interaction that led, in time, to the almost complete integration of the Agaw into Christian Amhara society.

The conquest itself was achieved by campaigns into Agawmidir and Metekkel conducted in two directions: from Qwara, reached via Alefa to the west of Lake Tana, following the upper course of the Beles river right into the heart of the hot lowlands of Metekkel; and from the southern end of the lake across Gilgel Abbay (small Blue Nile) into the extremely rich highland districts of Agawmidir. It is apparent that following the early attempts at conversion by the island monasteries of Lake Tana in the fourteenth century, the formerly pagan Agaw areas to the immediate south and west of the lake had gradually been assimilated, and now served as a base for further advances into the more remote Agaw districts.

The campaigns seem to fall into two distinct periods, the first of which lasted from the beginning of the reign of Serse Dingil (1563-97) to the end of Susenyos's rule in 1632. Within these six decades important advances were made, even if the campaigns themselves were only in the nature of occasional raids. Serse Dingil once marched a huge army via Alefa to the extremely hot basin of the river Beles as far as Mt Belaya, returning by way of Achefer.³⁴ The imposing mountain of Belaya, which rises in the middle of Metekkel, is today occupied by a branch of the Agaw, but in those days was apparently still populated entirely by the Gumuz (Shankilla), who put up an equally stubborn resistance. On another occasion, the king led his forces to Achefer, where he overcame strong, apparently Agaw, opposition, moving on into Metekkel as far as the Dura river, and returning via Ankasha.³⁵ Susenyos is also described as having campaigned via Alefa into the hot lowlands of Dankwra (= Dangur?) and Gajige, and 'in the country of the Agaw called Bure', where he lost many of his soldiers in the fighting.³⁶ Occasional raids these campaigns may have been; nevertheless, as far into the interior as the sources of the Abbay in the heart of Agawmidir, we begin to see by the reign of Susenyos the emergence of a Christian community. Thus Jeronimo Lobo, who visited the area between 1625 and 1632, reports:

The famed Nile, called Abaui... has its source in a province called Cahalla (= Sakala), one of the best in the empire, populated by a certain group of people called *Agaus*, Christian in name and pagan in their customs because of their proximity to many pagans also called *Agaus*, with whom they have blood relations.³⁷

However, it was really during the second period, coinciding with the reigns of Fasiledes (1632-67) and his son Yohannes (1667-82), that the campaigns became more determined and brought more lasting results. Penetrating the remotest corners of Agawmidir, Fasiledes conducted repeated campaigns in all

³³ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1790), III, 375.

³⁴ C. Conti Rossini, ed. and trans., *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel* (Paris, 1907), 113-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116-7.

³⁶ F. M. E. Pereira, *Chronica de Susenios* (Lisbon, 1892-1900), 102, 107-8.

³⁷ *The Itinerario of Jeronimo Lobo*, ed. and trans. D. M. Lockhardt, M. G. Da Costa and C. F. Beckingham (London, 1984), 227.

of them: in Azena and Zigem (1635); in Dangla, Ankasha and Zigem (1636); in Zigem and Metekkel (1640); in Metekkel as far as Belaya (1641); and in Ankasha (1646, 1650 and 1661).³⁸ The stiffest resistance seems to have been put up by the Ankasha, inviting the special wrath of the king, who, his chronicler tells us:

...came back and fought against Hankasha. He killed many; looted their cows; and carried off their women and children...³⁹

A final expedition was sent under a high-ranking official to bring back one of the king's sons, Dawit, who had rebelled against his father in 1667 and taken refuge in Metekkel, on Mt Belaya; the poor young man was captured and sent to the royal prison of Wehni Amba.⁴⁰ It may be that, on Mt Belaya, Dawit was declared king by his followers and the local militia. The most prestigious church there today is called Niguse Dawit (King Dawit), and local informants narrate with much awe that a king was buried there.

The climax of the conquest of Agawmidir and Metekkel was then reached under Fasiledes' successor, King Yohannes (1667–82), usually called 'Yohannes the Saint', who scoured every corner of Agaw country with his troops in 1668, 1669, 1671, 1672 and 1681. The campaign of 1669, one of the most determined, is described as follows by his chronicler:

He marched towards Banja; and released the invaders throughout the land of Banja... He camped at Lakuma... he left from here and camped at Ahusa... and he devastated Shashna... He again invaded Sikut and Askuna Banja. And he started having all the trees of Sikut cut down, assembling by proclamation all Agaw clans, tribe by tribe, so that [the clearing] could be a road and a passage for all travellers; and so that, passing through this road from Sarka to Bed, he could fight against [the Agaw of Sikut], Sekhela, Qizhe, Chet, Dangla, Kwakwra, Chara, Timhwa, Achefer and Anbessa Gamma... Then every Agaw who lives in the middle of Sikut which is called Gam was terrified, took refuge at a church... and said... 'I shall become Christian and submit to the king and pay tribute and I shall do whatever the king orders me to do...'.⁴¹

In this quotation we see the reason for the king's final success. For the first time the country was methodically opened up to invasion and occupation. Clearing the apparently heavy forest, Yohannes for example opened the way to Metekkel; one of his roads, it seems, ran in the same direction as the modern road to Metekkel from Injibarra. Injibarra itself was used by the king as a major camping site, where he left the huge royal retinue with all the provisions while the troops were sent out to fight in all directions.⁴² At the same time Yohannes realized that military campaigns alone were not enough; and he encouraged the clergy to begin active evangelization in the whole of Agawmidir and Metekkel.⁴³ One of the principal monastic leaders of those days, Tetemqe Medhin (d. 1678), was specially assigned to evangelize the Gumuz (Shankilla)

³⁸ R. Basset, *Etudes sur l'histoire d'Ethiopie* (Paris, 1882), 29–33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴¹ I. Guidi, *Annales Iohannis I, Iyasu I et Bakaffa* (Paris, 1903), 11–16, 17, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12. Almost all these are still used as place names in the area, and are easily identifiable.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15.

and the Agaw of Metekkel.⁴⁴ He and other priests were assisted to step up their efforts; and they were given full protection. On one occasion, Yohannes was furious at a report that his priests had been attacked:

And he left Askuna when he heard that the Agaw of Chara and Metekkel had rebelled, killed monks and desecrated churches, saying that the churches should be shut down and the idol houses re-opened. And he invaded Chara... and killed many of them... and he devastated all their land up to Metekkel and Lalebola...⁴⁵

For all practical purposes, then, the basic task of incorporating the Agaw of Agawmidir and Metekkel into the empire had been accomplished during the eleven decades between the advent to power of Serse Dingil in 1563 and the death of Yohannes in 1682. The only section of the Agaw against which Iyasu I (1682–1706) had to campaign was the Zigem, living in the furthest southwestern corner of the region.⁴⁶ And Iyasu's real concern in this direction was no longer the Agaw but rather to bring the Shankilla (Gumuz) under effective control. As regards the Agaw, there are interesting indications, from this period onwards, of their effective integration into the socio-economic, political and military life of the state in Gondar, beginning with their traditions of conquest by Yohannes.

Today, King Yohannes, 'the Saint', is highly venerated in Agaw tradition. He is fully absolved of his military excesses, which are attributed instead to mere local rivalries and mischief. A fascinating story of this kind was narrated to us at Gimjabet, the traditional centre of Ankasha, whose land was, we have seen, attacked and devastated by Yohannes in 1669.⁴⁷ The king, we were told, was not to blame for this.⁴⁸ It was rather a local enemy of the Ankasha, another Agaw clan from neighbouring Gwagwsa, which misled the king into believing that the Ankasha were idolators, and rebellious. The king was naturally angry at the false report, and invaded the area. On his arrival, however, he discovered that the Ankasha Agaw had been Christian for some time, and that they had even built a Church of St Michael in the middle of their land! Yohannes was deeply saddened to think of his impulsive action, much regretting what he had done; he deposited the *tabot* (altar-stone) of St Mary, which always accompanied him on his campaigns, in the old Church of St Michael; and made generous endowments of lands both to the church and to his Agaw victims. Since then, the Church of St Michael has been renamed Agaw Gimjabet Maryam, which literally means 'the Agaws' St Mary of the Royal Treasure House'. The main town of Ankasha district, also called Agaw Gimjabet,

⁴⁴ 'Gedle (acts of) Tetemqe Medhin', f 49r. This is an unpublished MS discovered recently in Metekkel. Written in 1680 by a contemporary of the saint, it is of considerable importance to the history of the period. We hope to publish a preliminary note on the work in *Annales d'Ethiopie*.

⁴⁵ Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I*, 17.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, *Annales*... *Iyasu I*, 156–7.

⁴⁷ See n. 42 above.

⁴⁸ This story was narrated to us during the long and useful interviews we had with Qegnegeta (Master of the Right) Tessema Jembere, a 79-year-old official of the local church who had also served as a schoolteacher for many years. The church title 'master of the right' is essentially derived from the organization of the mediaeval royal court, divided between numerous officials of the right and of the left: cf. my *Church and State*, 269–74.

subsequently grew up around the site, and has continued to serve as a major cultural and commercial centre of the Agaw of the region.

We find, in fact, that some of the oldest churches and leading families of the Agaw trace their endowments of land as well as their *rist* or *gult* rights to Yohannes' proclamations. Moreover, we see special relations beginning to develop from this time on between the royal court and certain sections of the Agaw population. The Kwakwra appear to have obtained access to the court at an early date, for the death of an important chief of this Agaw clan, called Libso Kwakwra, is specially mentioned during Yohannes' campaign of 1669, in which he apparently participated on the king's side.⁴⁹ Then we are told that Libso's house in the district of Kwakwra was visited fairly regularly by Iyasu I, who was apparently delighted to spend the night there whenever possible.⁵⁰ Later, the sons of Libso became important court officials. One, Ewostatewos, had the title of Yeshaleqa (Major), and was killed fighting for Iyasu during the Gudru campaign, while another, Amsale, was promoted to the important office of Gondar Azmatch (Commander) in 1701, and had the lofty title of Bilatengeta (Counsellor) when he died in 1704.⁵¹

The other family that began to be prominent was that of Chuhay of Metekkel. We have already seen the importance of Chuhay's name in the traditions of the fourteenth century about the monasteries of Lake Tana. It would appear that this early Chuhay was the ancestor of the later Chuhay of Metekkel, where his people apparently moved to escape such pressures on the Agaw in the vicinity of the lake.⁵² Later, in the seventeenth century, Chuhay's family became a valuable ally of the Christian kings. In April 1682, Yohannes sent 'Chuhay, the leader of the people of Metekkel', together with others, against the neighbouring Shankilla.⁵³ This co-operation increased over the years. In 1692, Iyasu sent important state prisoners to Metekkel for safe-keeping 'in the house of Chuhay who is a friend of the king'.⁵⁴ On other occasions, Chuhay accompanied Iyasu on important campaigns against the Shankilla, once actually as a Fitawrari (Commander of the Vanguard) of the royal forces.⁵⁵ During the king's famous campaign against the Gudru in 1702, Chuhay was entrusted with the important responsibility of looking after the royal retinue and provisions which were left behind when the army crossed the Blue Nile.⁵⁶ By then, Chuhay's house at Sigadi had become another favourite spot where the king passed the night.⁵⁷

The special friendship which existed between Chuhay and Iyasu was most notably demonstrated when the king was assassinated on the orders of his own son, Tekle Haymanot, who took over the crown. This unheard-of act caused a major scandal, and in the confusion that followed a pretender, one Amde Siyon from Gojjam, gained wide support, and proclaimed himself king at Yibaba. He moved from there to Metekkel where he was warmly welcomed by Chuhay; and it was in Chuhay's neighbourhood, probably at Sigadi Church

⁴⁹ Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66, 106, 206, 222.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 104, 218; Basset, *Etudes*, 52, 53. Local Agaw traditions also give particular prominence to the Kwakwra, whose very name literally means 'Kill and die!', and is the epitome of courage and military valour. Elders said that Kwakwra was the Fitawrari of the Agaw.

⁵² See n. 30 above.

⁵³ Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I*, 46.

⁵⁴ Guidi, *Annales... Iyasu I*, 142.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-4, 177-8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 177-8, 225, 226.

founded by Tetemqe Medhin some years earlier,⁵⁸ that the coronation of Amde Siyon took place. Chuhay then accompanied Amde Siyon to his final confrontation with Tekle Haymanot's army at the battle of Qebero Meda, where Amde Siyon was defeated, and many of his followers, including Chuhay, were killed with him.⁵⁹

Chuhay remains, nevertheless, a crucial figure. In him and his like the Agaw of Agawmidir and Metekkel turned from fierce resistance to incorporation in the Ethiopian empire to close collaboration with its rulers. Through him, they came near to being arbiters in the struggle for the throne. Even the defeat of Amde Siyon was not the end, for there are suggestions that Agaw involvement in the crisis survived Chuhay's death, and that his people played a part in the subsequent assassination of the usurper, Tekle Haymanot.⁶⁰ Such intimate involvement in the affairs of state not only reveals the extent to which the Agaw leadership had been integrated into the imperial regime, but points to something more fundamental, on which this integration rested.

We have seen the legendary wealth of the Agaws' own land in cattle, grains and honey, which served as a motive for the conquest of Agawmidir and Metekkel by the Ethiopian state from the moment the capital was transferred to Gondar. But from the moment that the conquest was complete, we can also see how Yohannes and especially Iyasu carried their campaigns still further, down into the vast lowland areas of western Gojjam predominantly occupied by the Gumuz, or Shankilla. The special attraction of the Gumuz and their land lay in the alluvial gold which they traditionally panned, admittedly in relatively small quantities, from the numerous rivers and streams flowing into the Blue Nile and its major tributaries, such as the Beles and the Dura.⁶¹ From Chuhay's own career in the service of Iyasu, it is apparent that the attempt of Gondar to control this new region depended upon the enlistment of the Agaw in the service of the king. It is equally clear that, with the conquest of western Gojjam, the Agaw chiefs were richly rewarded for their alliance with the crown. Certainly the Agaw went on to become major intermediaries between the Gumuz of the Metekkel interior and the central state, a crucial position which they had clearly attained by the second half of the eighteenth century, when Bruce remarked:

The Agaws are those that pay the greatest tribute in gold to the king and furnish the capital with all sorts of provisions. Any calamity happening in their country is severely felt by the inhabitants of Gondar.⁶²

⁵⁸ 'Gedle Tetemqe Medhin'; see n. 44 above.

⁵⁹ Basset, *Etudes*, 61-2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

⁶¹ The importance of this general area for its gold has been noted since the days of the sixth-century traveller Cosmas: McCrindle, *Christian Topography*, 52-3. However, the problem of the identification of the specific region meant by Cosmas has not been fully resolved; and opinions have been weighted more in favour of the widely known territory of Fazogli in the modern Republic of the Sudan. Nevertheless, the contiguous Ethiopian provinces of western Wollega and western Gojjam, on either side of the Blue Nile, have always been an important source of gold: cf. Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy* (Naples, 1981), 58-62. The chronicles of the kings of Gondar have many references to this; and in the case of the Gumuz areas of western Gojjam, the local administrative archives clearly show that the people there paid their taxes in gold until 1942.

⁶² Bruce, *Travels*, II, 662.

It was an historic role, which the Agaw maintained almost intact down to our own day.

When Bruce wrote, of course, circumstances were somewhat different. The usurpation of Tekle Haymanot had inaugurated a long period of dispute in which the authority and power of the monarchy deteriorated over a period of more than a century. For the Agaw, this could only mean an increase in their importance to the central state, in the manner described so graphically by Bruce. It gave them both confidence and growing influence in the government of the empire. If that influence never grew to the level of that of their Zagwe relatives in Wag and Lasta in the twelfth century, it may simply be because the situation which developed in the eighteenth century was more complicated, with many different forces in play. But although the Agaw did not go so far as to establish a new dynasty, we may nevertheless be entitled to see in their rise the same elements that brought the Zagwe to power six hundred years before. By showing us how a people on the periphery of the empire moved to its centre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Agaw of Agawmidir and Metekkel may help us to understand how this may have happened at an earlier date, for which we have so little evidence.

SUMMARY

The earliest documents available on the Ethiopian region, in the form of Greek and Ge'ez inscriptions, give a general picture of considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity in a relatively small area of northern Ethiopia. One of the ethnic groups referred to then and subsequently, with remarkable continuity from pre-Aksumite times until the present day, is the Agaw. Different sections of the Agaw seem to have constituted an important part of the population occupying the highland interior of northern Ethiopia from ancient times. In the early days of the gradual formation and consolidation of the Aksumite state, they seem at first to have been peripheral to the process, which was clearly dominated by the Semitic-speaking inhabitants of the area. Later, however, they assumed an increasing importance, so much so that they eventually took over political leadership, establishing the great Zagwe dynasty. The dynasty lasted for about two hundred years, and transmitted the institutions as well as the cultural and historical traditions of Aksum, almost intact, to later generations.

The exact processes of this development cannot be reconstructed for those early days. Instead, this article is a preliminary attempt to understand the integration of the Agaw into the state and society of the Ethiopian empire over hundreds, even thousands of years, by considering a relatively recent period in the history of the Agaw in the northern and north-western parts of Gojjam. The considerable sense of history which the people of this area possess, going back to the time of its conquest and conversion in the seventeenth century, together with the existence of written materials for the period, provide an opportunity to study a particular example of the entry of the Agaw into the civilization of Christian Ethiopia which may throw light upon the more distant past of their ancestors.