

ORIGINS AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE HAMINA SONG-MENDICANT TRADITION

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ABSTRACT The Hamina are a group of people who are practicing song-mendicancy in order to ward off debilitating physical impacts of leprosy coming down from a legendary leper ancestor. Leprosy is an age-old scourge of humanity with an unrestrained power of shaping human identities including identities in Ethiopia. Its age-old prevalence, mysterious pathology and dreadful physical impacts helped leprosy to secure a special place in the Ethiopian traditions throughout history. This paper intends to examine the social history of the Hamina with parallel evaluations of medical, social, economic, political and cultural changes that occurred in twentieth-century Ethiopia.

Key Words: Leprosy; Mendicancy; Hamina; Lalibela; Charity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with an investigation of the various appellations by which the Hamina are known in Ethiopia and then proceeds to identify the virtues of the almsgiving tradition, especially as it relates to those with leprosy. The overall aim of the paper is to undertake a historical examination on the socio-economic, cultural and medical origins and transformation of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition in Ethiopia.

The Hamina are a social category in the Orthodox Christian-dominated north-central highland area of Ethiopia who perform the ritual of song-mendicancy in the belief that it will ward off the debilitating impacts of leprosy coming down from a legendary leprotic ancestor (Mondon-Vidailhet, 1922; Berhanou, 1970; Levine, 1965; Mesfin, 2000). They perform the ritual of pre-dawn song-mendicancy going from province to province, village to village, and door to door with the belief that a swirl of mist from plants and a haze from a barking dog protect them from the spirit of a hereditary leper (Makonnen, 1965 E.C.⁽¹⁾; Salamawit, 1987 E.C.; Mesfin, 2000). Moreover, although the Hamina have adopted portions of the predominant cultures that surrounds them, they use a distinct argot and maintain endogamous marital relations among themselves. Their ancestry remains important to their living culture, which can be found, for example, as they undertake their marriage using a banquet prepared for the dead known as *Taskar* (Dasta, 1962 E.C.; Kawase, 2007; Makonnen, 1965 E.C.; Salamawit, 1987 E.C.).

Dasta Takla-Wald's lexical definition to the stem term of Hamina, i.e. Hammana, as an expression, "I also cometh like my father, hanging my *selcha* (leather pouch or sack) in my armpit, my whip/whisk in my fingers," partly summarizes the essence of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition (Dasta, 1962 E.C.).

Within the zonal division of the north-central Christian highland area Hamina are alternatively known in Wollo as Abba Wudde, in Gojjam as Amina and in Showa as Lalibeloch; and commonly and derogatorily as Abba Gonda and Dabraham in many northern zones. Further north in the Tigray region, they are called Hamen. Lexicographically, all the names connote leprosy-avoidance, pre-dawn itinerant song-mendicancy, talkativeness and causticity, and insolence. In addition to the above renderings, the terms Abba Gonda and Dabraham shade meanings of amputated stumps of limbs associated with leprosy (Afevork, 1905; Baeteman, 1929; Guidi, 1935; Yohannes, 1948 E.C; Tasamma, 1951; Berhanou, 1970; Kane, 1990; Ya-Ityopiya Quwanquwawoch Tenat Enna Mermer Taquwam, 1993 E.C.; Bahru, 1994 E.C.; Yelaq, 1995 E.C.; Mesfin, 2000). Hence, the term Hamina and its synonyms serve as both names for the social category of song-mendicants and expressions of mannerisms.

In fact, it is very difficult to trace the linguistic root of the terms, except asserting a common origin and gradual corruption for the three variants, i.e. Hamina, Amina and Hamen. Equally, the association of those song-beggars with the thirteenth-century Orthodox Christian pious Emperor Lalibela,⁽²⁾ mainly in the historical kingdom of Showa, remains an exercise of historical speculations. The speculations range from the Emperor's special sympathy shown by either allocating special charity or organizing Hamina into guilds whose annual pilgrimage were centered around the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, in the district of Lasta (Mondon-Vidailhet, 1922; Powne, 1966; Berhanou, 1970; Sergew, 1972; Shelemay, 1982; Mesfin, 2000).

During the second half the twentieth century, the identity of the Hamina was outwardly linked by name association with the pious Emperor Lalibela, an association which many who discriminated against the Hamina thought was presumptuous and arrogant, especially when the inherent cause of their social stigmatization was their fierce negative association with leprosy and leprosy-sufferers. On the other hand, towards the end of the twentieth century the term Abba Wudde appears to be new in the lexicography of Amharic; Abba Wudde lacks a standard definition in major Amharic dictionaries, although it is used in the sense of "my beloved." This moniker, Abba Wudde, has increasingly predominated the meanings of Abba Weddaqi or Abba Ayraba ("Father Never-do-well") that were previously associated with secular monks (Bernanou, 1970; Mesfin, 2000; Kane, 1990).

The origins and transformations of the Hamina song-mendicant traditions are strongly related with the socio-religious and medical conceptions of leprosy in the Christian highland area of Ethiopia. In addition to their fateful association with leprosy or leprosy-sufferers, different contexts that are described below, distinguish the Hamina song-mendicants from other groups of praise-singers or ordinary beggars.

First, in terms of performance strategy, the Hamina perform their song-mendicancy before dawn, symbolizing their leprous association with the swaying of a fly-whisk that they carry, all the while declaring the vanity of this world without accompaniment by musical instruments. Secondly, they receive non-victual alms mainly in the form of grain and live animals. Thirdly, the Hamina song-mendicancy is performed either in a group or as a couple. Finally, they are strictly endogamous and

perform their marriage ritual (or any other social feast) using the *Taskar* banquet, which is prepared in the memory of relatives who have passed away.

LEPROSY IN TRADITION: THE VIRTUES OF ALMSGIVING

Throughout human history people have had an exceptional power of engendering lepers' identities often with a stereotype of reduced social power, regardless of human cultural, temporal and spatial differences of the sufferers. The power of this stereotyped image has endured because of the unrestrained power of the disease with its an age-old prevalence that manifests with dreadful physical impacts and mysterious pathology.

Leprosy as the oldest slow-killing scourge, with a physically and consequently a socially crippling power, has been known by man since time immemorial and it is believed to have developed over a long period of human evolutionary history (Diamond, 1999). According to Jared Diamond, diseases such as cholera, measles, smallpox, and AIDS, among others, are generally termed as crowd diseases. Those diseases could not survive themselves in small bands of hunter-gatherers and slash-and-burn farmers. Given the survival nature of those epidemic diseases upon the prevalence of dense human population, he asserts the evolution of those diseases only after 10,000 years ago with the beginning of the Neolithic civilization and having a momentum with the rise of cities. On the other hand, diseases such as leprosy, yaws, and yellow fever, with their microbes capable of maintaining themselves in animals and soil, chronically infect people including those in smaller and isolated as well as denser populations. Diamond takes their ability of infecting tiny and fragmented population for their long-lasting evolution with humanity.

Pathologically, many aspects of leprosy have remained mysterious. Although the causative agent of leprosy, *Mycobacterium leprae*, was identified by a Norwegian, H.G. Armauer Hansen, during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, its modes of transmission remain unknown, giving rise to different speculations.⁽³⁾ The most recurrently emphasized modes range from a direct person-to-person infection through air-borne droplets and frequent skin-to-skin contact to the mediation of the soil and gastrointestinal system (Ministry of Public Health, 2002; Silla, 1998). Under normal circumstances only less than 5% of all people who are infected with the Bacillus of leprosy will develop leprosy as the susceptibility to the disease is hereditary though the disease itself is not hereditary (Silla, 1998; Gussow, 1989; Iliffe, 1987; Price, 1963). Above all, unlike other tubercle bacilli, *Mycobacterium leprae* resides long-dormant under the host cell and needs a long incubation period lasting from six months to more than twenty years (Ministry of Public Health, 2002; Iliffe, 1987; Silla, 1998; Price, 1963; Pankhurst, 1957). Medically, *Mycobacterium leprae* is hideously hazardous. Exclusively, affecting the skin, eyes, peripheral nerves, bones, internal organs, the mucous membranes of the nose and the throat, it fatally ends in complete blindness, complete loss of sensory nerve, and severe physical paralyses, deformities and mutilations.

The age-old prevalence, mysterious pathology and hideous medical impacts in combination, offered leprosy a pivotal place across different human traditions

often with strong associations with guilt, impurity, curse, rejection and heredity. Consequently, in Judeo-Christian circles the cause of leprosy has commonly been associated with “God’s punishment for some sin” based on the teachings of the Old Testament. This attitude is best demonstrated by the stories of Miriyam and Aaron in Numbers 12: 10–14, Uzziah in Chronicles 26: 16–21, and Gehazi in Kings 5: 14–27 (The Holy Bible: King James Version, 1987). Particularly, God’s rule given to Moses and Aaron the priest on the procedures of identifying and segregating leprosy-sufferers in Leviticus 13: 1–45 and 14: 7–14, were used to justify making the plight of leprosy and leprosy-sufferers worse in the ancient and medieval Christendom.

Restrictions surrounding lepers in medieval England, for example, not only banned the sufferers from every social affair with the “healthy” members of a community, but regulations also instructed lepers to attend a unique religious procession that marked the sufferers as dead persons (Whitehall, 1989). The eradication of the disease from the dominant parts of Western Europe as of the end of the medieval period, was mainly attributable to the strict social-banishment policy which at times was accompanied by massacre of the sufferers (McNeill, 1976; Schneider, 1975; Zinsser, 1985).

Unlike the Old Testament, however, the New Testament calls for tenderness and condolence towards the sufferers. Jesus Christ’s sympathetic concern and miraculous healing of the sufferers are recurring phenomena in the Gospels; most probably shaping a sympathetic attitude towards the sufferers. In this regard mention must be made to Matthew 8: 2–4; Luke 8: 12–13, and Luke 17: 12–19. Above all, in Matthew 10: 8, Jesus is indicated to order his disciples to evangelize the gospel elsewhere in the world and to heal lepers without any reward for it. This was of course the motto of European Catholic and Protestant missionaries, who engaged in missionary work and leprosy care work in Africa—including Ethiopia—as of the nineteenth century.

Traditions in the Islamic world have not significantly differed; the cause of leprosy has generally been conceived as “a retribution for some sin,” following the pious traditions of the Prophet (Mohamed, 1985). Similarities can be found in eastern religious traditions; traditions in China equate sin with sexual misdemeanor and leprosy as “a reward of that sin from heaven”; in India and Japan the causes of leprosy have generally been associated with sin and impurity (Skinnes, 1964a, 1964b, 1968; Feeny, 1964).

Leprosy traditions in Orthodox Christian dominated north- and central-highland parts of Ethiopia, where 97% of Ethiopian leprosy-sufferers inhabit (Mesele, 2005: 125–126) and where leprosy-induced traditions such as the Hamina song-mendicant tradition are strictly observed, lack perfect similarity to the Judeo-Christian, the Islamic world or the Far East. Emphasizing selected stories from the Scriptures, such as the stories of Job in Job 1–45 and Lazarus in Luke 16: 19–31 and other canonical accounts of the Church such as books of miracles and hagiographies, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church indicates the cause of leprosy as will of God to test one’s faith. According to the ordinance of the Church, the mortification of the body is generally perceived as a sign of the impurity of the soul and corporeal sufferings as a means to cleanse that impurity.

Given that everyone living in this world is impure or “leprous in soul” (or pseudo lepers), corporeal sufferings befall chosen people whose devotion and patience God wants to test as a “leper in body.” Thus, it is believed that the latter will be rewarded in the hereafter. Those who missed the chance being “lepers in body” will also be rewarded in the hereafter based on their amount of compassion and charity to the body lepers (Tensa’e Ya-Matshaft Masattamiya Derjet, 1990 E.C.; Schneider, 1975; Iliffe, 1987).

Therefore, religious compassion and alms bridge the corporeal lepers to the soul lepers in the Orthodox Christian tradition. This notion, in turn, offered not only unrestrained alms directly to the sufferers, but also to the hereditary claimants of leprosy, i.e. the Hamina singing beggars. Moreover, different stories in the canonical accounts of the Church render testimonies associating the cause and cure of leprosy with the will of God to test one’s faith, and justify the giving of alms to the needy, in general, and leprosy-sufferers, in particular, as virtues of eternal life (Tensa’e Za-Guba’e, 1994 E.C., 1989 E.C.; Tasfa Gabra-Sellassie, 1988 E.C.; Budge, 1927). These stories had strong social ramifications as both Christian religious leaders and political rulers of the Christian Empire followed their examples in their dictates to their subjects in the years prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as far as the socio-religious origins of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition is concerned, mention must be made of two significant stories and acts of martyrs.

The first is the story of Simon the Cannibal (Balla’e Sab), which appears in the book of the miracles of St. Mary. It has strong socio-cultural significance not only for its generous and perpetual calls for almsgiving to the leprosy-sufferers, but also for its inspirations of other cultural developments such as traditional paintings and verse compositions. The story is told that Simon the Cannibal devoured seventy-eight people including his wife, children and relatives.

At the end of the day, however, Simon managed to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven for his alms of half-a-drink of water to a leper beggar in the name of St. Mary (Budge, 1923; Tasfa Gabra-Sellassie, 1988 E.C.; Biasio, 2000). Paintings on church walls, like those in the Ura Kidana Mehret Church (Fig. 1), and in manuscripts, such as *One Hundred and Ten Miracles of Our Lady Mary*,⁽⁴⁾ depict the strong socio-cultural places of the story of Simon the Cannibal.

Another story that was influential in the origin of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition is that of St. Gabra-Kristos. While other Ethiopian leprosy-sufferers indicate him as their patron saint, the Hamina trace their genealogy back to him (Germa, 2000; Èlsabet, 2005; Mesfin, 2000). Nevertheless, neither his leprous background nor Ethiopian origin is substantiated by all versions of his hagiography. According to his hagiography, St. Gabra-Kristos was the only son of the Eastern Roman Emperor, Theodosius. Originally, his name was Abd al-Masih. At the age of fifteen, he started to live a disguised pious life by joining the destitute at the Church of St. Mary in Armenia and abandoning a marriage arrangement with the daughter of the Western Roman Emperor. When St. Mary exposed his saintly life after fifteen years, he decided to change and lead another pious life, but God redirected the ship he was boarding to the realm his father. Again he led another fifteen years of pious life in the courtyard of his father’s home, receiving charity



Fig. 1. One of the most detailed paintings of Simon the Cannibal. The painting appears on the southern portal of the replica of the Meqdas (the Holy of Holies) at the Ura Kidane Mehret Church, Zegie Peninsula, Lake Tana. *Photo: Courtesy of Ato Dawit Tefari (2005).*

and being severely mistreated by the servants. Finally, when he died, he received a pact from God as a patron saint to the blind, handicapped, deaf, lepers and to all severely sick people (Tasfa Gabra-Sellassie, 1988 E.C.; Ashagari, 1959; Budge, 1898, 1927).

Though he was not indicated as a leper in his hagiography, the traditional wall and manuscript paintings in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church portrayed St. Gabra-Kristos as a leper. Church walls (Fig. 2) and manuscript paintings, nonetheless, depict him as a leper, even if it remains unclear how and when St. Gabra-Kristos became exclusively associated with the leprosy-sufferers as their patron saint and the Hamina song-beggars as their ancestor.

The time for the translation and/or composition of those canonical accounts of Simon the Cannibal and St. Gabra-Kristos in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are unknown. Similarly, the elevation of charity, as both secular and spiritual virtues of Christian life, remains unclear. In this regard, what we clearly know is that social ordinance was sanctified by Emperor Zara Yaqob (reign 1434–1468) requiring every member of the Christian highland empire to strictly observe monthly and



Fig. 2. A 17th century painting from the Abraha Atsbeha Church depicting the passion of St. Gabra-Kristos as a leprotic beggar and the grief of his parents upon the revelation of his identity. *Photo: Courtesy of Ato Dawit Tefari (February 2008).*

annual holidays of saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with the distribution of alms to the needy (Haber, 1961). No doubt, the period of Emperor Zara Yaqob was a significant landmark in the history of almsgiving in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Yet, the elevation of charity as a secular and spiritual virtue did not result from imperial decree; almsgiving, by custom, had acquired wide and deep socio-cultural as well as political values long before the fifteenth century.

In fact, different hagiographies of saints and chronicles of Christian rulers bear such testimonials. The hagiography of Emperor Lalibela, for example, claims the emperor's offering of his only son Yetbark as a charity to leper-beggars or the Hamina song-mendicants declaring "Alms have more values than sacrifices!" (Ya-Qeddu Lalibala Dabr Sabaka Guba'e, 2000 E.C.: 122). Likewise, the chronicle of Emperor Amda-Tseyon (reign 1314–1344) indicates him as the patron father of the poor, citing the emperor's excessive charity and humble concern to the needy (Huntingford, 1965).

This alms-power relation was maintained throughout the Ethiopian imperial history until the last quarter of the twentieth century. While excessive alms to the poor was used to magnify the Orthodox Christian religion of Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) and hence his political power against the widely circulating rumor for his conversion to Catholicism (Dufton, 1867; Bairu, 1977), the opposition of ministers against the unrestrained power of Regent Tafari lacked wider acceptance for the same reasons of charity in the 1920s (Marse Hazen, 1999 E.C.). Furthermore, the vigorous and exclusive material supports of the royal families of Emperor Haile Selassie (reign 1930–1974) offered to the modern leprosy control programmes included support to the emergent leprosaria; for example, Ras Makonnen patronage to the leprosaria of St. Anthony, Emperor Haile Selassie to the Princess Zennebe-Werq Leprosarium (which became All Africa Leprosy Rehabilitation and Training Center, or ALERT), Prince Asfawesen to the Boru Meda and Princess Tenagne-Werq to the Kuyera leprosaria, signifies the continued socio-political interest given to some of the destitute during the twentieth century.

On the other hand, traditions also relate occurrences of major socio-economic and political calamities to such general lack of concern to the destitute. Excusing

the defeat of the Christian highland army by the Sultanate of Adal in the sixteenth century, one tradition, for example, condemns Emperor Lebna-Dengel (1508–1540) for his negligent concern to the destitute:

...irresponsibly playing with your army, you destroyed the Wall. The destroying Wall in turn exterminated the destitute who gathered around it in need of alms. ...Envisaging the fateful repercussion and the inevitable retaliation of God for this irresponsible act, the clergy advised you to confess it. However, you neglected the advice condemning it as an unfair act of labeling you as a shoveler of the destitute. Again, because of that you snored and hid yourself for ten days in your tent objecting to communicate anyone and even rejecting the service of meal to the dignitaries at the palace. ...Counting these entire, God raised Ahmad Grag against you ... (Gabra Sellassie, 1959: 31).

In the Orthodox Christian-dominated areas, the socio-religious and political values of alms were so deep-rooted, we find an inimitably compassionate social attitude towards some groups of mendicants such as the leprosy-sufferers. From the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, different European travelers and missionaries testified the unrestrained alms rights the sufferers exercised over the society which extended as far as attacking and overtaking the property of anyone who denied them alms (Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961; d'Abbadie, 1980; Soleillet, 1986; Pearce, 1980; Borelli, 1890; Johnston, 1972; Stern, 1968; Massaja, 1985). Although, they were aggressive and impudent in their manners of alms request, no one dared to take any action against them, agreeably describing their offensive and unruly manners as “the Brawler of God” (Guidi, 1935; 251).

Furthermore, in the process of collecting alms, roaming from region to region, village to village and house to house, the sufferers deserved the unrestrained material supports of the Ethiopian Christian rulers. The sufferers were also privileged to get permanent charities residing in the vicinity of courts, accompany rulers and at times to serve the rulers as political advisors (d'Abbadie, 1980; Soleillet, 1986; Johnston, 1972; Stern, 1968; Pearce, 1980; Combes & Tamisier, 1838; Skinner, 1906; Iliffe, 1987; Pankhurst, 1968).

It might be such strong affiliations with the Christian rulers that made the leprosy sufferers highly respectable in addition to the Christian sympathy. In any case, it is normal to assert the partial birth of Hamina song-mendicant tradition from such convenient socio-religious virtues of leprosy in the Orthodox Christian-dominated areas.

SOCIO-MEDICAL ORIGINS

The Hamina song-mendicant tradition was partially the results of deep-rooted popular conceptions that associated the causes of leprosy with heredity and relief from illnesses with singing while begging in Ethiopia. As a hereditary disease, leprosy has wider acceptance in the areas where the Hamina song-mendicant

tradition has strictly been observed. From the nineteenth-century sources, it is very difficult to distinguish the Hamina song-mendicants, who were commonly characterized by itinerant group pre-dawn song-mendicancy, insolent manner and their reception of alms in kind from other leprosy-sufferers.

The first British diplomat in Ethiopia, Walter Plowden, who offered a detailed eyewitness on the purpose, modus operandi and contexts of the Hamina song-mendicancy, alternatively called the Hamina as “*dekama* (feeble),” “loathsome objects,” and “wretched lepers” (Plowden, 1868: 404–406). No doubt for his confusion of the Hamina song-mendicants with leper-beggars. The French missionary, Antione d’Abbadie, in his Amharic-French dictionary, also indicated the Hamina as “*choriste mediant, ordinairement lepreux*” (“group of mendicants, ordinarily lepers”) (1881: 6).

Here, it may be worth mentioning Assefa Balcha’s (1992) glance on the origin of the Hamina song-mendicant identity in the province of Wollo. According to him, whenever leprosy befell on individuals or families, they had to turn to the song/prayers of professional beggars, known as Lalibeloch (also, Lalibaloch), in order to avert the disease from appearing in themselves. If we believe Assefa, the Hamina identity has been perpetuated in two ways, i.e. through the practices of strict endogamous marriage among the Hamina song-beggar groups and the enrollment of new group members upon the occurrence of leprosy. Assefa’s glimpse is highly provocative for further detailed research on the identity root of the Hamina song-beggars.

It is very difficult to point out the exact time for the introduction of leprosy and the inception of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition in Ethiopia, although a very ancient prevalence of leprosy in Egypt, the Mediterranean and the Greco-Roman world, the Arabian Peninsula and, above all, the Far East has been a well established fact based on archaeological and written evidences (Diamond, 1999; Kiple, 1993; Cochrane et al., 1964; Shaller, 1972; Duncan, 1985; Browne, 1985; Bryceason & Pflatzgraff, 1990; Feeny, 1964; Schneider, 1975; Skinsnes, 1964b). By the virtues of Ethiopia’s longstanding socio-economic, political and cultural relations with those leprosy afflicted areas (Sergew, 1972), it is most probable that leprosy and related Hamina traditions in the land of modern-day Ethiopia are also old. The faith that Ethiopians may grant to the healing powers of song and prayer appear as heartfelt in contemporary society as was told in folklore.

According to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, singing and dancing, mainly with stringed instruments and pipes, were considered as cursed practices identifying with the descendants of the biblical Cain, the sinner (Budge, 1922). Culturally and popularly, however, singing had deep healing values in the Ethiopian cosmology. The observance of the Zar cult healing rituals, for instance, used to be accompanied by drumming and singing (Shelemay, 1982).

Emphasizing how all the traditions of singing and healing were started by the first generation of the Oromo during the medieval period, the chronicler of Emperor Menelik II (reign 1889–1913), Gabra Selassie had the following to tell:

...Whenever they [the first seven Oromo ancestors] would be ill, he [the Witch Doctor] advised them to slaughter cattle, put the blood in their

forehead, take tobacco and sing a song to relieve from their sickness. When they performed this, they relieved from their ailments. ...Observing their relief, everyone started to follow their footsteps and became idolater[s] ... (Gabra Sellassie, 1959 E.C.: 29–31).

The extract depicts the contradictory views in Orthodox Christian dominated areas of Ethiopia of singing while expressing a curse on one hand, and the healing virtues of songs on the other.

There is a general lack of historical study on the relationship between music making and healing in the Ethiopian society. This lack, in turn, limits us from presenting a detailed analysis on such relationship with leprosy. Prevalent cultural practices and passed-down legends for other diseases, such as smallpox, also support the partial origin of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition insofar as they support the existence of a general belief in the interconnectedness of singing and healing in the Ethiopian society. The following section considers the scant historical record and explores the changes in the Hamina singing ritual.

HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE HAMINA SONG-MENDICANT TRADITION

The first comprehensive historical glance on the Hamina song-mendicants appears in *Abba Bahre's* socio-anthropological account, *A Chronicle at Galla*, which was written during the last decade of the sixteenth century. *Abba Bahre's* glance on the Hamina song-mendicants was not only a passing remark but also an important reference. While explaining reasons for the military success of the Oromo, *Abba Bahre* indicates the classification of the society of the Christian highland area into ten classes of which only one was liable to engage in war with the non-classified Oromo army. Of the ten social classes, the ninth was a class of minstrels. In the class of minstrels, in turn, there were categories of beggars. They were known for their vainglory to the offering and severe curses proffered for the denial of alms against whom no one took action agreeably to the custom (*Abba Bahre* translated in Getachaw Haile, 1997 E.C.).

Abba Bahre did not mention those different categories of minstrels by their distinct names; he only described their unique features. However, Getatchew Haile, in his translation, indicated those categories as “*lalibela*,” “*amina*,” and “*abba wedaqi*” (1997 E.C.: 210). Similar to Getachaw, *Alaqa Atsme Giyorgis* (n.d., Part I, 22: 99–100) described these categories of beggars as Hamina and Lalibela in his discussion addressing the same historical inquiry based on the *Abba Bahre's* Oromo classless/Christian highland classed theory.

The passing remarks of *Abba Bahre* and *Alaqa Atsme Giyorgis* offer two important glances at the emergence and transformation of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition. The first is the Hamina's unrestrained customary rights to alms and privileges not to participate in both local and regional warfare. No doubt, these privileges offered special impetus for the persistence of the tradition. Secondly, the Hamina song-mendicant tradition was non-Oromo in origin though today there

are Haminas in northern Showa who claimed an Oromo descent.⁽⁵⁾

Alaqa Taye's (1922) indication of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition as a remnant of the Gafat culture strengthens the non-Oromo origin of the tradition. According to him the original homeland of the Gafat people was in northern Showa. Nevertheless, because of the recurrent military assaults of the medieval Christian highland rulers, particularly Emperor Susenyos' (reign 1607–1632) devastating military campaigns against them, the Gafats were uprooted from Showa and dispersed all over the Christian highland kingdom. These landless people turned into different caste groups such as the minstrels, weavers, tuners, smiths, the Hamina song-beggars and others as a means of survival.

Alaqa Taye's indication on the Gafat origin of the Hamina tradition appears to be credible for diverse reasons. First, his opinion has unequivocal substantiation from other research work.⁽⁶⁾ Secondly, some of the historical events and issues he discussed such as Showa being the original homeland of the Gafat people, their eviction from Showa and dispersion into the different provinces of the Christian highlands either because of their recurrent military confrontation with the Christian Empire or the pressure of the Oromo population movement, and their gradual integration into other peoples and cultures have been confirmed by other research work as well (*Alaqa Atsme*, n.d.; Tadesse, 1972; 1988). Thirdly, their strong relations with other caste groups in Ethiopia or the people of Gafat are also confirmed by both oral traditions as well as other research work (Kawase, 2007; *Alaqa Atsme*, n.d.; Dasta, 1962 E.C.; Kane, 1990; Getachaw Haile, 1997 E.C.). Mesfin Mesele (2000) for example, documented a tradition that relates the fate of the Hamina song-mendicancy with a curse made against the Haminas' forefather, Hamen, because he touched the Ark of the Covenant. *Alaqa Taye* (1922), on his part labeled the same fate to the forefather of the Gafat people.

Generally, the Hamina song-mendicant tradition is an intertwined fabric cumulatively resulting from socio-economic, political, cultural and medical attributes; its origin can be traced to the Ethiopian remote past. Once the tradition was started, undoubtedly it had to undergo changes; adding new attributes until it emerged in today's contexts and forms. Although it is very difficult to identify the first context or attribute that engendered the Hamina identity, at least since the nineteenth century, hereditary leprosy has been an important attribute of the Hamina identity.

As of the turn of the twentieth century, the hereditary conception of leprosy started to face strong challenges following the inception of modern leprosy care work under a general epidemiological principle of "contagious" transmission. This attitudinal shift was first marked by the inauguration of the first leprosarium in Ethiopia, the St. Anthony Leprosarium, under the auspices of the French Capuchin Catholic missionaries in Harar in 1901. Three decades later the tradition disseminated into Addis Ababa when the Sudanese Interior Mission inaugurated the Princess Zennebe-Warq Leprosarium, on the southwestern outskirts of the city. This attitude shift, at least around the elite literate circle, was assisted by the beginnings of printing medium,⁽⁷⁾ the introduction of western institutional health and policy systems and the development of improved relations with foreign nations. Particularly, improved relations with the rest of the world attracted many European;

health advisors such as Paul Merab facilitated the training of Ethiopians abroad, others such as Dr. Malaku Bayan, strongly criticized the popular hereditary conception of leprosy.⁽⁸⁾ The social consequences of such attitudinal change around the ruling elites were quick.

Emperor Menelik II, who was a strong opponent to the European health advisors' proposal for the segregation of leprosy-sufferers from the society, characterizing ostracization as an agonizing Christian crime (Merab, 1921), did not hesitate to move against the Hamina song-mendicant tradition. In June 1908, for example, he wrote the following letter to a certain *Alaqa* Estifanos:

...I ordered you to prohibit the Lalibela from shouting. Yet, the screaming Lalibela are becoming a threat to the whole country. Since you are very busy in other administrative affairs, I have appointed Getahun. Leave the mandate of controlling the Lalibela for him. If he will fail to control them, he will also be deposed (Abraham, 1993 E.C.: 13).

This is good evidence the Ethiopian rulers and governing powers tried to banish the Hamina song-mendicant tradition since the turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the custom persisted throughout the twentieth century, but with increasingly stigmatized identity associations. The recurrently mentioned reasons for this increasing stigmatized identity transformation of the Hamina were their indolence and their audacity to associated themselves with the pious and much beloved Emperor Lalibela.⁽⁹⁾ However, the true cause was more likely an increasing association of leprosy with contagious causation and transmission in the face of limitations of modern leprosy control initiatives in addressing the social and medical problems of leprosy.

CONCLUSION

From limited historical records, we can gather that the origins and transformations of the Hamina song-mendicant traditions are strongly related to the socio-religious and medical (mis)conceptions of leprosy in the Orthodox Church-dominated north- and central-highland parts of Ethiopia. The positive social and medical association of singing and begging with alms-giving and healing, has not been enough to diminish the stereotyping and discrimination against those like the Hamina who claim strong links with legendary and real lepers.

The Hamina song begging tradition started to face strong socio-medical and political challenges since the turn of the twentieth century. Basically, this challenge resulted from the inception of modern leprosy care work by European missionaries in the southern half of the country identifying the disease with contagious causation and transmission. Following the transformation of those care work centers into standard leprosy hospitals during the second half of the twentieth century, massive leprous population movements from north to the south led to the emergence, consolidation and transformation of leprous communities around those treatment centers in the southern half of the country (Mesele, 2005). This

development in turn marked the separate social transformations of leprosy-sufferers in the southern half of the country while the Hamina song-beggars continued to testify the traditional “hereditary” conception of leprosy in the northern Orthodox Christian-dominated half of the country. The continued observance of the Hamina song-mendicant tradition not only bears out the continued social problems of leprosy in the Ethiopian society but also the failures of modern leprosy control initiatives to address the social problems of the disease.

NOTES

- (1) The Ethiopian calendar (E.C.), the principle calendar used in Ethiopia, is often used in citations for locally published works. The Ethiopian calendar has twelve months of 30 days and a thirteenth month of five or six days. The Gregorian calendar is seven to eight years ahead of the Ethiopian calendar.
- (2) Lalibala is an alternative spelling of Lalibela.
- (3) *Mycobacterium lepromatosis* was also identified as a causative agent by Han et al. (2008).
- (4) Illustrations from the manuscript can be found in Budge (1923).
- (5) During my fieldwork in northern Showa, an elderly Hamina called Gofe Yadate strongly claimed his Oromo origin tracing the names of his forefathers up to twelve houses (generations).
- (6) Sergew Hable Selassie, for example, offered invariably similar explanations to the historical origin of the Hamina in relation with Gafat. See Sergew Hable Selassie (n.d.: 92–96).
- (7) For example, the quarterly bulletin, *Le Semeur d’Ethiopie* was published to raise funds for the inmates of the St. Anthony Leprosarium by the French Capuchin Catholic missionaries at the St. Lazarus Printing Press, first at Harar and later at Dira Dawa from c. 1900 to 1913. It addressed different issues on the contagious nature of leprosy taking experiences from the history of leprosy during the European medieval period.
- (8) See the criticisms of Dr. Paul Merab on the mistaken Ethiopian hereditary and other attitudes of leprosy (1912: 130–132; 1921: 160–166); See also Dr. Malaku Bayan’s criticisms on the same problem in *Berhanenna Salam* weekly, *Hedar* 21, 1920a E.C. and *Hedar* 28, 1920b E.C.
- (9) The following commentaries, which appeared in different periodicals, offer good testimonials for the stigmatizing identity of the Hamina during the second half of the twentieth century: Telahun Gabra-Medhen, 1954; Merse Hazan Abbabba, 1954 E.C.; Mangestu Gadamu, 1957 E.C.; Diba Kullu Zawde, 1957 E.C.; Sente’ayyahu Zalalam, 1989 E.C.; *Fart*, 1993.

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