Reconstructing Zagwe Civilization

Melakneh Mengistu
Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The Zagwe period is believed to be the richest and most artistic period of Ethiopian civilization since the conversion of Ezana though its achievements have been virtually consigned to obscurity. One of the ideological weapons which aggravated this obscurity is arguably the deep-rooted allegiance of the Kabrə Nāgāst to the Solomonic dynasty. Contemporary researchers on Kabrə Nāgāst seem to have underestimated the ideological onslaught of the Kabrə Nāgāst on the Zagwe period that their contributions to the medieval Ethiopian civilization have been virtually shrouded in mystery. Thus, expatriate and compatriot authorities on the medieval Ethiopian cultural history are called upon to revisit the impacts of the Kabrə Nāgāst on the Zagwe period from the other end of the telescope, thereby, to reconstruct the unsung achievements of Agāw civilization.

**Keywords:** Kabrə Nāgāst Agāw civilization, obscurity, research gaps, historical reconstruction

The Historical Background of Agāws

Northern, central and north-western Ethiopia is today inhabited by the Amhara, the Tigre and the Agāw people, who are hardly distinguishable from one another. These groups have many common cultural, historical, geographical roots and somatic characteristics (Gamst, 1984, pp. 11-12).

Agāw is a generic name with which four well-known Cushitic speaking groups of Ethiopia spread over Eritrea and North-western Ethiopia are designated. They are the most ancient and indigenous people of Ethiopia. “The Agāw, indeed, were the very basis on which the whole edifice of Aksumite civilization was constructed. In later times, the Agāw remained a key linguistic, ethnic and cultural component in the formation of Təgrean, and especially, Amhara civilization” (Taddesse, 1988, pp. 6-7; Quirin, 1988, pp. 197-198).

Their political control of Ethiopia before the restoration of the Neo-Solomonic dynasty is designated as the Zagwe era. Taddesse Tamirat also asserts that,

The Agaw were the inhabitants of the country north of Jāma and east of the Abbay. He further maintains that at the medieval period, the Agaw language and people consisted of a number of island-like survivals spread over a great territory extending from Bogos in Eritrea to Agaw-Madr in Goūgām and to the areas east and south of the Bāshillo River which formed the emerging region of Amhara. (Taddesse, 1972, p. 5)

In his recent study, Taddesse also reiterates that the scattered survivals are as wide spread as the Billān (in and around Kārān; Eritrea), the Qomant and Qara (Sāmen Gondār Zone of the Amhara Region and south of Lake Tana Agaw-Madr Goūgām (what is now Agaw-Awi Zone) and Wag-Hāmra Administrative Zone (Taddesse, 1988, p. 5).
Similarly, Levine asserts that “During the first millennium A.D, the inhabitants of Amhara were the Agâw people who developed a distinct South-Ethio-Semitic tongue, Amharic quite possibly through a process of pidginization and creolization” (Levine, 1973, p. 72). In the same vein, Buxton presumes that the area under the direct rule of the Zagwe kings “probably embraced the highlands of modern Eritrea and the whole of Tâgray, extending southwards to Wag, Lasta and Damot) and thence westwards towards Lake Tana” (Buxton, 1970, p. 44). Thus, different sections of the Agâw seem to have constituted an important part of the population occupying the highland interior of northern and central Ethiopia from ancient times.

According to Taddesse, “The exact process of this development cannot be reconstructed for those early days. But this kind of interaction could be attributed to internal strife, migration or resettlement venture” (Taddesse, 1988, p. 5). Traditional historians like Taye, however, do not recognize the black Jews as an ethnic Agâw on account of their Hebraic practices or Jewish faith which is incompatible with the monotheistic Orthodox Christianity (Taye, 1946, p. 18).

Regarding the state of their language, Hetzron maintains that “The Agâw language was once spoken in a very large area in the northern half of Ethiopia but was gradually superseded by Semitic languages like Amharic and Tâgrîha. The once continuous Agâw areas are split into small islands that have so far escaped Semitization” (Hetzron, 1969, p. 2). When it comes to its variants, Appleyard classifies Central Cushitic into four distant dialects as under (Appleyard, 1984, p. 581).

\[ \text{Proto-Agâw} \]

\[ \text{Awhi (Goğgam)} \]
\[ \text{Billan (Eritrea)} \]
\[ \text{Qamant (Gondar)} \]
\[ \text{Khamtanga (Wallo)} \]

These languages are said to be mutually unintelligible due to a prolonged isolation and hence descriptively almost independent. The long-term effect of such isolation from each other and the irresistible cultural assimilation into Amharization and Tigreanization has been the supersession of their languages by the former ones.

Consequently, the Agâw in and around Kârân; Wâllo, Gondâr, Goğgam and some parts of Tâgray have formed island-like survivals in terms of the retention of their vernacular which provides the weakest social boundary with the neighboring Semites whose culture and physiognomy are indistinguishable from one another.

Presently, the Agâw speaking families across the pocket survivals are apparently dwindling due to the growing pressures of urbanization, demographic shifts like rural migration and the striking cultural congruence
between the two groups. This problem was compounded by the prolonged rule of the Solomonic Dynasty and the positives’ attitude of the Agāw towards Amharas and vice versa. Gamst in this regard asserts that,

Amharization has not and probably will not affect the various other ethnic groups of Ethiopia as drastically as it has affected the Agaw ... The reason why most Agaw groups have been so effectively Amharized to the point of total assimilation is that they have had a continuous contact with the Amhara over a span of many centuries, and their acculturation has been further encouraged by congruence between the two cultures. (Gamst, 1984, p. 124)

This assertion is also equally applicable to the Təgrayanization of Agaw residing the vicinities of Təgray. Such an effective assimilation has already resulted in the dwindling number of Agaw speakers from millions to hundred thousand across north-western Ethiopia. A case in point is the Agaw of Agaw-Madar, Goğgum; Kärän, Eritrea; Wag-Sâqoṭa, Wállo, and some pocket survivals in and around Gondar and Təgray (Abārgālè; Tămbe) who speak Amharic or Təgraya with an Agaw bent. They have allegedly forgotten their vernacular and are not race-sensitive or parochial in their attitude towards neighboring Semitic groups.

Bender also observes that “not only the present day Amhara are Semitized Agaw but also Amharic became the dominant language of Ethiopia by the accidents of history” (Bender, 1983, p. 48). Fiqre Tolessa contends that Amharic emerged in the breast of the Zagwe dynasty as a Ləssanā Nogus or the chosen tongue of the Imperial Court (Fäqre, 1993, p. 8; 2008, pp. 245-246).

Anti-Zagwe Stereotypes

The decline of the Axumite Kingdom brought about a period of Agāw ascendancy and political control of Ethiopia and the establishment of the Zagwe dynasty (C. 10th AD). Zagwe designates one of the oldest dynasties which ruled Ethiopia after the decline of the Axumite Kingdom (Gamst, 1984; Ullendorff, 1965).

There are two conflicting sources-internal and external-regarding the chronology of the Zagwe dynasty. To begin with, Tadesse limits the rule of the Zagwe to 130 years (1140-1270) on the basis of established earlier scholarship and other documents. Similarly, Gamst maintain that the Zagwe rule lasted 170 years (1100-1270 AD) and 133 years (1137-1270) respectively. According to Ethiopian sources, most of which were compiled from the late fifteenth century onwards, the Zagwe Dynasty began in the first half of the tenth century or c. 930 AD. For instance, Alāqya Tayyā maintains that the Zagwe came to power in the first half of the tenth century. The Zagwe are, therefore, supposed to have ruled the country for a period of three centuries. Other Ethiopian sources limit the number of kings to five, thereby supporting the argument put forward by Conti Rossini that the Zagwe could not have ruled more than a century and a half.

Särgäw Hablä-Səllase, on the basis of fragmented Coptic and Arabic sources, argues that the Zagwe probably came to power between 1030 and 1050 AD thus reducing the Zagwe period from the maximum 375 years to slightly over 200 years. The reason behind this kind of inconsistency could be attributed to the lack of documentary evidence lending credence to the facts and figures surrounding the myth of the Zagwe Dynasty. Thus, the neo-Solomonic dynasty regarded the Zagwe Dynasty as usurpers as a result of which sources are biased. Thus, it seems that no consensus has been reached among scholars on the chronology of the Zagwe Period. At any rate, the Agāw rule over Ethiopia, whether consolidated or shaky, seems to have spanned over a century as could be recovered from tradition and multifarious documents.

The Semitic Ethiopians and the Agāw are known to have experienced a bloody power struggle against each other, as well as, instances of peaceful transitions from one dynasty to another. The overthrow of the Zagwe dynasty or the restoration of the neo-Solomonic Dynasty in 1270 is presumably attributed to the
concerted intrigues of the clergy and the Neo-Solomonic elite on ideological grounds. The Zagwe were allegedly believed to be illegitimate to the throne in the traditional Ethiopian theocracy.

**Colophonic Assumptions**

One of the propaganda ploys devised to disparage the Zagwe, among other things, was the production and dissemination of the *Kəbrə Nəgəst* by the clergy and the proponents of the Solomonic dynasty. Among a range of sources, Jack provides a brief summary of its contents as follows:

The heart of the work tells of the queen of Saba’s visit to King Solomon, her infatuation with him, and his wisdom and wealth; her conversion to Judaism, her marriage to him; her return to Ethiopia the birth of their son, Mənilək, the subsequent visit of Mənilək to Solomon—his father, the removal of the Ark of the Covenant from Israel to Ethiopia, the African Zion and its enshrining in Axum—the new Jerusalem—the rule of king Mənilək I, the second David, over Ethiopia, and the establishment of a messianic dynasty. (Jack., 1996, p. 192)

According to Otto Rank and Budge, the saga of such a legendary hero is also characterized by the following elements:

1. The hero is the son of the most distinguished parents.
2. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as secret intercourse of parents due to external prohibitions.
3. During or before pregnancy, there is a prophecy in the form of dream or oracle cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father.
4. As a rule, he is saved by animals or lowly people.
5. After he is grown up, he finds his distinguished parents in a versatile fashion.
6. He takes revenge on his father.

On the bases of the above parameters, Levine contends that Mənilək I is more like a legendary figure than an historical monarch as he exhibits the characteristic features of Moses and Oedipus. In fact, neither Solomon, nor Saba nor Mənilək are supernatural but ordinary mortals.

One of the problems surrounding the study of the *Kəbrə Nəgəst* is its colophonic variability. The facts of its publication such as the anonymity of its compilers, the date of its appearance, its source (indigenous or a translation from Coptic legends), and the circumstances under which it was composed remain dubious. With regard to the setting, Carl Bezold has marked off the date of its compilation to the post-restoration period of the Solomonic line with the advent of Yəkunno Åmlak to the throne (1270-1285) though he does not locate a specific date (Bezold, 1928, p. 12). On the other hand, J. Roth’s *Ga’az*-German version of the manuscript reads:

That book [the *Kəbrə Nəgəst* which appeared during the reign of the Zagwe says, those who reign not being Israelites are transgressors of the Law. (Roth, 1905, p. 172)

Taddesse’s argument that the first Arabic copy of the book was translated from the Coptic manuscript in 1225, in the days of Laliballa and Abba George, the good Bishop in Ethiopia’ is consistent with the Arabic version of the colophon. He further notes that:

The anti-Zagwe feelings among the Semitic-speaking Christians—Tigre and Amhara—are provided by the tradition about the first Arabic copy of the *Kəbrə Nəgəst* in Ethiopia. An Ethiopian Version could not be made right away because
as the scribe has it; it went out in the days of Zagwe and they did not translate it because this book says: “Those who reign, not being Israelites, are transgressors of the Law”. (Taddesse, 1988, p. 65)

Yonas, on the other hand, argues that it does not matter whether the exact date of the compilation of the Ethiopic version of the Kəbrə Nəgəst is located or not, but its reflection of the socio-political context. What matters most, according to Yonas, is “the general period—as an indicator of the cultural political or the ideological atmosphere as a condition sine qua non of the work’s production” (1995, p. 49).

Thus, the relevance of Ullendorff’s observation that “the period in question” was one of those critical moments in the history of the country marked by power struggle between the Zagwe dynasty and the so called Solomonic dynasty (Ullendorff, 1965, p. 4). Though its facts of publication remain to be contentious, it could be safely concluded that the book must have been compiled by proponents of the Solomonic dynasty during the power struggle between the Zagwe and the former. In this context, the colophon of its appearance seems to be by no means accidental.

By implication, the foundation of an ancient Ethiopian empire which enjoyed unshakable political, diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with Jerusalem is a tribute to medieval monarchs and their chroniclers who produced a political gospel that effect. On the other hand, their legendary journey to Jerusalem seems to be more like a diplomatic mission rather than a heroic venture involving high risks. It then follows that the Kəbrə Nəgəst is believed to be a politically motivated myth evolved by the pro-Solomonic elite.

This attitude was manifested in the preaching of the clergy who stigmatized the Agäw language by identifying it with the tongue of the Devil, and the intervention of Abunə Täklä Haymanot in the persuasion of the last Zagwe king to abdicate in favor of Yokuno-Amlak. Even worse, this ethnic polarization was extended over to the linguistic front. For instance, the Agäw language has been superseded by Amharic in the northern half of Ethiopia ever since the fifteenth century which marks the emergence of Amharization.

Amharization is to be understood as the prevalence of Amharic over the Agäw languages like Awŋi; (Southern Agäw); Billän; Eritrea, xhamatanga and Wällo (Wag-Säqoţa) since the 15th century. This aspect of acculturation is also applicable to Tigreanisation in which case many Agäws in the neighborhoods have been virtually assimilated.

This is partly attributed to the unholy alliance of the clergy with the so called Solomonic dynasty. According to Kassie, Mäsahəfä R’tu獠 or the book of orthodoxy abounds with anti-Zagwe preaching (Kasse, 1972, p. 10). For instance, one of their Satanic verses directed against the Agäw people and the Agäw language reads:

The demon taught their language to the people of Agaw:

for the people of Agäw are wicked and powerful.

One can imagine how incredibly such preaching could easily mislead the gullible minds of those days at an age when anything in Gə’ez was taken for granted to be of a Divine origin mainly by the clergy and by the congregation. By the same token, (Dästa Täklä-Wäld, 1962, p. 79), an Ethiopian Lexicographer, after defining Agäwiňa as,

a language spoken by ethnic Agäw; their priests conduct holy masses in Gə’ez like Amhara and Tigrean priests. It is presumed that the Agäws are conversant with the language of birds.

This is presumably intended to stigmatize their human language by identifying it with the language of
animals, thereby, commenting on its “unintelligibility”. It is a reflection of the deep-rooted prejudice against the Agäw people and their language thereby glorifying Ga’ez and stereotyping Agäwönä. Who could be more responsible than the Solomonic elite for the current ethnic polarization and identity crisis in Ethiopia?

Similarly, Bayä asserts that, “The majority of historians like Donald Levine, usually disparage the Zagwe rulers as usurpers, the reason among others for saying so being that Märra Täklä Haymanot had defeated the Aksumite emperor in battle” (Bayä, 1996, p. 40). This joint offensive unleashed by the anti-Zagwe elite was intended to brainwash the generality of the public and instill the legitimacy of Yäkunno Ämlak in particular and the Solomonic Dynasty in general. The ploys through which it was propagated include both regular sermons intended for the congregation and the dissemination of manuscripts like the Käbrä Nägäst (Glory of Kings). Consequently, the Solomonic dynasty used to enjoy this political prestige without interruption right from Yäkunno Ämlak down to Haylä Śəllase I (1270-1974) nearly for seven centuries.

The Triple Motives of the Käbrä Nägäst

It is widely believed that the Käbrä Nägäst was politically motivated apart from its theological and historical concerns. Most importantly, it was employed as strong weapon of political fortification or as an exclusive political gospel of those days. Thus, Hubbard asserts that,

To fortify the claims of Yäkunno Ämlak, his successors’ unbroken line to the last monarch, it was necessary to set down in a systematic fashion, the Axumite tradition of the Semitic descent of the ruling family. (Hubbard, 1965, p. 15)

This argument has also been reinforced by Piovanelli and others who share the views of Hubbard unequivocally:

The Käbrä Nägäst was written to justify the claims of the so called Solomonid dynasty founded by Yékun Ämlak over …the Zagwe family who had held sway for well over a century. The major ideological aim of the Käbrä Nägäst is thus evident to establish the moral authority of the new royal dynasty founded by Yäkunno Ämlak (1270-1285) by presenting the arrival to power of the new southern, Amharic speaking military leaders not as a revolution but as a timely restoration after centuries of trouble and usurpation. (Piovanelli, 2013, pp. 9-10; Hubbard, 1956, p. 360)

By the same token, Levine endorses Conti Rossini’s view who categorically states that the “Käbrä Nägäst has no other purpose than that of demonstrating the usurpation of Yäkunno Ämlak to be nothing more than a just act of vindication” (Levine, 1975, p. 12).

The Käbrä Nägäst has apparently integrated most of the basic beliefs of Ethiopian tradition into a consistent ideological scheme, which is dramatized through the Solomon-Saba myth in the sense of ideological construct. According to the Käbrä Nägäst, it is ordained that “no one except the male seed of David, the Son of Solomon the King, shall ever reign over Ethiopia” (Budge, 1922, p. 127).

Thus, the victory of the Solomonic line over the Zagwe Dynasty was accompanied by a concerted ideological campaign by the Church and State with accent on the “restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty”. Ever since the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century, the Church has been closely related to the state. In other words, the Church was dependent on the kings for its material needs, while the ruling elite needed the Church to legitimize its rule.

This intimate collaboration between the Ethiopian State and Church was to a great extent the reason for the evolution and maintenance of the national saga of the “Solomonic origins” of the Ethiopian ruling house
and of the “Jewish origin of the Ethiopian population” first developed in the first half of the sixth century. Shahid and Bayä also conjecture that,

Ethiopia appears to have been a powerful country on the Horn of Africa during Emperor Laliballa’s time. This claim (sic) might have driven some of their antagonists ...to wage an anti-Zagwe war of propaganda that might have contributed to their down fall. (Bayä, 1996, p. 6)

During the power struggle between both dynasties, the Anti-Zagwe moves were spearheaded by the so called saints and monastic scribes like Ābunä (Bishop) Täklä Haymanot of Šäwa and Yäsus-Mo’a of Däbrä Damo. Some of their sermons intended for the congregation under the guise of evangelization were characterized by the patronage of the Church in political affairs as reflected in the following couplet which borders on a Propaganda ploy (Gädlä Täklä Haymanot, 1946, p. 28).

The royal power was usurped and given to the others who do not belong to the people of Israel called the Agaw.

By the same token, Assäfa with a cross-reference to Gäbräsəllasse, who was the chronicler of Mənilk II, also recapitulates the myth of the Solomonic dynasty which was intent upon marginalising the non-Solomonic elements from political power and the role of Täklä Haymanot in the restoration process:

The State of Israel was transferred to the others who are non-Israelites. They are known as the Zagwe. They ruled for 333 years. God restored the power to Yəkunno Amlak who descends from the line of Solomon with the help of Abuna Täklä Haymanot’s prayer. (Assefa, 2007, pp. 125-126)

This is an indication of the propaganda warfare waged against the Zagwe by the adherents of the so called Solomonic dynasty with “divine” intervention. It must have been cherished for strategic reasons up until the eve of the February Revolution of 1974 which dealt a decisive blow to the legendary dynasty. Otherwise, there could be no divine ordinance in favor of the Solomonic line or against the Zagwe dynasty which is politically, morally and theologically motivated.

Although the Zagwe rulers were, on the whole, more devout than the “Solomonic” rulers, they did not achieve ideological legitimacy due to the concerted intrigues of the clergy and the Solomonic elite. The Monotheistic Christianity and the Monarchy were the principal pillars of Ethiopia till the breakout of the February Revolution (1974) which brought an end to the feudal order in Ethiopia. Church and State have thus been operating hand-in-glove ever since the restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty with Yəkunno Āmlak (1270).

According to historians like (Budge, 1922) and the bulk of tradition, the last king of the Zagwe Dynasty, Nā’akuttolā’ab, abdicated peacefully in favor of Yəkunno Amlak at the instance of Abunā Täklä Haymanot, though such an assertion does not seem to stand to reason in the context of power struggle. However, the impact of the clergy could hardly be undermined even in contemporary politics. Even worse, certain historians seem to endorse such a historical fallacy.

From the foregoing observations, it could be concluded that the scribes of those days were not only mere sycophants but also politicians in disguise. The Kabrā Nāgātt thus provided the ideological justification for the process of Semitic expansion and defined the criteria for assimilation into Orthodox Christianity and acculturation. Consequently, one-third of the government revenue since the reign of Yəkunno Amlak down to Ḥaylā-Šallase. I had to go to the Church in return for its outstanding contribution to the concerted coup: Hubbard reflects upon this intrigue as follows:
There appeared a member of the Solomonic line called Yekunno-Amlak in Shoa, and with the help of the greater Saint, Abuna Täkolá Haymanot, he expelled the Zagwe and became King of Kings of Ethiopia. In return for his help of the Saint, Yekunno Amlak agreed to give to church one-third of the revenue of his kingdom, and his successors have followed, on the whole, his example. (Hubbard, 1956, p. 362)

Thus, the compilers of Kəbrä Nägästå were not motivated by artistic pursuits as the Solomonic elite would have us to believe but politicize the restoration process. The clergy, for instance, resided at court and followed the emperor in his wanderings throughout the country. Though there were doctrinal differences among Ethiopian clergy, some of them seeking the support of secular power were no doubt instrumental in the consolidation of the Solomonic line at least up until the fall of the last Ethiopian Monarch in February 1974. In connection with its theological concern, Budge asserts that,

The Kəbrä Nägästå was edited to make the people of Ethiopia believe that their country was especially chosen by God to be the new home of the spiritual and Heavenly Zion of which its chosen people the, Jews, had become unworthy. (Budge, 1922, p. 13)

This dream was traditionally associated with the theft of the Ark of the Covenant (Ṣəllatā Muse) or associated with the Biblical Moses. It follows that the theosophical conception of the link between Judaism and Ethiopian Orthodox Church made Christianity a prime integrating force in the life of the society.

Many historians like Hubbard and Levine maintain that the historic bond which unified Christianity, the Ethiopian nation and the Solomonic Dynasty has traditionally been so significant that it seemed faith; nation and throne are linked by Divine ordinance. Thus, scholars like Piovanelli endorse the view that the Kəbrä Nägästå was a strong theological weapon which fortified the Solomonic descent of Ethiopian kings from Mənilik I to the deposition of Haylässəllase I in 1974:

The Kəbrä Nägästå provided Ethiopian Christianity with a strong and lasting Israelite identity that eventually enabled its rulers to negotiate as equals with their European homologues and even, in the case of Emperor Haylässəllase Into be perceived as the black messiah of the African people in exile. In this sense, the Kəbrä Nägästå functioned as a means to establish a new political, social, and religious order. (Piovanelli, 2013, pp. 20-21)

The Reception of Kəbrä Nägästå Under the Imperial Regimes

The Kəbrä Nägästå is a national epic in three respects: First, it contains a myth of the founding of the Ethiopian nation which is an imaginative work that embodies a conception of crucial formative events in the national history. Second, it can be interpreted as an expression of central psychological conflicts which members of the society typically experience in the course of growing up. Third, it is a literary expression of a complex of constitutive symbolism or cultural legitimacy (Levine, 1975, p. 16).

All the more, Yonas corroborates Levine’s view with the following assertion:

Kəbrä Nägästå is a national epic in the sense that it is a foundational narrative— … which edifies and glorifies the foundation of the Ethiopian Empire by deliberately connecting its founding to some prestigious past, and further describes it as a “master code” for it was employed as a means of creating a viable national identity. (Yonas, 1995, p. 56)

It could also be classified as myth which is a traditional story that ostensibly explains the genesis of social or natural phenomena. Mythology serves an etiological function and entails a moral or political sanction. Mythological stories seem to retain their power and attraction over thousand years of history since they appeal to some basic instinct in humans as is the case with the Kəbrä Nägästå by which the superiority complex of
Semitic Abyssinians has been shaped and cherished as an embodiment of their deep-rooted psychological complex like socio-cultural strings of constitutive symbolism or cultural legitimacy (Levine, 1975, p. 16).

Since the legitimacy of the throne derives from a belief system formulated in religious terms, the authority of the throne had to concern the subject of faith. Consequently, almost all Ethiopian monarchs were loyal to the principles prescribed by the Kəbrâ Nągăstå among others. For instance, Ethiopian Emperors like Yohannes IV and Ḫaylä Śallase I are known to have upheld the views stipulated in the Kəbrâ Nągăstå. To cite but few examples, Yohannes IV had a high regard for this document. This was reflected in one of his letters to the late Lord Granville, the Contemporary Superintendent of the British Museum, in August 1872 demanding the return of the Kəbrâ Nągăstå which was plundered by the British army after the heroic fall of Thewodros at Mąqdăla.

An extract from this letter thus reads:

There is a book called “Kivera Negust” which contains the Law of the whole of Ethiopia, and the names of the Shums [i.e. chiefs], and Churches, and Provinces are in this book. I pray you find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country my people will not obey my orders without it. (Hubbard, pp. 4-5; Shahid, 1976, p. 37)

Similarly, the late Emperor Ḫaylä Śallase I had also a similar regard for the book. This was expressed in his exclusive interview with the Editor-In-Chief of The Sunday Dispatch in 1964. In the words of the Editor:

I asked Emperor Ḫaylä Śallase I if he would make a personal comment on this legend. He replied in a firm and forthright manner: “This is not a legend. It is based on the most universal book in the world—the Holy Bible.” (Hubbard, 1956, pp. 4-5)

Even more so, the claim of Ḫaylä Śallase I to have descended from the House of David, which is an expression of a Divine ointment as promulgated in the Revised Constitution of 1955 is yet another justification for the inviolability of the Emperor’s power. Thus, it could be concluded that the Kəbrâ Nągăstå is a political, theological and historical manifesto intended to invest an aura of legitimacy to the neo-Solomonic dynasty.

Moreover, this theocracy is highlighted under Article Two and Four of the (Revised Constitution, 1955, p. 3) follows:

The imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Minilik I, Son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Saba, and King Solomon of Jerusalem.

That by virtue of his imperial blood as well as the anointing which he has received, the person of the emperor is sacred; his dignity inviolable and his power is indisputable.

By virtue of his “divine ordinance” and anointment, the emperor was also accorded with inviolable dignity and indisputable power. Consequently, the royal title of Emperor Ḫaylä Śallase I which was embellished with phrases like “the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings, Elect of God, and Emperor of Ethiopia” are presumably reassertions of his “royal blood.” This kind of political indoctrination was cherished by Semitic Ethiopians as well as the bulk of the populace under the monarchy, at least, up to the breakout of the defunct February Revolution of 1974. Thus, Jack contends that,

The Kəbrâ Nągăstå is arguably the most outstanding work of Ethiopian literature. The epic and national saga of Ethiopia, it is the very epitome of Ethiopia’s national, historical and religious feelings, and has been most intimately woven into the very fabric of Ethiopian life and society. (Jack, 1996, p. 192)
This view is also corroborated with Levine’s assertion that the “Kəbrə Nəgəšt is a repository of the Ethiopian national and religious feelings” (Levine, 1975, p. 16).

The Unsung Achievements of the Zagwe Dynasty

In spite of its wide-acclaimed reception, the Kəbrə Nəgəšt is believed to have cast its shadow over the Agaw Civilization of the medieval Period. I beg to differ from Bayä who contends that “The Kəbrə Nəgəšt...might have contributed, perhaps in a not significant way, to the extraordinary longevity or durability of the Solomonic Dynasty and to the equally inexplicable eclipse of the Zagwe and the Agaws” (Baye, 1996, p. 43).

One of the major issues which have been neglected in the study of the Kəbrə Nəgəšt is its impact on the traditional civilization of the Zagwe in the sphere of diplomacy, political stability, linguistics, genetics and agronomy, architectural, commercial developments. Pre-historic and botanical evidences reveal that the Zagwe have laid the foundation for a multi-national unitary state from lack of which the country suffered till the emergence of Gondărîne period as the first capital for ethnic Amhara-Oromo joint kingdom (Gamst, 1984). Hancock also corroborates the preceding view with his assertion as, “Both in terms of foreign and domestic policy, and also in terms of architectural expression and spiritual development, Lalibâlła’s reign had represented the zenith of the Zagwe Dynasty’s power and achievements” (Hancock, 1977, p. 106).

They are also credited with preserving incalculable material and spiritual wealth from devastation by making Ethiopia neutral from the Crusades which ravaged the Eastern Mediterranean between 1095-1365 AD (Lapiso, 1983, pp. 88-89). In the sphere of foreign trade, they are known to have initiated bilateral commercial, and cultural links with neighboring countries like Jerusalem after a long period of isolation from the outer world.

The other cultural contribution pertains to the linguistic hybridization. Thus, according to Bender, Ullendorff and Levine, the Agaw have furnished Amharic with some linguistic characteristics as the latter is said to be built on a substratum of Agaw language (Bender, 1983; Ullendorff, 1965; Levine, 1974). This is attributed to the fusion of both groups which resulted in the creation of a lingua franca or a Creole or proto-Amharic based on Cushomotic syntax (vb. Final) and Semitic lexicon which according to Bender became the dominant language of Ethiopia by the accidents of history (Bender, 1983; Fiqre, 2008).

In terms of physiognomy or physical appearance they have supplied the bulk of the Abyssinian population and determined their Somatic characteristics. Ullendorff asserts that it is the amalgam of Agaw with the immigrant Semitic elements which has given rise to the main Ethiopic type ethnically as well linguistically. (Bender, 1983; Ullendorff, 1965; Levine, 1974). By the same token, Bender conjectures the identity construction and/or crisis from which both groups seem to have suffered:

I have frequently heard the statement that the Amhara are Semitized Agaws….The physical appearances of present day highland plateau Amhara are quite varied but certainly are in the range of what Semitized Agaw would presumably look like. (Bender, 1983, p. 48)

Moreover, agronomists and botanists also posit that the Agaw have developed varieties of plants that reached them by diffusion from South Arabia and provided the major crops of the Ethiopic agricultural civilization (Taddesse, 1972, p. 57). In the same vein, James Quirin also corroborates this view with the following testimony:
In the Millennium before the rise of Aksum, the Agaw were among the most culturally creative people in Africa, credited with the development of the region as a centre of plant domestication, animal husbandry and plow agriculture. (Quirin, 1998, p. 197)

What is regrettable is the fact most of these contributions have not been sufficiently acknowledged and popularized. In spite of few registered treasures, nothing or little is known about the Zagwe contribution to Ethiopian civilization. The obscurity of this period is further aggravated by both subjective and objective factors.

One of the subjective factors is the deliberate and concerted intrigue of the Solomonic elite and the clergy. Paradoxically enough, in a country where ancient oriental and Greco-Roman civilization dating back to the BC’s is enthusiastically pursued, the medieval history and contribution of its indigenous people is still shrouded in mystery. Thus, Taddesse reflects on this paradoxical attitude as follows:

The local people, although as much Christian and part of the Axumite cultural tradition as the peoples of Tigre and Amhara, had apparently preserved their linguistic identity and used Agäw outside the church. Essentially based on this linguistic difference, the Zagwe kings have been dismissed, on the dominant traditions of their political enemies as alien and impious groups of adventurers. This has long obscured what is perhaps the richest and most artistic period of Ethiopian civilization since the conversion of Ezana. (Taddesse, 1972, p. 57)

Moreover, the chronicles of those kings in spite of the conflicting figures have not been documented nor preserved. According to Pankhurst, the lives of the Zagwe kings that have survived are those of Lalibälla and Na’akoto Lā’ab, the first existing in an MS of early XV and the second in an MS of XVII (1979, p. 68). Another aspect of obscurity is the conflicting figures of Zagwe kings and their corresponding chronology which varies from five to eleven kings spanning across 120 and 133 or more years respectively (Buxton, 1970; Taddesse, 1972).

Moreover, their contribution to the survival and consolidation of Christianity is hardly acknowledged. For instance, the fact that they had fought rebels in the south of the country and were powerful to frustrate Egypt’s imperial ambition to convert the country to Islam has not received a sufficient coverage in the Ethiopian historiography. Virtually nothing or little is known or documented about their currency, national anthem (if any) national flag (hierarchy, of military-command-chain or organizational set up, legal proceedings of their court and folklore).

Even the rock-hewn churches at Lalibälla, the main town of the Zagwe kings and the grandeur of which is grudgingly acknowledged, are mentioned briefly as monuments constructed by foreign (Egyptian or Syrian) Christian exiles. The Lalibälla monolithic churches, art historians argue, were a result of a long period of political and social stability (at least over a century), a period that has been hardly surpassed in the country’s history since the so-called “restoration” of the neo-Solomonic dynasty in the late thirteenth century (Rossini, 1928).

Ironically enough, it is regrettable that even compatriots like Täkälä šädik Mäkuriya, Barhanu Donqè, Särgäw Hablã Šollase and Ḥaruy Wäldä Šollase hold the view that these architectural pearls are the works of Syrian and Egyptians warriors as reflected in their writings. I wonder if there is a record in the annals of history which reveals a king who has ever assumed the role of a sculptor or a carpenter apart from his vision and patronage.

When it comes to its attributions, two different ideological strands appear to have been in play in the reproduction and perpetuation of such manifestly discriminatory historical writing. The first ideological assault
RECONSTRUCTING ZAGWE CIVILIZATION

certainly originated from the Solomonic rulers and their chroniclers (Amhara and Tagrean monks) who discovered the rhetoric of written chronicles to present themselves in a better light than the Zagwe Dynasty would appear.

The second ideological strand was that represented by Conti Rossini, whose writing in the early decades of this century did not hesitate to stress and emphasize the foreign (south Arabian, Syrian, Egyptian) footprints in nearly every dimension of Ethiopian civilization (Buxton, 1970). On the other hand, the architectural pearls of the Zagwe still retain their force as authoritative sources, at least among historian.

For instance, Buxton remarks that the Zagwe kings attained a degree of stability and technical advancement seldom equaled in Abyssinian history (Buxton, 1970). Thus, in spite of its width and breadth, the contribution of Zagwe period to Abyssinian civilization has not been sufficiently popularized for one reason or another.

The situation is reminiscent of the medieval period in the history of Western Europe during which ancient Greek manuscripts were destroyed due to Christian hostility to “pagan art”. The problem was further compounded by the prolonged reign of the Solomonic era which aggravated the eclipse of the Zagwe civilization. What happened to the Agaws who inhabited Eritrea, Begemder, Tigray and Šowa? What is the reason for the disruption of Agäw civilization? How and why were Agäws balkanized into island-like survivals all over north-western Ethiopia and Eritrea? Was Ethiopian cultural history impartial or discriminatory? Thus, Murdock resentfully observes that “The lack of information is doubly regrettable since all indications point to the Agäw as one of the most creative peoples on the entire continent” (Murdock, 1949, p. 182).

Conclusion

The anti-Zagwe propaganda warfare was waged with the patronage of the clergy who were instrumental in the restoration of the so called Solomonic Dynasty in 1270. In order to invest an aura of legitimacy to the throne, they had to launch propaganda warfare against the Zagwe via the Kəbrə Nəgəšt which is said to be their political gospel. The Kəbrə Nəgəšt had captured the attention of both compatriot and expatriate scholars who have reinterpreted it to their discretion and in the context of the restoration process. However, their observations and value judgments seem to suffer from partiality for the so called Solomonic dynasty thus undermining the impact of this political “gospel” on the Zagwe civilization.

The foregoing observations would hopefully provide a staple for calibrating the research gap between the existing corpus of research out put on the Kəbrə Nəgəšt and what has been shrouded in mystery about the Zagwe civilization. The latter is presumably attributed to the obsession of scholars with the face value of Kəbrə Nəgəšt when its attendant impact on the cultural and material achievements of the Zagwe period should have received a proper critical attention or recognition.

This gap on the critical reception of Kəbrə Nəgəšt calls for a renewed commitment on the part of linguists, sociologists, agronomists, philologists, folklorists, historians and political analysts with a view to reconstructing and popularizing the multi-dimensional contributions of the Agaw people to Ethiopian civilization without prejudice to the glorious era of the Neo-Solomonic dynasty.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt acknowledgements are due Dr. Mersha Alehegne and W/t Lemlem Haile for their unreserved technical assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.
References


Budge, S. W. (1972). The Queen of Saba and her only Son Menylek. London: Martin Hopkins and Company Ltd.


