

Reconstructing History from the Grave Yards of Ethiopia's Past: The Case of Tigray

Wuhibegezer Ferede^a, Gezae Haile^b

Abstract

This research aimed at locating, identifying and documenting graveyards and funeral rites for reconstructing the life history and achievements of prominent personalities in Ethiopia's past and their social philosophy of death as depicted in grave markers and oral discourses of the society in the Regional State of Tigray. Accordingly, data was collected through in-depth informant interview about funeral rituals and rites, field observation for deciphering information from grave markers, and document analysis for reviewing historical records such as eyewitness accounts. The data was collected from Churches and Monasteries in Mekelle, Tembien, Adwa, Aksum, Maychewu and their environs. Hence, this paper traverses as far as the fourth century to examine the Christianization process in Ethiopia based on Abba Selama Kesate Berhane's grave mark which is found at Enda Abba Selama in Tembien. It also examined the achievement and lives of St. Frumentius, Abune Yohanis, Abba Merha Christos, Christopher Dagma, Bashai Awallom and Rass Alula, and traced the missing link in their historical biographic narratives. The social philosophy about death, funeral rituals and manifestation of grief were also analyzed from oral narratives and inference from practices. The critical examination of the collected data provided baseline information about the lives of unknown but historically important personalities such as Christopher Dagma, son of Vasco Dagma, who came to Ethiopia leading the Portuguese soldiers in the war against Gagn. It also shed light on some controversial issues such as the periodization of the Christianization of Ethiopia and Ethio-Eritrea relations.. Furthermore, the study attested that the funeral rituals and the bio-data carved on physical setting of the cemeteries and inscriptions(symbols) had immense dataset about family line, demographic and social pattern, biographies, social status, causes and the society's view of death in the study area. As these graveyards are deteriorating and disappearing very fast, the study emphasizes the urgent need for the deployment of a multidisciplinary research team in order to digitize, document and rescue the vanishing dataset in these sites. .

Keywords: *Biography; Death; Funeral; Graveyards; History; Rituals*

^a Bahir Dar University, email: wuhibegezerbdu@gmail.com

^b Mekele University

Introduction

This research was conducted with the primary intent of locating, identifying, and documenting graveyards and funeral rites for reconstructing the life history and achievements of prominent personalities in Ethiopia's past and the society's view about death as depicted in grave markers and oral tradition of the society in the Regional State of Tigray.

Specifically, the study explored the life history and achievements of historically prominent but so far neglected personalities such as St Frumentius, Abune Yohanis, Abba Merha Christos and, Christopher Dagma through careful scrutinization of the information preserved in their grave marks and the oral discourses of the locale.

Before elaborating the Ethiopian experience using cases from Tigray, it seems appropriate to briefly look into how mankind has commenced on the burial practice and rituals.¹ The general understanding of the root of the burial practices at the global level is very vague. However, the development of archeology and ancient inscriptions provides us some clues.

In this regard, inscriptions offer a more personal and enduring expression of the lives and social relationships of the deceased in the past. Besides, archeological findings indicate that the earliest known hominid remains were the garbage heaps of predators. Some scholars also identify that Neanderthals began to bury their dead unintentionally and oriented the body in *East-West Axis*.

It is believed that in earlier times when there were no cemeteries, people used to have burial plots near their family homes. These graves were usually marked with stones, rocks or wood as a way to keep the dead from rising. They were mostly marked with the deceased's name, age, and year of death. Gradually, churchyard burials evolved involving large tombstones (Daniel and Bellair 2005). Thus, public cemeteries evolved very recently in the 19th century. Eventually, people started giving importance to the gravestones, headstones, footstones as a means to memorialize the dead.

Rituals, funeral ceremonies or rites and monuments for the dead have played an important part in the development of our early imaginations though they differ across cultures. In fact, the burial of dead body was not at first a ritualized attempt to renew the deceased. It was rather an early precursor of sedentary life.

According to Campbell (1987), the first burials indicate a recognition by an agricultural people of the cycle of life. He stated "it is in the mother's body that grain is sown: the plowing of the earth is a begetting and the growth of the grain a birth....the idea of the earth as mother and of burial as a re-entry into the womb for rebirth appears to have recommended itself to some of the communities of mankind at an extremely early age..." (*ibid*).

Therefore, burial which is tantamount to planting the deceased for later renewal is the earliest known human ritual. In such tradition, some of the kings were buried together with their servants alive but Egypt's pharaohs substituted statues for the living servants, which undoubtedly gave great comfort to those courtiers who outlived the monarch (*ibid*).

¹ Burial is not the only practice for hiding the deceased. Many Hindus cremate the body and the ashes in to running water.

Therefore, for disposing and commemorating the dead, societies have employed different practices. One such form is the cemetery (graveyard) which is a spatially defined area where the remains of the dead are buried. The term burial ground is more often employed than graveyard to designate non-consecrated places whereas churchyard refers consecrated graveyard.

Though Ethiopia had been a pioneering center of world civilization and referred as cradle of humanity, how, when and why the society had started grave markers and mourning rituals is not exhaustively studied due to complete neglect of history of death and graveyards. However, archeological researches on the obelisks and statues ended with identifying them as grave markers (Munrohay, 1994) without providing any details.

Sadly, it seems that we Ethiopians have remained to this date largely ignorant of even the resting place of most of our kings let alone that of ordinary citizens. If asked to locate the grave site of Amdetsion, Atse Lebene Dengel, or Atse Yohanis, to mention few of them, it is very likely that most of us will fall in a trap of confusion or utter Harena area in Wajjrate, Debre Damo and Metema respectively without counting on any historical evidence.

The closure of the historical narrations about the life and the achievements of these leaders is neither known nor clearly identified due to complete neglect of the study of grave yards for historical reconstruction. Even so, this study did not directly engage in constructing the history and historiography of death in Ethiopia which is a broad area of scholarship other researchers from history and archeology might consider. Instead, it focused on indicating the significance of graveyards for historical reconstruction using cases from Tigray Regional State.

Statement of the Problem

At present scholarly examination of cemeteries is substantially neglected in disciplines such as political science, history, archaeology, genealogy, sociology and anthropology (Walter 2006). Thus, the source of information has not yet been explored systematically. Particularly, the use of cemeteries as data source for historical research has remained largely unnoticed. Worse, in the Ethiopian context the study of graveyards using historical approach has not even started yet.

However, the contemporary technological advancements allow us carry out an in-depth analysis than was possible using the application of the conventional method of visual inspection and manual transcription. Thus, this study was intended to analyze the role of the cemetery in historical reconstruction since cemeteries serve as tangible testaments of the changing socio-cultural realities. In spite of their merits for historical inquiry, unfortunately in Ethiopia many of the graveyards and their memorials are deteriorating and eventually disappearing into the pages of anonymity. This had called for an urgent intellectual labor for documenting the vanishing dataset and reconstructing the neglected historical realities taking cases from areas in Tigray.

Besides, previous historical studies were heavily burdened with document analysis and to some extent on oral tradition. For the most part the role of graveyards for historical reconstruction was a neglected area of study. Thus, this study focused on exploring graveyards and funeral ceremonies for constructing the life history and achievements of

prominent, but forgotten individuals in Ethiopia's past using cases from Regional State of Tigray.

Generally, this study will address the following questions:

- Why do historical studies fail to examine the information preserved in graveyards for reconstructing the basic achievements and life history of prominent individuals in the regional state of Tigray?
- What type of historical data set is preserved in graveyards?
- What are the social values attached to the deceased individual as inferred from the funeral rites of the community and the grave markers?
- How and what must be done to preserve endangered but relevant grave sites?
- How and what must be done to facilitate networking among historians and policy makers in documenting historical data from endangered graveyards?

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

This study focused on exploring graveyards, funeral ceremonies and discourses about death among the community of Tigray in order to understand the life history and achievements of historically prominent but so far forgotten individuals through careful examination of the grave yards, and in order to initiate a large scale study at national level.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study include:

- Describing the achievements and life history of some of historical prominent individuals from the information preserved in their grave yards.
- Identifying the social values attached to the deceased individual as preserved in the grave yards, funeral rites and oral tradition of the community
- Describing the philosophy of the society in regard to death by decoding the symbols from graveyards
- Identifying the type and the historical significance of the data set preserved in grave markers and oral discourse
- Tracing the historical development of graveyards in the region using historical sources
- Exploring and proposing ways for restoration, preservation and recording endangered cemeteries
- Generating base line data using inventories and audiovisuals

Limitation and Delimitation of the Study Area

The study was confined only to Orthodox Christian cemeteries found in the Churches and Monasteries in central and southern Tigray excluding countless mass graveyards found in palaces, open fields and hidden sites. Many monasteries preserved cross-inscribed grave slabs and body remains for commemorating the final resting place of Saints, monks and martyrs. In this area one can also find in the open air mass military cemeteries, designated to honor Italian soldiers who fought in 1930s. Nevertheless, this study was focused neither on the religious martyrs nor on the soldiers all together.

Besides, the study would have been very comprehensive, had it incorporated the rural-urban variants and experiences of different religions.. This would have been important for indicating change and continuity in terms of the graveyard design and mourning style. Furthermore, though it draws lessons from previous works using archeological findings as source of evidence, the discussion is confined to historical realities in selected churches and monasteries of the study area.

Finally, though the application of geophysical survey tools such as ground penetrating radar, electrical resistance, and magnetic survey were important for this study it was not possible to make use of them for locating unmarked burials, finding the extent of a cemetery, fitting historic cemetery to their physical location, locating mass graves associated with battles and verifying past cemetery removals. This has adversely impacted the researchers' effort for producing inventory using UNESCO standard and producing e-copies.

Significance

This study can serve as an important tool for developing historical reconstruction using the information maintained in grave sites and hence, it promotes better understanding of the cultural landscapes, family genealogy, demographic features, historical and natural phenomena of the past. It also aids other researchers in tracing the historical development of graveyard using historical sources, or by studying and recording grave memorials. Out of this, new insights and ways of understanding death, dying and bereavement could be formulated. Most importantly, it is hoped that this study will result in the identification of tourist attraction sites associated with prominent individuals/Kings such as St. Frumentius and Chistopher Dama.

In spite of the great potentials for attracting Christian pilgrims and adventurers, the graveyards of at least these two individuals were not identified as important tourist sites. The neglect of the historical significance of the rest places, at least of the Kings of the Ethiopian State, might get the attention of policy makers and as well historical researchers would reorient their attention towards developing new approaches that promote the understanding of history from grave sites.

Review of Related Literature

"If the word death were absent from our vocabulary, our great works of literature would have remained unwritten, pyramids and cathedrals would not exist, nor works of religious art. The pathology and creativity of the human mind are two sides of the same medal, coined by the same mint master."
(Koestler, 1977)

In any analysis of the historical relevance of grave markers, burial practices, and responses of the survivors to remember and commemorate the deceased, the reviewing of existing literature concentrates on narratives about the Western society. A study on African society is often sidelined. In spite of the variation in the context, extrapolating that narrative which deemed relevant to this study was our preoccupation.

Historical Development of Grave Markers

Historically, the widespread use of permanent grave markers has been identified in the Aksumite and pre Aksumite archeological sites associated with Obelisks and Statues. But the evolutionary shift from such large structures towards specified cemeteries is not clearly studied. In the remaining part of the world, this phenomenon is relatively recent. In Europe, it was only in the twelfth century that funerary monuments began to be constructed for high ranked clergy and nobility (Colvin 1991:327-63). Eventually, only affluent families were entitled to bury their dead within the church buildings.

For the mass of the society which was regarded as unclean, the re-use of graves in churchyards was common in late medieval and early modern era (Kselman 1993: 165-221). Thus, getting access of burial site in the church was a privilege. Due to the acute scarcity of burial land certain sites were used for burial continuously over a thousand years which in turn resulted in the growth in the height of the burial ground and gave the graveyard its distinctive appearance with its many humps and bumps (*ibid*).

Understanding Cemeteries / Graveyards

The belief in an afterlife has left us a very rich ritual and religious monuments. Historically, the earliest ritual monuments that we found are the burial chambers which are collectively known as megalithic tombs and they had been used for both ritual and burial service (Mannion 1993). According to Meyer (1993: 3), cemeteries are open texts which could be read by anyone who takes the time to learn their special language. They are also cultural institutions that symbolically represents many of the community's basic beliefs and values about what kind of society it is, who its members are, and what they aspire to be (*ibid*).

The original meaning of cemetery as a sleeping place reflects the notion of some kind of resurrection. The burial markers also serve as material witnesses to the changing socio-cultural feelings associated with death because the forms of remembering and commemorating changes in relation to changing social conception of death. Though grave markers were primarily used to commemorate the deceased, they also have served as chief sources of information which have historical, social and evidential values. Therefore, the materials and inscriptions of cemeteries are rich repository of information that connect the present society with previous generations and their history.

According to Lawson (2004) cemeteries (graveyards) are important markers of family lines, good starting point for genealogical investigation, most accessible source for the study of the history of a local community, open air museums, and most accessible source about the demographics and social patterns from a bygone age. Burial sites provide us data about the cultural landscapes, historical and natural phenomena of the past (*Ibid*)

Graveyards as Historical Sources

According to Dannel (1995), considerable differences exist in the material artifacts and burial practices at graveyards especially in relation to religious affiliation. In spite of this variation, grave markers are dominated by religious symbols and reflect the social status of the deceased and its living relatives. They commemorate the more affluent in society, but for many ordinary people nothing more than a simple uninscribed stone marks their grave. Thus, grave

is as much an indicator of the social status of the funeral organizers as of the deceased. Accordingly, cemeteries indicate the stratification and segregation orders of the living. Segregation of the living is reaffirmed in death for different ethnic and religious groups and for different social classes (Lawson, 2004). To deny someone a grave among others or individuals at death is a way for society to express repudiation. Ethnic difference in death can be expressed either through separate ethnic cemeteries, separate sections in cemeteries, or ethnic symbols inscribed on grave markers (*ibid*).

The vivacious information which has historical substance and is preserved in the grave markers include bio-data of the deceased, the religious affinities, mortality/resurrection symbols, demographic indicators, causes of death, job and social positions (Kamas, 2008). Thus, using cemetery data, it is possible either to write the history or demographic nature of the concerned community (Foster 2003:469). It is in this way that cemeteries act as proxies of the communities in which they serve (Foster and Hummel 1995: 93-94). Therefore, the memorials imprinted in the grave markers and death rituals which pass on from generation to generation orally are important providers of information not available to the researcher through any other source. In general, funeral ceremonies, and inscriptions engraved on grave markers constitute immense information relevant for the development of historical research (*Ibid*).

In spite of their significant importance for historical reconstruction, grave yards in Ethiopia are unfortunately neglected areas of study for various reasons. No one has systematically studied them so far. Therefore, this study perhaps marks the starting point and could initiate a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary research that needs to be undertaken in the entire region and as well nationally for harnessing the benefits preserved with them. Besides, as many of these graveyards and their memorials are deteriorating due to neglect, there is an added urgency for addressing this issue timely.

Research Methodology

Methods

At the onset, we (the researchers) have adopted UNESCO's standard data collecting instrument. The instrument was used to collect data about [a] grave type and related information (identification of individuals, cemeteries, family grave sites), [b] bio-data (name, age, title, job, rank/status, photo, statue, birth day, year of death, personal achievement and religion of the deceased) [c] material from which the grave and the marker made from, language and lettering style of the marker (Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrinya, English, Italy) and [d] motifs (none, angel, ribbon, foliage, book; cross; star; war service).

Thus, after preparing the necessary equipment for field survey, we conducted field observations of the graveyards and the surroundings, analyzed markers, gathered evidence about the people buried and searched for supporting documents. Generally, using this instrument relevant data was collected. Besides, information regarding the identification of inscription/footnote on headstone record exactly as it appears on stone, grave, marker, description of the current physical condition, and preservation status including threats with possible preservation and conservation was gathered.

In this study, we used analytical thick descriptions of the discourses produced through oral informants and the texts/ inscriptions presented at the grave markers.

Sources of Data

Primary Data

Primary data were collected using interviews (about death rituals), and field observations (physical survies) of grave markers to decode the data they preserved. Besides, archival data was used to supplement the data set collected from cemeteries. Hence, religious leaders, families of the deceased, elders, peasants, civil servants, community gate keepers, grave diggers, and coffin makers were key informants.

Secondary Data:

Document analysis was the basic source of secondary data. To this end, data was collected from scholarly books, journals, dissertations and religious documents.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis wasn't confined only on sampled headstones within the graveyard but rather holistic focusing on the entire population of the cemetery.. Thus, the findings are more descriptive than inferential providing empirical facts in lieu of theoretical disquisitions.

Data Collection Techniques

In-depth and Key Informant Interview

The qualitative nature of this study presents to the researchers the option of conducting an interview using semi structured interview guide. The significance of this interview guide was that it allowed some informal setting between the researchers and the participant, therefore, creating a relaxing atmosphere for the respondent to respond freely to the questions. It also availed the respondents and the researcher the opportunity to get to know one another very well, and since the interviews were not a one-time-off undertakings, the researchers were able to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience. In this regard, a total of nineteen individuals were interviewed for collecting data on each individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences.

Field Work

Thorough field work was also carried out in four rounds with 15 informants of different backgrounds to collect data about (a)grave type and related information (identification of individual, cemeteries, family gravesites), (b) biodata (name, age , title, job, rank/status, photo, statue, birth day ,year of death, personal achievement and religion of the deceased), (c) material from which the grave and the marker were made including language and lettering style of the marker (Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrinya, English, Italy), and (d) motifs (none, angel, ribbon, foliage, book; cross; star; war service).

Besides, the researchers took part in mourning rituals. Observation is useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which study participants live; the relationships among and between people, contexts, ideas, norms, and

events; and people's behaviors and activities (what they do, how frequently, and with whom). This helped the researchers to collect the appropriate and relevant information on naturally occurring behaviors in their typical contexts. Observation was carried out in two rounds, in the months of March and May 2016, through attending the mourning ceremonies for the deceased.

Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussion was conducted with interview participants in each site forming diverse age and gender groups. The FDG helped the researchers to collect information about the change and continuity in grave yard style and cemetery rituals. Here, the researchers extracted pertinent data from perceptions, intentions, knowledge and tradition of the residents.

Discussion

The inspiration of this research work was laid down at a joint discussion one of the researchers had with his friend in which they talked about the former's failure to visit his mother's graveyard. That event was very decisive in the conception of the research and as well in shaping and directing the whole process of the study. Though a research on graveyard might indeed bring back some unpleasant emotional sentiments, it can also be a rewarding experience where you find some historical facts buried beneath the recorded history such as the finding of the name/s of families forgotten long years ago both among the community and the academia. Of course, every human being has personal philosophical inquisition about ultimate destiny of life and hence, aspires to research about it most often using unstructured perceptions instead of empirical data. Having all these impressions in mind and designing baseline interview instrument, the researchers set out towards the study areas to collect all the data deemed suitable to the research from the Monasteries and Churches of Mekelle, Tembien, Adwa, and Maychew. We have also interviewed priests, local elders and all associated with facilitation of departing deceased and as well we have taken part in several mourning rituals. Thus, here under is analytical discussions and description of the data set we have had from the aforementioned sources.

Biographies of the Dead from Graveyards

Enda Aba Selama: The Grave Marker of the First Abune of Ethiopia

We have found various open and secret grave markers in and around the ancient Churches and Monasteries of Tembien.² But, we couldn't manage to deal about all biographies and the achievements of all those cases here in this research. The primary focus of the researchers with regard to Tembien had to do with Abba Selama. In very remote possibly inaccessible

²Remains of Saints and soldiers which have historical value is found scattered everywhere in the study site. In some cases such as Enda Aba Yohani, Enda Abba Daniel, Enda Mariam Etsewito we found cave graves where by the skulls of many deceased individuals /religious martyrs supposed to be killed by Gagn are kept in and commemorated as Saints.

hilltop,³ stood the Church and monastery which is believed to be the rest place of one of the prominent but controversial religious figures in Ethiopia, Abba Selama.⁴

One of the issues causing controversy is the claim that the fourth century marked the onset of the Christianization of Ethiopia (Bahru, 2002:8; Munro-Hay, 1991:69). This normative historical dating of the Christianization of Ethiopia is bereft of empirical evidence and most often refuted by the present day traditional scholars. Some scholars refer back to the first century arguing either on the basis of the conversion of Bacos, the treasurer of Queen Candace (Eusabius, 1887) or on the two paintings in St. Mathew Church of Italy which narrates about the presence of St. Mathew in Ethiopia.

Historians usually cite the trilingual inscription of Ezana and his coins to support the fourth century thesis (Kaplan, 1982). Disregarding the debate on the issue of its credibility, the narratives produced out of it could not address the fallacy of generalization if we ask the question 'how could it be possible to talk about the Christianization of the entire state merely because of the conversion of its leader?'. In this regard, the date of the conversion of the entire broad mass cannot be exactly the same as the date of the conversion of the Royal Members. The account of Rufinius is the second source with some historical relevance but it is also filled with self-contradicting narratives. Rufinius's description of the wrecked ship and the appointment St. Frumentius as head of the Ethiopian Church by Egypt contradicts with Ezana's inscription and as well with his own account which narrates about the coming of St. Mathew to Ethiopia in the first century following the drawing of apostolic lots denying the then 'Ethiopia' an access to Christianity for about 300 years while its neighbor Nubia embrace it in the first century looks anomalous. Thus, the scientific study of St. Frumentius's grave marker which is found at Enda Abba Selama in Tembien is very important for dating the age of Abba Selama and as well as for estimating the date of the Christianization of Ethiopia. It's also important to identify the genealogical line of Abba Selama *vis-a-vis* the description of Rufinus. If those all details are proved to be true, the grave yard in Tembien can serve as a holy shrine and a great marker of the Christianization of Ethiopia than Aksum Tsion because it's there that we find Ethiopia's first Abune(pope).

Ras Alula Engda: Enda Abba Girma

One of the unique incidence which had been a blessing in disguise for this research was the reconstruction of the burial chamber and iconic statue of Ras Alula. By the time the researchers first developed the proposal for this research project, the rest place of this prominent states man was neglected and its where about contested. In fact, even following the inauguration of the reconstructed burial chamber at Enda Abba Girma, Enda Michael Monastery in Tembien claims to hold the corpse of Ras Alula. Hence, the contention between these two claimants could not be resolved due to the discrepancy between the oral discourse⁵ and the absence of technology for conducting scientific checkup.

³Some pilgrims wonder Debere Damo as most inaccessible religious center in Ethiopia. The case in **Enda Abba Selam** is very complicated than Debre Damo. After climbing mountain cliff, you be requested to climb up using iron chains to see the grave site of Abune Selama which placed inside gorge of mountain.

⁴Informants: Priest Wolde sellassie; Abba Gebre Selama

⁵Informants: Aboy Kedane; Berhane Hailu

Albeit, Rass Alula Engda (1827-1897), whose claimed burial is rebuilt and inaugurated in Enda Aba Gerima Monastery⁶ through the financial support from an investor named Dawit Gebreigziabih⁷, was a distinguished military general, strategist and politician. According to Erlich (1989), Rass Alula Engda was Ethiopia's greatest leader since Emperor Tewodros II.

The reconstruction was carried out through higher academic intuitions such as Aksum University in lieu of individual initiatives so that organic social discourse could be transformed without risking any significant damages during the reconstruction process. In fact, the initiative is reminder for us to commemorate the fallen heroes who lost their lives while defending the interests and the sovereignty of the country.

Hence, our endeavor in this research was half done in this event as it also compels us for honoring other prominent national figures like him who are forgotten in the dustbin of history.

Alula's fame is not simply confined to his bravery in the battle field or his remarkable military strategy rather it is often attributed to his vision that gave primacy to national interest disregarding internal squabbling in the power politics. Generally, we can use burial sites as national memorials to the dead as we do a monument to a victory. Therefore, the identification and promotion of rest places and concomitantly life achievements of such historically prominent individuals and even the kings of the state has to be one of the preoccupations of academic institutions found in the Regional State of Tigray.

Abune Yohannis: Enda Michael

Funerary chapels, baptisteries, and churches were constructed over the remains of martyrs as that of the grave yard of Abune Yonannis which is found in Enda Michael in Mekelle. This religious father was originally from Eritrea, but he dedicated his entire life to shaping the religious and economic life of the Ethiopian society. He vehemently opposed and blatantly fought against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. While this religious father born and reared in Eritrea always called for unification of the two sides of the Mereb, the political elites were preoccupied on principle of self-determination. This scientific study of the biography and the achievement of this religious father is important for analyzing the Ethio-Eritrean relation.⁸

Christopher Dagma: Seharti

Chistovao da Gama (1516-1542), the son of Vasco da Gama, was a Portuguese military commander who led the Portuguese army of around 400 musketeers in support of the forces of Gelawudeyose, successor to his father following the death of the fugitive king Lebedengel at Debre damo and who was fighting against army of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. Miguel De Castanhoso, who accompanied Gama, has left us eyewitness account about the engagements (Burton 1966).

The relation between the highlanders and the Muslim Sultanates was fundamentally shaped by the race for the control of trade routes. Thus, contest for outlets and routes of main gate

⁶Field observation (Gezae and Wuhib, Adwa 29 March 2016)

⁷Informant: Berhane Hailu

⁸Visiting the museum reserved for this religious father inside Enda Michael and reading the influential book written in Amharic by Liq likawunet Yared Kassa, Hiyawu Misker (1994) is suffice to be puzzled about the roles and the commitment of Abune Yohannis.

ways was one of the dominant causes for the rivalry between the Solomonic kingdom and the Muslim Sultanates of the 16th century. By the virtue of their location, the Muslim States exercised control over the trade routes but the steady growth in power of the Solomonic kingdom projected serious challenge on the unilateral control particularly in the 16th century. The contest for control resulted in series of wars culminating only when the Futuh-al Habasha (1529-1543) changed the course of the history of the region by involving international actors that were competing against each other for dominating the Indian Ocean commerce. This war, often expressed in religious terms by instrumentalists, has been viewed as a struggle between Christians and Muslims for religious pursuit. But in essence it was the desire to control trade routes that set these struggles in motion.

As Ifat bid for the status of commercial hegemony, Amadtsion reacted militarily against its leader Haqadim 1328 and supplanted him by Sabaddin in 1332 as it's clearly documented in the account of the glorious victories of Amadtsion. In 1445 the force of Zerayacob reduced Adal successor of Ifat to a tributary status. The ascendancy was challenged by the more militant leadership and opposition broke out rejecting the status of dependency. Besides, the infighting among the Afar, Somali, and Harari was directed towards the central lands where there was solution for the demand of pastoral land. In addition to the internal developments, rivalry for patrolling the red sea and the Indian Ocean led to the internationalization of the internal conflict. It was due this historical process and with demand from the high landers 400 Portuguese soldiers under Christopher Dagama disembarked at Massawa in 1541 and took control of the coastal town of Arkiko which was governed by appointee of Gagn.

The soldiers marched south wards to join Gelawodeyose, the successor of Leben Dengel. Transferring his seat from Dersega to Semien Mountain, Gagn designed an army that could isolate the Portuguese military assistance from joining Gelawudeyose. After confronting and defeating Gagn's army at Seharti, the advancing Portuguese soldiers took rest at Wafla. Mean while, Gagn asked military backing and soon received 900 musketeers along with 10 canones from the Turks. The aid force of the Portuguese were routed with this help and the commander in chief Christopher Dagma was killed amidst of the war (White 1967). Captured with fourteen companions, Da Gama was brought to Gagn's camp and beheaded. Later on, an expedition was sent to recollect the dead body of Da Gama. However, the success of this expedition in taking the corpse of Da Gama back to his home is not historically documented anywhere. Thus, according to the oral tradition the remains of this prominent individual is believed to be preserved in *Saharti*.⁹

Description of Funerals and Burials Traditions

Mourning Process

The loss of relatives is, perhaps, the most difficult and emotionally distributing experience for all of us. The grieving process is very contextual but a dignified farewell is taken not only to honor the departed, but also helps to bring respect to the surviving family (FDG). The surviving family focuses on the importance of creating beautiful, long lasting, and unforgettable tributes.¹⁰ As the soul departs out of the flesh, the one who was nursing the deceased is responsible for clothing the eyes and the mouth of the deceased. If they are found

⁹Informants: Semehal Nega; Tsegay Gebreanania; Etsegent Fantaye

¹⁰ Field Observation (Wuhiand Gezae, 26 January 2016)

open its regard as something amoral.¹¹ Besides, the church has a system of dignifying departed souls through prayer named as *ጸሎት-ፍትሐት*.¹²

According to the burial principles stated in the book of the dead,¹³ which is locally named as *Metsehafe Genzet*, before the burial of the coffin, the corpse must be washed by *Selan*, the thumbs and the forefingers of the leg tied together where by the arms for ordinary citizens are placed on the reproductive organs, for monk on the eyes and for priest crossed and covered with white cloth.¹⁴ Smoked by the burning of incense, the corpse finally will be inserted into the burial box. Three Prayers which are altogether named as *Tselote Fethat* (*ፍትሐት*) will be made inside the house of the deceased and additional four along the way till the final departure.¹⁵ The details of the mourning practices of the society and families of the deceased are omitted from this report for they tend to be more relevant for an anthropological than a historical research.

For instance, in the final departure, the people mourning would wash their hands to signal that everyone is immune from the blood of the deceased. As it has been stipulated by Durkheim (1995), mourning is not a natural moment of private feeling wounded by loss; it is rather a duty imposed by the group. Therefore, the social connections of individuals during their lifetime dictates the organization, form, and duration of the mourning. The survivors affirm the social imperative of remembering and mourning the dead.

Impact of death on Society

Many historical facts connected with causes and consequences of death such as mass emigration, death through famine, or changes in the political, religious or social fabric in the community were inferred from cemetery data we have collected in the field work. But in this part, we will focus on analyzing only the impact of death on the social scale.

The pervasive impacts of death on the family members and community at large is barely studied in Ethiopia. Thus, how the departure of certain individuals shape the overall relations of the living is worthy of mentioning. Some of the most significant impacts of death which we have inferred from the collected data include incidents of family breakup due to conflict for inheritance, dividends and the difficulty of upbringing youngsters. The attachment of the living had with the deceased could also lead to psychological trauma and intensive/deep mourning also to health disorder. The death of political or religious leaders also creates leadership vacuum. Surprisingly, the economic cost of death is heavily associated with funeral costs instead of the loss of the productivity of the deceased. There is a very exhaustive expenditure attached with the mourning process which lasts for seven consecutive years. In remembrance of the dead in every week for about 40 days people gather around and mourn their loss having food and drinks.

¹¹ Informant: Priest Sahlu Gebre Mariam

¹² The prayers after the separation of the flesh from the soul are elaborated in Ethiopian ecclesiastic tradition as *ፍትሐት*

¹³ See the reference

¹⁴ Informants

¹⁵ See *Metsehaf Genzet*,

Meaning and Philosophy of Death to the Society

The Social Philosophy of Death

The Christians' understanding of the destiny of life in light of its resurrection has given the living an assignment of constant struggle to merit eternal bliss and avoid eternal damnation which in turn demands separation of real life (spiritual life) from physical life. Thus, the understanding of the social philosophy of death demands answering questions such as how the society understands and celebrates death, what values it attaches to death, and how it represents death symbolically. The society's philosophy of death in the study area is centered on the perceptions of the living about the nature of departed souls.

Accordingly, departed souls are believed to be active entities which have connections with the living. The community members believe that there is communication between the dead and living souls. In fact, the majority of the residents are the adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the social philosophy of death is inherited from the teachings of the Church, which is explicitly contradictory with the Protestant teaching that views dead souls as inert or dormant.

The other important issue is pertains to the confusion of branding graveyards as profane and sacred. Locating the dead away from the living, enclosing burial grounds with fences to separate the living from the dead and as well decorating and adorning the graves cape is common practice. The separation between the city of the living, the residence, and the burial site evoke question about the why of separation in between them. Europeans might do so primarily due to the health concern, but in the study area the separation is due fear of the spirits of the dead and for customary sake.¹⁶ A resting place for the dead, which was at once sacred from profanation, dear to the memory, and captivating to the imagination is now turned into a place full of bad and horrific spirits under the command of the spirit of death. Thus, the community prohibits its members from staying around the grave site at midnight and late evening for fear of being attacked by such spirits. Contrary to this practice, we have also found grave sites inside the Church which implies its sacredness.¹⁷

The social perception about death in the study area is essentially descended from the religious percept which claims the origin of the flesh from mud, i.e., “አፈር ነህና ወደ አፈርም ትመለሳለህ”(ዘፍ ፫ : ፲፱). Thus, in the separation of flesh and soul following death, the erecting of grave markers goes to the flesh whereas prayers are assumed to assist the soul as it will stay in the purgatory till judgement day.. Thus, the moral majority ascribed to the Paulian teaching which see the separation of flesh and soul as way towards eternal life in the heavenly world. In the vernacular language it's stated as:

ወነአምር ከመ ለእመሂ ተነስተ ቤተ ማሕደርን ዘበምድር ብነ ሕንጻ በኅበ እግዚአብሔር በሰማያት ዘኢገብሮ እደ ሰብእ

We know that our souls rest in heavenly residence created by God if it separates from our flesh.

¹⁶Informants: Haregua Tselalome; Mengisha Wold ezigi

¹⁷Informant: Senaye Hailemelekote

Accordingly, it's believed that the flesh will not resurrect with the soul, and death is taken as the liberation of the soul from the imprisonment in the flesh. The graveyards evoke or establish memory of death which serves to remind the living of their own fragility and urgent need to prepare for death. Thus, the living witnesses the grave message regularly as a reminder that this world is not their home.

Description of the Graveyards



Photo by researchers, 2016

Examination of the different symbols engraved and the inscriptions carved on graves depict religious symbols usually the cross; the deceased's name, date, and place of birth; the cause and date of death; and his or her profession or source of income for living.¹⁸

What is argued by some scholars about Obelisks as an indicator of patriarchal society was not observed in the grave sites in our study. We did not find any clue that seem to indicate the patriarchal hierarchy of power of males over females. The important advantage of the carvings is that by reading the inscription on a gravestone, one can identify the religious beliefs, social class, occupation, and several other aspects of the life of the deceased.

As we had inferred from our observation, nowadays like other dimensions of our lives, our grave markers and our mourning styles are increasingly becoming westernized. In the major cities we identified wide varieties of exotic shrubs, flowers, and trees which are used for decorating the grave sites. Grave capes are becoming too sentimental and expensive. In contrast, in the rural parish there are hardly any mounds, entrance gates, gardens, iron fencing, or works.

Social Stratification in Graveyards

The other preoccupation of our field work was to find answers for the following question; do rites and grave markers (rites) indicate social hierarchy (status) and religious affinity?

¹⁸See these variables from the photo indicated here above. In our field observation and the examination of the different aspects of the grave markers, we identified expressions of religious belief in the resurrection and memorials of the family members and friends which read as we will never forget you and your memory lives in our hearts ever.

Accordingly, in our field visit we found separate sites for religious, political and military leaders, for non-Christians, for the wealthy, and for foreigners. Thus, the differences during life time persisted in the after life as reflected at the cemeteries. We are stratified in death as we are in life. This is evident in terms of the number of attendees of the mourning, warmth of the prayer of the priests, and magnificent of the grave markers. Unfortunately, in all cases where we participated, the deceased were ordinary individuals. In those cases, only close relatives wept whereas the rest few simply accompanied them.

However, many informants and our informal previous experience reveal that death and grave marker of the rich, the dignitaries, famous professionals and religious fathers is exclusively the exception. In some cases they are buried inside or beneath the place of worship with an indication of their biographical data. Typical example is the burial site of Abune Yohannis in Enda Michael Church found in Mekelle city. Wealthy families tend to compete for status by ornamenting their family headstone in comparison to others around while those who could not pay for a headstone at all usually had symbol of cross made from wood on the place of the burial.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Critical examination of the collected data provided baseline information about the lives of unknown but historically important personalities such Christopher Dagma, son of Vasco Dagma, who came to Ethiopia leading the Portuguese soldiers in the war against Gragn, and St. Frumentius, the first Abune of Ethiopia. It also shed light on many controversial issues such as the date of the Christianization of Ethiopia and Ethio-Eritrea relations. Hence, these and other historical intricacies can be further illuminated using cases from the graveyards. Furthermore, funeral rituals, bio-data carved on physical setting of the cemeteries and inscriptions (symbols) had immense dataset about family line, demographic and social pattern, biographies, social status, causes and social philosophy of death of the society in the study area.

Cemeteries (graveyards) are important markers of family lines, good starting point for genealogical investigation, most accessible source for the study of the history of a local community, open air museums, and most accessible source about the demographics and social patterns from a bygone age. Burial sites provide us data about the cultural landscapes, historical and natural phenomena of the past.

Though grave yards are laden with biographical data which show social status, religious affiliation and demography, they were largely ignored in the historical reconstruction of Ethiopia's past. Thus a new focus on grave yard study could soften the wrestling in Ethiopian historiography because the historical narratives and the historiography of the country has been mainly burdened with document analysis of king centered phenomena. Thus, this study could serve as an important tool for developing historical reconstruction using the information maintained in grave sites and hence, it promotes better understanding of the cultural landscapes, family genealogy, demographic features, historical and natural phenomena of the past.

The study highlighted the significance promoting grave sites of prominent individuals such as St. Frumentius, Christopher Dama and Kings as tourist attraction sites. In spite of the great potentials for attracting Christian pilgrims and adventurers, the grave yards of, at least, these

two individuals wasn't not identified as important tourist site. Specially, the grave yard in Tembien could serve as holy shrine and is a great marker of the Christianization of Ethiopia than the Church of Aksum Tsion because it's there that we find Ethiopia's first Abune.

The neglect of the historical significances of the rest place at least of the Kings of the State should get the attention of policy makers, and there is a need for historical researchers to reorient their attention towards developing new approaches that promote the understanding of history from grave sites. The reconstruction of the life history of prominent personalities of Ethiopia's past using the information from their graveyards could serve to awaken the minds of the current generation by explaining the vast unknown in our past and by linking the past to the present. The grave yards in the study area are deteriorating and disappearing. Thus, there is a need for a multifaceted and holistic project for digitizing and documenting them and rescue the vanishing dataset. The application of geophysical survey tools such as ground penetrating radar, electrical resistance, and magnetic survey were important for this study, but it was not possible to make use of them for locating unmarked burials, finding the extent of a cemetery, fitting historic cemetery to their physical location, locating mass graves associated with battles and verifying past cemetery removals. This has crippled our effort for producing inventory using UNESCO standard and producing e-copies. Worse, now a day, there is westernization and secularization of death rituals and grave markers.

Generally, grave sites could help us to have national memory to the dead as we do a monument to a victory. Therefore, the identification and promotion of rest places and concomitantly life achievements of historically prominent individuals and even the kings of the state has to be one of the preoccupations of academic institutions found in the Regional State of Tigray.

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