

Empress Eleni: Overturning Falsified Narratives on Her Consort, Ethnicity, and Religious Background

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Abstract: *Empress Eleni, also known as Romna, was the consort of Emperor Ba'eda Maryam and she was renowned among the court dignitaries of Ba'eda Maryam and his successors. Eleni was an eminent politician and a devout Christian. A lot has been said and written about the political career and religious devotion of Empress Eleni. Regrettably, however, Empress Eleni's belongingness, religious background and consort remain controversial. Nearly all the published books and articles on medieval Ethiopian history introduced Empress Eleni by her mistaken identity and this was generally accepted as an ultimate truth, at least, for the last sixty years. This article attempted to examine the chronicle of Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob and his son Emperor Ba'eda Maryam and other contemporary sources intensively and offers the real identity of Empress Eleni in connection with her belongingness, consort and religious background.*

Keywords: Empress Eleni, Ite Žan Zela, Romna, Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob, Emperor Ba'eda Maryam, ethnicity, religious background

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Introduction

As stated clearly in the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam, Empress Eleni was the consort of Ba'eda Maryam. On the other hand, in the same chronicle a certain queen by the name Ite Žan Zela, sister of Mahiko was mentioned in association with his rebellious character against Zar'a Yaeqob. Mahiko was the Garad of Hadiya and the son of Mehemad and at this time, Ite Žan Zela was not mentioned whose daughter she was but later on, when the scribe tried to relate as she was the daughter of Mehemad he misspelled Eleni instead of Žan Zela. Consequently, by associating Eleni with that of Ite Žan Zela, the identity of Eleni remains perplexed. Some writers considered that Empress Eleni was the wife of Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob, ethnically Hadiya and originally a Muslim. Some others claim that Eleni was the consort of Emperor Ba'eda Maryam and her origin was from Adal. Some other sources still argue that Empress Eleni was the wife of Ba'eda Maryam but ethnically as she was from the Muslim community of Dawaro. These different views claimed by different writers entangled Empress Eleni's identity.

This paper challenges the works of preconceived writers who misrepresented the identity of Empress Eleni in connection with her origin, religious background and her consort, and finally it attempts to reconstruct the actual history of Empress Eleni. In this paper I used both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources I used are mainly Ethiopian chronicles. In addition, I also consulted contemporary travelers' accounts and secondary sources produced later by both Ethiopians and foreigners.

1. Is there any irrefutable evidence that signifies as Empress Eleni was the consort of Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob?

To respond either in a negative way or affirmatively, it is vital to examine and analyze all the available sources in relation to Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob and Empress Eleni. Among these sources, the chronicle of Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob(1434-1468) and his son Emperor Ba'eda Maryam(1468-1478), which was compiled together, most probably while Eleni was alive and certainly during the reign of Lebna Dengle(1508-1540) and published by a French researcher, Perruchon, in 1893, is an unclassified document of the country with reference to Zar'a Yaeqob and Eleni. I consulted this chronicle from A to Z. There are indications as the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam was compiled during the reign of Lebna Dengle. For instance, the scribe tells us that 'ወከማሁ ይረድኝ ለንጉሥን ልብነ ድንግል ወልዱ ወፍቁሩ.'¹(May God help our king, Lebna Dengel, beloved son (of Zar'a Yaeqob). The writer further states that 'ወኮነ ማሕቶታ ወአብርሃ ጽልመታ ለዝነቱ ንጉሥነ ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ እግዚአብሔር ይክፍሎ መንግስተ ሰማያት እንበለ ቅስት ወሐተታት ወለወልዱ ልብነ ድንግል ይከልሎ ከመ ስሙር ወልታ ወለወላዲቱ ንጽሕት እንበለ ጄኔ አጥባታ'² (Our king, Zar'a Yaeqob, enlightened the dark and became the light of (Ethiopia), may God pay him the kingdom of Heaven without an examination and challenges, protect, as a nice shield, his son Lebna Dengel, and his mother, who was pure except her two breasts). Having said all about the time when the chronicle was written I will continue my objective analysis first on her consort and then on her belongingness.

Tseyon Mogäsa and Žan Häyla (regnal names) were the consorts of Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob mentioned by name in the chronicle. Tseyon Mogäsa was the mother of Emperor Ba'eda

¹ Jules Perruchon (ed.), *Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqob et de Baeda Maryam Rois D' Ethiopie De 1434 A 1478* ,(paris: Boullion, 1893), p.23

² Ibid., p.48

Maryam and certainly, though not stated in the chronicle, she was the Qägn Bäaltihat or the right hand Empress of Zar'a Ya'eqob. Concerning Tseyon Mogäsa, the chronicle states that **‘ወበእለተ ተገዛራሄ ለይእቲ እሙ ዘስማ ጽዮን ሞገሣ ወሰደ ወልዳ በእደ ማርያም እጣነ ወማሕቶተ’**³(Ba'eda Maryam took incense and candle light to the memorial day of his mother who was called Tseyon Mogäsa). Regarding Žan Häyla, the scribe states that **‘ወአወፈያ ለገና ኃይላ ይዕተ መካነ ከመ ይኩና ርስተ እስመ ብዕሲተ ንዕሱ ይዕቲ ዘተሰምየት ግራ በዓልቲሐት’**⁴ (He (Zar'a Yaeqob) gave this place (Eba) to be an estate of Žan Häyla, who was his youth's wife and designated as Gera Bäaltihat (empress of the left hand). According to the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob, Žan Häyla aka Fremaryam, was the favourite wife of Zar'aYaeqob. In addition to Eba, Zar'aYa'eqob gave the church of Mäkanä Maryam to Žan Häyla, who was the mother of his daughters, namely Berhan Zämäda, Mädhen Zämäda, Säblä Maryam and Del Debaba.⁵

Except Tseyon Mogäsa and Žan Häyla, the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Baeda Maryam which is compiled together says nothing about another consort of Emperor Zar'aYaeqob. On the other hand, one queen by the name Ite Žan Zela and Eleni mentioned in the chronicle in association with the two Muslim leaders of Hadiya, Mahiko and Mehemad respectively. Mahiko was a disobedient Garad of Hadiya and his disobedience to Emperor Zar'aYa'eqob was described as follows:

ወእምዕበየ ኅይሉ ወገበ ሐድያሰ ገራድ ሶበ ለአኩ ቃለ አጼ እንዘ ይብሉ ነፃ ውስተ ዴዴነክ ፀዊረክ መንግሥክ ወይቤ ውዕቱ ሐድያ ገራድ ዘስሙ ማሂኮ ወልዱ ለገራድ ምሕመድ ወእኑሃ ለእቲ ገና ዜላ ንግሥት ቀኝዕ በዓልቲሐት ኢይመጽኦ አንሰኦ ገበ ዴዴክሙ ወኢወጽኦ እምብሔርየኦ እንዘ ይብል ከመዘ ለአከ ወዕቱኒ ወአበየ ቃለ ንጉሥ።⁶

(When they sent an order of the emperor to Garad of Hadiya, to summon him to the court and pay his tribute, because he felt strong, Hadiya Garad, whose name was called Mahiko and son of Garad Mehemad and brother of Ite Žan Zela, Queen of the right Bäaltihat,

³ Ibid., p.106

⁴ Ibid., p.87

⁵Ibid. ,pp.54-55, See also Rita Pankhurst, “*Taytu’s Foremothers: Queen Eleni, Queen Sablawangel and Bati Del Wanbara*” in Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, (eds.) by Svein Ege, Harald Aspen,etal (Trondhem, 2009), p.52

⁶Perruchon(ed.), *Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqob et de Baeda Maryam*, pp.16-17

rejected the call of the emperor and responded by saying that neither he will come to the court nor will he leave his kingdom).

On the other hand, the chronicler relates that ‘ወነበረ ነበ አዘዘዎ በሀገረ አይፈርስ ለውዕቱ ሐድያ ገራድ ምስመድ አቡሃ ለንግሥት እሌኒ ቀኝበ በዓልተሐት’⁷(As he was ordered, Hadiya Garad Mehemad, father of Queen Eleni, Qägn Bäältihat, stayed at a place called Ayfärs). As stated clearly above, the name Ite Žan Zela and Eleni are presented in association with Mahiko and Mehemad, brother of Žan Zela and father of Eleni respectively. In other words, Ite Žan Zela and Eleni were not mentioned as wives of Emperor Zar’aYaeqob anywhere in the chronicle. Moreover, these names, Žan Zela and Eleni, are incompatible with both Zar’a Ya’eqob and Mehemad respectively. Firstly, Zela, a suffix given for a regnal name, unless it was the title of a queen of Hadiya Garad, it is unknown in Ge’ez literature as a regnal name. Ite Žan Zela was the title of the right hand queen. The prefix Žan, however, was the title of the left hand empresses for Ethiopian emperors. For instance, the left hand empresses of Zar’a Ya’eqob and Ba’eda Maryam were called Žan Häyla and Žan Säyfa respectively. If Ite Žan Zela had been the right hand queen of Zar’a Ya’eqob, the suffix for her royal name would be called Mogäsa rather than Žan because Mogäsa was the most frequent regnal name for the right hand empresses of Ethiopian emperors in the period between fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Accordingly, the right hand Queen of Zar’a Yaeqob was called Tseyon Mogäsa. Some of the royal names of Ethiopian empresses include Tseyon Mogäsa(Zar’a Ya’eqob),⁸ Admas Mogäsa (Ba’eda Maryam)⁹, Naod Mogäsa (Naod),¹⁰Admas Mogäsa (Minas)¹¹, Malak Mogäsa(Sarsa Dengel),¹² Seltan Mogäsa (Susenyos),¹³ Aelaf Mogäsa (Yohannes I),¹⁴ and Berhan Mogäsa (Bakaffa).¹⁵

⁷Ibid. , p.59

⁸ Ibid., p.106

⁹ Ibid., p. 125

¹⁰ Tekletsadiq Makuria, *Ya Ityopia Tarik ka Atse Lebna Dengel eska AtseTewodros (A History of Ethiopia from Emperor Lebna Dengel to Emperor Tewodros)*, (Addis Ababa: NP, 2000 E.C.(rpt), p.22 See also Tekletsadiq Makuria, *Ya Ityopia Tarik ka Atse YekunoAmlak eska Atse Lebna Dengel (A History of Ethiopia from Emperor YekunoAmlak to Emperor Lebna Dengel)*,(Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1966),

¹¹Conti K. Rossini (ed.), *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad)*, (Paris: Vol.1, 1907), p.6

Secondly, the name Eleni mentioned in association with Mehemad, Garad of Hadiya, is a misnomer because the name Eleni is neither a baptismal nor a regnal name. It is merely a proper name for a Christian woman. Rita, erroneously, had attempted as if Eleni was a baptismal name.¹⁶ Rita's claim is groundless. As to me the name Eleni spelt as a daughter of Mehemad is a slip of the pen. Accordingly, the name Eleni must be emended into Zela because the writer unconsciously alludes to the name Eleni instead of Zela, obsessed by Empress Eleni, widow of Emperor Ba'eda Maryam and whose chronicle is also compiled with Zar'a Ya'eqob. Furthermore, Ite Žan Zela's brother and father were not loyal to Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob. It is pretty clear that Mahiko was a rebellious leader of Hadiya and his father Mehemad, albeit obedient, was not trustworthy in the court of Zar'a Ya'eqob. During the battle between Arwe Bädlay and Zar'a Yaeqob in 1445, Mehemad was kept away from the battle field because of his religion and was ordered to stay at Ayfärs because he was not trusted.¹⁷

Several writers, both local and foreign, contemplate that Zar'a Yaeqob had married several wives. However, the claim of these writers was not supported by the chronicle. If Zar'a Ya'eqob had married more than two consorts, there is no need to designate his consorts as Gera Bäaltihat and Qägn Bäaltihat. Despite the fact that polygamy was unacceptable in Christianity, it appears legal for Ethiopian emperors in the fifteenth century. Zar'a Yaeqob, Ba'eda Maryam and Naod had married two consorts each. The possible justification behind this permission for the aforementioned emperors seem that all of them came to the throne after marriage and a son born from a wife before coronation was not legitimate to succeed the throne. As a result, the three Ethiopian emperors married a second wife officially after their coronation. To differentiate the first from the second, they designate the first wife as Gera Bäaltihat and the second wife as Qägn Bäaltihat. Qägn Bäaltihat was the identity card for the main wife of an emperor in the fifteenth century, and it happened in line with the Psalm of David. 'Upon thy right hand did stand the

¹² Alemu Haile (trans.), *Ya Ityopia Tarik: Ya Atse Susenyos Zena Mawael (1597-1625 (A History of Ethiopia: A Chronicle of Emperor Susenyos (1604-1635))*, (Addis Ababa: Sirak Printing Press, 2005 E.C.), p.74

¹³ Ibid., p.35

¹⁴ W. Wright (ed.), *Catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscripts in British Museum*, (London: 1877), Orient.510, f.238a

¹⁵ Ibid. Orient. 636, f.5b

¹⁶ Rita Pankhurst, "Taytu's Foremothers", p.52

¹⁷ Jules Perruchon,(ed.),*Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqob---*, p.59

queen in gold of Ophir.’¹⁸ According to sources, the successors of Zar’a Yaeqob, Ba’eda Maryam and Naod were born from Qägn Bäaltihats or right hand empresses. For example, Naod was succeeded by his second son, Lebna Dengel, though he had an older son from his first wife.¹⁹ In this regard, Emperor Galawdewos, in his letter to king Joao of Portugal, states that ‘This letter is sent in the presence of King of Ethiopia, Asnaf Sagad, son of King Wanag Sagad, second son of King Naod.’²⁰ Because of the aforementioned reasons Emperor Zar’a Yaeqob had married two wives, Žan Häyla and Tseyon Mogäsa. Apart from these two, there is not any irrefutable evidence in the chronicle as Eleni was his consort. Anybody, who is literate of the Ge’ez language, will not be deceived by the claims of ill-informed writers anymore. Ite Žan Zela, who was not mentioned as a wife of somebody in the chronicle of Zar’a Yaeqob, was the queen of Hadiya Garad, contemporary of Emperor Lebna Dengel. Alvarez, who was in Ethiopia in the period between 1520 and 1526, described the queen as follows:

It was fifteen days since the Moorish Queen had come to this court, she was the wife of the King of Adea [Hadiya] ... This queen came to the Prester to ask him for assistance, saying that a brother of her husband had risen against her and taking the kingdom. This queen came quite like a queen, and brought with her fully fifty honorable Moors on mules and a hundred men on foot, and six women on good mules, they are not very dark people. Eighteen days after this queen’s arrival, she received dresses.²¹

This queen stayed in the court of Lebna Dengel in need of assistance and in response to her request he sent fifteen thousand troops to subdue the uprising in the kingdom of Hadiya but the uprising continued and as result Lebna Dengel determined to make a campaign and went in person to subdue the uprising and as soon as he entered the kingdom all the people in Hadiya obeyed him as their sovereign.²² I think, this queen was Ite Žan Zela and the most possible

¹⁸ Holy Bible: *King James Version*, Psalm 45:9

¹⁹ Lord Stanley (trans.), *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia During the Years 1520-1527*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1881), p.143

²⁰ Richard S. Whiteway (trans.), *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1902), pp.115-116

²¹ Lord Stanley (trans.), *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy*, p.323

²² *Ibid.* pp.325-330

justification why her name was mentioned in the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob in connection with her brother and father, who were contemporaries of Zar'a Yaeqo, is because the writer was familiar with Ite Žan Zela in the court of Lebna Dengel and due to the fact that the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam was compiled during the reign of Lebna Dengel.

Although there are no testimonies in the chronicle that would support their claim appropriately, some writers, both local and foreign, had misrepresented the personal identity of Empress Eleni. For instance, Beckingham and Huntingford had misrepresented the history of Eleni aka Romna by misquotations. They misquote and misrepresent it as:

Lebna Dengel, son of Naod, was grandson of Baeda Maryam through his first wife Romana Warq. But although this queen was capable of asserting herself when necessary, she was wholly surpassed by the forceful personality of Eleni. This woman, the daughter of Mehmud (Muhammad) the Moslem governor (garad) of Hadya, was married-doubtless as a matter of policy-by Zara Yaeqob; she was his senior queen (the queen of the right).After his death she became the second wife of his successor Baeda Maryam, who make her his queen of the right, in spite of the fact that Romana Warq his first queen 'the wife of his youth' as the chronicler calls her, was alive.'²³

As stated above in detail, the first wives of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam before coronation were called Žan Hayla and Žan Sayfa respectively. Besides, Romana Warq was a name for the daughter of Naod and sister of Lebna Dengel, and mother of Hamelmal. Romna was another name of Eleni and mother of Eskender and Naod. She was not the wife of his youth for Ba'eda Maryam as reported by Beckingham and Huntingford wrongly but a wife after coronation. Above all, a wife of Zar'a Yaeqob cannot be a wife of Baeda Maryam, his son.

Among Ethiopian writers, the late professor Tadesse Tamrat and Tekletsadiq Makuria, a guru of medieval Ethiopian history and, a prolific writer respectively, were well-versed in Geez literature and I think they have consulted the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam, which was published in 1893. Regrettably, both of them failed to narrate accurately what was written in the chronicle.

It is evident that Empress Eleni was the consort of Emperor Ba'eda Maryam and this was confirmed by the chronicle and acknowledged by other subsequent chronicles. Contrary to this,

²³C. F. Beckingham and G. B. Huntingford(eds.), *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520, written by father Francisco Alvares*,(Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1961), p.14

Taddesse contends as if Eleni was the consort of Zar'a Yaeqob. He asserts that 'Eleni was originally a Hadiya princess, married to King Zar'a Yaeqob as early as 1445, some years before Baeda Maryam was born.'²⁴ Taddesse cited the chronicle of Zara Ya'eqob as a source but quoted inaccurately. So the assertion of Taddesse is far-fetched and utterly misleading. Let alone a specific year of matrimony between Zar'a Yaeqo and Eleni, there is no any kind of clue to support his claim. As stated earlier, Ḥan Häyla and Tseyon Mogäsa were the two consorts of Zar'a Ya'eqob. Taddesse further argues that 'When Zara Yaeqob died, Eleni retained her old title Qägn Bäaltihat in the court of his successor. Her position appears to have been purely ceremonial and she was not numbered among the four wives of the new king.'²⁵ Taddesse seems misled by the assertion of Beckingham and Huntingford. They assert that 'Baeda Maryam was very fond of Eleni, but regarded her as his mother which suggests that she was a wife in name and status only, and confirms the assertion of Tellez that she was childless.'²⁶ This is a wild imagination; one could not marry a wife for the sake of name and status only. As a matter of fact, Ba'eda Maryam loved Eleni very much because she was perfect in everything and the mother of his sons, Eskender and Naod. Besides, Empress Eleni was the right hand empress of Ba'eda Maryam and her title was Admas Mogäsa, not Qägn Bäaltihat. Regarding her title, the chronicle states that 'ወለብዕሲተ ንዕሱ ግራ በዓልቲሐት ሰመይዋ ዣን ሰይፋ ወለቀኝዕ በዓልቲሐት እሴኒ ሰመይዋ አድማስ ሞገሣ'²⁷ (His (Ba'eda Maryam) youth's wife, empress of the left hand, designated as Ḥan Säyfa and Eleni, empress of the right hand, designated as Admas Mogäsa).

Ḥan Säyfa and Admas Mogäsa were the two consorts of Ba'eda Maryam but Taddesse did not want to acknowledge it. Empress Eleni was the favourite wife of Emperor Baeda Maryam. His love to Eleni and her personal qualities is depicted as follows:

ወለቀኝ በዓልቲሐት ዘሰማ እሴኒ አፍቀራ ጥቀ ንጉሥ በጾታሃ እስመ ኮነት ፍጽምተ በኩሉ ንብ እግዚአብሔር በገቢረ ጽድቅ ወሃይማኖት በገቢረ ጸሎት ወቁርባን ወበዓለምኒ በሥርዓተ ማዕድ ወሕግ በአእምሮ መጽሐፍ ወነገር በእንተዝ ኩሉ አፍቀራ ንጉሥ ፈድፋደ ለንግሥትነ እሴኒ ወረሰያ ከመ እመ።²⁸

²⁴ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p.288

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Beckingham and Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies*, p. 14

²⁷ Jules Perruchon (trans.), *Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqo*, p.125

²⁸ Ibid.pp.175-176

(Our king (Ba'eda Maryam) loved Qägn Bäaltihat very much for the sake of her femininity and her name was called Eleni. She was perfect in everything in front of God by practicing righteousness and having strong faith, by praying and receiving the Holy Communion. In worldly terms, she was accomplished in preparing food (royal table) and familiar with law, state affairs and knowledgeable with books. For all these qualities, the king greatly loved our queen Eleni and treated her as his own mother).



Fig. 3 HMML EMDA 00010, fol. 10r, King Bä'ädä Maryam, Queen Eleni, and the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam.

Adapted from: Habtamu M. Tegegne, “Fragility and Resilience: Church History and Myth in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia” in *Æthiopica* 23(2020), p.137.

The above picture is an extant testimony as Eleni was the consort of Be'eda Maryam.

As opposed to the above ample testimonies, Taddesse persisted in his reluctance as Eleni was not the consort of Ba'eda Maryam by taking the phrase ‘ከመ እመ’ (as his own mother), as an indicator and argues that ‘It is very clear from this that Eleni was not Ba'eda Maryam's wife. But in deference to his father Zara Yaeqob and to her own apparently capability, he let her retain the

title of Qägn Bäaltihat which she already held in Zar'a Yaeqob's court.'²⁹Taddesse's argument is implausible and I don't think that his argument would help him one iota to convince honest historians who consulted the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob and Ba'eda Maryam. Besides, Qägn Bäaltihat was not the title of Empress Eleni. Admas Mogäsa was her title. Even when he came across to persuasive evidence in the later times that signify as Eleni was the consort of Ba'eda Maryam and mother of his sons, Taddesse did not want to change his mind and admit his mistakes. He reluctantly reported as:

Baeda Maryam's queen, who was the mother of both his successors, Eskender (1478-1494) and Naod(1494-1508), is reported to have been a member of a family of regional notables in Ennäse and Ennäbse; she is closely associated with the great Cathedral of Martula Maryam.³⁰

Tekletsadiq, unlike Taddesse, had reflected different views in his different works concerning Empress Eleni's husband and her belongingness. Tekletsadiq asserts that **‘አጼ ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ ከሐድያ ባላባት የምትወለደውን ጽዮን ሞገሣ የምትባለውን ሴት አግብተው ነበር::እንደዚሁም ልጃቸው በአደ ማርያም እሴኒንና ሮማነወርቅን ሁለቱም ከአዳል ባላባት የሚወለዱትን አግብተው ነበር::**³¹(Atse Zar'a Yaeqob married a woman called Tseyon Mogäsa, who was native of a Hadiya notable. Likewise, his son Ba'eda Maryam married Eleni and Romanäworq; both of them were natives of Adal).

Tekletsadiq's claim is fictitious. Tseyon Mogäsa, indeed, was the wife of Zara Ya'eqob and the mother of Ba'eda Maryam but her belongingness was not mentioned anywhere in the chronicle. Eleni, in fact, was the wife of Ba'eda Maryam but Romna is another name of Eleni, not another wife of Ba'eda Maryam. The assertion of Tekletsadiq that Eleni and Romna were natives of Adal is also inaccurate. Tekletsadiq, contrary to the aforementioned assertion, states as **‘አጼ ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ ሁለት ሚስቶች ነበሩአቸው አንደኛይቱ ቀኝ በዓልቲሐት ሁለተኛይቱ ግራ በዓልቲሐት**

²⁹ Taddesse , *Church and State*, p.288

³⁰ Taddesse Tamrat, *“Ethiopia in Miniature: The Peopling of Gojjam”* in Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, by Harold G. Marcus & Grover Hudson(eds.), (Michigan: Michigan State University, Vol.I, 1994), p.959

³¹ Tekletsadi, *Ya Ityopia Tarik ka Atse Lebna Dengel*,p.21

ይባላሉ፡መጽሐፍ የሐድያውን የገራድ መሐመድን ልጅ ንግሥት እሌኒን ቀኝ በዓልቲሐት የልጅነት ሚስታቸውን ገና ኃይላን ግራ በዐልቲሐት ይላቸዋል፡፡³²(Atse Zar'a Yaeqob married two wives. The first was called Qägn Bäaltihat and the second Gera Bäaltihat. The book tells us that the daughter of Garad Mohammad, Queen Eleni, was queen of the right hand and his youth's wife, Žan Häyla, queen of the left hand). Tekletsadiq's claim is baffling. At first, he told us about Tseyon Mogäsa only and here Tekletsadiq tells us about another two wives. Actually, the chronicle tells us only the two wives of Zar'a Yaeqob, Žan Häyla and Tseyon Mogäsa. Tekletsadiq, inconsistently, continued his speculation as follows:

አጼ በአደ ማርያም በእስላሞቹና በክርስቲያኖቹ መካከል ሰላም እንዲመሰረት የዘመኑን የጋብቻ ዘዴ በመከተል የሐድያውን ባላባት የገራድ መሐመድን እህት እስላሚቱን ክርስትና አስነስተው አግብተው እንደ አባቶቻቸው ንግሥት እሌኒ ቀኝ በዓልቲሐት አሰኝተው አብረው ይኖሩ ነበር፡፡ አጼ በአደ ማርያም ሚስቱን ንግሥት እሌኒን እንደ እናቱ ይወዳት ነበር ሲል ዜና መዋዕሉ የገለጸልን የደዋሮ ባላባትና የእስላም ተወላጅ ነበሩ፡፡...አሁንም አጼ ናዖድ የደዋሮውን ገራድ የእስላሙን ልጅ ክርስትና በተነሱበት ቀን ስማቸውን እንደ አባቶቻቸው እሌኒ አሰኝተው በሕግ አገቡ እኒህም ሴት ሥርዓተ ንግሥ በተደረገላቸው ቀን ናዖድ ሞገሣ የሚባል ስመ መንግስት ተሰጣቸው፡፡³³

(Following the fashionable marriage system of the time and to maintain peace between Muslims and Christians, Atse Ba'eda Maryam married a Muslim woman, sister of Garad Mohammad, a Hadiya notable. On her baptismal day Ba'eda Maryam ordered to be called Queen Eleni, Qägn Bäaltihat as his fathers' and began to live together. Queen Eleni, Atse Baeda Maryam's wife, stated in the chronicle that her husband loves her as his own mother, was a Muslim and native of a Dawaro notable....Atse Naod also married a Muslim, daughter of Dawaro Garad and designated her name Eleni as his fathers' on the day when she was baptized. This woman was given a regnal name called Naod Mogäsa on the day when the coronation ceremony took place).

The claim of Tekletsadiq regarding the origin of Eleni and Naod Mogäsa is an invented one. There is no evidence for what his claim. Tekletsadiq makes Eleni once native of Adal and

³² Tekletsadiq, *Ya Ityopia Tarik ka Atse Yekunoamlak*,p.189

³³ Ibid.pp.364-365

another time native of Hadiya and then of Dawaro. His argument to associate the name Eleni with the wife of Zara Yaeqob, Baeda Maryam and Naod and the origin of empresses namely Tseyon Mogäsa, Admas Mogäsa and Naod Mogäsa with the Muslim Community of Hadiya and Dawaro was also groundless. In addition, Tekletsadiq wrongly quoted Eleni as a sister of Garad Mohammad. In the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob, a queen of Hadiya was mentioned as a sister of Mahiko and a daughter of Mehemad. Tekletsadiq, when he accessed a new circumstantial evidence, in relation with Eleni's belongingness, he was reluctant to acknowledge the source. His skeptical narration was presented in such a manner:

አንድ በአማርኛ የተጻፈ ታሪክ... በአደ ማርያም የእነብሴይቱን ባላባት የምጣድ ቤቲቱን እሴኒን አግብቶ አነገሣት ይህችም እሴኒ ንግሥት መርጡለማርያምን ሰራች ይላል፡ በሌላ ላይ አልፍ ብሎ የናዖድ እናት ያደርጋታል። ታሪኩ በጥያቄ የተጻፈ ስለሆነ በሙሉ ሊታመን አይቻልም በእርሳቸው ዘመን አቅራቢያ የነበሩ ፖርቱጋሎችና ሌሎችም ፀሐፊዎች ሁሉ የድዋሮው የመሐመድ ልጅ ያደርጓቸዋል በግዛት የጎጃምን አብዛኛውን ክፍል ትገዛ እንደ ነበርበእነሴ የሚገኘውን መርጡለማርያምን ያሠራች እርስዋ መሆንዋን ታሪክ ፀሐፊው ሁሉ ተስማምቶበታል ምናልባት አባት የደዋሮ ባላባት እናት ጎጃሜ ትሆን ይሆን አይታወቅም።³⁴

(A history book written in Amharic... states that Ba'eda Maryam married and crowned Eleni, who was a notable of Ennäbse and head of the royal table. This queen, Eleni built the church of Märäta Maryam. On the next page, the writer makes her the mother of Naod. Because the book was written from an interview, it is doubtful to accept it fully. Her contemporaries, the Portuguese and other writers made Eleni the daughter of Mohammad of Dawaro. All the historians (of her time) agreed that Eleni was the governor of the greater part of Gojjam and the church of Märäta Maryam found in Ennäbse was constructed by her. It is unknown; probably her father might be from Dawaro and her mother from Gojjam).

The book cited by Tekletsadiq, as one history book, is a book written by Tekle-Iyesus Waqjira. This book was a vital source of Tekletsadiq's books. Tekle Iyesus's book underestimated and

³⁴ Tekletsadiq Makuria, *Ya Geragn Ahmed Warara (An Invasion of the Left-Handed Ahmed)*, (Addis Ababa:

Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1966), p.130

instead Tekletsadiq preferred to acknowledge Portuguese sources as Eleni was native of Dawaro. As a matter of fact contemporary Portuguese writers did not assert that Eleni was ethnically Hadiya or Dawaro. For instance, Alvarez, a contemporary Portuguese writer, did not say anything about the origin of Empress Eleni.

The speculative errors of both Ethiopian and foreign writers have misled so many people who refer to their books. For example, the late professor Merid Wolde Aregay was one of them. Before their access to the above mentioned sources, Merid and Girma were correct in stating Empress Eleni as the widow of Ba'eda Maryam. In their common work they state that 'The administration of the Empire was directed by the able and popular Empress Eleni, widow of Baeda Maryam (1468-1478).'³⁵ However, later on, when Merid became familiar with the book of Taddesse, by citing it, Merid asserts that Empress Eleni was the widow of Zar'a Yaeqob.³⁶ Within the chronicles or some other documents of the country we know only one empress by the name Eleni. So the assertion that an empress by the name Eleni anterior to Empress Eleni of Ba'eda Maryam or posterior to her is totally unconvincing. In relation to this, the chronicle of Emperor Yohannes I(1667-1682) states that 'ወእምድኅረዝ አመ ፲ወ፱ለታህሳስ ኮነ ዕለተ መንግሥቱን ለንግስትነ ንግሥተ ሃይማኖት ሰብለወንጌል ከመ ሥርዓተ መንግስቱን ለንግሥት እሌኒ ወንግሥት ሰብለወንጌል ብዕሊተ ንጉሥ ወናግ ሰገድ በፈቃድ እግዚአብሔር'.'³⁷ (Hereafter, the coronation ceremony of our queen Säblä Wängel, queen of religion, took place on Dec.27 with the providence of God, as it was formerly done for Queen Eleni and for Queen Säblä Wängel, wife of Wänag Sagad).

Here, if somebody asks why the two famous Ethiopian Empresses mentioned in this chronicle in association with the consort of Yohannes the just, because the chronicler knew that all of them were natives of Gojjam. It was in this similar fashion that Ite Žan Zela as mentioned in the chronicle of Zar'a Yaeqob in connection with her brother and father.

³⁵ Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde Aregay, *The Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations, 1500-1632*, (Lisbon: Junta de Investigacoes do Ultramar, 1964),p.24

³⁶ Merid Wolde Aregay, “ *Southern Ethiopia and The Christian Kingdom, 1508-1708, With Special Reference to Oromo Migration and Their Consequences*, (London: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1971), p.111

³⁷ Ignatius Guidi (ed.), ‘*Annales Iohannes I, Iyasu I Et Bakaffa*,’ in *Scriptores Aethiopici textus-Series Altera-tomus V*,(Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1903), p.7

2. Is There Any Clue that Denotes that Empress Eleni Was Originally a Muslim and Ethnically Hadiya?

The above question has been answered differently by different authors. Taddesse and some other writers claimed that Empress Eleni was originally a Muslim. These writers, however, did not have a common understanding about the origin of Eleni. As stated above, Tekletsadiq inconsistently narrates that Eleni was native of Adal in one of his books and native of Hadiya and Dawaro in another. Similarly, Beckingham and Huntingford claim once as native of Hadiya and then Dawaro.³⁸ In addition, Abir asserts that Eleni was originally from Dawaro. He tells us that ‘Queen Mother Illeni, Zara Yaeqob’s itege, with the help of some power courtiers, succeeded about 1484 in overthrowing Amde-Micael’s power and became the power behind the throne in the coming thirty years. The daughter of Dawaro’s Muslim ruler, Illeni was baptized only when she married Zara Yaeqob.’³⁹ Unlike other writers, Taddesse consistently contends that Eleni was native of Hadiya. Misguided by Taddesse’s assertion, a memorial hospital in the name of Empress Eleni has been constructed by Hadiya elites at Hosaena, capital of Hadiya Zone, by considering Eleni as their own queen. In reality, no authoritative sources exist that indicate that Empress Eleni was originally a Muslim and ethnically Hadiya. As stated in the chronicle, Empress Eleni was perfect in front of God. Her perfection in church matters was a blind spot for the aforementioned writers. It is not an easy task to be perfect in the dogmas and canons of the church for a new convert. It appears that Taddesse and Tekletsadiq were highly influenced by foreign sources rather than consulting the chronicles properly. As mentioned earlier, the name Eleni was spelt mistakenly as Žan Zela, who was Queen of Hadiya Garad, sister of Mahiko and daughter of Mehemad.

Empress Eleni was a devoted Christian in fasting the whole year. Alvarez, a contemporary Portuguese writer and who was familiar with her in the court of Lebna Dengel, reported her fasting activity as ‘Some old women also, who are in way withdrawn from the world, keep this fast, and they say that Queen Helena fasted every day in the whole year and only ate the said three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.’⁴⁰ This is impossible for a newly

³⁸ Beckingham and Huntingford ,(eds.), *The Prester John of the Indies*, pp. 14, 425

³⁹ Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry*, (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1980), pp.36-37

⁴⁰ Lord Stanley(trans.), Narrative of, p.290

converted queen. When Alvarez was enquired whether the dogmas and cannons of Portuguese church was the same with that of Ethiopia, Eleni was one of them who questioned him. Regarding questions and answers, Alvarez states that ‘Some answers went and other questions came, each in their own fashion, and in much disorder way, because they were not all questions from Prester John, for some were from his mother, and others from his wife and also from Queen Helena.’⁴¹ This signifies that Eleni was active in church matters even when she was in her old age. Moreover, Eleni was a leading protagonist of the House of Ewostatewos Movement, a Gojjamite monastic network. Regarding this, Wion states that ‘Royal churches belonged consistently to Däbra Libanos network, until Queen Eleni, at the beginning of sixteenth century, founded Martula Maryam and affiliated it with Ewostatewos network.’⁴² This is indicative of her belongingness and she was not a Muslim originally because a neophyte cannot be an opponent of the royal church and a Hadiya queen cannot be the adherent of Gojjamite monastic order versus Teklehaymanot’s network. If Empress Eleni had been native of Hadiya and originally a Muslim, Alvarez, who was in the court of Lebna Dengel for about five years, would have told us about her origin and religious background. Alvarez’s informants, such as Abuna Markos and Pero de Covilham told him so much about her but none of them told him that Eleni was a Muslim and ethnically Hadiya. Similarly, if Empress Eleni had been a Muslim of Hadiya, she would have been served as a bridge between Muslims and Christians and able to stop the intermittent conflicts between the two parties. On the contrary, Eleni was anti-Muslims and this was reflected in her letter sent to Portugal.⁴³ In addition, if Empress Eleni had been native of Hadiya, there would be an influx of her relatives from Hadiya to the court of Ba’eda Maryam, Eskender, Naod and Lebna Dengel as Mentwab’s brothers did in the palace of Bakaffa⁴⁴ and Wubit’s close

⁴¹ Ibid. p.226

⁴² Anais Woin, “Why did King Fasiladas kill his brother? Sharing Power in the Royal Family in Mid Seventeenth Century Ethiopia,” in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 8(3-4) (Paris: 2004),pp.16-17

⁴³ Sergew Hable-Selassie, “The Geez Letters of Queen Eleni and Lebna Dengel, to John, King of Portugal,” in IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Ethipici, 2 vols. (Rome: 1974), p.555

⁴⁴ Weld Blundell(ed.), *The Royal Chronicles of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922, pp.70-72

relatives in the palace of Iyoas.⁴⁵ Alvarez tells us that Empress Eleni was the governor of Gojjam. Her kingdom and the church constructed there by her order were reported as follows:

There is another kingdom of the Prester, named Gojame, of which a great part belonged to Queen Helena....I heard Pero de Covilham says that he had gone by order of Queen Helena to show how an altar should be made in a church which she had ordered to be built in this kingdom, where they buried her and they made this altar of wood, and covered it all over with gold, and also the altar stone was of solid gold.⁴⁶

Similarly, the chronicler of Iyasu I (1682-1706) stated that the church of Martula Maryam was built by Empress Eleni. The chronicle states:

ወሐረ ወበጽሐ ጎበ ቤተክርስቲያን እንተ ሀለዎት ቅርብተ ጥቃ ከተማሁ ዘሰፈረ ወጎደረ ቦቱ እንተ ይኔቱ መርጡላ ለንግሱተ ሰማይ ወምድር እግዝእተ ከልነ ቅድስት ድንግል በ፪ ማርያም ወላዲተ አምላክ ዘለክብረ ንጽሐ ይደሉ ሰጊድ እንተ ሐነፀታ እሌኒ ንግስት ብዕሲተ ንጉሥ በእደ ማርያም ሠናየ ህንፀተ በወርቅ ወበብሩር ከመ መቅደስ ሰሎሞን ጠቢብ⁴⁷

(He (Iyasu) went and reached a church which was nearest to the place where he camped and passed the night and this church is the house of queen of heaven and earth our lady Saint Virgin Mary in flesh and conscience and mother of God and for her purity deserves kneeling down. The church was nicely built by Queen Eleni, wife of Ba'eda Maryam with gold and silver as the Synagogue of Solomon-the wisest).

The enquiries of Iyasu the great about Martula Maryam elaborated as:

ወጎሠሠ አዕሩገ እለ ሀለው ህየ ወየአምሩ ነገረ ወግዕ ዘይኔቱ ቤተክርስቲያን ወረከቦሙ ወተስእሎሙ እንዘ ይብል እፎ ነበረት ይኔቱ ቤተክርስቲያን ወመኑ ወዕቱ ዘሐነፃ ወአውስእዎ እሙንቱ ወዜነውዎ እንዘ ይብሉ ኦ እግዚእነ ንጉሥ ሐናጺሃሰ እሌኒ ንግስት ይኔቱ ወንብረታሃ ለይኔቱ ቤተክርስቲያን ጥቀ ሠናየ እምኩሎን አብያተ ክርስቲያናት እለ

⁴⁵ Sergew Gelaw(ed.), *Ya Ityopia Tarik (A History of Ethiopia)*,(Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press,2002E.C) ,p.78.

⁴⁶ Lord Stanley(trans.), Narrative of, p.350

⁴⁷ Ignatius Guidi(ed.), ‘Annales Iohannes I, Iyasu I Et Bakaffa’ in *Scriptores Æthiopicici Series Altera-Tomus V*,(Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1903),p.72

ሀለዎ ውስተ አድባራት በባህር ወበየብስ። ወነበረት ይእቲ እምኔሆን ሠናይተ ህንፃ፤ ወዕድምተ ሱራሬ፤ ወክብርተ ዝክር፤ ወልዕልተ ዜና። ወካህናቲሃኒ አዕናቁ እለ ነበሩ ንቤሃ ወሊቆሙ ይሰመይ ርእሰ ርኡሳን ወምኔቱ ይእቲ ለአቡነ አባ ገብረ ኢየሱስ ዘእምደቂቀ ቤቱ ለአቡነ ኤዎስጣቴዎስ”⁴⁸

(Iyasu searched for elders who were living around and know the history of this church and after he found them he asked by saying that how was the church and by whom it was built. They responded and told him saying that O our lord- king, the builder of this church was Queen Eleni and the property of this church was too nice from all churches which were in the mountains of the islands and dry lands. It was nicely built more than others, beautiful with its foundation, remembered with celebrity and great with its history. And the priests there were emeralds and the leader of them was called head of heads and head of the monastery was called Abba Gebre- Iyesus who was one of the sons from the house of our father Ewostatewos).

Tadesse acknowledges that Gebre-Iyesus was the disciple of Abba Ewostatewos. He tells that ‘Gebre-Iyesus was one of the early disciples of Ewostatewos and said to have accompanied his master to Egypt, the Holy Land, and Cyprus’.⁴⁹

In addition, Tekle-Iyesus testifies that Eleni was native of Gojjam. He states that ‘የአጼ በእደ ማርያም ሚስት እሌኒ ንግሥት የእነብሴና የእነሴ ባላባት ናት። ...ንግሥት እሌኒ የአጼ በእደ ማርያም ሚስት ናዖድና እስክንድርን የወለደችቱ መርጡለማርያምን ደብራለች።’⁵⁰(Emperor Ba’eda Maryam’s wife, Empress Eleni, was a notable of Ennābse and Ennāse.... Empress Eleni, who was the wife of Emperor Ba’eda Maryam and the mother of Eskender and Naod, has built the church of Martula Maryam). In contrast to the above testimonies, some writers considered that Empress Eleni was childless. Tellez, for example, asserts:

Naod reigned at 13 years, and left the crown to his son Lebna Danguil otherwise called David, then an infant and during his minority the Empire was governed by his mother Magueza, [Naod Mogesa] and the Empress Helen, who had been wife to the Emperor Beda

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Tadesse Tamrat, Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527,(Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, University of London, 1968), P.387

⁵⁰ Girma Getahun(ed.), *Ya Gojjam Tewled Bamulu ka Abbay eska Abbay(A Genealogical History of Gojjam from*

Abbay to Abbay),(Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2003 E.C.),p.35

Mariam, much respected by all men, for her singular gravity and wisdom. This lady had neither son nor daughter, but enjoyed many lands left to her in the kingdom of Gojam by her husband, was very rich, and performed extraordinary works.⁵¹

Similarly, Rey claims that 'Queen Helena (Eleni) had been one of the four wives of Baeda Maryam, who reigned from 1468to1478, the only one of the four who was childless.'⁵² As a matter of fact, Ba'eda Maryam's sons Eskender and Naod were born to Eleni aka Romna. Concerning the sons of Ba'eda Maryam, the scribe states 'ወነገሮ ለንጉሥ ከመ ተወልደ ህጻን እምእግዝእትነ ሮምና'⁵³(They told the king that a baby was born to our queen Romna). The chronicler further narrates that 'ወካዕበ ተወልደ በህየ ህጻን እምሮምና እግዝእት ወሰመየ ስሞ እንቆ እሥራኤል'⁵⁴(Again, a baby was born in that place to our queen Romna and called his name EnqoIsrael). Enqo Israel was another name of Naod but the writer did not state whether this name was another name of Naod or not just like that of Eleni and Romna. Romna was another name of Eleni, Accordingly, Budge vindicates that Eskender and Enqo Israel were the two sons of Empress Eleni. ⁵⁵

Taddesse argues that Empress Eleni re-emerged as a queen mother in the court of Eskender after the disappearance of Romna.⁵⁶ Taddesse's argument that Eleni and Romna were two different women is inaccurate. As stated in the chronicle, Romna was the mother of the two sons of Baeda Maryam and the claim of Taddesse that Eleni emerged after the disappearance of Romna as another queen mother is improbable. Officially known wives of Ba'eda Maryam were Žan Säyfa and Eleni and if Romna was the name of another woman, it is unlikely to be called our queen and

⁵¹Balthazar Tellez, *The Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia: Containing the Geographical description of all the kingdoms, and Provinces of that Empire; the Natural and Political History; the Manners, Customs and Religion of the People*, (London: J. Knapton, 1710), p. 113

⁵² Charless F.Rey, *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia, 1490-1633*, (New York: Negro University Press, 1969,rpt),p.28

⁵³ Jules Perruchon (ed.), *Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqob*, p.156

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.161

⁵⁵ Wallis E.A.Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia*, (Oosterhout N. B.: Anthropological Publications,vol.I,1970), p.319

⁵⁶ Taddesse, *Church and State*, p.289

more specifically, her sons would not be successors of their father because they were illegitimate according to the then tradition. If Empress Eleni had been childless, as claimed by some writers, two things would be unlikely to happen. Firstly, the question of marriage alliance between sons and daughters of Ethiopian and Portuguese royal families would not be an issue for childless Eleni. However, marriage was one of the issues of Empress Eleni. Interestingly, her demand was not limited to one time marriage rather a continuous marriage alliance between the royal families of Ethiopia and Portugal.⁵⁷ Secondly, the so-called childless Eleni cannot be a regent of Lebna Dengel. Unless Eleni was the grandmother of Lebna Dengel, it is really unthinkable to assume the position of regency. It is unlikely to stay in the court of Eskender and Naod let alone to be a regent of Lebna Dengel in her old age.

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that Empress Eleni was the regent of Lebna Dengel and as stated by Alvarez, she was responsible for the designation of him for the throne. Alvarez relates that ‘Abima Martos [Abuna Markos] told me that he and Queen Helena made him king, because they had all the great men in their hands.’⁵⁸ Furthermore, Eleni was mentioned as the mother of Lebna Dengel. Alvarez states that ‘they were with him [Lebna Dengel], as they said, the Queen his wife, the Queen his mother, who is Queen Helena.’⁵⁹ In the book of Alvarez, the biological mother of Lebna Dengel was mentioned two times, once while she was in life, and then after her death when the Portuguese missionaries conducting a memorial service for her by the order of her son. In a similar way, Eleni was mentioned as the mother of Lebna Dengel two times.⁶⁰ Moreover, Lebna Dengel himself tells us that Empress Eleni was his mother. In his letter sent to a Portuguese King, Don Manuel, Lebna Dengel described her as follows:

When I enquire, they told me how Matheus had died as soon as he entered my countries, [country] at the monastery of Bisan. I did not sent him, but Queen Helena sent him who governed me as my mother, because at that time I was eleven years of age, for I remained of that age at the death of my father, when I succeeded the crown of my kingdoms, and the Queen Helena governed for me.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Sergew Hable-Selassie, “*The Geez Letters of Eleni*, p.555

⁵⁸ Lord Stanley (trans.), *Narrative of*, p.143

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* ,p.223

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* ,See pages, 226, 258, 298

⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp.390-391

Eleni, in fact, was the grandmother of Emperor Lebna Dengel and the reason why she was mentioned as his mother by Alvarez and Lebna Dengel himself is because of the common tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For example, Lebna Dengel was the great grandson of Zara Yaeqob but the chronicle asserts that he was his son. In line with the above description, Tsega Zä Ab, a contemporary of Empress Eleni and who was the ambassador of Emperor Lebna Dengel to Portugal, acknowledges that Empress Eleni was the grandmother of Emperor Lebna Dengel. His testimony about Eleni is elaborated as follows:

Nahod having reigned 13 years was succeeded by his son Lebna Danguil, or David, who being a child at his father's death, the empire during his minority was managed by his grandmother Helena, who had been wife to Emperor Beda Mariam, and who for her admirable wisdom and learning, was highly esteemed by all sorts of people. She had a great dowry in the kingdom of Gojam, where she built the stateliest church that had ever been seen in Ethiopia.⁶²

Even in the title of the letter sent to King Emanuel, it was stated, 'The letters of Helena grandmother of David, the precious John, to Emanuel, King of Portugal, written in the year 1509.'⁶³This conclusive evidence presented above clearly shows Empress Eleni's identity. Initially, the regent of Lebna Dengel was his own biological mother; Naod Mogäsa and Eleni were counselors. It is stated in the chronicle of Lebna Dengel that “ወአሜሃ ጎ-ት-ሜገብ መንግስት በትዕዛዝ ወላዲቱ ንግሥት ናጋድ ሞገሣ ወበምክረ ካልዕታ ንግሥት እሌኒ እስመ የአምራ ሠሪአ ቤተ መንግስት ወፈድፋደስ ዛቲ ጠባብ እሌኒ ተአምር ሕገ መንግስት በታዕነ ቩ ነገሥት⁶⁴(At that time the kingdom was ruled with an order of his mother, Queen Naod Mogäsa and with the counsel of the second, Queen Eleni, who was knowledgeable how to rule a kingdom and more specifically, the wisest Eleni was experienced in how to rule a kingdom in the court of three kings).

Here, the three kings before Lebna Dengel, refers to Naod, Eskender and Baeda Maryam. As stated above, the wisest Eleni came to power as a regent of Lebna Dengel after the death of his

⁶²Michael Geddes, *The Church History of Ethiopia*, (London: Chismell, 1696), p. 42

⁶³ Ibid. P.45

⁶⁴ Herausgegen Von and Manfred Kropp(eds.), *Die Geschichte Des Lebna-Dengel, Cludius Und Minas*, in

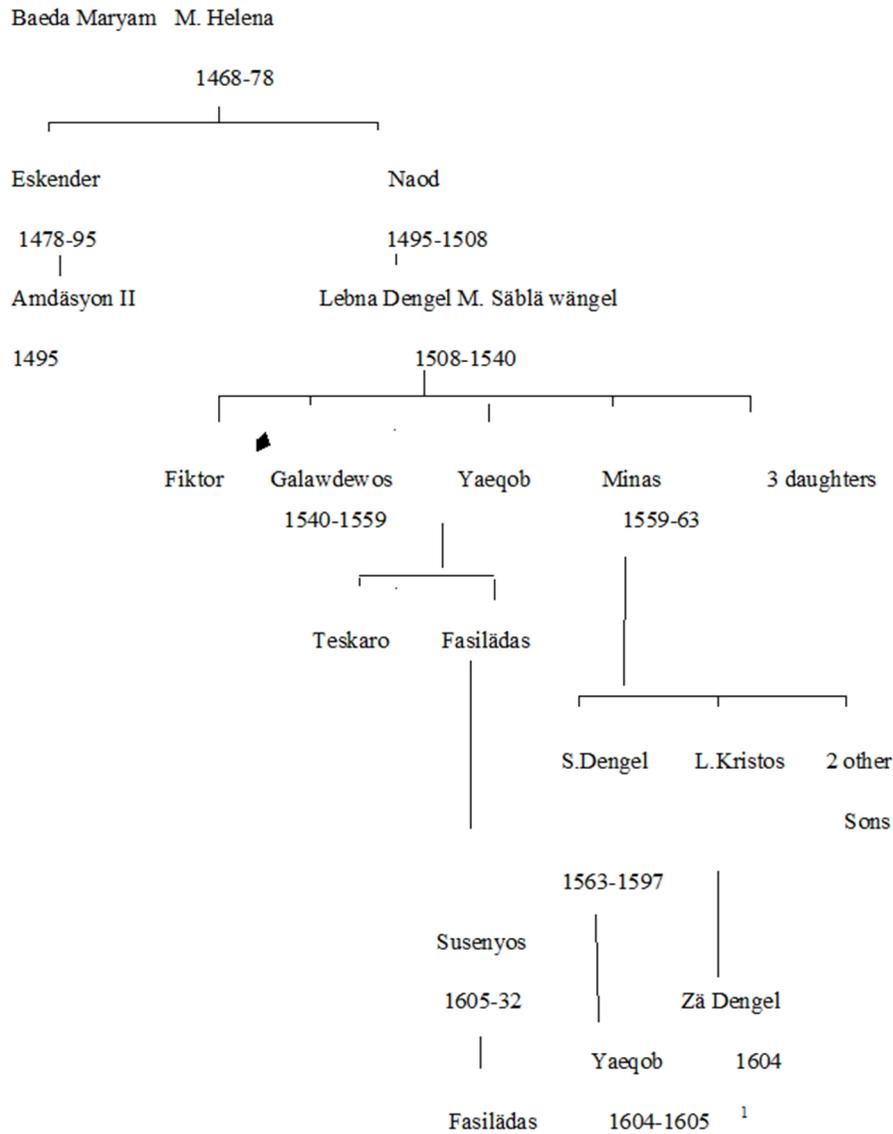
Scriptores Æthiopicæ Tomus 83,(Lovanii: InAedibus E.Peters, 1988), p.3

mother, Naod Mogäsa. Eleni's wisdom and religious knowledge eulogized by her contemporary, Tsega Zä Ab, as follows:

Queen Helena, who was dowager Empress; The Hand of Mary who was grandfather to David, and who, David being underage, at that time was Regent of Ethiopia; she was undoubtedly the wisest and religious princess, and was mistress of so much learning, that she composed two books in the Chaldee Tongue[Ge'ez]: The title of the first was Euzara Clebaa,[Säbehewo Bäenzira?] that is to say, praise the Lord with organs; in which she discoursed learnedly concerning the Trinity, and the Virginity of the Blessed Virgin; The second is called Chedale Caay[Tsedale Tsehay], that is, the Beam of the Sun, in which she has divers accurate discourses concerning the law of God.⁶⁵

The charismatic quality of Empress Eleni is really unparalleled. At first, Rey asserted that Eleni was childless, but later on he verified that she was the mother of Eskender and Naod and the great grandmother of multitudes. In his genealogical table of Ethiopian Emperors from 1468 to 1632, Empress Eleni's sons and grandsons were depicted as follows:

⁶⁵ Geddes, *The Church History of Ethiopia*, pp.114-115



¹ Charles F. Rey, *the Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia*, see the genealogical table as an appendix.

It was on the above justification that Susenyos attempted to reconstruct the church of Martula Maryam. The endeavour of Susenyos to restore the church was reported by Almeida as follows:

It (Nebesse) was the place situated in the interior of Gojam, an important district, which in the past belonged to Queen Elena, who had founded there a renowned church, as we said in book three of this history. As the emperor was the great grandson of King David, who was raised by Queen Elena as a son, and on whose behalf she governed the kingdom several years; he greatly desired to restore this church and for the sake of the

memory of Empress Elena, he granted a good part of the gold of two altar stones, which had escaped the destruction committed first by Gragh [Gragh] and then by the Gallas.⁶⁶

It is pretty clear that Empress Eleni was native of Gojjam and this expressed by different sources either wittingly or unwittingly. For instance, Eskender, the successor of Baeda Maryam, was sent to Gojjam to be the son of Anbäsa Dawit, Gojjam Nägash. The scribe states that ‘ወወሃበ እስክንድርሃ ወልደ ከመ ይኩኖ ወልደ’⁶⁷(He gave his son, Eskender, to be the son (of Anbäsa Dawit). Even though the writer did not tell us anything about the relationship between Anbäsa Dawit and Eleni, Anbäsa Dawit might have been a close relative of Eleni. Taddesse contends that Eskender was sent to Gojjam to stay with his foster father, King of Gojjam.⁶⁸ In reality, Eskender was not sent to stay there but to be the son of Anbäsa Dawit. It is unthinkable to consider that Eskender, the first son of Emperor Baeda Maryam, was sent to grow under the protection of unrelated Anbäsa Dawit, rather it appears that Eleni sent her son Eskender to Gojjam to grow there under the protection of her relative, Anbäsa Dawit, in attending the traditional education system in her homeland. Eskender might have attended his education at Däbraworq because he and his son Amdäseyon II and his daughter, Martha, were buried there.⁶⁹ Moreover, the wives of Naod and Lebna Dengel, Eleni’s son and grandson respectively, were natives of Gojjam. Naod Mogäsa also known as Maryam Kebra was native of Lämchän, East Gojjam.⁷⁰ Säblä wängel, wife of Lebna Dengel, was also native of Ennämäy, East Gojjam.⁷¹ Unless Eleni herself was native of Gojjam, it is unthinkable to send her son to grow there and recruit the wives of her son and grandson only from Gojjam. Empress Eleni was well known among her posterity and as a result, Empress Mentewab, aka Berhan Mogäsa, the wife of

⁶⁶ Jonathan Good (trans.), “Reflections on the Notion of Empire and ‘Kingdom’ in the Seventeenth Century Ethiopia: Royal Power and Local Power,” in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 8, 3-4 (2004), p.30

⁶⁷ Jules Perrucon (ed.), *Les Chroniques Zara Yaeqob*, p.160

⁶⁸ Taddesse, “*Ethiopia in Miniature*,” p.959

⁶⁹ Sergew(ed.), *Ya Ityopia Tarik*, p.37

⁷⁰ Girma(ed.), *Ya Gojjam Tewled*, p.35

⁷¹ Ibid. p.36, See also Sergew(ed.), *Ya Ityopia Tarik*, p.49 Here Tekle Iyasus tells us that Sabla Wangel has built a famous church called Mangesta Samay in her homeland just like that of Empress Eleni.

Emperor Bakaffa (1721-1730) and, who was the adherent of a Qebat (Uncion) sect was nicknamed as Dagmawit Eleni or Eleni II and the daughter of Abba Ewastatewos.⁷² The above expression signifies that Empress Eleni belonged to Gojjam and there was only one empress by the name Eleni anterior to Mentewab.

Despite the fact that the aforementioned writers had attempted to associate Eleni's background with the Muslim community of Hadiya, there is no evidence that shows the interaction between Eleni and Hadiya community. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Eleni had faced a kind of discrimination because of her religions background and ethnicity. Rather, Empress Eleni was very much respected as if she was the mother and father of all, among court officials in her long court life, more than half a century (1468-1525).⁷³ The love of court officials and their belief towards Eleni expressed as 'There was a great rumour and talk at the court about the death of Queen Helena. They said that since she had died all of them would die great and small, and that while she lived, all lived and were defended and protected, she was the father and mother of all.'⁷⁴ The expression of Alvarez shows that Eleni was very much beloved by her people until her death.

Conclusion

Empress Eleni was immensely popular and her all-round qualities rarely seen among her posterity. She was an outstanding politician, skilled diplomat, a devout Christian and a leading protagonist of the House of Ewostatewos network and she was also the author of two religious

⁷² Kendeneh Endeg, "Monks and Monarchs: Christological controversy of the Ethiopian Church and Its Impacts on the State, (1632-1878)", (Ph.D. Dissertation, State University of Florida, 2011), pp.105-106.

⁷³ Bell, as cited by Rita, claims that Empress Eleni died in 1522. Other sources narrate differently. Girma and Merid state that she died in 1525. See Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde Aregay, *The Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations*, p.172 Huntigford claims that Eleni died in 1526, See, Richard Pankhurst (ed.), *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century AD to 1704*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.112, James Bruce makes it in 1525, see, *Travels to Discover the Source of Nile*, Vol. II, p.161. In my opinion the assertions of Bruce, Girma and Merid are correct because Alvarez, who was in Ethiopia from 1520 to 1526 told us that the death of Empress Eleni was eight or nine months before he returned to the court of Lebna Dengel in 1526 from northern Ethiopia. See Lord Stanley, p.321

⁷⁴ Lord Stanley (trans.), *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia*, p.330

books. In her long political career Eleni was highly influential and it was in favour of her that the sons and grandsons of Emperor Ba'eda Maryam succeeded to the throne and ruled Ethiopia under her counseling. In her wisdom, Eleni was very much respected and admired by all sorts of people in the court of Ba'eda Maryam, Eskender, Naod and Lebna Dengel. In general, she was the paragon of empresses.

It is disappointing, however, that by misquoting Ite Žan Zela, sister of Mahiko and daughter of Mehemad instead of Empress Eleni, wife of Baeda Maryam, the identity of Eleni remained distorted as if she was originally a Muslim, ethnically Hadiya and childless. At the end of the day, as the Amharic saying goes aptly 'Iwnätena Negat Iyadär Yetäral' (Truth and dawn gradually gets crystal clear) the actual identity of Empress Eleni reappeared quite clearly. Moreover, it is safe to conclude that there is neither any irrefutable evidence that signifies as Empress Eleni was the consort of Emperor Zar'a Yaeqob, nor any clue that indicates her belongingness to Hadiya. Rather, she was the consort of Emperor Baeda Maryam and native of Gojjam. There is no circumstantial evidence that shows that Empress Eleni was originally a Muslim. Eleni was a devout Christian and knowledgeable with church dogmas and canons and more specifically she was an ardent supporter of the Ewostatewos movement. Above all, the life of Empress Eleni was highly associated with the kingdom of Gojjam. She had been the governor of the kingdom until her death and she built a famous church and was buried there. All these are indicative of her belongingness. Eleni was also the mother of Emperor Eskender and Emperor Naod and the grandmother of Emperor Lebna Dengel and the great grandmother of early modern Ethiopian Emperors. So the assertion that Eleni was a wife of Zar'a Yaeqob, ethnically Hadiya and originally a Muslim did not emanate from the indisputable evidence they have, rather it appears from speculative errors of these writers. The claim that Empress Eleni was childless is also utterly inaccurate. As far as the then Ethiopian political system is concerned, it is really absurd to be influential and remain in power for a long period of time for a widow without a child from her consort to be crowned, and whose ethnic and religious background was outside of court officials. Accordingly, the claim of some Ethiopian and foreign writers that childless Eleni remained influential in the court of Eskender and Naod and finally became a regent of Lebna Dengel in her old age is all in all far-fetched because their claim is not supported either by the internal evidence in the chronicle of Emperor Zara Ya'eqob and Ba'eda Maryam or by other external sources.

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