

Traditional Values, meaning and use of urban space in highland towns of North Ethiopia

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URBAN KNOWLEDGE
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Introduction

Lefebvre¹ concept of space tells as that cities are fashioned, shaped and invested by social activity during a finite historical period. Hence, the outcome, i.e. the “city” is the product of a certain cultural and social process belonging to that particular society. Urban space refers to space in the city in its different forms and character as a product of social process which took place in continues historical period². The paper attempt to understand spatial character of cities in North Ethiopia through identifying and analysing traditional values attached to meaning and use of urban spaces. Tradition in the context of this study is knowledge inherited from the past and continues updating itself as per the present situation³. Consequently, it is an important link between the past and present. To understand traditional use and meaning of urban spaces, it is necessary to look in to the social and cultural structure of the society in focus. Socio-cultural values define the type of social organisation that any society might have and the relationship between people and space. Hence, daily activities of people in any society are intentionally and unintentionally guided by such values related to socio-cultural system. Daily activities are used to refer also to the processes that shape the surrounding physical environment⁴. Even organising the most private part of our environment is influenced by the values in society level as they also influence how people think. Understanding socio-cultural values therefore leads to better understanding of how individuals, groups, communities and societies use space and identify themselves with particular character of the physical environment, i.e. structures and open spaces. Values on the other hand influence the type of institutions which are established in different levels of the society and the institutions in turn translate the same in to concrete actions which reshape the built-up environment⁵.

The focus of this paper is to discuss socio-cultural values which have contributed to the conceptualisation and use of urban spaces in tradition of highland towns in North Ethiopia. By doing so, it tries to offer a platform for better understanding of urban settlements in the mentioned area. Besides, the study provides a deeper insight into an area that has been neglected by studies and practice of urban planning in Ethiopia.

Spiritual Factors

Location of a political capital

The concept and meaning of urban space in towns of North Ethiopia is incomplete without mentioning the role religion played in the study area. Since the 4th century⁶

1 Henri LEFEBVRE, The production of space (Oxford, Blackwell publishing, 1991) pp. 73

2 David HARVEY, Social justice and the city (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) pp. 32-38

3 Karl-Heinz KOHL, “Coming back to one’s own: What happens to tradition in Neo-Traditional movements?” in Richard ROTTENBURG, et.al (ed.), The making and unmaking of differences. Anthropological, sociological and philosophical perspectives. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction publisher, 2006) pp.99-100

4 Anthony Edwin James MORRIS, History of urban form before the industrial revolutions (Harlow, New York, Longman scientific and technical and John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1994) pp. 379-380. Angel RAMA, The lettered city (Durham, London, Duke University Press, 1996) pp. 27-31

5 Gideon SJOBERG, The pre-industrial city, past and present (New York, Free Press, 1965)

6 Bahiru ZEWEDE, A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855 – 1974 (Addis Ababa, et al., University Press, 2002) pp. 1

until 1975, Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was state religion which influenced the socio-cultural development of the society in the country and particularly of the study area. Indeed, the Orthodox Church was “*Siso Mengist*” meaning it had a right of claim to a third of Government including land in the country. Consequently, it was an institution which was not only guiding the social life of the people but also active in matters related to land administration and development for centuries. In fact, legends tell that at the time of the Zagwe dynasty⁷, the kings were important religious persons, and are considered saints of EOC⁸. Moreover, the church was also the most important learning centre, which used to produce the intellectuals of the country before the introduction of modern education in late 19th century⁹. Another important element in relation to space and spirituality in tradition of North Ethiopia is that selection of a location as a political centre had been always attached to intervention of supernatural power. For instance, the selection of cities such as Gondar (17th century), Addis Ababa (late 19th century) and Debre Birhan (15th century), which was a capital of Zer’a Ya’qob¹⁰, were attached to a divine choice¹¹. The following extraction from a legend reveals supernatural foundation of Gondar:

Archangel Ragu’el told Emperor Lebna Dengel several prophecies on the future of his dynasty, and in particular that the children of his son Minas, having left Shawa¹², would “establish their residence in the country of Gwa”¹³

As a result, there were several intents to establish a capital city on places with names beginning with the letter “G” until the foundation Gondar which was probably inverted to refer to Gwa-dar or Gondar is often spelt.¹⁴ The legend says that it was, however, only in the 17 century that God revealed the exact place to Emperor Fasilides. There are several versions of this story, how and when the place called Gondar was discovered by the Emperor. The following quote from Pankhurst¹⁵ is one of the examples.

“One day seeing a buffalo, Fasiladas (the Emperor) began to chase it on horseback, endeavouring to get close enough to strike it with his lance, but the animal, which was young and strong, fled before him in the woods, crossing first the Magac and then the Angerab river. The monarch, becoming tired and out of breath, lost ground, and on reaching the wooden hill which divides the Angerab and Qaha rivers, found himself completely alone, with his clothes torn by the thorns. In front of him lay a small pool into which the animal had vanished. Fasiladas, his horse panting with perspiration, was obliged to halt, and, stupefied by the disappearance of the prey he had so tenaciously followed, jumped to the ground to drink a little water and refresh himself. At that moment an old and venerable hermit is supposed to have miraculously come out of the lake. ... He spoke with the voice of the Archangel, saying “God has guided you; this is the place pre-announced by the angel, and designated for the new capital of the realm: ... All those who dwell her will enjoy the kingdom of heaven, even if they are not baptized: and I will protect you until the end of your life”¹⁶.

7 The Zagwe Dynasty reigned in Ethiopia between 10th to 12th century

8 Discussion with Priests in Churches of Lalibela in February 2008 and this fact is also believed by people who belong to EOC.

9 Richard PANKHURST, A Social History of Ethiopia: The North and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II. (Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1990) pp. 126-130

10 Zer’a Yakob was one of the most important Emperors in the medieval history of Ethiopia who reigned from 1434 to 1468.

11 Richard PANKHURST, “Notes for the history of Gondar” in Ethiopian Observer, No.3 (1969):177-227, 117-118

12 A former province in Ethiopia, today the region is found partly in the Oromia and partly in Amahara Region.

13 Richard PANKHURST, History of Ethiopian Towns: from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century, (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982) pp. 117

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Richard PANKHURST, History of Ethiopian Towns: from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century, (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982) pp. 118

However, evidences about the location of Gondar or other important urban settlements in North Ethiopia show the site selections were influenced by availability of water, farming land, elevation (mostly 2000mts above sea level) and strategic positions with respect to defence and control of important trade routes. Consequently, political power needed a blessing from the church for important decision so that it can ensure the acceptance of the noble and the general public.

Concept and hierarchy of Spaces

The other important factor which directly has influenced the land use of the urban centres is how space is conceptualised in the learning of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There are two important examples which explain the concept of space, i.e. Map of Tigre, which is more related to spatial organisation of a province or a region; and the rules and regulation of church construction. The rules and regulation determine the different kind of spaces and their hierarchical relationship as per spiritual meaning of each space. Here it is important to know that the Map is a document which was prepared somewhere before or in 18th century. On the other hand the concept used for the construction of churches is a tradition which is respected in the construction of Orthodox churches in Ethiopia.

Important cities such as Axum and Gondar in North Ethiopia were considered as holy places and for that matter the geographic location was also perceived as a reference of spiritual position in relation to other holy places and paradise¹⁷. Map of Tigre¹⁸ [fig. 1] is an evidence of such spiritual conceptualisation of space and hierarchical relationship of the same. The map shows the different districts in Tigre province and their respective position in relation to the holy city of Axum¹⁹.

The mentioned map is a circular diagram, which has three different sectors and a centre which is emphasised by a box inscribed Axum. The box is surrounded by three concentric circles; one of the inner circles contains the name of eight cardinal points, such as North, South, East, West, North-East, North-West, South-East and South-West. The top of the map is assigned for west and at the bottom east, while the North-West axis is assigned the horizontal one, i.e. south is the left end of the map and North the right side. The outer concentric circle has various segments which are assigned the name of different districts in Tigre²⁰ with respect to the centre, i.e. Axum and the cardinal points which are supposed to show their position.

The above map have little to do with the actual size and location of districts, it was rather a representation of spiritual relationship between Axum, i.e. the "*the site of a concrete action of primal place instauration*" and the districts in the same province where Axum is found. Distance, in its literal meaning seems unimportant, as all districts are organised at the same distance from the centre. However, orientation of a location with respect to cardinal points may imply how near the district is from the centre in terms of spirituality. Axum is the same place where the historical Axumite Empire once had its centre and at the same time the holiest place for the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Gondar was also considered as "*Topocosmo*" meaning "somatic image of things in cosmos"²¹, hence given an important place in Ethiopian cosmological order, representing a symbolic centre of religious, political and ritual life of the time. However, the "*Topocosmo*" nature of Gondar is reflected on the religious writings of the Gondarian time, where places in Gondar were used to interpret places in biblical stories²².

17 Interview with Archpriest Dr. Merawi Tebege. The archpriest is head of Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Germany. The interview was made on 22nd August 2008 in Cologne.

18 Tigre is a region in North Ethiopia where Axum is found.

19 Alula PANKHURST, "An early Ethiopian manuscript Map of Tigre" in Taddese Beyene (ed.), Proceedings of the eighth international conference of Ethiopian studies (Addis Ababa, The institute of Ethiopian Study, 1988) pp. 73

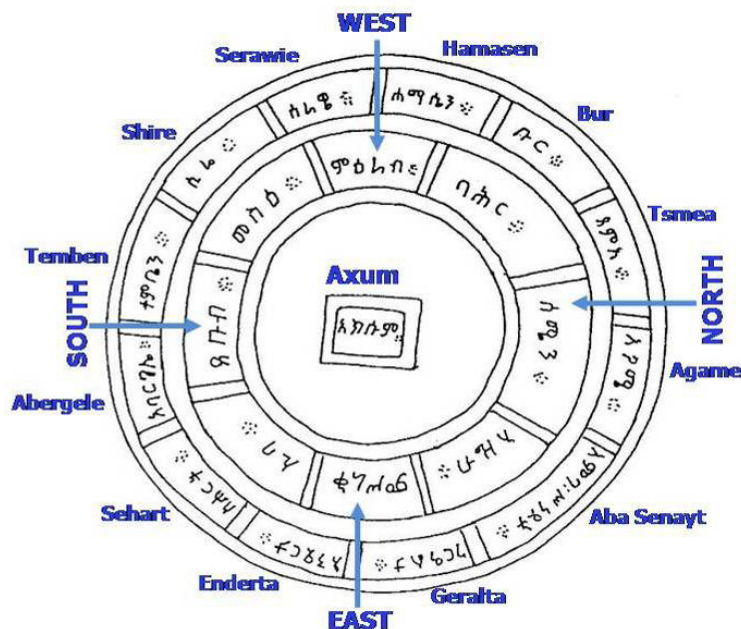
20 Tigre is in present day one of the federal states in Ethiopia.

21 Jean ROBERT, "History of space perception III, A sense of place: Some historical symbols, myths and rituals of 'placeness'" 1999, < <http://www.pudel.uni-bremant.de> > [Accessed August 6, 2008]

22 Tania TRIBE, "Place, space and representation in 18th century Gondarine painting"

[fig. 1] Map of Tigre, year unknown

Source: Adopted by the Author from Tania TRIBE, 2004:67 (see footnote no. 19)



The orientation in the map is even completely different from the one we use in present day. As it is illustrated in figure 1, the top of the map is not north but west and the rest is organised accordingly. In addition, if we try to locate some of the location name in the map, it will be difficult to fit them in a geographical Map. For instance, Hamasen (in present day Eritrea) is found exactly on the north from Axum.

It appears that the west which is written on the top of the map might have meant north. However, we find Temben in the South according the map [fig. 1] and also in reality it is also found in the south, while Agame is again found in the north in the same map and in reality in north-east. Just putting these districts in their geographical position will show that most of the districts are found in East and South-East of Axum²³.

The map is little known by people who are conversant with history of North Ethiopia and the teaching of EOC (Ethiopian Orthodox Church). However, couple of respondents attempted to discuss what they understood by such map. An interesting discussion is given by Ato Girma Getahun²⁴ who is conversant with the teachings of EOC. First of all he thinks that the map should have originated at least from the Medieval, if not as far back as the Axumite period. The reason for this conclusion is that, there are names of district on the Map such as “Bur” and “Sehart” which according to the informant belong to ancient times and are not any more in use. The second important point is the importance of “East”, because in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition this direction is assumed as being the direction where Jerusalem²⁵ is, as well as Paradise. In addition, the Map might be an interpretation of spirituality and worldview of the early church in Axumite Kingdom. Besides the existence of old monasteries and well-endowed churches in the mentioned district could only strengthen this assumption. On this respect my other respondent, Dr. Merawi²⁶ told that from his training and profession as a Priest and theologian in Ethiopian Orthodox Church, he can only attach the organisation of the map to spiritual reasons, even though there

in Joao Manuel RAMOS and Isabel BOAVIDA (ed.) The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Ethiopian Art. On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16th – 17th Centuries. Papers from the Fifth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art, Arrábida, 26 – 30 November 1999. (Hunts, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004): 67-69

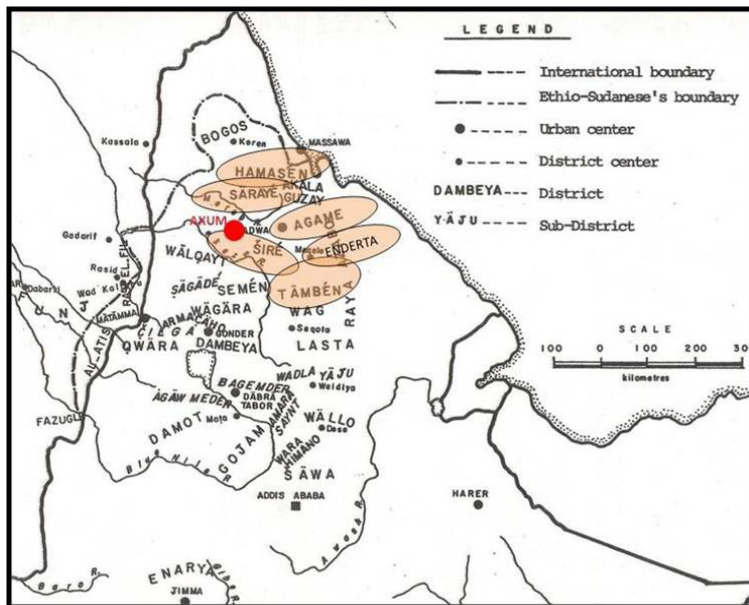
23 Shiferaw BEKELE, 1990:51 “The state in Zamana Masafent, 1786-1853” in Taddese BEYENE, Richard PANKHURST, and Shiferaw BEKELE (ed.), Kasa and Kasa, papers on the lives, times and images of Tewodros II and Yohannes IV (Addis Ababa, 1990) 25-69

24 Ato Girma Getahun, Author of Advanced Amharic Lexicon.

25 In reality Jerusalem is exactly on the North from Ethiopia.

26 Interview with Archpriest Dr. Merawi Tebege (see footnote No.17).

was little about such kind of map from his theological education. Similar to the first informant, he also stresses the hierarchical relationship of the respected Monasteries and endowed-churches in relation to each other and Axum, which is the location of the pre-eminent church of St. Mary. Very important reference is that the centre i.e. the church in Axum is the holiest place in Ethiopia and the second one, i.e. "East" which is direction of Jerusalem and Paradise. Consequently, it put the "East" as the most important position in the whole world of EOC. Actually, the priest thinks that the relationship between the districts and Axum might be based on "the Pilgrim of the 9 Saints"²⁷ from Constantinople to Axum and to the monasteries around it. The Pilgrims followed a particular pattern in their procession from Axum to establish the mentioned Monasteries around Axum and in the regions located on the map²⁸.



[fig. 2] Geographical location of some of the districts in map of Tigre

Source: Adopted from Shiferaw BEKELE, 1990:51 (see footnote no. 23)

Alula Pankhurst²⁹, however, thinks that the map was produced around 18th century based on information obtained from different sources. In addition, he stresses on the Map's similarity to ancient and medieval European map as well as Arab's cartography, which place Jerusalem and Rome in the centre in case of European and for the Arabs, the Holy city of Mecca. Considering, the early contact of the Arabs and North Ethiopia, Arab cartography might had much influence on the development of such map. Nevertheless, from the study's point of view, the most important point is the discussion on the orientation of locations on the map and in particular the importance given to East-West axis. This might help us understand the meaning of the cardinal points in spiritual world of the study area. The aforementioned author³⁰ related the emphasis given to East-West axis with the movement of the sun. However, there is no clear evidence, whether the real orientations of the districts were manipulated to fit the East-West direction with the hierarchical position of the locations in the map.

The above conclusion is not much different to the opinion of the informants³¹ on the former paragraphs, who stressed on the importance of the East orientation; however the latter attached the importance to religious belief. As a result, a district might be organised with respect to the east direction according to the position of its monastery

27 "The Pilgrim of the 13 Saints" it is a legend of 13 Saints who came from abroad to Axum in the history of Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

28 Richard PANKHURST, State and land in Ethiopian history. (Addis Ababa, The institute of Ethiopian Studies and the faculty of law, Haile Sellassie I University, 1966) pp. 22

29 Alula PANKHURST, "An early Ethiopian manuscript Map of Tigre" in Taddese Beyene (ed.), Proceedings of the eighth international conference of Ethiopian studies (Addis Ababa, The institute of Ethiopian Study, 1988) pp. 73

30 ibid: 83

31 See Footnote Nr. 17 and 24

or church in religious hierarchy, even though, the real geographical location of the district might be different from what is given on the map. In my opinion, the importance of sun's movement makes much sense. The direction of sunrise is attached to the direction of "paradise". Sunrise is a very important phenomenon for all life on earth, which makes the east, i.e. the direction of sun, as source of life. As a result, "paradise" as the most important place in Christian religion occupies the same location. Somehow it makes the light rising in the morning for giving life to the world could only come from the "paradise". This gives sun's movement highest importance and a reference point to establish hierarchical relationship between spiritual and practical world. As a result, the holiest place in the world, i.e. Jerusalem could only be found in the east, even though its geographical location is exactly north of Ethiopia.

The importance of East is still valid in the present use and meaning of Orthodox Churches in Ethiopia. The space organisation of Ethiopian Orthodox Church follows for centuries a principle which dictates the type of spaces to be included in the church, how those spaces should be arranged and used. Of course, there are different forms of churches and the circular one is one of the three types of church construction. However, all churches principally should have three different spaces inside the church and other two in the compound³². As it is sketched in figure 3, there are five different spaces which are located inside and around the church building. The core is reserved for *Kedeste Kedusan* (holy of holy), where the *Tabot* (duplicate of the Arc)³³ is kept. Except the priests nobody is allowed to enter into this place. The second space around the *Kedeste Kedusan* is called *Kedest* (sanctified) and it is where the bread and wine for Holy Communion is kept and also where the communion takes place. The third place inside the church and with lower hierarchical position in relation to the above two is *Kene Mahlet* (the place for church hymn). The *Kene Mahlet* is accessible for all church goers.

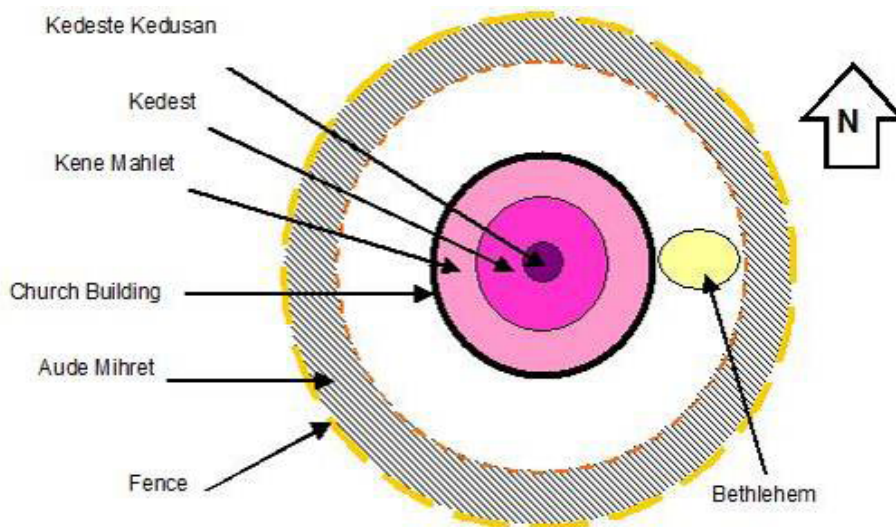
Outside the church in the compound there is the wide open space called *Aude Mihret* (platform of Mercy) and a small building called *Bethlehem*. *Aude Mihret* is open for the whole congregation to the church, regardless of their purification³⁴ status for the church's ceremony. The small building, which is called *Bethlehem*, is where the Bread and Wine for Holy Communion is prepared. Most essential point here is that *Bethlehem* is strictly located in the East side of the church's building and at lower elevation in relation to the *Kedeste Kedusan*. This is aimed to create a symbolical relationship with the birth place of Jesus in Jerusalem and also to be able to create a representative image of Jesus' life in the church's compound. That is for instance, Bethlehem is the place in Jerusalem where Jesus was born and Golgotha where he was crucified. Hence, his birth is represented through the preparation of bread and wine, i.e. Jesus' flesh and blood in *Bethlehem*, while *Kedest* is an example of Golgotha where the flesh and blood is presented for sacrifice, i.e. crucifixion³⁵.

32 Aymro WONDMAGEGNEHU and Joachim MOTOVU, *The Ethiopian orthodox church* (Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970) pp. 46-48

33 *Tabot* is a replica of Arc of Covenant and in Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition; it is the most important thing which should be there in order to establish a church.

34 Purification refers to the preparation that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church followers do in order to go to the Mass. This includes bathing and fasting from food and other earthly pleasures.

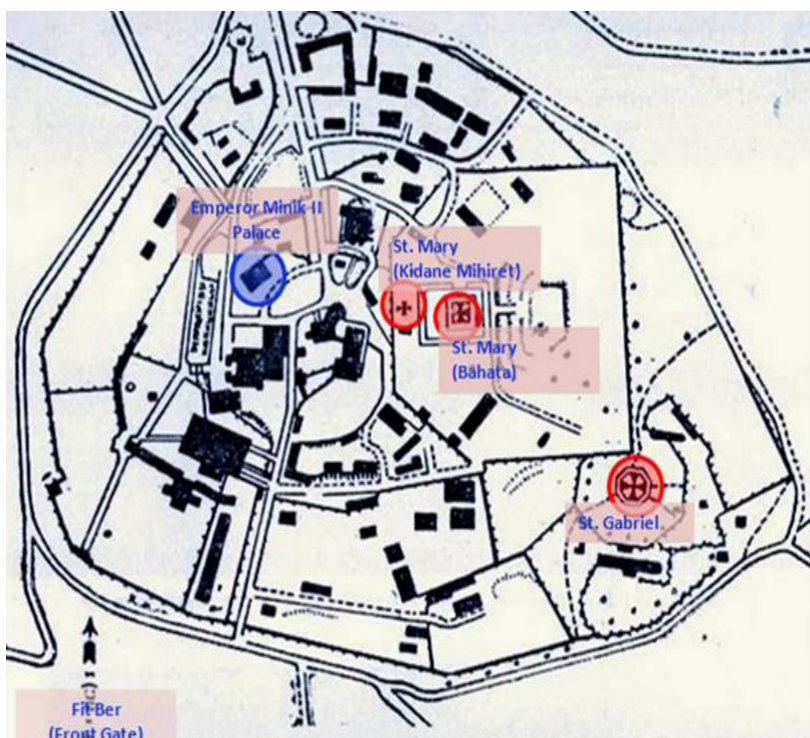
35 Aymro WONDMAGEGNEHU and Joachim MOTOVU, *The Ethiopian orthodox church* (Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970) pp. 46-48



[fig. 3] Schematic map of Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Source: Aymro WONDIMAGEGNEHU and Joachim MOTOVU, 1970:46-48 (see footnote no. 35)

The other important point in relation to religious influence of spatial organisation is that the location of church itself in a whole settlement. In most cases, churches are everywhere to find in towns of highland Ethiopia. However, according to the tradition churches are one of the components composing a royal palace. Indeed, a royal expedition had never taken place without the presence of the *Tabot*³⁶. Even high ranking military officials and other royal persons used to go to expeditions with the *Tabot* of a favourite saint or archangel. The essential point here is the location of the church or the *Tabot* which is always kept at the eastern side of the palace or Imperial tent [fig. 4]. This could be again observed in Grand Palace of Addis Ababa, where all three churches, i.e. St. Gabriel, St. Bahata and St. Mary churches are all located at the eastern side of the palace³⁷. This shows again the connotation given to the meaning of east as the highest hierarchical direction or place from religious point of view.



[fig. 4] Compound of Grand Palace, Addis Ababa

Source: Adopted from Mahitem WOLDE-MESKEL, 1962:3 (see footnote no. 37)

36 See endnote 33.

37 Mahitem WOLDE-MESKEL, *Zikire Neger* (Addis Ababa, Artistic Printers, 1962)

In conclusion, the above discussion reveals again how important the orientation toward the east as a location of “Paradise” and “Jerusalem” was to assign a location for *Bethlehem*. In second place, the relationship which is established between the core, as the holiest or the highest in spiritual hierarchy, and the periphery in both Figures, i.e. Map of Tigre and the schematic diagram of the church. Moreover, Map of Tigre demonstrates how space was understood in Ethiopian spiritual world, while the schematic map of the EOC illustrates how the religious meaning of spaces is represented in the practical world. In a way, it attempted to create a strong bond between the spiritual world and the practical one. On the other hand, in a royal compound, religion is just one of the components surrounding the centre, i.e. the political administration. It seems the importance of religion or spirituality has been reduced compared to political administration. Nevertheless, the location assigned for the church or religion is again east to the centre. This means, in my opinion, the organisation of the royal compound assigns earthly and celestial power in their respected position, i.e. political power in geographical centre of the settlement while spiritual power in its virtual centre, i.e. “east”.

Socio-Political Factors

Origin of urban centres in Ethiopian history is attached to political administration, trade and religious activities³⁸. Important urban centres however had a mixture of the above mentioned origins, with political administration being the dominant one. Particularly, the administration was the institution which had the power to design and provide the legal framework guiding overall life in the country. This means that the administration through its legal provision could influence the pattern of main activities, which are responsible for the use of space as well as the change in the physical environment. It is also necessary to notice that socio-cultural values are responsible for the type of administration and the political administration provides rules and regulation, which guide the actions reshaping the environment and when time goes by remains as a tradition affecting the values of future generation and the trend of physical development.

*Ser'ata Mengest*³⁹ or *Ser'ata Geber*⁴⁰ is one of the most important sources in demonstrating how legal provision in the tradition of North Ethiopia had affected land use. *Ser'ata Geber* provides the steps and orders of settlement which were the guidelines for putting up the royal palace and the important establishments around it. Even during expedition, there were detailed procedures how to select location for temporary camping place and the order around royal tent. As Manuel Almeida⁴¹ describes the royal camps of 15th and 16th centuries, it used to be set according to strict regulations. As highlighted in the following extract: which everybody were following. *“Of these people the Emperor, lords and ladies, captains and many of the soldiers have many tents. They pitch them in a very orderly way which is always the same. The Emperor’s tents, four or five very fine tents, are placed in the centre. A handsome open space is left and then on the left hand and on the right, before and behind, follow*

38 Mesfin WOLDE-MARIAM, “Some Aspects of Urbanization in Pre-Twentieth Century Ethiopia” in Ethiopian Geographical Journal, Vol. III, No. 2 (1965): 13-19

Acalu WOLDE-MICHAEL, “Urban Development in Ethiopia, 1889-1925” in Journal of Ethiopian Studies Vol. XI. No. 1 (1973): 1-16

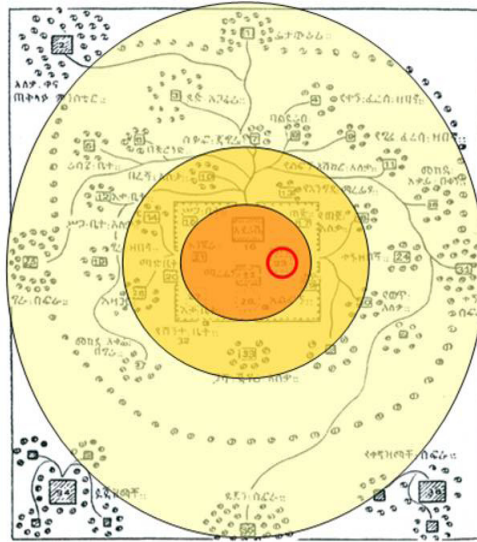
Donald CRUMMEY, “Towns in Ethiopia, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” in Ahmed ZEKARIA, Bahiru ZEWDE and Taddese BEYENE (ed.), Proceedings of the International Symposium of the Centenary of Addis Ababa, November 24 – 25, (Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1987), 1-15

39 *Ser'ata Mengest* means order of Government. See Heinrich SCHOLLER, Ethiopian constitutional and legal development, Volume II: Essays on Ethiopian legal development (Cologne, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2006) pp. 9

40 *Ser'ata Geber* means order of tasks. See Manfred KROPP, The *Ser'ata Gebr* – A mirror view of daily life of the Ethiopian Royal Court in the Middle Ages. In Taddese BEYENE (ed.), Proceedings of the eighth international conference of Ethiopian studies, Volume 1 (Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1988) 219-236

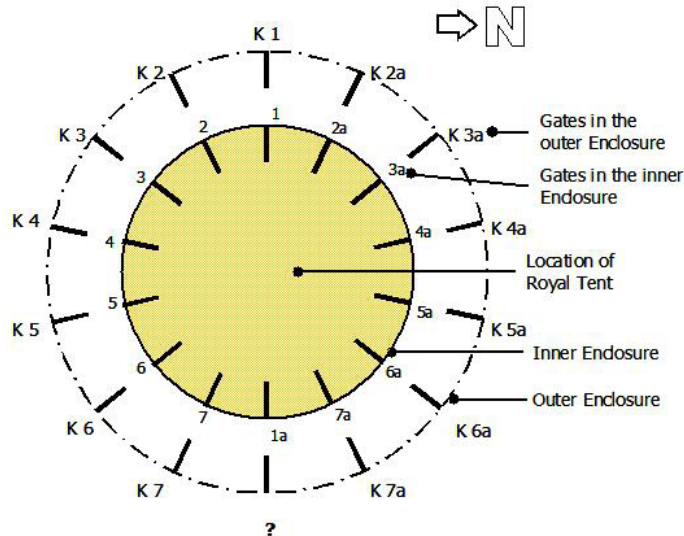
41 Manuel ALMEIDA, “The history of high Ethiopia or Abassia” in C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD (ed.), Some records of Ethiopia, 1593 – 1646 (London, Hakluyt Society, 1954) 79-80

[fig. 6] The camp of Ras Haylu at Adet in 1929
 Source: Adopted from Richard PANKHURST, 1966:111 (see footnote 28)



The third part of settlement group is the periphery surrounding the whole camping as a wall protecting the whole settlement. Military officers in the highest hierarchy are assigned a location to camp on this part of the settlement. The location where each officer and his soldiers settle represented the hierarchical relationship between the officials. For instance, the “Rases”⁴⁶ in first place are assigned in case of this map to the North but most importantly in front of the tent of the sovereign together with the officials with military title “Fitaorari” or commander of the vanguard. On the other side the rear side from the royal tent in the same settlement group is occupied by the officers with the title “Dedjatch” or commander of the get as well as a King in this case Tékléhaimanot King of Gojam⁴⁷ at the time.

[fig. 7] Enclosures of royal camp and the gates as provided by Ser'ata Mengest
 Source: Adopted from Manfred KROPP, 1988:232 (see footnote no. 49)



Similar thing is reflected on the camping of Ras Haylu Takla Haimanot at Adét⁴⁸ in 1929. In this case the “Ras” being the centre, the camping of the different officials is organised around the most important person in the centre. From the same map, it is possible to read the organisation of main parts of the camp as the highest military officers were occupying the periphery and the front in relation to the tent of the

46 “Ras” literary meaning the head, used to be the highest military title in Ethiopia.
 47 Gojam is a former province in the North-West of Ethiopia and presently part of zones in Amhara regional Government.
 48 Adét is a small Town in Amhara Region in North Ethiopia.

sovereign being the most prestigious. On the other hand, the sovereign's household, guards and courtiers are organised around the immediate surrounding of the royal tent. The front side is assigned to officers who are responsible for the gate toward the sovereign's tent, while the right side used to be reserved for the most prestigious courtiers and officers.

Beside the general order of settlement provided by the old legal document or *Ser'ata Mengest*, there was also a detailed provision how the left or right wing should have been located in the around imperial camp. In addition, the number of gates and enclosures around the royal palace was provided by the legal document. Manfred Kropp⁴⁹ discusses, how important the mentioned legal document was in organising the life of Ethiopian royal court and the use of space in the Middle Ages.

The location of the royal palace, as well as the fourteen gates around the inner and outer royal camp enclosures were a kind of organising elements for the whole settlement. Each door on the inner and outer enclosure had names which somehow indicated particular activities or status in relation to the space around the particular gate. The most prestigious gates are those in front of sovereign, which is Gate 1 in the inner enclosure and K1 in the outer enclosure. The naming given to these gates also show the importance, for instance "*Weddanash*" which had a literal meaning "precious" and *Bete-Anbasa* "House of the Lion" for Gate K1 and 1 respectively. The gate located on the rear side of the King, i.e. 1a, on the other hand is "Qwalf" which literally means the dead⁵⁰. The above mentioned prestigious gates might be in my opinion the ones that the sovereign uses for important public ceremonies. These could be justified by the principal gate or "*Fit Ber*" (front gate) of Emperor Minilik II palace (present Grand Palace) and Emperor Faciledes' palace in Gondar, which were the location where important announcements, such as public reading of proclamations and announcement of promotions of important government officials, used to be made. In addition, the path from the Faciledes palace to the "*Fit ber*" was emphasised by arches which now are in ruin. The arches used to provide emphasis to the mentioned gate. Moreover, the "*Fit Ber*" was also the gate which was directly leading to "*Jan Teke*"⁵¹ *Adebabay* (square), which was the main square of Gondar⁵².

Faciledes palace enclosure in Gondar (17th century) and Grand Palace in Addis Ababa (19th century) are good examples to understand the name of the gates in relation to land use. Though the number of gates in Faciledes palace and Grand palace enclosures reduced to twelve and eight respectively, the naming of the gates was similarly attached to the type of activities around the gate or the residence of an official who use it the most. Until the 19th century, most administration activities were attached to residential purpose as the officials use to execute their tasks from their residential place, as it is the same for the Emperor, where the palace is his residence and also the office where he used to take care of the matter of his Government.

49 Manfred KROPP, "The Ser'ata Gebr – A mirror view of daily life of the Ethiopian Royal Court in the middle ages" in Taddese BEYENE (ed.), Proceedings of the eighth international conference of Ethiopian studies, Volume 1 (Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1988) 219-236

50 On the meaning of most of the names of the Gates in the royal enclosure, I have to depend on the help of people who know Geez, which is a language used before Amharic and now just the language of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The main person translating or explaining the meaning of the mentioned Geez words were Ato Gebre Meskel Alemu, librarian in Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa University (AAU); Ato Abrha Adugna, Philologist in IES, AAU; and Prof. Richard Pankhurst, who is one of the founding member of IES and author of number of books in Ethiopian History.

51 Jan means his Excellency and Tekel planted. It is a name given to Gondar's oldest Fig tree which was planted by Emperor Faciledes at the foundation of the city. In conclusion, Jan Tekel Adebabay is the square where the Fig tree is planted and also named after the same.

52 Giorgis MELLESSA, "Gondar yesterday and today" in Ethiopian Observer (1969) 164-176

4. Conclusion

Orthodox Church was part of state in the past and the selection of location for a political capital is an essential example exhibiting the union. In my opinion, the sovereign decided where to settle or establish the capital city logically but need to demonstrate that it was God's wish. So, the monarch attaches his decision with a prophecy based on the belief that God had communicated with him through a dream, vision or sign where to settle. The above discussion showed the importance of hierarchical order in using space as well as in facilitating activities. In one side, values attached to religious belief are used to guide religious activities by determining the meaning and use of space. On the other side, values attached to socio-political administration guided the pattern of physical development and pattern of land use through administrative ordering mechanism. Such kind of approach in qualifying different location, helped in one side managing land and other properties. On the other side, it has facilitated the administration of hierarchical society. Besides, where there was a need to organise military expeditions and/or for other reasons, it was easy to secure order and coordination of a huge mobile group of people.

The other important point observed in spiritual and socio-political use and meaning of space is the clear relationship between core and the periphery. The centre being the most important, i.e. sacred or feared; yet it is difficult to say that the periphery is totally of less importance. Taking into consideration the Military organisation of most powerful divisions, such as the *Fitaurary* or the Chief of the advanced Guard and *Ras*,⁵³ they were always assigned on the border of the periphery but corresponding to the area facing Emperors principal Gate. In case of the church, the periphery could be considered partially less important as it is a place for the one who are not allowed or ready to inter the church building. Yet, *Bethlehem* is not a place less important than the other inside the church building, though it is located on the periphery of the church compound. At the same time, it is possible to appreciate the importance of orientation in both cases. The location of "*Bethlehem*" [fig 3] in the eastern side of the church's building shows its importance in the hierarchical organisation of the whole compound, while in the Military or administration organisation, the east is reserved as spiritual location. Similarly, the place on the periphery, which is oriented in front of the sovereign's tent or palace, has highest hierarchical importance next to the centre.