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ARCHITECTURAL INNOVATION OF ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Stéphane Ancel

Introduction

The claim of the continuity of traditions is the motto of all Churches. A Church is always based on tradition, but we must not forget that it is also subject to innovation. Religious institutions are first of all naturally led to adapt to the political contexts of the territories where they are established. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not different. The period of the 'Marxist' military junta (the *derg*, between 1974 and 1991), for example, forced the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to adapt its organization and official discourse.¹ It first invented a new form of administration – the parish council organization – to face the economic and social challenges raised by the revolutionary regime. It has also changed part of its discourse, on society and its objectives, harmonizing it with that of political power.

If it is subject to political changes, a Church also evolves because of the religious plurality existing on its territory. Of course, the authorities of religious institutions are reluctant to admit the influences they may be subject to from other religions. Identifying, for example, the 'Pentecostalization' of Catholics in Brazil required a deep analysis of discourses of the institution and the highlighting of the reintroduction of the miracle, exorcism and thaumaturgy in Brazilian Catholics practices.² In other fields of research, it has been shown that the relations between different religious institutions, present on the same territory, have generated a 'co-construction in which each party models its own identity because of the other'.³ If Churches innovate because of contacts with other religious institutions, can we see the impact on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church?

I present here a phenomenon that raises questions: since the early 2000s, Orthodox cathedrals have been appearing all over the Ethiopian territory. As I will show, this phenomenon undeniably characterizes an innovation within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. But does this phenomenon also reflect an adaptation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the Ethiopian religious context?

Cathedrals in Ethiopia

From the 16th century onwards, the Orthodox churches in Ethiopia adopted a circular plan in most parts of the territory of the Kingdom of Ethiopia, sometimes with an octagonal

[Page 496] variant.⁴ These circular churches consisted of two concentric aisles (called *qeddest* and *qene mahlet*) encircling a square chamber, the central sanctuary (the *meqdes*). Today, these circular churches still represent the overwhelming majority of churches in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, areas that represent the historic heart of the ancient Christian kingdom. The current Tigray State-Region is, however, an exception. Since the 16th century, the majority of the churches here have adopted a rectangular plan, oriented from east to west. The division of the different spaces (*meqdes*, *qeddest* and *qene mahlet*) was, however, similar to that of the circular churches.

Today, after arriving at Addis Ababa International Airport, travellers on their way to the city centre are sure to notice the huge church erected in the middle of the new business district adjacent to the airport. The Bole cathedral Medhane Alem ('Saviour of the World') has indeed impressive dimensions: its nave has ca. 70 metres length, 25 metres width. Consecrated in 2004, the church stands in the centre of nearly five hectares of land and the height of its towers competes with those of the new buildings in this thriving and growing district. In addition to its gigantic dimensions, this church stands out because it does not adopt the circular or rectangular plan of later churches. Although it is oriented from east to west, it follows a basilical plan and has a very wide nave, unlike the older churches. Besides, the nave is topped by a large dome with lantern and two wide porches mark the southern (for women) and northern (for men) entrances.

The Bole Medhane Alem cathedral in Addis Ababa is not an isolated case. Since the early 2000s, the Ethiopian cities and countryside have been covered with huge churches having a basilical plan and monumental size. All of these huge churches are called 'cathedrals' (*katedral* in Amharic) by the local population. They all consist of a wide nave, one or two domes and one or more towers serving as a bell tower or lantern. The Tseha Tseyon Abemba Maryam cathedral in Debre Marqos is an example of it. Consecrated in 2004, it has ca. 50 metres length and 20 metres width. A more recent one, dedicated to Gabriel, can be seen at Meqele (Tigray Region capital city), standing in front of both the stadium and the Martyr's memorial monument. It has 65 metres length and 35 metres width. The city of Addigrat also hosts one, dedicated to Medhane Alem. Many other examples can be given. While many Ethiopian cities are now home to at least one of them, it is possible to see large churches with the same characteristics being erected in villages. This process is indeed spreading to the countryside. The circular plan is gradually being abandoned in favour of churches with a basilical plan, offering a wider nave to the faithful. In some cases, the new church is built close to the old church, which is preserved. In others, the old church is partially destroyed and rebuilt according to the new design, preserving only the old central sanctuary. This phenomenon changes the Ethiopian landscape: these churches leave their mark on the urban and rural landscapes and put their shadows on the public space. The sacred space, in its Orthodox Christian definition, is visible from afar and to all, whether one is faithful to Orthodoxy, Protestantism or Islam.

Haile Selassie's Cathedrals

However, if we look at recent history, the construction of this type of church is not really a new phenomenon. From the beginning of his reign, Haile Selassie (1930–1974) had churches built with the same architectural characteristics. Shortly after his coronation in Addis Ababa in 1930, the monarch ordered the construction of a new church, dedicated to the Trinity.⁵ The construction was completed in 1944 and the church was consecrated as Qeddest Sellase ('Holy Trinity'). This new church had a basilical plan and had a wide nave with a dome over

[Page 497] the transept. The Qeddest Sellase church in Addis Ababa is usually considered to be the first example of new church architecture in Ethiopia. But another church of this type had been erected a few years earlier, still in Addis Ababa. Indeed, the Coptic metropolitan of Ethiopia, Qerellos (1929–1950), had a large church built on the land where his chancellery was established. In 1932, the work was completed and the church was named Qeddest Maryam ('Holy Mary'). It had a basilica shape, with two domes, one over the nave, the other over the transept. During the 1960s, Haile Selassie decided to replace some churches in Addis Ababa as well as in the provinces according to the new architectural model. Thus, the churches Qeddu Estifanos ('Saint Stephen') and Debre Negwedwed Qeddu Yohannes ('Saint John, son of thunder') were rebuilt in Addis Ababa. A new church dedicated to Medhane Alem, on the road to Entoto, also featured the latest architectural innovations. Outside Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie ordered the construction of a new church in Qullubi, between Dire Dawa and Harar, as well as another for the monastery of Debre Libanos, which were completed in 1962 and 1963, respectively. At last, a brand new church was also built in 1965 in Aksum next to the old Aksum Maryam Tseyon. In this particular case, the architecture took a fundamentally modernist turn: although it had a very wide rectangular nave, the church was entirely covered by a huge dome.

Thus, the reign of Haile Selassie undeniably saw the emergence of churches with new architectural features. But we must notice that not just any church was concerned: indeed, these new churches responded to a political and memorial need. The bond uniting the monarch, his family and the memory of old and recent political events were glorified in these churches. Qeddest Sellase was dedicated to his own memory, that of his family and his actions before and during the Italian occupation of the country; Aksum Maryam Tseyon embodied the starting point of the centuries-old bond uniting the monarchy, the Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian people; through the church of Qullubi, Haile Selassie revived the memory of his father while promoting a national identity through one of the few religious sites bringing together the two main religious communities of the country (Orthodoxy and Islam); and the construction of the new church of Debre Libanos symbolically renewed the alliance between the monastery and the royal power to promote the ecclesiastical independence of Ethiopia. In fact, when, in 1951, it was necessary to choose a clergyman as the first Ethiopian archbishop in history, and thus end the tutelage of the Coptic Church, the then abbot of Debre Libanos was chosen. The church of Medhane Alem was built to house an altar (*tabot*) that had followed the royal family to England during his exile and thus was intended to recall the sacramental continuation in exile. And the church dedicated to Yohannes was rebuilt in honour of his son, Prince Makonnen, who died in 1957.

However, another factor motivated these constructions: the desire to introduce a new concept of modernity and aesthetics in the country. This desire was clearly expressed in the case of the Estifanos church in Addis Ababa. This church was founded by Menelik. But despite its relatively recent construction, Haile Selassie decided to rebuild it in the 1960s. Indeed, it was now located near the Africa Hall, built in 1961 and headquarters of the OAU since 1963, and thus in the middle of a brand new neighbourhood. The reason for its reconstruction was prosaically explained in 1965 by the Ethiopian Tourist Organization as the need for 'a contemporary style of architecture in harmony with the modern buildings and the wide roads surrounding it'.⁶ In other words, the modernism of the new district ordered Haile Selassie to adopt a new design for the church in accordance with the new aesthetic canons in force in the city. The basilica-type churches built at the time were therefore not only seen as new and grandiose for the people of that time, but above all as 'modern'. The leaders of the Orthodox Church fully embraced this modernism: the latter was in line with

[Page 498] the establishment of the new Patriarchal administration introduced between 1951 and 1959, an administrative process also seen as ‘modern’. In 1968, a small book celebrating the ninth anniversary of the consecration of the first Patriarch of Ethiopia drew a parallel between the evolution of the shape of the churches, the rise of the Ethiopian Patriarch and the ‘modernization’ of the administration of the Orthodox Church.⁷ However, it took several years before a Patriarch had a church to build with the new designs. In 1973, Patriarch Tewofelos (1970–1976) consecrated the Gofa Gäbre’él church in Addis Ababa. The shape of this church, although very close to those already built by Haile Selassie, was still seen as innovative by the population. Newspapers of the time emphasized that it was a ‘church with a modern form’.⁸

However, none of its new churches built at the time were called ‘cathedral’, except for one: Qeddest Sellase in Addis Ababa. It should be remembered that the concept of ‘cathedral’ in Ethiopia did not exist before. No church was designated by a term that came close to the meaning of ‘cathedral’ (episcopal see). Some foreign scholars had taken the liberty of calling some Ethiopian churches ‘cathedrals’ (Conti Rossini about Aksum Tseyon,⁹ or Zervos about Qeddu Giyorgis in Addis Ababa¹⁰), but it was only a means of making their readers understand the symbolic importance of these churches. It was not a reflection of an ecclesiastical reality. Haile Selassie introduced the term ‘cathedral’ in Ethiopia but this term was only used to refer to the Sellase church. The term thus lost its ecclesiastical meaning, Selassie not having become the church of the Patriarch (Qeddest Maryam was still the Patriarch’s one). On the contrary, it served to distinguish the main royal church of the country. It should be noticed, however, that two of the new churches built at these times received a special title. In 1962, the new church in Qullebi received the title *re’sse adebrat*, meaning ‘chief of the main churches (debr)’.¹¹ In 1965, when it was inaugurated, the new church Maryam Şeyon in Aksum was called *re’sse adebrat wagadamat*, i.e. ‘chief of the main churches and monasteries’.¹² These churches, nationally important and with a strong symbolic impact, were certainly placed symbolically above the simple churches of the country. But undeniably, they were not put on the same level as the Sellase cathedral. The role of Sellase cathedral in the 1950s and 1960s confirmed its unique position. All national and international celebrations were held in this church. It would be a mistake to think that this church symbolized the power of the orthodox patriarchate. The Patriarch had no power over the clergy of Qeddest Sellase. The appointment of the *liqe seltanat*, the head of this church, was exclusively dependent on royal power. Moreover, the *liqe seltanat* competed with the Patriarch in directing the affairs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the rivalry between him and the patriarchate poisoned the life of the institution until the revolution of 1974.¹³ The notion of ‘cathedral’ thus remained only attached to Qeddest Sellase and only attached to royal power.

An innovation adopted by the faithful

Unsurprisingly, the military junta, in rule from 1974 to 1991, stopped the construction of newly shaped church in the country. Few churches were repaired and only small ones could be built. In addition to the lack of financial means, the political climate was not favourable to a large-scale construction policy. On the one hand, the military junta deeply reformed the administration of the Orthodox Church, placing officials linked to the new regime at its head and making the institution a docile and discreet ally. On the other hand, all religious practices were discouraged. Although not prohibited, major religious celebrations were only tolerated if fully supervised by members of the new regime. During this period, Qeddest Sellase continued to be the only church called a ‘cathedral’.

[Page 499] A few years after the fall of the military junta in 1991, however, a semantic change is perceptible. During the 2000s, authors of publications concerning the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its recent history assimilated the term ‘cathedral’ to the sole architectural characteristics of a church. For example, Gofa Gäbre’él church in Addis Ababa was called a ‘cathedral’ (still presented as a church with modern architectural features),¹⁴ whereas, as we have seen, it was only perceived as a simple church when it was inaugurated by Patriarch Tewofelos in 1973. The use of the term ‘cathedral’ became more widespread.

In 2001, in the town of Debre Marqos (Gojjam), work on the construction of a new church was already well advanced on the plot of the Abemma Maryam church. That year, the clergy of this church published a small booklet whose objective was to explain the progress of the work and thus to encourage financial donations from the faithful.¹⁵ Although still under construction, the name of the new church was already fixed: yäTserha Tseyon Abemma Maryam katédral. Significantly, the little booklet did not propose a definition of the term ‘cathedral’. The future church was simply described as ‘the new modern church’. It is clear that the term ‘cathedral’ here was only used to define architectural features. The little booklet also tells us an interesting fact: the decision to build a new ‘modern’ church is said to have been taken in 1989 by the parishioners themselves. The diocese had virtually no role in this decision, other than to endorse it. The parishioners and clergy set up a committee to prepare and supervise the construction and to raise the funds. Elected by the parishioners, the 28 members of this committee were all lay people, with only three exceptions: the ecclesiastical leader of the church and two priests. During the time of the works, the diocese, which has its seat in the city, interfered very little in the affairs of the parish. Its role was limited to approving its annual budget, as it did for all the parishes of the diocese. The decision and supervision of the construction of the cathedral was therefore a purely local and parochial process.

This parish independence was possible, thanks to the new form of church administration. In 1978, the patriarchate launched a major reform of the parishes. From now on, each parish was required to have an assembly of parishioners. Hailed as an instrument of ‘democratization’,¹⁶ this assembly had to elect the members of the parish council in charge of the financial management. Each year, the diocese had to evaluate the parish budget, and the parish was responsible for giving a percentage of this income to the central authority. The reform also imposed that each individual would henceforth depend on only one parish and would pay an annual contribution to benefit free religious services. This reform had two aims: the first was to rationalize the collection of donations to the Church, which had become its unique financial source since the 1975 agrarian reform; the second was to centralize ecclesiastical administration by providing the dioceses a right of control over the accounts of the parishes. This reform was a success. At first, the collection of funds from the parishes permitted the Church to recover in spite of a political context that was not favourable to it. Second, the reform allowed the patriarchate to centralize the decision at the national level and to have the means to impose it locally. But paradoxically, this reform, which wanted to reinforce the centralization of the administration, also led to the reinforcement of the parish identity and the decision-making independence of the parishioners. Previously, a believer could bound himself to one or more churches, without geographical constraints, and thus distribute his donations according to his personal preferences. The reform, on the contrary, tied (in the strong sense of the word) the faithful to one church. The religious associations that animated the life of a church now recruited their members only from families living in a specific territory. The confessors, which each family needed for different rituals (baptism of children, funerals, etc.), could only be priests from their parish. The bonds between the

[Page 500] faithful and their parish were in fact considerably strengthened, especially in the city where, before the reform, the faithful could easily follow and participate in the celebrations of different churches. The strengthening of the parish identity and the ‘democratic’ aspect of the appointment of the members of the parish council meant that the latter gained considerable local power. In fact, the diocese could not oppose the decisions of the parish council without immediately engaging in a tough fight with the parishioners. Indeed, if the parish gave its annual percentage and its budget was validated, nothing allowed the diocese to interfere in its internal affairs. The parish of Tserha Tseyon Abemma Maryam in Debre Marqos raised enough funds to build ‘its’ cathedral. The faithful of the parish paid according to their means. Those from the parish, but living in Addis Ababa or abroad, were also solicited. Once the funds were raised, no outsider could really oppose the work, whether he represented the patriarchate or the state.

The term ‘cathedral’ did not suppose any ecclesiastical meaning. It even lost its memorial and national value. From then on, it was a purely architectural term. Nevertheless, thanks to its architectural characteristics, a ‘cathedral’ had an important symbolic significance for the parish community. It is sure that these new churches, financed by the faithful themselves, aimed at expressing the religious fervour of the members of the parish community. Because of their ostentatious features (large size, bell towers, domes), these churches project the pride and devotion of the parish members on the surroundings. The aim was not to glorify an ancient site or an important local history: most of these churches were not located on remarkable religious sites, like Şerha Şeyon Abemma Maryam church in Debre Marqos or the Bole church in Addis Ababa. The latter does not glorify a prestigious past but the opulence of the inhabitants of Bole district.

However, we may wonder whether the ostentatious characteristics (monumental size, decorations) of these churches were the only ones that explain their success among the faithful. Of course, economic elements can also explain the proliferation of these churches. The materials used for construction were widely available; manpower was also available and construction times were thus considerably reduced; and the Ethiopian state having now allowed Ethiopians living abroad to invest in Ethiopia, a new source of finance has emerged in the parishes.

Some liturgical innovations?

Did these churches bring about a change in religious practices? The construction of this new type of church was considered by some to be a necessity as the Ethiopian population was growing quickly.¹⁷ As we have seen, this argument does not work for the Haile Selassie period. Nor does it seem to be totally convincing for the recent period. First of all, let us note that these churches were built on territories already well provided with churches. Second, the size of the churches was never totally conditioned by the number of faithful living in a territory, but rather by the number of them receiving the Eucharist.

The plan of a round-shaped church traditionally consisted of three concentric spaces that defined three stages from the most sacred (the sanctuary, *meqdes*) to the most profane (*qeddest*, and then *gene mahlet*). Nevertheless, the church’s limits did not stop at the walls of the building. There was a fourth space, represented by the open-air area between the building and an outer wall. The vast majority of the faithful attended the ceremonies within this very area, and not within the church itself. Indeed, not everyone could have access to the interior spaces of the church, and this was not related to a problem of available place. Attending Mass inside the church building inevitably meant receiving the Eucharist. And receiving the

[Page 501] Eucharist without being sufficiently purified could damage the very body of Christ. So, a candidate for the Eucharist had to make sure, and thus reassure the priests, of his spiritual purity. Entering and attending Mass in the building therefore presupposed beforehand a specific spiritual preparation made up of prayers and fasts. This was why the compound surrounding the church served as an open-air nave in which the vast majority of the men and women of the parish stood, separately.

Thus, new cathedrals provide a major innovation: a large nave allowing the gathering of a larger number of faithful. The division between sacred and profane spaces is preserved, as is the separation between men and women, as well as the west-east orientation of the building. The liturgy has not undergone any major changes either: the consecration of the Eucharist is still made out of sight of the faithful and its distribution takes place outside the sanctuary. During the celebration of Mass, the faithful stand in the wide nave. Separated from them, the chanters stand just in the front row of the nave, marking the space known as the *qene mahlet*. The priests distribute the Eucharist to the faithful in a space between the *qene mahlet* and the few steps leading to the sanctuary: here is now the *qeddest*. The separation of the faithful from the chanters is another innovation. Above all, however, it should be noted that in these new cathedrals, the place of priests has been considerably reduced and that the most sacred spaces are narrowing, while the most profane spaces are growing dramatically.

Certainly, the architecture of these great cathedrals reflects the new expectations of the faithful. Indeed, the place of the parishioners is now crucial in the organization of the church, thanks to the parish councils. Symbolically, their place in the church building is in line with this new role. There is no clear evidence so far that the criteria for access to the Eucharist have become more flexible. One should however wonder whether the construction of large naves might not represent an innovation based both on the need to show the widest possible community of the faithful and on the aspiration of the faithful to participate more actively in the liturgy. In a context of intense religious competition, especially with the evangelical movements, do these new cathedrals represent the 'orthodox reaction' to the new religious expectations of the Ethiopian Christian population?

An adaptation to the religious context

The political situation in Ethiopia totally changed after the fall of the military junta in 1991. The separation of church and state, established as early as 1974, was of course maintained. But the Ethiopian constitution of 1995 insisted on several points: religious non-discrimination, the absence of a state religion, freedom of worship and the absolute absence of state interference in the affairs of religious institutions. In fact, religion re-emerged in the Ethiopian public space. Religious institutions (Muslim, Protestant and Orthodox) could, without limit, encourage the religiosity of their faithful.¹⁸ The opening of new places of worship increased and religious ceremonies gathered a large number of faithful. The evangelical and Protestant movements, which had been particularly badly treated by the military junta, were now very successful, so much so that they recruited from the faithful of the Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Indeed, the latter started to see these movements as its main rivals.

This new religious context played an important role in the evolution of the Orthodox, Muslim and Evangelical institutions. As Terge Østebø said, 'while [Orthodox, Muslim and Evangelical movements] are clearly separate communities, they remain entangled in the way that they are all affected by developments in each of them'.²⁰ Undeniably, the politics engaged by one of the movements lead mechanically to a reaction from the others. The religious context now allows for proselytism, large religious manifestations and the incredible

[Page 502] multiplication of places of worship. These phenomena, as Østebø explained, encourage each of the religious institutions to introduce protective measures in order to preserve their religious space. Polemics between Muslims, Orthodox and Evangelicals increase and the ‘acoustic war’, i.e. the loudspeaker competition between religious institutions in Ethiopia, is declared in most Ethiopian cities.²¹ Each religious ceremony is a pretext for a wave of sound in order to flood the public space with songs and clamours coming from the clergy and the faithful. Orthodox cathedrals offer an ideal position for loudspeakers: perched on top of high towers and domes, they control the sound environment of the neighbourhood. Similarly, the construction of cathedrals enabled the Orthodox to cope with the mushrooming of mosques and Protestant churches across the country. It is no coincidence that the cathedral dedicated to Gabriel in Maqale was built right in front of a mosque that had just been completed. By its dimensions, an Orthodox cathedral marks the urban landscape and imposes the Orthodox sacred space on everyone, whatever their faith. In this way, the Orthodox Church symbolically reminds other religions that it has claims on the Ethiopian religious space; in other words, it asserts itself as the main and oldest religious institution in the country.

On the other note, Protestant and Evangelical movements allow a much more performative religiosity during celebrations, and offer a very conservative discourse on daily life, especially on the most trivial subjects. Undeniably, this seduced some of the Orthodox faithful. Having clearly identified the danger, the Orthodox clergy and faithful adapted the Church’s discourse to include issues related to daily life and the challenges posed by the country’s new religious landscape. The publications of the Mahbara qeddussan association bear witness to this process: they offer, for example, advice on how to associate religiosity with daily modern life and advice on sexuality, but also, they do sharp criticism of other religions and provide commentaries and explanations of theological writings. The proliferation of Sunday schools also represents an innovative movement dedicated to changing the religiosity of Orthodox faithful. These schools promote a more performative religiosity, associating collective singing and dancing. These songs and dances permit the occupation of the public space by the faithful at each celebration. Thus, it is clear that the new religious context has led the Orthodox Church to put the faithful and their daily life at the centre of the institution’s attention, whereas previously the continuity of gestures and rituals had priority. As the faithful have a new place both in the discourse and in the celebrations, the building of a wide nave takes on a new meaning: previously exiled outside, the faithful are now accommodated in an indoor and comfortable space that is sufficiently wide and close enough to the sanctuary, in which the maximum, at least in theory, of them can gather.

Notes

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- 8 "የመካነ ሀይማኖት ቅዱስ ገብርኤል ቤተ ክርስቲያን ሥራ ሊተናቀቅ ነው." ዜና ቤተ ክርስቲያን, 29 *hedar* 1966 EC(December 8, 1973).
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