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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 山形, 孝夫 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002969

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The Monasteries of the Blue Nile: The Circular World of Africa¹⁾

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PROLOGUE

The town of Bahir Dar is located on the southern coast of Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, about one and a half hours by light plane from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. The airplane glides like a bird over the highlands of Ethiopia 2,000 to 2,500 m above sea level.

I conducted my first survey at Lake Tana in September 1989, just at the end of the rainy season. The highlands were lush with greenery as far as the eye could see, and the round thatched roofs of houses appeared in clusters like mushrooms sprouting from the carpet of greenery. It was a remarkable sight. This, in retrospect, was my introduction to the round houses of Ethiopia²⁾ (Yamaguchi 1974: 45-67).

The airplane flew over a veritable sea of *tef* ready for harvest. *Tef* (*Eragrostis tef* (Zucc.) Trotter) is the grain used to make *injera*, the traditional staple food of the Ethiopian people. Ethiopia seems to be the only country in the world where this grain is consumed on a regular basis. The *tef* grain is extremely small. In fact, about 100 kernels are equivalent in weight to a single wheat kernel. It is nevertheless highly nutritious, containing some six or seven times as much iron and three times as much calcium as wheat.

Ethiopia has its own unique traditional calendar. New Year's Day is September 11 and is referred to by the people of Ethiopia as *addis amat* (new year) or *hadeshu amat* (holy year).

New Year's Day on September 11 and the *Maskal* on September 26 are Ethiopia's two great festivals³⁾ (Ullendorff 1956). The celebrations begin on the eve of the actual festival. Families cover the earthen floors of their houses with fresh grass, slaughter one sheep per house, and then light a bonfire and wait for the arrival of the holy new year. Children form a circle around the fire and dance. This is one of the traditional features of the Ethiopian new year. After a while, two of the dancers come out of the circle toward each other and the rest of the children beat time with their hands. Then drums join in the rhythm and the dancers begin to move feverishly, holding their hands on their hips and twisting their bodies and pointing the right and then the left shoulder at each other. The dancing procession

then weaves through the lanes of the town, moving from house to house and continuing until dawn.

In the natural calendar, New Year's Day marks the border between the rainy season and the dry season. For farmers, the new year comes like a call to the fields to harvest the *tef* and plant new seeds. This is based on the knowledge among the farming community that the dry season is certain to come and that preparations must be made for it in advance. Indeed, after the arrival of the dry season, the farmland that was once covered in greenery becomes a scorched and rocky semi-desert that refuses cultivation.

Two-thirds of the farmland on the Ethiopian highlands is said to be located on sloping property more than 2,000 m above sea level. The farmers plant *tef*, barley, maize, beans, and other crops directly on the sloping land. Skillfully dodging stones and pebbles, they dig furrows with ox-drawn plows and push soil over the planted seeds. The reason why they do not remove them is that the stones prevent the loss of topsoil when torrential rains assail the Ethiopian highlands.

In any case, these torrential rains mercilessly scrape off the topsoil and leave behind countless numbers of rocks. Since the depth of the soil is only about thirty centimeters, the farmers' labors are devoted to the struggle of coaxing produce from this barren land.

The Blue Nile comes into sight as the airplane approaches the airport at Bahadahl. During the rainy season, the river looks like a giant snake writhing across the face of the earth. The overflow from Lake Tana follows the canyon dividing the Ethiopian highlands from east to west and roars over ridges and sends up clouds of spray in its search for lower ground. The water then stretches out in tentacles, eroding the red soil like a living breathing reptile. The effect is enhanced by the brownish-red color of the water, which gives the rivulets the ferocity of tongues of fire. This is the Blue Nile during the rainy season. The people of Ethiopia refer to the torrent as *tisissat* or "water that smokes." The smoke becomes a colossal mass of water that pushes southward, turning to the west and then meandering into the vast dry regions of the Sudan.

The huge Lake Tana has an area of 3,673 km². Since ancient times the people of Ethiopia have believed that a fearsome monster lives in the depths of the lake. The fact that this monster is always portrayed as a snake makes me wonder if the sight of the Blue Nile during the rainy season perhaps gave rise to the legend. It was to see the monasteries around this haunted lake that I came all the way from Japan.

THE MONASTERIES AT LAKE TANA

Ura-Kindanemeret monastery

It takes about a half an hour by car from the small, quiet airport to the town of Bahir Dar. The colorful feathers of resting waterfowl of various sizes are visible in

the shade of the tall papyrus reeds growing in clusters along the shore of the lake. Suddenly, a bird falls like a stone out of the sky, plummeting directly toward the surface of the water. The blueness of sky and water meanwhile forms a seamless sheet of color that seems to stretch away endlessly.

Cape Zege protrudes from the south shore of this enormous lake like a verdant finger of land pointing out to the water. On the summit of a tree-studded hill at the end of the cape stands Ura-Kindanemeret Monastery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The monastery was built in 1682 during the reign of King Itas I of Gondar and has survived through innumerable twists and turns of history to the present day. According to legend, however, the monastery traces its origins to the year 335 in the reign of King Ezana. According to Ethiopian tradition, Christianity was introduced at the time of two brothers with the symbolic names of Abreha (he who has made light) and Asbeha (he who has brought about dawn) in the Axumite Kingdom of northern Ethiopia. These two brothers came to Lake Tana to spread the teachings of Christianity and laid the foundations of Tana Kirkos there. The church continued to serve as a base for missionary work and as a political center for the Christian country until the beginning of the sixteenth century (Ullendorff 1960, Aymro 1965).

What brought this to the verge of collapse was the Muslim invasion of the sixteenth century. According to historical records, Muslim armies based in Harar and led by Ahmad Gragn (1506–1543) invaded central Ethiopia during the 1530s and caused the fires of war to spread through the country. It was a so-called *jihad* (holy war). Churches were burned down. Most of the monastery buildings at Lake Tana were also burned to the ground. It was not until 1541 when Christian forces led by King Galawdewos (1522–1559) and bolstered by the Catholic armies of Portugal drove the Muslims out of the area. Gragn died in the battle at Lake Tana and the hostilities finally subsided (Pankhurst 1955, Ullendorff 1960).

Built in the seventeenth century, the present monastery is a reproduction of the ancient institution. The complex consists of a church with a thatched roof, two inner galleries circumscribing a central sanctuary, and independent thatched monks' huts scattered around the periphery. There seem to be twenty or thirty of these huts, but the exact number could not be confirmed. This is because the huts are shielded from outside view by tall fences and hedges. In reality, however, there are other reasons which I will discuss later.

The thatched roof of the church forms a huge cone, with a *maskal* (cross) protruding from the top. Inside, the church is an enormous circular hall of wooden construction with the *mukdas* (sanctuary) at the center. Visitors take their shoes off at the front entrance. They then look up to see the inner surface of the thatched roof, the woven grass giving it the look of the inner surface of a Zen monk's bamboo hat. A series of supporting beams point up powerfully from the circumference toward the center of the ceiling. The walls are made of dried mud. Enclosed by these walls, the air in the church is chilly and stagnant as in a cave.

The monk's huts are scattered irregularly around the church along with communal facilities such as a dining hall, stable for domestic animals and an archives vault that serves as a simple warehouse. The church at the center of the monastery and the surrounding monks' huts differ greatly in two respects with the Coptic monasteries in the Egyptian desert.

First of all, the Coptic church is basilican in style, a feature that becomes more and more obvious the older the building. By contrast, the Ethiopian church is circular and centralized. In particular, the circular structures circumscribing the sanctuary in two concentric circles are unique features of the Ethiopian church.

The second difference is the style of the monk's living space. In the Coptic monastery, monks' cells developed as a cluster surrounded by high castle-like walls, and this style continues to the present day. In Ethiopia, however, the monks' huts display an almost totally scattered or independent arrangement, and the area of each hut is clearly demarcated and isolated from the others by high fences or hedges.

What are the origins of these differences and lack of continuity? In view of the communication between the two churches for almost a millennium from the fourth century, these differences are not merely surprising but in fact seem to be very strange.

The present article looks deeply into the question of what historical facts and experiences lie behind the above differences, and I think that my reasons for choosing "the circular world of Africa" as a subtitle will become clear as I discuss the problem in the second section.

Kebran Gabriel monastery

This monastery is located on a tiny island in Lake Tana about one hour by boat from the waterfront. All I could see across the blue surface of the water was an occasional reed boat floating on the waves. The panorama reminded me that Lake Tana is ten times as vast as Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan.

As the boat entered an inlet on the island, I noticed an old man in a white robe, obviously a monk, watching us from behind a stand of trees and holding a cross in his right hand. When the boat arrived, I made a greeting in Amharic and asked the monk for assistance through a guide. From there we walked slowly up the path toward the church at the top of the hill, talking and enjoying the view. The path cut through a natural forest of *acacia*, *eucalyptus* and deciduous trees. The monk identified himself as of an Amhara tribe. Although there are eighty or more ethnic groups speaking different languages in Ethiopia, the Amhara and Tigre, most of whom are Christian, populate the central highland region around Lake Tana and comprise about one-third of the total national population. These people are the proudest and most powerful in Ethiopia. The pride comes from the firm belief that the nation's founder, Menilek I (the legendary founder of the Solomonic Dynasty in 1000 B.C.) is the son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba and, in addition, that the Amhara and Tigre are the chosen peoples of God. It is a fact that, on the basis of

that belief, these people have created their own unique culture and maintained a position of control in Ethiopia for centuries. In the time of King Ezana in the fourth century A.D., ancestors of the present Amhara and Tigre accepted Christianity and in the fifth century went on to undertake projects such as the Ge'ez translation of the Bible and the Book of Liturgy⁴), making the central highlands the cradle of the highest level of culture in Ethiopia. Moreover, the form of Christianity that persists among them to this day is entirely different from that introduced by European missionaries in other parts of Africa. I was deeply impressed by these peoples, with their auburn skin, slender build, energetic attitude, and eyes that seem a little too big for their faces.

The path through the forest was blocked intermittently by torn branches or fallen trees that had been split right down the middle by bolts of lightning. I pressed up the path toward the summit, pushing away the branches, breathing the mountain air softened by night dew and almost losing my step several times on stones protruding from the clay. To the side there were thatched huts surrounded by small farm plots where maize and another unfamiliar plant were growing amid green vegetables. "Those are coffee seedlings," said the monk guiding the way. The huts seemed to be residences for the monks and the plots their individual territories. Looking more closely I saw huts here and there surrounded by fences but strangely bereft of any sign of human habitation.

Arriving at the top of the slope and passing through a wooden door, I suddenly came into a bright open space at the center of which stood a church with a round thatched roof. A *maskal* cross protruded from the pinnacle of the roof. It was a circular space similar to that at Ura-Kindanemeret monastery.

Inside the church, a faded fresco of the high priest Yohannes killing a serpent remained on the earthen wall. The wall itself was broken down in places by dampness and age.

The story of Yohannes goes back to the fourteenth century. A lone monk is said to have rowed out to the uninhabited island in a reed boat. Until then the island had been feared and avoided by the local people who believed that it was home to a diabolic serpent. The monk, whose name was Yohannes, waded without any weapon into the deep forest of the island where the huge trees cast a dark shade even in daytime. The rumor about the serpent proved true. A monster with scales like blue lightning and a tongue as red as fire darted out at Yohannes from behind a rock, head and tail raised high like the two ends of a bow. But the monk did not show any fear. He just lifted a bronze *maskal* high into the air and turned aside adroitly, bringing the cross down on the serpent's head. As a result the serpent died and peace returned to the island. Yohannes remained there, cutting a clearing in the forest and building a church with his own hands. Then a woman appeared to reward these great achievements. Miraculously, the woman brought food from some unknown place and devoted herself to the service of Yohannes. Legend has it that this woman's name was Kebran and that she was an incarnation of the angel Gabriel.

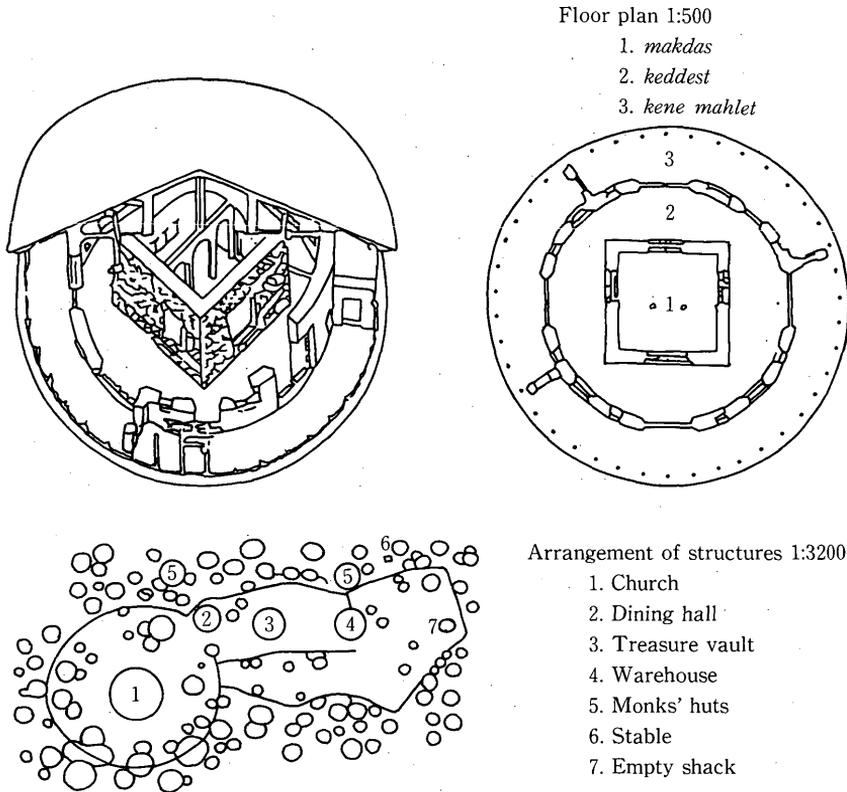


Figure 1. Ura-Kindanemeret Monastery, by R. Miyake
 (Lake Tana, Ethiopia)

The present church was built during the reign of Amda Tseyon (1314–1344) during the Solomonic dynasty (Huntingford 1965). Subsequently, the church was destroyed by fire after being hit by lightning, leaving behind only the sanctuary, but was reconstructed by Iyasu I (1682–1706) during the Gondar dynasty (Mathew 1947). The aforementioned fresco is thought to date back to the seventeenth century.

Construction and style of the church building

Most of the church buildings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, not only those at Lake Tana, adopt a structure based on circular plans. I would like to take a look at the inner structure of the Ethiopian church with reference to the illustrations and floor plans shown in Figures 1 and 2⁵⁾.

The sanctuary at the center of the church consists of a square enclosure called the *mukdas*. Enshrined at the center of the enclosure is the *hostia* (Eucharist) and the stone tablet called the *tabot* upon which are inscribed the Ten Commandments of Moses. This tablet is undoubtedly unique to the Ethiopian church.

An inner and an outer gallery circumscribe the sanctuary in concentric circles.

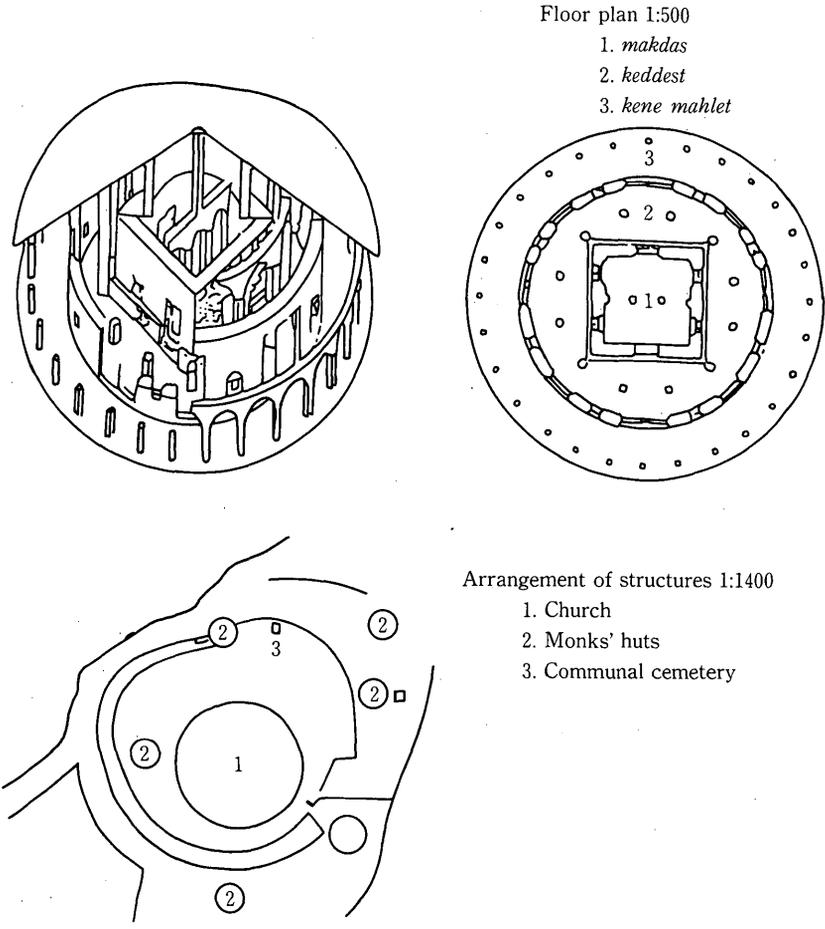


Figure 2. Kebran Gabriel Monastery, by R. Miyake (Lake Tana, Ethiopia)

The former, called the *keddest* (holy place), is shielded from the outside by a heavy curtain hanging at the entrance. This curtain is lifted only at the time of Holy Communion during the Mass.

The outer gallery is called the *kene mahlet*. The monks circumambulate this gallery, chanting holy prayers and hitting their staffs on the floor to the rhythm of drums. The term "dance-walk" would probably be an appropriate description. The curtains hanging on the walls of this gallery are embellished with paintings executed in bright color washes and depicting the agonies suffered by male and female figures who have succumbed to the temptations of the devil and fallen into hell (*gehennam*). Amazingly enough, all of these figures are naked and pure white; only the devils are portrayed in black.

This circular structure of the churches at Lake Tana is not confined only to monasteries. It is the norm in all old-style churches, and it differs sharply from the

basilican churches in Egypt.

What is the reason for this discrepancy in church style between the two countries? A certain opinion has been raised to answer this question and is now widely accepted. In this connection I would like to introduce the hypothesis of E. Ullendorff, a professor at London University and prominent authority on Ethiopian studies (Ullendorff 1956: 216-56, 1960: 109-111).

In a nutshell, Ullendorff sees a distinct analogy, in terms of structure, between the churches of Ethiopia and the shrines of ancient Judaism. According to him, the primary common feature is the structure of the galleries and inner sanctuary and the enshrinement of the Ten Commandments of Moses on the *tabot* at the center. The sanctuary in the shrines of ancient Judaism was a forbidden space where only a few privileged persons such as King David and King Solomon were allowed to enter. The sole reason for the taboo was the presence of the tablet. In other words, the sanctification of the *tabot* made the sanctuary a forbidden holy place, and the galleries were constructed to serve as protective barriers.

This sanctification of the *tabot* seen in the Ethiopian church has no equivalent in the Coptic church of Egypt because the custom of enshrining the *tabot* in the sanctuary never existed in the latter.

There is a festival in modern-day Ethiopia that vividly reflects the importance of the sanctification of the *tabot* in the Ethiopian church and serves as still another distinct difference with the Coptic church. Held in conjunction with the Christmas celebration, the festival is called *Gena* and is held on January 7.

On the morning of the festival, the *tabot* is transferred from the sanctuary to a palanquin and then carried around and around the circumference of the sanctuary by a procession of priests wearing pure white hats and robes. With crowds of people waiting breathlessly outside, the procession gathers tension with each revolution. As they walk, the priests hit the floor with prayer staffs taller than themselves. The palanquin is crowned with a red, green and brown parasol symbolizing the universe. As the rhythm of the drums grows feverish, the priests begin to hop and jump in dance-like steps, the scarlet patterns on the skirts of their white robes waving like flowers in the wind and their chants resonating across the summit of the mountain. Any ordinary Christian viewing this scene would naturally wonder what connection it could possibly have with Christmas.

The event, explains Ullendorff, originates in the legend that King David of Israel placed the stone tablet of the Ten Commandments on a palanquin and had his retainers carry this as he entered Jerusalem. According to the Second Book of Samuel, King David became so overcome with emotion that he stripped off his clothing and ran around the palanquin dancing and singing (2 Samuel 6.5, 6).

Ullendorff points out that this circular world encompassing the sanctuary is considered a "place of miracles" (*enda ta'amer*) for the very reason that the *tabot* is considered sacred. In the Ethiopian church, therefore, it is none other than the *tabot* that makes the sanctuary a holy place. The above is an outline of Ullendorff's hypothesis, which is now widely accepted among European scholars.

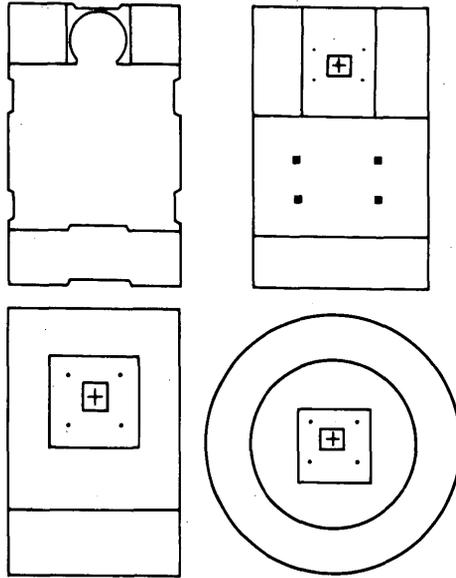


Figure 3. Diagrams indicating the possible evolution from the basilican to the round church from Ethiopia, by S. Pankhurst (1955)

At the same time, however, other scholars have stated that the circular church is unique to Ethiopia and has its origins there. One of these scholars is Sylvia Pankhurst (Pankhurst 1955: 167–170). Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia via the Syrian Church and Coptic Church in the era of the Axumite Kingdom (fourth century). According to Pankhurst, the church building at this time was a stone structure of the basilican style adopted from the Coptic Church of Egypt. The reason for this is simple. The Axumite Kingdom of northern Ethiopia had an abundance of excellent stone, and the people used this to build their homes. But a great change took place as Christianity spread from Axum to the central highlands, namely, the evolution from the basilican to the circular church. How and why did this change come about?

In response to this question, Pankhurst cites the abundance of forest resources in the central highlands and points out that the round houses of wooden construction used by the local inhabitants served as a model for the new church building. Figure 3 presents Pankhurst's diagrams illustrating this evolution. Pankhurst's hypothesis that the circular structure of the Ethiopian church is derived from the traditional round thatched huts of the Ethiopian people is highly suggestive.

There are problems, however, because Pankhurst does not say anything about the structure, function or symbolism of the round thatched house. She only cites the abundance of forest resources in the central highlands and the existence of the traditional round thatched houses. I personally find it unlikely that this great shift

from the basilican to circular church occurred simply as a result of these two factors. I think that the key to this problem lies rather in the circular structure and function of the thatched hut. My primary interest in the round houses of Africa in fact arises from this problem.

Arrangement of the monks' huts

As I mentioned earlier, the thatched huts serving as residences for monks face in odd directions and lie scattered at various intervals around the periphery of the church with its sacred *tabot* at the center. This arrangement contrasts sharply with the clustered residential style in the Coptic monastery and therefore can be called a unique feature of the Ethiopian monastery.

The arrangement of the huts is shown in Figures 1 and 2. As a rule, the huts are designed for solitary occupation. I use the modifier "as a rule" because there are often cases where young aspirants share a hut with a superior. The aspirant is usually a boy of about ten years of age who has a family or regional connection with one of the monks in the monastery. He serves the monk in question, taking responsibility for daily chores such as cooking, washing and tending the vegetable plot while at the same time learning to read and write under the monk's tutelage. It is an utterly compulsory form of education in which the aspirant learns everything from the way to recite the holy prayers in the Ge'ez language to the rituals of the church. In this way, the young men progress through various stages of training, facing examinations at each level before finally being ordained as full-fledged monks.

Daily life in the solitary monk's hut is independent and complete in itself. Each hut is surrounded by a fence and stands amid the lush forests of tall eucalyptus, pine and cedar trees that cover the sloping hillside. The trees block all distant views and allow only a narrow patch of sky to be seen overhead. The 2m high fences that delineate the borders between respective territories are covered in the black branches of rose bushes bristling with sharp thorns, and the single gate in each fence is so small that a visitor has to bend over to pass through. Each hut presides over an individual piece of territory. The vegetable plots which lie within the fence here are of course divided into small sections by the trees and bushes.

The solitary hut is not built to welcome visitors from the outside. On the contrary, it is an utterly independent and exclusive "individual" space. What is it then that draws the monks into the center of the circle? The answer is the *tabot* and the *hostia*. The huts and the church are held in a state of inevitable unity by the dynamic relationship between the center and its concentric circles. This arrangement simulates the circular structure of the sanctuary itself and holds all participants together in a unity that reaches out to the rhythm of the universe. I do not think that this dynamic relationship between the church and the huts is fully explained by Ullendorff's hypothesis, namely, the sanctification of the *tabot*.

What brought me to this conclusion was the realization that the Lake Tana monasteries as a whole can be regarded as a "community" very much like the

traditional little villages and island hamlets of Japan.

As a result, the scene of the monastery at Lake Tana was suddenly consistent with the scene of villages scattered across the Ethiopian highlands. This was just a scene of round thatched houses in a typical village. Although I will bring this up later, it was similar to the villages on the African savanna described as a round-plan "homestead" in architectural studies by Koji Hara and Kiyoto Satoh. It is also consistent with the symbolic dimension referred to as the "circular world of Africa" by the anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi.

The principal problem here is the question of what exactly is the source of this centripetalism and dispersion, or rather centrism and individualism, in the circular world represented by the monasteries at Lake Tana.

It can probably be said that the daily routine in the monastery stands on a fine counterbalance between these two antagonistic forces. Caught in the counterbalance, the monks have to make an effort to find inroads to the center of the circle and a sense of community, grasping whatever possibility arises. That is probably why the monks refer to the eyes of outsiders as the "devil." Although the "devil" is often the monks themselves, they inevitably have to consider how to defend themselves from these eyes.

With this point in mind, I will devote the next section to a discussion of the symbolism of the round African house with reference to the circular houses of the Turkana people, who live in the northwestern region of Kenya bordering Ethiopia. This will serve as preliminary information for the present study.

THE CIRCULAR WORLD OF AFRICA.

The round houses of the Turkana

The Turkana people live in the northwestern part of Kenya and number about 160,000. They raise animals such as cows, goats, sheep, camels and donkeys. The meat, blood and milk from these animals (except donkeys) are their staple foods. Sorghum and other crops are cultivated in some areas, but as a whole farm products account for only a tiny proportion of the diet. The lands upon which the Turkana live are extremely arid, receiving only 200 to 400 mm of precipitation annually, and so it is necessary to move the animals to the hills where precipitation levels are higher. As a result, these people are forced to lead a sort of nomadic lifestyle, with patriarchal polygamous families broken into at least two segments living independently, sometimes more than 100 km apart. The language of the Turkana is Central Para-Nilotic (Eastern Nilotic) (Ohta 1989: 291).

P.H. Gulliver's excellent survey is a well known source of information about the Turkana, but in the present study I will discuss the physical features and structure of the round Turkana homestead with reference to Nobuhiro Nagashima's article on the symbolism of the Turkana residence (Gulliver 1951, 1955; Nagashima 1974). The interpretation of the symbolism of the round

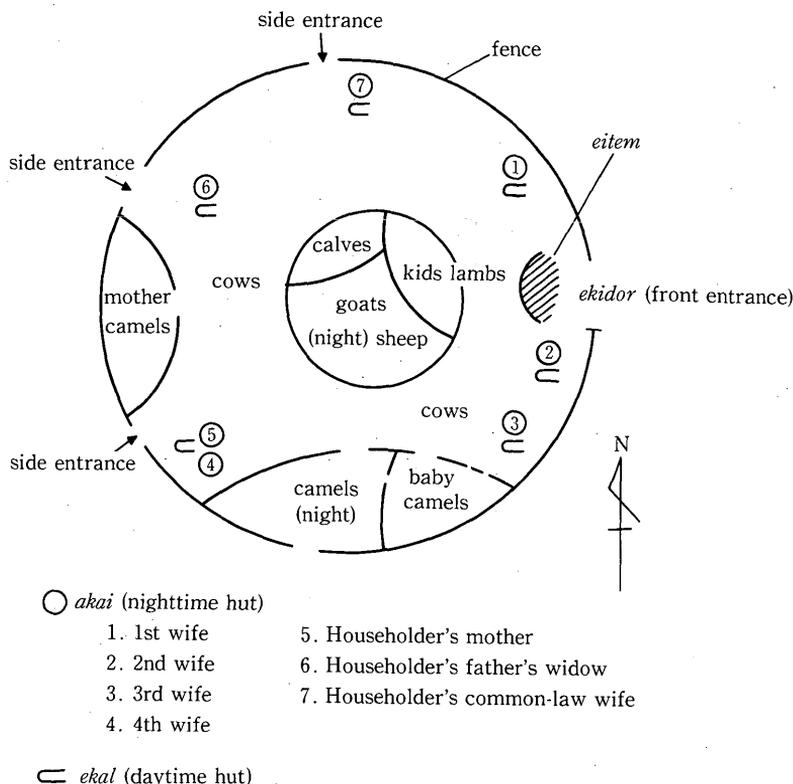


Figure 4. Circular homestead of Turkana, by P.H. Gullirer and N. Nagashima

Turkana homestead is an important issue in the present discussion because it may provide, I believe, a key to understanding the circular world of the monasteries at Lake Tana.

I will begin by explaining the overall structure and arrangement using Nagashima's and Gulliver's floor plans of the Turkana *awi* or homestead (Figure 4).

The "fence" is a barrier made by piling up the branches of thorny shrubs. The height and thickness of this barrier depends on the danger of incursion by wild animals and intruders from the outside.

The *ekidor* is the front entrance of the *awi*. This, as a rule, faces east. It is usually reserved for male family members, but it is also used for the passage of cattle herds. It is blocked at night from the inside with thorny sticks. Each *ekal*, or "daytime hut" for women, has its own separate exit/entrance.

The *akai* is the hut used by women at night. This is a small round thatched hut made by sticking the branches of trees in the ground and then weaving smaller branches among these and binding the whole with hemp rope. During the rainy season, cow-hides are draped over the hut to protect it from the rain. Each of the senior wives, as well as each co-wife and adult daughter, has a hut of her own and

spends the night there. The mothers and children, especially young daughters, reside in the open areas of the *awi*.

The *ekal* is the hut where women work in the daytime. It is a semi-spherical enclosure made by sticking the branches of trees in the ground. The upper portion is covered in grass for protection from the sun. This space is the center of women's daily activities such as meals and child care. The "hearth" is located at the *ekal* entrance and is used for cooking. It is not clear, however, whether this is communal or private.

The *eitem*, which serves as both the location of open-air fires and the family head's seat, is a semi-spherical enclosure situated near the *ekidor*. Adult sons gather around the fire here, but its usual use is as a seat and bed for the family head.

The "cattle pens" are enclosures established in the center of the *awi* and used to protect calves, goats, sheep and other cattle that are vulnerable to attacks by wild animals. The pen for camels is generally situated on the southern side of the *awi*. The family head's wives, mother, father's widows and others all have their own animal pens. At night, adult cattle are left to roam at will in the open spaces of the *awi*.

The above is an outline of the structure and physical characteristics of the *awi*, or residence of the Turkana people, as demonstrated by Nagashima and Gulliver. The definition of the *awi* is of course open to various interpretations, but, broadly speaking, it can be called a circular space or system isolated territorially from the outside, encompassing a number of *ekal* occupied by wives, and governed by the monopolizing and centralizing force of a patriarchal figure.

At all times the *awi* contains one *ekal* for each wife, or rather each adult woman. This in fact is an indispensable structural element of the *awi*. As a result, the *awi* and *ekal* exist on the basis of a mutual complex concept wherein the existence of the former depends totally on the latter and the latter are enclosed and protected by the former.

This relationship sheds light on the exclusive and independent nature of the *ekal*, each of which is occupied by a mother and her children. In short, the *ekal* is an independent and self-complete unit revolving around one female figure and equipped with its own independent toilet, sleeping space and facilities for cooking and eating.

The inner structure of the *awi* and the symbolism of the circular residence are highly relevant to our discussion of the monasteries at Lake Tana, because they offer an interesting analogy in terms of the order of space with the circular church and the monks' huts scattered around it.

For the time being I will bring up three points that are related primarily to the inner structure of the circular residence and are reflected in the system of space in both the circular residence and the circular church, and I will take these points up in more detail in the following section.

- 1) Centrapetalism, or centrism
- 2) Self-completeness, or individualism

3) Dispersion, or isolationism

The African village: the circular plan and the homestead

Reports published in the field of architectural studies provide various suggestions for our inquiry into the question of what elements are contained in, and what sort of system of space is represented by the circular plan of the African residence. In particular, the "Survey on Villages of the World," which was implemented five times from 1972 to 1979 by Koji Hara and his staff at the Manufacturing Technology Research Institute, the University of Tokyo, turned the focus of architectural research from classical subjects such as palaces, shrines and temples to the buildings in mundane outlying villages. This effort helped to shed light on the lifestyles of the world's little known peoples, and it also provides information that is invaluable to the present study (Hara 1987; Satoh 1987).

Hara traveled across the Sahara and penetrated into the heart of the continent for the very purpose of bringing about this shift in the focus of architectural interest. I will therefore confine myself to a more detailed discussion of the two characteristics that Hara saw in the appearance of the African village, that is, the circular plan and the homestead.

I will begin with the circular plan. Hara suggests that the chief characteristic of the African circular plan is the closed curve demonstrated by the circle: "The existence of the circle in architecture reflects various meanings, but in all cases it can be said to express completion, pointing to a central orientation on the one hand and to individual units on the other. The latter interprets the circle as the typical closed curve, and so for this reason probably captured the interest of the people of Africa...(my translation)" (Hara 1987: 196).

In this statement Hara is referring to villages in the savanna of west Africa, such as the hamlets of the Tuareg and Hausa in the desert town of Agadez in Niger.

Hara's main point is that, among the centrism, self-completion and individualism demonstrated by the circle, it is individualism that is expressed in the circular plan of the African village. The reason, he surmises, is the fact that the Africans found the greatest interest in the closed curve structure of the circle.

Why, then, did the Africans find such interest in this structure? The second characteristic of the African village pointed out by Hara, namely the appearance of the homestead, issues from this discussion of the closed curve structure, the reason being that the circle as a closed curve indicates the clear and complete detachment of individual territory, which is an indispensable prerequisite for the establishment of an independent homestead. In this connection, Hara argues that the African people have grounds for their strong interest in the closed curve structure of the circle. He says that the status of the "individual group" in the extended family system of Africa is the crucial problem here. Addressing the closed curve structure in relation to the acquirement of individuality and independence, he discusses the issue as follows.

The overall plan of the African village cannot be derived by simply dividing the residences of the extended family system into elements like rooms and then placing a roof over each room. The hearth has to be divided by the number of wives. The toilet and shower, and sometimes the animal pens and granaries, also have to be divided. In other words, the overall plan of the African village cannot be derived by dismantling the residences of the extended family system from 'rooms' into 'apartments.' By nature, the African residence is comprised of a large number of elements with clear divisions of ownership and occupancy. In short, the African family is held together by complex vertical and horizontal human relationships, and the 'homestead' is the physical aspect that gives independence to groups of family members revolving around respective females and brings spatial order to the whole... (my translation) (Hara 1987: 192).

Hara's argument is lucid but does not resolve all questions. One problem relates to the nature of the circular plan and the primary geometrical origins of the circle itself. Hara addresses this problem as follows.

The circle is the most appropriate spatial element for the preservation of the independence that is fundamental to the establishment of the homestead. The geometrical completeness and tension inherent in the circle is ideally suited for the expression of the parts of the homestead, that is, the small living units comprising the residence. The division of territory by the use of the circle is thus a clear-cut approach to the structure of the homestead. The circular plan can probably be better explained, therefore, by looking at the extended family system and its significance than by seeking an answer in primitive geometry or technological necessity... (Hara 1987: 192).

According to Hara, it all comes down to one issue, that is, the division of space on the basis of the circle, and this issue is the key to an understanding of the circular world of Africa. The diverse and complicated human relationships resulting from the extended family system give rise to innumerable conflicts, and these conflicts can be avoided only by procuring independence and individuality for the small living unit in the midst of the larger residence. The circle as closed curve is the ideal way to achieve this. The above is the Africa-oriented argument advanced by Hara.

We see, therefore, that the circular plan of the residence did not persist in African society merely because of its technological and geometrical simplicity. Rather, it involves issues related to the systems, symbolism and consciousness rooted in the fundamental structure of ongoing human existence and relationships in Africa.

The circular plan of the monastery (1)

Hara provides a lucid analysis of the circular plan in Africa, but it remains to be seen whether that analysis can be effectively applied to the relationship between the church and the surrounding monks' huts in the Ethiopian monastery. I will address this question by looking at the closed curve structure demonstrated by the

1. Gate
2. Former guest house
3. St. Antonius Church (basilican)
4. Apostles Church (basilican)
5. Keep
6. Monks' quarters
7. St. Mark Church (basilican)
8. Library
9. Guest house
10. St. Antonius-Paulo Church (basilican)
11. Warehouse
12. St. Mary Church (two-story)
13. Former flour mill
14. Vegetable garden
15. Well

- ▲ Former castle wall
- Castle wall built in the 18th century
- Castle wall built in the 19th century

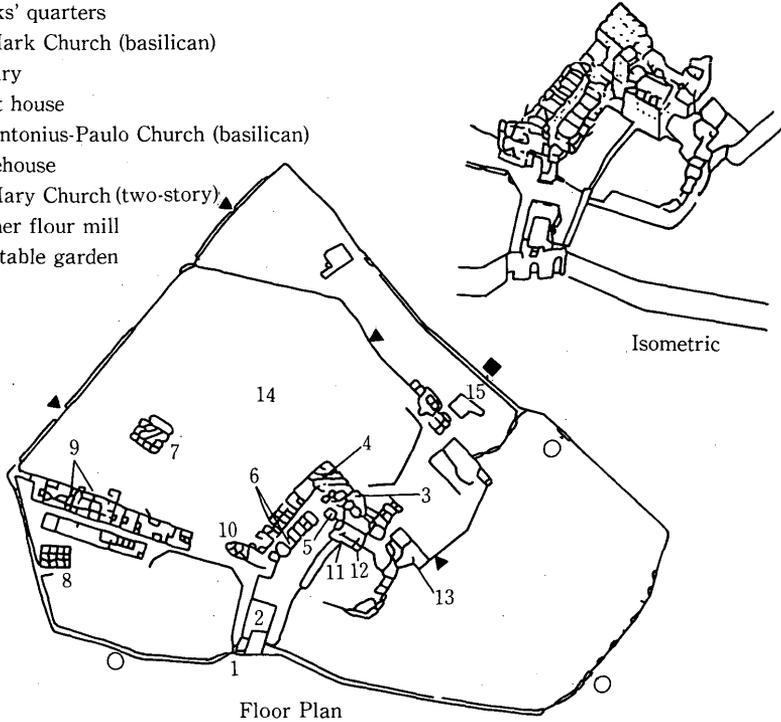


Figure 5. St. Antonius Monastery, by R. Miyake

circle. I ask the reader to refer to the floor plan of the church and the arrangement of monks' huts in the Ethiopian monastery (Figure 2) and, for comparison, to the bird's eye view and floor plan of St. Antonius monastery of the Egyptian Coptic Church (Figure 5).

I will begin with a description of these references. As the illustration shows, the Ethiopian monastery features a central church loosely surrounded by monks' huts. Nothing in the location of the huts reveals any particular rule or restriction, but the closed curve structure cited by Hara is clearly evident in the relationship between individual huts.

What brings me to this conclusion is the memory of how, as soon as I set foot on the island and entered the territory of the monastery, I was confronted with a look of hostility that seemed to reject all intrusion from the outside. That hostility came at me as a strange undefinable sensation rising from this lonely island on Lake Tana.

Each thatched monk's hut stands as an independent residential unit hidden

behind a fence. The hut itself closely resembles both the *ekal* of the Turkana people and the circular residence described by Hara. The strangeness, therefore, was not in the physical appearance of the huts but rather in their strict and exaggerated concealment. All fences are built, no doubt, to prevent intrusion from the outside. But in this case, the will to be isolated seemed to me a sort of hyper-reaction, or rejection of the outside world.

The path winding its way up to the church at the top of the hill was paved in pounded clay. Huge trees towered above me and reduced my sphere of vision to a minimum. The fact that I felt something peculiar as I trudged up the path was probably due in part to the uneasiness of being watched by countless invisible eyes from the windows of the huts. I realized this to be true when I turned to take a photograph of one of the huts and noticed a person's silhouette slip away into the rear of the hut. The event made me look at the fence as a means used by the monks to conceal themselves from outside view.

At the beginning, I thought that the lack of tall brick walls like those in the monasteries of the Egyptian desert (Figure 5) or any sort of "keep" to provide protection from intrusion was evidence of the freedom and openness of the monasteries at Lake Tana. The reason for this, I assumed, was that the vast waters of the lake provided more than enough protection. Indeed, the Ethiopians believed that the island was home to a diabolic serpent and so feared and avoided it. Thus my first impression had some foundation in fact. But by designing and building these fences the monks had obviously found a way to hide themselves from outside observation that was even more effective than the circle as a closed curve. These wooden barricades surrounding each round thatched hut are nothing more than peripheral margins expressing the isolationism contained in the circle.

The "island" is isolated from the continent by the water of the lake. Robbed of all routes of escape in this closed space, the monks continue to insist on independence from each other and a life of individual separation.

In this respect, the vital keyword to understanding the arrangement of monks' huts in the monastery at Lake Tana is the existence of a "circle," that is, the closed curve that clearly detaches one unit from another and procures territory for each individual.

The circular plan of the monastery (2)

In the previous section we have looked at the entire monastery as a kind of community with a circular plan and discussed the spatial expression of the circle or closed curve in view of the arrangement of individual monks' huts. Here I would like to study the spatial relationship between the huts and the church at the center of the monastery.

Before I begin, it is necessary to reconfirm our understanding of the centripetalism that is one of the three basic points related to the spatial order demonstrated by the circular residence, that is, centripetalism, individualism and isolationism.

What comes to light immediately when we compare the *awi* of the Turkana people with the circular monastery is the centripetal force represented by the *awi* family head. The *awi* features a dynamic spatial order in which the *ekal* of a number of women lie scattered around the periphery of this exclusive, centripetal and sometimes even sacred power of the householder. At all times, the *awi* encloses a number of *ekal*, and the *ekal* in turn depend for their existence on participation in this spatial order. The resulting dynamic composition is called a "homestead."

The central, or rather centripetal, dynamism is the very nature of the *awi*, and the householder functions in this relationship as a kind of spiritual existence. In the monastery, on the other hand, the center of this centripetal dynamism is the holy *tabot* and *hostia* placed in the *mukdas* sanctuary by the monks.

As mentioned earlier, the church in the Lake Tana monasteries is circular in design and consists of two inner galleries circumscribing a central sanctuary, characteristics that are common to all old churches in Ethiopia. The term *mukdas* refers to the very heart of this circular structure. This space is used to enshrine the *hostia* and the tablet inscribed with the Ten Commandments of Moses, both of which are considered sacred in the Ethiopian church. The *mukdas* is the appropriate receptacle for these holy items because it is considered a "place of miracles" (*enda ta'amer*). In other words, the Ethiopian church has always looked to this point for the source of unified centripetal force.

It is clear from the overall plan of the *awi*-like monastery that the institution owes its existence to this enclosure of monks' huts by the centripetal force of the *mugdas*. It perhaps can also be said that the retention of this centripetal force from the center in the *ekal*-like monks' huts is a prerequisite for the monastery to function like an *awi*. If this is true, the center and peripheral units are eternally polarized.

This structural order seems to imply the existence of two antagonistic cosmological "spaces," that is, "inside" and "outside," "center" and "periphery" or "heart" and "border."

The daily existence of the monastery may in fact be based upon a fine counterbalance between these two antagonistic forces. Caught in the counterbalance, the monks have to make an effort to find inroads to the center of the circle and thereby a sense of community, grasping whatever possibility arises. As a result, they have to wage a constant battle against the outside space and against intruders who recklessly cross the border into their territory.

This is no doubt why the monasteries on the deserts of Egypt and those at Lake Tana differ widely in lifestyle and yet seem to share close structural similarities.

CONCLUSION

To date, two concepts have been cited with regard to the dynamic relationship between the circle and its center, evident in rituals, especially those accompanied by

dancing.

One is that the unique attributes of persons dancing at the periphery of a circle are erased by the center, while the other is that the persons dancing at the periphery of a circle acquire a kind of holy power from the center. Choreographer Masashi Ichikawa states that these two concepts are common to all forms of dance in which the participants form a circle and move around a central point (Ichikawa 1983).

The monks at Lake Tana form a circle around the *tabot* in the sanctuary and do a kind of walking dance around it all night long, shuffling and stamping the ground with their bare feet, hitting it with prayer staffs and moving to the rhythm of drums. The movements of feet are simple and the rhythm of the drum monotonous, but as the night grows late the monks experience a state of spiritual elevation and the church fills with ecstasy. Incense is burned and sweet-smelling smoke fills the church. This dance, which Ullendorff refers to as the dance of King David, is an example of the dance around a circle.

The physical activity of stamping bare feet on the ground and moving to the rhythm of drums and cymbals is well known in the field of religious anthropology as a form of magic ritualism. Some scholars claim that it involves a kind of witchcraft in which the dancer tries to awaken the sleeping spirits by stamping the floor or ground with feet and sticks, and to achieve supernatural powers by communication with these spirits.

The circular movements of the monks may be used to simulate the circular nature of time as well as to communicate with spirits. This is the circular rhythm evident in the seasons of plants and in the birth and death of humans. The participants in this circular rhythm dance to the rhythm of the eternal, universal drumbeat of the death of the old order and the birth of the new.

I will not repeat here my description of how the monks at the Lake Tana monastery perform a "holy dance" that continues in an increasing fever from night until dawn. But it is a fact that the sacred universal power represented by the *tabot* and the *hostia* in the sanctuary exerts a mysterious force on the dance, at once erasing the individuality of the participants and enhancing it to such a degree that the individuals become unified with the holy power.

When the monks celebrate Mass at the climax of this holy dance, the sacred space of the church is opened all at once to the outside, breaking the tension between the inner and outer and releasing the holy power beyond the two concentric borders of the church. It is this very instant when the monastery as *awi* suddenly changes and becomes a festival site.

In this way, the monks experience union with the holy power, a sense of union that is probably consistent with the experience of ecstasy common to the entire circular world of Africa.

NOTES

- 1) The present article is a revised version of a previous article of the same title published in

the No. 25 (1992) issue of the annual report of the Christian Culture Research Institute at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University.

- 2) In his article entitled "The Circular World of Africa: Houses and World Views" (1974), Masao Yamaguchi took an early interest in the round-shaped houses and homesteads of Africa and argued a variety of interesting issues on the structure of houses and on the symbolism of the space created thereby with reference to the works of Gaston Bachelard. The article also includes excerpts from an interview with Mazisi Kunene, who came to Japan in 1969 to gather funds for the liberation movement in South Africa. I would like to quote Mr. Kunene here because I feel that his comments shed light on the circular world of Africa in a succinct and highly accurate way: "For example, the arrangement of circles expresses the various differing realities of a community and indeed the circular universe..." (*Nippon Dokusho Shimbum*, April 20, 1970)
- 3) It is widely assumed that the New Year Festival on September 11 and the Maskal Festival (Festival of the Cross) on September 26 correspond to the New Year Festival and Yamin Nora'in festival of ancient Israel. This is the hypothesis that the Christian culture of Ethiopia is influenced by the religious view and ancient culture of Judaism. The word *maskal* means "cross," but it is also used to refer to a flower of the chrysanthemum family that blooms in the fields during this season. The origins of the festival are not clear, but legend has it that it originates from an anecdote concerning St. Helena, mother of the fourth century Roman emperor Constantine the Great. The following is an outline of the story.

The story starts from the episode of the poisonous snake harrated in the Book of Numbers (21:6-9) during the period when Moses and the people of Israel wandered in the desert after the Exodus. It is said that one person after another was being bitten by poisonous snakes and that Moses saved them from this affliction by making a bronze snake and placing it on the top of his staff. Subsequently, the Jewish people worshipped the bronze snake as a healing instrument of God, but after the birth of Christianity the Golgotha cross of Jesus came to replace this. Infuriated, the Jewish people buried the cross in the ground and used the site as a garbage dump thereafter. St. Helena, it is said, was grieved to hear of this and traveled to Jerusalem to search for the lost cross. This proved futile, so Helena visited the house of a town elder and, asking for information. She was advised to go to a place called Kirakos. Helena went to this place and built a pyre, and amazingly enough the smoke came down from the sky like rain and stopped at the spot where the cross had been buried. This event occurred on September 26. The following day, Helena began to dig and eventually unearthed the cross, thereby returning the Golgotha cross to the Christian people. Helena built a church on the spot and the following year sent to Ethiopia the part of the cross where Jesus' right hand had been nailed. The Maskal Festival has been a holy celebration in Ethiopia ever since.

Every year on this day, people gather the dried branches of trees and make a pile of firewood called a *demera*. After prayers, they set fire to this and sing *Eyohasbebay - meskelem Tebaye!* ("Look at the maskal flowers spread on the floor of my house. Now is the time to begin work!")

- 4) Ge'ez is often called "classical Ethiopian." It is said to have resulted from the meeting of the indigenous Cushitic languages with the language of the Semites, who crossed the Red Sea to Ethiopia from the Arabian Peninsula before the time of Christ. The language was used in Axum, the kingdom that prospered in northern Ethiopia during the Solomonic dynasty, and today many Ge'ez inscriptions remain from the third to tenth centuries. Although eventually dying out as a spoken tongue, Ge'ez continued to be used for writing

until its replacement by Amharic at the end of the nineteenth century and thus can be found widely in translations of the Bible and other Christian literature. Today it is a dead language aside from its use in the rituals of the church.

5) These illustrations were compiled by joint research under Dr Riichi Miyake, professor of architectural engineering at Shibaura Institute of Technology. The author is extremely grateful for permission to use the illustrations here.

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