



An Ethiopian “Renaissance” Queen? Mentewab as Protector of Arts and Patron of Iconography

Raita Steyn

Associate Professor: Art Education

Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education

University of Pretoria, South Africa



Abstract

In Ethiopia, the period from the late 16th and 17th Centuries has caused a controversy because some consider this period as Ethiopia’s recovery from religious, civil conflicts as well as sectarian discord, while others including Kofi Darkwah (1975), define it as a continued descent processes for the empire. In line with this disagreement, factual information can speak for itself in the course of this study. Emperor Susenyos (1572-1632 CE) was a strong supporter of Catholicism, yet his son, Fasilidas (1603-1667 CE) as his successor, reinstated Ethiopian miaphysite Orthodoxy. The establishment of Gondar as the permanent capital in 1636, is an event heralded by Henze (2000) as the onset of an Ethiopian Renaissance, particularly in artistic, architectural, and musical domains. After Fasilidas’s demise, his son, Yohannes I reigned from 1632-67 CE. Yet, it was Fasilidas’s grandson, Iyasu I the Great (r. 1682-1706 CE), who distinguished himself through extensive architectural projects, notably transforming Gondar into a captivating city. Iyasu I’s assassination caused significant turmoil in Gondar, subsequently resulting in a gradual loss of political power. When Iyasu I’s son, Bakaffa (r. 1721-1730 CE) ascended to the imperial throne, the arts - namely, chant (zema), poetry (qene), interpretation (tergum) and refinement of the court minstrels’ music had already been supported and vigorously promoted. However, it was Bakaffa’s wife and later widow, Mentewab (1706-1773 CE), who emerged as the pivotal figure in this Ethiopian “Renaissance”. Additionally, the diverse styles of Ethiopian iconography sponsored by Mentewab, some adorned with elements reminiscent of the decorative style of the Rococo period, illustrate the queen’s remarkable aesthetic standards.

The research on Mentewab, also known as Welete Giyorgis, has been guided by portrayals in iconographies, chronicles, paintings, testimonials from church builders and castles, and indirectly by information provided in texts such as Kebra Negast, and Fetha Nagast. To this end, special attention has been drawn on Mentewab’s legacy as the founder, protector, and patron of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Narga Selassie, renowned for its resplendent Qwara style that fused European, Islamic, and Indian elements while retaining strong Ethiopian traits. With special attention to the iconographic representations of Queen Mentewab as the *ktetor* of Narga Selassie Church, the study explores symbolic significances embedded within relevant creations and artistic styles. By contextualising them within their historical framework, this analysis explores Mentewab’s influence on her contemporary politics, religion, art, and literature in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Ktetor, portraits, Mentewab, Narga Selassie, Queen-mother, Qwara style.

Introduction

Afro-Byzantine society – similar to Byzantine – advantaged male rulers, therefore, women in power were sovereigns either through their fathers, their husbands or their sons, which also



meant that they were economically subordinate to them (Hussey, 1970; Ahrweiler, 1977). Mentewab (ca 1706-1773 CE), came into power in 1730, soon after her spouse, Emperor Bakaffa died. As her son Iyasu II was too young to take over the throne, Queen Mentewab became the *de facto* ruler of Ethiopia as regent once with her son, Iyasu II (Alem Sagad, 1730-1755 CE), and later again with her grandson, Iyoas I (Adyam Sagad III, 1755-1769) (Ullendorff, 1960:81, Di Salvo, 1999:20-21; Fogg, 2001:78-79).

Queen Mentewab, literally meaning “how beautiful!” (Henze, 2000: 104), also known by her baptismal name of Wallata Giyorgis (daughter of St George) and later by her throne name, Berhan Mogasa (Glorifier of Light) is in fact one of a few independent Ethiopian sovereigns who had certain economic autonomy and used it for her religious devotion and political authority. Founder of churches and donor of iconographies were some of Queen Mentewab’s public expressions of her devotional dedication to the Ethiopian Orthodox – and perhaps to the Catholic Church too as, according to James Bruce (1884:101), she “had a warm attachment to the Catholic religion”.

Historical framework

Most scholars generally place the end of the Ethiopian Middle Ages within a broad span, ranging from the later part of the 15th Century to the late 16th Century. This era encapsulated significant events such as the reign of Zara Yakob (1399-1468 CE) alongside his renowned consort, Queen Eleni (died 1522 CE), the distressing Muslim invasion led by Ahmed Gragn in the 1530s, the conflicts with the Oromo, the consequential Portuguese military backing of Christian Ethiopia, and the Jesuit missions. While some, exemplified by Paul Henze, perceive the late 16th Century and the subsequent 17th Century as a period of recuperation, others, including Kofi Darkwah (1975), characterise this time as a continued descent for the empire marked by civil and religious conflicts, as well as sectarian discord.

Emperor Susenyos (1572-1632 CE) a strong supporter of Catholicism, yet his son, Fasilidas (or Fasil Alam Sagad) (1632-1667 CE) as his successor, reinstated Ethiopian miaphysite Orthodoxy. The establishment of Gondar as the permanent capital in 1636, is an event heralded by Henze (2000, 100) as the onset of an Ethiopian Renaissance, especially evident in Arts, Architecture and Music. After Fasilidas’s demise, his son, Yohannes I (or Alaf Sagad) reigned from 1667-1682 CE. Yet, it was Iyasu I the Great (r. 1682-1706 CE), Fasilidas’s grandson, who distinguished himself through extensive architectural projects, notably transforming Gondar into a captivating city. Iyasu I’s assassination (at his son’s Tekle Haymanot’s orders), caused significant turmoil in Gondar, subsequently resulting in a gradual loss of the city’s political power. Iyasu I’s son, Bakaffa (r. 1721-1730 CE), supported the arts—namely, chant (zema), poetry (qene), interpretation (tergum) and refinement of the court minstrels’ music. However, it was Mentewab (1706-1773 CE), Bakaffa’s wife and later widow, who emerged as the pivotal figure in this Ethiopian “Renaissance” (Henze, 2000: 100, 104). Henze’s identification underlines Mentewab’s strong personality as defining and promoting the Ethiopian Woman’s image and role in the country’s collective historical memory. Her reign spanned as queen, queen-mother, and regent until 1769, marking the commencement of the ‘Era of the Judges/Princes’ (Zemene Mesafint). Mentewab’s pivotal role extended as a ktetor, κτήτωρ, i.e. ‘Founder’ and ‘Patron’ of ecclesiastical institutions, as ‘Protector’, and ‘Benefactor’ of numerous artistic expressions, including artworks, icons (murals), illuminated manuscripts, prayer books, chronicles, churches, and palaces.

Royal chronicles, modern scholarship and narratives regarding Mentewab

Although plentiful information is found about Queen Mentewab, “her own life story remains virtually unrecorded”, states Stanislaw Chojnacki who furthermore observes that *Iyasu II’s Royal Chronicle* was written under his mother’s supervision, which results in this being “her only official history” as cited in Di Salvo (1999:21). Although she was, of course, a *de facto*



ruler of Ethiopia during the reign of her son Emperor Iyasu II, little is known about Queen Mentewab's early life, except that she is of noble descent, born from a family in Qwara, close to Lake Tana. Perhaps this explains Mentewab's attachment to this location which she chose to build the Church of Narga Selassie (Di Salvo, 1999:22). It is also held that Mentewab had a Portuguese grandmother, hence her much fairer skin tone than the conventional (Bruce, 1804:101; Ullendorff, 1960:8; Henze, 2000:104; Fogg, 2001:78-79; Steyn 2014:108).

Chojnacki notes that traveller James Bruce's accounts on Mentewab – whom Bruce personally had met (in her old age) – were transcribed in a fairly 'liberal' way compared to the narratives documented by Franciscan missionary, Remedius Prutky – who also knew the queen and her son. Chojnacki considers the latter to be "a more reliable source", as he distinguishes that they vary considerably in specific sections (Di Salvo, 1999:21). Relevant information from these versions will be considered from a comparative viewpoint and assessed accordingly in this study.

Emperor Bakaffa's first wife mysteriously died just a few hours after her coronation as queen. At that time, Wallata Giyoris or Mentewab was Bakaffa's female consociate and soon became his second wife and Empress of Ethiopia. Accounts on what happened after Emperor Bakaffa's death differ; according to the royal chronicle, shortly after his father's death, Iyasu II was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia but as he was only seven, his mother, Mentewab, was crowned co-ruler, "at the express wish of her young son". Chojnacki, however, notes that according to Prutky, the whole event was skilfully attained "in the greatest of secrecy" by concealing Emperor Bakaffa's death "for an entire year" and bringing Iyasu II (from Mount Wahni) "secretly to Gondar", until he was proclaimed Emperor (Di Salvo, 1999:21). Prutky furthermore expands:

...most of the high officials, including the Abuna of the Ethiopian Church and the Ecege of the monks rose up in rebellion. Mentewwāb, along with Iysāu and a small group of loyal followers, warded off a series of attacks on the royal castle for eight days, and were only saved by the timely arrival of a friend and ally from Gojjam with his troops. The short-lived rebellion had failed and Mentewwāb's position was never again challenged... (Di Salvo, 1999:21).

Chojnacki acknowledges Prutky's version to be "more plausible" than the account given in the chronicles but does not say why he agrees (also compare McEwan, 2003:143). Based on the above narrative, I consider the revolt of the monks and state officials against Mentewab as an indication that the noblemen and religious authorities were unable to accept that a queen could ascend to the Ethiopian throne (Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye, 2016:255-272).

Considering the time of Mentewab's rule, traditionally the Imperial House of the Ethiopian Empire belonged to the Solomonic dynasty – an inherited monarchy where power succession passed from one male member of the royal family to another. This system affirmed patrilineal descent from the biblical Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. In the Ethiopian National epic, the *Kebra Nagast* ("Glory of Kings"), compiled in the 14th Century, Chapter 86 describes how the Queen of Sheba (also known as Makeda) abdicated her throne, making her son, Menelik I, the ruler of Ethiopia. In Chapter 87, the nobles were compelled to swear that henceforth, no woman would be queen or rule over Ethiopia. It is therefore understandable that, as emphasised in the *Kebra Nagast*, (translated as "The Glory of the Kings", a 14th-century CE national epic of Ethiopia), only male members were considered fit to rule. However, I believe there was an additional reason for the hesitance of the nobility and religious authorities of the Solomonic dynasty. They may have been afraid that a female ruler could once again bring down the dynasty, similar to what had happened in 980 CE, in the case of Queen Gudit/Yodit (Vantini, 1975; Sergew Hable Selassie, 1972; Hendrickx, 2018; Steyn, 2019).



The historical work, the *History of the Patriarchs of the Alexandria*, associated with the Coptic Orthodox Church, includes a 10th Century letter that refers to a certain “Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiah”, believed to be Gudit/Yodit. The letter states, “A woman, a queen of Banî al-Hamwiyah, had revolted against him and his country, taking many captives, burning cities, destroying churches, and driving the king from place to place” (Vantini, 1975:323; see also Sergew Hable Selassie, 1972; Hendrickx, 2018; Steyn, 2019). As noted by Hendrickx (2018),

“It is beyond doubt that there existed a regular correspondence between the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria and Miaphysite Ethiopia on the one hand, and Miaphysite Nubia on the other hand. This is testified by different Chronicles in Coptic and Arabic, and especially the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*.”

According to popular belief, especially among Ethiopian Christians, Queen Gudit is described as a rebellious woman, even as a prostitute who raised an army, invaded Aksum from where she had been exiled, and burned its palace and churches. Yet, against all odds and against the rules of the *Kebrâ Nagast*, Queen Mentewab counterbalances Makeda’s declaration of a ‘woman unfit to rule’ by becoming herself ‘officially’ the ruler. It is ironical that her son, though a male descendant, was defined as ‘unfit to rule’, due to his young age. Mentewab’s dominant personality comes to the fore when, after Bakaffa’s death (1730 CE), she chose as her lover one of his younger family members, Melmal Iyasu, who also happened to be a successor to the throne following the patrilineal Solomonic line. Being considerably much younger than Mentewab, Melmal Iyasu, was sarcastically nicknamed ‘Iyasu the Kept’ by court officials.

Queen Mentewab: views among Ethiopians and nobility

As Queen and regent, Mentewab navigated complex political landscapes, facing both admiration and opposition among the common people of Ethiopia. Queen Mentewab’s relationship with the nobility was complex; apparently, her noble descent, from a family in Qwara, was not considered significant enough to justify her high aimed endeavours. Regarded, thus, as a woman of humble origins who rose to prominence through her marriage to Emperor Bakaffa and her subsequent influence as regent for her son, Emperor Iyasu II, Queen Mentewab faced challenges and opposition from certain factions within the nobility. Understandably, some nobles might have resented Queen Mentewab’s rise to power and her perceived interference in political affairs, particularly during her regency. Additionally, her efforts to consolidate power and promote her own interests may have clashed with the ambitions of other noble families. On the other hand, the queen’s efforts in sponsoring the construction or restoration of churches, monasteries, and other religious institutions (i.e., Narga Selassie Church and the Qusquam Monastery) endeared her to many Ethiopians, particularly those who benefited from her charitable works and educational initiatives. In a country of strong religious tradition, Queen Mentewab was generally regarded as a benefactor and patron of the arts.

Queen Mentewab should also be given credit for authorising the writing of the following:

- a. *The royal chronicle of Iyasu II*, one of the treasures of the building of the church of Narga Selassie that was looted by a British punitive expedition in 1868. This manuscript is currently in the British Library (McEwan, 2003:141).
- b. Her house at Dek Island on Lake Tana.
- c. The commission of a royal manuscript known as the *Revelation and the Life of St. John*.
- d. Two confirmations that Queen Mentewab was the founder of Narga Selassie and donor of the wall paintings, observed in the chronicle and the engraved representation of



“Walatta Giyoris (Mentewwāb) in the miniature on f.134r of the *Acts of St. George*, Brit. Lib. Or. 715 (Di Salvo, 1999:22).

- e. Queen Mentewab’s portraits were commissioned by herself. (Di Salvo, 1999:21). The *Revelation and the Life of St. John* contain portraits of herself, Iyasu II and her grandson Iyo and is considered to be of great importance of the 18th century Ethiopian history and painting art. Fogg and Hosking (2001:78-79) write that these pictures were completed by one royal artist alone, “who drew on a series of 17th-century French engravings that were in the collection of the imperial court at Gondar.”

The above prosopographic information on Mentewab illustrates the persistence of traditional stereotypical images on the position and role women in the Christian history. In her remarkable and thorough study on the position and role of *Women in Roman North African Society*, Martine De Marre (2002; 314-315), writes that while some Christian women chose the path of piety and martyrdom, on the contrary and against the submission to regal authority, several Christian women were often opposing male authority and standing up for women’s rights. Furthermore, De Marre argues that ‘women with wealth’ were in positions to carry out some authority, even in a Christian context, as women were denied “anything but the humblest role in the Church hierarchy”. As such, the author considers African women also donors and founders of significant structures. From a comparative viewpoint, therefore, without committing any anachronism, I consider the above findings indeed credible factors for better understanding Mentewab’s befitted role as co-regent of Ethiopia, positioned against the patrilineal authoritative Solomonic lineage.

Unmistakably we can ascertain, thus, that Mentewab was wealthy, bearing in mind that as Empress she gave command to finance and patronised several structures and paintings in Gondar and Lake Tana, yet in the eyes of her people continued to maintain her humbleness (Levine, 1965:26; Di Salvo, 1999:22-23; Henze, 2000;105; Friedlander, 2007; 197-199; Steyn, 2014:111). This factual information is substantiated by an Ethiopian codex (kept in Berlin), where is documented the first decoration of the Narga Selassie Church, built by the Empress Mentewab. Indeed, unlike Queen Gudit, Mentewab did not destroy the churches; instead, she founded and protected them, which is an indicative of her positive influence and action towards Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

Noteworthy, María-José Friedlander points to a text where Queen Mentewab is equalled to the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, Helena (250-330 CE) in terms of piousness, intelligence, and motherly affection as well as her support for the arts:

We want to write down the report on the piety of our king Iyasu and our queen Walatta Giorgis, as their piety has given us great delight; because there is no king like Iyasu, except for Constantine, and there is no queen like Walatta Giorgis, except for Helena; because they are like one another: their love is the same, their shrewdness is the same and their piety is the same.”(Friedlander, 2007:197). From a comparative viewpoint, see also, Ullendorff (1960:81-82) Di Salvo (1999:211), Hein and Kleidt (1999:179).

Mentewab’s identification with Helena is strengthened by De Maree’s (2002:315) evidence about the position and role of Helena, as a well-known founder and donor, who besides her “Christian foundations and benefactions”, was recognised as “the last imperial woman to appear on a Roman medallion”. This way of using imagery for lasting commemoration of one’s legacy can be seen as another point of parallelism between the two powerful women.

Queen Mentewab: Portrayal and Symbols in Ethiopian Icons



Portraits of kings or other royal figures as patrons were seldom portrayed in iconographies before the 18th Century. Portraits of donors flourished after the 18th Century whereby images were mostly presented with the Virgin as their protector (Chojnacki, 1983:239; Friedlander, 2007:54, 200; Steyn, 2014). Considering the dominant position of Mary in the Ethiopian iconography, Martha Wright (2004:374), contributes this preference, artistically and spiritually, to Mary's human nature which defines humility, purity of soul and body, virtues that rendered her worthy to have carried and brought Christ to the world as its Saviour. To venerate her image below Christ's, according to hierarchal rules, means to place her closer to their human condition, therefore, to see Mary as a messenger with empathy who comprehends and advocates in favour of humans to Christ.

In the context of this study, for a centralised governed country, and from an historical, religious viewpoint, the Ethiopian social order should be considered and understood in line with the Byzantine *Political Ideology* (Ahrweiler, 1977:158-160). Based on the politico-spiritual connection between Ethiopia and Byzantium, Ethiopians have interpreted their human social structures and earthy authority as reflection of the hierarchal conceptualised supernatural cosmic order. This view would not be identified with the traditional African ideology of ancestors' worship, which contrary to the Ethiopian, interprets the supernatural as projections of the authority of the living, whereby ancestors are conceptualised as the eldest elders in the lineage system of social stratification (Keesing, 1981:335, 507; Maphela, 2021).

In my opinion, Ethiopians feel closer to Mary because they consider her as the ideal image of *Mother* an existing dominant figure and part of their own human world view. In the African cultural tradition, a woman's social position and role as mother has collectively and diachronically maintained a distinctly higher status compared to the one as maiden and as married woman. The rationale behind the concept is that a man may have more than one wife but only one mother.

As African queen mothers were traditionally considered women with great authority they were frequently classified as 'Male', and by Nature's right defined as the 'king's maker'. In line with concept, the status of Mentewab as mother of Iyasu II should be considered even higher than a queen's. It has been also noted that as a queen mother she had the acquired political power and the required intellect to promote new ideas and the Arts in her court (Shepherd & Shepherd, 2002).

The iconography in Narga Selassie's monastery, painted by a court artist, is defined as the Qwara style, by which European, Islamic, and Indian features are blended, yet maintain their distinct Ethiopian characteristics (Di Salvo, 1999:23, Friedlander, 2007:199). Chojnacki categorises the Qwara School as part of the Second Gondarine style and points out three major features of the Qwara style. The first feature is the powerful use of different hues of pure colours; the particular use of *terre-verte* in shades of blues opposed to the general use of colour in other 18th Century Ethiopian wall murals. The second characteristic is the childlike plump-faces while the third quality is the over-adornment of elements which, according to Chojnacki, bears similarities to the decorative European paintings of the Rococo style (Chojnacki, 1983; Di Salvo, 1999:23-31, Friedlander, 2007:54, 199).

Building on the specific features of the Qwara Style artistic tradition become evident in the painting titled 'The Covenant of Mercy.' This painting, portrays the Virgin Mother and Christ joined by hands, sitting side-by-side. Below the Mother and Child are two prostrated donors: Queen Mother Mentewab and her son, Iyasu II. Friedlander (2007:202), explains that the joint hands' gesture symbolises Christ's promise to answer the prayers of those who appealed in the name of the Virgin.

This artwork, located on the south wall of the Church of Narga Selassie on Lake Tana, exemplifies three key characteristics identified by Chojnacki (1983). The powerful use of different hues of pure colours, particularly the distinctive use of *terre-verte* in shades of blues, stands out in contrast to the prevalent colour schemes in other 18th Century Ethiopian wall murals. Additionally, the childlike plump-faces and the over-adornment of elements in the icon are parallel to the decorative European paintings of the Rococo style as noted by Di Salvo (1999) and Friedlander (2007).

Another, most magnificent painting (Fig. 1) is placed on the west wall of the Church of Narga Selassie. Queen Mentewab is portrayed in a prostrate position just below the Virgin dressed in a blue cloak, holding the Infant Christ. This symbolises that Mentewab is under their protection (Di Salvo & Raineri, 1999:25, 160, 174). The painting of the Virgin in a blue cloak, holding Baby Christ are surrounded by two archangels, one holding in a sword and the other angel, a flower. Friedlander (2007:197), notes that all these types of paintings of the Virgin were similar in that time i.e. the angels typically holding a sword and flowers. They no longer are “the vigilant defenders of the Mother and Child but have been reduced to a mere decorative function”.



Figure 1: Empress Mentewab lying prostrate at the Virgin Mary's feet on the west wall of the Church of Nagra Sellasie, Lake Tana, 1728.

Queen Mentewab is depicted in a flower-patterned skirt and a plain white shirt. Of great interest is the illustration of her hair (Fig. 1), as it resembles the traditional Ethiopian braids, placed in the shape of a patterned halo. Friedlander describes her pleated hairstyle as “pulled back”, “to give the impression of a crown surrounding her serene and beautiful face.” (Friedlander, 2007:202). This traditional styling is not only unique to Mentewab but finds resonance in other representations and cultural sources as depicted in a Tigray magic scroll (Fig. 2). According to Jacques Mercier (1979:99), the Abyssinian women's hairstyle is identifiable as the hair is intricately twisted into fine braids near the head and cascades loosely over the shoulders in a substantial mass.



Figure 2: Tigray magic scroll: the Abyssinian women's hairstyle. Mercier (1979:99)

In another painting, which is also found on the west side of the wall in the church of Narga Selassie, Mentewab is portrayed beneath the image of the Virgin, while her son Iyasu II is consecutively placed below a painting of the Crucifix and under the protection thereof. According to Chojnacki, donors were incorporated in the different topics of iconography, not only under the Virgin Mother's protection but commonly under the guard of the Cross in iconography. As such, images of Mentewab and Iyasu II are carved onto two ceremonial crosses – prostrate in devoutness and under the protection of the Virgin Mother and Child on one cross and the other, under the protection of the Holy Trinity (Di Salvo, 1999:26-29; Friedlander, 2007:197). Queen Mentewab donated both ceremonial crosses to the church of Narga Selassie. Friedlander (2007:197) proposes that “both the construction and paintings were completed, and the church dedicated to the Holy Trinity before Iyasu died in 1755”.

The portrayal of Queen Mentewab under the protection of the Virgin Mother and Child, could suggest that the Virgin Mother protects the womanly rulers while Christ guards the male sovereigns. This could also justify Mentewab's need for spiritual and physical protection, which is echoed in the building of this church and her castle respectively. A scribe explaining why these iconographic types were made relates that Queen Mentewab was in search of spiritual protection “in the redeeming power of the holy images” (Chojnacki, 1983:247). This also underlines that Queen Mentewab sought spiritual protection through the Virgin and her son through Christ (Steyn 2014:109). This could also be interpreted as intentionally mirrored the queen-mother-son relationship through the representation of the Virgin Mother and her Son.

In another intriguing historical context, an 18th-century illuminated manuscript titled ‘The Acts of St. George’ features a depiction of Walatta Giyoris (Mentewab) and King Iyasu II engaged in a royal benediction act (Fig. 3). This act is symbolised by crossed fingers, signifying a response to prayers seeking protection and support from powerful mortals. Notably, this icon not only serves this specific purpose but also conveys Mentewab's profound piety and humility, as highlighted by Di Salvo (1999:22 & 24) and Steyn (2014:110-111).



Figure 3. The Acts of St. George, Mentewab and King Iyasu II

In addition, there is a miniature icon that depicts Mentewab and her daughter, Walatta Israel, in an act of submission below the Virgin Mother. This unique depiction known under the title the 'Story of Mary' discovered at the Amba Maryam Monastery. Chojnacki (1983:247), explains this 'piety posture' as a frequently occurring phenomenon in Ethiopian religious art. He notes that the donor's position is seldom standing, an exception being representations of King Iyasu II found on the side panel of the triptych. According to the author, Ethiopian iconographers rarely rendered the images of nobles, kings, queens, and clergymen in their physical likeness. In this context, I propose that Ethiopian emperors presented themselves with a spiritual appearance in line with the ideal image expected of Byzantine Orthodox rulers. Furthermore, the placement of the queen-mother alongside the king's sister, Walatta Israel, and Iyasu II reinforces my belief that, in Ethiopian iconography, the Virgin is perceived as the protector exclusively of women sovereigns.

Conclusion

This article indirectly challenges the denial (conscious or unconscious) of women's role beyond the traditional gender context, as defined in the *Kebra Nagast*, according to which only male members should rule. The relevant contextualisation is crucial to better understand how Mentewab's hegemony and maternal qualities were perceived within the Ethiopian culture and feminist discourse. Queen Mentewab's strong personality and multifaceted role in the Ethiopian history and religious art created her unique legacy both nationally and internationally.

As a queen and mother of Emperor Iyasu II, Mentewab used her position of power and authority in the most remarkable way, politically and socio-culturally. As a woman with limited choices, she handled with astonishing boldness political challenges and threatening conflicts, particularly *vis à vis* the nobility, with the necessary presence of mind and capability. As a devoted mother, her maternal role strategically projected most probably contributed to enhancing her popularity, and her prosopography in the Ethiopian History. Her ability to combine authority with humility, marked her reign as a period of cultural flourishing highlighted by architectural innovation. Socio-culturally, Queen Mentewab's life had had a unique impact on collective, traditional perceptions about female leadership and patronage beyond her ruling region. Intellectually, as a patron of the arts, and *ktetor* of churches and monasteries, Queen Mentewab proves her perceptiveness in balancing her devotion to religious tradition with her love for arts through a highly inspiring imagery.

Regarding the portrayal of Queen Mentewab in Ethiopian icons, her spirituality and political authority are clearly depicted. At the same framework, Mentewab's hegemonic power, enveloped in her mortal humility in the face of Virgin Mother and Child eternal puissance are



symbolically presented in reflection of the Byzantine hierarchic tradition. These artistic representations not only attest to her devoutness but also to her strategic alliances and quest for legitimacy in a male-dominated political arena.

References

- Ahrweiler, H. (1977). *L'idéologie politique de l'Empire byzantin*, Paris, 1975 [=H πολιτική ιδεολογία της Βυζαντινής Αυτοκρατορίας, Athens.
- Bruce, J. (1804). *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*. Edinburgh. Vol. 4.
- Budge, E.A.W. (1932). *The Queen of Sheba and her only Son Menyeliak (I)*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Chojnacki, S. (1983). *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting*, Wiesbaden.
- Darkwah, K. (1975). *Shewa, Menilek, and the Ethiopian Empire, 1813-1889*. Heinemann Educational.
- De Marre, M. E. A. (2002). *The Role and Position of Women in Roman North African Society* (Unpublished Thesis), University of Johannesburg.
- Di Salvo, M. & Raineri, O. (1999). *Churches of Ethiopia. The Monastery of Nārgā Sellāsē*. Milan.
- Fogg, S. & Hosking D. (2001). *Ethiopian Art: Catalogue by Sam Fogg Rare Books & Manuscripts (Firm)*, London.
- Friedlander, M. (2007). *Ethiopia's Hidden Treasures, A guide to the paintings of the remote churches of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa.
- Hein, E. & Kleidt, B. (1999). *Äthiopien – christliches Afrika*, Melina Verlag, Ratingen.
- Hendrickx, B. (2018). The Letter of an Ethiopian King to King George II of Nubia in the Framework of the Ecclesiastic Correspondence between Axum, Nubia and the Coptic Patriarchate in Egypt and of the Events of the 10th Century AD. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 99.
- Henze, P. B. (2000). *Layers of Time, A History of Ethiopia*, New York.
- Keessing, R. M. (1981). *Cultural Anthropology*, Canberra, Australia.
- Levine, D. N. (1965). *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago.
- Maphela, B. (2021). COVID-19 burial guidelines in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 102(Special Ed 1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.102.112>
- McEwan, R. (2003). The Revelation Illuminations of Qwesquam and Derasge as Assertions of Political Destiny in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art*, Addis Ababa, 5-8 November 2002:140-151.
- Mercier, J. (1979). *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, New York.
- Sergew Hable Selassie. (1972). *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*. Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University.
- Shepherd, R. & Shepherd, R. (Eds.). (2002). *1000 Symbols: What shapes Mean in Art and Myth*, (1st ed.). New York: Thames & Hudson).



Steyn, R. (2019). Gudit, a Jewish Queen of Aksum? Some Considerations on the Sources and Modern Scholarship, and the Use of Legends. *Journal for Semitics* 28 (1):16 pages. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6573/6003>.

Steyn, R. (2014). *Christian Divine, Holy and Sainly Protection of African Rulers: In The Byzantine 'Coptic' Iconographic Tradition* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Johannesburg. Retrieved from <https://ujdigispace.uj.ac.za>

Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye (2016). Gojjam(Ethiopia): peopling, Christianization, and identity, African Identities, DOI: 10.1080/14725843.2015.1128805

The Fetha Nagast (The Law of the Kings). (1968). Translated from the Ge'ez by Abba Paulos Tzadua; ed. by P.L. Strauss. Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University.

Ullendorff, E. (1991). *The Ethiopians. An Introduction to Country and People*. London: Oxford University Press.

Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence

The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.