WHY DID KING FASILÄDÄS KILL HIS BROTHER?
SHARING POWER IN THE ROYAL FAMILY IN MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ETHIOPIA

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The transition between the two long reigns of King Susneyos (1607-32) and King Fasilädäs (1632-67) is not well known, and a striking historical fact hides some subtle religious and political events of the time: Susneyos is associated with Catholicism, while Fasilädäs is the King who restored the “national” faith. This study focuses on a specific place to throw light on some of the mechanisms at play during this transition. This place is a monastery founded by queen Wäld Sä’ala, wife of Susneyos and mother of Fasilädäs. A familial drama, whose roots and branches are deeply linked with the national background, not to mention with international developments, took place here.

Wäld Sä’ala was originally from a noble family of Wäläqa and Mära˙bété, regions located in south Amhara and north Säwa (see map 1). She married Susneyos around 1595. Her regnal name was Šełtan Mogasa, following the regnal name of her husband, Šełtan Sägäd.¹ They had numerous children, amongst whom was the future King Fasilädäs (r. 1632-1667) and his younger brother, Gälawdewos. Wäld Sä’ala founded her own monastery, named Qoma Fasilädäs, in south Bägémder. Its construction began in 1618 and was completed in 1640, as internal documents show. She lived at Qoma until her death in 1661 and was buried there.²

¹ Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, Chronica de Susneyos, rei de Etiópia, segundo o manuscrito da Bibliotheca Bolleana de Oxford, 2 vols. (Lisboa, 1892, 1900), 2, 34; P. Pedro Paez S.J., Historia Aethiopiae, Liber I et II, in Camillo Beccari, Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales Inediti a Saeculo XVI ad XIX (hereafter abbreviated as RAESOIS) (Roma, 1905), 2:164; Jules Perruchon, “Notes pour l’histoire de l’Ethiopie. Règne de Susneyos ou Seltan-Sagad (1607-1632),” Revue sémitique 5 (1897): 77. References to the published chronicles, such as the Chronica de Susneyos, are to the translations, which provide full reference to the original Gé’ez texts.

² This study is based on a Ph.D. dissertation, defended in January 2003, University of Paris-1 Sorbonne, laboratory Centre de Recherches Africaines. The title is “‘Aux Confins le Feu, Au Centre le Paradis.’ Qoma Fasilädäs, un Monastère Royal dans l’Éthiopie du 17ème siècle.”
The accompanying article by H. Pennec and D. Toubkis touches on the political and religious context of Susneyos’s reign. Wald Sa’ala had been fiercely opposed to Catholicism, as reported by the Jesuit sources. According to a text written for Qoma Fasiladás’s monastery, she left the royal court in 1618, a few years before the official conversion of the king. But even though she was opposed to the Catholic policy of her husband, which may be seen as the reason why she chose to separate herself from it, the choice of her son, Fasiladás, to re-establish Orthodoxy did not bring her back in a less independent state of mind.

Religious choices are inextricably linked with contextual and political challenges. This study presents, therefore, the games of alliances spun by some members of the royal family—the Queen, the King and his younger brother, and the Coptic metropolitans, titular leaders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church—during the period from 1640 to ca. 1650. The biggest challenge crystallizes around the relationship between the Queen Mother, Wald Sa’ala, and her son, King Fasiladás.

Tales of a fratricide

Oral Tradition in Qoma designates Galawdewos, younger brother of Fasiladás, as the genuine heir of Susneyos. Even today, Qoma’s memory denies the legitimacy of Fasiladás’s rule:

When the work [for Qoma’s church] was finished, ‘Abd Susneyos had already died owing to his muteness. He designated his son Galawdewos as his heir. Before, one would have said żwəd efənə (“betrothed of the crown”) but now one says alqa wała (“inheritor of the throne”). He had been designated by the government to succeed to his father. But Fasil was jealous and wanted the throne. He killed his brother and took his father’s power. This hurt his mother, who decided not to see him anymore. Their father died for accepting a foreign religion and he brought dishonor on the country, and now her son killed her son! Then Wald Sā’ala accomplished her work in this church.

1 Letter of Manoel Barradas in Beccari, RAESOIS, 4:71; Patriarchae A. Mendez S.J., Expeditionis Aethiopicae, liber III et IV, in Beccari, RAESOIS, 9:242; Patriarchae A. Mendez S.J., Expeditionis Aethiopicae, liber I et II, in Beccari, RAESOIS, 8:333-34.
2 According to A. Mendez, Wald Sā’ala left the royal court because she was opposed to the Catholic policy of her husband. Mendez in Beccari, RAESOIS, 8:333-34.
3 I have recorded this very formalized tradition amongst the intellectuals of Qoma monastery, the civil administrators of the parish, some clergy of neighboring churches, and the chiefs of the Muslim and craftsmen communities present on the parish territory.
4 In this version, after having officially declared the conversion of the Ethiopian Church to Catholicism, the tongue of King Susneyos twisted in his mouth and he became mute.
5 The inclusion of this ancient phrase might testify to the tradition’s antiquity.
6 Interview with Liqä Kahenat Käbädä Fäqadu, civil administrator of Qoma’s monastery, 11th and 18th September 1999.