THE SELLING OF THE NÉGUŚ:
THE «EMPEROR OF ETHIOPIA»
IN PORTUGESE AND JESUIT IMAGINATION

«… pera a reputação tanto val o que he como o que se ima-
gina e o mundo se governa pello que lhe fazem cret».

European imagination once saw the political leader of the Christian king-

dom of Ethiopia, the négus (négusá nágäši), as the true embodiment of the

Prester John. Such an identification gained special intensity during the centu-

ry-long period when Portugal and Christian Ethiopia were in close contact.
The Portuguese sailors, colonial officers and the countless clerics that prowl-
ed in the Indian Ocean commonly referred to Christian Ethiopia and to its

1 Letter of Lourenço Pires de Tavora to el-Rei [D. Sebastião], 19 July 1561, in: JOSE DA SILVA MENDES LEAL (ed.), Corpo Diplomático Português [E-c.], IX. Relações com a Curia Romana, reinado de el-rei O. Sebastião (continuação), Lisboa, Typographia da Academia Real das Sciencias, 1886, 300–303, here 303 [«… for one’s honour, what is believed matters as much as what actually is, and the world is govern-

ned through what we are made to believe».]

2 P. Emmanuel de Almeida ad Praepositum Generalem So. Iesu, Gorgorra, 16 Jun.

1628, in: CAMILLO BECCARI (ed.), Rerum Aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales ine-
diti a saeculo XVI ad XIX, vols. I–XV, Roma 1903–1917 [in the following: RASO],
here XII, 247–289, esp. 269 [«The fathers went to encounter him more than half a

legua away, and as he stepped down they kissed him, as was the habit, on the hand;
he was riding a mule, with four other horses on his right, and dressed in velvet crimson,
with a golden crown on his head, and another two crowns, much larger and heavier,
carried by two pawns on horses; in the front, trumpets were being played, together
with eight atabals on top of four mules. Altogether, along with the train accompanying
them by foot and on horses, it made a grandiose and royalish impression».]
ruler as the «Preste». They believed him to be a powerful monarch, lord over dozens of kingdoms and, what was more important for a society still animated by the Crusader spirit, a decisive ally in the war against Islam.  

Such a «love story» between the medieval eschatological myth and the Portuguese explorers was, however, a short lived one. The different Portuguese embassies that visited Ethiopia between 1520 and 1541, and the Jesuit mission that ran between 1556 and 1632, provided Europe with a tamed — and more realistic — image of its ruler. It turned out that the Preste cum ṇaguś was a weak ruler, constantly harassed by both Muslim armies and by internal revolts (local rulers, Fälåša, Galla), and of dubious Christian faith. In short, the Ethiopian Preste proved to be an illusion, the result of a misunderstanding, of ignorance, or of both. 

By the time of the Jesuit mission the image of the Ethiopian ruler had completely changed. The Spaniard Pedro Paez put things with crystal clarity when he suggested to his friend and compatriot Tomás de Ituren, right before embarking upon what was to be a successful career in Ethiopia, that the Preste was to be found in «Catayo» rather than in the Ethiopian highlands. With the Jesuits the Preste was, thus, displaced from Christian Ethiopia: relegated to other lands or to the status of an outdated myth. This process went hand in hand with an increase in the factual information produced by Europeans on the land and on the institution of the ṇagusā ṇəgəsšt. Alvares’s narrative of 1540 and, to a large extent, the dense annual letters of the Jesuits written mostly between 1603 and 1632, produced profuse ethnographic descriptions of this institution, descriptions which still today represent invaluable sources for the historian. Likewise, the most ambitious Jesuit narratives, written by Paez, Almeida and Mendes, with their quotations of royal chronicles and of works such as the Ḟəṭha ṇəgəsšt, hinted for the first time at the rich indigenous literary tradition that upheld the legitimacy, and the government of the Christian state.  

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4 A common contemporary interpretation claimed that the name «John» derived from ḡan, a word appearing in such composita as, e. g., ḡan hoy! (commonly translated as ‘Your Majesty!’) — the form of address to the Ethiopian monarch.

5 By «Catayo» Paez was probably meaning the Tibet of the Dhalai Lama, that his companion Antonio de Montserrat had recently visited; Diu, letter of 4 December 1602, in: RASO XI, 32–35, here 35.

6 Manoel de Almeida, for instance, translated a chapter from the chronicle of Minas in his Historia de Ethiopia a alta; see Francisco Maria Estevés Pereira (ed., tr.), Ḟəṭha ṇəgəsšt. Historia de Minás Además Sagad, Rei de Ethiopia, Lisboa 1888 [Extrahido do Boletim dă Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa: n.º 12, 7.ª serie — 1887], 7.