

Tsegaye Gabre - Medhin

COLLISION OF ALTARS

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COLLISION OF ALTARS

A Conflict of the Ancient Red Sea Gods

TSEGAYE GABRE-MEDHIN

A play based on the fall of
the third greatest power in the world:
Emperor Kaleb's Axumite Ethiopia
of sixth century.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

The play was written seven years ago and is only now due for publication. Ours, Africa's in general, or, in this case, Ethiopia's in particular, is just another part of today's inquisitive generation that must be encouraged to come to terms with its historic past; even that historic past often torn and denied against him. And this, to a lesser or greater extent, may be achieved, by the process of re-interpreting to himself, the human events of his past, which in a way, is still responsible for his present conflicting awareness, if not for the shaping of his total future event. It is in this sense alone, that a historical play becomes an instrument of history and change. Yet, the position of the interpreter becomes even more difficult, when the material of historic documentation happens to be rather thin and sparse, sometimes handed down by unrealistic ancient spiritual mystics. The other difficulty is that of the dramatist: (a) How to condense, the rather widespread and complex machinery of the world Power inter-relationships, North East Ethiopian Axum's, Byzantium's, Persia's, and South Arabia's religious cultures and political state. (Considering of course that, what is a power struggle today behind the mask of ideological conflicts, was a power struggle then as now under the cover of religious cultures and political state. (Considering of course that, and the Kremlin palace at Red Square are now, the Temples of Altars in the cities of spiritual powers were then.)—(b) How to depict a story that took a lapse of over half a century, in a distant period as far removed from ours, occupied nearly twelve hundred years ago, into less than three hours of dramatic experience. It is because of these, and of course other less obvious contemporary difficulties, that this play should be considered as a play only based on history, and NOT a factual historic document. Besides, it is now accepted of any historical interpretation, that quite a considerable share of its body comes from legend, folk tales and proverbs, from its more recent research findings, and of course,

from the humble interpreter's imagination.

Concerning the play's main body of history, my major reference materials have been, Durnheim's *The Royal Cemeteries of Kush*, vols. I-V, the *Kibre Negest* or the Ethiopian Royal Chronicles, *Book of the Ethiopian Saints Vol. I* by Wallis Budge, also his *Bualam* and *Yewasef*, *L'Omlia di Yohannes* by C. Conti Rossini, *Il Gadla Arawi* by Giudi, *La vie de Saint Za Mikael Aragawi* by Marc Antoine Van de Oudenrigin, *Life of Mohammed* by Muar, *Mohammad at Mecca* by W. M. Watt, Ullendorff and Trimmingham on the Ethiopian black Judaic 'Falashas' of the period, Byzantium and Persian history of Sixth Century, the fragments of the pre-Sabian legend of the North East nilotic 'Semri' people, the fragments of the ancient sun gods, Almugah, Astar, Mahrem, Beher etc., of the Saba Kingdom in South Arabia before the coming of the Sabians and with them their influence of additional Greek gods; also *The Arabs and History* by Bernard Lewis, *Axum Expedition, India and Ethiopia* by Littman, and of course the Holy Bible, Old and New Testament, the Holy Koran and the Life and Religion of the Persian Zarathushtra.

Regarding set and production of this play, I would like merely to point out my preoccupation with the idea of an illustrative total theatre, functional dance, mime, incantation, incense burning, Ethiopian wigs and African type masks and rituals, old Ethiopian type Orthodox Church chant, music, praise singing and of course verse drama, which I hope will bring together that original sense of the theatre's craft, the dance-actor, director-designer and author relationship to a closer effort of combined imagination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am obliged to my good learned friends who with their first-hand professional knowledge helped raise certain valuable points of historic relevance and references: Dr Richard Pankhurst, former Director, Institute of Ethiopian Studies: Professor S. Rubenson, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts: Ato Duri Muhammad, Department of Economics: Dr Victor Low of Michigan State University: and particularly Professor Cheikh Anta Diop of the University of Dakar.

CHARACTERS

KING KALEB

(THE HERMIT)

The Axumite Ethiopian Emperor. Abdicated his Throne in favour of his younger son Gabre Maskel, Nezana, in 542 AD when his great expedition to Arabia failed. Instead he became a monk, but, here for the purpose of the play we make him a hermit and retain his abdication until 587 AD.

ABA PANTELEON

(THIRD VOICE)

Head Monk, Confessor, and Royal Overseer. Symbolic head of the Orthodox Christian faith in Axum. Also plays the THIRD VOICE.

RABBI YONA

(SECOND VOICE)

The Prince Bet Isreal, elder son of Kaleb. Symbolic head of Black Judaic faith in Axum. Also plays the SECOND VOICE.

NEZANA

Kaleb's younger son, the King Gabre-Maskel, or, Servant of The Cross.

QUEEN NOBA

King Nezana's wife, daughter of the Chief of the Southern Lake people of 'Semri'. (Descendants of the fallen Empire of Kush.)

ARMAH

Nezana's son, the Crown Prince.

CHIEF WATTO

Head of the elders of the Southern Lake people. Symbolic head for the old religion of the Noble Serpent in and around Axum. Also plays FIRST VOICE (priest of Atetse or Issis).

ARAAYA

Little Prince Araaya, the great grandchild of Kaleb, better known as Dagna Dejan.

JAFFAR

Jaffar Bin Abu Talib, Cousin of Mohammed, the new Prophet from Mecca. Leader of the immigrant family of Mohammed now in Axum. Also plays FOURTH VOICE, symbolic head of earliest Islamic faith in Axum.

- RAMIA** *Ramia Umm'Habibah, the young member of the immigrant family who is the betrothed of Mohammed, and ex-wife of Uthman Bin Huwayrith.*
- ROYAL CRIER** *A blind Persian woman called Zaradushia, serving as Royal Crier.*
- MAD JULIAN** *Captain Julian, the Roman prison officer who was the Consul of Byzantium, later imprisoned and became mad.*
- ABAS** *Governor of Adulis Port Town and Captain of the Palace Body Guard. Also chief Royal flogger.*
- TWO GUARDS** *The two Keepers of palace gate peace, and assistant royal floggers of Axum.*
- CHILDREN'S CHORUS** *A group of nine village urchins, with a range of nine to fifteen years of age, of all skin colours and sizes; all looking like thugs.*
- MOTHER'S CHORUS** *A group of five lean-faced, worn, Hamitic type African mothers, in dirty and torn leather skirts. They wear beads, some are almost naked, with old Nilo-Hamite hair-does.*
- BEGGAR'S CHORUS** *A group of seven dishevelled, rather old and tattered beggars, with sticks and shrunken leather pouches.*

All characters and all chorus groups are a mixture of all colours, a result of Hamitic African, Arab, Indian, Jewish, Greek, etc. cross-breeding.

Apart from Kaleb, Nezana (Gabre-Maskel), Armah, Watto, Araaya, (Dagna Dejen), Yona (Bet Isreal), Aba Panteleon, Jaffar, Ramia and Abas, all names are imaginary, and to a considerable extent, the mannerisms of all the characters are also imaginary.

place

THE ALTARS OF THE CITY OF AXUM: THE THEN CAPITAL OF ETHIOPIA.

time
587 AD—629 AD

ACT ONE: END OF THE GREAT RISE

- SCENE I —CALLS OF THE INNER VOICES
SCENE II —INTRODUCTION
 (PART ONE) AND MIME OF THE ROYAL MOCK
 DEATH
 (PART TWO)

ACT TWO: REIGN WITHOUT TEARS

- SCENE I —RITES OF THE FLOGGING OF THE
 PRINCE
SCENE II —NIGHTS WITHOUT LOVE
SCENE III —EXODUS
 (PART ONE) AND RANT OF THE TEACHERS
 (PART TWO)

*ACT THREE: "HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THE YEAR OF
 THE ELEPHANT?"*

- SCENE I —DEATH-WATCH BEETLES CHANT
 (PART ONE)
 (PART TWO)
 —END OF NOBLE SHIVER
SCENE III —WAY OUT TO VOMITURITION

ACT ONE

END OF THE GREAT RISE

I. CALLS OF THE INNER-VOICES:

Darkness. Midnight. Axum, 587 AD. Off-stage, single ritualized calls from four competitive voices, respectively. Humming in the distance more voices calling out other devotions of more primitive sects may also be echoed. Out of the darkness, the declamation of each of the four voices cause their respective symbolic signs to blaze out on a large metal frame hanging on centre back wall. The wall itself is in the shape of a huge red marble heart, the royal insignia of Axum. Each time the symbolizing voices of each of the faiths are pronounced, the large metal pieces in the heart-shaped wall, blaze out, first, in the form of a writhing enormous Serpent, next, as the Star of David, third, as the Holy Cross, and finally as the Holy Crescent. Unless lighted on, the metal glows are normally less visible than the red, huge heart-wall forming the background of the stage.

VOICE ONE: *(From the far dark)*
The spirits of our dead, demand.
The spirits of our living, obey.
(Serpent lights up)
I, Watto, speaker of their will,
And of your dreams, command.
Listen my children,
Children of our life-giving lake,
Children of our red water gate
We have caused
Our Noble Serpent to starve.
From the bosom of our bright waters
We have caused it, the Mother of Ham
To lick at the muddy sand.

Our eyes have strayed long
Away from your pharoahinic roots
Across the dirt of the salt water, and
Towards the distant Kabah Stone of the
Quaryash.

Our ears have taken in
The many strange gods of Sabea
Of our Axumite brother-masters,
The war-gods, long married
To our land and daughters.
We have trained our hearts to refuse
The seasonal offerings expected of us.
We have dared to deny our Noble Serpent

Ra

Mother of Kushite Meroe
That which is its ancestral right.
But listen my children,
The spirits of our dead Ham still demand
The spirits of our living must obey.
*(Wild stifled human groans from within,
then humming drums. Blackout on serpent.
Silence.)*

VOICE TWO:

(From the far dark)

Sh'maa Yisrael

(Star of David lights up)

Adonai Alohenu, Adonai Ehad.

Hear, O Isreal convert

The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Sh'maa Yisrael,

I am Rabbi Yona, servant of Jehova

Known as the Prince Bet Israel.

My aged, frail and tired father

The Great Emperor Kaleb of Axumite
Ethiopia

Is about to abdicate his Throne

In favour of my younger brother

The Christian Heir Apparent Prince Gabre

Maskel, Half breed of Kush Throne

Known as The Servant of The Cross.

Hear, O Israel convert

The Lord is one, and Axum is One.

(Drums clash with horn pipes. Blackout on the Star of David. Silence.)

VOICE THREE: *(From the far dark)*
Bism 'Ab, Wo-Wold,
Wo-Menfes Kidus. Amen.
Our father which art in Heaven,
(Holy Cross Lights up)
Why hast thou forsaken us!
I am the Head Monk, Aba Panteleon
Confessor of the Royal Household
Overseer for the Empire of Great Kaleb.
I speak the voice of the Savior,
I speak the will of Axum.
. . . The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the communion of the Holy Ghost
Be with us all.
Axumite Ethiopia stretches her hands
In supplication to God.
(Clash of bells, drums, horn pipes and wild cries of joy. Blackout on Cross.)

VOICE FOUR: *(From the far dark)*
Bism Alah Al'rahman Al'rahim,
(Holy Crescent lights up)
Praise belongs to Alah.
I, Jaffar Bin Abu Talib
Cousin of our Apostle Mohammad
— May Alah bless and preserve him —
Speak. O great Nagashi Kaleb
Kind descendent of Sabea
Protector of Mohammad's family
And of his betrothed, Ramia Umm'habibah
All here, under your good care
— May Alah bless and preserve you —
The Prophet has bidden me to say
That Arabia is a barbarous nation
Worshipping idols, eating carrion
Fornicating, committing shameful deeds
The strong devouring the weak.
And now Alah has smitten
The enemies of the Nabi

Who seduced his faithful.
 Wherefore he sends you Great Nagashi
 And his people of Islam here
 A message of peace and courage.
 Hear, O people of the Kitab
 Praise belongs to Alah
 To the Lord of the worlds
 To the Merciful, the Compassionate
 To the Wielder of the Day of Judgement.
 Him do we serve
 And on Him do we call for help.
*(Horn pipes, cries of joy, crash of brass sistras
 and drums. Blackout on Crescent.)*

II INTRODUCTION

AND THE MIME OF THE ROYAL MOCK-DEATH

PART ONE

Early morning. Dim stage light. On centre stage, a huge altar of many phases. Convertible into a massive oriental throne—Axumite Ethiopian style—into large lecterns of various denominations, and into a huge block for a tomb. A few paces towards the front of the stage, at centre left of the tomb, is a stone gate which leads to a ladder, going down to a dungeon. On both sides of the front stage, two narrow wall drops, showing the Axumite steles. There are two steps at the foot of each stele. At the foot of the steps of the left stele, a dove holding a tall batch of olive branches towards the audience. At the foot of the right one, the clutch of a hawk's claws throwing its kill of a dove at the audience. The steles have small window-sized doors opening out to the steps leading towards the front edge of the stage.

Enter mime of the Royal Mock-Death. Brass horn pipes announce the Royal entrance. The King and his entourage appear at right of Heart-shaped wall. They are, first, a uniform group under one spotlight, pausing like in a family painting. Suddenly they separate, each under different shades of different spotlights.

EMPEROR KALEB, the Axumite Ethiopian monarch, at the close of his reign, (587 AD). Rather frail, aged, pale and grief-worn. His crown weighs heavily on his pointed forehead. Though old, his bearing of confidence is still

there. At times, aloof, eerie, exuding an air of the unknown, of an almost unearthly bearing. Beneath his searching deep gaze, eliciting fear and a calm possessive terror, one sees he is tormented. He moves in centre forward, held supported by his grandson, Prince Armah, on his left, and the Head Monk, Aba Panteleon, on his right. Their support is merely a symbolic gesture, he finds himself leaning on his Royal cane, the long silver sceptre. He wears a life-death mask, green and red, along either side of his face. His mimed performance depicts a spiritually broken old ruler, who, just before surrendering his crown to an invisible power, fights an inner moral war with a fierce final courage of desperation. His battle looks more a mental state than real, one of being torn between two strong decisions rather than between physical forces.

NEZANA, his son, also known as GABRE-MASKEL or SERVANT OF THE CROSS is about to be crowned King. He is late-middle-aged, tall, lean, greying, sensitive and touchy. He has developed a shrill voice, a rather slender feminine posture, smoother features, and the demon's cunning. Rumours tell that he was emasculated, just before the birth of his son Armah, during an expedition he led against the neighbouring tribe of Angabe. Despite his violent fits which possessed him at birth and thus deprived him of the full exercise of his faculties, Nezana is regarded as active, a devout if not a fanatic Christian. He is also a religious idealist; elegant, subtle, and a charming death-god. Nezana has assured airs, a cruel subtle face, but is capable at times of melancholy and bitterness to the extent of self indulgence. At present, he wears a helmet type mask, engraved with the cross; a determined militant appearance of an Axumite military leader set on a sense of mission. The mime he performs depicts one who moves with confidence, balance, and determination. His presence is also commanding, his steps definite. The tide of a will for triumph seems to rise in him as that of his father's is falling. His sardonic stare elicits a vague, pitiful quiet in the father, provokes arrogance in Prince Armah, and strikes fear in the Head Monk. While miming, he follows immediately behind his father, yet keeps an exaggerated formal distance between them.

ABA PANTELEON, the Head Monk, is Confessor of the

Royal Household and overseer of the Empire's interests. His cross-shaped mask is pulled down on his face from the top of his head-dress. He is in his late seventies but very well preserved. Thickset, corpulent, and heavily bearded. His intelligently imposing serene eyes and cool manners give him the looks of one accustomed to being listened to. He is a keen, deft diplomat, well experienced in the petty ecclesiastical intrigues of the day. His clothing has more pomp and ornamentation than that of the Royal family. The large silver processional cross he holds up with both hands with reverent awe, is huge and very high above his head. His mime shows a solemn devotee, overtly compassionate, yet with an underlying will to interpret his personal wishes into what he expects to be accepted only as the will of Kaleb. This Panteleon is the son of a young Syrian orphan, found among the famous nine saved from a Syrian shipwreck. His father, later on, left him in the care of the original old bishop Panteleon. He was then re-initiated, re-baptised and helped to make his way up to the Royal Court, by the meticulous apprenticeship of the bishop, Abune Panteleon, who was the oldest in the Syrian monks' group, yet the one who, until his recent death, outlived his nine exalted friends.*

This present Panteleon is considered a near exact behaviorial duplicate, raised in the true image of his long deceased finder and spiritual father, particularly where the sensitive question of contempt for the Byzantine authority is concerned. Now with a token mime support towards the spiritually agonized Monarch, he leads him ceremoniously to the Altar.

PRINCE ARMAH, Kaleb's grandson, is twenty-eight, and the only son of Gabre Maskel, Nezana. He is about to be crowned Crown Prince. Often at odds with his father Nezana, he has grown with a stronger feeling towards his grandfather. Yet his rough, crude pride checks him from exposing this attachment too obviously. His eyes gleam more

* (These are the Nine White Syrian bishops who took flight to Axum during the reign of Tezana, 463-502 AD, and established themselves as the spiritual guides of the Empire. The party of the Nine Holy ones is believed to be the only group who managed to escape to Axum from among the hundreds of the followers of Eutytyches and Dioscurus at the Council of Chalcedon. The rest were either deposed or banished for heresy after the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, held at Chalcedone, 'The City of the Blind', on 8th October, AD 451.)

hope than ambition yet his unsettled air betrays quite a relentless personal will. He too is sensitive, a little rash, at times defiant, even spoilt. His heavy limbs give him an awkward posture, but his movements are quite nimble in spite of this. Armah stands out for his amicable nature, and guileless carriage. In his lonelier moments, he plays on the church drums, no doubt an influence of 'the great hymn compiler, his friend, the Court's favourite poet, the famous old Yared, (later Saint Yared).' Armah's mask is in the shape of a gosling in flight, the edges of whose wings flicker a star-like radiance as he moves. With his left hand, he carries a golden casket which he intermittently holds up with ceremony. His mime consists of a more sincere symbolic support for his afflicted grandfather, of gesturing the highlights of his desolation, and of tempering this with an arrogance towards his father.

Each is led under his separate circle of spotlight. All movements are mute, precise, urgent and intimate. Each moves, theatrically, towards centre stage, then back to the step at the foot of the Altar. Each mimes, interprets his separate message, separately, as he stops facing the Altar. Abe Panteleon, muttering a silent prayer, stands on the right of the Altar (and stands) with his cross facing the other three. Nezana and Armah kneel, Kaleb prostrates himself with his hands stretched out to form the cross. He stays down spread-eagled with his forehead pressed against the floor. THE ENTIRE MIME SHOULD NOT LAST MORE THAN ONE MINUTE. As the spots merge into one, they are once more framed as a group. Horn pipes, drums and the crash of instruments rise in the background. Silence. With the stage lights turning brighter, we find that the speakers of the Inner Voices are standing on either side of the heart-wall; Watto on the right, Rabbi Yona and Jaffar on the left.

ROYAL CRIER:

(Proclaims off stage)

Now kneels great Kaleb, wrecked

Wrapped in sackcloth, fallen on ashes

Cut off from the grace of His favourite

saints.

His sixty thousand strong sons of Axum

Together with the scores

Of his giant warring elephants
Are eaten up by the plague of Mecca,
Sunk into the dust of desert earth.
The winds of Arabia
Are clouded red by their young blood.
Here, Kaleb is masked
In the shade of his bated breath,
Aware of his painful days
That have come to the brink,
The great Kaleb is shorn of faith.
He has erased his memory of Sobok
Of Ethiopis, of Endebis, and of Tezana
His triumphant forefathers,
Of mighty Ezana
Who reduced the Nations of Tiawa,
Agame,
And the distant Arabetics
Beyond the Khybar water's gate
To his iron will.
Here, kneels great Kaleb, tired.
He will not allow himself
To come forward any more
And have the dead homes
Of his people in his sight.
Here, his noble spirit torn into shreds,
His mettle brow hit into the dust of earth
He will not allow his face of grief
To pry upon the wounds
Of his left-over people.
A people now melted down
To a nation without sons.

MOTHERS' CHORUS: *(A group of wailing, lean mothers, not less than five, of all sizes and ages, of all skin colours, and of Axum's and her neighbouring hair styles, with beads and clay masks, in leather rags, some almost naked, humming a litany in the half-dim, like shadows sway and crawl across the stage beneath the Heart-wall.)*

Our wombs cry for our sons,
Whose tender bloods

The plague of Arabia claimed.
Our eyes ache for their sight
But the desert vultures
That slit out their beautiful eyes
Have perched back on our castrated homes.
They scratch for the worms in our roofs.
Where are the flowers of our lives, Kaleb?
Why have you pinned down our love
To rust in a scavenging day?
Where are our men, Kaleb?
Why have you hung our wombs to dry
Beyond the darkness of time?
Our breasts hurt, demanding
What visitation ravaged our essence.
The sleepless spirits
Accuse our thoughts, Kaleb.
The season of mothers
Question our dreamless nights.
Our wombs cry for our sons,
Our feet fret for their sight.
Where are the flowers of our lives, Kaleb?

(They go out crawling. Kaleb rises. Tears his gown off his shoulders. Makes an effort to keep his head high. Lights half-dim. The altar turns immediately into his throne. Lights brighten. On either side of the throne are two golden statues of unicorns. Aba Panteleon steps back and raises the cross. As Kaleb staggers and sits himself on the throne, Nezana and Armah stand on either side of it. Except for Kaleb, the others remove their masks by pulling them down to the back of their necks. We find that Nezana has a dusky light-brownish Arab complexion with a slight African bone structure. Aba Panteleon has a whitish Syrian skin, and Armah, a dark-brown complexion with a heavier African bone structure. Kaleb gestures an elaborate hand-clap and horn pipes bleat in the background;)

ABA PANTELEON: Call the Southern Princess, Noba
Daughter of the Chief Watto of Semri
Wife of the Servant of The Cross
Mother of the Prince Armah.
Also call the child Prince Araaya
Great-grandson of Great Kaleb,