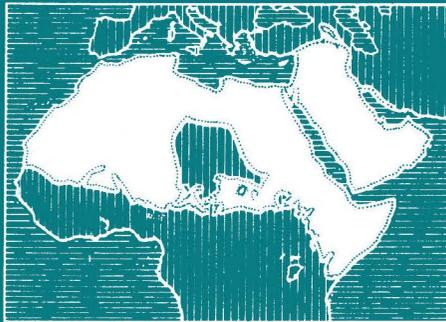


JOURNAL  
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## Editor's Note

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## **Foreword: When Academics Fail**

In this special issue of the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture*, we are publishing Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes' in-depth critique of Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*. Belcher and Kleiner's work is a translation of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ge'ez hagiography of Ethiopian Saint Wälättä Petros. Unfortunately, Belcher and Kleiner's work is full of misinterpretations and distortions that have sought to rewrite African spiritual history in a degrading lens that draws on racial stereotypes.

We decided to dedicate this issue to Yirga's work, without reducing it to a 30-page article, for two main reasons.

First, the details in the review are crucial. In order for readers unfamiliar with the Ethiopian context to understand the extent to which Belcher and Kleiner have distorted the facts, it is important to provide all the necessary background, context and critique. Yirga provides compelling insights into Wälättä Petros' life and the uniquely African form of monasticism that ruled her life. He then examines the key findings in Belcher and Kleiner's work, showing how errors of translation as well as deliberate and false insertions and misinterpretation have taken this important African saint out of her spiritual context. Wälättä Petros is represented as a violent, diseased nun who lusts after her own female followers while finding heterosexual sex so disgusting that she wishes to "kill" heterosexuals. Belcher employs negative stereotypes about Africans, women and LGBT people in her invention of this Ethiopian saint as seemingly unable to control her emotional, lustful and savage nature.

As Yirga’s thorough review shows, Belcher in her subsequent works continues on distortion and misinformation of one of the ancient forms of African Christianity and the monastic life. She tried to portray monasteries as places where people with same sex desire hide. On the contrary to Belcher’s claim Ethiopian Orthodox Church monasteries are places where monks and nuns—considered dead to this world—lead the strictest form of spiritual life. Just to give a glimpse of this, I will quote Yirga on the first two phases of the three rigorous spiritual paths that people who join the monastery need to pass through (Yirga, p. 144 ff.).

The first phase which will last from three to seven or in some occasions more years is a testing period where “the novice demonstrates their spiritual dedication through long hours of hard work, eating only once a day, helping older monks and nuns, and serving the community” (Yirga, p. 141). As Yirga describes the second phase is a transition to become a monk or nun.

The person closes their ears and eyes and swears in the name of God saying [...] “[t]his world is dead to me and I am dead to this world”. The person is placed in a grave or coffin and is tied with [...] a robe normally used to tie a dead body. A funeral rite is then performed as if he or she is dead [...] In “dying”, nuns and monks forsake life as we know it, including relationships, family, comfort, and pleasure. Celibacy and humility are the cornerstones of monastic life” (Ibid., p. 142).

Yirga’s article also details problems with Belcher’s methodology, particularly around how she has handled spiritual material, photographed nuns, and ignored local experts. The latter is a concerning issue, as Belcher states in her preface how she willfully ignores local experts on crucial points who did not support her analysis except one who is an ex-monk who left the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Belcher and Kliener, 2015, p. xxx)<sup>1</sup> most likely for another sect. For Belcher this person “had the scholarly background

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1 See the reference section of the following article for complete bibliographic information.

necessary to read the anecdote with skill but also the distance to read it openly” (Ibid.). Unlike Belcher’s claim this kind of informant cannot be considered to provide genuine interpretation for the same reason that she mentioned. It is obvious in human psychology that an apostate often describes his/her former religion in a negative manner to justify her/his disaffiliation. Besides, one cannot be sure whether this lone local informant of Belcher is factual.

The misinterpretation and errors found in the translation may be understandable as the main author of the book, Belcher, lacks knowledge of the source language as she professed.<sup>2</sup> Her co-author does not seem to have the requisite knowledge to take such an important task either. We all make mistakes, and minor errors in translation are of course understandable. However, Belcher and Kleiner’s work goes beyond simple errors and “innocent” misinterpretations. As Yirga’s thorough review exposes the translation has been distorted in order to fit Belcher’s claims, with words inserted or misinterpreted to twist the meaning. At times, Belcher’s analysis does not appear to have support from her own English translation and she continues ignoring the local experts’ interpretations and advice (see appendix 2, for instance).

Yirga also shows how the essentialization and insertion of ethnic identities into the text have worrying implications for how we understand African history.

Belcher has received criticism in the past for her interpretation of this holy text, though not to the same academic rigor as appears in Yirga’s article. Her previous method for deflecting criticism has been to hide behind the LGBT rights movement. This is not out of any attempt to stand with LGBT people; rather, it is used as a way to label Africans who criticize her as homophobic and antithetical to progress. As readers of this article will see from the detailed review in this issue, this is not about LGBT issues. It is about bad scholarship. Hence,

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2 See Belcher’s preface of the book under discussion.

giving enough space for a detailed counter-argument to Belcher and Kliener's dubious work is necessary.

This leads us to the second reason why the editors of this journal felt it as essential to provide a unique platform for a thorough review of Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*. As a journal, we support all scholars, regardless of background, who seek to genuinely enrich our knowledge of Afroasiatic languages, history and culture. A detailed review is necessary not only to adherent of Ethiopian Orthodox church and African people in general who have had their history distorted but also to academics as a whole who expect truth and honesty in academic publications. Unfortunately, Belcher and Kleiner's book does not meet even a minimum standard of truthfulness and honesty expected in such publications. It is a miscarriage of scholarship disguised under an academic work.

Girma A. Demeke  
General Editor

**Colonial Rewriting of African History:  
Misinterpretations and Distortions in  
Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggles of  
Walatta Petros***

Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes

**Abstract**

*The Hagiography of Ethiopian Saint Woletta Petros was recently translated from Ge'ez into English by Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner. Belcher has no knowledge of Ge'ez and simple errors in the translation suggest that Kleiner lacks the fluency required to accurately interpret the language. A western lens with a deliberate distortion of the facts has been applied to the text, using contemporary western understandings of marriage and monastic life to interpret a 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian nun. Contemporary ethnic politics have been inserted into the interpretation in a way that reproduces negative racial binaries, and relies heavily on the colonial racialization of African identities and western color prejudice that does not exist in Ethiopia. This has resulted in a colonial rewrite of one of Ethiopia's most holy books. Belcher represents Woletta Petros as a violent, diseased and lustful nun, reproducing racist stereotypes about black women. Sexual scenes and a same-sex partnership between nuns have been inserted into the text where they do not exist in the Ge'ez original. This article will detail the most significant misinterpretations in Belcher and Kleiner's translation. It will also offer an Ethiopian interpretation of Woletta Petros, considering her legacy within context and drawing on the testimony of the local scholars. The article will show that the translation, as well as Belcher's subsequent publications around Woletta Petros,*

*constitute colonial scholarship, where a foreigner who cannot understand the language is elevated to the status of expert at the expense of the local people who can not only read and write the language, but also have decades-long training in the interpretation of these important holy texts. The article will demonstrate that the colonial practice of taking African intellectual resources and using them to rewrite African history is not a relic of the past, but an ongoing and supported practice within universities. Major universities, as important sites of knowledge production, should not contribute to racial prejudices and distortions of African history by supporting projects that are carried out by scholars who deliberately exclude or distort the voices and experiences of local people. This article seeks to prompt a change in the writing of African history, where the agency of black people to narrate their own histories and experiences is respected and supported.*

## **Introduction**

Western museums, libraries and universities have large collections of looted and unethically-acquired African artifacts and manuscripts. Recently, there has been significant public debate on whether these stolen intellectual and cultural items should be returned to their countries of origin. However, the practice of interpreting these texts in a way that harms the history, culture and identity of the people from whom they were taken continues unchallenged and without any public discussion.

This paper aims to address this issue by examining one case where an African text has been translated and interpreted by western scholars who have little to no knowledge of the language and context in which the text was written. It will show that the 17th century Ethiopian Ge'ez book *ገድለ ቅድስት ወለተ ጌጥሮስ*, published by Princeton University Press as *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*, was translated based on stereotypical assumptions. The primary researcher, Wendy Belcher, takes the Ethiopian Saint Woletta Petros and turns her into a sexualized, exoticized and violent black woman. Belcher, with no knowledge of Ge'ez and

disregarding the cultural context in which the text was written, has taken many anecdotes out of their historical and spiritual context. Belcher and Kleiner have inserted words and concepts into the translation that do not exist in the Ge'ez original. Indigenous Ethiopian scholars with significant training and knowledge in relation to this text have been consulted by Belcher but then ignored, their expertise deemed irrelevant and at times antagonist to Belcher's own interpretation. This article argues that this is colonial scholarship in action, with a western scholar rewriting the history of this important Ethiopian saint within her own western lens and ignoring the testimony of local experts. This amounts to a deliberate distortion of history. It demonstrates how colonial scholarship operates by enabling the scholar to act as if they are a decolonizer by controlling the intellectual process of domination and liberation through the inclusion of local elites who internalize western epistemology while excluding people with local or indigenous worldviews.

To readers unfamiliar with Woletta Petros' legacy, I will first offer an Ethiopian perspective on the saint's life and provide historical and cultural context to her hagiography. I will then examine Belcher and Kleiner's expertise, and provide a detailed examination of the major misinterpretations in their translation, focused primarily on how Woletta Petros is represented. Finally, this article will demonstrate that western rewrites of African history have significant implications for how Africans see themselves and their place in the world. In the past, this practice has been criticized as the theft of history, the colonization of the mind and the destruction of African memory, among others (Goody 2006; wa Thiong'o 1994; Park 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This paper demonstrates how "Westernized Universities" (Grosfoguel 2013) still incubate the highest levels of racism towards black people by denying Africans the agency to tell their own stories to the world and by supporting research by unqualified scholars.

## Historical and Cultural Context

Before addressing Belcher and Kleiner's translation, I would like to offer a historical and cultural background for the life and works of Woletta Petros. It is important to understand the context in which she lived, particularly the strict monastic rules that governed her community. I will offer these from an Ethiopian perspective, drawing on Ethiopian holy books and insights from Ethiopian scholars who were interviewed as part of my 2019 fieldwork to Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela. The historical context provided below is brief, but the examination of Ethiopian monastic life and rules is more detailed in nature. It seeks to offer a counter to the distorted interpretations of spiritual life in Belcher's account of Woletta Petros' life.

### *Brief Historical Context*

Christianity has a long history in Ethiopia. Ethiopian church scholars teach that it arrived in the country during the times of the Apostles through three ways: the baptism of the eunuch of Queen Candice at the hands of Phillip (Acts 8:26-40), the participation of Ge'ez speaking Ethiopians on the day of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12) and the coming of Matthew to preach the gospel in the country. Though the Ethiopian state became a Christian country around 350 AD, Ephraim Isaac provides evidence for the arrival of Christianity since the first century AD (2013, p. 17-18). Ethiopian Christianity is therefore not an imposed colonial religion, but a uniquely African tradition that is significantly older than western Christianity. Ethiopians developed their indigenous Tewahido tradition by producing their own literature and translating numerous religious texts into Ge'ez, the then lingua-franca and liturgical language of the country. The Ethiopian monastic tradition also developed around this time and became the center of literature and spiritual life. Monasteries interpreted religious texts using an indigenous African lens, producing stories and ways of relating to the world and God in ways that differ from western Christian practices. The Ethiopian Gospels የገሪማ ወንጌል (Garima Gospels) are the earliest surviving

complete illuminated gospels in the world, written in Ge'ez on goat skin between c. 330 and 570 AD. Many Ethiopian leaders before the Marxist-Leninist Derg period (1974-1991) gave support to monasteries. They regarded them as sacred and inviolable places of moral leadership and discipline. Some leaders went to monasteries to gain spiritual healing and instruction; others were buried there.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, foreign attempts to convert Ethiopia to Catholicism endangered this tradition and led to religious civil war. The conversion was initiated by Jesuits who were allowed to stay in the country following Portuguese support of the Ethiopian King in his war against Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi. Ahmad was an Ethiopian Muslim warrior who fought the Christian Kings from 1528-1544 with the support of the Ottoman Turks. After he was defeated, Ethiopians saw the Jesuits as friends, but the Jesuits viewed the Ethiopian Tewahido tradition as heresy that had to be expunged. After many failed efforts, they succeeded in converting Emperor Susenyos (1607-1632) to Roman Catholicism. Susenyos declared allegiance to the Pope of Rome and ordered his people to be rebaptized and follow the Catholic way. Most Ethiopians resisted and a bloody religious civil war ensued. Many Ethiopians, especially women like Woletta Petros, resisted the order of the king. The Jesuits insisted on harsh treatment against those who resisted. The ongoing violence forced Susenyos to realize that his people would never fully accept European Christianity. He rescinded his edict and handed his throne to his son Fasiledes (1632-1667). Fasiledes expelled the Jesuits in 1632, and made alliances with neighboring coastal forces to prevent European entry to his empire. Europeans were not welcome in the country for many years to come.

### ***Woletta Petros' Place in the Civil War***

Woletta Petros lived during this time. She was born to a noble family and was married to a man loyal to the converted king Susenyos. She despised her husband's conversion to Catholicism and started to help Ethiopian resistance groups, as well as Tewahido church

priests, monks and nuns. When her husband marched to suppress local resistance against Catholicism, she abandoned him and joined a monastery. She was forced to return but started a hunger strike and refused to communicate or sleep with her husband when she learned that he accepted the clothes of the slayed Tewahido Patriarch Abuna Simon as a reward from the king. Her uncompromising determination forced him to comply with her demands to leave him. She left, stayed with her brother for a short time and planned to go to the monastery. As a noblewoman from the court, she needed guidance about the countryside. A priest introduced her to a nun, Ehet Kristos, who had also left her husband, and the two became close friends. Shortly afterwards, she took the vow and became a nun at 24 years old. She started mobilizing people not to recognize the converted king, asking priests not to call the usual praise for him during Mass. The king brought her to court and forbade her teachings under threat of death. She was sent to her family, but she was undeterred. She went to the sacred Waldeba monastery and eventually started to live as a hermit, surviving only on wild plants and fruits. According to her hagiography, when she reached the last stage of monastic life, God asked her to return to the world to save souls for His Kingdom. She refused but eventually accepted her mission with divine assurances, as shall be detailed later. She returned as a powerful critic of Catholicism.

Many Ethiopians saw Woletta Petros as a sign from God and started to follow her. The king heard news of her influence and had his soldiers bring her before him a second time. Susenyos told her to accept Catholicism or die. She was fearless and refused conversion again. As Isaac writes, she was “a person scornful of [religious] compromises” (2013, p. 270). The king planned to kill her but his advisors warned that this might incite rebellion from her relatives in the Fetegar and Dewaro regions. She was exiled to the wilderness in Zhebey for three years. In the desert, people were inspired by her fearless resistance and open criticism of the king. She created her

first monastic community there. At a time when royals were killing for a new religion, the story of a fearless noblewoman who abandoned the court to be with her people spread quickly. Her method of fighting back was to live the strictest form of spirituality.

Men who converted to the Catholic faith viewed a woman's spiritual authority as blasphemous, but the Ethiopian monastic tradition gave her the language and authority to reinvigorate her country's ancient faith. While Catholicism regarded her faith as a heresy punishable by death, Ethiopian monasticism gave her the power to overcome death. This is the most important ideal of being a nun: to spiritually leave this world and live in the afterlife while on earth. It involves seeing the world through the lens of the soul, not the flesh, and to submit to the salvation of the people, not to the cruel demands of the powerful. Her faith was not a strategy or a means of resistance. It was a way of life. Her commitment to her faith and the strict rules of monastic life continued after Ethiopia returned to the Orthodox Tewahido tradition. Isaac writes:

Woletta Petros showed tremendous energy and passionate zeal in her fight against the Catholic movement which had gained dominance during the reign of Susenyos. During the subsequent reign of Fasiledes, after the restoration of Orthodoxy, she continued to oppose with equal passion any belief, or any deviation from what she considered true Christian discipline (2013, p. 270).

Woletta Petros is celebrated as one of the most devout and fearless saints in Ethiopian Christianity. Her adherence to monasticism is one of the keys to her holiness. Monastic life gave her the philosophy, language and space to bring many people together. It is important to note that monastic life in Ethiopia is practiced with notable difference to monastic life in Europe. In Ethiopia, monasteries are holy places where "dead" people live, as monks and nuns metaphorically must die to be accepted in the order. This act of "dying", of forsaking family, relationships, comfort and sustenance, means that monks and nuns live as if they are already

in heaven. They become members of the “bride city”, creating a sacred bond with God (Revelation 21:2). This is what gives them spiritual power. To deviate even slightly from monastic principles and practices is a tremendous sin, to go against an assured place in heaven. Furthermore, adherence to monastic rules are important to keep monasteries as undefiled holy ground where people exist as embodied souls. While Woletta Petros stood against Catholicism, her equally important struggle was in ensuring that the people who followed her lived according to the edicts of Ethiopian monasticism. To better understand this uniquely powerful world, we need to abandon our familiar viewpoints on monastic life and try to make sense of 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian monastic rites and beliefs.

### *Understanding the Monastery*

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when religion was one of Ethiopia’s highest preoccupations, monasticism was one of the most respected ways of life. Monks and nuns were not only spiritual people, they were links to the divine. Today, monks and nuns are still highly respected for their devotion, though their way of life faces many threats and challenges, as shall be discussed later.

Monastic values and practices today echo those of Woletta Petros’ time. People who join the monastery pass through three rigorous spiritual paths. The first stage is አመክሮ (*Amekro*), a time when the novice demonstrates their spiritual dedication through long hours of hard work, eating only once a day, helping older monks and nuns, and serving the community. This period lasts from three to seven years, sometimes more. The novice must demonstrate endurance, humility, silence and prayer before taking the vow to become a nun or a monk because “it is better to take no vows than to take them and not fulfill them” (Tzadua 1968, p. 75).

The 13<sup>th</sup> century *Fetha Nagast* (Justice of Kings) further provides specific rules for novices, also known as virgins.<sup>1</sup> It states, “Neither shall a virgin appear to people at sunset... She shall not fatten her body beyond the correct proportion. Food is the weapon of concupiscence and solitary life is the first bond of purity” (Tzadua 1968, p. 75). Novices face hardship to ensure they will not break their vow. They must ensure that they have conquered their desire to have a family or sexual intimacy.<sup>2</sup> Novices can return to their former life if they are unsure about their ability to endure the silence and hard work of monastic life, but while living in the monastery, they are still expected to live by the strict monastic rules.

The novices who prove their endurance prepare to take the vow. This is the second stage, named ምንኩስና (*Minkusina*). The person closes their ears and eyes and swears in the name of God saying “አለሙ በእኔ ዘንድ የሞተ ነው፤ እኔም በአለሙ ዘንድ የሞትሁ ነኝ” (Workneh 1956 et.c. ድንግልና ሂወት p. 68-69)<sup>3</sup>. This means, “This world is dead to me and I am dead to this world”. The person is placed in a grave or coffin and is tied with መግነዝ, a robe normally used to tie a dead body.<sup>4</sup> A funeral rite is then performed as if he or she is dead, and “ቀብሩን እምልብ

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- 1 Referring to novices as “virgins” is indicative of their “newness” to monastic life. While many who joined were young people who had never had sex, many others, like Woletta Petros, joined later in life after leaving marriages and family life.
  - 2 This is understandable given the rule in the *Fetha Nagast*: “A monk [or nun] who renounces the world must detach himself [or herself] completely from his [or her] parents, his [or her] relatives and from his [or her] secular friends, just as the dead are separated from the living. If his [or her] parents entered the monastery, their relationship shall be spiritual only” (Tzadua 1968, p. 72).
  - 3 In references, “et.c” refers to the Ethiopian Calendar.
  - 4 This ritual differs from place to place. For example, in some places “the candidate, having been brought into the presence of the prelate, is paced in the midst of the assembled clergy; and then a circle of fire is lighted around him...the attending priests chant *the requiem for the dead*” (Wondmagegnehu and Motovu 1970, p 26).

ከመዘግብተ”：“I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind” (Psalm 31:12) is recited.<sup>5</sup> In “dying”, nuns and monks forsake life as we know it, including relationships, family, comfort, and pleasure. Celibacy and humility are the cornerstones of monastic life. From this moment onwards, monks and nuns are “መላእክት ዘበምድር ወሰብእ ሰማውያን”：“Angels on earth and humans on heaven”. They are also called Brides of Christ.

The status of the monk or nun as dead to this world cannot be understated. While a monk or nun is ርሁቅ እምዓለም, distant from this world or dead to this world, they are alive in the spiritual world. Their devotion to monastic life means that they walk around on earth as if they already exist in heaven. The monastery is regarded as the collective body of monks and nuns. It is symbolic of the bride city of Jerusalem which is “married” to God (Revelation 21: 2 & 9). This is contrasted with the outside world where the adulterous city of Babylon intoxicates its dwellers with sins of immorality (Revelation 17:1). Life in the monastery is righteousness; breaking any of its rules or showing desire for the outside world is committing the sin of Babylon, which is collectively called “ዝመት” (*zimmut*), meaning adultery (James 4:4-5; 1 John 2:15-17).<sup>6</sup>

Part of living this spiritual existence involves stringent rejection of earthly pleasures. Monks and nuns eat very little, work hard and pray constantly. Monastic life is also governed by the covenant of

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5 In addition to the indigenous monastic books, the ceremony is regarded as a literal realization of biblical references about putting to death what belongs to our earthly nature (Col 3:5) and crucifying the flesh with its earthly passions and desires (Gal 5:24).

6 The Ge’ez literature frequently refers to several biblical sources without mentioning the exact chapter and number of the text. For instance, it refers to Paul’s saying or John’s saying in the Bible without providing the exact verse numbers. This is due to the fact that separate Bible texts were translated into Ge’ez at different times before the Bible took its present form.

silence. Church scholars refer to a large body of biblical verses including, “ወልሳንሂ እሳት ይእቲ” “And the tongue is a fire that defiles the whole body” (James 3:6) and “life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). They say the key principle of monastic silence is contained in the holy book *Filksyous*, which says “ጉዩይ እምሰብእ ወኣርምሞ”, “depart from people and stay in silence” (1982, p. 16). This does not mean that people do not speak to each other at all. Rather, their conversation is limited by spiritual necessity because through prayer they are in constant dialogue with God. The *Fetha Nagast* prescribes:

Monks [and nuns] shall live doing good among themselves and towards all people. Never shall they walk through the squares and the streets without modesty and gravity, nor shall they joke among themselves irrelevantly or flippantly: rather they must be devoted to silence and gravity (Tzadua 1968, p. 71).

To behave without modesty or even just to joke paves the way to grave sin within the monastery, as it leads the monk or nun away from the status of “living in the soul” towards “living in the body”. The monastic holy books further state “ዘእንበለ ተራሕቆ እምዓለም ወተመትሮተ ተናግሮት ምስለ ሰብእ ወኣዘልፎ ኅድኣት ኢትከውን ጸሎት እንበለ ፅርዓት”, which means, “Without being distanced from the world, without abandoning talking with people, without becoming a loner, constant prayer cannot be made” (*Filksyous* 1982, p. 17).

Through adhering to monastic principles and constant prayer, monks and nuns often start to have spiritual revelations. Some of them become ባህታዊ (*Bahitawian*, hermits or “loners”). *Bahitawi* have no community or home. Isaac describes their lives as follows:

Bahtawi are ascetic persons totally detached from the world, living in caves, woods, or deserts. Dressed in sheepskins they can occasionally turn up in a town or a court or even the king’s palace, to utter some angry or pungent social and prophetic message without political fears, and have always been regarded as very

useful political critics. Bahtawi literally means ‘the loner’ (2013, p. 169).

The third and highest stage of monastic life is ፍጹማን (*Fitsuman*, the perfects). They wear a special sign called አስኬማ (*askema*), and they become ለባሲያን ምስቀል (wearers of the Cross). *Bahtawi* can become *Fitsuman*, though it is not necessary to be *Bahtawi* in order to move to this stage. *Fitsuman* communicate with angels, the Virgin Mary and God. They can make miracles happen and their prayer is dedicated towards the salvation of the monastery, the country and the world. *Fitsuman* beseege God to forgive all people in the world. Some of them hurt their body by wearing heavy metals and eating ash and wild bitter plants. They will not stop until they receive ቃልኪዳን, *Kalkidan*, a covenant that God will fulfil their wishes. *Fitsuman* are mediators, offering their suffering as a sacrifice for the salvation of others.

*Fitsuman* are known for what many would consider extremes. For instance, Kristos Samra, an Ethiopian nun and saint, is known for praying for twelve years in water, surrounded by spears, asking God to reconcile with the Devil. God agrees but when the Devil refuses, God grants Kristos Samra the right to bring souls out from hell and deliver them to heaven (Filpos 1992 et.c). This is the power of *Fitsuman*. Their strict, uncompromising commitment to their life as “dead to this world” gives them the power, and responsibility, to work for the salvation of others.

### **Woletta Petros: Hermit, Abbess, Nun, Saint**

The Ge’ez text says Woletta Petros embraced her calling because “እስመ ኮነት ስክርተ በፍቅሩ”: “she was drunk with His [God’s] love”, and her journey into a celibate monastic life was like “entering into a heavenly wedding and to Jesus Christ the groom” (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p. 14). She reached the stage of *Fitsuman*, founded many monasteries and was elevated to the status of saint with several miracles. Her longing, however, was to become a ባህታዊት, *Bahtawit* (female singular of the plural *Bahtawi*), rather than an Abbess. She

went to Waldeba, a 4<sup>th</sup> century monastery of extreme asceticism. There, she became a servant to a strict elderly nun, tirelessly serving others. When the nun died, she distanced herself from others and became a *Bahtawit*. She lived in caves, eating only wild plants for seven months. One day, a *Fitsum* (singular form of plural *Fitsuman*) named Melkea Kristos approached her to say goodbye as he knew he was going to die soon. When he told her, she wished to die before him. Knowing her thoughts, he told her that her time has not arrived, that she would go on to found seven monasteries and save many souls for God. But she did not want this responsibility. She went to ፍልሰተ ቦረሃ, a wilderness where monks and nuns go alone to pray until their soul departs from their body.

Her hagiography states that she was determined to be a hermit, but God came to her and gave her a new mission of going out to the world and saving souls for Him. Woletta Petros refused his request. She said she was incapable, made of mud and soil: “እጩ ይከውኑኒ ዝንቱ። ወእጩ ይትከሀለኒ አድኅን ካልኣነ ዘኢይክል አድኅኖ ርእሰኖ” (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p. 44): “How is it possible for me? How can I save others when I am unable to save myself?” To her, fulfilling a divine responsibility of saving others’ souls appeared impossible. God brought her doves and precious glasses, saying, “these are the pure souls of your children, keep them for me”. The doves and glasses represented the souls of her followers. Her resistance was strong. She refused many times, saying “what if they fly away from me and return to the world? What if they get broken?” She feared the loss of a single soul. Finally, God gave her a unique promise that removed her fear. It is called ቃል ኪዳን, *Kalkidan*.

*Kalkidan* is a covenant between God and saints who pass through extreme spiritual devotion. It contains a list of promises God bestows upon the saint. Through their *Kalkidan*, saints obtain divine power to perform miracles or other acts. God told Woletta Petros that he would give her the power to make sure that anyone who becomes a “soul” in her monastery would never return to the “flesh”

again. He granted her the ability to see her followers' future, so that she would know if their lives would lead to sin and damnation. He promised “ወለእመ ሰአልከኒ ወፈቀድኪ ይሙት በዕለት ዘበአ እገብር ለኪ ወአፌጽም ፈቃደኪ” (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p.45-46): “If you beseech me wishing someone to die the day they entered [the monastery], I will do so and fulfil your wish”. This promise to end the life of a monk or nun at Woletta Petros' wish is in line with the responsibility God gives her to “keep” the precious souls of her followers. If she should see that they might sin, He promises to take them early so that their souls may be saved. He declares: “ወአይትጎጥጥል መኑሂ ዘይበውዕ ውስተ ቤትኪ ወዘይትጎጥጥልሂ ኢይበውእ ውስተ ቤትኪ። ወቤትኪሂ ኢይፈልስ እስከ ኅልፈተ ዓለም ወዝገቱ ውእቱ ትእምርተ ኪዳን ዘማዕከሌየ ወማዕከሌኪ።” (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p.45-46): “No one who enters your house [the monastery] will be lost and no one who would be lost will enter. Your house [the monastery] will not perish till the end of the world. This is the covenant between me and you.”

According to her hagiography, God's promise, the *Kalkidan*, assured Woletta Petros that all who came to her would be saved, but also gave her a significant responsibility. She left Waldeba, and started teaching at Tselemt. While she was a staunch opponent of the converted king, her greatest concern was in “keeping” the souls in her flock for God. As a result, she did everything she could to enforce the strict rules of the monastery. For her followers to deviate from this path was to forsaken the heavenly city of Jerusalem, the holy bride of the Lamb, and become adulterous like the children of Babylon.

These strict rules were based on Ethiopian scriptures. In her monasteries, women and men are separated. Members give away all their belongings and share whatever meagre food they have together. When they leave for service, she told them to go in pairs like the way Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs (Luke 10:1; Mark 6:7). Following the monastic rules of silence, she ordered them “ከመ ኢይትናገሩ ቃለ በከላህ አለ በልኖሳስ”: “to never speak loudly but softly”. For

Woletta Petros, the covenant of silence is an integral principle of monastic spirituality. Monks and nuns are in constant conversation with the spirit world. They should not speak loudly because the monastery is not a place for play and socializing. It is a place where the scripture is practiced daily: “There be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Ephesians 5:4; Ecclesiastes 5:6). It is also a place where the flesh willfully receives suffering to successfully deliver the soul into the hands of God. When monks and nuns physically die (not just the “death” of being dead to this world when one takes the vow), members of the monastic community celebrate the union of the departed person’s soul with God and pray that they finish their spiritual path likewise.

It is within this context, and within God’s *Kalkidan*, that Woletta Petros wished some of her community members to die. Sometimes she prayed for this when they were deeply spiritual and righteous (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p. 80). To die when one is close to God assures the greatest reward in Heaven. When she saw that they were on the path of breaking monastic rules, she would scornfully chastise them and ask God to keep them with her. In specific cases, she prayed for a few members to die when they could not be stopped from committing sin that would damn their souls forever. For instance, two women fall sick by her prayers: one was flippantly boasting about her physical beauty and another wanted to return to her relatives.

How could a woman become so celebrated when she prays for people’s deaths? This may appear strange unless we see it within the 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian monastic context and God’s *Kalkidan*. Once a nun or monk takes the vow and is dead to the world, they cannot return to the world of the flesh and the living. To break their vow is to break the soul’s ties with God. This is the core of Woletta Petros’ struggle. As an Abbess, she would not allow any soul to return to the world of the flesh and be forsaken. As shown above, God had

entrusted her to keep them for Him. When God revealed to her their future, she would pray their body, the soul's temporary shelter, would perish rather than their souls. To keep their soul's tie with God, she had to break their soul's tie with their body.

Often, she offered herself as a sacrifice for the sin of others, eating ash and *kosso* (a bitter plant). As Jesus offered his pain and blood for the souls of his followers, Woletta Petros' likewise offered her pain and suffering as a sacrifice for members of her community. This extreme supplication for others' souls echoes biblical traditions where spiritual leaders ate or drunk bitter plants. The bitterness is a reminder or expression of suffering, humility and sacrifice. For example, God ordered the Israelites to eat the lamb with a bitter herb (Exodus 12:8; Numbers 9:11). "I am nothing but dust and ashes," said Abraham (Genesis 18:27). "I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance," said Job (42:6). Jesus tastes the hemlock and myrrh and drunk the bitter cup which represented the sin of his people (Matthew 20:22; John 18:11). Like Jesus, Woletta Petros suffered in her body to absorb the sin of her flock. Her life was an embodiment of extreme humility, self-mortification, and devotion. She slept on the floor, walked without shoes, wore iron bracelets with sharp points on her arms and ankles, and wore abrasive sack cloth under her dress. She was the Abbess who swept the ashes from the oven. She did all of this to save the souls – the pure doves and precious glasses – that God entrusted to her.

Near the time of her death, the Virgin Mary came to Woletta Petros and said, "እምፈቀድኩ አንሰ አዕርፍኪ እም የማ ዝንቱ ዓለም። ባህቱ አሕዘነኒ ብካዮሙ ዘዮም ለደቂቅኪ ወለአዋልድኪ። ወበአንተዝ ኃደጉኪ ትንብሪ ሎሙ ኃዳጠ" (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 115): "I wanted to give you rest from the sorrow of this world. But I felt sad due to the cry of your sons and daughters. For their sake, I left you to stay with them a little longer." Here, we see Mary saying she wished Woletta Petros to die, to have rest, but that she left her for the sake of her followers. Shortly after this, Woletta Petros died at the age of 50. On her deathbed, she called the priests to read

the monastic rules from the scriptures, reminding them to live by them and follow Ehete Kristos as they had followed her. Thirty years after her death, Galawdewos wrote her hagiography to inspire the monastic community she left behind, as well as the laity of the Ethiopian Tewahido Church. Today, centuries after her death, nuns and monks still live by her legacy at the monasteries on Lake Tana.

Having offered an Ethiopian perspective on and context for Woletta Petros' life, I will now examine the interpretation offered by Belcher and Kleiner in their translation of her hagiography and show how misinterpretations have warped the important legacy of this African holy woman.

### Issues of Translation and Expertise

ገደለ ቅድስት ወለተ ጌጥሮስ (The Hagiography of Woletta Petros) has been translated by Wendy Belcher and co-translator Michael Kleiner. While Belcher has also made Woletta Petros the subject of many articles and conference papers, this article focuses on *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, published by Princeton University Press, and a journal article based on this translation titled "Same-Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint". Belcher claims that Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos were in a same-sex partnership (though they remained celibate in keeping with their vows) and that Woletta Petros felt desire upon seeing nuns being lustful with one another. She has claimed that her translation is "one of the more important academic findings in the history of same-sex desire in Africa" (2016, p. 31).

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of Belcher and Kleiner's translation and interpretation, it is important to note how this book was translated. It involved a process of comparing multiple manuscripts to examine discrepancies between the Ge'ez versions, as well as a Conti Rossini version and Italian translation. They stress

repeatedly that their translation is as close to a literal translation as possible: “Our translation is not a free literary rendition; it does not take liberties with the Gəʼəz text but follows it closely” (2015, p. 66) and “our translation is not a loose literary one, but as close to the original as is possible in English” (Belcher 2016, p. 23). They also explained that where they added words to make the translation readable, they “have indicated these with square brackets” (Belcher and Kleiner 2015, p. 67). It is important to note that Belcher does not read or speak Geʼez, so she relies on her co-translator Michael Kleiner. She describes Kleiner as having, “excellent knowledge of Gəʼəz and English (as well as many other languages) and a doctorate in Ethiopian studies from the University of Hamburg, one of the three leading centers of Ethiopian studies outside of Ethiopia” (2015, p. xxiv).

As will be shown below, it is unclear how Kleiner could have made so many simple errors if he has an excellent knowledge of Geʼez, especially if they were seeking to produce a translation that is as close to the original as possible. It suggests that Kleiner, though he may have knowledge of Geʼez, does not have the fluency required to translate a Geʼez text with accuracy and nuance. Belcher also refers to Wolf Leslau’s *Comparative Dictionary of Geʼez*.

I believe it is important to briefly explain my own positionality and background in relation to this work. I came to examine it as an Ethiopian scholar trained in both the traditional Ethiopian and western education systems. I attended initial training in Geʼez in the traditional education system. At 16, I left my hometown Lalibela to enter the Monastery of Daga Estifanos, a few kilometers from the Monasteries of Woletta Petros. I experienced firsthand the ways of monastic life: the long hours of fasting, prayer, and devotion. I never made it past the *Amekro* stage, choosing to leave the monastery before taking my vows.

In 2019, I was granted sabbatical leave to conduct research into the issue of knowledge grabbing and epistemic violence. I was interested in how traditional Ethiopian scholars and students were impacted by the loss of their manuscripts. I conducted fieldwork and interviews at the traditional schools in Bahir Dar, Gondar and Lalibela. I also travelled to western museums and institutions where these manuscripts are held as artifacts and resources. Some of my findings have been published in the article “‘Holding Living Bodies in Graveyards’: The Violence of Keeping Ethiopian Manuscripts in Western Institutions” (Woldeyes 2020).

During this research, I spoke with many traditional scholars in Gondar and Bahir Dar about Woletta Petros and her hagiography. I went to the Rema church at Lake Tana where I spoke with priests, but I did not enter the Monastery where nuns continue to live by the legacy of Woletta Petros as doing so is prohibited. Given that I do not have access to the many manuscripts that Belcher and Kleiner used in their work, I have opted to use the Ge’ez manuscript from Lake Tana that Belcher suggests is the original manuscript by Galawdewos. All of the Ge’ez quotes in this article about Woletta Petros are taken from this manuscript, which Belcher digitized and released on her *academia.edu* profile. I have used the page numbers Belcher inserted over each folio. I have also used a Ge’ez copy with Amharic translations produced by the monastery.

While I have a good knowledge of Ge’ez, I do not claim to be an expert because, according to Ethiopian tradition, one cannot become an expert in Ge’ez without completing the proper training. In Ethiopia, Ge’ez is not taught in the state-run school system, but in the indigenous traditional school system. The Ge’ez language requires at least five years of training at *Qine Bet* (The House of Poetry) to understand it and another seven years to learn interpretation using it in the special school of *Tirguamme Bet* (The House of Interpretation). Ge’ez texts are written based on the extensive literature the Ethiopian indigenous church scholars

developed since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Their interpretation requires the qualification of being መሪሪታ, *Merigeta* (lead scholar). Traditional scholars cannot be recognized as an authority in Ge'ez translation without this proper education and certification. Many western orientalist view themselves as exempt from this African requirement. Neither Belcher nor Kleiner have received any of this training, and they have disregarded the testimony of local experts who have. The entire traditional education system can last up to 30 years, after which, the learned scholar gains the title *Arat Ajina*, "Four Eyed", someone with the ability to see the past as well as the future.

Respecting the traditions of my homeland, I have checked all the Ge'ez quoted in this article with traditionally trained scholars in Ethiopia, as well as scholars currently living in Australia, Germany and the USA. I did this for all the Ge'ez that appears here, even those that I could myself read with confidence, to ensure that the proper meanings and nuances were captured.

## Interpreting Woletta Petros

The curious nature of *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* starts from the title. The use of the words "struggle" and "biography" both desacralizes and secularizes the spiritual subject of the book. The word "biography" secularizes the text to make it responsive to non-spiritual themes. Belcher explains why she chose the word "struggle":

As one Ethiopian Orthodox Täwähədo Church priest said to me privately, the Gəʼəz title for hagiographies is the word for "struggle" (gädl)—which can only mean the struggle against temptation ... and Wälättä Petros herself struggled with desire (2016, p. 34).

Belcher inserts her own meaning into the information from the priest, speculating that it "can only mean" the struggle against temptation. While Belcher provides an account of the historical

background to Woletta Petros' life, she does not use this in interpreting the struggles that the saint endured, namely the struggle against Catholicism and the struggle to save the souls of her flock. By centering struggle with sexual desire in Woletta Petros' life, Belcher removes the spiritual and local context in which the saint lived.

The main problem with the translation is not the title. Belcher's interpretation of the "Life and Struggles" of Woletta Petros depicts colonialism's stereotypical construction of black women's sexuality as an expression of a state of nature where pre-modern people struggle with their violent and lascivious sexual drives. Woletta Petros is invented as a black spiritual mother who desires her publicly lustful young nuns, while wishing to murder them if they are sleeping with the opposite sex.

No Ethiopian traditional scholar, including the monks and nuns who guard Woletta Petros' legacy at the Lake Tana Monasteries, have arrived at this interpretation in their centuries of studying the text. My own examination of the Ge'ez and the Amharic translations of the text, as well as consultation with spiritual scholars trained in Ge'ez and the interpretative practice of *Tirguamme*, cannot find anything to suggest this interpretation. Belcher, despite not reading or understanding Ge'ez or studying the monastic and cultural context in detail,<sup>7</sup> positions herself as the expert. This following

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7 The failure to study the monastic context in detail can be seen in the lack of references and discussions of Ethiopian sources and her overreliance on western writers. For example, in the introduction to the translation, which includes the 17th century historical context (2015, p 1- 10), there is not a single reference to Ethiopian scholarly or local sources. The introduction regarding "Tāwahədo Church Monasticism" (2015, p. 13-17) also does not include Ethiopian sources. Instead, it relies heavily on a Masters Dissertation by Marta Camilla Wright which Belcher claims is "the most important scholarly work" on the topic (2015, p. 16). The entire bibliography shows a significant reliance on orientalist literature

analysis challenges Belcher's interpretation. It is not my intention to address every error in the translation. I also recognize the possibility of mistakes and contamination in every translation. This paper will therefore focus on the major issues around interpretation and the larger claims that Belcher argues to be "important academic findings".

### *"Marriage" Between Two Nuns*

In Belcher's interpretation, she argues that Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos are a same-sex couple. She argues that this union between two nuns was arranged and sanctified by a priest. In the story, Woletta Petros had left her brother's home to become a nun, and was living in disguise at Robeet. A priest called Aba Tsigie Haymanot heard the news and came to visit her. Belcher and Kleiner translate the scene and their conversation as follows:

When he arrived there, he met with her and learned that she lived alone. He said to her, 'My child, how can you live alone without a companion? This is not good for you.' Our holy mother Walatta Petros replied, 'How do I do that? From where can I find a companion who will live with me? Am I not a stranger in this town?' He responded, 'If you want, I myself will bring you one. There is a fine woman named Eheta Kristos who, like you, left her husband and home, became a nun, and now lives with her sister. This would be good for both of you' (2015, p. 113).

This translation seems fairly straightforward but there are some subtle problems that are later used by Belcher to interpret this scene as one where the priest is matchmaking Woletta Petros with Ehete Kristos. For example, the Ge'ez text says "አንተ ህጻን እጩ ትኑብሪ ባህተተኪ ዘእንበለ ቢጽ". Belcher and Kleiner translate this as "My child, how can you live alone without a companion?" A more accurate translation would be "you are young (like a child), how can you live without a

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including those with racist and stereotypical views of Ethiopians, which shall be discussed later.

friend?” There are two issues with Belcher and Kleiner’s translation. Firstly, the translation of ቤጽ is misleading. The Ge’ez word ቤጽ means “friend” or “neighbor”, not “companion.” The word ቤጽ is used to translate biblical references about “love your neighbor”. “አፍቅር ቤጻክ ከመ ነፍሰክ” means “Love your neighbor as your soul or yourself” (Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Leviticus 19:18; Galatians 5:14). In English, the word “companion” can indicate a platonic relationship, but it also relates to a sexual or romantic partner. The word “companion” is not equivalent to ቤጽ, as the Ge’ez word does not share the same double meaning. This may appear very minor but, as will become clear, the word “companion” appears to have been chosen to make the meaning closer to marriage.

Secondly, why did the priest say, “it is not good for you to live without a friend”? The priest is following the biblical tradition of care in spiritual journey where “two are better than one...If either of them falls down, one can help the other up” (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10; Proverbs 27:17). Moreover, examination of earlier passages offers an explanation. Woletta Petros was a member of the highest class in society, a noblewoman who abandoned her husband, stayed briefly with her brother, and left in disguise to become a nun. When she left home, she took maidservants: first three, later one. The last one caused her trouble and left. For a noblewoman who was new to rural life and whose family and relatives were hated for their conversion to Catholicism, to be alone was not good. Until she starts her monastic life, the society cannot see her as anything different from her former noble background.

However, Belcher and Kleiner offer a different interpretation. In their book, they state that, “someone starting off in the spiritual life needs a guard on her virtue, to prevent against temptation” (2015, p. 113). In her article, Belcher argues,

The puzzle is unraveled when we look at the abbot’s words more closely—they are directly from the Bible and God’s rationale for marriage. God created Eve for Adam because ‘It is not good for the

man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' (Genesis 2:18). This passage is recited twice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo marriage rite (Chaïne 266, 267, 274, 275). (2016, p. 24).

This interpretation is an absurd stretch, attempting to link God's creation of Eve for Adam to a priest suggesting that a woman early in her spiritual journey should not be without a friend. Belcher continues, claiming,

Like God, the abbot is a matchmaker, providing a life-mate suitable for Wälättä Peṭros by introducing her to 'a fine woman' whose 'character . . . is good' (113, 114). By invoking the biblical language of marriage, the author(s) represent the women's relationship as a holy and permanent partnership originating in the church. Thus, the purpose of the anecdote in the text seems to be to give church sanction to the women's partnership (2016, p. 24).

This is a deliberate subversion of the text, one that is not even present in the English translation Belcher and Kleiner provide. Even within western marriage rites, where a couple stand before a priest and take a vow, the priest's suggestion that Woletta Petros needs a friend does not constitute matchmaking or a marriage rite. Furthermore, within the Ethiopian context, marriage by a priest is officiated inside a church that has the replica of the Ark of the Covenant, and involves the special marriage prayer called *serate takilil*, and the taking of holy communion by the couple. It is the holy communion that make the uniting couples into one body, not the mere presence of a priest. Moreover, Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos have left their husbands to become nuns but technically, they are not divorcees. That means a priest would not perform the rite as it violates the church's rule of marriage.

Belcher does not claim that Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos undergo a marriage rite. Rather, she claims that the "language" of the priest and the subsequent meeting between the two indicate that they become church-sanctioned companions *similar* to a marriage

and that the two felt romantic love for one another. Yet the words used in the Ge'ez text do not support this interpretation.

Belcher and Kleiner translate what happened when the two nuns first met:

As soon as our holy mother Walatta Petros and Eheta Kristos saw each other from afar, love was infused into both their hearts, love for one another, and [approaching,] they exchanged the kiss of greeting. Then they sat down and told each other stories [about the workings] of God. There was no fear or mistrust between them. They were like people who had known each other beforehand because the Holy Spirit united them (2015, p. 115).

According to Belcher, this “description of their first encounter is rapturous” (2016, p. 39). One of the Ge'ez scholars I consulted said that the Ge'ez text provides a spiritual purpose for the meeting of these two messengers of God. Woletta Petros was a woman from the court, Ehete Kristos was a woman from the country. In the same way God prepared Aron to help Moses in his struggle to free the Israelites from the Pharaoh's rule, God prepared Ehete Kristos to help Woletta Petros in her struggle to free Ethiopians from Catholicism. It was God who poured love into their hearts.

In their translation, Belcher and Kleiner dramatize the scene using two keywords Belcher later uses to eroticize the meeting: “kiss” and “infused”. The Ge'ez word ተሰዓጣ (“to exchange the kiss of greeting”) is not in the text. The word “kiss” is further inserted into the English translation whenever the nuns greet each other. For example, when Ehete Kristos meets Woletta Petros after exile, the Ge'ez text says “ወተራከበት ምስሌሃ ወተአምኅታ” which means “she found her and greeted her”. The Amharic translation for ወተአምኅታ is እጅ ነሳቻት (greeting by bowing the head). Belcher and Kleiner add the word “kiss” to romanticize the reunion. They write, “Eheta Kristos found her and kissed her in greeting” (2015, p. 165). The reason why the word

“kiss” is added in the translation becomes clear when one reads Belcher’s article. Of the initial meeting, Belcher argues:

The unusually ecstatic language of this passage is itself a sensual marker. Then, all Ethiopians kiss close friends of either sex on the cheeks, so the kiss was not sexual, but these two women were strangers. They would not normally greet a stranger in such a way on first meeting, so the author(s) seem to be suggesting a somatic pull. Also, their feelings for each other occurred instantaneously upon seeing each other (upon the gaze, their sight of each other’s bodies), not later upon getting to know each other. The author(s) depict Wälättä Pēṭros and Eḥətä Krəstos as closely connected physically, looking at and being invested in the other’s body (2016, p. 26).

The statement that Ethiopians do not kiss strangers in greeting is untrue. However, this is irrelevant given the insertion of the word kiss, which does not appear in the Ge’ez. When “ወተአምሃ በበይናቲሆን” is translated as “they exchanged the kiss of greeting”, kiss is a deliberate insertion to romanticize the meeting. “ወተአምሃ በበይናቲሆን” is a form of greeting exchanged by bowing one’s head, and does not involve intimate hugging or kissing. Any Ethiopian who goes to the Tewahido church can hear this during the Holy Mass when the Deacon sings “ተአምኑ፡ በበይናቲከሙ”፡ the exact similar phrase in plural, meaning “greet with one another”. Attendants of the Mass bow their heads and greet the people around them singing, “አግዚአብሔር አምላክነ ይደልወነ ከሙ ንትአሙን በበይናቲነ”፡ “May God our Lord enable us to greet one another.” Belcher does not refer to this tradition, but it is this tradition and context in which Woletta Petros and Ehet Kristos meet and become friends.

The other keyword “infused” is also taken out of context to suggest a sudden attraction upon seeing each other’s bodies. The Ge’ez author is writing in a spiritual context relating Woletta Petros and Ehet Kristos’ love for each other as the work of the Holy Spirit, not as a physical or earthly love. ተሰውጦ (“infused”) refers to the pouring

of something. In other spiritual texts, it is used to express a divine gift, the pouring out of God's love or spirit. It is used in Joel 2:28: "እሰውጥ እምነ መንፈስየ ዲበ ኩሉ ዘሥጋ": "I will *pour out* my Spirit on all flesh". Even in the manuscript Belcher suggests is the original, the word is used in a sentence that explains how the smoke of the myrrh poured into Woletta Petros' body: "ወእምውእቲ ማዕጠንት ወፅአ ጢስ እጣን ፀዓዳ በአምሳለ በረድ ወመልአ በአፉየ ወተሰውጠ ውስተ ከርስየ" (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 114): "From the thurible, the smoke of the myrrh came out like a cloud and it filled my mouth and *poured into* my stomach". The author of Woletta Petros' hagiography is providing a spiritual context where the word ተሰውጠ is used to express how the Holy Spirit poured love into their hearts, suggesting that the friendship is spiritual, not romantic. When Ge'ez authors want to express romantic connection where the feeling of bodily love springs from the body (not poured into it from the Divine), they often use words such as "ተነድፈ", "to be pierced with the emotion of love": like "እስመ ንድፍት አነ በፍቅሩ": "for I am pierced by his love" (Songs 5:8). This phrase is missing from the first meeting or from any subsequent encounters between Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos.

### *The Sexual Misinterpretation of Soul and Body*

Even when reading Belcher and Kleiner's translation, the scene itself does not suggest a rapturous meeting where two women fall in love with one another and undergo a church-sanctioned union. Readers of the English translation would no doubt find such an interpretation baffling without the added speculation that Belcher provides in her article. One such interpretation is the reading of Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos as being of one "body and soul".

Belcher and Kleiner translate that after meeting, the two nuns lived "in mutual love, like soul and body. From that day onward, the two did not separate, neither in times of tribulation and persecution nor in those of tranquillity, but only in death" (2015, p. 116). In her analysis, Belcher romanticizes the metaphor "soul and body". She writes,

The language of the passage is that of marriage vows. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo marriage rite, the priest asks God to make the couple ‘one in body and soul’ (Chaîne 258, 259). Likewise, the author(s) write that the two women constitute such a singularity because their ‘love’ is that of the ‘body’ and the ‘soul’ for each other; that is, together they make a unified whole in a perfect melding, two alterities who need each other to be complete. They are not two souls together, but two bodies and two souls that make up one being. In this way, the author(s) make clear that the women had an exclusive life-long partnership (2016, p. 26).

In this interpretation, Belcher highlights the act of becoming “one in body and soul” in marriage but ignores the text’s own references to how nuns and monks in the monastic community become “one in body and soul”. Belcher and Kleiner translate passages about the monastic community that read: “There were no strangers there and no kin; rather, all were equal, of a single heart and of a single soul while Christ was in their midst” (2015, p. 209) and “the members of her community embraced one another in love, like soul and body, brother with brother and sister with sister” (2015, p. 212).

In the monastic context, “soul and body” expresses harmony, proportionality, mutual coexistence, and community. The monastic world is sacred, and the people are not separate individuals but communed and interconnected beings, forming the body of the heavenly city who is wedded to the slaughtered Lamb Jesus. Ethiopian monastic scriptures and rules underscore this reading. They declare that nuns and monks live like a single person, a single joined *soul and body*. The *Fetha Nagast* dictates six rules that monks and nuns must follow throughout their lives. One of these rules dictates,

Monks [and nuns] shall live as a single soul, ... and shall have one thought only in their bodies. Even if they are many in body, their chief is only one, namely God, Who unites [them into] this single soul, which is made one by the bond of love. Each one of them lives

not only for himself [or herself], not one for another, to please God. They serve [one another] equally and voluntarily, as a result of which peace reigns among them. Each one takes the work of the other and there is none among them who suffers injustice. Therefore, they inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Their mind is united in perfect obedience, and they live as they will in the life which will come at the end of time (Tzadua 1968, p. 72).

This principle applies to all monasteries. The dissolution of many bodies and souls into one soul and body, an everlasting companionship among faithful followers, however strange it may seem to the western gaze, is a reflection of the divine gift that unites monks and nuns in Ethiopia. As the *Fetha Nagast* states, “monks [and nuns] have no power over themselves, to detach themselves from their like of spiritual fraternity, just as the natural unity of the parts of the body cannot be dissolved except by death” (Tzadua 1968, p. 72). They are one, like soul and body, in this life and the afterlife. This understanding of “body and soul” is clear in the text, as stated above in Belcher and Kleiner’s own translations.

It is unclear why Belcher chose to interpret one instance of “body and soul” as a marriage-like union, but not others. As demonstrated in the previous section, there is no rapturous meeting to suggest romance, with the Ge’ez words suggesting that God brings the nuns together in a similar way that he brings the members of the monastic community together. The nature of the bond between Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos is further emphasized in the text when it states: “ወኮና በኩሉ መዋዕለ ሕይወቶን ለወለተ ጴጥሮስ ወእኅተ ክርስቶስ ከመ ፣ እግዝእትነ ማርያም ወከመ ሰሎሜ” (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 51-52): “for the remainder of their lives Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos became like Our Lady [Virgin Mary] and Solome [Mary’s sister].” Belcher and Kleiner translates this in a similar fashion as, “Throughout their entire lives, Walatta Petros and Eheta Kristos were like our Lady Mary and Salome” (2015, p. 157). In a footnote, they note that Solome was the sister of Mary and the aunt of Jesus. The deeply spiritual and sisterly love between Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos, likened to the bond

between the Virgin Mary and her sister, is clearly platonic. Furthermore, the Ge'ez text provides how Woletta Petros started to live with Ehete Kristos and other nuns after taking her vow:

ወሀለዋ ምስሌህ አህተ ክርስቶስ ወወለተ ጳውሎስ ወለቱ ለአትናቴወስ ወሰናየ ኮነ ተራክቦቶን ወንብረቶን ህቡረ በህየ በከመ ይቤ ዳዊት ሣህል ወርትዕ ተራክባ ጽድቅ ወሰላም ተሰዓማ ናሁ ሠናይ ወናሁ አዳም ሰባ ይሄልዋ አጎት ኅቡረ (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 24).

Ehete Kristos and Woletta Pawulos, daughter of Atnatewos, lived with Woletta Petros. As David said, 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for sisters to dwell together in unity.'

Here, the Ge'ez text replaces the Bible's verse "how pleasant it is for *brethren* to dwell together in unity" (Psalm 133:1) with "how pleasant it is for *sisters* to dwell together in unity", showing an Ethiopian Tewahido church viewpoint on female and male spirituality. In the Ge'ez text, Ehete Kristos, like all the other nuns, addresses Woletta Petros as "Mother". Belcher herself appears aware of this, and that much of her interpretation relies on speculation. She concedes that without a later anecdote about lustful nuns, "Wälättä Peṭros and Eḫətä Krəstos have an exemplary female friendship" (2016, p. 34-35). It is this anecdote that shall be the focus in the next section.

### *The Scene of the Lustful Nuns*

Woletta Petros is uncompromisingly dedicated to her flock and to the ideals of monastic life. She expects her followers to adhere to the strict monastic rules, and feels distraught when they do not follow them. For Woletta Petros, the worst thing that can happen to a person is not death, but the loss of one's soul to the Devil. Often, death is welcome if it ensures one's entrance into heaven.

Belcher and Kleiner's translation turns this spiritual zeal into violence and sexual longing. In the translation, they invent a chapter title: "Our Mother Sees Nuns Lusting after Each Other" (2015, p. 254). The original Ge'ez text does not have chapters or chapter titles,

so this is an invention. The anecdote in this chapter includes a conversation between Woletta Petros and a Priest Monk Aba Zahawariyat. The priest compels her to tell him why God has caused many deaths among her flock. In this conversation, Belcher and Kleiner translates Woletta Petros' reply as follows:

Since you compel me, listen up and let me tell you. It was evening and I was sitting in the house, facing the gate, when I saw some young nuns<sup>8</sup> pressing against each other and being lustful with each other, each with a female companion. Therefore, my heart caught fire and I began to argue with God, saying to him, 'Did you put me [here] to show me this? I now pray and beg you to relieve me of the goods that you have entrusted to me. Or else take my life! I prefer perishing to seeing these [sinful] daughters of mine perish [for eternity]' (2015, p. 255).

Belcher claims that in the above quote lies "one of the more important academic findings in the history of same-sex desire in Africa" (2016, p. 31). It is therefore important to examine the Ge'ez closely. She translates "እነዚ . . . ይትማርዓ፡በበይናቲሆን" as "being lustful with each other". The word of contention here is ይትማርዓ, or *yitmarea*. To support her translation, Belcher uses Leslau's dictionary where she identifies two possible root words: መርዐ (*marea*) which according to Leslau means "be lascivious, be lustful, be dissolute, be licentious, be debauched, enjoy venereal pleasure" and መርሐ (*mareha*) which

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8 The text does not say Woletta Petros saw "young nuns". It says "ርእኩኝ እነ ለደናግል" which literally means "I saw virgins". As shown earlier in the *Fetha Nagast*, there is a big difference between ደናግል ("virgins", novices) who have not taken their vows, and መነኮሳይት (nuns) who have. Belcher and Kleiner inaccurately blur the difference between the two by making age (young nuns vs. older nuns) the basis of the difference between the two groups (2015 p. 15). This is an example of poor translation or a failure to understand the difference between these two stages of monastic life. However, while the two stages are very different, it should be noted that novices were expected to strictly adhere to the rules of monastic life while living in the monastery.

Leslau defines as “lead, guide, show (the way), prove” (qtd. in 2016, p. 33).

Here, Belcher presumes the word with the sexual connotation should be the correct root word and picks it. She declares that, “according to the Gəḍəz-English dictionaries, [m-r-ḥ (መርዕ)] is unequivocally sexual” (2016, p. 33). Unfortunately, this is a sign of a poor understanding of the Ge’ez language. Depending on the context, the meaning of the word *marea* (መርዕ) varies. The context in which it is used renders meaning to it. In a monastery, church and other spiritual contexts, the non-sexual meaning is always present. In trying to understand the meaning based on its context, I investigated how Ethiopian Ge’ez dictionaries (ሰዋሰው) translated the word. There are four different meanings from well-known Ge’ez to Amharic dictionaries. I cite here from መጽሐፈ ሰዋሰው (*Metschafe Sewasew*):

- መርዓ - *marea*, ሰርግ፣ ሙሽራ = wedding, or bride or bridegroom. The verb form is ተመርዐወ (*te-merea-wo*) means ተዳረ፣ ተሞሽረ = to be wedded or to be beautified like a bride or groom (1963 et.c, p. 158).
- መርአ - *marea*, ጠወረ = to support an elderly person till he/she dies (1963 et.c, p. 150).
- መርአ - *marea*, ተዳራ = to behave adulterously (1963 et.c, p. 150).
- መርዓ - *marea*, አንድነት ግቢ = a compound or gathering area (1963 et.c, p. 153).<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, the meaning of the word depends on the context and the context does not support Belcher’s interpretation. A scholar of *Tirguamme*, interpretation, explained that in Ge’ez, it is common to express the gravity of sins using metaphors. For instance, ሐሜት, when two or more persons are gossiping, they are described as committing cannibalism: የሰው ስጋ ሙብላት (*yesew siga meblat*) which

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9 Some believe this book was originally written and published by Aleka Taye in 1889. Tesfa Gebra Selassie republished it in 1963.

literally means “eating human flesh”. Likewise, adultery is also used to describe several instances of non-sexual sin. አፍቅሮተ ንዋይ, the love of money, and ባእድ አምልኮ, worshipping another god, are common examples. In fact, in a monastery where the scripture is strictly followed and nuns and monks are regarded as dead to the world, adultery is broadly defined as showing any form of love or lust for this world. Monastic people strictly follow the scripture which says, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 John 2:15-17). Likewise, in the book of James (4:4-5), friendship with the world is regarded as adultery: “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” Adultery is used to describe sin in all of these cases because the community as members of the church or heavenly Jerusalem are “married” to Christ, as described in the Bible multiple times (Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34). Woletta Petros’ use of the word and her reaction is consistent with Paul’s reaction in 2 Corinthians 11:2 “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”.

Since the scripture uses “wedding”, “love” and even “adultery” in a spiritual context (as how Paul compares the union of husband and wife to Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:22-23), it is not the word but the spiritual context that defines the meaning. Among the manuscripts that Belcher and Kleiner examine, they note discrepancies with the words used in this scene. Understanding the above contexts explains why the manuscripts vary in using the word *merea* (to behave adulterously) and *merha* (to lead in a game) interchangeably as the essential meaning of both is the same: to show love or friendship to this world, rather than the spiritual one. Further evidence for this can be drawn from a similar reaction Woletta Petros expressed to a nun who was boastful and proud of her beauty. As will be discussed later, the action of the proud nun was adulterous and Woletta Petros was enraged by her.

According to the local scholars, one of the obvious reasons why one has to follow this non-sexual interpretation of the word *meraa* is by looking at where the young novices were during the act. They were openly visible to anyone in the monastery including their spiritual Mother Woletta Petros. Hanging out and pushing each other in a game in this case could be described as መዳራት, to behave adulterously from a chaste life with Christ. It appears that Belcher senses the importance of context but instead of following how the text presents the spiritual context, she changes the context by describing it as “a sexualized environment” (2016, p. 35). This demonstrates why the school of *Tirguamme* (translation and interpretation) is seen as a requirement to accurately interpret Ge’ez texts. These examples and the testimony of the scholars clearly show that in this context the word *maraa* (መርዕ) does not have an “unequivocally sexual” meaning.

In explaining the discrepancies between manuscripts, Belcher reasons that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ge’ez scholars must have had difficulty knowing how to express female sexuality:

Perhaps Gälawdewos or Zä-Hawaryat did not have ready language to describe women being sexual with one another and coined a form, which a later scribe then assumed was an error and consciously corrected. This would be something like an English speaker coming across ‘she magnetized him’ and assuming it was a mistake and changing it to ‘she magnified him,’ with neither being particularly idiomatic (2016, p. 33).

If Belcher is unsure about the meaning of this crucial word and refers to how English translators could mistranslate words, one may ask why Ethiopian Ge’ez scholars were not consulted to verify the accuracy of her translation. What is most concerning here is that she did ask them, but she chose to disregard them. In the book, she explains how she sought the assistance of Selamawit Mecca, her

Ethiopian informant who is neither a follower of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church nor has expertise in Ge'ez:

I decided to ask various experts what they thought of the passage while I was in Ethiopia. Before we got started, however, Selamawit warned me that if I told traditional Ethiopian scholars what I thought the anecdote actually said, they would just politely agree with me, telling me what I wanted to hear. Or, given the sensitivity of the issue of same-sex desire in Ethiopia, my mere presence as an American might skew the answer. I was grateful for her impeccable field methodology.<sup>10</sup> So she and I parted and asked Ethiopian scholars about the passage without hinting at our own thoughts. We separately showed the Conti Rossini print edition passage to several older Ethiopian male scholars. They all said that the two nuns were not pushing each other around but following each other in a game, being frivolous. Sound philological principles backed their understanding of the passage, but playing tag hardly seemed to warrant a deadly disease (2015, p. xxviii-xxx).

There is a lot to unpack here. The translation of “following each other in a game, being frivolous” (2015, p. xxx) aligns with the testimony I received from the numerous scholars I interviewed. However, Belcher rules that this testimony is false because she does not understand why frivolity would “warrant a deadly disease” (2015, p. xxx). She applies her own western lens to her interpretation of the book rather than seeking to understand how frivolity would be understood in an Ethiopian monastic context. I appreciate that to western audiences not familiar with Ethiopian monasticism, this may indeed seem like an extreme reaction. However, it is important to view the text within its 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian monastic context,

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10 This methodology seems to have been invented on the spot, suggesting the lack of prior ethics approval for interviewing without full disclosure. In my university, gathering information without obtaining full and informed consent or without obtaining approval from the academic ethics committee justifying minimal disclosure based on compelling exceptions demonstrates ethically questionable practice.

not within a western context in which it has never operated. Given monks and nuns are “dead to this world” and “living as if already in heaven”, forming the soul and body of the bride city of God, to break monastic rules is akin to breaking the sacred communion with Heaven. In short, it is a way towards damnation.

Since local Ge’ez experts do not provide the answer Belcher wants, she disregards their testimony. Instead, she turns to someone else:

Selamawit recommended we approach a different type of scholar, a young former monk for whom she had tremendous respect. Ḥaylä Şəyon had grown up in the Tāwəḥədo church but had left it, so he had the scholarly background necessary to read the anecdote with skill but also the distance to read it openly. Ḥaylä Şəyon took one look at the anecdote and immediately said that it was about same-sex desire (2015, p. xxx).

It is remarkable that Belcher has pinned her entire analysis on a young former monk whose training in Ge’ez, if any, is not disclosed. She has disregarded many local experts, many of whom train for decades in order to fully understand and interpret Ge’ez, for a single monk who left the order. Like Seyon, I grew up in the church and entered, but then left, the monastery. My knowledge of Ge’ez, alongside my consultation with local experts (and, indeed, Belcher’s own consultation with local experts), does not confer with his analysis.

What we see here is the white scholar situating herself as the only objective judge of black people’s history. Black experts who do not confirm her analysis are replaced by those who do, regardless as to their lack of expertise. As a result of this, Belcher discards all ambiguities surrounding the meaning of the word *marea* (መርዕ), including how it operates in spiritual contexts.

After translating “እንዘ . . . ይትማርዓ፡ በበይናተሆን” as “being lustful with each other” (2015, p. 255), Belcher introduces further changes to

intensify the erotic meaning of the scene. For example, she and Kleiner translate the phrase “አገተ ምስለ አገተ” which literally means “one with another” to mean “with a female companion”. The word “companion”, again, has the double meaning that means it can also be romantic or sexual. They also add in brackets the word “[sinful]” which does not exist in the Ge’ez text. In her article, Belcher goes on to further elaborate what Woletta Petros might have seen the young novices doing: “kissing, caressing and pressing against each other” (2016, p. 37). In the text, there is no mention of kissing or caressing. This is Belcher’s speculation.

Belcher also translates *yitgafaa*, the word preceding *yitmarea*, with a sensual connotation, as “pressing against each other”. This is inaccurate. The root word for *yitgafaa* is *gefaa* (ገፍአ). When translated into Amharic the last letter አ is dropped and becomes ገፋ. This literally means “to push”. This phrase “አንዝ . . . ይትጋፍአዓ፡ በበይናተሆን” means “pushing one another”. It is a simple frivolity I myself grew up playing with my friends. Not a single scholar I interviewed in Ethiopia considers Belcher’s translation accurate. The text simply suggests that the young novices Woletta Petros saw in the field were being frivolous, playing a game. Belcher does not understand why this is a serious cause of sorrow for Woletta Petros unless sexual sin was involved.

As mentioned above, there are discrepancies between manuscripts. Belcher claims that 10 manuscripts contain the word “m-r-ፍ”, and that Kleiner suggests that the changed manuscripts amount to censorship (2016, p. 33). If the meaning of the phrase “አንዝ . . . ይትማርዓ በበይናተሆን” had a sexual meaning that later Ethiopian scribes would seek to alter, especially given the contentious issue of same-sex desire in Ethiopian politics, as Belcher notes, one would presume that the word would be completely removed from modern reproductions of the text. However, this is not the case. When I travelled to the Lake Tana’s Rema Monastery in 2019, I bought a copy of the Ge’ez manuscript Belcher and Kleiner translated with a

side by side Amharic translation. These copies are not in English, so they are purely produced for Ethiopian visitors to the monastery. In this current edition, the Ge'ez phrase “እንዘ ይትጋፍዓ ወይትግርዓ በበይናቲሆን” still exists today (See Appendix 1). The Ge'ez words are translated into Amharic as “ሲጋፉና ሲላፉ” which means “playing frivolously by pushing each other.” If the Ge'ez word has a same-sex connotation as Belcher claims, it is inconceivable how the monastery would still reproduce these words now and distribute it to anyone given that, as Belcher states in her article, the administration of today's Ethiopian church does not support same-sex relations (2016, p. 40).

If Belcher continues to claim that the word means lustful when it is still being reproduced in an environment where such a scene would be viewed negatively, she is essentially saying that the monks and nuns who reproduce the book do not know what it means. She is situating herself above the people she is writing about, relying on racist stereotypes that black people are so ignorant that they do not know or understand their own books and history, and they need a white woman who cannot speak the language to decode it for them.

### ***“My Heart Caught Fire”: Woletta Petros as a Lustful Nun***

As discussed, the above scene depicts novices frivolously disregarding monastic rules and Woletta Petros responding with despair, as she believes the only way to go to heaven is to live a strictly devoted life. Her dedication to her followers is so strong that she would rather die than see these women go to hell. This scene is one of many that shows Woletta Petros' love towards her followers, as well as the uniquely strict spiritual rules of isolation and silence that apply to all the people who live in monasteries.

However, Belcher needs this scene to depict lustful nuns as the Ge'ez text shows no evidence of sexual intimacy or desire. Even after Belcher invented Woletta Petros and Ehete Kristos as “exclusive partners through thick-and-thin, a type of married couple” (2016, p. 27) who are “closely connected physically...and being invested in the

other's body" (2016, p. 26), the text deprives Belcher of evidence of a romantic life between the two. As quoted earlier, Belcher recognizes this and says that, "without this anecdote, Wälättä Peṭros and Eḥətä Krəstos have an exemplary female friendship" (2016, p. 34-35).

Furthermore, Eḥete Kristos does not appear in the text as much as would be expected for a life-partner. Belcher senses this as a problem and asks, "why does Eḥətä Krəstos fall out of the text?" (2016, p. 37). She suspects "they [the authors] are trying to hint to careful readers that Eḥətä Krəstos was part of the problem, that she had to be banished if Wälättä Peṭros was to avoid stains on her soul before her death" (2016, p. 37). This speculation is at odds with Belcher's previous assertion that the arranged partnership between the two was holy and proper, sanctified by a priest and God. Belcher also speculates that Woletta Petros' same-sex partner was being promiscuous: "perhaps an unnamed Eḥətä Krəstos was one of the lustful nuns whom Wälättä Peṭros saw that day" (2016, p. 37). She insists that her readers should focus on the scene of the lustful nuns in order to understand what is happening to Woletta Petros. Belcher reinvents this scene as a place and time where Woletta Petros discovers a new meaning for her own sexual identity. She hypothesizes:

Thus, if Wälättä Peṭros had been kissing, caressing, and pressing against Eḥətä Krəstos, she may have thought nothing of it until she saw other women doing the same. The reason the saint had such an intense affective response—confusedly calling out for the nuns' death and then her own and then allowing yet more women to be brought in to solve the problem—is because her own behavior had been illuminated. She suddenly knew herself as a woman who wanted women, who had been in denial about what she was doing, and who was terrified (2016, p. 37).

It is remarkable that Belcher, from a misinterpreted word, can interpret Woletta Petros' despair at nuns disobeying monastic rules

as being a sudden realization of her own sexual identity and desire. Since the Ge'ez text provides no evidence of Woletta Petros being lustful, Belcher refers her readers to go back to the scene of lustful nuns and read the second sentence in the conversation between Woletta Petros and the priest:

Therefore, my heart caught fire and I began to argue with God, saying to him, 'Did you put me [here] to show me this? I now pray and beg you to relieve me of the goods that you have entrusted to me. Or else take my life! I prefer perishing to seeing these [sinful] daughters of mine perish [for eternity]' (2015, p. 255).

When I asked Ge'ez scholars, particularly those trained in the art of interpretation, how I should read "my heart caught fire", all of them explained that Woletta Petros was enraged or distraught. This is ቅዱስ ቁጣ, holy anger, with fire representing the Holy Spirit. None of them suggested desire.

In an attempt to justify her interpretation, Belcher found it useful to exploit a traditional Ethiopian practice called *samena worq* which literally means "wax and gold". It is an indigenous method of interpreting riddles and texts, as well as an Ethiopian literary system and interpretative philosophy (Girma 2011). The wax is the literal meaning of the word and the gold is the hidden meaning. Ethiopians with excellent linguistic and cultural knowledge test each other to find the gold that is hidden within the wax, the gold being the message in a word, poem, or text. Belcher seeks to apply *samena worq* to find meaning for the phrase "my heart caught fire".

Tragic violence against culture occurs through removing its meanings from its contexts, through corrupting its most beautiful and creative legacy to attack itself, and rendering into its creative core narratives of barbarism, sensuality and irrationality. Belcher seeks to apply *samena worq* to sexualize the life of Woletta Petros, so she presents the core of this Ethiopian indigenous method of creative exchange as sexual. She writes, "a common aspect of sām-

anna wärq is a surface religious meaning with a hidden sexual meaning” (2016, p. 34). Belcher claims her informant Hayla Seyon, the former monk, told her “my heart caught fire” is an example of *samena worq*:

On the surface, it expresses her [Woletta Petros’] anger against God for showing her this scene, but the words chosen also suggest that she is angry because she felt desire upon looking at the scene (2015, p. 255).

In Belcher’s analysis, fire has a double meaning: anger and sexual desire. In Ethiopia, fire as a metaphor can be interpreted in many ways. In everyday life, fire has numerous meanings. For example, እሳት የበላ፣ “someone who ate fire” could mean “brave”; እሳት የላሰ “someone who licks fire” could mean “fearless”; እሳት እራት , could mean “a dinner of fire”, the name of an insect that runs to fire (like a moth) or a person who takes a dangerous risk. In the church, it symbolizes divine anger (Ephesians 4:26) or the Holy Spirit. In the latter case, church scholars referred me to Luke 24:32. The phrase “ነጸ ልብዩ”, “my heart burned” (according to Belcher and Kleiner, “my heart caught fire”) is used in the plural by people whom Jesus was talking to without revealing himself. As in all cases, context is everything. Even if sexual meaning may be conveyed in *samena worq*, this occurs only in relation to texts that involve non-spiritual matters, not in spiritual books like Woletta Petros’ hagiography. However, Belcher uses *samena worq* to interpret the scene thusly:

Thus, on the surface, in the wax layer, the author(s)’ metaphor about a heart ‘catching fire’ or ‘flaring up’ expresses the saint’s anger against God for showing her this sinful scene. Underneath, in the hidden gold layer, the author(s)’ fiery verb suggests that Wälättä Peṭros was angry because she felt desire upon looking at the scene. That is, seeing women being sexual with one another made her heart burn with desire (2016, p. 34).

Once she claimed to have discovered the “gold” of the text, she moves on to invent a bizarre mix of divine intervention through black slaves and death. She writes, “upon her crying out to God upon witnessing this scene, God immediately appeared, promising to fulfill her ‘wish’” (2016, p. 35). Belcher creates two wishes for Woletta Petros by treating “fire” as *samena worq*: a sexual wish (desire as the gold for fire) and the wish to die (anger as the wax for fire). Belcher writes that God “delivers to her ‘seven black maidservants, namely, six strong young women in their prime and one elder woman’” (2016, p. 35). Belcher writes, “God instructed Wälättä Peṭros to have these women ‘carry out your wishes’ by assigning each of the six young women to each of the lustful nuns and keeping the elder woman with herself” (2016, p. 35). Although Belcher does not make clear which of the two “wishes” were met by the seven maidservants, her dramatic narrative does not exclude the possibility of the fulfillment of both wishes. She writes, “the six young maidservants are grim reapers assigned to kill the six lustful young nuns” (2016, p. 36) but also renders God’s action as strange and exotic:

The queerness of this anecdote reaches its apotheosis here, when God sends beautiful young women to take care of women-desiring women. Is it some type of joke: the women being desirable young servants who were more appropriate sexual companions for the nuns than their peers? (2016, p. 35).

Belcher’s interpretation leaves the scene inexplicable, bizarre, and meaningless. This is a core element of racist constructions of African spirituality with strangeness being its unique quality. She concludes that the “excess of the metaphor suggests that content is being hidden” (2016, p. 35) and that the hidden “gold” in this metaphor is that Woletta Petros was also a lustful nun:

The author(s) inform us in the next anecdote that Wälättä Peṭros herself fell sick and died not long after, presumably carried off by the elderly maidservant God assigned. (In metaphorical terms, the

strong young maidservants killed six quickly, while the weak elderly maidservant killed one slowly.) Despite her plea that she or the lustful nuns perish, all died. That is, the author(s) hint, Wälättä Petros was one of the lustful nuns who had to pay the ultimate price (2016, p. 36).

This is how Belcher decided to end the character she invented using the Hagiography of Woletta Petros. This is not reflected in the Ge'ez text. Woletta Petros dies much later after the sexualized anecdote. This interpretation, as detailed above, is the result of continually taking the text out of context. A more likely interpretation was offered by a scholar who told me that the seven maidservants were sent to look after Woletta Petros' seven monasteries.

Belcher extends her interpretation towards the entirety of Woletta Petros' flock, classifying the monastery as "a sexualized environment" (2016, p. 35). For example, in the section where Woletta Petros requires nuns and monks not to go out of the monastery alone but in pairs, Belcher and Kleiner provide a sexual rationale for this rule and explains why a previous Italian translation "not to go out singly alone" was wrong:

Furthermore, our blessed mother Walatta Petros imposed a rule on the brothers and sisters that they should not go out one with one alone, but rather in pairs of twos ... Here our translation differs substantively from Ricci's, who takes the first part of this phrase to mean that they should not go out singly alone (*non . . . ognuno a solo, ma a due a due*), thereby obscuring the sexual point of the rule (2015, p. 212).

Although the translation of monks and nuns having to go out in pairs is correct, to imply that there is a hidden sexual point to this is their own speculation. Alongside the scene of the lustful nuns, they insert the word "flirt" into the text when it does not appear in the Ge'ez. In one passage, Woletta Petros tells members of her community not to speak with each other, except in prayer. The Ge'ez

in the text says “ከመ ኢይዛውዑ በበይናቲሆሙ” . This means “they should not speak with one another”. A church scholar informed me that these rules are not unique inventions, but are drawn from biblical verses (such as Luke 10:1; Mark 6:7; Ephesians 5:4; Ecclesiastes 5:6; Proverbs 18:8; Romans 12:2) and incorporated into the monastic tradition for implementation without compromise. Belcher and Kleiner translates “ከመ ኢይዛውዑ በበይናቲሆሙ”, “they should not speak with one another” as “they should not talk and flirt with each other” (2015, p. 204). The insertion of “flirt” is deliberate to construct life in the monastery as a constant struggle with sexual desire.

In another anecdote, Belcher and Kleiner insert “flirt” to construct Woletta Petros as having visceral reactions towards heterosexual sex. The Ge’ez text says “እመ ርኢኩ በዓይዝ መነኮስ ወመነኮሳይት እንዝ ይዛውኡ በበይናቲሆሙ እምፈቀድኩ ረጊዞቶሙ በረምሕ ሕቡረ ለክልኤሆሙ” (Galawdewos, 17<sup>th</sup> c, p. 81). They translated this as “If with my own eyes I should see a monk and a nun talking and flirting with each other, I would want to jointly pierce them through, both of them, with a spear” (2015, p. 205). Flirting is not equivalent to the Geez word ይዛውዑ, which means talking. Again, the insertion of “flirting” is a deliberate strategy to invent a sexually suppressed community struggling with its own rules. This interpretation of Woletta Petros and her community is a clear manifestation of epistemic racism. Belcher has imposed a sexualized identity on the devout spirituality of black African nuns and monks whose texts she cannot read and whose scholars she deliberately ignored.

### *Woletta Petros as Violent*

As mentioned earlier, God gave Woletta Petros a promise, a *Kalkidan*, that all who came to her shall be saved. He gave her the significant responsibility of “keeping” the souls of her followers, of ensuring they keep their vow. Sometimes, this would involve asking God to take souls early.

For instance, the Ge’ez text says this:

ወሰበ አእመረት እምነ ቅድስት ወቡርከት ወላተ ጴጥሮስ ሕሊናሆሙ ወዘይረከቦሙ በደኃሪ መዋዕል ትጹሊ ወትስኦል ሃበ እግዚአብሔር ከመ ይሙቱ ፍጡነ በሥጋሆሙ ወይሕየው በነፍሱሙ ሕይወተ ዘለዐለም ወዘኢየሓልቅ ለትውልደ ትውልድ። (Galawdewos 17<sup>th</sup> c, p.79).

This can be translated as follows:

When she knew their thoughts and what they will face in their later life, she prays to God to let them die in their flesh and be saved in their souls in the everlasting life that will not end from generation to generation.

When Woletta Petros knew someone’s life would lead to sin, she would step in to ensure they would die and go to heaven before they could commit any sin that would see their soul damned for all eternity. Her zeal is powerfully expressed in a passage Belcher and Kleiner misinterpreted:

If with my own eyes I should see a monk and a nun talking and flirting with each other, I would want to jointly pierce them through, both of them, with a spear. I would not be worried that my doing this would be considered a crime, for just like the [biblical] priest Phinehas killed Zimri and the Midianite woman, and just like Samuel killed Agag—even though Phinehas and Samuel were priests who were not allowed to kill—they were moved by great zeal for God, so it was not a crime for them. Rather God said to them, ‘You have given my heart relief’ (2015, p. 205).

Due to the insertion of the word “flirting”, Belcher interprets this as Woletta Petros having “extreme reactions to heterosexual desire” (2016, p. 29). She writes, “she wanted to murder the two with an act of violent piercing that allegorized the act she despised” (2016, p. 29-30). Woletta Petros, constructed as a nun who desires other nuns, now wishes to cause violence towards heterosexuals. She continues to interpret Woletta Petros as a lustful nun whose desire or disgust causes her to commit violence. The violence Woletta Petros is being

accused of is in fact her prayers for God to take people before they commit sin. When God takes these people, Belcher does not interpret it as mercy, but as an act of violence. For instance, she inserts the following chapter title into the text: “Chapter 66: Our Mother Cripples the Disobedient Nuns”. This passage tells the story of Amete Kristos, a nun who dies after boasting of her beauty. It is not possible to interpret this story without understanding the monastic world as a place where the flesh dies to allow the soul to exist in heaven. Belcher and Kleiner translate the scene as:

One day our holy mother Walatta Petros saw her bragging and arguing with a companion. Instantly, Walatta Petros summoned her and made her stand before her. With an angry eye, Walatta Petros looked her up and down and said to her, ‘What is it with this curviness [of yours]? What about [attaining spiritual] beauty [instead] through eating little food and drinking cold water? So far as I am concerned, I would like to pierce you with a spear and kill you!’ (2015, p. 219).

As mentioned above, the rule in the *Fetha Nagast* states, “Food is the weapon of concupiscence and solitary life is the first bond of purity” (Tzadua 1968, p. 75). Woletta Petros reminds Amete Kristos what the flesh is made of: earthly food and water. She would seek for Amete Kristos to die through spiritual means (the “spear”/God) instead of continuing on her path of sinning within the monastic context. The word “curviness” does not exist in the Ge’ez text. The word of contention here is “ላህይ”, meaning “beauty or appearance”. In footnotes, Belcher and Kleiner provide two translations: “Lit, *gəzäf* (density, stoutness, obesity). Ricci translates *gəzäf* as [the Italian word] *floridezza* (flowering, blossoming)” (2015, p. 219). Belcher and Kleiner have merged their literal meaning with how Ricci translated it into Italian. Merging the Italian and Ge’ez, they get “curviness”, a word that eroticizes the scene. Belcher argues that “someone’s devotion to the flesh caused Wälättä Peṭros to call for a spear, to drive out desire with the phallus of violence” (2016, p. 30). Through

this interpretation, Belcher activates the racist identity of the angry and irrational black woman who would kill based on her emotions.

Later in the story, Amete Kristos falls sick and eventually dies. Belcher and Kleiner provide a medical diagnosis for her “piercing sickness”:

It is unlikely she had a stroke (since they are rarely painful). Rheumatism is a somewhat more likely possibility, even if it only rarely sets in at a young age. Alternatively, Amätä Krastos’s symptoms might have resulted from severe depression. Condemned for pride, perhaps the vivacious girl took to her bed and stayed there, losing muscle mass and becoming incapacitated. Not wanting to eat or move around due to chronic pain, she further deteriorated, becoming paralyzed and wasted (2015, p. 219).

The spiritual here is turned into a disease that can be explained by science. This example of applying a western scientific lens to an African spiritual text shall be discussed in more depth in the next section. For now, it is important to note how Belcher interprets this anecdote, among others: “Wälättä Peṭros threatens sinners, yes, but she kills tempters. Is it because she herself was tempted by them?” (2016, p. 31). Belcher directs her readers to interpret the activities of Woletta Petros as the policing of a “sexualized environment” by a black Abbess who is guided by her own intense disgust or desire. Belcher constructs this by inserting and picking phrases and sentences from the entire body of the Ge’ez text, decontextualizing and mistranslating these words, and finally piecing them together in her analysis. As Ann Stoler states, “sexuality is the most salient marker of otherness and therefore figures in a racist ideology” (1989, p. 636). This rendering of Woletta Petros as a woman driven to violence due to her own sexual desire or distaste draws on racial stereotypes of Africans as irrational, sexual and savage.

Woletta Petros also prays for what all monks and nuns desire: to go to God when they are their most spiritual. She also has the ability to

heal and halt death. She prayed for numerous people to be healed from their physical illnesses. She sends the sick members of her community to be healed with holy water called *ፀበል* (*tsebel*). She also healed others after her death (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 120-123). While Belcher and Kleiner include these passages in their translation, it is the examples of so-called “violence” that Belcher focuses on in her introduction of the book and her article where she casts Woletta Petros as a woman viscerally disgusted by heterosexual sex.

This interpretation that privileges violence also appears in translations that are not only taken out of context, but are mistranslated. For instance, in one scene, Woletta Petros is approached by a priest named Aba Ze-Selassie who says he wishes suffering and death in the community to end. Belcher and Kleiner incorrectly translated their conversation as follows:

Abba Za-Sillasé said to our holy mother Walatta Petros ... ‘Since those who see and hear loathe us, let it be done and enough! May we be spared this death [of slow decay]!’ Our holy mother Walatta Petros replied to him [CR resumes], ‘Do you want death to come [now]?’ Abba Za-Sillasé responded, ‘Yes, I do.’ So our holy mother Walatta Petros said to him, ‘If you want it, then let it be as you have said,’ and right away death struck, just as she had commanded it (2015, p. 260).

The Ge’ez text reads as follows:

ይቤላ አባ ዘሰላሴ ለእምነ ቅድስት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ ... እምአመ ተወጥነ አስከ ይእዜ ወኃጣእኩ ሰረፍተ ወአለሂ ይሬእዩ ወይሰምዑ አስቆረሩነ እምይእዜሰ ኮነ ወአስለ ወይእትት እምኔነ ዝንተ ሞት። አውሥአቶ እምነ ቅድስት ወቡርክት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ ወትቤሎ ቦኑ ትፈቅድ አንተ ከመ ይቆም ወይቤላ እወ እፈቅድ ወትቤሎ እምነ ቅድስት ወክቡርት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ እመሰ ፈቀድክ ይኩን በከመ ትቤ ወሰቤሃ ቆመ በከመ አዘዘቶ (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 115).

Aba Ze-Selassie said to our Holy Mother Woletta Petros... ‘From the beginning until now, I couldn’t rest, and those who see and hear abhor us. From now on it is completely enough. Let this death go away from us.’ Our Holy Mother Woletta Petros said to him, ‘do you want this to stop?’, and he said to her, ‘yes, I want [it to stop]’.

Our Holy Mother Woletta Petros said to him, ‘if you want, let it be as you said.’ Immediately, it stopped as she ordered it.

The above translation, verified with Ethiopian scholars, and compared with the Amharic translation, is the opposite of Belcher and Kleiner’s translation. Woletta Petros did not order death to strike her own community in a time of sickness. Rather, she ordered death to stop.

### *Linking Woletta Petros with Animals and Disease*

As has been shown above, the misinterpretation of a few words can significantly impact how a text is translated. Another example removes Woletta Petros from a spiritual association with Jesus and instead links her to an animal. In a section where the Ge’ez text details how Woletta Petros carried out her pastoral duty, Belcher and Kleiner translate:

As for her, she guarded them like the pupils of her eyes and watched [over them] like the ostrich watches over her eggs. Walatta Petros watched over their souls in the same way, day and night. But every day she had to swallow ashes and dung on account of them, just as our Lord had to drink bile and myrrh when he tasted death for the redemption of the entire world (2015, p. 231).

The Ge’ez text reads:

ወይእትኒ ነበረት እንዘ ተዕቅቦሙ ከመ ብንተ ዓይን ወከመ ታስተሐይጽ ሰገኖ ሃበ እንቅሆሃ።  
ወከግሁ ታስተሐይጽ ሃበ ነፍሳቲሆሙ መዕልተ ወሌሊተ። ወከሎ አሚረ ትሰሰይ ሐመደ ወከሶ  
በእንቲአሆሙ። በከመ ሰተየ እግዜነ ሐሞተ ወከርቤ (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 87).

She shielded them like the pupils of her eyes. She watched over their souls days and night like an ostrich that watches over her eggs. She ate ash and *kosso* on their behalf, like Jesus drunk the hemlock and myrrh.

The phrase “she had to swallow ... dung” is translated incorrectly. The equivalent word for “dung” does not exist in the Ge’ez text. The

Ge'ez phrase says “ትሴሰይ ሐመደ ወኮሶ በእንቲያሆሙ በከመ ሰትየ እግዚእነ ሐሞተ ወከርቤ” means “she would eat ash and *kosso*”. *Kosso*, as stated earlier, is a bitter herb. Woletta Petros follows the example in the story of Jesus where he tasted the hemlock and myrrh and drunk from the bitter cup on behalf of his people. She does the same with ashes and *kosso* on behalf of her spiritual children. Belcher and Kleiner mistranslate ኮሶ (*Kosso*) into ኩሶ *kuss*, (excrement). To suggest, even metaphorically, that Woletta Petros ate dung or excrement is deeply degrading. It speaks to Belcher’s lack of knowledge and Kleiner’s lack of fluency in Ge’ez. They have relied here on Ricci’s previous Italian translations, as they note in the translation: “Ricci put in his note, *kos* is not a proper Gəʿəz term but a variant of Amharic *kʷəs* or *kus* (excrements, animal manure, bird droppings, dung)” (2015, p. 231).

Woletta Petros is further aligned to the literal (rather than metaphorical) behavior of an ostrich with a footnote that explains, “ostriches ... are a species of East Africa known to swallow sand and pebbles to aid digestion” (2015, p. 213). The Ge’ez version shows Woletta Petros watching over her flock in a motherly fashion, and suffering, like Jesus, in order to redeem the people for whom she is responsible. This English interpretation represents Woletta Petros as a strange being who swallows dung like an exotic animal.

Woletta Petros’ spiritual suffering is further made strange when Belcher and Kleiner insert medical speculations into the text. Woletta Petros, alongside the ability to see her followers’ future, feels their pain and suffers for them. In the Bible, righteous people often suffer for others, and Woletta Petros is no different. Belcher and Kleiner interpret her suffering using the lens of desire and disgust, and apply a medical lens to speculate on what disease she may have. Returning to the scene where Woletta Petros talks of the “flirting” monk and nun:

Furthermore, if our holy mother Walatta Petros was informed that a monk and a nun had violated this [rule], she would suffer exceedingly. She would moan and roll around on the ground, until she was vomiting, as well as urinating blood and pus (2015, p. 205).

Given that Woletta Petros wore abrasive cloth and iron bracelets with sharp points, it is understandable that she would be wounded in the process. This is also a spiritual affliction, where she suffers similar to Jesus for the sins of others. However, Belcher and Kleiner provide another interpretation:

We can only speculate about the physical and/or spiritual nature of this response. It may be some kind of intestinal problem (gastroenteritis, a peptic ulcer) that causes similar symptoms and can be provoked by such stressors as receiving upsetting news. Urinating blood and pus suggests a urinary or vaginal infection, common disorders. Among these are sexually transmitted diseases, which WP may have contracted long ago from her husband, or which may be WP psychically taking on the consequences of the inappropriate sexual behavior of her flock (2015, p. 205).

For Belcher and Kleiner, the cause of Woletta Petros' suffering is not her righteous and spiritual empathy, it is disease. They later speculate that this may have been "endometritis" (2015, p. 206). Even when they consider the spiritual aspect, they speculate that Woletta Petros is psychically suffering for the sexual immorality of her flock, further sexualizing the monks and nuns under her care.

According to Belcher, Woletta Petros' own desire is also the cause of her suffering, where "the author(s) represent heterosexual desire as disgusting, the cause of revolting physical symptoms, and Wälättä Peṭros as having visceral reactions to the very idea of men and women having sex with each other" (2016, p. 30). Belcher further suspects that Woletta Petros might have,

Contracted a sexually transmitted disease from her much older and sometimes violent husband. Or perhaps this husband's behavior

later caused in her a posttraumatic stress disorder reaction to the very idea of heterosexual sex, her gushing body a kind of feminist stigmata (2016, p. 30).

The Ge'ez text never presents any member of the monastic community as committing sexual sin, nor does it provide medical explanations for Woletta Petros' suffering. To label Woletta Petros' suffering as a "feminist stigmata" obscures how Belcher's interpretation imposes the worst manifestation of patriarchy onto the saint: the view that women are incapable of overcoming their weak and emotional nature. She invents Woletta Petros's body as a Freudian "dark continent" where sexual anxiety and disease is rampant.

The application of scientific speculation to the text continually seeks to understand its themes according to a contemporary western lens, not the Ethiopian monastic context in which it is set. Within this interpretation, monks and nuns do not suffer spiritual afflictions or die through God's mercy. Rather, they have disease and perish. As mentioned before, Belcher and Kleiner speculate that Amete Kristos dies from rheumatism or complications from severe depression. They later speculate that a monk was suffering from "leprosy" or "hypothyroidism" (2015, p. 319). The spiritual cause of deaths in the monastery are hypothesized within a scientific lens that extends disease to the whole country: "The contagious diseases in Ethiopia that could have caused an epidemic were typhus (nədad), cholera (fängəl), smallpox (bädädo, kufañ), dysentery (həmamä fänşänt, həmamä aṭraqi), influenza, and the plague (däwe q'wəsl)" (2015, p. 188). The monastery is also called a place "without good sanitation" (2016, p. 29). There are no references in the Ge'ez text to poor sanitation. This is an invention that reproduces harmful stereotypes about Africa as a place of dirtiness and disease, and strips a holy text of its spiritual intentions.

Many of these interpretations emerge from a colonial legacy. Belcher's basis of inventing Woletta Petros as a black queer woman

desiring her own spiritual children while killing some of them, is an attempt to invent a black erotic figure from a pre-modern world. Belcher claims that the text “demonstrates that the earliest written records on African sexualities are not European” (2016, p. 21), obscuring her reliance on colonial themes by seeming to champion African narratives of sexuality as authored by Africans. The irony here is that Belcher has authored this narrative about African sexuality herself, inserting sexual themes into a book where there are none. In this orientalist reincarnation of *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe 2016; Said 1978), Belcher presents Woletta Petros as an African ancestor of modern queer women, one that experiences “revolting physical symptoms” (2016, p. 30) and “kills tempters” (2016, p. 31) due to her own disgust towards heterosexual sex. This further draws on stereotypical images of black people as irrationally driven to savagery and violence. Spiritual afflictions are removed from their Ethiopian monastic context and are speculatively examined using the lens of western science. The following quote from Belcher’s interpretation of Woletta Petros summarizes this:

In Ethiopian hagiobiographies of female saints, female sainthood represents the ascent of a woman who is not sweetly kind but brutally powerful. She will not fit Protestant or Roman Catholic ideas of how a saint should behave. In a word, she is not ‘nice.’ When Christ comes to her in person, Walatta Petros refuses to do as he commands, repeatedly rejecting his advice. In other instances, she lies. She is quick to judge and punish. Faced with others’ natural emotions of fear or sadness, she rebukes rather than comforts. She forbids a mother to weep over her dead son. We might forgive such ‘sins’ in a male saint, but other acts are harder for modern readers to stomach from a woman or a man (2015, p. 37).

This is the consequence of removing a holy text from its context and attempting to translate it with little or no fluency in the language of said text, while also disregarding local experts.

## Ethnicization of Ethiopian Identities

In the previous section, I have focused only on how Woletta Petros is represented. There are several other issues, one of which is the essentialization and ethnicization of 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian identities. Here it is important to remind readers of the Ethiopian context in relation to ethnicism. Firstly, in Ethiopia, ethnicity has become a highly politicized issue since 1991 due to the reorganization of the country based on ethnic identities. I acknowledge that there is a variety of views on the issue of ethnicism. My interest is not to engage with these debates, but to address the Ge'ez text and how modern politics is being applied inappropriately.

Belcher interprets Ethiopian linguistic and cultural differences and relationships using the lens of western color prejudice. She presents Woletta Petros and "highland" people called Habesha as those who view themselves as "red" people whose ethnocentric views exclude "black" others as savages and slaves. She uses the name Habesha to present Orthodox Christians as racially and linguistically distinct from other groups. In the Ge'ez text, there is not a single reference to "Habesha". The term "Ethiopian" is used. However, Belcher uses "Ḥabäša" 130 times in her book with Kleiner. In her 2012 book on Samuel Johnson, Belcher states that:

I have chosen to use the term 'Habesha' for this culture, rather than 'Ethiopian,' 'Eritrean,' 'Abyssinian,' 'Amhara,' or 'Tigrinya,' because these other words have changed meanings regularly over the centuries, do not refer to the whole, or are ethnically charged (2012, p. 19).

This appears to be reasonable at the beginning, especially when Belcher claims to use it in a unifying context when she says that "Habesha" is often "used by young Ethiopians and Eritreans to forge connections across time and space" (2012, p. 19). However, although young Ethiopians use this term in a unifying way, western

orientalists who dominate the field of Ethiopian history frequently apply it to alienate Ethiopia's indigenous civilization from the African continent. They present the Ethiopian writing system, Tewahido Christianity, agriculture, architecture and other traditions as imports from South Arabian settlers called the Semites and the Habesha. For instance, when introducing his translation of the *Kebrā Nagast*, Budge wrote the origin of the name Habesha as follows:

In the eleventh or tenth century before CHRIST a further invasion of ABYSSINIA by Asiatic SEMITES took place, and it was they who taught the Abyssinians the elements of civilization. The principal tribe of the invaders was called 'ḤABASHA', and they came from YAMAN in western SOUTH ARABIA. They gave the name of 'ḤABESH' to this part of AFRICA in which they settled, and it is from this that the modern name of 'ABYSSINIA' is derived (1932, p. x).

Budge further writes that “the SEMITES found them [indigenous Ethiopians] negro savages, and taught them civilization and culture and the whole scriptures on which their whole literature is based” (1932, p. x).

This view does not have support from the numerous indigenous manuscripts in Ethiopia. It is a Eurocentric colonialist archive that racially bifurcated linguistic and religious diversity in Ethiopia into essentialist tribal identities which gained currency due to the rise of ethnic politics since 1991. Belcher's use of the term “Habesha” in the translation of Woletta Petros is combined with other ethnic terms in a way that implies that the Hagiography is situating Habesha as superior to other Ethiopians. She presents Habesha as viewing themselves as civilized, literate and Christian, while others are savage and primitive.

Before looking at the absence of evidence in the Ge'ez text, I would like to introduce new readers to the two opposite epistemological

positions on the origin of Ethiopian civilization.<sup>11</sup> The first position follows the Hegelian assumption that Africans do not have their own history, philosophy and civilization. They are people “enveloped in the dark mantle of night” (Hegel 1956). This group, sometimes known as western orientalists, prefer to see Ethiopia as part of the Middle East and Arabia rather than black Africa. This thinking can be traced to the Göttingen School of History which applied Biblical terminologies of race to the peoples of the world (based on the story about the children of Noah in Genesis 9). In the story, Noah cursed Ham to become a slave for his brothers. The story was modified later by making Ham black and justifying the subjugation of Africans on the basis of the “curse of Ham” (Goldenberg 2003). Arthur de Gobineau invented the Hamitic myth for racial classifications (1853). The popularity of the idea served the purpose of scientific racism and colonialism (Sanders 1969). Travelers and anthropologists such as John Hanning Speke and S.G. Seligman duplicated, modified, and applied it over diverse linguistic identities in East Africa (Rigby 1996, p. 65-70). One of the consequences of the Hamitic thesis was its contribution towards the racialization process of Hutu and Tutsi identities that ultimately led to the genocide in Rwanda (Mamdani 2001; Eltringham 2006).

European orientalists and some of their Ethiopian followers argue that Ethiopian civilization emerged from the coming of white-skinned South Arabian Semite settlers who enslaved and intermarried with the local people (Budge 1932; Ludolf 1684; Ullendorff 1965). Some ascribe what they regard as signs of civilization such as Christianity, writing, agriculture, organized administrative systems, empire, sainthood, morality and so on to the

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11 I am not claiming that scholarship on the Ethiopian origin of history can be neatly divided into these two groups. I am interested here to show the power relationship between two major epistemological positions, where one position is located in colonial scholarship and is supported by modern institutional power, while the other is excluded or suppressed.

Semites and later Habeshites from South Arabia, and present the rest as Negroid, enslaved and primitive. For example, writing his introduction to the *Kebra Nagast*, Budge inserted this:

the ABYSSINIANS or ETHIOPIANS, as the people themselves prefer to be called, owe more to the SEMITES than to the HAMITES, or NEGROES, or EGYPTIANS, or GREEKS, or any other people with whom they came in contact in the prehistoric or historic periods. The SEMITES found them negro savages, and taught them civilization and culture, and gave them the Holy Scriptures on which their whole literature is based, and set before their eyes shining examples of righteous kings, prophets, priests, and holy men (Budge, 1932 p. x).

This dualism frames every diversity in the country as a composite of rival identities.

The second position relates to writings that challenge the distortion or exclusion of African civilizations from history (Du Bois 1946; Diop 1974; Means 1945). It argues that Ethiopian civilization belongs to black Africa. Over 90 percent of the Ethiopian population are speakers of Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic language families. All of these families belong to the bigger language family/phylum called Afroasiatic which is assumed to have originated in Africa around ten thousand years ago. Part of the Semitic group crossed the Red Sea, taking civilization from Africa to the Middle East, not the other way around (Bernal 1987). Based on his analysis on the Sabeen inscriptions, A. K. Irvine presented his conclusion on the term Habesha as follows:

There is little or no reason to suppose that any case of Habasat or Habasa refers to a South Arabian tribe or distinct... The equation of Habasa with Abyssinia is moreover the most natural one. The onus of proof really lies with those who maintain otherwise and there is little doubt that the earlier views of Glaser and Conti Rossini were

largely founded on *a priori* assumptions, if not wishful thinking (Irvine 1965, p. 194).

Girma A. Demeke's work in particular examines the linguistic history of the country in detail, showing the indigenous, non-essentialist and non-racialist origin of the name Habesha, among other topics (2018, Vol 1). Based on a critical analysis of the literature on Ethiopian languages and a consideration of local scientific sources, Demeke showed that the thesis which views Semitic languages as an import from South Arabia is false (2014, chapter 4). Looking at the Ge'ez language's extensive development and other archaeological evidence, Ethiopia was more advanced than Yemen or South Arabia. For instance, Ethiopia controlled parts of South Arabia at various times between the third and sixth century AD (Bowersock 2013). According to Richard Pankhurst, "it was from Ge'ez, it is believed, that the Armenians, a religiously kindred people, borrowed several of their letters" (2005, p. 2).

The first position developed from the colonial period. Among others, Wallis Budge and Conti Rossini were prominent advocates of the Hamitic-Semitic or Negroid-Caucasian thesis, and they inserted this classification of races into their translation and interpretation of Ge'ez manuscripts. This view is still advanced by powerful western institutions of Ethiopian studies, which control and produce knowledge about Ethiopians using European languages, for the benefit of those who can understand western languages. The existence of these two divergent viewpoints is not a problem in and of itself. In fact, many European scholars who shared the first viewpoint have made significant contributions to our knowledge of Ethiopia. Their position on the origin of Ethiopian civilization was not an ideological position but a recognition of the dominant scholarship of that time. However, there are others who dogmatically view the first position as neutral, scientific and objective, and seek to use their academic power to dismiss any scholarship that opposes it. They disparage Africans who base their analysis on indigenous knowledges, claiming them to be dogmatic

and unscientific, while supporting the racially-biased authors of the past who regarded Africans as Negros, Hamites, savages and primitives, claiming them to be scientific sources. Modern Ethiopian education policy also adopted their Eurocentric framework, decentering the country's rich history and language. Ethiopians who support the second position find it difficult to gain institutional support to research or publish their studies while supporters of the first position are acknowledged as original thinkers.

I am giving this background to contextualize the position of Belcher's translation and how it plays in today's politicization of identities, despite the Ge'ez text having no reference to such topics. Belcher has the right to follow either of the two positions above but in a translation where not a single word of "Habesha" exists in the original, she is reinventing Ethiopians as superior vs. inferior, insiders vs. outsiders, civilized vs. uncivilized, and Christians vs. pagans. The sources of her analysis and references on Ethiopia rely heavily on the orientalist group, including Wallis Budge and Conti Rossini who follow Speke's racist classification of East Africans, and ignores the second viewpoint. As a result, she presents Ethiopians as being in constant struggle along ethnic lines.

Other identities, such as the Woyito and the Kemant, are also inserted into the text. For example, when a woman lost her *tuaff*, an offering she bought to light in the church of Woletta Petros, she becomes sorrowful, thinking the loss was a sign that her offering was not accepted because she had sinned. She prays to Woletta Petros saying, "አኩ ደቤ አምላክኪ ኢመጻእኩ እጸው ዲድታነ አላ ኃጥአነ?" which means "didn't your Lord say I came to call the sinners, not the righteous?" Belcher and Kleiner speculate that the woman bringing the offering was perhaps not a Habesha. They write, "As the woman doesn't say 'our Lord,' perhaps she is not a Christian, but from one of the local ethnic groups that had not been Christianized, like the Wäyṭo" (2015, p. 291-3). This interpretation presents Ethiopian Christianity as ethnocentric, excluding groups based on ethnic and

linguistic differences while compelling non-Christians to bring offerings to the church.

In another anecdote, Belcher and Kleiner again speculate about the ethnic identity of a woman whose Godmother was an old nun at Woletta Petros' monastery. The Ge'ez text describes their spiritual relationship saying, “ወለይኦቲ ብእሲት ኦብኦታ ክርስትና አሐቲ አረጊት እምነ ማህበር” (Galawdewos 17th c, p. 133) which means “Among members of the monastery there was an old nun who christened her”. Belcher and Kleiner translate “ኦብኦታ ክርስትና” to mean “abəʾata krəstənnā (had induced her into Christianity)” (2015, p. 306) and suggest that,

Abəʾata krəstənnā indicates that the elder woman persuaded the younger one to embrace Christianity when the latter was already an adult .... Although Christianity was widespread among the Amhara around Lake Ṭana at this time, there were non-Christians among immigrants to the area and other ethnic groups, like the Kəmənt (2015, p. 306).

Firstly, the Ge'ez does not specify when the woman was baptized or christened. Secondly, identifying these women as Amhara and Kemant does not appear in the text.

People who are unfamiliar with the modern ethnicization of Ethiopian identities may consider these references harmless. As a person researching historical, social, and epistemic injustices, I do appreciate scholars' efforts to uncover power relationships and call for injustices to end. However, this speculation, alongside Belcher's practice of replacing the word “Ethiopian” with “Habesha” does not seek to celebrate diversity or challenge oppression. Rather, it seeks to essentialize and invent “Habesha” as antagonistic to other ethnic groups. The classing of Habesha as “red” and others as “black” is one example of how western color prejudice is applied to the text. The classifying of people according to color does not exist in the Ge'ez, nor does color classification have the same meaning in Ethiopia as it does in the west. For instance, I am from the region

Wollo, and I am called “*teyim*”, meaning “dark brown”. That means, I am not “black” to my friends. My maternal grandmother and mother are “*keyi*”, meaning “red”, my paternal grandfather is “*tikur*”, meaning “black”, and my siblings are “red” or “brown” depending on how dark they are. This is not a racial classification, but rather an observation, similar to how one may be called “pale”, “white”, or “olive” skinned in Europe.

Regardless as to one’s position on ethnic politics in Ethiopia now, to apply these politics to 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian holy books where they do not appear renders Ethiopians as forever divided by ethnic lines. People in the west may see the speculation of scholars over African identities as an attempt to get at the bottom of the text. For Africans however, the writing of ethnic identities by an outsider scholar from a reputable university serves a dangerous political agenda locally. The Rwandan genocide was partly engineered by Belgian colonists and local elites who applied the Semitic or Hamitic classification over Tutsis and Hutus by creating a connection with Ethiopia (Mamdani 2001; Eltringham 2006). African scholars have shown tremendous concern at the essentialization and ethnicization of Africa’s diverse cultural identities, as it has served the cultural and political capital of political elites who utilize the colonial library for their own advantage (Mudimbe 1988; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 1998; Vail 1989; Zeleza 2006). The extent to which western institutions still allow the invention and reproduction of antagonistic and tribalist identities is deeply concerning given the politicization of identity around the world.

## **The Violence of Misinterpretation**

In the previous sections, I examined Belcher and Kleiner’s translation and Belcher’s interpretation of Woletta Petros, and showed how various misinterpretations have removed this saint from her African context. While I have already discussed some of the harmful implications of this rewriting of African history, this

section shall examine the violence of this scholarship on the monastery and the people in more detail.

### *The Foreigner as Expert: Using “Homophobia” to Deflect Criticism*

Belcher notes in her article that same-sex and LGBTQ peoples in Ethiopia and East Africa live in “increasingly hostile environments” (2016, p. 40). She cites an instance where the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church declared that, “‘Ethiopia shall be the graveyard of sodomy, not its breeding ground’” and notes that some have claimed that “same-sex sex exists in Ethiopia today due to ‘cultural colonization’ by Westerners” (2016, p. 40). The life of Woletta Petros, she argues, “proves that modern African states, including Ethiopia, cannot use the false claim that same-sex sex is a Western import as grounds for anti-‘homosexual’ legislation” (2016, p 40). When she received backlash for her interpretation, she published a defense on her website in which she referred to herself in the third person. Of one criticism, she states:

Although Belcher has repeatedly stated that the two women were life partners who did not have sex, many Ethiopians have sexualized the matter and accused her of depicting the celibate saint as in an ongoing sexual relationship. These false accusations have to do with current Ethiopian politics around LGBTIQA issues rather than the translation (n.p.).

Repeatedly in her publications about Woletta Petros, Belcher highlights the hostile environment for LGBTQ people in Ethiopia, claiming that criticism towards her has to do with “current Ethiopian politics”. She highlights the most extreme cases, such as the Patriarch’s statement about sodomy, while excluding legitimate criticism she received from the church. For example, she received a letter from Archbishop Aba Matewos, writing on behalf of the Patriarchate Head Office in 2007 et.c (2015 in the Gregorian Calendar) (See Appendix 2). In the letter, Aba Matewos states that the church was “extremely happy” to learn that Belcher was

translating the hagiography because it would mean that Woletta Petros' deeds would "unfold to the wider community" and gain "global attention". He then adds that "we very regrettably learn that you came up with a wrong interpretation of part of the text that there was an act of same sex relations in between nuns who were monastic sisters." On behalf of the church, he expresses "pain and anger" and hopes that the manuscript she is working from is authentic. The need to understand context is also stressed, with Aba Matewos writing, "it is our hope that you recognized how the language needs thorough knowledge and care to freely understand the message even a word carries in a context. We wish you could contact Scholars of the language". This reasonable request on behalf of the church is not mentioned in Belcher's defense.

Belcher's highlighting of homophobia in Ethiopian politics renders any Ethiopian opposition as immediately suspect. Indeed, I suspect it will also be falsely applied to my own criticism of her work. While homophobia is a reality in Ethiopia, and I am sure she has received criticism from those who hold homophobic views, to imply that this is the only reason that her work is being critiqued is deeply disingenuous. To further apply this to the local experts and scholars, erasing their knowledge with the label of "homophobic", relies heavily on the racist assumption that black people are barbaric and ignorant enough not to accept the truth about their own history. She does this through privilege that positions the western expert as objective, while black people are biased and homophobic.

Belcher fully utilizes this privilege. In her online defense, she references the sentence that refers to the lustful nuns and states that, "No one who reads Gəʿəz has disputed the English translation of this sentence as it appears in *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*" (n.p.). By her own admission, it is not true to say that "no one who reads Ge'ez" disputes her claim, as she details how she asked Ethiopian traditional scholars what the Ge'ez meant and they gave her a different answer. Furthermore, this statement is

misleading and speaks to Belcher's privilege in operating in a world that privileges English and western knowledge. Critical scholars have shown the prevalence of linguisticism, racism in languages, leading to the loss of diverse perspectives across the world (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Most experts in Ge'ez are traditional scholars who cannot speak English and can therefore not use their significant expertise to refute Belcher's translation in western academic or public discourse.

In this defense on her website, Belcher uses the Leslau dictionary and the misinterpretation of *marea* and *yitmarea* to argue, "thus, the English translation of this sentence about 'lustful nuns' cannot be disputed" (n.p.). It is remarkable that Belcher, who does not speak Ge'ez, feels that her reliance on a dictionary and a single monk who left the order, in stark contrast to local experts who can read and understand the context of the text, means that her translation "cannot be disputed".

To use homophobia as a way of deflecting criticism is not, as it may appear, an attempt to stand with LGBTQ Ethiopians. It is a smoke screen that seeks not to invalidate the claims of powerful or homophobic people, but to attack the vulnerable and voiceless scholars, nuns and monks whose only interest is in the spiritual legacy of Woletta Petros. The monastic community has no interest in engaging in debates within Ethiopian politics, yet politics is called upon to invalidate their expertise. This speaks to a very real problem within academia, where colonial practices persist but are often disguised through rendering Africans as antagonistic to progress. It also speaks to what bell hooks termed as "the servant-served paradigm" whereby some white female scholars focus on the black female body to advance their own professional power (hooks 1994, p. 103-4). Belcher is a white American scholar who cannot speak the language of the text she is translating, yet she has more authority than the black, indigenous scholars who can not only read the book, but understand all the nuances and contexts in which it exists. This

results in the rewriting of African history within colonial or racist perspectives. This has a significant impact on how the world understands Africa, and how Africans understand themselves.

### ***Rewriting Ethiopian History: Implications for African Identity***

Western institutions hold extensive collections of Ethiopian manuscripts<sup>12</sup>, often to the detriment of local scholars and students in the traditional education system, where such manuscripts are textbooks (Woldeyes 2020). In this process, Ethiopian manuscripts serve as raw data for the reproduction of “new” knowledges by western experts. Ethiopian Ge’ez scholars are reduced to informants, data suppliers and facilitators.

Belcher and Kleiner’s access to the many Woletta Petros manuscripts scattered through the world is not enjoyed by the local scholars of Ge’ez. Local Ethiopian scholars cannot publish their own history and culture of ancient and medieval Ethiopia without travelling and gaining access to the numerous western universities and museums that control many Ge’ez manuscripts. Given they operate in a system that is not supported by state funding, and students of the traditional system face the highest levels of poverty, this is simply not possible. Digitized manuscripts, made available online, are entirely catalogued in European languages. Even if students in the traditional system had reliable access to the internet (which they do not), they cannot navigate catalogues in languages they cannot read. The lack of access and resources local writers face has made western Ethiopianists almost the sole producers of knowledge about Ethiopian history and culture. As such, Belcher becomes the world expert on Woletta Petros. Given her many misinterpretations, this is concerning for how Ethiopians come to know their own history and

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12 Amsalu Tefera calculated that currently 6928 manuscripts and scrolls exist outside Ethiopia. He noted that this figure considers only officially recognized and recorded Ethiopian materials held in foreign universities and institutions (2019, p. 41).

is a disservice to many western scholars past and present who enrich our knowledge of Ethiopia with their genuine academic works.

The texts produced by orientalist scholars remain dominant not just in Ethiopian Studies but also in the Ethiopian education system since its inception (Isaac 2007; Kebede 2008; Woldeyes 2017). Despite never being colonized, Ethiopia has a western education system with English as the medium of instruction (Negash 2006; 2010). Unlike Ethiopian languages, English is viewed as a neutral language (Zewde 2008). Western control over knowledge production and the use of a European language in education has the detrimental effect of inventing new identities, subjectivities and histories that translate into material effects in the lives of African people (wa Thiong'o 1994; Phillipson 1996; Brock-Utne 2001). Tribalism and ethnicism invented or promoted through western knowledge gains validation in global media and local politics, in return becoming the basis of conflicts over essentialist identities (Lo Bianco 2017; Wai 2012). In this way, Ethiopians (and people all over Africa) internalize western understandings of themselves and their history as primitive and in need of development or outside intervention.

### *Impacts for the Monastic Community*

Woletta Petros' Rema Monastery at Lake Tana still exists today. Nuns live there as keepers of the memory of their founder and live by monastic rules: lifelong celibacy, silence, devotion, regular prayers for the Ethiopian people and love for each other as sisters. Since their establishment in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopian monasteries were centers of spiritual literature where books like the Hagiography of Woletta Petros were written. Monasteries contributed church leaders, including Patriarchs for the Ethiopian Orthodox church.

Since the 1960s, however, monks and nuns have faced an increasingly urbanizing and modernizing country where state and church leaders start to disregard their roles. The rise of the Derg, a

radical Marxist-Leninist government, in 1974 and its replacement with ethnic politics since 1991 created structures that have divided the country into a binary of urban and rural life. Despite being more than 85% of the population, farmers, pastoralists, poor laborers and servants in towns and cities are viewed as pre-modern, rural, traditional and backward (Rahmato 2009; Woldeyes 2018). Political leaders have sought to impose Patriarchs that suit their own political interest. Monks and nuns are known to be vocal critics of the collusion between church leaders and political authorities. The administration of the church and the monastic community have been in constant tension, especially since the Derg period (Engedayehu 2014). As Wagaw states:

If there has been a single group of people in Ethiopian history who have escaped official corruption and remained unintimidated by rulers and their surrogates, it is this group of ascetics. Alas, in the past three decades their numbers are few and their appearances in cities and villages have become less frequent. It may be that the long arms of self-serving rulers are reaching out to silence and perhaps eliminate them (1990, p. 42).

Belcher continually presents the monastery as a “sexualized environment”. She argues that “monastic institutions configure queer family and kinship as normative” (2016, p. 40) and presents homosexuality as a driver for many people to join the monastery, stating that, “in Christian cultures where same-sex desire is prohibited, some nuns become nuns precisely because they desire other women and in monasteries find freedom in the spaces that prohibit all desire” (2016, p. 42). She also states that she is aware that, “even some Ethiopians sympathetic to LGBTIQA rights fear that readings like mine endanger the many intense same-sex friendships of Ethiopia, as homophobia makes those friendships more fraught” and that she is “sensitive to these [and other] concerns” (2016, p. 38). Unfortunately, she does not express sensitivity to how her classifying the monastery within this lens may impact the nuns who still live there today. It is important to recognize the danger her work

poses to the monastic community in Ethiopia, especially to nuns who are most powerless in a male dominated system.

As discussed earlier, the monastery is a sanctuary where monks and nuns are regarded as “earthly angels. ... by giving up pleasure, and by despising everything, themselves included” (Tzadua 1968, p. 65). This monastic belief is an important basis for their existence as a community of sacred beings. Depicting their lives as a struggle with homosexuality in a context that severely criminalizes this practice presents a pretext for outsiders to disrupt their lives. In recent years, violence against monasteries have been orchestrated by political groups who use pretexts to confiscate their communal properties (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2014, n.p.). In 2013, government forces imprisoned and tortured some of the monks at Waldeba, the sacred monastery where, according to her hagiography, God revealed himself to Woletta Petros and made covenant with her. They brought false political charges when the monastic community resisted the desacralization of holy sites (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2014, n.p.). The Ethiopian Women’s Human Rights Alliance (EWHRA), in its submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Ethiopia reported that:

In an effort to pave the way for a planned sugar factory and sugar cane plantation, credible evidence exists that the Ethiopian government desecrated gravesites at the Waldeba monastery and forcibly removed monks who reside on the property. The monastery is considered one of the holiest sites for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians (OHCHR 2013, p. 4).

Monks and nuns feel a growing sense of unease in an environment that increasingly devalues their existence. When I visited Rema Monastery as part of my fieldwork, I asked if it was the nuns’ wish to show their sacred books to foreigners. As one local resident informed me, “The authorities consider manuscripts as artifacts and treasures that should be available to visiting tourists. The nuns and

monks cannot question these authorities. They should cooperate to build the country's image in the eyes of foreign visitors". They are subjected to the "tourist gaze" (Urry 1992), as foreigners photograph these nuns and put them into narratives they do not understand. It is within this context that Belcher photographed "the two women leaders of Walatta Petros's Monastery", the private "bed" of the nuns and published these images in her book (2015, p. xxviii, xxxi).

Most rural and all monastic people in Ethiopia believe that Ge'ez texts like The Hagiography of Woletta Petros are sacred, alive and powerful. They are placed in a church and brought out for readings during Mass and holydays and kissed by the faithful for blessings. Belcher was given access to one of these manuscripts, which she photographed and then made available online. She also reproduced and published 59 images of sacred paintings in her book without mentioning how she negotiated consent or what ethical guidelines she followed in the use of these items. The notion of subjecting sacred religious or indigenous materials into the hands of foreigners whose religion is unknown is possible only under a repressive structure that privileges whiteness in research and knowledge production (Smith 1999; Moreton-Robinson 2004). This is a source of great suffering for these spiritual people. As a local priest informed me,

It gives me enormous grief to see our Ethiopian church paintings used as objects of entertainment or curiosity by people who do not see them like we do. Our time is increasingly resembling to me like the time of Woletta Petros when followers of our indigenous Christian faith were dehumanized by *ferenjjs* [foreigners] and their collaborators.

The locals and recent reports claim this sentiment is particularly strong due to a new evangelical movement that focuses on proselyting youth, controlling political offices and essentializing ethnic and religious identities in the country (Abatt 2020; Jeffrey 2019).

In conducting research about the cultural legacy of vulnerable people, it is important to consider how one's privilege plays a part not only in interpretation, but in how said people may feel compelled to participate in research. It is important to also be sure that one's interpretations are accurate, especially when constructing a narrative that could potentially open up vulnerable people to harm.

### **Ethical Concerns with Research Conduct**

Alongside the harmful impacts of the research, as stated above, Belcher's fieldwork practice and overall approach to her research on Woletta Petros raise various ethical concerns. Belcher states that she and Selamawit Mecca conducted fieldwork at the monastery, where they stayed for two days photographing manuscripts. Belcher photographed some of the nuns (including a photo of their private living conditions) and visited Woletta Petros' grave (2015, p. xxvi-xxviii). Later, they spoke to local Ethiopian scholars to ask them about the meaning behind *yitmarea*, as has been detailed above. The photograph of the nuns and their living conditions were published in Belcher and Kleiner's book (2015, p. xxviii, xxxi), and Belcher's website. Belcher freely states that she ignored the local scholars who were consulted.

Academia enforces strict ethical guidelines on all scholars conducting research projects, particularly those involving fieldwork and human participants. The Belmont Report outlines three fundamental requirements for any research that involves human subjects. First, research should be respectful, which means treating individuals as autonomous agents (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects 1979). The investigators have the responsibility to disclose information about the purpose of their research, including possible risks and benefits to participants. This must be done using a language that can be understood by the participants. Informed consent must be sought, and participants have the right to withdraw consent at any time.

Belcher does not state how she sought informed consent from the monks and nuns whom she visited at Lake Tana. Given the nature of her work, it is imperative that she should explain whether she provided a consent form in the local language that was given to participants to sign, whether they were given full information on how the research would benefit them and in what way their manuscripts and personal photographs would be used, whether they were informed or asked about the existence of same-sex relationships in monasteries, whether they were asked for their own understandings of the text, and so on. It is clear that her participants have not been respected, with photographs of the nuns and their living conditions reproduced in an invasive and disrespectful manner.

Most concerning, Belcher also freely states that she did not fully disclose the nature of her research to the local scholars who were consulted, saying that she and Selamawit Mecca “asked Ethiopian scholars about the passage without hinting at our own thoughts” (2015, p. xxx). How did the scholars provide informed consent for this research? Belcher may argue that her research is of minimal risk and is therefore exempt under Princeton University’s guidelines. However, as these guidelines state,

If the research involves deceiving the subjects regarding the nature or purposes of the research, this exemption is not applicable unless the subject authorizes the deception through a prospective agreement to participate in research in circumstances in which the subject is informed that he or she will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature or purposes of the research (Princeton Research Integrity and Assurance 2013, p. 6).

Belcher is aware of the power imbalance between herself and local scholars, as she notes that her presence as an American could “skew” the answer (2015, p. xxx), but appears to think it is acceptable to conduct interviews without full disclosure. After conducting her research in this way, she discarded the information she gathered

deceptively and portrayed the informants through her writings as biased. These practices show that the local people are not treated with respect as autonomous individuals.

This opens up questions about whether the participants have benefited or been protected from harm in the conduct of this research. The second requirement of the Belmont Report is beneficence: the research should maximize benefits for the research participants and the society. It should also avoid or minimize risk to the participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects 1979). The definition of harm, according to Princeton University, is “anything that has negative effect on the welfare of research participants; the nature of the harm may be social, behavioral, psychological, physical, economic, legal, or reputational” (Princeton Research Integrity and Assurance 2013, p. 2).

In Belcher’s work, locals who disagree with her have been represented as homophobic or ignorant about the truth behind their own books. The monastery has been represented as a “sexualized environment”, an image that presents a potential pretext for people in power to disrupt their lives, as argued above. There have been no benefits to the monks, nuns or local scholars. In the letter the church sent to Belcher, they stated that they were happy if the holy message of Woletta Petros could reach a wider audience through Belcher’s work, a potential benefit. However, this benefit was not realized, as they state how hurt they were by Belcher’s distortion of Woletta Petros’ legacy. This misinterpretation of Woletta Petros impacts the telling of Ethiopian history, but it has also directly hurt church scholars, monks and nuns who have seen their religious beliefs represented in a way that does not align with how they understand themselves and their legacy.

The only people who have benefited from this research appears to be Belcher, Kleiner and their research associates. This relates to the

Belmont Report's third requirement, which is justice or fairness in the distribution of research benefits. The researcher is required to show the benefits of the research to the participants. "The application of justice means that investigators must not offer potentially beneficial research only to some groups, nor select only some accessible, vulnerable, or disadvantaged groups for research that involves high risk or little prospect of direct benefit" (Committee on Federal Research Regulations and Reporting Requirements 2016).

Despite the intrusive practices she demonstrated in her research, Belcher provides little to no information to her readers on the steps she took to address ethical concerns. Furthermore, there is the whole question of the use of inaccurately interpreted and deliberately ignored data, how wrong information is used to distort the story of living persons, and whether this amounts to serious academic misconduct or fabrication in research. She, Kleiner and Princeton University should be made to answer these concerns.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that Belcher and Kleiner have mistranslated and misinterpreted the Hagiography of Saint Woletta Petros, often by inserting words that do not exist in the Ge'ez original. Belcher has used these insertions to interpret Woletta Petros as a lustful nun whose visceral disgust for heterosexual sex causes her to violently call on God to kill her own followers. They also reproduce stereotypes about Africa as a place of poor sanitation and disease, using western medical speculation as an explanation for the text's references to spiritual afflictions. Contemporary ethnic politics have been inserted into the interpretation in a way that reproduces negative racial binaries, and relies heavily on the colonial racialization of African identities and western color prejudice that does not exist in Ethiopia. Many of these interpretations have occurred due to a deliberate disregard of the

views of indigenous scholars and removing the text from its 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian monastic context.

My analysis has drawn on my fieldwork and interviews with local Ethiopian scholars, and my own expertise as an Ethiopian scholar trained in both the western and Ethiopian traditional education systems. All Ge'ez translations have been checked with scholars trained in the traditional education system where Ge'ez is studied for five years and *Tirguamme* (interpretation) is studied for seven years.

In the school of *Tirguamme*, the principle that drives the scholars' work is ንብብ፡ ይቀትል፡ ወትርጓሜ፡ የሃድ። It means, "reading kills, but meaning heals." It is meant to suggest the importance of contextual interpretation and understanding rather than mere reading. The meanings we give to things are important. Belcher stripped local meanings from her interpretation of Woletta Petros, not just in using a western lens but in the practice of ignoring the local explanations offered to her.

It is academically disingenuous to disregard the testimony of local people with the decades-long training required to translate the work Belcher and her research associates cannot read. This projection of local experts as homophobic and therefore unreliable has resulted in poor scholarship and a misleading translation, but, more importantly, the corruption of the history of one of Ethiopia's most holy women. It speaks to the long-held dominance of white scholars in the field of African studies, and to the ongoing and pervasive racism in academic institutions where this practice goes unchallenged. It is colonial scholarship in action, with the white expert the only authority on black history and local informants carefully selected to corroborate her western account at the expense of vulnerable local people with the appropriate expertise.

Clearly, Belcher's errors, her lack of Ge'ez knowledge and her propensity to ignore local people disqualifies her from translating and interpreting Ethiopian manuscripts. Most concerning, however, is that her continuous misrepresentation and misinterpretation of this important religious text does not seem to come from her lack of Ge'ez knowledge or a proper understanding of Ethiopian monastic life. Rather, it seems to be a deliberate distortion of the facts.

Many Ge'ez manuscripts were initially looted in a context of unequal power relationships and brought to Princeton University. Subjecting these texts to unqualified and disingenuous individuals and producing knowledge that is antagonistic to the original owners is morally reprehensible. Currently, however, Belcher is writing a book on *The Teamere Mariam* (contracted to Princeton University Press as *The Ladder of Heaven*) and translating *The Kebra Nagast* with Michael Kleiner. *The Teamere Mariam* contains the most venerated stories of the Virgin Mary. The stories and the images in the texts are produced within an Ethiopian indigenous lens and are often read at Mass and holy celebrations. Mary's stories are seen as sacred as holy communion, so church goers who do not have holy communion<sup>13</sup> still feel blessed from having heard her stories. *The Kebra Nagast* is a national epic that tells the story of how the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia as God's chosen holy land and established the Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopian rulers. It was so important to the status of kings that when it was stolen by the British at the Battle of Maqdala in 1868, Emperor Yohannis IV pleaded with Queen Victoria, saying:

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13 In Ethiopian services, followers need to prepare and feel spiritually ready to take holy communion. As a result, many abstain from holy communion, believing themselves not worthy until they have appropriately carried out confession rites and prayed. Only children and those who live spiritual lives (monks and nuns) have holy communion at every service.

There is a book called 'Kebra Nagast' which contains the law of the whole of Ethiopia and the names of the shums (chiefs), and churches, and provinces are in the book. I pray you find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country people will not obey my orders without it (qtd. in Isaac 1971).

These are extremely important books to Ethiopian spirituality and, in the case of *The Kebra Nagast*, to the very formation of Ethiopia as a country. Belcher does not appear interested in genuinely translating these sacred books. For instance, from the hundreds of stories in *The Teamere Mariam*, she chose the theme of cannibalism for a recent article (2019). She also seems interested in exploring sexual themes in *The Teamere Mariam* (2016, p. 41). Her scholarship on Ethiopia employs racist stereotypes that have historically been imposed on black bodies: barbarism, dirtiness, disease, cannibalism and lustfulness.

She also focuses on the ethnicization of people's identities where ethnic references were not given. As noted, Belcher (with Kleiner) is currently translating *The Kebra Nagast*. In an article she published on this text, she wrote the following about who Ethiopians were:

To avoid confusion, I am referring to the peoples of the Kəbrä Nägäst as Ethiopians, although this is ahistorical and a conflation of various ethnicities and traditions. The peoples discussed in this paper are better called the Habasha or highland Ethiopians (2009).

As discussed earlier, Belcher is following what Kebede calls the Semitic thesis, which has been produced based on the colonial library European orientalist's produced about Africa (Mudimbe 1988; Kebede 2003). This literature denies Africans of any originality and authenticity or ownership of knowledge. The genealogy of this view relates to the racial theories about Africa in the works of Hegel, Gobineau, Speke, and Seligman. Rossini, Budge and their Ethiopian followers applied this view when interpreting Ethiopian manuscripts. Ancient texts, including *The Kebra Nagast*, never

portray Ethiopia in terms of dividing the people based on ethnic identities (Isaac 2013; Levine 2000). Belcher's interpretation follows the method of inventing African identities by essentializing linguistic and cultural diversities and turning them into antagonistic and tribalist histories. This is colonial scholarship disguised as critical and progressive.

I believe in academic freedom so long as it does not harm the freedom of others. Sadly, in the case of Belcher and Kleiner, "academic freedom" is a disguised privilege to reinvent the other with inferior qualities. It includes the freedom to abuse, degrade and misrepresent black people who have no access or right to challenge the misinterpretations and mistranslations of their identities and histories. It is a license for the enslavement of the African mind by looting African intellectual assets, controlling the system of knowledge production and denying opportunities for alternative viewpoints.

We must also examine how power relationships operate in the conduct of research. What ethics clearance did Belcher obtain to conduct fieldwork where she handles holy manuscripts and photographs local people? Did such clearance consider how white privilege operates in this environment and was full and informed consent obtained from the two nuns whose identifiable information, including names and photographs, were published and distributed through Belcher's work?

Furthermore, there is a larger question here that speaks to how academia wishes to move beyond its colonial past. We must ask ourselves why unqualified white people are continually allowed to be the authors of black history. We should ask if the reverse would be acceptable. Would a black African who could not read Latin or English be permitted to translate some of the west's most holy books? Would they be given funding, tenure and the status of expert? The answer, simply, is no. In a time when people are

demanding that black lives matter, we in the academy must demand that black voices matter too. The time has come for Africans to tell their own stories to the world.

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### Appendix I

The phrase እንዘ ... ይትማርዓ በበይናቲሆን which Belcher and Kleiner misinterpreted as “being lustful with each other” still features in current reproductions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Gedle Wolete Petros.

፫፩ ገድለ ቅድስት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ ዘእሑድ

ዳግመ ወትቤሎ አንሰ እብለከ ምሕረተ እግዚአብሔር ውለቱ ወኢኮነ መቅሠፈተ እፎ አንተ ትትቃወመኒ ይእዜ ወትብል መቅሠፍት ውእቱ ወይቤላ አባ ዘሐዋርያት እስኩ ንግርኒ ወአይድዕኒ ዘንተ ምሥጢረ ከመ እእመን ቃላኪ ወትቤሎ እምነ ቅድስት ወቡርክት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ አንሰ ኢይነግረከ ዳዕሙ አእምር ወእመን በልብከ ከመ ምሕረተ እግዚአብሔር ውለቱ ወይቤላ ውእቱኒ አንሰ ኢየአምን ለእመ ኢያይዳዕክኒ ጥዩቀ አምሕላኪ በእግዚአብሔር ከመ ትንግርኒ ወእምዘ ከሠተት ሎቱ እምነ ቅድስት ወቡርክት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ ወትቤሎ እመሰ አገበርከኒ ስማዕ እንግርክ ወኮነ ጊዜ ምሴት እንዘ እነብር ውስተ ቤት አንጻረ ፍሳት ርኢክዎን አነ ለደናግል እንዘ ይትጋፍዓ ወጃትማርዓ በበይናቲሆን አሐቲ ምስለ አሐቲ ወሶቤሃ ነደ ልብዩ ወአጋዝኩ እትዋቀስ ምስለ እግዚአብሔር ወእቤሎ ቦኑ አንበርከኒ ሊተ ከመ ታርእዮኒ ዘንተ ወይእዜኒ እስእለከ ወእስተብቀዓክ ከመ ትንሣእ እምነየ ዘወሀብከኒ አንተ ማገፀተክ ወእመእኮ ንሥእ ለነፍስየ ይኒይሰኒ እትሐጉል አነ እምእርአይ እንዘ ይትሐጉላ እማንቱ አዋልድዮ።



፫፪ ወሶቤሃ መጽእ ኅቤየ ወናዘዘኒ ወይቤላኒ ኢትፍርሃ አንሰ ሰማዕኩ ጸሎተኪ ወእገብር ፈቃደኪ ወሀለዋ ምስሌሁ ጂ አእማት ጸሊማት ወጂ ውርዘዋት ወገዚፋት ወአሐቲ አረጊት ወይቤላኒ ንሥኢ እላንቱ አእማት ይፈጽማ ፈቃደኪ ወሥርዒዮን ለጂ በበአብያቲሆን ለአጋት ለሰአሐቲ አሐቲ ወአረጊትሰ ትንበር ኅቤኪ ወኮነ በከመ ይቤላኒ ወበእንተዝ እብለከ ምሕረተ እግዚአብሔር ውእቱ ኢትብልኑ አንተ ከመዝ ወይቤላ ውእቱኒ ዝንቱሰ ምሕረተ እግዚአብሔር ውለቱ ወበውእቱ መዋዕል ሞቱ የወጃወጂ እምነአጋው ወአጋት ወፈለሱ እምፃማ ውስተ ዕረፍት ወእምሐዘን ውስተ ትፍሥሕት ጸሎቶሙ ወበረከቶሙ የሃሉ ምስለ ፍቁርሙ ሳላመ ዓለም አሜን ።

፫፫ ተስእሎ ዘከመ ተስእልዋ ለእምነ ቅድስት ወቡርክት ወለተ ጴጥሮስ በእንተ እሉ አጋው ወአጋት እለ ሞቱ ዘከመ ይድንኑ ወይትሐጉሉ ወይቤልዋ እስኩ ንግርኒ ከመ ይትናዘዝ ልብነ ወኢይናፍቅ እሉ ኩሎሙ እለ ሞቱ ይጸድቁኑ ኅቡረ





የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን  
መንበረ ፓትርያርክ ጠቅላይ ጽ/ቤት  
Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church  
Patriarchate Head Office

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As one of the Scholars who are trying to learn Geez and work with it, it is our hope that you recognized how the language needs thorough knowledge and care to freely understand the message even a word carries in a context. We wish you could contact Scholars of the language before you rich at this conclusion and reveal it to the world.

Therefore, I strongly ask you to correct yourself and stop talking about this issue which cannot represent the monastic life and values of our Church. We demand your equal effort to correct the damage you brought into the ascetic image of our Church by giving remedial lectures and publishing counteractive articles. For the rest, it is into your academic freedom to do researches and publish articles on our ecclesiastical knowledge and culture.

I pray that God richly bless you.

Cc: to EOTC Archdiocese of Washington DC and its surroundings

Washington DC

*[Handwritten signature]*



ለባ ማተያክ  
የጠቅላይ ቤተ ክህነት ሥነ ሥራ እስኪያገኙ  
የወላይታ ኮንታና ጳውሎስ ለሀገሩ ሰብስቶ  
ሊቀ ጳጳስ  
Abba Matewos  
G/M of the E.O.T.C. Archbishop of  
Wolaita Korta & Dawuro Dioceses

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P.O. Box 1283  
TEL. 011 155 00 98

አዲስ አበባ  
ADDIS ABABA

## About the Author

Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, Australia. His multidisciplinary research focuses on the critical study of development, education, history and law, and the importance of lived experience and epistemic diversity for decolonial and sustainable futures. His teaching practice is informed by the importance of indigenous knowledges, diverse epistemologies, histories, cultures and critical theories. He teaches postgraduate courses face-to-face and online and has won university and industry awards for his teaching, research and creative writing. He also researches African experiences and Ethiopian traditions, and writes creatively on belonging and diasporic lives. He taught law and worked with grassroots organizations in Ethiopia before completing his Doctorate in Australia.

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