

## THE HISTORY OF LEPROSY IN ETHIOPIA TO 1935

by

RICHARD PANKHURST\*

ETHIOPIA has suffered since time immemorial from a high incidence of leprosy, and is indeed said to have been one of the countries most seriously affected by the disease.<sup>1</sup> Its existence there is well documented in the rich travel literature of the area.<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese priest, Francisco Alvares, the first foreign observer to write a comprehensive account of the realm, testified in the sixteenth century that it was inhabited by “many lepers”.<sup>3</sup> The more numerous observers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicated that little had changed in the intervening years. Nathaniel Pearce, a British resident in the north of the country, declared in 1831 that infection was “very common among the lower class”, and that there were “thousands who had lost their fingers and toes”, and whose bodies were “covered all over with large white spots”.<sup>4</sup> A decade or so later, the French Scientific Mission reported that the disease was “very common” in the north, while the German explorer Eduard Rüppell, also writing of that area, described persons with bad sores on their feet, the bones of which gradually degenerated so that their toes fell off.<sup>5</sup> Travellers to the southern provinces told similar tales. Rochet d’Héricourt, a French visitor to Shoa, referred to leprosy in the 1840s as one of the most common complaints (though he admitted that he had not himself seen many lepers).<sup>6</sup> In Ankobar, the British diplomatic mission of 1841–2, which treated 717 patients, found that twenty-six were suffering from the disease.<sup>7</sup> Numerous cases were also reported later in the century by other observers, who noted significant regional variations: the French traveller Borelli, the Italian missionary Massaia, and an Italian physician De Castro all stated that leprosy was most widespread in Gojam, a province

\*Richard Pankhurst, BSc, PhD, 22 Lawn Road, London NW3 2XR.

<sup>1</sup> P. Mérab, *Impressions d’Éthiopie (L’Abyssinie sous Ménélik II)*, Paris, H. Libert [later E. Leroux], 1921–29, vol. 1, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies*, Cambridge University Press, 1961, vol. 2, p. 514.

<sup>4</sup> N. Pearce, *The life and adventures of Nathaniel Pearce*, London, H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831, vol. 1, p. 297.

<sup>5</sup> T. Lefebvre, *Voyage en Abyssinie*, Paris, A. Bertrand, 1845–9, vol. 1, p. 264, vol. 2, p. 366; E. Rüppell, *Reise in Abyssinien*, Frankfurt, Siegmund Schmerber, vol. 1, p. 208. See also, E. Combes and M. Tamisier, *Voyage en Abyssinie*, Paris, Louis Desessart, 1848, vol. 1, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. X. Rochet d’Héricourt, *Voyage de la côte orientale de la Mer Rouge, dans le pays d’Adel et le royaume de Choa*, Paris, A. Bertrand, 1841, p. 307.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kirk, ‘Medical report on the Kingdom of Shoa’, *Trans. Med. Phys. Soc. Bombay*, 1885, 7: 18.

in the north-west,<sup>8</sup> while another Frenchman, Soleillet, believed it was much more common among the Amharas of the north than the Oromos, or Gallas, of the south<sup>9</sup> – a view also shared in the early twentieth century by Dr Mérab, the perceptive Georgian proprietor of Addis Ababa's first pharmacy.<sup>10</sup>

The extent of leprosy impressed most foreign visitors.<sup>11</sup> It was described as “very prevalent” around Lake Tana<sup>12</sup> and in the west,<sup>13</sup> and common in most towns, including Desseye to the north,<sup>14</sup> Gore to the west,<sup>15</sup> and Harar to the south-east, where Dr Mérab saw about a hundred lepers,<sup>16</sup> but as relatively rare at the old capital, Gondar.<sup>17</sup>

The first tentative estimate of the country's leper population was made early in this century by Capuchin missionaries at Harar, who put it at 8,000.<sup>18</sup> A decade later, Mérab suggested a substantially higher figure. Arguing that there must have been between one and three lepers per thousand of the population, he estimated that there were at least twenty thousand among the country's ten million inhabitants. In support of this view, he asserted that some of his Ethiopian friends, who believed that many lepers concealed their disease, estimated that there were between five and ten per thousand, or a total of at least 50,000. The Emperor's interpreter, Hayla Maryam, had indeed spoken of no less than 100,000 but Mérab considered this an exaggeration.<sup>19</sup> Mérab's conservative figure of 30,000 was nevertheless considerable, for it compared with an estimated 130,000 in all India, 40,000 in Japan, 15,000 in Indochina, and 8,000 in Madagascar.<sup>20</sup>

#### TERMINOLOGY

Leprosy had been known in Ethiopia, since early times, as *lamts*. This term is found in the Bible, which was translated into Ge'ez, a Semitic language aptly termed the “Latin of Ethiopia”, between the fourth and sixth century,<sup>21</sup> and also appears in

<sup>8</sup> J. Borelli, *Ethiopie méridionale*, Paris, Ancienne Maison Quantin, 1890, p. 247; G. Massaia, *I miei trentacinque anni di missione nell' alta Etiopia*, Rome, Tipografia Poliglotta di Propaganda Fide, 1885–1895, vol. 2, p. 172, vol. 9, p. 62; L. De Castro, *Nella terra dei negus*, Milan, Fratelli Treves, 1915, vol. 1, p. 372. On the high incidence of leprosy in Gojam, see also I. Pearce, *Letters of health*, Addis Ababa, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 52; and H. Schneider, *Leprosy and health problems in Haraghe, Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, [n.p.], 1975, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Borelli, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 247; P. Soleillet, *Voyages en Éthiopie (Janvier 1882 – Octobre 1884)*, Rouen, E. Cagniard, 1886, p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> C. Annaratone, *In Abissinia*, Rome, E. Voghera, 1914, pp. 485, 501; C. F. Rey, *Unconquered Abyssinia*, London, Seeley Service, 1923, p. 43; G. Masucci, ‘Etnoiatria etiopica’, *Rassegna Sociale dell' Africa Italiana*, 1940, 3: p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> A. J. Hayes, *The sources of the Blue Nile*, London, Smith, Elder, 1905, pp. 103, 105.

<sup>13</sup> C. W. Bulpett, *A picnic party in wildest Africa*, London, Edward Arnold, 1907, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> D. Brielli, V. Calò, and A. Bevilacqua, *Note di patologia etiopica*, Rome, 1913, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> E. J. Bartleet, *In the land of Sheba*, Birmingham, Cornish Bros, 1934, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> Brielli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, note 14 above, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> J. W. Jennings and C. Addison, *With the Abyssinians in Somaliland*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1905, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> P. Mérab, *Médecins et médecine en Éthiopie*, Paris, Vigot, 1912, p. 130; *idem*, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 162.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> J. Ludolf, *Lexicon aethiopico-latinum*, London, Thomas Roycroft, 1661, cols. 15, 475; A. Dillmann, *Lexicon linguae aethiopicae*, Leipzig, T. O. Weigel, 1865, col. 37. Both works cite Biblical passages employing the term. On the translation, see E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 31–62.

### *The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935*

several Ge'ez medieval texts. The word is likewise current in Amharic,<sup>22</sup> the language of the central provinces and of the modern State, as well as in Tegranya, spoken in the north of the country, where the disease is called *lamtsi*.<sup>23</sup> Leprosy was, however, often designated by more general terms, also applicable to elephantiasis or other serious skin diseases. Use was thus made, in Ethiopian literature as well as in common parlance, of such words as *qwesalä sega* or *sega dawé*, i.e. ulcerated or diseased *sega* (body). and even more ambiguously, of *talaq dawé*, i.e. major disease.<sup>24</sup> Leprosy was, on the other hand, frequently referred to more explicitly as *qumtena*, an Amharic word derived from the verb, to amputate. This served to describe persons who had lost limbs, either on account of the disease, or, in former days, as a punishment for serious crime.<sup>25</sup> A similar concept probably lies behind the Galla, or Oromo, word for leprosy, *kurchi*, the etymology of which poses linguistic problems but may well have its origin in the verb, to cut or break.<sup>26</sup>

#### BIBLICAL IDEAS AND VALUES

Ethiopian Christians paid considerable attention to statements on leprosy (*lamtsi*) in Holy Writ.<sup>27</sup> They were thus well aware of the Old Testament belief that lepers were “unclean”, as stated in God’s injunction to Moses and Aaron in Leviticus 13, 44–46: “He is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall surely pronounce him unclean; his plague is in his head. . . . All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his dwelling be.” And the similar ideas in the Lord’s command to Moses, in Numbers 5, 2–3, that the children of Israel should: “put out of the camp every leper. . . . Both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them, that they defile not their camp, . . .”

<sup>22</sup> C. W. Isenberg, *Dictionary of the Amharic language*, London, Church Missionary Society, 1841, vol. 1, p. 7, vol. 2, p. 123; Antoine d’Abbadie, *Dictionnaire de la langue amariñña*, Paris, F. Vieweg, 1881, col. 23; I Guidi, *Vocabolario amarico-italiano*, Rome, Casa Editrice Italiana, 1901, col. 19; Brielli *et al.*, op. cit., note 14 above, p. 88; J. Baeteman, *Dictionnaire amarigna français*, Dire Dawa, Imprimerie Saint Lazare, 1929, col. 12; W. Leslau, *Concise Amharic dictionary*, Weisbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1976, pp. 8, 395.

<sup>23</sup> Francesco da Bassano, *Vocabolario tigray-italiano*, Rome, Casa Editrice Italiana C. de Luigi, 1918, cols. 19–20.

<sup>24</sup> S. Strelcyn, *Médecine et plantes d’Éthiopie*, Warsaw, 1968, Naples, 1937, vol. 1, p. 111; d’Abbadie, op. cit., note 22 above, cols. 276, 789; Guidi, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 193; Baeteman, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 395; da Bassano, op. cit., note 23 above, cols. 792–793, 1178; Brielli *et al.*, op. cit., note 14 above, p. 88; Kidana Wald Keflé, *Mashafa sawawew wages wamazgaba qalat hadis*, Addis Ababa, Artistik matamyá bét, 1948 Ethiopian calendar, p. 454.

<sup>25</sup> Isenberg, op. cit., note 22 above, vol. 1, p. 71; d’Abbadie, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 261; Guidi, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 251; Brielli *et al.*, op. cit., note 14 above, p. 88; Baeteman, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 387; Leslau, op. cit., note 22 above, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> E. C. Foot, *A Galla-English English-Galla dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, 1913, pp. 38, 86; *Vocabulaire français, oromo, abyssin*, Dire Dawa, Imprimerie Saint Lazare, p. 67; Gaetano da Thiene, *Dizionario della lingua galla*, Harar, Vicariato apostolico, 1939, pp. 79, 285; G. B. Gragg, *Oromo dictionary*, East Lansing, Mich., Michigan State University African Studies Center, 1982, p. 337.

<sup>27</sup> For Biblical attitudes to leprosy, see J. Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic medicine*, New York, Sanhedrin Press, 1978, pp. 324–339; H. Müller-Bütow, *Lepra. Ein medizinhistorischer Überblick unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der mittelalterlichen arabischen Medizin*, Frankfurt, Peter D. Lang, 1981, pp. 38–41. It is important to note that “leprosy” in the Hebrew Old Testament should not be identified with modern leprosy, but the words used for it by the Greek translators and the fact that it in part was a loathsome skin disease made such an identification easily acceptable within the late Christian and Jewish traditions.

This stern approach to leprosy was, however, mitigated in Ethiopian eyes by Christ's miracle, described in St Matthew 8, 2–3 (and St Mark 1, 40–42 and Luke 5, 12–13), in which: “. . . there came a leper, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. and immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”

Such texts made a deep impact in Ethiopia, where they found their way into numerous legends. One, embodied in both the Synaxarium and the Miracles of the Holy Virgin and illustrated in numerous manuscripts, tells how Mercurius, a bishop afflicted with leprosy, was reminded by St Zacharias that, because the Bible had called it “unclean”, the priesthood was “not fitting” for him as long as the disease was upon him. Mercurius thereupon went to a church dedicated to St Mary, where he prayed before her picture, after which, in a dream, he saw her hand rubbing his body, and, on awaking, found himself “cleansed”.<sup>28</sup>

Miraculous cures of leprosy (*lamts*) are a recurring theme in Ethiopic literature. They are attributed to Christ,<sup>29</sup> the Virgin Mary<sup>30</sup> and to various saints. St Zacharias is thus reported to have healed a deacon of leprosy by ordering him to fast and pray,<sup>31</sup> Abba Macarias to have healed a female leper by letting her touch his face,<sup>32</sup> and Abba Bifamon a blind leper by smearing the latter's eyes and body with his saintly blood.<sup>33</sup> St George of Lydda is said to have cleansed a leper by anointing him with oil from a sanctuary lamp,<sup>34</sup> while Abba Matthew is held to have healed, and later baptized, a “pagan” leper woman by smiting the earth with his staff and making the sign of a cross on the ground.<sup>35</sup> Cures, it was believed, could be achieved only if sinners repented. One leper woman, guilty of both incest and murder, learnt this to her cost, for though she washed in holy water by a church, and appealed to St Basil, she did so in vain: the Synaxarium claims that the earth was rent and swallowed her up, because, without any change of heart, she had “dared to sacrifice in uncleanness to the Church of our holy Lady the Virgin Mary”.<sup>36</sup>

Leprosy, though susceptible to miraculous cures, was also thought to be called down on wrongdoers. Elisha's curse of his servant Gehazi, reported in 2 Kings 5, 27, was thus repeated in the Ethiopian Synaxarium, which tells how the latter, “his sons and all his seed” became lepers.<sup>37</sup> Another legend held that the Emperor Diocletian, while destroying a sanctuary, was splashed by a drop of its holy oil, whereupon leprosy broke out on that spot, and caused him to die.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>28</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The miracles of the blessed Virgin Mary*, London, W. Griggs, 1900, text, pp. 36–37, translation, pp. 64–65; *idem*, *The book of the saints of the Ethiopian Church*, Cambridge University Press, 1928, vol. 1, pp. 241–242; *idem*, *One hundred and ten miracles of our lady Mary*, London, Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 71, see also p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *Baralam and Yewasef*, Cambridge University Press, 1923, text, p. 38, translation p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> Budge, *One hundred and ten miracles*, note 28 above, p. 301.

<sup>31</sup> Budge, *The book of the saints*, note 28 above, vol. 1, p. 242.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 197.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 554.

<sup>34</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *George of Lydda*, London, Luzac, 1930, pp. 71, 130, and plate 34.

<sup>35</sup> Budge, *The book of the saints*, note 28 above, vol. 2, p. 375, vol. 4, p. 1190. For the Ge'ez text see also I. Guidi, ‘Le synaxaire éthiopien’, *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1907, 1: 643, 149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 1022.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 1019.

<sup>38</sup> Budge, *op. cit.*, note 34 above, pp. 73, 146.

Manuscript illuminations, mainly in miracles of the Holy Virgin dating from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, reveal that Ethiopian artists depicted leprosy in three different ways. Sometimes the victim was painted with dark patches on his body (as in British Library Orient. MSS. 508, 510, 590, 639, 647, 649 and 653), and sometimes with white ones (as in BL Orient. MSS. 639, 641, 645), but in other cases almost the entire body was white (as in BL Orient. MSS. 520, 635 and Add. MS. 24,188). An even more graphic representation is found in an early nineteenth-century manuscript (BL Orient. MS. 718) of the life of the medieval saint-emperor Lalibala, who is seen as a child with a group of lepers. The latter have dark areas on their skin, and the victim in the foreground has lost all his fingers and toes.<sup>39</sup>

#### ETHIOPIAN ATTITUDE TO LEPROSY

Legends and beliefs, such as the above, reflected and helped to mould the Ethiopian attitude to leprosy. Perhaps because of belief in the possibility of miraculous cures, it seems to have been considerably more tolerant<sup>40</sup> than that of the West, where “total ostracism” of lepers in the early medieval period had been followed by their rigid detention in “houses of Lazarus”.<sup>41</sup>

The Ethiopian attitude to the disease can be seen in the country’s traditional code, the *Fetha Nagast* (Law of the Kings), which took an essentially empirical and humanitarian view of the disabling disease. That text declared that a leper could not serve as a priest, but stated that this was not on account of his being “unclean” – the concept found, it will be recalled, in both Leviticus and the Synaxarium – for such was “not the case” once he was baptized, but because, if he officiated, he would cause priests to be despised, presumably on account of the opprobrium with which the disease was popularly regarded.<sup>42</sup> A leper was likewise excluded from being a patriarch, not, we are left to assume, by reason of any uncleanness on his part, but because his complaint would prevent him from “associating with people under his jurisdiction”.<sup>43</sup> It was similarly stated that a judge had to be free of leprosy, but, again, only because the infection would “keep away many people who have [to come] to see him”.<sup>44</sup> As for marriage, the code rejected the idea that leprosy was a disablement, and affirmed that whether or not to marry a leper was a decision entirely for the would-be spouse.<sup>45</sup> In cases where the disease developed after marriage, however, two

<sup>39</sup> British Library, Orient MSS. 508 f. 34v., 510 f. 19v., 20r. 520 f. 219v., 220r., 590 f. 13r., 635 f. 101v., 639 f. 124v., 125r., 641 f. 128v., 129r., 641 f. 128v., 129r., 645 f. 94v., 647 f. 72r., 649 f. 83r., 653 f. 60r., 645 f. 94v., 647 f. 72r., 649 f. 83r., 673 f. 60 r. 60r., Additional MS. 24,188 f. 84v. Budge, *The miracles of the blessed virgin*, note 28 above, plates 69 and 70; B. L. Orient, MS, 718/39v. See also E. A. Budge, *Amulets and superstitions*, London, Oxford University Press, 1930, pp. 478–80, O. Jager, ‘Ethiopian manuscript paintings’, *Ethiopia Observer*, 1960, 4: 364, 366, 368–370; R. Pankhurst, ‘Some notes for a history of Ethiopian secular art’, *Ethiopia Observer*, 1966, 10: 44.

<sup>40</sup> Mérab, op. cit., note 19 above, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> A. S. Lyons and R. J. Petrucelli, *Medicine. An illustrated history*, New York, Abrahams, 1978, pp. 345, 388.

<sup>42</sup> Paulos Tzadua, *The Fetha Nagast. The law of the kings*, Addis Ababa, Faculty of Law, Haile Sellassie I University, 1968, p. 62; I. Guidi, *Il ‘Fetha Nagast’ or ‘Legislazione dei re’*, Roma, Tipografia della Casa Editrice Italiana, 1899, p. 106. See also, Ge’ez editions published by the Istituto Orientale, Naples, 1897, and Berhannena Selam Press, Addis Ababa, 1958 Ethiopian calendar.

<sup>43</sup> Tzadua, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 21; Guidi, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Tzadua, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 250; Guidi, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 428.

<sup>45</sup> Tzadua, op. cit., note 42 above, p. 137; Guidi, op. cit., p. 42 above p. 233.

different rulings were quoted. The first laid down that the appearance of infection did not entitle a healthy party to separate from a diseased husband or wife. The second ruling, which is described in the text as the better, stated that a man who wished to separate from a wife who had developed the disease could do so if he gave her a complete outfit and dowry, but if he did not wish to separate, he could live with her on condition that he provided her food, according to his means, "since what befell her was not by his or her will".<sup>46</sup>

The lack of segregation of lepers, implied in the *Fetha Nagast*, impressed Alvares, who claimed in the sixteenth century that persons afflicted with the disease did not "live away from the people", but with them. He added that there were, moreover, "many people" who "out of their devotion, wash them and tend their sores with their hands."<sup>47</sup> These statements are not confirmed by later observers. However, the early nineteenth-century French Saint Simonian travellers, Combes and Tamisier, commented on the humanity shown to lepers in Ethiopia, "These invalids, whom the Jews put outside the camp and who in Europe are excluded from society, communicate here with everyone. Those who have families remain with them, and, when a leper is rich, he never lacks servants." Lepers were seen at all festivities, and people displayed no reluctance at drinking from cups which had been used by them.<sup>48</sup> The Frenchmen claimed to have encountered a group of leper priests, with whom the village chief was on good terms, on occasion sharing the horns from which they had drunk.<sup>49</sup>

However, later nineteenth-century evidence suggests that lepers by then were often largely isolated from the rest of the society. The reason for this, according to Massaia, was that the disease was considered "dishonourable" not only for the victim, but also for his or her relatives to the seventh degree of consanguinity. The result was that lepers were supposed to avoid contact with healthy persons, even members of their own family, and had to remain in their own separate quarter, far removed from either towns or villages.<sup>50</sup>

Massaia's report is confirmed by other observers. Borelli noted that lepers "lived in groups separated from the rest of the inhabitants" and "married among themselves",<sup>51</sup> while the German traveller Rohlf's agreed that they could only approach within a certain distance of an ordinary settlement, and were then expected to make themselves known by calling out or other means. If they failed to keep the required distance, they rendered themselves liable to attack by any healthy member of society, and could even be killed. The latter statement is not, however, supported by other testimony and may have been the case only in Tigre province, where the segregation of lepers was perhaps stricter than elsewhere. That they were treated with some humanity is clear from Rohlf's statement that people, though avoiding unnecessary contacts with lepers, put out food or other alms for them to collect.<sup>52</sup> At Mandera, a

<sup>46</sup> Tzadua, *op. cit.*, note 42 above, p. 150; Guidi, *op. cit.*, note 42 above, p. 258.

<sup>47</sup> Beckingham and Huntingford, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, vol. 2, p. 514.

<sup>48</sup> Combes and Tamisier, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 1, p. 280.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 311.

<sup>50</sup> Massaia, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 9, p. 175. See also, Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Borelli, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 247

<sup>52</sup> G. Rohlf's, *Meine mission nach Abessinien*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1883, p. 291. For parallels elsewhere in Africa, see H. H. Scott, *A history of tropical medicine*, London, Edward Arnold, 1939, vol. 1, p. 611.

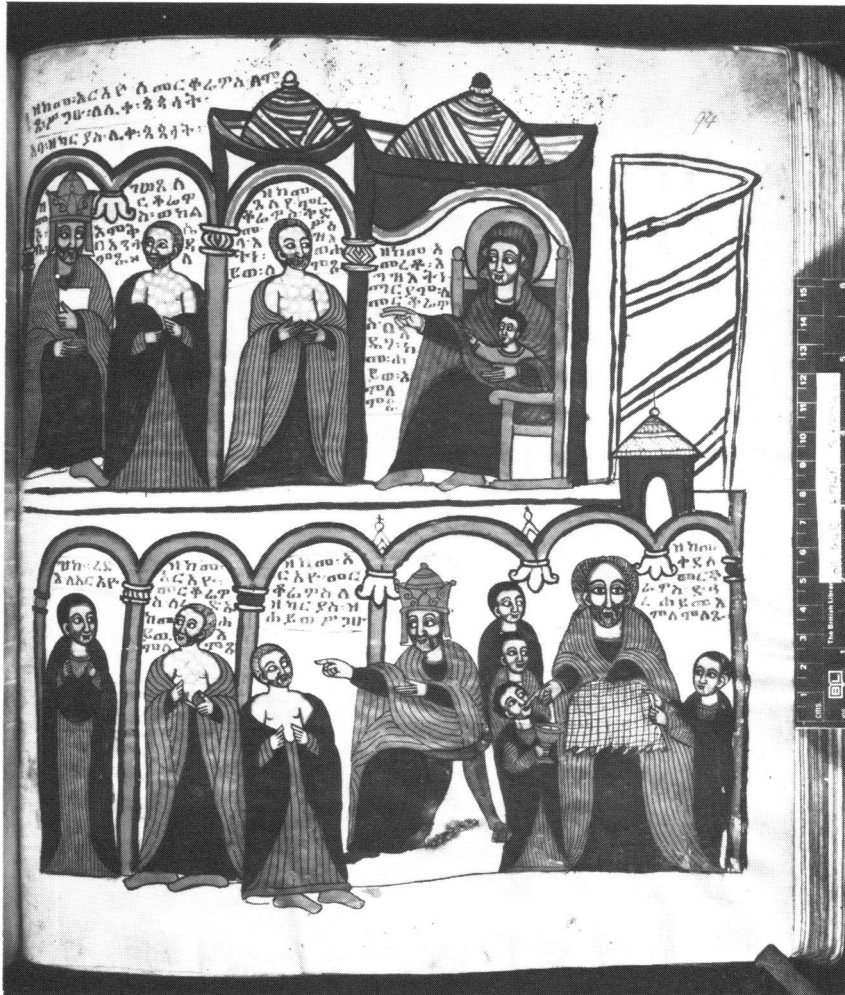


Figure 1. St Mary curing a leper depicted with white patches on the skin. From a seventeenth-century Ethiopian manuscript in the British Library (Or. 645).

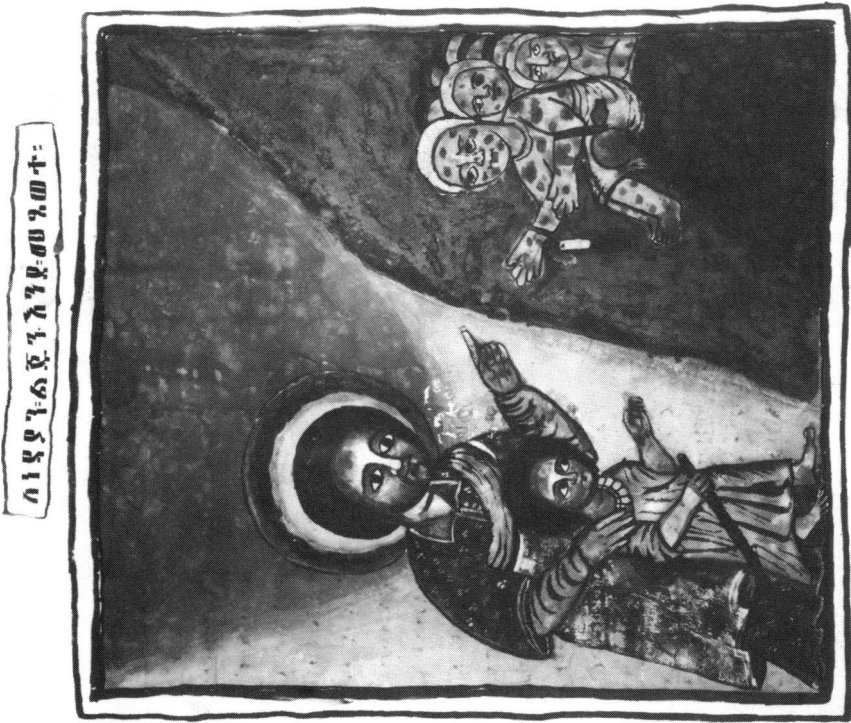


Figure 2. St Lailbala and a group of lepers shown without complete fingers and with dark patches on their skin. From an early nineteenth-century manuscript in the British Library (Or. 718).



Figure 3. An Ethiopian leper. From J. Borelli, *Éthiopie méridionale* (Paris, 1890).



## *The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935*

major commercial centre in the Muslim west of the country, there was in the late 1880s “a special isolated quarter to which lepers were relegated.”<sup>53</sup>

Lepers, though in large measure isolated from the rest of the population, were, Mérab insisted, never regarded as objects of horror, but rather of pity, even of sympathy, particularly among Christians who remembered Christ’s treatment of them.<sup>54</sup> They were therefore treated with toleration, and, to the surprise of many Western observers, were allowed to appear at court, as well as to beg with almost total impunity.

### LEPERS AT COURT

Ethiopian rulers, whose style of government tended to be paternalistic, raised no objection to the arrival at their courts of numerous lepers. Dajzmach Webe, the early nineteenth-century ruler of Tigre, used a leper monk as a messenger to the French traveller Arnauld d’Abbadie. The latter recalled that the man, a native of Gojam, had lost some of his fingers and toes, and observed in consequence that God was “taking his body bit by bit”.<sup>55</sup> King Sahla Selassie, the then ruler of Shoa, is said to have treated lepers with “especial charity”,<sup>56</sup> and frequently received them, and other unfortunates, at his palace. The British envoy Harris saw there the “miserable spectacle” of many “leprous” and “scrofulous” persons, besides others whose arms and legs had been amputated as a punishment for their misdeeds. This “horrible and revolting” mass of humanity was composed of “The old, the halt and the lame, the deaf, the noseless, and the dumb, the living dead in every shape and form”.<sup>57</sup> This is confirmed by Johnston, a British surgeon, who observed that on entering the palace compound he “passed, for about twenty yards, between two rows of noisy beggars, male and female, old, middle-aged, and young; who, leprous, scrofulous, and maimed, exhibited the most disgusting sores, and implored charity for the sake of Christ and the Holy Virgin.”<sup>58</sup>

Such sights were frequently seen at other royal capitals. The German missionary Stern, who declared that the great Emperor Téwodros, “from motives of mistaken piety”, encouraged the “social bane” of leper mendicancy, recalled that in the vicinity of the palace at Dabra Tabor there were “hordes of mendicants, clad and unclad, sound and diseased, some smitten with the curse of leprosy, others with virulent scrofula.” At the time of his arrival, they were lying in “promiscuous confusion”, but, on seeing him, they “all stretched out their withered hands, or ghoulishly came hobbling near, and in the name of *Kedus Michael*, *Tecla Haimanot*, or some other noted saint, almost forcibly demanded our charity.” This “mode of soliciting food or alms”,

<sup>53</sup> Borelli, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 166. Tolerance towards leprosy may also be seen in an Ethiopian couplet which punningly referred to Emperor Menilek as *yalāmsam* which could be interpreted either as “the leper” or “the sweetness of the world.” (*lamts*=leprosy; *alam*=world). I am indebted to Dr Bairu Tafla for drawing my attention to this pun.

<sup>55</sup> Arnauld d’Abbadie, *Douze ans dans la Haute-Éthiopie (Abyssinie)*, Paris, L. Hachette, 1868. vol. 1, pp. 547–548.

<sup>56</sup> Rochet d’Héricourt, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, p. 307.

<sup>57</sup> W. C. Harris, *The highlands of Aethiopia*, London, Longmans, 1844, vol. 2, pp. 246–247.

<sup>58</sup> C. Johnston, *Travels in southern Abyssinia*, London, J. Madden, 1844, vol. 2, p. 149.

he commented, was “in perfect harmony with the beggar’s trade”, and “a man’s Christianity” would indeed be “suspected” if he rejected such appeals for alms.<sup>59</sup>

Such sights were far from rare. A Greek physician, Nicholas Parisis, recalled that on visiting Dabra Tabor in 1885 he found that its 25,000 inhabitants included over a hundred lepers who had come from divers provinces to beg for alms. The majority were males between the ages of twenty and forty – he had in fact seen none below that age. Many of the men and women he saw had lost several of their fingers, and had flattened noses, which caused them to utter hoarse sounds that evoked in him a feeling of intense pity.<sup>60</sup>

Large groups of begging lepers were still common in the first decades of the twentieth century, when Mérab reported that no less than a thousand would sometimes assemble to receive alms from Emperor Menilek, founder of modern Ethiopia, and his chiefs.<sup>61</sup>

#### LEPERS WITH THE ARMY

The toleration afforded to lepers was such that large numbers of them traditionally accompanied rulers on campaign. Emperor Téwodros is said to have been “invariably” followed by “bands of professional *fakirs* on mules and horses” who “clog[ged] his steps and his ear with their perpetual whine”. This “crowd of beggars” seemed to Stern like a horde of “carriage-scenting hyenas”.<sup>62</sup>

This phenomenon continued, as noted by Soleillet and others, throughout the century.<sup>63</sup> Borelli, describing the return of Menilek’s army from Harar in 1887, said that it had among it many lepers who came to importune him during the night by chanting and displaying their “terrible malady”, with the loss of fingers, feet, and hands.<sup>64</sup> Menilek’s forces advancing on Adowa in 1896 are said by an Italian observer, Captain Moltado, to have consisted not only of warriors, but also of priests and lepers.<sup>65</sup>

#### LEPER MENDICANTS

Lepers, as well as persons suffering from other serious diseases, were, as Pearce noted early in the nineteenth century, “great beggars”.<sup>66</sup> This was confirmed by the French traveller Antoine d’Abbadie, who stated that they were known as *hamina*, and recalls that in Gondar in the 1830s he heard the “plaintive voice” of lepers, itinerant monks, and students, begging from door to door in the name of the saint of the day, Jesus Christ, Saint Takla Haymanot, or the Holy Virgin.<sup>67</sup> Blanc, a British

<sup>59</sup> H. A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia*, London, Wertheim, 1862, p. 121

<sup>60</sup> N. Parisis, *L’Abissinia*, Milan, Alfredo Brigola, 1888, pp. 136–137. See also, D. A. Zombaco, *La lèpre à travers les siècles et les contrées*, Paris, Masson, 1914, p. 392.

<sup>61</sup> Mérab, op. cit., note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 162.

<sup>62</sup> Stern, op. cit., note 59 above, pp. 84, 121.

<sup>63</sup> Soleillet, op. cit., note 9 above, p. 287.

<sup>64</sup> Borelli, op. cit., note 8 above, p. 247.

<sup>65</sup> R. P. Skinner, *Abyssinia of today*, London, Edward Arnold, 1906, p. 176.

<sup>66</sup> Pearce, op. cit., note 4 above, vol. 1, p. 297.

<sup>67</sup> Antoine d’Abbadie, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 6; Arnauld d’Abbadie, op. cit., note 55 above, vol. 1, pp. 169–170; Guidi, op. cit., note 22 above, col. 5. Antoine d’Abbadie recorded the text of a typical song by a leper who declares that, despite his poverty, God had taken his five fingers as tax. See Berhanou Abbebe,

### *The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935*

physician who travelled in the north-west in the 1860s, similarly reported that he was “at all hours of the day surrounded by an importuning crowd” of lepers, and persons suffering from syphilis, elephantiasis, and other complaints.<sup>68</sup>

Later in the century, Soleillet estimated that the lepers of Shoa numbered two or three hundred men, women, and children, who “lived in bands”, and travelled throughout the province. They were, he said, nocturnal visitors, who, spending the day in various isolated places, entered the villages at midnight, singing beautifully in chorus<sup>69</sup> – but, as we shall see, were often vociferous in their demands for charity.

Bands of lepers were also known in Tigre, where Rohlf's recorded that, expected to live in isolation from the rest of the population, they formed “companies of beggars”, and purchased old horses or nags, on which they rode far and wide. To awaken pity, they sent the most repulsive among them to beg. One group consisted of “truly pitiful creatures, hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked, some covered all over with spots, others with open wounds”, and rode on nags almost equally miserable. On his approach, the party halted at a distance, their hands raised towards him, gesticulating for alms. Never, he declared, had he seen so appalling, so frightful a sight.<sup>70</sup>

Leper beggars similarly abounded in early twentieth-century Addis Ababa. Boyes, a British traveller, said that they “were to be seen by the hundred . . . , many of them wrecks of humanity, some with arms or legs missing, and others suffering from all kinds of diseases.”<sup>71</sup> Christine Sandford, an Englishwoman long resident in the capital, asserted that with the “rapid growth of population” after World War I the prevalence of leprosy and other diseases increased.<sup>72</sup> Rey, at about this time, observed that such “remnants of humanity” were “allowed to wander about at will”. They were “great beggars, and when the disease gets too bad for them to walk they procure old ponies and ride from house to house soliciting alms. In this connection it is related that a well-known Greek, *not* a connoisseur of horse-flesh, bought a pony, and was surprised to find it continually stopping at houses *en route*. Inquiry elicited the fact that it had originally belonged to a leper and had so acquired its habit of house-to-house visits!”<sup>73</sup>

Begging lepers are said to have been treated with great consideration. Boyes, who felt that Ethiopian society treated them “rather generously”, reported that citizens going to market in Addis Ababa rarely passed them “without dropping something at their feet”, perhaps “a few sticks of firewood, something to eat, or whatever they were taking to market.”<sup>74</sup> Mérab took a similar view, observing that lepers were seldom turned away, for the Ethiopians were a “charitable and generous” people who always gave at least something, a piastre, a bullet (then much used in lieu of money), a piece

---

<sup>68</sup> ‘Hamina, distiques amhariques d’après une transcription d’Antoine d’Abbadie’, *Annales d’Ethiopie*, 1970, 8: 85–101.

<sup>69</sup> H. Blanc, *Narrative of captivity in Abyssinia*, London, Smith, Elder, 1868, p. 123.

<sup>70</sup> Soleillet, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, p. 287. For a modern novel referring to leper mendicants in Ethiopia see C. P. Murray, *Kulubi*, New York, Crown Publishers, 1973, especially pp. 387–389.

<sup>71</sup> Rohlf's, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, p. 290.

<sup>72</sup> J. Boyes, *My Abyssinian journey*, Nairobi, [n.p., n.d.], p. 19. See also, Guidi, *op. cit.*, note 22 above, col. 251.

<sup>73</sup> C. Sandford, *Ethiopia under Haile Selassie*, London, J. M. Dent, 1946, p. 63.

<sup>74</sup> Rey, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 48; *idem*, *The real Abyssinia*, London, Seeley Service, [n.d.], pp. 43–44.

<sup>75</sup> Boyes, *op. cit.*, note 71 above, p. 19.

of cabbage, a handful of barley, or a little cotton cloth.<sup>75</sup>

Lepers in traditional Ethiopia begged with almost total impunity. Pearce, in the early nineteenth century, claimed that they were sometimes thieves, and often “very insolent”, and would even abuse passing governors, who, in accordance with the custom of the country, would never take any repressive action against them.<sup>76</sup> Such statements were fully confirmed by later observers. Stern wrote of the “bluster and arrogance” of what he termed “indolent and often vice-tainted vagrants”,<sup>77</sup> while Soleillet described lepers begging every morning from house to house. They were scarcely ever refused, for they would return on the following night to curse any houses where they had been rejected. One of their most frequent threats was, “I will lie on your bed”.<sup>78</sup>

A vivid impression of the lepers’ exactions is provided by Massaia.<sup>79</sup> He recalled being accosted by a leper who insisted on being given, as of right, one of the neck-cords traditionally worn by Ethiopian Christians. “If you do not let me have it,” the beggar menacingly declared, “prepare yourself to sleep with me tonight.” The Italian, knowing the immunity enjoyed by lepers, felt it necessary to comply with this request, whereupon the beggar, with the same threat, demanded a dollar, which the missionary firmly refused. The leper then petulantly advanced on him, and attempted to caress him with his hands all covered in sores, and was only prevented from doing so by some local peasants, after which Massaia felt it expedient to make peace with his persecutor by presenting him with a bar of salt, equivalent to one-tenth of a dollar.<sup>80</sup> Emphasizing that such incidents were not uncommon, Massaia observed that lepers had total liberty to do what they liked, and that no one was able to restrain them. They accordingly entered any home, demanding whatever they pleased, abusing whoever failed to yield to their caprices, and committing sundry acts of violence against persons and property, for no authority dared either to admonish or punish them. On one occasion, for instance, a group of lepers appeared at a country market, and menacingly asked for some of the honey and butter exposed for sale. When the vendors refused this request, the lepers thrust their hands into the pots, thus rending the wares entirely unsaleable. The lepers’ unbridled liberty had reached such a point that many persons not actually affected by the disease joined them to enjoy their unrestricted privileges.<sup>81</sup>

Abuses of this kind seem to have subsequently been brought under some control, for we have no reports of them in the twentieth century. Lepers, in many cases on horseback, continued, however, to beg insistently for their sustenance. Rey, describing Addis Ababa in the 1920s, observed that they wandered around, exhibiting “revolting sores and stumps of legs and arms”. He himself saw “one of these unfortunates, lacking hands and feet and part of his face, mounted on a donkey as miserable-looking as himself, chanting outside the huts... until he literally blackmailed the wretched people into giving him a piastre or two to get rid of him.”<sup>82</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, pp. 131–132.

<sup>76</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, note 4 above, vol. 1, p. 297.

<sup>77</sup> Stern, *op. cit.*, note 59 above, p. 121.

<sup>78</sup> Soleillet, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, p. 287.

<sup>79</sup> Massaia, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 2, p. 73.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 172.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 173.

<sup>82</sup> C. F. Rey, *In the country of the Blue Nile*, London, Duckworth, 1925, p. 27.

### *The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935*

Mendicancy of this kind was also described in 1940 by an Italian, Masucci. He told of lepers, who, forbidden to beg by day, went from house to house by night, and then rode around by mule in the daytime, hurling insults at anyone who had refused them alms.<sup>83</sup>

Lepers, and other sufferers, traditionally flocked to the more important Ethiopian churches in quest of alms or miraculous cures. One of the largest concentrations of lepers was in the sacred city of Aksum, where Alvares in the sixteenth century reported the presence of “more than 3,000 cripples, blind men and lepers”.<sup>84</sup> Four centuries later, an Italian physician, Annaratone, wrote, in similar vein, of “about a thousand” lepers arriving at Aksum for a great festival from “all parts of Ethiopia”,<sup>85</sup> while a British traveller, Bent, described “a ghastly mass of beggars”, including “lepers innumerable, with decaying limbs”, who came “to get alms from the rich monks”.<sup>86</sup>

Lepers were a familiar sight at other churches, among them those of Addis Ababa,<sup>87</sup> and Desseye,<sup>88</sup> and many of them built their houses in the vicinity of churches and convents, as Marin noted in 1930, and Masucci in 1940.<sup>89</sup>

#### POPULAR IDEAS ON THE CAUSES OF LEPROSY

Ethiopian society had traditionally little knowledge of the cause or mode of transmission of leprosy. Mérab, who enquired diligently into popular beliefs, asserted that the Ethiopians attributed the disease to a “thousand and one causes, each as fantastic as the other” – among them a blow from the Devil, entry into a church sanctuary reserved exclusively for priests, and “violation of the marriage contract by moonlight”.<sup>90</sup> The latter belief was slow to die, for a study made in 1975 reported that some people asserted that the disease developed “after sexual intercourse in the open, when there is a moon, or when the woman has her period”.<sup>91</sup> Infection was also sometimes said to result from spirit possession.<sup>92</sup>

Notwithstanding the limited isolation of lepers, and their threats to sleep in the beds of persons who failed to provide them with alms,<sup>93</sup> there appears to have been no real awareness that the disease could be transmitted from person to person. Perhaps not surprisingly in view of its long incubation period, the Ethiopians believed, according to both Dr Parisi and Dr Mérab, that leprosy was not contagious. This view, which does much to explain the toleration afforded to lepers, was evident from the fact that though they avoided drinking from a horn touched by the lips of persons suffering from syphilis, they took no such precaution in the case of those with leprosy.<sup>94</sup> The

<sup>83</sup> Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> Beckingham and Huntingford, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>85</sup> Annaratone, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 485.

<sup>86</sup> J. T. Bent, *The sacred city of the Ethiopians*, London, Longmans, Green, 1896, p. 160.

<sup>87</sup> Rey, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 48; *idem*, *op. cit.*, note 73 above, pp. 43–44.

<sup>88</sup> R. Pankhurst, ‘Eugène Gaspar Marin’s impressions of Addis Ababa in 1930–1931’, *Africa Tervuren*, 1976, 22: 102; Brielli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, note 14 above, p. 14.

<sup>89</sup> Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 131.

<sup>91</sup> Schneider, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 106.

<sup>92</sup> M. Rodinson, *Magie, médecine, possession à Gondar [en Ethiopie]*, Paris, Mouton, 1967, pp. 63, 79–80.

<sup>93</sup> Soleillet, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, p. 287.

<sup>94</sup> Parisi, *op. cit.*, note 60 above, p. 136; Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 131.

Ethiopian belief in the non-contagious character of the disease was reinforced by the popular view that it was an inherited complaint. This was asserted in the popular sayings, "A leper is the son or better the grandson and great-grandson of a leper", and "A leper is not born except from a leper".<sup>95</sup> By the early twentieth century, however, Addis Ababa opinion was beginning to recognize occasional cases of contagion, among them of one or two Europeans, including an Italian in Harar.<sup>96</sup> The old beliefs were, however, not easily abandoned, as is evident from the fact that the Agaw people of Bagemder were reported in the 1960s as still of the opinion that leprosy was an "inherited disease". An Ethiopian health officer commented that this was "no wonder", for the complaint "certainly 'runs in families'".<sup>97</sup>

#### PRAYERS, VOWS, AND AMULETS

As mentioned above, the Ethiopians believed in miraculous cures. Many sick persons accordingly spent much of their time in prayer, and would vow to make generous gifts to the church if they recovered. The British Consul Walter C. Plowden stated in the 1850s that supposed miracles were not infrequent, for whenever offerings slackened, the priests saw to it that "a leper is cleansed, or the blind are restored to sight".<sup>98</sup>

One of the saints to whom prayers were frequently offered was Gabra Krestos, also known as 'Abd al-Masih. The son of Emperor Theodosius of Constantia, he is said in the Ethiopian Synaxarium to have been afflicted by a skin disease, and his sores were licked by the dogs in his father's courtyard. Though his illness is not specified in the text, popular belief sometimes identified it with leprosy. One observer of the 1970s was thus informed by a leper that the saint, wishing to "live a blessed life", gave "all his wealth to the poor people and asked God to give him leprosy to suffer like Jesus Christ." The Lord accordingly "gave him leprosy", and as a result lepers revere him as their patron saint.<sup>99</sup>

Use was also traditionally made of amulets against leprosy which were worn around the neck.<sup>100</sup>

#### MEDICAL TREATMENT

A great variety of traditional medical cures for leprosy were in widespread use. Ethiopian medical texts, the earliest so far identified dating from the late eighteenth century, indicate that the disease was treated both internally and externally.

Medicines for internal use came, like the greater part of the local pharmacopoeia,

<sup>95</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>96</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 131.

<sup>97</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 53.

<sup>98</sup> *Correspondence respecting Abyssinia 1846–1868*, London, House of Commons, 1868, p. 180.

<sup>99</sup> Budge, *The book of the saints*, *op. cit.*, note 28 above, vol. 1, p. 155; Schneider, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, p. 61. Though all traditions assert that Gabra Krestos suffered from some kind of skin disease the written texts do not actually specify that it was leprosy. See his life, *Gadl Gabra Krestos ba Ge'ezena ba Amareñña*, Addis Ababa, 1958, Ethiopian Calendar.

<sup>100</sup> Rohlfs, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, p. 320; Annaratone, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 501. See also, Combes and Tamisier, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 3, pp. 313–314. One amulet against leprosy is now housed in the British Library (Or. MS. 12,034, f. 115v–116r); another in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine (MS. 52,283 f. 57r–58r).

mainly from the vegetable kingdom, and consisted of the roots, bark, leaves, fruit, and seeds of a wide variety of plants, many of which also served in the treatment of syphilis and other complaints.<sup>101</sup> The most popular specifics against leprosy included the leaves, fruit, and root of the *mesanna* (*Croton macrostachys*),<sup>102</sup> the fruit and roots of the *gizéwa* (*Withania somnifera*),<sup>103</sup> and the roots of the *gamaro* or *gumaro* (*Capparis tomentosa*).<sup>104</sup> Medicinal use was also made of the *midaqwa*, or wild antelope, which was generally believed to possess great curative properties.<sup>105</sup>

Medicines for external application were even more numerous. Most were likewise based on plants of one kind or another, among them the roots of the *améra* (*Lonchocarpus laxiflorus*),<sup>106</sup> *messerech* (*Crotalaria platycalyx*),<sup>107</sup> *dadaho* (*Euclea schimperi*),<sup>108</sup> and *maqmaqo* (*Rumex abyssinicus*),<sup>109</sup> the leaves and fruit of the *degéssa* (*Calpurnia subdecandra*),<sup>110</sup> and the leaves, seeds and small branches of the *waginos* (*Brucea antidysenterica*).<sup>111</sup> Other remedies included the crowfoot, or ranunculo, which made a blistering paste,<sup>112</sup> and such common condiments as red pepper and mustard.<sup>113</sup> Many medicines also contained butter, while others were made with honey, white-of-egg, fig-juice, or the latex of the *qwalqwol* (*Euphorbia candelabrum*). Though most medicines for external application were thus largely herbal, some included such varied items as spiders' webs, cow-dung, birds' droppings, burnt dog's excrement (preferably, according to some prescriptions, that of a black animal), the stool of a black cat, a monkey, and a cock, the burnt horn of a black goat, and the fat of the *chelat* bird, as well as salt, sulphur, and soot.<sup>114</sup> Other popular cures are said to have included an ointment made from the powder of a burnt toad, during the application of which the patient was supposed to refrain from all sexual intercourse,<sup>115</sup> and, according to one otherwise unsubstantiated account, the blood of a

<sup>101</sup> R. Pankhurst, 'An historical examination of traditional Ethiopian medicine and surgery', *Ethiopian med. J.*, 1965, 1: 163; *idem*, 'Old-time Ethiopian cures for syphilis, seventeenth to twentieth centuries', *J. Hist. Med.*, 1975, 30: 204–206.

<sup>102</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 444–45; M. Griaule, *Le livre de recettes d'un dabtara abyssin*, Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1930, p. 84.

<sup>103</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, 446–447, 452–453; Griaule, *op. cit.*, note 102 above, p. 84.

<sup>104</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 444–445, 452–453; 474–77; Griaule, *op. cit.*, note 102 above, pp. 83–84.

<sup>105</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 447, 449, 453, 457.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 436–437, 444–445, 450–453, 474–477; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, 'An Ethiopian medical textbook written by Gerazmač Gäbräwäld Arägähän Däga Damot', *J. Ethiopian Studies*, 1971, 9, No 1: p. 159.

<sup>107</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 436–437, 446–447, 450–453, 476–477.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 444–445, 474–477; Griaule, *op. cit.*, note 102 above, pp. 83–85; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, *op. cit.*, note 106 above, p. 160.

<sup>109</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 474–475; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, *op. cit.*, note 106 above, p. 160.

<sup>110</sup> Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 474–475, 451–452; Griaule, *op. cit.*, note 102 above, p. 84.

<sup>111</sup> R. Cacciapuoti, 'Farmacoterapia vegetale indigena in Eritrea ed Etiopia', *Arch. ital. Sci. Med. Parasitol.*, 1941, 22: 354; H. F. Mooney, *A glossary of Ethiopian plant names*, Dublin University Press, 1963, p. 49; D. Lemondant, *Les plantes éthiopiennes*, Addis Ababa, [n.p., n.d.], p. 53; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, *op. cit.*, note 106 above, p. 159.

<sup>112</sup> Annaratone, *op. cit.*, note 11 above p. 501.

<sup>113</sup> Tsehai Berhane Selassie, *op. cit.*, note 106 above, p. 159.

<sup>114</sup> Parisis, *op. cit.*, note 60 above, p. 137; Strelcyn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, vol. 1, pp. 445, 447, 451, 453, 471, 473; Tsehai Berhane Selassie, *op. cit.*, note 106 above, pp. 159–160.

<sup>115</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 131.

newly born child – a specific also said to have been employed by Constantine the Great.<sup>116</sup> Some of these medicaments were far from cheap. One traditional practitioner at Gondar, Ato Balay, is said in the 1920s to have charged a fee of 30 to 40 Maria Theresa dollars for a cure.<sup>117</sup>

Use was also made of vapour baths, a long-established mode of treatment in Ethiopia,<sup>118</sup> where patients would be closeted in a small hut; and various medicinal plants, among them the aforementioned *degessa* and *gizéwa*, would be inhaled.<sup>119</sup>

#### THERMAL BATHS

Lepers seem to have taken good advantage of the country's thermal waters, which bubbled out of the ground in many areas.<sup>120</sup> This age-old remedy was noticed in the eighteenth century by the Scottish traveller James Bruce, who told of a patient who took the waters "every year, sometimes twice",<sup>121</sup> and it is also mentioned in the Ethiopian royal chronicles of the time,<sup>122</sup> as well as by later foreign observers.<sup>123</sup> Hot springs were frequented by lepers, as well as by persons suffering from syphilis, rheumatism, and diseases of the skin. Stern, describing some warm springs in Bagemder, said that "a small, insignificant building" raised over a two-foot pool served "the lame, the blind, and the halt", while those "afflicted with scrofulous, scorbutic, leprous and other contagious diseases had to perform their lavations in an enclosed pool a little lower down where they enjoyed the double advantage of getting cool as well as already tested water."<sup>124</sup> This rough segregation of lepers is not mentioned by other travellers such as Borelli, who imply that the sick bathed together without any distinction of their diseases.<sup>125</sup> Rohlfs, on the other hand, insisted that in Tigre lepers had a bathing hut of their own, downstream from other patients, and commented that the people, at least of that part of the country, were too Mosaic to allow persons suffering from leprosy ever to mingle with the population at large.<sup>126</sup>

#### MODERN MEDICINE

Though traditional medicine enjoyed extensive currency, and is indeed still widely employed, foreign medicines, by the nineteenth century at least, were not unknown, particularly in the towns. Early in the century, there is thus a report of arsenic sulphide powder being applied to leprosy sores in Shoa,<sup>127</sup> while lepers in Tigre are said

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>117</sup> Rodinson, *op. cit.*, note 92 above, pp. 29, 71.

<sup>118</sup> Pankhurst, 'Old-time Ethiopian cures', note 101 above, pp. 209–212.

<sup>119</sup> Griaule, *op. cit.*, note 102 above, p. 84.

<sup>120</sup> Combes and Tamisier, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 4, p. 203; Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 2, p. 173; Rohlfs, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, p. 318; Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>121</sup> J. Bruce, *Travels to discover the source of the Nile*, Edinburgh, J. Ruthven, 1790, vol. 3, p. 419.

<sup>122</sup> H. Weld Blundell, *The royal chronicle of Abyssinia 1769–1840*, Cambridge University Press, 1922, pp. 437, 482; Guèbrè Sellassié, *Chronique du règne de Ménélik II*, Paris, Librairie Orientale et Americaine, 1930, vol. 1, pp. 230, 232.

<sup>123</sup> Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 2, p. 239; W. C. Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla country*, London, Longmans, 1868, p. 111; Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> Stern, *op. cit.*, note 59 above, p. 91.

<sup>125</sup> Borelli, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, pp. 130, 155; Annaratone, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 501.

<sup>126</sup> Rohlfs, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, p. 319.

<sup>127</sup> Rochet d'Héricourt, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, p. 307. See also Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.



## *The history of leprosy in Ethiopia to 1935*

by the 1880s to have taken baths infused with sarsaparilla (*Smilax ornata?*), a specific then popular in Arab countries.<sup>128</sup> Mention is also made in early twentieth-century Addis Ababa of the use of mercury ointment.<sup>129</sup>

### THE FIRST LEPROSARIA

Ethiopia's first leprosarium was founded at Harar by the local governor, Emperor Menilek's cousin Ras Makonnen, in 1901. On the advice of a local French Capuchin missionary, Monseigneur Jarosseau, he entrusted the institution to the latter's order. The establishment, which was named after St Anthony, was run by two priests, Fathers Marie Bernard and Bernadin, assisted by a friar, Brother Thiotin, and three women missionaries, Mother Gervasie and Sisters Gertrude and Zoë.<sup>130</sup> Ras Makonnen, who provided the leprosarium with ample land, took a keen interest in its work, and frequently visited it with his retinue.

The institution, which consisted of forty-nine huts and "one large building with stone-and-plaster walls and a thatched roof", cared for between twenty-five and sixty patients, who came mostly from the local Galla population. They attended voluntarily, and were treated free of charge. In conformity with the absence of enforced segregation elsewhere in the country, they were allowed to come and go as they wished, as well as to mix "more or less indiscriminately with the healthy," but, as a rule, remained in the home until their condition had noticeably improved. Treatment in the early twentieth century was based mainly on the age-old Indian specific, chaulmoogra oil.<sup>131</sup>

The institution, which survived many political vicissitudes, continued to be run by clerics until 1930, when a French physician, Dr Jean Feron, was put in charge and made extensive use of copper.<sup>132</sup>

Despite its success, and the obvious advantages of establishing institutions to isolate the entire leper population,<sup>133</sup> no other leprosaria were set up for several decades. The delay was not only due to considerations of cost, but also to the widespread Ethiopian belief, to which reference has already been made, that leprosy was a God-given, inherited disease that was not contagious. Emperor Menilek, in particular, is said to have been opposed to the establishment of further leprosaria. When it was proposed to him that lepers should be rigidly segregated, he is said, by Mérab, to have refused to support the idea, which he considered unnecessarily cruel, and to have replied, "Have I not enough other things on my conscience?"<sup>134</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Rohlfs, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, p. 320. See also Masucci, *op. cit.*, note 11 above, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> De Castro, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 1, p. 372.

<sup>130</sup> Jennings and Addison, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, pp. 43–44; Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, pp. 160–161, 163; *idem*, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 132; De Castro, *op. cit.*, note 8 above, vol. 1, p. 372; J. Duchesne-Fournet, *Mission en Éthiopie (1901–1903)*, Paris, Masson, 1908, vol. 1, pp. 22–23.

<sup>131</sup> Jennings and Addison, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, pp. 43–44. On chaulmoogra oil, see also Scott, *op. cit.*, note 52 above, vol. 1, pp. 590, 641, 646–647.

<sup>132</sup> G. Steer, *Caesar in Abyssinia*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1936, pp. 83–84; A. Zervos, *L'empire d'Éthiopie*, Alexandria, 1936, pp. 257, 444; 'St Anthony's Leprosarium', *Ethiopia Observer*, 1958, 2: 75. See also, J. Feron, 'Leprosy in Harar', *Report of the First National Leprosy Conference of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, [n.p.], 1957, pp. 21–22.

<sup>133</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 19 above, p. 132.

<sup>134</sup> Mérab, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 1, p. 166.

After his reign, a second leprosarium was established at Akaki, just outside Addis Ababa, in 1934. Named after Emperor Haile Selassie, it was run by the Sudan Interior Mission. It was directed by a Canadian physician, Dr Ralph Hooper, assisted by twelve nurses, and treated some 200 to 300 patients.<sup>135</sup> This institution, and that at Harar, were the only two leprosaria in the country at the time of the Italian invasion of 1935.

#### SUMMARY

Leprosy has for centuries been prevalent in Ethiopia. Ethiopian Christians were well aware of Biblical references to the disease; their literature also contains many legends of miraculous cures. Ethiopians, perhaps for this reason, adopted a much more tolerant attitude to the disease than was common in the West. Lepers were, however, in large measure isolated from the rest of the population, but were permitted to beg at court and around churches, and to accompany the army on expeditions. Leper mendicants were allowed to accost and even to threaten the public with remarkable impunity. Ethiopians seem traditionally to have been largely unaware that leprosy was contagious – they regarded it rather as an inherited complaint. They sought to cure it in numerous ways: by prayer and amulets, by medicines for internal and external application, by medicated vapour baths, and by immersion in thermal pools. Foreign medicines, mainly from the Arab world and Europe, began to exert limited influence only in the nineteenth century. The first leprosarium was established at Harar, in 1901, and the second at Akaki, just outside Addis Ababa, in 1934.

<sup>135</sup> Zervos, *op. cit.*, note 132 above, p. 257; C. Duff, *Cords of love. A pioneer mission to Ethiopia*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 204–205, 269, 286.