

Preliminary Report on an Ethnohistorical Research Among the Ch'aré People, a Hidden Ethnic Splinter Group in Western Tigray¹

by Wolbert G.C. Smidt²

Abstract

The western Tigrayan lowlands are largely unknown to researchers. There are only very few publications containing ethnographical data on that region, and most of them date from the late 19th century (explorers) and from the 1930s (written by a colonial officer). Some of these publications mention “black people” (using the generalizing derogatory term “Shanqella”) in the western lowlands, who, however, were never described in detail, possibly because they were considered as marginal – both socially and culturally – by these writers and were seemingly never visited by them. Another reason for the general lack of information was certainly the climate of these bush- and savannah lands, which was regarded as extremely unhealthy by outsiders. Tigray is today usually described as ethnically almost homogenous. In fact, the historical Mezege lowland region below the Shiré and Welqayt highlands and west of Waldibba is marked still today by ethnic heterogeneity. Tigrinya-speaking people of highland origin form the majority, but there is also a minority described locally as “an ancient indigenous people” both by the highlanders and by themselves, as research carried out in

¹ The findings discussed in this article have their first origin in a research on diverse socio-political groups in Tigray started in 2004/05 in the framework of a larger socio-political and ethnological research on the traditional and modern Tigrayan society, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In March 2008 the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) made a teaching and research stay at Mekelle University (MU) possible, and MU graciously helped me to carry out a field trip to western Tigray in March/April 2008, within the framework of a larger research project of MU. I especially thank Haile Muluken for his very helpful support, and Habtom Gebremedhin from BOFED, Mekelle, for leading me into this region and sharing his observations graciously, thus making possible what I had wished to do for long. – I presented the findings on the Ch'aré first at the 17th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES), Addis Ababa (November 2009, “The Ch'aré of the Tsellim Bet – an Unknown Ethnic Splinter Group in the Western Lowlands of Tigray”), but my first “Preliminary report on an ethnohistorical research among the Ch'aré people”, of which this text is the second version, got lost as my laptop got stolen on the way to that conference. Most of my photographic documentation, showing economic aspects of the life of Ch'aré people, their material culture, settlements and ancient ruins, got also lost. I presented these and further findings in another paper during a workshop at MU in March 2010: “The Ch'aré of Western Tigray: a hidden ethnic group in the lowlands”, Workshop “Past and Present in Social Systems, Ongoing Social Anthropological Research in Ethiopia”. – For instructive and constructive comments, information and questions I thank Dawit Kassaye, Pino Schirripa, Neil Bradman, Dirk Bustorf, Habtom Gebremedhin, Günter Schröder, and my wife Chikage Oba-Smidt.

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2008 showed. Locally, they are known under the Tigrīñña term “Tsellim Bét” (‘House of Blacks’), and were formerly mainly called “Barya” in the sense of ‘slave’ (or ‘serf’) by Ethiopian highlanders. Today, they are regarded as ethnic Tigrayans, as they speak almost exclusively Tigrīñña. But different from the highlanders, they are not called Ḥabesha and also do not use this term for themselves. Usually, they define themselves as a separate group under the denomination Tsellim Bét. This term encompasses several groups, of which two, the Ch’aré and the Shiro, claim an ancient local origin. Socially, both groups seem to have been submitted by Christian Ḥabesha feudal lords already about three centuries ago and were reduced to a status of serfdom. Christianity was accepted by these serf groups only recently, and often in a syncretistic form. Economically they lived from hunting and gathering, fishing, and, at least partially, from agriculture. Their former language, apparently one of the most endangered of Ethiopia, is still remembered by a few Ch’aré elders. Samples of vocabulary of “Ch’arīñña” show a relation to Gumuz, which suggests that the Ch’aré are a remnant splinter group of a formerly much wider area settled by groups belonging to a Gumuz cluster along the western lowlands of Ethiopia in the borderlands to the Sudan.

Keywords: Tigray – Ch’aré – Tsellim Bét – Gumuz – Mezega – Welqayt – Shiré – Endangered Language – marginalized groups – serfdom – borderlands

Introduction

In the western lowlands of Tigray there is a “black” population, which claims to be the indigenous population of the area, the Tsellim Bét. The Tigrīñña term “Tsellim Bét” (lit. ‘Black House’) is used in the *weredas* Mezega and Tsebri in the western Tigrayan lowlands to designate a local population of “black” people of different origins. The term – and the people – are unknown in any other parts of Tigray and were also virtually unknown to researchers³. The two subgroups of the Tsellim Bét which are said – by their own oral tradition and Ḥabesha legends – to be indigenous to these areas are the Ch’aré and the Shiro, who are both “physically different”, but also to some degree culturally, from the dominating Ḥabesha culture. The Ch’aré and Shiro today speak Tigrīñña and have integrated themselves to a large extent into the dominating culture, but a number of elders have retained some knowledge of their ancestral language. A preliminary analysis showed that this language is related to Gumuz, a cluster of dialects spoken much further south in the Ethio-Sudanese border areas of Metemma and in Benishangul-Gumuz and usually classified as Nilo-Saharan (with some doubts). The very culture of the Ch’aré already confirms that they must have inhabited these lowlands since a long time already; nothing can be said on the Shiro as no informant could yet be interviewed. Also local

³ See a first discussion based on the scarce available information on that group in: Smidt 2005; with a further short discussion on them in the monograph which came out of the research on the traditional Tigrayan society: Smidt 2008:233, and an overview article summarizing the research done so far, Habtom Gebremedhin – Smidt 2010 (see also Smidt 2010a und 2010b).

Ḥabesha tradition, which claims that they had learnt from the Tsellim Bét how to survive in the “hostile” lowlands after the Ḥabesha migrated to their areas, leads to the same conclusion: Different from the Ḥabesha, the Ch'aré have a very detailed knowledge on the use of local plants for healing and for nutrition, and as hunters they have a deep knowledge of the area's fauna. Not influenced by Ḥabesha tradition in this sense, they consumed also animals not accepted as food by the Christian highlanders, such as *mefles* (Tigrīñña for ‘wild pig’); they have even influenced the Ḥabesha newcomers to adapt this habit themselves.

Overview of the field research and the area of research

The research on the Ch'aré people, which is presented in this article, was conducted within a larger project at Mekelle University, which focused on modern and traditional relations between Christianity and Islam in Tigray. The findings on the Ch'aré have first been presented in 2009 at the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. The author's specific research questions were: What is the history of the numerous ethnic groups in western Tigray? Were there groups in rural western Tigray who had a Muslim past and are by now integrated into the Christian Ḥabesha society? Or have they kept their Muslim religion despite Christian domination? And how do the different groups interact, in respect to their different religious backgrounds? As it happens often during research, the researcher found answers, which differed from the expectations – while he had expected to find former Muslim groups in western Tigray converted to Christianity, he instead found groups who were originally neither Christian nor Muslim, but had a long history of Muslim and Christian overlords and were ethnically different from all other groups in the region.

During a first extended field research on socio-political groups in Tigray in 2004/05, some preliminary oral information on a Tigrinnized “black group” called Tsellim Bét in Mezega had already been collected (results of this research s. Smidt 2005; 2008). The researcher hypothesized that the Tsellim Bét might be the remnants of former Muslim, now Christianized migrant groups, e.g. from central and western Africa (s. this hypothesis in Smidt 2007:1188). This hypothesis proved to be wrong.

As a frontier area between Ethiopia and the Sudan, western Tigray was historically marked by the historical presence of both Muslim and Christian powers, such as the Muslim Mezega kingdom of Queen Ga'īwa in the 16th century, and the Gondarine kings in the 17th century. Western Tigray – and especially the lowlands – is historically known as a retreat area for numerous groups of most diverse origins, including *shifita* and rebel groups from both the Sudan and Ethiopia. It has only rarely been visited by researchers, none of whom has done a major work on the region, except for one anthropologist who did an interesting study on the modern ex-fighters' agricultural settlement of Densha near the Sudanese boundary, in the Qaft'a Ḥumera region (Krug 2000) – quite far, however, from the region under study here, and not containing any anthropological discussions on the old populations of the wider

region. Most descriptions of the area date from the 19th century, most of them being travellers' accounts (e.g., by the mid-19th century explorer and at-times-settler Mansfield Parkyns⁴) and maps produced by geographers using information by such explorers. Very few travellers coming to northern Ethiopia through the Sudan crossed today's western Tigray – most took either the more southern, well-established caravan route of Metemma or, in a few cases, the northern route via Keren, or of course, as usually done, landed at the port of Massawa and thus avoided the routes via the Sudan. There is one scholarly work on western Tigray, which focuses on economic history and anthropology – the pioneering work of McCann (1990). He described the dramatic change of agriculture starting from the late 19th century, with strong involvement of Habesha overlords and slavery, but without a discussion of the ethnic groups involved; it is, however, so rich of details that it is indispensable for anyone studying western Tigray. The only existing detailed – but still incomplete – really ethnographic description of the wider region dates from the 1930s and has been done by an Italian researcher and officer, Giovanni Ellero (on him s. below; cp. also Ellero 1948).

The general lack of research in the area is probably owed to two completely unrelated factors: An evident problem is the bad image of the western Tigrayan lowlands as a traditional retreat area for *shifita* – a tradition, which in a way continues until today, even if most of Qaft'a Humera is by now pacified⁵. This, together with the remoteness of the area and its fame as “unhealthy lowlands”⁶, hindered researchers active in highland Ethiopia to conduct any deeper research here. In addition to this, there is a tendency of researchers interested in Ethiopia to believe that the real “discoveries” (an evidently problematic term) can be done elsewhere: Ethiopianists interested in ancient Ethiopian Christianity would be active in the northern-central highlands, far from this area, and social anthropologists would rather look for ethnic groups and the complexities of social-cultural structures far from traditional Christian Ethiopia, in the south, or even more in the southwest,

⁴ Mansfield PARKYNS (1853), *Life in Abyssinia: Being Notes Collected During Three Years' Residence and Travels in that Country*, London, p. 349f.: he mentions black groups (Tekwarir), without, however, going into any detail.

⁵ During this research journey, a truck following us on the route to Humera was hit by a rocket which had been shot by unidentified fighters hidden in the grasslands in the immediate proximity of the Ethiopian-Eritrean boundary, parallel to the street to Humera (30 March 2008). A week before this journey a bomb hidden in luggage exploded in a bus coming from Humera, on the same street; and a year before, a small only locally operating rebel group had shortly occupied the street town 'Addi Geshu in the Habesha-Kunama *wereda*, where we also stayed for a night. There are also very few reports of attacks of travellers by bandits all over the Qaft'a Humera area, usually without any casualties (except if the attacked resisted).

⁶ The following account from a journey of Ethiopian Jews through Mezega in the *Derg* period illustrates well this observation: “Mezega is known to be the hottest part of all Ethiopia, its inhabitants are blacker than other Ethiopians and riddled with malaria. I myself saw lots of children with bellies swollen like a woman in her ninth month.” Shmuel YILMA (1996), *From Falasha to Freedom: An Ethiopian Jew's Journey to Jerusalem*, Jerusalem, p. 37.

such as in the wider Omo region, home of many dozens of ethnic groups speaking most diverse languages. Usually it is assumed that northern Ethiopia is just marked by its “highlands’ culture”, which until very recently has not been of interest for social anthropologists. One can, however, occasionally find information on the ethnic plurality of western Tigray and indications for a rather complex history with changing masters – but the one who does not search, does not find... Certainly, the fact, that the scarce material often just mentions “slaves” also contributed to a structural lack of interest, as slaves were usually associated with a lack of cultural traditions, having been uprooted from their areas of origin, thus less interesting for a classical social anthropological approach – definitely in contrast, however, to more contemporary approaches.

The lowlands of western Tigray, as mentioned above, were the home of ethnic groups and subgroups of very diverse origins – from Sudanese in the largest sense to more recent Ḥabesha settlers –, which have never been studied. This preliminary research therefore aimed at getting at least a first impression of today’s situation. For example, some written sources and old maps mention “Tukrir” (many of whom settle now in Ḥumera as plantation workers and merchants⁷) or simply “black people”. 19th century sources on western Tigray also occasionally mention the presence of diverse migrants from the Sudan, usually without going into any detail. No research has ever been carried out on any of these groups (except for a short linguistic research on the Hausa and Fellata by Ellero 1995:99-102). Their situation today, including their integration or non-integration into the Tigrayan society, is totally unknown.

One better-known historical example of a Sudanese migrant group are the Nimrāb: In the early 19th century a subgroup of the Arabophone Nubian Ja‘alīyīn settled in the lowlands below Welqayt, under the leadership of their king and rebel-chief *make* Nimr (known in Ethiopian records as Nebīr, ‘the leopard’). This Muslim king of Shandi, originally tributary to the large kingdom of Sinnār, had rebelled against the expanding Egyptians, killed the son of the Egyptian vice-king and was granted asylum by the northern Ethiopian rulers in the Welqayt lowlands, precisely in May Gubba. He and later his son and successor ruled the petty kingdom of the Nimrāb in that area, tributary to Christian Ethiopia. After two generations, however, most Nimrāb were deported by the Egyptians to the Sudan and were finally granted pardon; some of their subjects must, however, have stayed in the area⁸. The sources mention, that outlaws from the Sudan, slave groups and former Mekka pilgrims (among them West-Africans) settled in the realm of the Nimrāb. In addition, nearby highland Welqayt was also known for Béte Isra’él or “Felasha”, as this Judaizing group was generally called in Ethiopia, with their principal settlement

⁷ Wolbert SMIDT (2010c), “Tukrīr”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 998-1000.

⁸ Wolbert SMIDT (2007), “Nimrāb”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 1187f.

in ‘Addi Agew, who were especially known as potters – a further example for the ethnic plurality of the region.

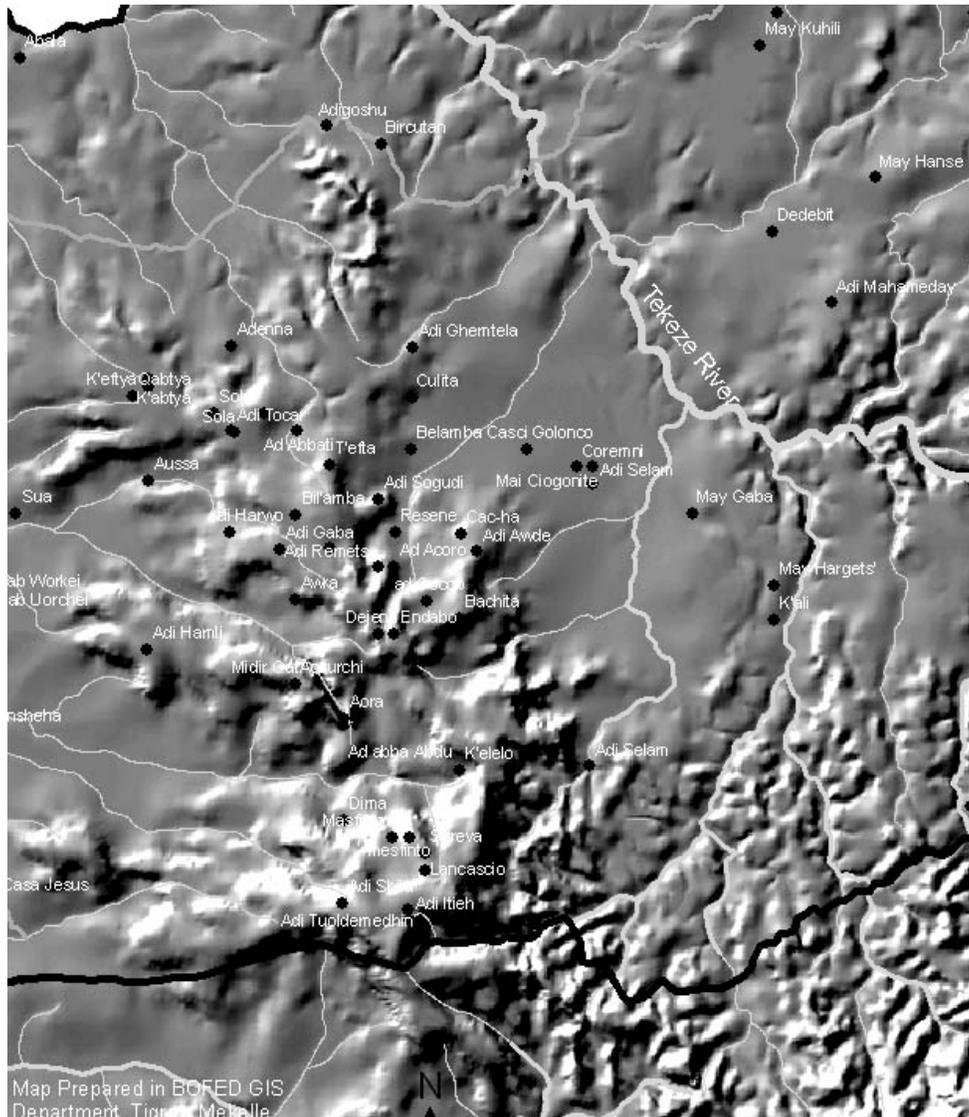


Fig. 1: Map of the May Gaba area, by Habtom Gebremedhin (BOFED / Mekelle), 2010⁹

The research presented in this article was carried out in late March to beginning April 2008 in Megu’ and May Gaba and surrounding villages. May Gaba is the administrative centre of Mezega *wereda*, which today belongs to the Welqayt District in the Western Zone of the Regional State of Tigray (sometimes also called Welqayt-Tsegede Zone¹⁰). Historically, the term Welqayt designated only

⁹ Note: Transliterations are not authoritative.

¹⁰ The Western Zone consists of the three districts of Qaft’a Ḥumera with the capital Ḥumera (encompassing vast lowland areas in the northern and western part of the zone), Welqayt with

the highlands in western Tigray and was a political entity for its own, with their own governors interlinked both with the rulers in Gonder and with local rulers in Tigray and other Tigrīñña-speaking provinces. Today, the administrative term Welqayt also includes the lowlands between the Welqayt highlands and the Tekkeze river, which are called the Mezega lowlands.

The physical map above (fig. 1) shows the wider research area, with May Gaba in the middle-right, the main route Shiraro–Humera south of the Eritrean boundary on the upper left, and the historical Waldibba lowlands (a traditional monastic retreat area) in the west, directly south of the Tekkeze. May Gaba is located south of Dedebit, the first centre of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), on the other side of the Tekkeze in the same, rather remote lowlands. The map gives an overall impression of the geomorphological structure of the wider area, with the densely populated Welqayt highlands in the west of the May Gaba lowlands (i.e. Mezega) along the Tekkeze river, and in the southeast the first slopes of the Simén mountain range with the tributaries of the Tekkeze.

The language

A preliminary documentation of very few samples of the language was possible, albeit very difficult, as most Ch'aré affirmed to have forgotten or never learnt their original language and have totally shifted to Tigrīñña. Usually they call their language Ch'ariñña. Already this language designation is derived from Tigrīñña, the original language designation has not been recorded yet; however, some call the language simply Ch'aré, similar to the pattern that some people in Tigray call their language simply Tigray – following the widespread habit in the Horn of Africa that ethnic-geographic designations are also used as language designations. In the beginning of the research, the first informants only mentioned that their ancestors had spoken another language, without remembering any word. One group of Ch'aré informants (s. fig. 3), however, remembered the phrase

Kiyya forgummo! - 'Do you drink beer?'

This phrase, still used even by some who do not speak Ch'ariñña any more, was recognized by most Ch'aré interviewed, and helped in some cases that more words were remembered. Usually, Ch'aré who are above 50 or 60 years old confirm, that in their youth they had regularly heard Ch'ariñña, but already then it had been replaced by Tigrīñña in daily practice.

The Ch'aré who were knowledgeable in Ch'aré oral history confirmed that there is only one more language in the wider region, which strongly resembles

the capital 'Addi Remots in the highlands (the southeastern-central part of the zone), and Tsegede with the capital 'Idaga Hamus (the southern strip of the zone). It is separated by the Tekkeze from the Northwestern Zone in its east; in its west lies the Sudan and in its north Eritrea, with the Tekkeze (here called Setit) forming most of the boundary.

the Ch'ariñña, which is the Shiro. However, not one single Shiro could be identified during the research. The Ch'aré involved in the research also mentioned that no other language was known to them, which resembles their old language. A comparison, however, with wordlists of Nilo-Saharan languages shows a clear relation with the Western-Ethiopian language cluster – or cluster of dialects – called Gumuz.

The following words in Ch'ariñña representing numbers had been recorded:

| Ch'aré | | | = | Gumuz ¹¹ | | |
|---------------|---|---|---|---------------------|---|---|
| <i>imband</i> | - | 1 | = | <i>mband</i> | - | 2 |
| <i>wekek</i> | - | 2 | = | <i>okak</i> | - | 3 |
| <i>sinakw</i> | - | 3 | = | <i>sinaku</i> | - | 7 |

The similarities to Gumuz are evident; however, due to the lack of linguistic data so far, the discrepancies (e.g. the Ch'aré word for 'one' corresponding to the Gumuz word for 'two') cannot yet be explained. As only one single informant remembered how to count in Ch'ariñña – and this not perfectly – it shall not be excluded that his memory was simply not correct. But it shall also be noted, that he was sure about what he was saying.

Also other recorded vocabulary corresponded to Gumuz, such as the following:

| Ch'aré | | | = | Gumuz | | |
|---------------|---|-------|---|---------------|---|---------------|
| <i>aya</i> | - | water | = | <i>aya</i> | - | water |
| <i>kiiya</i> | - | beer | = | <i>kiiya</i> | - | beer |
| <i>qusima</i> | - | tooth | = | <i>qusima</i> | - | his/her teeth |
| | | | | <i>qosa</i> | - | tooth |

In Gumuz, 'his/her' is *arma*; the Ch'ariñña term *qusima* is a conjugated form of *qosa*. This gives a first impression of the grammatical proximity of Ch'ariñña to Gumuz, even if at this stage of the research nothing more can be said. However, there were also differences between the recorded vocabulary and the vocabulary in Gumuz wordlists; it shall, however, be noted, that a research on Gumuz language is necessary in order to be able to identify possible correspondences to dialectal expressions, identify synonyms or rare (outdated?) words in Gumuz.

| Ch'aré | | | = | Gumuz | | |
|-----------------|---|-------|---|--------------------|---|-------|
| <i>mugwa</i> | - | house | = | <i>metsa</i> | - | house |
| <i>migikema</i> | - | good | = | <i>gesberma</i> | - | good |
| <i>ch'aré</i> | - | spear | = | <i>muba (muwa)</i> | - | spear |

Also other Ch'ariñña vocabulary confirms the phonetic and structural proximity to Gumuz, such as *iiba* ('father'), *yedey* ('mother'), *luquma* ('head'),

¹¹ I thank Dawit Kassaye in Benishangul-Gumuz for his help. See also Bender 2005:915.

peema (also *p^heema*, 'arm'), *qelema* ('goat'), *kwaach'a* ('sorghum') and *gizūqwa* ('sesame'). Despite their reputation of having been hunters and gatherers, the Ch'aré possess agricultural vocabulary; the terms for sorghum and sesame, and also for goat, are not borrowed from the Tigrīñña "masters", therefore agricultural activities should predate the settlement of Ḥabesha in the area.

The comparison with Gumuz shows an evident close connection, while due to the lack of sufficient material the question has to remain open if the relation consists in a rather remote relation, or if Ch'arīñña should simply be considered a dialect of Gumuz. The Gumuz live southsouthwest of the Ch'aré, with a considerable distance between these groups. The Gumuz consist of different groups, non-centralized and segmentary, who live in a long-stretched territory from western Wellega along affluents of the Abbay river to the northwest along the Abbay in western Gojjam to the vast Ethiopian-Sudanese border areas southwest of Gondär (Begémdir). The ethnic designation "Gumuz" is not used by all of these groups, who do not form a socio-political unit and even not a traditional confederacy; a wide-spread self-designation, used by many groups, is *Bega* ('man'). Many Gumuz groups live separated from each other in different areas. The ethnic term Ch'aré is not known by the Gumuz¹², at least judging from the publications known to me and from oral informants on Gumuz. The Ch'aré themselves who were interviewed had never heard of the Gumuz and do not entertain any links to these areas.

The Gumuz language is generally considered to be Nilo-Saharan¹³ - while linguists note that it is quite independent from other Nilo-Saharan languages. As Bender underlines (2005), the similarities with Nilo-Saharan languages, which led to this classification, might simply come through lexical influence from neighbouring Koman¹⁴. Koman "and Gumuz are quite distinct, though they share much lexicon because of their geographical propinquity" (Bender 2007). For this reason linguists do not yet fully exclude that Gumuz forms a

¹² Just to mention a few examples, to illustrate the diversity of their self-designations, there are Gumuz groups in Belojegenfoyy *wereda* who are called Dekera (in Shenkora), Delengwa (in Meti and Waja), Debatsa (in Soge), Ebanja (in Dhedessa), Disoha (in Kuta Muri and Dimtu), Dejoja (in Kuta Muri and Kemash zone), Degufa (in Sirba Abaye *wereda*). I am grateful to Dawit Kassaye for his information on this.

¹³ Cp. Lionel M. BENDER (2005), "Gumuz language", in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden.

¹⁴ This is a small Nilo-Saharan language family (the name "Koman" was created by scholars in the 20th century). It includes languages spoken by several small ethnic groups southwest of the Abbay river: T'wampa (Uduk) in the Sudan, Ganza southeast of them in the Sudan, Opuuo east of the latter in the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands, Kwama again further southeast in Ethiopia (and a small pocket in the Sudan), Mao east of the latter in Wellega in Ethiopia, several scattered Komo groups in Ethiopia and Sudan south and north of the Kwama, and in the south Shita in the Ethio-Sudanese border area of the Baro river, north of the Gambella region, and the recently extinct language "Gulé" of the Funj people of Jebel Gulé in the Sudan. It is hypothesized that the Koman language family belongs to a larger grouping which includes East Sudanic, Gumuz "and the Kadu languages of Kordofan". – See M. Lionel BENDER (2007), "Koman", in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden.

cluster of dialects (or languages) independent from all the other known linguistic branches. Their linguistic peculiarities show in any case that the Gumuz are a very ancient population group, linguistically separated from others since a very long time.

Further research on the Ch'aré might be exciting in this perspective: It may help to confirm or disprove the supposed link of Gumuz to Nilo-Saharan languages, as the Ch'aré are living in an area far from any possible influence by Koman neighbours, from whom the possible "Nilo-Saharan influence" might stem. The only remote Nilo-Saharan neighbours the Ch'aré have (even if not direct neighbours) are the Kunama. In case Ch'arĩñña, which is clearly close to Gumuz, shows considerably less or no influence from Koman, i.e. that the mentioned similarities between Gumuz and Koman cannot be confirmed for Ch'arĩñña, this may then speak for the Gumuz- Ch'arĩñña cluster as a separate linguistic branch; this has evidently to be checked against the possibility of language contact with Kunama, another Nilo-Saharan language, whose relation to Koman is, however, rather remote. But we have to be careful: Even if the Ch'aré oral tradition and that one of the new Ḥabesha settlers – together with other evidences – confirm that they had been settlers of the region before the arrival of the Ḥabesha, they could have migrated to the region only a few centuries earlier from the southwest, in a time, when Koman influence on their language was already possible. Further research also on the migration history of the Ch'aré, the Gumuz groups and the Koman is therefore necessary.

First findings on their history in written sources

The first and almost only scholar to briefly refer to the Ch'aré in a publication was Giovanni Ellero, in his book published posthumously in 1995 on the basis of texts authored during the 1930s. Ellero was an Italian colonial officer and researcher, who was stationed in Welqayt and Shiré and left the only in-depth documentation and analysis of the whole region produced until today, with a great wealth of ethnographical details (s. also Ellero 1948). From his marginal reference we can, however, just deduct that some Ch'aré groups were systematically employed as slaves by Ḥabesha overlords in northwestern Ethiopia, together with several other groups originating from much further south, such as probably Mao.

He does not mention anything more than just a name: Without any information on their area of origin, he lists the word "Ciareh" (i.e. the Italian transcription of "Ch'aré") among enslaved groups serving Ḥabesha overlords in the Shiré area, in a passage in which he describes the social organisation of Shiré¹⁵. He explains (ibid., p. 41) that Shiré was an important centre of slavery, due to its geographical location and the fact, that it was traditionally crossed by

¹⁵ Giovanni ELLERO (1995), *Antropologia e storia d'Etiopia. Note sullo Scirè, l'Endertà, i Tacruri e il Uolkait*, ed. by Gianfrancesco LUSINI, Udine: Campanotto, p. 42. – Cp. Denis NOSNITSIN (2010b), „Šire“, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden, p. 669-672.

many slave caravans. This corresponds well to the observation also from the Kunama territories further north: “The Təgrəñña from Wälqayt, ‘Adyabo [historically linked with Shiré], and Säraye are remembered for their raids to obtain slaves, grain and cattle” (Dore 2007:454). Ellero describes two different categories of slaves in Shiré: those, who went into serfdom by their own decision, submitting themselves to a specific person who becomes their master, and the “*bariä*”, which he seems to use in the sense of ‘born slave’. Under this category he lists the “sudanese, galla, sciangalla, uollamo, ciareh” – as he calls these groups, which shows that his list is based on local parlance and oral informants, without carrying out specific research on the groups themselves. The listed terms are derogatory and generalizing, as they were used by the slave masters, and Ellero provides no further background on which groups exactly are meant by these terms (ibid., p. 42).

The first time that the Ch'aré – or to be precise: groups, to whom the Ch'aré belong, without being mentioned by name – visibly entered into modern history was in the 1980s. In that period northwestern Ethiopia, i.e. today's western Tigray, and in that time the northern region of the Gonder province, was the main area of operation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP)'s military branch.

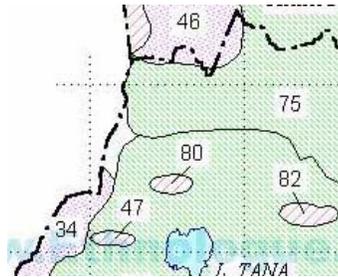
“The lowland area [of Welqayt, i.e. Mezega] is home to the ‘Bet Baria’ (the family of the Slaves). This is a group of former slaves whose history and origins are little known, but now they speak Tigrigna and Amharic and have adopted Christianity and other values of the Welkayate (people living in the Welkaite area). The ‘Bet Baria’ were employed in the lowland areas, tending the farms of well to do peasants who resided in the highland areas. According to an estimate made in 1979/80,¹⁶ their number was between one thousand five hundred to two thousand families. A large percentage of the ‘Bet Baria’ were ‘possessed’ by few well to do peasant families earlier on. Dejazmatch Desta and his sons used to ‘possess’ those residing in the ‘Mezaga’ of the Telelo area, Grazmatch Gebre Michael, those in the ‘Mezaga’ area of Welkaite [sic!] while / Kegnazmatch Gebru ‘possessed’ the ones in the ‘Mezaga’ of Birtukan. While the ‘Barias’ looked after the farms of the well to do peasants and landlords, the latter in turn provided protection. Fearing abduction, members of the ‘Bet Baria’ had to confine themselves to their immediate surroundings. If they had to travel to the nearest market or to go out fishing or hunting, they had to travel in groups. To fetch water from the nearest pool or water well the women had to walk in groups. Then the EPRP began military activities in the Welkaite area, a small number of the ‘Bet Baria’ still remained under the possession of the local gentry. A large number were freed but evicted from the cultivable land. For some months, the EPRP focused on the ‘Bet Baria’.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Footnote 31 in the original text: „Report prepared in 1983 by Muzei, an EPRP member, who had been assigned to the area“ (Muzei = Mi‘uzey).

¹⁷ KIFLU Tadesse (1998), *The Generation Part II. Ethiopia: Conflict and Transformation*, University Press of America, p. 434f.

This group, however, does not appear in any official record of that same period. The Ethiopian Institute of Nationality Studies does not mention them – and even no Gumuz (on their linguistic relation with the Ch’aré see below): According to a typescript on the population of Gonder there were no Gumuz in Wegera *anrajja*, to which belonged Setit-Ḥumera, Welqayt and Tsegede in that period, i.e. the region discussed here. The report only knows Gumuz groups much further south in Tach Armech’eho, Mat’ebiya Metemma and Q^wara.¹⁸ The well-known linguistic map of Ethiopia drawn by SIL International follows the same information: Gumuz are shown only much further south, and western Tigray is marked as fully tigrinophone. This further illustrates, that the group described in this article were highly “invisible” – or more correctly: their existence was simply overlooked.

Fig. 2: Detail from the 1999 SIL map (cp. *Ethnologue*: Gordon 2005), no. 34 = Gumuz, 75 = Tigray/ Tigrīñña, 46 = Kunama, 47 / 80 / 82 Agew-languages (internet source: www.ethnologue.com)



Older Ethiopian Christian sources regularly mention “Shanqella” (a pejorative term of the highlanders meaning ‘black people’, often connoting ‘black slave’) in the area nearby the Waldibba monasteries and also in the lowlands approximately west of Shiré, against whom the highlanders regularly carried out raids, e.g. in the time of the mid-18th century ruler of Ethiopia, *atse* Iyasu II (s. Guidi 1910-12, p. 136, where Iyasu’s war against the Belew is described – which confirms that the area concerned was northeastern Ethiopia). Traditionally, these black populations are identified by scholars with the Kunama, who live northwest of Shiré in the Gash-Setit lowlands in today’s Eritrea (or even Nara), which is certainly often a doubtful attribution. These sources deserve a new analysis, as in many cases they almost certainly refer to the Ch’aré and related groups, who were much closer to Waldibba (e.g., probably in the case of the lowland population attacking Waldibba according to the Chronicle of *atse* Yohannīs I, Iyasu I and Bekaffa, s. Guidi 1903:165; Nosnitsin 2010c:1112; or in the case of “pagan black warriors”, who encountered the 14th century Saint Samu’él of Waldibba according to his *gedl*, s. Nosnitsin 2010a). The remote Waldibba area, famous for its numerous monastic communities and hermits’ retreat areas, is situated in the lowlands south of Shiré, east of Tsellemti, and west/southwest of Mezega¹⁹.

¹⁸ See Ethiopian INSTITUTE OF NATIONALITY STUDIES: *Gonder. Ye-bizib bizabt bebereseb*, Addis Abeba [ca. summer 1991] (typescript). I thank Günter Schröder for his information on this rare document. – Cp. also: *Population and Housing Census 1984, Analytical Report on Gondar Region*, Addis Ababa 1990, p. 33, table 1.11: This report mentions 29.299 Gumuz – based on estimations from the different *weredas* – for the Gondar region (1984).

¹⁹ Cp. Denis NOSNITSIN (2010c), “Waldəbba”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 1112-1114 (NB: the map attached to the article needs to be corrected, as it places Waldibba far too east, into the Mezega lowlands).

One shall add also some notes on the terms “Tsellim Bét” and, just to give a general idea, Mezega. Mezega regularly appears in sources especially since the 16th century²⁰. In that time this was the name of a vast lowland kingdom, whose boundaries are only very approximately known: It encompassed all of the western Tigrayan lowlands, extended up to Ras al-Fīl²¹ in the Metemma area in the south, and to the north into today's southwestern Eritrea and the northern Sudanese border areas around Kassala²². Mezega was ruled by Muslim groups of Beja background (“Belew”), while the population itself must have had diverse origins, from Gumuz, Nubians to, perhaps, Kunama – and certainly the Ch'aré discussed in this article. Oral tradition (on which more will be reported below) in today's Mezega mentions the rule by “Belew Kelew” which declined with the rise of the Gondarine kingdom. This certainly refers to the ancient Mezega kingdom; the Belew are known in sources as an important Beja group at the coast and further inland, which ruled vast areas – and some sources confirm that they have taken power over the Welqayt lowlands respectively Mezega in the 15th century²³. In the 16th century the Mezega kingdom rose to prominence, when it allied itself to *imām* Aḥmad bin Ibrāhīm (known in the highlanders' tradition as “Grañ”), who was himself partially of Belew origin. The Muslim Queen of Mezega, who originally was just a regent but finally took the full power, was called Ga'īwa, and is still well-remembered under this name as a half-legendary figure in Tigrayan highland traditions²⁴. Contemporary Portuguese sources mention her, such as sources produced under the rule of *imām* Aḥmad over Ethiopia. When *imām* Aḥmad's administration and armies successively lost control of Ethiopia, Ga'īwa invaded the Tigrayan highlands with her armies and seems to have devastated important Christian strongholds. After that period, however, Mezega was reduced in importance – and in territory. Mezega does not seem to have been under any strong rulership after that. The name still appears from time to time in sources, but rather as a geographical term with the connotation of “fertile lowlands” in northwestern Ethiopia. Starting from the Gondarine period,

²⁰ For an overview on travellers and other writers on the region s. ŠIHABADDIN AHMAD IBN ʿABDALQADIR (1897, 1901), *Futuh al-Habaša. Histoire de la conquête de l'Abyssinie (XVI^e siècle) par Chihab Eddin Ahmed ben ʿAbd el-Qader, surnommé Arab-Faqih*, ed., tr. by René BASSET, 2 vols., Paris (Publications de l'École des lettres d'Alger 19, 20), pp. 426f. (footnotes).

²¹ A frontier territory, which belonged to Mezega in the 16th century, then paid tribute to Sinnār, but in the 18th century – in the period of *atse* Iyasu II – became a border province of Christian Ethiopia, with Muslim governors or sub-governors (among them high-ranking refugees from Sinnār), and finally belonged to the Sudanese Qallabat (Metemma) sultanate. Cp. TSEGA Endalew Etefa (2010), “Ras al-Fīl”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 331f.

²² Cp., especially on the kingdom, Gianfrancesco LUSINI (2007), “Māzāga”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 891f.

²³ Didier MORIN (2003), “Balaw”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 455f. (with further references).

²⁴ See this excellent overview of the known sources on her: Denis NOSNITSIN (2005), “Ga'əwa”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 646f.

Mezega was at least partially included into the Gondarine realm, now perceived as “the lowlands of Wälqayt”²⁵. Today only the lowlands between Welqayt and the Shiré highlands have retained the historical name Mezega.

The term Tsellim Bét and its origins are much more obscure. As the first documentation of the scarce written historical material shows, the term Tsellim Bét has not been used until only recently to designate the Ch’aré – who were known under the much more pejorative term Bét Barya. In high Tigrīñña (of central Tigray and central Eritrea) the term Tsellim Bét is usually not known, but is easily understandable as, literally, ‘House of the Blacks’, or, more freely interpreted, ‘the Black Tribe’. However, the term appears in a few older documents from Tigray, showing an at least occasional use, even if in a different context. One may suggest that when the term “Bét Barya” had to be dropped due to its discriminatory connotations, one decided to make use of the term Tsellim Bét, which connotes people of darker complexion. One shall, however, underline, that the older appearances of the term do not directly refer to today’s Tsellim Bét; the previous appearances of the term refer to other geographical areas. In Shiré, for example, one area is called Tsellim Bét²⁶. The *Metshafe Aksum*, an early work focusing on land rights and the history of the area of Aksum, also mentions Tsellim Bét in the Aksum / ‘Adwa area (Conti Rossini 1909-10:3, 23; cp. Habtom Gebremedhin – Smidt 2010:497). This, interestingly, corresponds to one oral tradition among today’s Ch’aré, which refers to an origin from the Aksum area (on this see below). One may speculate, that the term was generally used for groups of people of darker complexion, some of whom might later have mixed with the Ch’aré, who, however, seem to be of a lowland origin, as the analysis of their other oral traditions and their linguistic affiliations suggest. All over the Tigrayan highlands, in fact, one can find stories on “black” populations, which are sometimes considered to be settlers since Aksumite times, sometimes of more recent origin, being the re-settled subjects of Tigrayan lords. These groups are certainly of most diverse origins and might have only slight or no connections with the Tsellim Bét of Mezega, and particularly with the Ch’aré.

Socio-political structure of the Ch’aré and oral traditions

The two bigger towns with a considerable population of “Tsellim Bét” (mainly Ch’aré) are May Gaba in Mezega *wereda* and, north of it, Megu‘ in Tsebri *wereda*, but in both only forming a minority. They also live in settlements around May Gaba, to the direction of the Tekkeze, notably in May Ch’e‘a and

²⁵ Denis NOSNITSIN (2010d), “Wälqayt”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 1122f.

²⁶ Giovanni ELLERO (1995), *Antropologia e storia d’Etiopia. Note sullo Scirè, l’Endertà, i Tacurri e il Uolcàit*, ed. by Gianfrancesco LUSINI, Udine: Campanotto, p. 29; Denis NOSNITSIN (2010b), “Širè”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 669-672, here 669.

Taḥtay May Ḥumīr, La'īlay May Ḥumīr, and numerous other villages such as May Da'īro (visited during this research), Īt'ano (with the greatest remaining community of Ch'arīñña speakers), and Īnda Mika'él, on the western bank of the Tekkeze, and some of them outside settlements in scattered houses. As there are no statistics, it is difficult to estimate their number; but they may form approximately five percent of the population of May Gaba. Some of these might belong to the Shiro and not to the Ch'aré.

According to the oral tradition of the Ch'aré interviewed²⁷, their name is derived from the word for spear, *ch'aré*, which was used by their ancestors, who were great hunters. The ethnonym Shiro was said to refer to an ancestor called Shiro, but due to the proximity of Shiré and the fact that also there is a considerable presence of “black” people, an etymological connection to Shiré shall not be ruled out. Only the Ch'aré informants themselves used the term Ch'aré, explaining that this was their real name. Almost no one of the Ḥabesha informants, even direct neighbors, had ever heard of this ethnonym; they unanimously declared that they were called Tsellim Bét. According to them there were two groups in Mezega: The Ḥabesha, who all had migrated from the highlands to this area, and the Tsellim Bét, the “original inhabitants of the land”, and more precisely: the Ch'aré being the original inhabitants of the area around May Gaba. In casual talk, Ḥabesha informants called them “Barya” (a ‘black person’, with the connotation of ‘slave’, generally regarded as pejorative), but immediately explaining that that term shall not be employed any more; others even used the term “Tukarir”, explaining that this word simply means ‘black with curly hair’, but is never used by the Tsellim Bét themselves²⁸.

One informant from Megu', who had grown up with a Ch'aré family, remembered the full list of groups living in Mezega and Tsebri which were traditionally considered to form the larger group of Tsellim Bét, according to Ḥabesha tradition: besides the Ch'aré and the Shiro, they were Kunama, Oromo, Abigar, Gobet'o, Komo, Musungo, Mawo, Kefa. These names are interesting, as they do not reflect the official nomenclature of ethnic terms in Ethiopia, but the names as they were used in daily life by the groups in Mezega

²⁷ Especially the following informants shall be gratefully mentioned: *Ato Nigusé Hayle*, Bét Mulu' (50 years); *Ato Demoz Gebeyo*, Īnda Mika'él (63 years); *Ato Aseffa Gebre*, May Gaba (39 years); *Qesbi Alemayyehu Dejene* (ca. 70 years); *Ato Meresa Gebremaryam*, May Gaba (ca. 40 years); *Ato Ret'ebe Risqey*, May Gaba (ca. 45 years); *weyzero Qunnu Asfera*, May Da'īro (ca. 60 years); *Ato Birhane Galagay*, Megu' (85 years).

²⁸ Wolbert SMIDT (2010c), “Tukrīr”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, p. 998-1000. – One shall note here that the popular Tigrīñña explanation for that term (in different variants, such as Tukarir etc.) is linguistically not tenable; the term has a long “history of migration” – originally it was the name of a medieval West-African kingdom, which was preserved by the populations of this kingdom and its dependencies. With time, all pilgrims and other migrants from western Africa were called Tukrir when they settled in Sudanese regions – from where the term got also known in Eritrea and Ethiopia, where minorities of these West-African groups settled. As we see in this example, people even start using the term for other, non-West-African groups.

and Tsebri. The Abigar are known as a subgroup of the Nuer. The informant explained, that some of them had lived here for generations, but were originally brought from the southwest – sometimes over very far distances – by the Ḥabesha overlords of Mezega and Tsebri. All of them have lost their language and their group identity, except the Ch'aré and Shiro, of whom, however, the last reliable informants have just died recently, according to him, or are living far away in remote villages. He remembered having heard that there was a relation between the Ch'aré and the people of Dejjiyatmanja in Qwara, “behind Metemma”. He was the only one to refer to such a relation.



Fig. 3: Ch'aré family and neighbour in their home in May Gaba, illustrating their adaptation to the dominating Tigrīñña culture (female hairstyle and gold jewellery, injera, coffee equipment), March 2008

Clarification on the status of the Ch'aré as a migrant group or rather an ancient local group came from the informants in May Gaba – both Ch'aré and Ḥabesha insisted that they were an “indigenous” population settling here long before the arrival of the Ḥabesha from the highlands. A group of Ḥabesha elders, interviewed in the ruins of the nearby Gondarine castle of Bét Mulu’ (on this below), explained their historical and actual relation with the Ch'aré in detail. According to them, the history of the Ḥabesha rulership of the country started in the 17th century, and was strengthened especially under *atsé* Bekaffa.

In that time this was a wild and uncivilized land, according to them then lying beyond the boundaries of the Christian kingdom. The rulers were originally the Muslim Belew Kelew (i.e., evidently the Beja group dominating the historical Mezega kingdom), but these lost their power over the area with the arrival of the Ḥabesha. Until that moment, the north, up to the Sudan, had been ruled by “*shaykh* Menshel”, and the southeast, up to May Hargets and Waldibba, by “Ferej”; Mezega “was a centre for all Muslims”. The population of the area were already then the Tsellim Bét, who were afterwards submitted by the Ḥabesha. Their relation, according to these informants, was “good from the beginning”: The Ḥabesha provided military protection, while the Tsellim Bét would hunt and work for their new overlords – according to the discourse of these informants. However, another informant underlined that the Ch'aré were also warriors and that there were clashes with free Ch'aré groups armed with spears and swords until the early period of Hayle Sillasé. The Tsellim Bét then “did not have a religion”, they were even not Muslims, and have remained like this until recently; some informants mentioned that they were originally “venerating stones and trees”, a typical description of a traditional, very local and non-codified religion not understood by their monotheistic neighbors.

According to them, the Tsellim Bét were especially “great hunters”, able to hunt even leopards, elephants and rhinoceroses, which were abundant in this region in the past. The region was a wild borderland, which was once visited by Bekaffa, the story tells. The warrior and hunter “Abba Nayzgi” or “Ayanazgi” from Welqayt, as the tradition calls him, impressed the king by his great capacities as a hunter²⁹. Then the king gave him Mezega as governorate. Ayanazgi built his castle here – the ruined castle of Bet Mulu’ on a hill above nearby May Gaba – from where he governed the region, and from where he collected the tributes. He had ordered to get grain and *araq*i every year, and the Tsellim Bét and the Ḥabesha respect this order until today. The informants reported that still every year *araq*i is brought here both by Ḥabesha and Tsellim Bét, to make sure that peace will prevail in the land – and they continue the tradition as all their ancestors had done it since the time of Ayanazgi. Also whenever a visitor comes to the castle, he is asked to bring *araq*i to this place for sacrifice³⁰.

Since the establishment of Gondarine rule by Ayanazgi, Ḥabesha have started settling in the region, i.e. since approximately three hundred years. Most Ḥabesha settled in the nearby highlands, however, and came down only seasonally, while some settled permanently. Most of today’s settlers in the Mezega lowlands came only during the last one to two generations. The Ḥabesha informants underlined that without the help by the Tsellim Bét they could not have survived. Not only the Tsellim Bét were good hunters, but

²⁹ See Nosnitsin 2010d. He could be identified as Ayanazgi in the chronicle – a further interesting example for the an oral tradition, which preserved information over centuries.

³⁰ Interestingly the researcher was exempted from this, possibly due to the wide-spread opinion that as a *ferenji* he was not obliged as the spirits had no power over him.

above all they were great specialists of medicine, different from the Ḥabesha who did not know the land. Until today, they know the medical plants of the area, unknown to the Ḥabesha, with which they could heal any disease, including malaria. This is, one shall remark here, an interesting similarity to the Gumuz, whose traditional religion knows “ethno-medical specialists” (Abbink 2005:917). The Ḥabesha informants – among them an Orthodox priest – underlined that this included also the food of the Tsellim Bét with which they could heal: Even if the Orthodox Church does not allow it, they learnt eating *mefles* from the Tsellim Bét (Tigrīñña for ‘wild pig’), which helps against malaria, they say; both Ch’aré and also drink *mefles* blood. Those who eat the food of the Tsellim Bét do not become sick here. The description of the *mefles* revealed that they included even rhinoceroses into that term – perceived as huge wild pigs. Rhinoceros skin has, according to traditions in other regions of the world, really antiseptic capacities, which fits into the description of the informants, who said that the Tsellim Bét could heal their Ḥabesha patients using the skin. The fact that the Ch’aré are much more knowledgeable in the medical plants than the Ḥabesha may support the story that they were the “original” settlers of the land – which means that they must have settled in this area at least some centuries longer than the Ḥabesha migrants. An aspect of medicine shall be added here: They also have the reputation to be able to produce powerful amulets (similar to the Gumuz much further south), which can protect from diseases, heal, and even serve as love charms³¹.

On different occasions, Ḥabesha informants said that the Tsellim Bét were great hunters, but also gatherers. In addition they were active as peasants, but in the services of the Ḥabesha. In one case an elder informant described the Tsellim Bét, meaning clearly the Ch’aré, as “born slaves” – even if many of them were never serving as slaves. He put them into two categories: There were the ones who were serving the Ḥabesha “*goyta*” (‘master’), and the others who lived freely in the wilderness, they ‘served the grass’, as he expressed himself – they were the “*nay se ‘ari barya*”, ‘*the slaves of the grass*’, living ‘just as animals’ (“*kam insesat*”; also called “*sar barya*”, Amh.), which could be raided and then sold to other “*goyta*”³². This is how the Tsellim Bét seem to have generally been perceived about a generation ago and before, but most informants rejected that description, even if it seemed to be generally well-known – and describes well the real status traditionally accorded to the Ch’aré within Ḥabesha society. The image depicted by many non-Ch’aré informants of them was, however, very positive. The Tsellim Bét never entered into any

³¹ Which is reported already in the mid-19th century from the black populations below the Welqayt highlands by Mansfield PARKYNS (1853), *Life in Abyssinia: Being Notes Collected During Three Years’ Residence and Travels in that Country*, London, p. 350.

³² This has to be seen in the context of a long history of slavery and serfdom which has marked the relation between the Christian highlanders and the populations in the borderlands of the Western lowlands for centuries. Cp. Dirk BUSTORF – Wolbert SMIDT et al. (2010), „Slavery“, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 677-681.

conflict with them, according to Ḥabesha informants of Mezega; both groups had clearly distributed their tasks, the ones hunting and working in the fields, the others protecting the land. The Tsellim Bét were caring also for the children of the Ḥabesha and saved their lives due to their secret medical knowledge. However, marriages were not allowed and started only in the 1980s and 1990s, in the course of the reforms by the TPLF and the government – which was welcomed by the interviewed informants. Before, however, there were regularly relations between Ḥabesha men and Tsellim Bét women. Evening talk in Ḥabesha bars revealed a typical saying popular among men: The Tsellim Bét women were perceived as very attractive, much more than “their own” women, as they had very round forms (jokingly called in their familiar talk “*qotsri ḥaddē*” = ‘number 8’, as that number is imagined to visualize the forms of a Tsellim Bét woman – typical bar talk).

Descriptions by Ch'aré largely, but not fully, confirmed the traditions told by the Ḥabesha settlers, who tended to idealize their relation. It is striking to observe the behaviour of Ch'aré in the market – never one could see anyone alone, they were always moving in a way that one would not see them first – while especially younger Ḥabesha were much more actively moving around in the public space, showing off, amusing themselves loudly, in contrast to the much more shy appearance of Ch'aré. Ch'aré informants strongly underlined that their relation to the Ḥabesha was traditionally very good, as they were helping each other. However, they also mentioned that in the past there was the danger to get kidnapped. They underlined, that their identity was “Tigrayan”, but they were not Ḥabesha. They spoke Tigrīñña like all Tigrayans, but their origin was different. Therefore they are a *bihér* (‘people’) for their own, Ch'aré informants claim; some locals also call them a *bihère seb* (‘ethnic [sub]group’, a smaller unit than *bihér* in Tigrīñña). But when asked about their nationality respectively ethnic background in offices, they would generally reply with “Tigrayan” (‘Tigrayan’).

The Ch'aré in the towns have largely adapted to the Ḥabesha lifestyle, from clothing to the small rituals of daily life (see fig. 3). They are Orthodox Christians like the majoritarian society. However, their rituals still seem to differ from the classical Orthodox traditions, with syncretistic elements; trees and water places are regarded to bear special powers; baptisms are celebrated in the public in the rivers, e.g. in May T'imqet. Two documented Ch'aré genealogies show an adaptation process which must have started already at least six generations before: Most persons listed in these local Ch'aré genealogies bore typical Tigrīñña/Amharic, and sometimes explicitly Orthodox Christian, names – names which were inspired from their masters, and thus not forcingly signs for a full conversion to Christianity, but already for their inclusion into the dominant highlanders' culture. Names with non-religious background are more widespread: such as T'uquré (‘my black one’), Yemata (‘from the evening’, i.e. born after sunset), Wegaḥta (‘dawn’, i.e. born in the morning), Sennay (‘happiness’ [in hunting]). However, despite the very strong

adaptation processes, which also led to the fact that until today no one has yet described them as *bibér*, the Ch'aré also managed to keep a strong identity. This identity is not revealed to others, does not lead to any claim for recognition, but is still felt strongly within the group; the group's proper name is usually not revealed to others, the leading culture is adapted especially where it is visible (clothes, jewelry, pottery, coffee ceremony) and the language of the ancestors given up in daily life. However, less "visual" aspects of their own culture and traditions are preserved, such as the "inner" group identity, their traditional medicine and some oral traditions. One may speak of ethnic "mimikry" (Smidt 2008:233), the group being of reduced visibility only – which we may understand as a strategy of survival. While being known locally (even if partially only), they do not appear within any larger political or administrative structures of the regional state until today. One knowledgeable Ch'aré informant mentioned – in contrast to the others, who insisted to be the "original" settlers of the land – that in ancient times the Ch'aré had lived in the highlands up to Aksum, but had been displaced by the expanding Habesha starting from the rise of the Aksumite Empire. This story of origin may be understood as one more element of adaptation to a culture perceived as the leading one – the Tigrayan culture, which is based on the glory of Aksum; thus the myth of origin of the Ch'aré is consequently also linked with Aksum, claiming even a more ancient right over it than the Habesha (if this tradition is not linked with a real link with the area or group of people appearing in the *Metshafe Aksum*, mentioned above).

Economically the Ch'aré seem to have acquired a relative wealth, based on diverse activities from agriculture, hunting, fishing to small trade (on the May Gaba market). The Ch'aré are active fishermen at the Tekkeze and its tributaries Qalema, Zarema, Deqoqo, Tewlembe, and the Minmine. They are using fishing-hooks and sometimes poisonous liane leaves that kill fishes; fishes are dried and sold at markets. As the linguistic evidence discussed above shows, the Ch'aré must have been active in agriculture already since long, thus disproving the leading Habesha discourse, which sees them as hunters and gatherers only. Their main grain is sorghum, but also sesame; they also produce cotton. Oil is produced by them from oil seeds with wooden mills driven by camels and sold in local markets. The economical activities of the Ch'aré again remind of the Gumuz: The Gumuz are usually "shifting agriculturalists and agro-pastoralists" (Abbink 2005:916). Products of Gumuz are cotton, coffee, peanuts, millet, oil seeds, beans, sorghum; also animal husbandry is practised, and "hunting, fishing and gathering" (ibid. 917; see for more detail information on the Gumuz, including their relation to the Ethiopian highlanders, Donham – James 1986).

Conclusion

The Ch'aré seem to be an example for a precarious, but all in all successful adaptation of a marginal group, which integrated itself into the majoritarian society both culturally and religiously. This adaptation was carried out without

fully giving up their separate identity – which remains hidden and thus “invisible”. This is certainly a result of a long history of domination, which led to the development of economic and cultural survival strategies. Their “friendship” with the dominant group, which is one of these strategies, also has to be seen in the context of local concepts of “blackness” and stereotypes linked with it. These traditional views mix and clash with modern politically correct discourses, which led to the adoption of a new ethnonym – which, however, still does not recognize the self-designation of the group.

Both the linguistic and ethnographic observations strongly suggest a link of the Ch'aré with the diverse Gumuz groups in western Ethiopia, even if they are rather far from the Ch'aré. The historical traditions both of the Ḥabesha settlers and the “indigenous” Ch'aré suggest, however, that these relations may not be very recent and probably predate at least the high time of the 16th century Mezege kingdom – while it shall not be excluded that there were some contacts between Gumuz groups and this region until only a few generations ago, e.g. due to slave-raiding or to voluntary migration (as the singular tradition about a link with Qwara suggests). The preliminary data of this research support the idea of Gumuz having settled in a large area reaching from Mezege via Wegera and Metemma down to the boundaries of Beni Shangul, perhaps much more interlinked with each other in the past, even if probably never settling in a continuous territory, but with considerable distances between each other due to migration or displacement. It remains an important question how ancient the presence of the Ch'aré in Mezege really is – more data on this will help to get a clearer idea on the unknown populations of the Mezege kingdom and the never clearly specified ‘black populations’ of the lowlands mentioned in Gonderine and earlier documents such as the *gedl* of Samu'él of Waldibba.

Future research is scientifically especially promising on linguistic questions, not only as the language treated in this article is one of the most endangered languages of Ethiopia, but also due to the possible theoretic implications for the study of Nilo-Saharan. Also archaeology and heritage studies would bring important results, not the least because of the Gondarine castle of Bét Mulu' hitherto totally unknown to researchers; a publication treating especially the research results on this castle is in preparation. A further and more profound study and re-reading of historical sources is an urgent desideratum, as the known Ethiopian and foreign sources might have partially been misread, as the existence of the Ch'aré and Shiro (and possibly other local groups) in the region was not known to researchers, who usually interpreted the mentioned ‘black people’ as Kunama or Nara – even in regions far beyond their traditional territory. This also leads to the necessity of a documentation and re-interpretation of ethnic and toponymic information contained on maps on this region, which are – even if not detailed – abundant, as the northwestern Ethiopian borderlands had attracted several explorers and travellers especially in the 19th century, whose reports were used by cartographers. The present research was territorially very limited, therefore a further ethnological study following this one should survey the areas from the adjacent Shiré low- and

highlands to the western plains of the Qaft'a-Ḥumera lowlands, as sources point to the existence of pockets of groups of most diverse origins. This will help to enlighten not only the migration and settlement history of this vast, almost unstudied region, but also, with the help of yet totally unrecorded oral traditions, to enlighten its political history – from the once militarily very active local Muslim kingdom of Mezega (“Belew Kelew”), the important Sudanese Funj-state of Sinnār, to the establishment of the Gonderine rulership, and to local conflicts between expanding Egypt and the new, consolidating Ethiopian highland rulership starting from the mid-19th century.

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