

Unique Textiles of Tigray

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1. Introduction

In 1998 a small group of textiles unlike any other in the world were found in Tigray. These extraordinary weavings are large cotton curtains made over a period of several decades in the mid-to late-nineteenth century to hang in a number of churches located in the Tembén and nearby region (fig 1). They and their silk prototypes¹ are the only textiles of such monumental size woven in the tablet or card weaving technique known to exist anywhere. Tablet weaving, which is an ancient technique used extensively in northern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East, is typically confined to producing narrow bands and belts a few centimeters in width.²

The significance of these textiles, aside from their being unique, is that their existence is an example of a foreign artistic technique being introduced to Ethiopia, used for a very specific purpose across a period of more than a century, before gradually declining and disappearing without being adopted into daily use in spite of its potential practical application. These curtains are also material evidence confirming the existence of the foreign artisan settlements said to have grown up across highland Ethiopia near the courts of local rulers to provide their needs for apparel, weapons, tools, utensils, and other items not traditionally manufactured in Ethiopia at the time.³

1 A description of the silk prototype is given in the following paragraphs.

2 Tablet weaving is a technique of combining warp and weft, characterized by the use of flat tablets, or cards, for the production of the shed. These tablets, usually square and made of some stiff material, carry the warp through holes punched in their four corners. Because all the tablets have to be gripped together by the weaver's hands, the technique has only rarely been used for textiles wider than a few centimeters, e.g. for narrow bands. As it requires only the tablets, a beater to force the weft into position, and some means of tensioning the warp, the technique has had a wide distribution from the sixth century onward, but mainly in northern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. Peter Collingwood, *The Technique of Tablet Weaving*, 1982, 1986.

3 Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1990

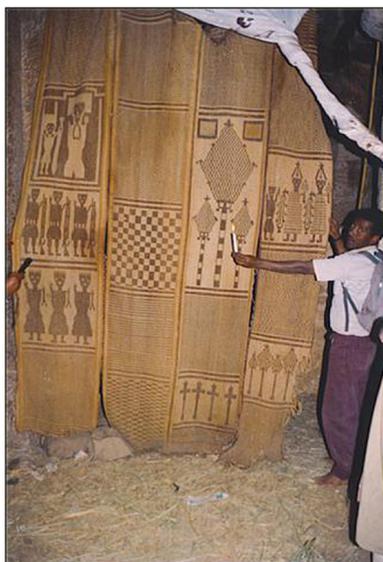


Fig. 1: Curtain Hanging in a Tembén Church

This essay is intended to place these unusual textiles in the context of Tigrayan cultural history, to relate the story of the discovery of an unrecognized treasure, and to emphasize the urgency of the present campaign in Ethiopia to raise awareness of the value of preserving such objects of their cultural heritage.

2. The Tigrayan Cotton Tablet-Woven Curtains and their Prototype

The first examples of tablet woven curtains made of cotton yarn were discovered by the author in 1998 at Gebri'él Wuqén, Abba Yohanni, and Qoraro. Since that time similar curtains or fragments thereof have been recorded in eleven more churches in the region between Aksum and Meqele.⁴ The curtains consist of narrow panels sewn together into a wide hanging suspended with loops from wooden poles fixed between columns to conceal the maqdas, or holy of holies, in the church. Examples found are made up of from three to ten panels each. The cotton curtains range in length from 370 cm to 540 cm and panels vary in width between 22 and 36.5 cm. Each panel is decorated with distinctively Ethiopian designs, arranged in

⁴ Of the curtains found in the 14 churches recorded to date, curtains in five churches visited between 1998 and 2002 have been thoroughly analysed and published by M. Henze and M. Gervers (see References). This paper briefly describes six recorded in 2004-5. Prof. Gervers plans an article covering the details of these six plus three others not yet recorded. Images of all the silk and cotton tablet-woven curtains can be found on the University of Toronto's Deeds Project website: <http://ethiopia.deeds.utoronto.ca>.

figural registers combined with registers of geometric patterns along the length of the panel. They were woven of brown dyed and natural colored cotton yarn in a technique called double-faced tablet weaving or card weaving. See description of the technique in footnote 2 and photographs of a representative group of the curtains in figs. 4 – 13.

The existence of these cotton tablet-woven textiles might never have been known if Emperor Teowodros had not antagonized Queen Victoria of England so much that she sent General Napier with an expeditionary force to his fortress at Meqdela in 1868.⁵ The prototype of these cotton curtains was almost certainly the heavy hangings made of colored silk yarn found among the treasures Tewodros had looted and stored at Meqdela. After the Emperor's suicide, The British Museum agent on the scene purchased one large panel and two officers collected others which then found their way into Western museums, one single panel to the British Museum, one three-paneled curtain to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (fig. 2). In the latter museum the hanging came to the attention of a scholar with an interest in Ethiopia, Prof. Michael Gervers of the University of Toronto. His presentation on the subject at the Third International Conference on Ethiopian Art at Addis Ababa University in 1993 (proceedings in press) and publication of an article in the *Rotunda Magazine* of the Royal Ontario Museum⁶ alerted others active in the field of Ethiopian studies including Paul and Martha Henze. This presentation led to the Henzes' recognition of the silk panels at Abba Gerima (fig. 3) in 1995 and the cotton curtains which they discovered at Gebri'él Wuqén in



Fig. 2 (Left): View of a Long Curtain in Red and Blue Stripes



Fig. 3 (Right): Fig. 4 (Right): Color Silk Curtain from Abba Gerima

5 Darrell Bates, *The Abyssinian Difficulty*, 1982.

6 Michael Gervers, "The death of King Bakaffa, Story Told in Silk" *Totunda*, 27/4, 1995

1998⁷ (fig. 4) His specialization in textiles and medieval history led Prof. Gervers to design a detailed study of this extraordinary hanging. The Canadian Conservation Institute undertook the cleaning and conservation of the panel and an analysis of its structure and of the dyes used in preparing the yarn.⁸ Prof Gervers continued his research and enlisted the assistance of Dr. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska of Uppsala University in Sweden in iconographic interpretation of the figures on the curtains. They concluded that the textiles were probably commissioned to honor the royal family of Gonder, King Bekaffa and Queen Mintewwab with their son. King Bekaffa and his wife reigned together from 1721 to 1730.⁹ It is likely that the British Museum curtain was woven during the king's lifetime. The curtain in the Royal



Fig. 4 (Left): Weaving kept in Gabriel Wuqén



Fig. 5 (Right): Detail from Weaving kept in Gabriel Wuqén

Ontario Museum depicts only the figures of a crowned queen and an uncrowned king indicating that it may have been made after King Bekaffa's death in 1730 and reflects the historical reality that Queen Mintewwab ruled as regent until their son assumed the throne as King Iyasu II in 1738. She was the most influential figure

7 Martha Henze, "Tablet-woven Curtains from Ethiopia: New Light on a Puzzling Group of Textiles". *The Textile Museum Journal*, 1999-2000.

8 The results of the dye analyses were published in three CCI Analytical Reports, listed in References of this paper and summarized in The Textile Museum Journal article above.

9 For details of their comprehensive study of the silk hangings in the British Museum and in the Royal Ontario Museum see Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers: "Monumental Ethiopian tablet-woven silk curtains: a case for royal patronage", *The Burlington Magazine* 138, 1996.

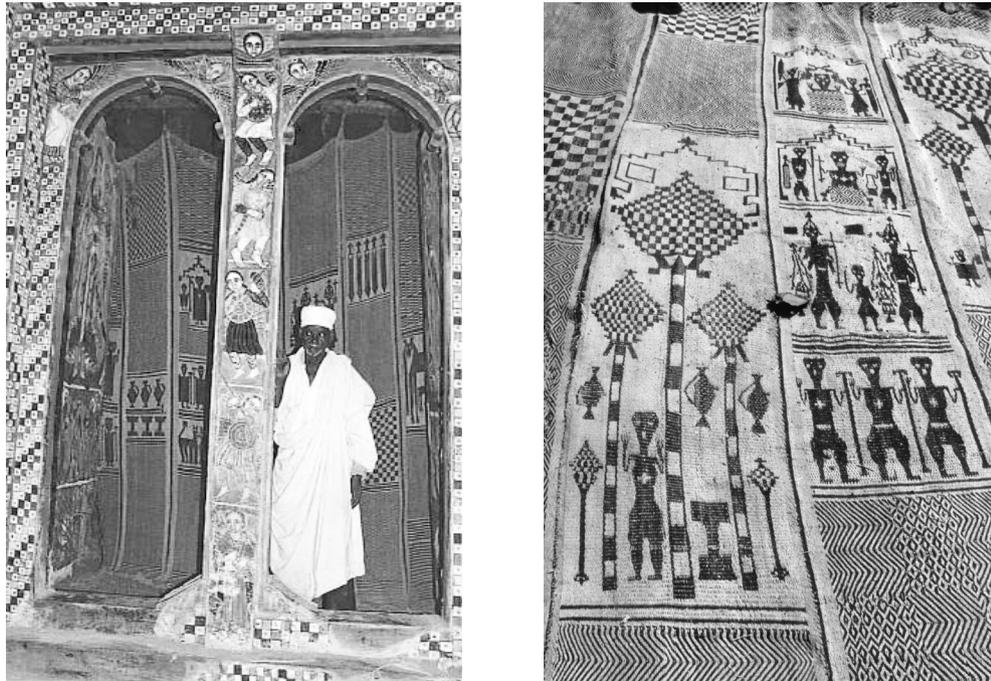


Fig. 6 (Left): Monastery of Ruba Qwisa
Fig. 6a (Right): Detail from Hanging in Inda Abba Hadera



Fig. 7: Hanging from the Monastery of Inda Abba Hadera

in the Gonderine dynasty for many years until its power declined in the late 18th century.

The most prominent designs on the silk curtains clearly depict Ethiopian ceremonial events. In both examples, crowned figures are shown seated on thrones attended by angels and ecclesiastical personages wearing neck crosses, holding processional crosses, and carrying books, censers, and prayer sticks resembling those still in use today in Ethiopian churches. They are guarded by soldiers carrying rifles and other accoutrements recognizable as models appropriate to the mid-18th century. Other registers feature the arrangement of figures and objects interpreted by Gervers and Balicka-Witakowska as representing the Crucifixion and the Trinity which are repeated in an assemblage of crosses and figures, all instantly recognizable as Ethiopian

Two other three-paneled silk hangings of a size similar to the one at the Royal Ontario Museum had been reported as hanging in the monastery church of Abba Gerima and was photographed by the French scholar Guy Annequin in the 1960s but remained unpublished.¹⁰ After Gervers introduced the BM and ROM hangings at a conference in 1990, Paul Henze re-discovered the hangings in the monastery of Abba Gerima while traveling on a photographic expedition in 1995, photographed them thoroughly and this writer included them in her article for *The Textile Museum in Washington, DC*, published in 2000, in which she recorded the sighting of the first cotton curtains. One three-paneled Abba Gerima curtain has a central panel with four registers of ecclesiastical figures between two side panels of geometric patterning only. A second curtain woven of the same red, green, blue, and yellow silk yarn has three panels filled with blocks of various geometric designs. The priests said that the curtains had come to Abba Gerima during the reign of *ras* Mika'él Sihul of Tigray who lived from 1686 to 1780 and was closely involved with Gondarene dynastic politics for several decades of the 18th century. The Abba Gerima curtains might have been companion side pieces for the figural panels from Meqdela. No other such curtains of heavy silk have yet been found elsewhere in Ethiopia.

With the exception of the royal figures, many of the designs and objects found in the silk curtains are replicated in those made of cotton. They also feature the same geometric patterning, religious figures, and displays of ecclesiastical objects, some in the crucifixion arrangement, but most are apparently used as decorative ornament. Just as the luxurious silk tablet-woven curtains were hung in Gonder under commission from the reigning king and queen of the time, the more humble brown and white tablet woven curtains of the Tembén are said to have been distributed to churches in his kingdom by Emperor Yohannes IV during his reign from 1872 to 1889. Given differences in design among them, it is possible that some were ordered by different patrons.

10 Guy Annequin provided Gervers with a copy of the manuscript and a photograph of one Abba Gerima curtain hanging before the *meqdes* of the church. See Michael Gervers, "The tablet-woven hangings of Tigre, Ethiopia: from history to symmetry", *The Burlington Magazine*, cxlvi, September 2004.

According to oral tradition, the silk and cotton curtains also share a common origin, though separated in age by about 150 years. At Abba Gerima, when asked by Guy Annequin and by Paul Henze where their silk curtains had come from and who made them, the answer was the same. In 1995 Henze was told that they had received the hangings during the reign of *ras* Mika'él Sihul who was closely involved with the Gonderine court especially during the regency of Queen Mentuab 1730-1769. The priests said that they were made in a village called May Zbi south of 'Adwa by people called "Seglin" who had come from somewhere else and were not Ethiopian. Thirty years earlier, Guy Annequin had been told that they were made at a "village near Mount Dammo Gelila, ten kms south of 'Adwa", most likely the same location.¹¹ The tablet-woven cotton curtains found in the Tembén since 1998 have been attributed in at least two churches to the same unidentified Seglin in the same area. In 2002, Gervers was told at Giyorgis Ruba Qwisa that they had received their hangings from Emperor Yohannes IV who had ruled Tigray from his capital Meqele from 1872 to 1889.¹²

Given the oral evidence, it seems safe to say that the silk curtains were woven in the second quarter of the 18th century by a royal commission for the Gonder court and it is likely that the Abba Gerima curtains were made at the same time and in the same workshop. Clearly, the patron who commissioned the cotton curtains for the Tembén churches, presumably Emperor Yohannes IV, was aware of or had seen the silk curtains woven for Gonder royalty approximately 150 years earlier. He was also aware that there were weavers living in an artisan village south of 'Adwa who could reproduce them. The intriguing question is: Who were these people and where have they and knowledge of this technique gone?

The present writer agrees with Prof. Gervers that the Seglin weavers were most probably Jewish immigrants from Yemen¹³ where there is a long tradition of producing fine small bags and belts in the table weaving technique among the Jewish community. There is evidence of a great deal of trade through the centuries and of migration across the Red Sea, especially in turbulent times.¹⁴ This weaving technique is also widespread in Egypt but the connections supporting the Red Sea influence seem stronger.

In Ethiopia, tablet weaving appears to have been introduced by a group of foreign weavers who adapted their own traditional weaving skill to create the splendid silk curtains honoring Gondar's royalty. The patrons for such work were few and knowledge of the technique disappeared among the foreign artisans and their Ethiopian assistants¹⁵ as generations passed. Prof. Gervers suggests that

11 Gervers, op cit. 2004.

12 Michael Gervers, op cit, 2004; Martha Henze, op cit, 2000.

13 Michael Gervers, op cit, 2004.

14 Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper, "The Jews in Yemen", The Israel Museum, 1994

15 There is no evidence that Ethiopians were employed in the production of the curtains but it is reasonable to suppose that Ethiopian weavers may have been trained to some degree to execute simpler designs in a project of this magnitude. One panel of the silk curtains, 70 cm in width, would have required the use of over 350 tablets, impossible to manipulate

they may have worked in Gonder when the kingdom was strong but moved to Tigray and settled south of 'Adwa when that region became more prosperous and powerful.¹⁶ Emphasis shifted almost entirely from royal ceremonies to religious symbols although there are a few instances in the cotton panels where a weaver has tried to reproduce the royal figures seen in the prototype silk hangings, for example, Gebri'él Wuqén and Inda Abba Hadera. (see figs.).

3. Brief Description of the Cotton Tablet Woven Curtains Found – 1998-2006

The first cotton tablet-woven curtains were found in 1998 hanging across the maqdas of the great basilica rock church of St. Gebri'él Wuqén which is located not far from 'Abiy 'Addi in a cliff facing Worqamba across a broad valley.¹⁷ Fig. 4 two complete curtains woven of a thick loosely spun natural and brown dyed cotton were made up of four panels, approximately 370 cm long and 46 cm wide. Each panel displayed several registers of primarily ecclesiastical figures and objects, interspersed with well executed geometric patterning. A third curtain has three panels of geometric patterns only. All showed signs of having hung for many years. Almost all of the original hanging loops had been replaced by leather ones. They were heavy with dust and the bottom edges were frayed from contact with the stone floor as they were pulled aside over and over.

During a second visit to Gebri'él Wuqén the following year, we learned that the church of Abba Yohanni on the other side of the mountain also had curtains similar to these. Indeed it does have the remnants of a three-paneled curtain ornamented with a variety of crosses amid geometric patterning only and has been amended with panels of plain-woven fabric (fig 5). The tablet-woven panels were woven with tightly spun cotton yarn which permitted the weaver to depict details of the figures very sharply.

A fragment of two panels of a curtain was found on the same trip in Qoraro Maryam. Qoraro lies not far from Hagere Selam where we were told by the eldest priest that the curtain had been complete when he came there in 1942-43 but had been lost in a fire some years later. The fragment was found in the new church which replaced it. When we asked if they knew of churches with similar curtains nearby, we were told that curtains like these had been brought to three churches in the area at the same time—"to Qoraro Maryam and to one the East and one to the West", a clue that has proven to be true.

in one pack. The weavers must have devised a stationary apparatus to hold the warps in tension and divided the threads into manageable packs so that two or more weavers could work side by side. See Collingwood, pp 28-35, for an illustration of how this could be done.

¹⁶ Gervers, op cit, 2004

¹⁷ More detailed descriptions can be found in Martha Henze, 2000, and Gervers 2004

In 2002, it was finally possible to visit these two churches which lie south of Qoraro. An extremely rough track barely negotiable by land cruiser descends a valley-side several kilometers before reaching a relatively level area where the first church, Giyorgis Ruba Qwisa, lies. The further 6 kilometers to Inda Abba Hadera must be done on foot. At Giyorgis Ruba Qwisa, a curtain of ten panels still hangs inside the painted doorway of the *meqdes* (fig. 6). Each panel measures 45 cm in width, making this the widest set of the tablet-woven curtains yet found.¹⁸ A panel decorated with processional crosses arranged to represent the Trinity takes the central place, while other panels contain ecclesiastical figures and paraphernalia. Two panels, however, are enlivened by a pair of confronting felines and a pair identified by Gervers as a mare and foal with long tether ropes.

The curtain at Inda Abba Hadera had been saved when the church burned a few years ago and will be hung in the new church being built. Two panels made up of blocks of geometric patterns flank four figural panels. Two panels feature assemblages of processional crosses like those of Ruba Qwisa, one panel has the confronting felines and the mare and foal and a row of staff crosses. The fourth panel interestingly features two seated figures one crowned and one with the attributes of a bishop; both are reminiscent of the royal figures depicted in the British Museum and Royal Ontario silk curtains¹⁹ (fig. 8). A seventh panel of geometric patterning has become detached but is in good condition. Priests say that Emperor Yohannes IV commissioned all these curtains during his reign from 1872 to 1889. They cite another church as having one, Qeqema Maryam, which is located high above Chech on the escarpment separating Lower Tembén from the upper region. To date no one has photographed the curtain said to be there still.

By early 2004, Ato Kebede had identified six more churches with curtains; four of them in the same area of Tembén as Ruba Qwisa, Inda Abba Hadera, and Qoraro, that is, south of the east-west road between 'Abiy 'Addi and Meqele. Another lies north of Aksum, a second south of 'Adwa. It is not certain that all of these were commissioned by Emperor Yohannes IV of Tigray, but he was very active in rebuilding and reopening churches that had declined so it is reasonable to suppose that he would outfit them with curtains as he had done to others. It would seem that these curtains, made in a strange way, were considered special and worthy of being the gift of an Emperor.

From examination, it can be concluded that the cotton curtains were probably made over a period of a decade or so in the last quarter of the 19th century. A difference in coloration, weaving skill, and quality of yarn makes it questionable that they were woven by the same weavers at the same time.

The two churches closest to Enda Abba Hadera and Ruba Qwisa have the best preserved examples in this new group: Inda Sillasé Gedam and Maryam Adeferti at Inda Sillasé church a remarkably well-preserved seven-panel curtain was found hanging in place by its original woven loops (fig. 9). Four of the seven

18 The varying width of the curtains suggests that they were most probably brought to the churches as separate panels and assembled to suit the space in each one.

19 Gervers, *op cit*, 2004

panels are filled with well-defined figures, arranged together, followed by three panels of geometric patterning. Figures are primarily ecclesiastical with one very long register filled with crosses and tabot stands and one with a bishop figure accompanied by even rows of five figures holding prayer staffs and six figures with hands raised in prayer. Confronting felines share the panel with them. In another panel three warriors hold spears as tall as they are and share the space with a very large depiction of the “mare and foal” below, ten sheathed swords are arranged across the space. These figures fit the spaces so exactly that they were probably used for decoration rather than having any symbolic meaning. Each side margin is finished with a border 4-5 cm wide in an ochre color, the first time a third color has occurred in these curtains. The seven-panel curtain at nearby Maryam Adeferti has the same characteristics as the Inda Sillasé curtain except it omits the register of warriors with spears. These two clearly were woven at the same time and by the same weaver(s) using the same cartoon instructions.

Two churches, Debre Tserabi and May Anbasa, lie on the “old Tembén road” just southeast of Meqele. They probably received their curtains from Emperor Yohannes IV at a different, earlier, time than those just described. Curtains in both churches are very worn and faded, and all three panels are missing one third to one half their length.²⁰ Whether there were other panels with figures attached to these remnants originally is not known. Now there is only one register of four deacons with censers and a secular person on the piece at May Anbasa. This monastery of five monks had some very interesting manuscripts and crosses and a robe that belonged to Emperor Yohannes in its treasury.

Debre Bankol Medhanina Igzi, a large very old monastery complex which lies northwest of Aksum, owns two five-panel curtains, originally well-woven and of good coloration, but in degraded condition now. Some panels are missing at least one third of their length and have long hanks of loose warps dangling from the remnants. Some hanging loops were replaced with plain woven fabric and each loop has had a metal ring sewn on it at some point before they ceased to use the curtains. A panel of one curtain has a register devoted to a large processional cross, another panel has a row of prayer sticks; the remaining panels were geometric patterns. Two of the five panels of the second curtain have figures. One features an elaborate cross assemblage representing the Crucifixion; the other has a row of long spears.

In 2006, one additional curtain was examined and photographed at the church of Debre Selam Maryam Zengwi which is located in the region called Segli, south of ‘Adwa, the purported homeland of the tablet-woven curtains of Tigray. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the fact here and the example surviving is rather poor one. The three panels are 40-45 cm wide and 222-225 cm long. The surface is much abraded but one panel shows a row of sheathed swords and a pair of confronting felines (fig. 13).

It is unlikely that many Segli curtains remain to be discovered, but it is still possible that a thorough inventory of textiles in church treasuries of Tigray could

20 Debre Tserabi has five sets of three panels each stored in its treasury. This suggests that some of them were attached to one another to make a wider hanging when they were still in use.

reveal a few more. And there remains the mystery of the identity of the weavers to be solved.

Ethiopia is a country like many others that lack resources and expertise to care for all the precious articles that the centuries of history have left to them. There are many more pressing issues facing the country, but it is heartening to see a major campaign to preserve its heritage taking shape. The most important task now is to find ways to improve the conditions in which unique historical objects like these are kept and to encourage education in subjects that will prepare young Ethiopians to undertake the preservation of their heritage before it is too late.