

Gunda-Gundo

Kevin O'Mahoney

1. Historical Background

The name “Gunda-Gundo” may be translated, in the local Irob language, as ‘The Scrambling Place for Wood’ because young people gathered to collect wood on the bend of the River Kaswa. The monastery is built at that location. But to grasp the origin and significance of the monastery it is necessary to go back in history, perhaps even before the reign of ‘Amde Tsion (1314-1344).

Ewostatéwos (c. 1273-1352) was a young monk in Ger’alta when he came to the conclusion that to save Ethiopian Christianity from decadence some reforms were necessary and they should begin in the monasteries. One of his most contested reforms proposed that the Sabbath should be honoured as well as the Sunday. Such a proposal was in violation of the Alexandrine tradition, which in the XIIIth century had suspended all customs that could be traced back to the Old Testament. The monastery in Ger’alta rejected his proposed reforms. From there he went to make foundations in Seraye and also in Shiré. Quite possibly he was a co-founder of the monastery of Abune Zekaryas in Cherni Abesa, just north of Inda Sillasé, which was founded in 1300 and followed the rule of Ewostatéwos. Further conflicts with the monastic community took him to Cairo about 1337 where he hoped to obtain redress from the Patriarch of Alexandria. After failing to obtain any support he went into self-imposed exile in Armenia, which was renowned for its monastic asceticism. There he died about 1352.

2. The Stephanites

Ewostatéwos’ idealism, however, had infected other monks, most notably Istifanos, who was born about 1394 in Subuha-Sa’isi’. After being ordained a deacon by the Alexandrine metropolitan at the age of 18, he entered the monastery of Debre Qoyatsa, near Inda Sillasé. For 12 years he remained in prayerful contemplation before being ordained a priest in 1424. On returning to his monastic community he rebuked the monks for failing to observe Holy Scripture and the Apostolic Canons.

In turn, the monks accused him of trying to impose excessive ascetical practices and expelled him. So, about 1428, together with a few disciples, he set out to found his own monastery.

The monastery of Debre Qoyatsa was destroyed by *imam* Ahmed al-Ghazi's armies in 1536 and only restored by Bekaffa (1721-1730).

It might be said that the Stephanite schism formally dates from that epoch. I have called it a "schism" rather than a "heresy" because I cannot trace any differences of a doctrinal nature, but only of disciplinary practices of a puritanical nature in opposition to the Alexandrine metropolitans. The Stephanites, therefore, represented a puritanical sect within the Ethiopian Church. Besides insisting on the observance of the Sabbath, they refused to pay the traditional reverences to the Cross and Mary. For their obstinacy ordination to the priesthood was forbidden to members of the Stephanite sect.

Within the context of those early years after the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty towards the end of the XIIIth century, the unity of the country called for close ties between the Crown and the Church. Anything that might be looked upon as weakening the ties of the king and the metropolitan was considered to be a threat to the nation. Between Ewostatéwos and Istifanos insubordination to the established ecclesiastical authority took on a much wider perspective since their practices were not merely confined to monasteries but also rallied numbers of ordinary laity. In self-defence the Crown could not tolerate such a menace. Persecutions of the schismatic sect were, therefore, as much national issues as breaches of ecclesiastical discipline as affecting the lives of the ordinary laity.

In this regard I might mention that even in the late 1960s it was extremely difficult in 'Agame to find men willing to take part in construction work on a Sabbath.

3. The Monastery of Gunda-Gundo

In Gunda-Gundo's list of priors Istifanos is recorded as being the first. Nominally, that might have been so, but, while agreeing that he died in 1438, it is also asserted elsewhere that he died for his tenacity in the prison of Zer'a Ya'iqob (1434-1468). While on his way to the court of the king, however, Istifanos is said to have stopped at "Qeyh Anf" ("Red Headland"), near 'Idaga Ḥamus. From that headland he looked down towards the River Kaswa and said: "*There is the region that will be a refuge for my disciples.*" Until then it was said to have been an abode for wild animals and scarcely populated. In the vicinity, however, there is a district called "'Addi Keshi" ("The home of priests") with an old church dedicated to St. Michael. Most probably there had been, or were, some hermits.

Dr. Schneider, for example, affirms that during the first half of the XIVth century there was already a religious community in the region of the River Kaswa. Whether or not they lived at Gunda-Gundo is a matter of conjecture. The question might also be asked: Were they disciples of Ewostatéwos or others? Dr. Enno Littmann,

whose jubilee we are celebrating, states that among the inscriptions that he found in Aksum there is reference to a sovereign called Dani'el. He is considered by some to have been a forerunner of the Zagwe dynasty after having defeated Judith's descendants. She had been influential in bringing about the decline of Aksum and the destruction of Debre Dammo. To escape her attempts to eradicate Ethiopian Christianity archaeological evidence suggests that royalty and eminent ecclesiastics took refuge down the eastern slopes of Tigray. Mordini even refers to four metropolitans being in that locality during the second half of the XIIIth century.

To the east and southeast other Stephanite monasteries were founded from Gunda-Gundo. The most ancient of these was at Des'a, east of Wuqro, and it was there that Abune Abakerazun, the second on the list of priors died in 1471. In the vicinity of that region three other foundations were made. But down the slopes to the east of Gunda-Gundo four other monasteries were also established. Little or nothing of most of these foundations remains, as *imam* Ahmad al-Ghazi destroyed them. Quite a lot of their religious and artistic treasures, however, were brought for safety to Gunda-Gundo, and there they remained, as that was one of the few places that he never sacked.

Although Zer'a Ya'iqb is reputed to have put to death about seventy Stephanites in the early years of his reign, he sought to reconcile the Stephanites with the national church at the Synod of Mi'tmaq in 1450. He accepted the observation of the Sabbath, but the monks seem to have been unwilling to accept ordination from the Alexandrine metropolitan. Consequently, they were excommunicated. *abune* Ezra, the fourth prior of Gunda-Gundo, went to Jerusalem in 1475 with some companions. There the Syrian patriarch lifted the excommunication and ordained *abune* Ezra. On returning to Ethiopia in 1479 *abune* Yishaq recognised the annulment of the excommunication.

4. Arts and Architecture

When I visited Gunda-Gundo I did not have the equipment to carry out an architectural survey. I was more interested in savouring the community's monastic spirit. Not far from the monastery I met a hermit living in the shelf of overhanging rocks. He told me that he only eat roasted barley and prickly pears when in season. Once a year he washed and that at *Temqet*, the feast commemorating the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Today, taking into account both priests and deacons, the total community might number approximately twenty-five.

For those who might be interested in the monastery's architectural details, I would refer them to A. Mordini's excellent survey "Il Convento di Gunde Gundie" published in *Rassegna Di Studi Etiopici*, 1954. Some of the details decorating the wooden pillars, according to the author, show influences ranging far and wide, Indian, Armenian, Byzantine and North African. That in itself shows the renown of the monastery. Most of the woodwork dates from the last decades of the XIVth or XVth centuries.

At that time, numerous precious manuscripts illustrated with captivating paintings were scattered all over the floor. Many had been deposited there for safekeeping at the time of *imam* Ahmad al-Ghazi. That explains why there is no one consistent style throughout the collection. Dr. Schneider, who visited Gunda-Gundo in 1961, photographed over 7,000 pages of manuscripts. Last year a friend visited the monastery and told me that now the manuscripts are preserved in cupboards.

On his first visit to Gunda-Gundo in January 1844 St. Justin de Jacobis mentions in his diary that he was shown a Greek icon of Mary with Jesus on her knee between her arms. To the right and left of her head were some letters, which for centuries had remained a mystery to the monks. Justin de Jacobis translated these as the Greek abbreviations for "Mother of God". The enigmatic icon was certainly very old and highly revered by the community, as it was only displayed once a year on the patronal feast of Our Lady.

Gigar Tesfaye in his article "*Nouveaux Documents de Gunda Gundie*", published in *Abbay*, No. 11, 1980-1982, has brought to light the background history of the icon. When *abune* Ezra returned from Jerusalem in 1479, after having the excommunication of the Stephanites lifted, he brought the icon with him. The style of the painting resembles that of Salonika in the XIV century.

5. The Situation of Gunda-Gundo Today

5.1. *Vocations*

Some years ago there was quite a large community in the monastery. Today, however, that has shrunk, but there might still be about twenty-five members, including priests and deacons.

5.2. *Resources*

Formerly the monastery possessed considerable land in the vicinity of Gunda-Gundo. In times of irregular rainfall and drought the income from the land helped the monks to survive. Most of their holdings, however, were redistributed following the death of the emperor.

5.3. *Natural Disasters*

Within the last decade or so flash floods swept away the protecting wall alongside the bank of the river. Orange and banana groves, the only source of the monks' income, were in danger of being swept away.

5.4. The Intervention of the Catholic Eparchy of 'Addigrat

Since the monastery of Gunda-Gundo is both a religious and cultural inheritance of the nation, the Eparchy of 'Addigrat made a considerable donation some four or five years ago to rebuild the protecting wall and preserve the fruit garden of the monks.

5.5. 'Addigrat's Gunda-Gundo Committee

About 1842 repairs were made to the monastery. But now the impoverished monks face the burden of repairing the ancient roof of their chapel, which was in danger of collapsing. If the roof collapsed, the tomb of *dejjazmach* Subagadis and many artistic treasures might be endangered. A committee was established in 'Addigrat to help preserve this heritage. Members of the committee requested abune Tesfaslasé to appoint one of his priests to be a member. Once that was done they, in turn, made him their treasurer with the responsibility of keeping account of the donations, big and small, that were being received from benefactors living both in the vicinity and far and wide. Thanks to these donations the first phase of the work has been completed. Very shortly the second phase will begin and the required materials are being held in a container inside the compound of the Cathedral.

6. Summary

The name "Gunda-Gundo" means 'The Scrambling Place for Wood' in Irob language because that spot on the banks of the River Kaswa was where the young people collected wood. The monastery is built at that location.

6.1. Background

Ewostatéwos (c. 1273-1352) considered that monastic reforms were necessary to save Ethiopian Christianity from decadence. One reform was to re-introduce the observation of the Sabbath. Conflicts with various monasteries over his reforms led to quarrels, so he went to Armenia in self-imposed exile. He died there in 1352.

6.2. The Stephanites

About 1394 Istifanos was born in Subuha-Sa'is'i. In 1424 he was ordained a priest. Because he wished to practise the reforms previously initiated by Ewostatéwos, his monastic community expelled him in 1428. That was the beginning of the "Stephanite schism". Because he inspired many monks and laity his schism threatened the unity between the Crown and the established Church. When summoned by Zer'a Ya 'iqob to appear at court he passed near Idaga Hamus. Looking down towards the River

Kaswa he prophesied: "There is the region that will be a refuge for my disciples." Later, in 1438, he died in prison. Zer'a Ya 'iqob's synod of Metmaq (1450) failed to reconcile the Stephanites and the establishment. *Abune Ezra*, the fourth prior of Gunda-Gundo, went to Jerusalem in 1475. The Syrian patriarch there absolved the community of all canonical censures and ordained Ezra a priest. After he returned to Ethiopia in 1479 the Stephanites were accepted by the Ethiopian Church.

6.3. Art and Architecture

After visiting the monastery in 1954 A. Mordini published his detailed survey showing that the designs of the woodwork showed Armenian and Byzantine influences. He stated that they ranged from the last decades of the XIVth to the XVth centuries. A little later, in 1961, Dr. Schneider photographed over 7,000 pages of the manuscripts preserved in the monastery.

6.4. The Situation Today

There are not as many members in the community today as there were formerly. Moreover, the impoverished monks were unable to repair the ancient roof, which was in danger of collapsing. If the roof collapsed the tomb of *dejjazmach* Subagadis and many artistic treasures might be endangered. To preserve this religious and cultural heritage a committee was formed in 'Addigrat. Members of the committee requested the Catholic bishop, *abune* Tesfasillasé to appoint one of his priests to the committee. In due course, the committee made him the treasurer of the funds that benefactors, both near and far, donated to the conservation work. The first phase of that work has now been completed. Very shortly the second phase will begin as the required materials are already being held in a container inside the compound of the Cathedral in 'Addigrat.

Bibliography

Mordini, A.
1954 *Il Convento di Gunde Gundie, Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, pp. 29-70, Roma.

Mordini, A.
1964 Indagini sul Convento di Gunde Gundie e su Problemi di Storia Medioevale Etiopica", Citta del Vaticano, p. 85-111.

Gigar Tesfaye
1979 *Notes sur Gunda-Gundie, Abbay*, No. 10, p. 93-100.

Gigar Tesfaye
1980-1982 *Nouveaux Documents de Gunda Gundie, Abbay*, No. 11, p. 125-134.

Ellero, G.

1939 *I Conventi dello Scire e le loro Leggende*, Reale Societa Geografica Italiana,
p. 835-852, Roma.

Guidi, I.

1899 *Le Liste dei Metropoliti d'Abissinia*, p. 1-16, Roma.

Henze, P.

1998 *A Visit to Gunda Gunde* - February. (Unpublished).

Bandge, W.

1970 *A History of Ethiopia*, Anthropological Publications.