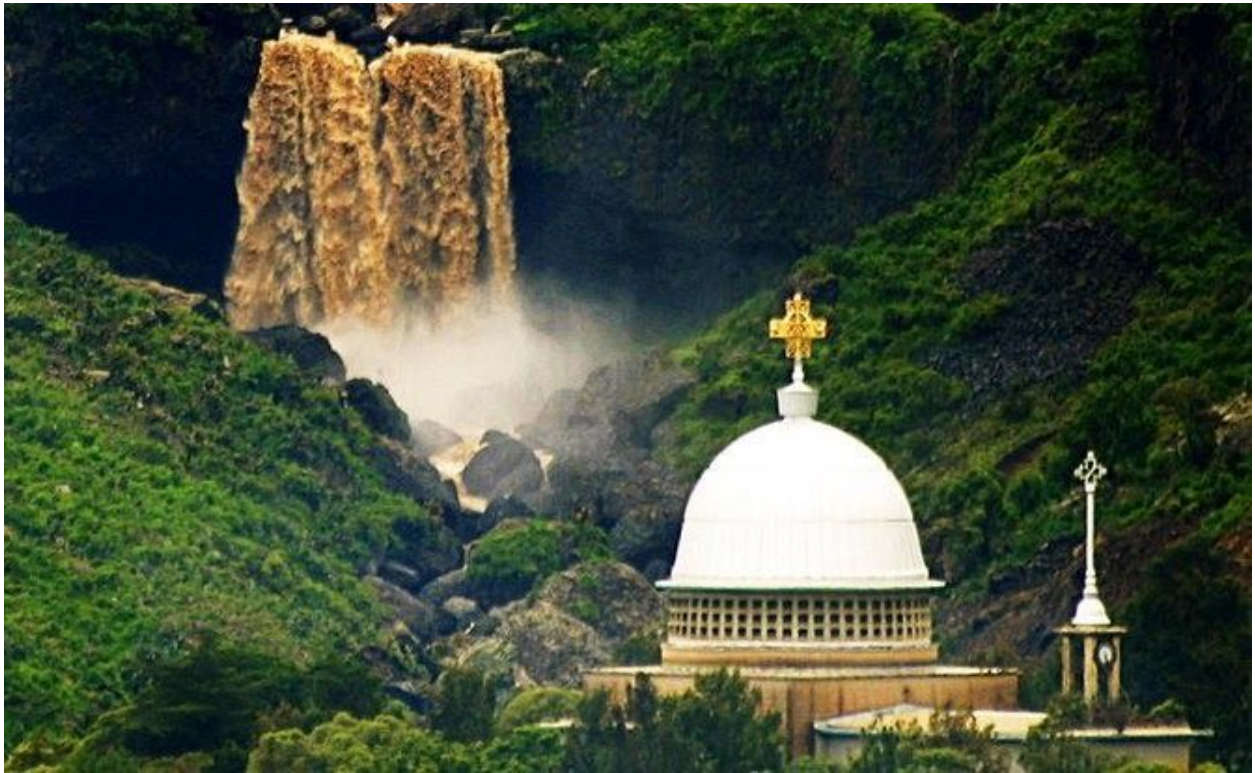


MONASTERIES AND EXORCISMS



Debre Libanos, Ethiopia

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Written by Justin Fornal

“Are you sure we can’t get some buna”?

I plead with my local friend Mikael Tamerat as we stumble along a footpath passing steaming *buna* (coffee) stalls on our way to Debre Libanos Monastery. It is still early in the morning, the mountain air is crisp, and some hot coffee would really set the day right. Toasty smoke billows from the quaint stalls where the coffee beans are roasted fresh for each new pot. Guests are invited to purchase small espresso sized cups of the ebony broth, served with a few sprigs of *Tena’adam* herb, a fragrant highland rue. The proper breakfast outside of Debre Libanos is a few cups of boona and a piece of *ambasha*, a dense focaccia like bread.

“No coffee until after the exorcism. All sacred processions should be done on an empty stomach.”

Mikael is an Ethiopian explorer, born and raised in the nation’s capital Addis Ababa, just 100 miles to the south. During my two week stay he had been incredibly

generous with his time and knowledge, taking me to witness the lesser known rituals and traditions of his homeland that are seldom experienced by outsiders. You could say we had very similar interests. The night before while feasting on *shagnya* (raw cow hump) in chili oil and the quintessential local brew *tella*, Mikael knew exactly how to get my undivided attention.



“Tomorrow is Wednesday. Wednesdays are for exorcisms. At dawn we leave for Debre Libanos”

Debre Libnaos is more than a monastery; it is a collection of churches, caves, and other sacred structures spread over an expansive compound. It is also a destination for pilgrims seeking spiritual assistance, penance and even refuge. The location was founded in the 13th century by Saint Abune Tekle Haymanot. In paintings, the Saint is portrayed with six wings and one leg. His bloodied dismembered limb always posed neatly nearby. One version of the story is that Tekle was standing in prayer for 22 years in a cave. Hoping to crush his devotion, the devil appeared in the cave and



sliced off one of his legs. Utterly devout, Tekle did not fall and stood on one leg praying for an additional 7 more years.

Over the centuries the area became an epicenter of both spiritual practice and academic thought. The compound became the site of a brutal massacre in 1937 when Italian fascists, under the command of Benito Mussolini, slaughtered an estimated 400 monks, priests, and academics, throwing their corpses off of a nearby cliff. The Fascist troops proceeded to loot and lay waste to the compound's religious treasures and vast collection of handwritten scriptures. This was just one of many sacred places that were decimated in the brutal Fascist campaign.

Finally reaching the main thoroughfare, Mikael and I approach two long lines of people, many of whom are wrapped in thick blankets trying to stay warm in the dew soaked grass. The two lines, separated by sex, stem out from the gateway to a small courtyard with a square structure in the middle. Mikael laughs at the host of curious eyes cast in my direction.

"You might be the first American to come to the exorcism."

By the time the hour draws close to 9 am, I notice the two lines have extended to include hundreds of pilgrims.

"Mikael, forgive my ignorance but what exactly are we standing in line for? Is everyone here getting an exorcism or are we just going to be witnesses? It sure doesn't seem like we are all going to fit in that courtyard."

He leans in close and whispers.

"Every Wednesday the pilgrims wait to enter that building, it is the *Meskel Bet* (House of the Cross). Soon the head priest of the Church will come down the hill with the *tsilat*. He will take the *tsilat* into the *Maskel Bet*. When these people see the *tsilat*, those who are possessed will reveal themselves."

"What is the *tsilat*? Is it a scroll or artifact?"

"It is a massive gold Coptic cross. It is so powerful that the priest must keep it wrapped in special fabrics. You're gonna see, when that cross comes down the hill

things are gonna get intense. Who knows, perhaps there is a demon in you that will reveal itself. Haha!”

As we wait, several young pilgrims question Mikael in Amharic in regards to the purpose of my visit. A twelve year old boy named Fikru explains how he has been coming here every Wednesday for two months. He has seen a lot.

“There are all different kinds of demons inside of people.” Mikael translates. “Some of them go easy, some want to negotiate, others want to fight.”

Suddenly an excited murmur rushes over the sleepy crowd. Those who are seated jump up to attention. All eyes turn towards a kaleidoscopic procession strutting down the hill. Several men in brilliant robes escort the head priest who is carrying a sword sized object in front of him swaddled in red velvet. Everyone is mesmerized by the sight as they draw ever nearer. Clusters pilgrims yell out as if in agony.

Mikael leans in, “He has it! That is the *tsilat* he is carrying in his arms. Here we go brother.”

As the group walks through the two lines, everyone sparks to attention and beings mumbling and whispering prayers. The holy procession enters the gates and quickly disappears into the *Meskel Bet*. Then there is silence. A wild ghastly scream cuts the morning air and everyone quickly turns to see a woman with rolling eyes being carried in from the parking lot. Each limb is being held tightly by an adult male. The woman contorts, growls, and twists her mouth in terrible grimaces as she is pulled through the praying crowd. Everyone moves out of the way as the chaotic assembly disappears into the *Meskel Bet*. The entire crowd listens as the woman’s screams crescendo, then fall to silence.

Soon after, an usher appears at the gates and instructs the lines to start filing in.

Participants snake towards the courtyard, filter through the *Meskel Bet*, kiss the cross, and then depart out the rear gate of the courtyard. The entire process starts to feel like talismanic tollbooth. After 30 minutes, we are finally inside the gate. Mikael



instructs me to take off my shoes and when my time comes, to kiss the cross three times. Everyone is barefoot and balancing on the sliver of concrete edging as to not fall into the mud filled yard.

As I enter the *Meskel Bet*, I am immediately cloaked by a very strange sensation. It is as if I have stepped into a painting, a feeling of watching oneself dissolve into a different frequency, becoming one dimensional, almost paper. The tiled floor feels electric and familiar under my naked feet. The mixed aromas and pheromones of all who are present in the tight vestibul send me free wheeling into an overwhelming state of *deja vu*. It is not simply a sense that I have been in this space before, it is something much larger in scope. My mind flutters with rapid snapshots of moments and faces I know but cannot quite place, like a word on the tip of one's tongue. For one fleeting glimpse an entire world sparkles through my cerebellum. Just when I feel like I can wrestle the vision from the shadows of my subconscious, it wriggles free like an eel and slinks back into the dark abyss. Startled by the revelation, I look forward and witness each pilgrim in front of me dropping to their knees and kissing the *tsilat* which is placed across the high priest's lap, still enshrouded in thick red velvet. All the while, two other priests whip and throttle each pilgrim's back repeatedly with large prayer beads. This beating of the demons is also a tradition meant to mirror the moment when Jesus Christ had his flesh torn apart by Roman soldiers who whipped him mercilessly with a Flagrum. As the priests strike down in a hypnotic rhythm, they chant quietly in *Geze'*, an ancient South Semitic language that is considered the sacred voice of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

As I fall to my knees, I take a guess where the top of the cross is beneath the velvet, doing my best to imitate the initiates I saw enter before me. I am surprised that the red velvet is warm against my lips, it is as if the fabric was a pot holder and the cross within had just been pulled from a hot oven. After feeling several rosary wraps across my shoulders, I stand up and look to offer a glance of respect to the priests. They are in a deep state of meditation, their eyes are not present. They gaze right through me. I quickly move out of the way so Mikael can file in behind me. Soon after we exit out the back gate.



Walking through the town with our new friend Fikru, we both feel a shared elation. I fumble for words.

"Something very strange happened back there. I don't know exactly what it was but the energy was crazy."

"It is that cross, man. Some of the Ethiopian crosses are so incredibly powerful. You are feeling that because you got so close. The red velvet represents the holy cleansing fire inside of the cross. One of our greatest crosses was stolen and taken to a museum in Belgium. The museum burned down so they brought the cross back to Ethiopia.

"Wow, that sounds like some of the powers attributed to the Ark of the Covenant."

Mikael nods and smiles, "My country has places and items that are very ancient and very powerful, that is why we have to protect them. Fikru says today's exorcism was very tame. Usually more people are possessed. However he wants to show you one more place."

We follow Fikru past vendors selling giant *tiringo* citrons, ornate velvet umbrellas and large Coptic crosses hand carved from local pink marble until we reach the outskirts of town. We approach a large barn with clouds of silver blue smoke pouring out the open doors. Inside is dark except for the red light coming from glowing fires. The rear wall is stacked floor to ceiling with piles of timber, small trees, and dried bushes. Groups of men are chopping the wood into smaller bits and feeding it into the large fires. The fires fuel massive clay ovens which are filled with hundreds of pieces of flatbread. The aromatic combination of fragrant woods with freshly baking bread is completely intoxicating

"Are they making *injera*?"

"No this is *dabe*, it is unfermented sorghum bread. This is all that the monks in the monastery will eat. It is their sacred food. All of the men working here are pilgrims. By working here, they are being blessed. Everything in this barn is sacred; the sorghum, the wood, the fire, the water, everything.

We walk through the darkness and reach a brick pit filled with embers and ash. Several men sit along the edge soaking their feet deep in the pile of ash as if it were a basin of cool water. Once I get closer, I can see that they have covered their faces and arms in the ash as well.

"Everything is sacred, but especially the ash", Mikael says, inviting me to sit.

"The sacred ash is called *emnet*, in Amharic the word means faith."

We sit down and begin to paint our own faces in the sacred ash. Fikru returns with a piece of the brick hued *dabe* bread straight from the oven. He tears it apart and passes the pieces out amongst us. Being aware of the possibly sensitive etiquette, I watch and wait for Mikale and Fikru to take a bite before I tear into my piece.

The *dabe* has strong sour flavor, surprisingly gritty texture, and a warming smoky finish. It is unlike any bread I have ever tasted. We all sit in smoke filled darkness staring into the glowing coals. Minutes pass without anyone speaking. Finally I break the silence.

"Tell Fikru thank you for bringing us here; It is an incredibly peaceful place."

Mikael nods, "He wants you to know his story."

"He used to be a very active child and a very good student. But about a year ago he started falling asleep in class, could not concentrate, and no longer enjoyed being around the other children. His family believed someone in his village put a bad spell on him. They sent him to *Debre Libanos* by himself on a bus which is 8 hours from his home. He stayed for six months sleeping wherever he could, and praying everyday at the sacred sites. He felt better as if the spells were lifted. Fikru went home and everything was ok for a few weeks, but then the bad feelings came back. So he returned."

"Where does he stay now?"

"He met a nun who lets him sleep in her home. He helps her with housework."

"Will he ever go home again and return to school? He must miss his family so much."

Mikael speaks with Fikru for a few minutes. As Fikru speaks his testimony, for the first time I see our jovial host wear his sadness. My clumsy questions has opened a wound.

As he finishes the story, Fikru instinctively reaches into the fire pit and once again paints his face with a handful of sacred ash. Mikael stares into the glowing coals as he begins to translate.

“He said maybe one Wednesday soon his demon will come out and finally leave, then maybe his family will let him come home to stay.”

JF



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