

# **The Story of Debre Genet Elias: One of the Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia**

By Tsehai Alemayehu

Over the course of my life, I have read many a travelogue about Ethiopia written by serious researchers and itinerant travelers. These books, written almost always by foreign travelers, describe some aspect of Ethiopia or another as a hidden treasure, an unexpected gem, an experience all to itself. Some are taken aback by the natural landscape – the savanna of the Great Rift, the tropical tundra of the Bale and Semien Mountains or the lunar landscape of the Danakil. Others share the unexpected delight of thousand-years old historic relics – from the ancient churches of Lake Tana, Gondar, Tigray and Wollo to the mosques of Harar to the castles spread across the north. Early in life before I had a chance to see for myself, I often set aside all the gushing narratives in these books as the results of low expectations – ‘የፈስ አግግስ ፈረንጅ ወሬ’.

Fortunately, I have lived long enough and have earned the luxury of personal time so I can travel across Ethiopia and visit many of the sites I grew up reading about. I have had a chance to see all of the famous sites and many more that are not as famous. What stands out to me is that travel writers seem to fall head over heels in love with the more visually striking sites. They rarely seem interested in exploring the things that are so much more fundamental to understanding the makeup of the average Ethiopian, the building blocks of the Ethiopian identity. We the natives of that magical land know that these places, institutions and/or events which are rarely featured on magazine covers are the actual hidden treasures of Ethiopia.

I wanted to share with readers the story of one of those hidden treasures whose impact on the history, literature, religious life and culture of Ethiopia is immeasurable. Yet it is so well hidden you probably have never heard of it unless you happen to be a student of one of the disciplines of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church or an aficionado of Ethiopian theatre, literature or history.

This treasure is the Debre Genet Elias Church. Located just a stone's throw from the Abay River in the extreme south of Gojam, Debre Genet Elias (or Debre Elias as it is known by most) was founded in 1474. Ever since, it has been dutifully serving the spiritual needs of parishioners who attend daily mass by the hundreds. But those who know the long history of this institution will argue that its unique position arises from something else. They will tell you that this humble church has been one of the centers of excellence for the education of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church clergy who go on to serve across the country. For over five centuries, it has been home to some of Ethiopia's most elite schools of Zema (spiritual music), Aquaquam (choriography), Qine (poetry), theology, astrology and philosophy.

One can easily point to dozens of better-known churches or monasteries all over the country. The churches in Gondar, Tigray and now Addis, founded at the centers of Ethiopian political power, they have been endowed with substantial economic resources for much of their history. As a consequence, at the height of their respective influence, they were magnates of the very best from across the country. The status of the churches in Lalibela arises from the unfair advantages they draw from the magnificent other worldly architecture they are housed in. However, Debre Genet Elias will hold its own against any of them when it comes to impact on the sustainability of the Orthodox Tewahido tradition.

I have no desire to diminish the contributions of the other centers of excellence. I know I would fall spectacularly were I to attempt to do so. My purpose here is to point to the fact that Debre Genet Elias is one of several less celebrated centers that can go toe to toe with the globally renowned institutes of Gondar, Axum and Lalibela. These are the true hidden treasures of Ethiopia. But like all hidden treasures, they are not part of the well-trodden path.

Debre Genet Elias in particular is incomparable when it comes to its contribution to the sustainability of the Tewahido faith and to the services of its alumni to our country. You would be hard pressed to point to even three or four such institutions large or small that have had greater impact.

To help the reader get a sense of this place among the revered Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido institutions, I give you a sampling of distinguished alumni who studied there and left their mark in the last 100 years. Some of the alumni achieved their distinction within the Tewahido Church system. Others, eventually ventured to civic life and rose to heights matched by very few.

One of the alumni went on a quiet but radical program of reform of the Tewahido Church, including the establishment of “Sebeka Gubae”, Sunday school and the lay choir of women and men. Today nearly every church features these elements, but some 65 years ago, this historic leader faced a near uprising when he proposed these reforms. This distinguished alumnus of Debre Genet Elias is nonother than the recently canonized Saint Theophilos. He was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ethiopian national to serve as the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido church and the 1<sup>st</sup> Patriarch appointed by an Ethiopian sovereign.

Several other alumni went on to rise to the rank of Archbishop of the church. The most prominent among these was Archbishop Petros, the Archbishop of the Archdioces of Gondar and founder of the Monastery of Debre Sina Mariam in Gorgora. Archbishop Petros was a contemporary of St. Theophilos and a distinguished scholar in the same class as his contemporary. While these two stand out, Debre Genet Elias produced several other important archbishops and scholars in the last 100 years.

Yet another alumni distinguished himself within the Tewahido church but in an entirely different vein. Here I am speaking of Dr. Isaias Aleme. In his youth, he established himself as a talented student of Zema and Aquaquam in Debre Elias. Later on, he contributed immensely to Saint Theophilos’ modernizing project by composing many of the songs ley members now sing on every occasion. He wrote the lyrics and music for “እንደቸርነትህ” and “አባታችን ሆይ”, among others.

Many more alumni of Debre Genet Elias, with and without further training, achieved prominence in Ethiopian civic life. Two of them stand out not just because they stand at the pinnacle of their respective fields, but because they innovated those fields. One was the first modern Ethiopian playwright, journalist, patriot and public intellectual Kegn-Geta Yoftahae Nigussie. He was the founder and leader of the early theatre arts movement in Addis. A patriot who fought against the Italians in the last war, he personally created a propaganda unit to help keep the morale of the patriots fighting at home and of the Emperor campaigning abroad. Unfortunately for him, he quickly fell out of the Emperor’s good graces once victory was won. When the Emperor disappointed many by elevating those who fled the country during the war bypassing those who organized and led the patriotic guerilla warfare and laid siege to Italian forces, he wrote “እናት ኢትዮጵያ ሞኝ ነሽ ተላላ፣ የሞተልሽ ቀርቶ የገደለሽ በላ”። And in so doing he started the popular discontent against the way the Emperor was leading the nation. He died of poisoning when he was still in his early 40s.

The other is the first Ethiopian novelist, not just in the sense that his novels have sold many more copies than any other but also because his “ፍቅር እስከ መቃብር” is considered to be the first Ethiopian novel. Of course, I am speaking here of the one and only Dr. Haddis Alemayehu. He is a man of many talents who served his country in numerous roles. Before everything, he distinguished himself as a master of ቅኔ። He polished his skills in this field first in Debre Genet Elias and then went on for advanced study to Debre Work and Dima.

He is a true renaissance man. He was a patriotic fighter during the Ethio-Italian war. He was captured and imprisoned at multiple Italian garrisons in the Mediterranean until he was freed when the allied forces overrun these garrisons early in the second world war. He immediately joined the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the chief propaganda officer and served in the diplomatic corps representing Ethiopia in those early post-war days when the new world order was being negotiated and redrawn.

Within the country, he served in multiple departments at the ministerial rank. While his most significant work might have been his public service, Dr. Haddis is best known for his many novels. He has written several volumes both before and after ፍቅር እስከ መቃብር. But that is the volume which elevated Ethiopian fictional writing to new heights. He is a household name even today some two decades removed from his passing.

I wanted to share this story of Debre Genet Elias today not just because the place is a hidden treasure and its history fascinating, but also because I stumbled onto a current event involving this place that I wanted readers learn. I stumbled on an effort initiated by the people of the city of Debre Elias to renovate the main church building. Apparently, the building and its highly regarded frescoes have deteriorated over time. The parishioners and the alumni living all over the world have initiated an undertaking to restore the church and the frescoes back to their original forms. An impressive team of architects, artists, engineers and specialists in restoration and historic preservation has drawn a plan to restore the church.

Another team has developed a funding plan for this high-cost project. While much of the cost will be raised locally, Debre Eliasies abroad are working to come up with a fair share of it. Their effort, specially their GoFundMe page is what initially caught my attention. I have since spoken with the organizers and have learned that they have a well thought out plan to achieve their goal and have already raised a big chunk of it.

I thought readers might want to support such a historic institution and preserve our common heritage and wanted to share the address of the GoFundMe page. And here it is.

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/the-debre-genet-elias-church-rehabilitation-project>