

The 'əqā bet: An Indigenous East African Repository

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Figure 1. Example of 'əqā bet (Northern Ethiopia). Photo Vitagrazia Pisani (2014).

The building visible in this picture (Fig. 1) is an 'əqā bet, that is a storeroom or "treasure house," of a Tewahedo Orthodox church in northern Ethiopia, which we will not identify for security reasons. Christian Orthodox Churches in the modern-day states of Ethiopia and Eritrea have functioned for centuries, and in some cases for over a millennium, as some of the region's main repositories of written and material culture. While some sacred artefacts, such as the altar tablet (*tābot*) are permanently housed in the church, most are kept in a nearby structure known in Amharic as 'əqā bet (ዳታ ቤት; see 'Ḥabḥā' in Kane 1990, 1183a; the term 'əqā bet is also used to indicate a separate hut of a nobleman's house where his valuable clothes and utensils were kept; cf. Chernetsov 2005, 345a).

The 'əqā bet is similar to a sacristy and is generally located in a building that is separate from or annexed to the church, though in some churches, especially before the seventeenth century, the side rooms may also serve as a facility for storing materials (cf. Bausi 2014, 51; cf. also Pankhurst 2014, 252a). When detached from the church, the 'əqā bet may consist of a solid round or rectangular stone tower, or it may be a simple round or rectangular hut, which, being built with more perishable materials than those used for the church, requires frequent maintenance. Some churches, especially the largest ones, may have more than one storeroom (cf. Chernetsov 2005, 345a).



Figure 2. Ecclesiastic items, storeroom of a church. Photo Vitagrazia Pisani (Northern Ethiopia, 2014).

Within the 'əqā bet are housed a number of objects that are necessary for the spiritual and material needs of the priests or monks who perform religious services within or near the church, and for the larger Christian communities they serve. Among the sacred artefacts that stored in an 'əqā bet one can find various types of crosses, censers, liturgical crowns, icons and vestments, as well as consumables such as candles and incense (Figs. 2 and 3). The items are often kept without a strict separation or clear organization system (cf. Nosnitsin 2020, 319). Arguably, the most important artefacts kept in the 'əqā bet are the church's manuscripts, given the importance of the scriptures for Christians. In Christian Orthodox Ethiopia and Eritrea, manuscripts may contain copies of books from the Old and New Testament as well as canonico-liturgical or hagiographic collections written in classical Ethiopic, that is to say the liturgical language used by Orthodox churches in this region.



Figure 3. Ecclesiastic books and crosses collection. Photo Ethio-SpAffe.

Typically, items kept in the 'əqā bet could be produced or commissioned by the church's community, that is by those who performed or participated in its services. Prominent regional or national secular and ecclesiastical actors who wished to strengthen their ties with these communities, or to enhance their chances of salvation, could also act as donors of sacred objects or consumables. These could be produced *ad hoc* or transferred from the 'əqā bet of another institution. Moreover, especially in older churches, a small number of the items kept in the 'əqā bet are attributed, often by local oral traditions, to prominent figures, including former emperors or the founder of the church. As such, the 'əqā bet and the people who take care of it from one generation to another, contribute to documenting and maintaining the identity and network of a religious community.

In this respect, some of the objects kept in the 'əqā bet carry inscriptions that commemorate pious acts of donation to the institution. Manuscripts, in particular, and especially Gospel books, contain more extensive notes or texts that either document the donations of sacred objects, consumable goods or land to a church or contain hagiographic and historical information about individuals connected to it. For example, one would typically expect to find a copy of the Vita of a saint who was considered the founder of a church, or after whom the building was dedicated, in its 'əqā bet.

Despite the presence of thousands of Ethiopic manuscripts in European and American institutions, a far greater number of manuscript collections remains to this day in the possession of churches and monasteries in Ethiopia and Eritrea (cf. Bausi 2014, 46, 51; Pankhurst 2014, 252a). In this respect, the 'əqā bet can be viewed as an 'ecclesiastic library' (Nosnitsin 2020, 319; on the concept of library, see Pankhurst 2014, 252a–256a), and sometimes an 'əqābē *maqābē*, 'keeper of the books', is responsible for the care of the manuscripts collection. In many cases the books are also inventoried with the other objects stored together. We have a number of examples of old inventories, already attested from the end of the 13th century. Among them is the long list of books in the well-known Four Gospels book of Iyasus Mo'a (EMML no. 1832) from the Monastery of Dabra Ḥayq ጴጥሎስ (Wallo, Ethiopia) (on this Gospel Book and on this note, cf. Sergew Hable-Selassie 1992), which are very useful for the understanding of the circulation of a literary work and its importance within a monastic community. Lists of items and of books are often added as 'additional notes' on the blank pages at the beginning or end of the manuscript, without being connected with the main text(s) (cf. Bausi 2008, 546–547, and Bausi 2014, 51). A small church library counts on average between 20–40 books (Fig. 3). Generally, a medium-weight manuscript is kept in a leather case with straps that can be used to hang it on the wall or under the roof (Figs. 4 and 5), while larger manuscripts are usually kept standing on the ground. In the past, hand-made chests could be used for keeping the most treasured books, but more recently bookshelves and cupboards are also starting to be used in the 'əqā bet (cf. Nosnitsin 2020, 319–320).



Figure 4. Storeroom of a church: manuscripts in carrying leather bookcases and items hanging on the wall. Photo Vitagrazia Pisani (Northern Ethiopia, 2014).



Figure 5. Storeroom of a church: manuscripts in carrying leather bookcases hanging on the wall. Photo Sophia Dege Müller (Northern Ethiopia, 2014).

As the above shows, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches and their treasures contribute, in a manner that bears comparison to Western museums and universities, to the construction of collective identities and to the preservation and reinterpretation of historical narratives about the past. However, and in contrast with museums, most of the artefacts kept within the 'əqā bet are not on permanent display and can be used only by the local clergy – though on some occasions scholars are also granted some degree of access – and viewed only by those who take part in the religious services they perform.

Since the 'əqā bet cannot be accessed by faithful without authorization, for the safety of the artefacts and for their sacred qualities, it needs to be guarded. This task falls to the sacristan, the *qaysa gabaz* (or *qesa gabaz*, *qasa gabaz*), an 'administrator of the church' (on this figure, see Habtemichael Kidane 2005); a priest entrusted with managing the liturgical and religious functions of the church, who is also responsible for the 'əqā bet and all the church property. In monasteries with a bigger property the sacristan is instead called *maggābī*, 'steward; administrator' (cf. Chernetsov 2005, 345a; on the figure of the *maggābī* see Sokolinskaja 2007).

The system of practices and beliefs described here has contributed to the preservation of objects for hundreds, and in a few cases thousands, of years. One of the most remarkable instances, is that of two Gospel books that have been dated to late antiquity and preserved in the Garimā monastery in northern Ethiopia, where they are linked to the memory of a homonymous founder active between the fifth and sixth centuries. Evidently, the values that have contributed to making Ethiopian and Eritrean churches such remarkable repositories of cultural heritage do not always align with those which inform museum practices in the West, or in comparable secular institutions in Ethiopia and Eritrea themselves. In fact, in ecclesiastical institutions conservation was typically driven by a desire to preserve the memory of holy individuals associated with that institution and by reverence towards the sacred. In this respect, from a museological perspective, the organizational structures that revolves around a church, and its 'əqā bet offer a significant alternative to the Western museum model, one which, albeit not devoid of challenges, allows for a closer relationship between objects and their communities of origin.

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Vitagrazia Pisani is the principal investigator of the individual project 'The Gə'əz Version of the Passio of St Cyprian (Gadla Qirqos): A Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary' (DFG project number: 488455109; Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies, Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg).