CORE SYMBOLS OF ETHIOPIAN IDENTITY AND THEIR ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING THE BETA ISRAEL TODAY

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The cultural identity of the Ethiopians is considered from an anthropological perspective, specifically, an explication of a number of key terms or core symbols taken from Amharic. This approach provides a glimpse of the Ethiopians' values and 'native' understanding of various issues including how a child should be raised, how a youth should behave and how an adult must act in order to attain his most cherished goals. The selected symbols are looked at contrastively in order to highlight some of the polar tendencies that are inherent in traditional Ethiopian culture. An attempt is made to relate the Ethiopian world view or ethos to the new situation of living in Israel, and also to interpret a number of the most striking behavioral patterns that have been manifested during the absorption process. These patterns are discussed in light of the lingering relevance of the Ethiopian's traditional culture and value system.

INTRODUCTION

In order to make sense out of the behavior of the new immigrants from Ethiopia, it is crucial to understand something about the cultural world that they left behind in Ethiopia. Whereas most researchers who have looked at the Jews of Ethiopia have focussed upon their "Jewish" roots and practices,[1] it is also imperative to take into consideration those symbols and values which they share with their neighbors, who for the most part are Christian Amharas from the Gondar region and Tigreans from Tigray province. For, while differing from the Christians in regard to religious practices, the Jews of Ethiopia spoke the languages of their surroundings, that is to say, Amharic and Tigrinya, which, with few exceptions, are the mother tongues of all the immigrants who have come to Israel.

Much anthropological research has been carried out to demonstrate the intimate connection between language and culture, and the ways in which ideas, or symbols are internalized and can be seen to have direct effects on group behavior. This perspective in anthropology is sometimes termed the "symbols and meanings" approach to the study of sociocultural phenomena.[2] Stated most simply, culture can be regarded as a set or system of symbols, shared and transmitted by a group of people; the group can be a specific society, or a segment of a society, such as a status group or occupational caste. In this view, "culture" is the tag given to the categories and concepts against which the culture-bearers, the individual members of the society, match their perceptions of real events.

Culture, then, is that which provides meaning for human experience. As individuals grow up to become members of their society, they learn the categories which comprise their universe of meaning, for the most part in the form of the vocabularies of social, political, religious and other interactional settings. The ability of individuals to under-

stand what goes on, to internalize values and to communicate their cultural knowledge to others (such as inquiring anthropologists) rests on the basis of the common meanings conveyed by means of verbal symbols.

At the heart of this approach is the attempt to explicate those "core symbols" through which individual members of a society organize their experiences.[3] Core symbols are the words used by the "natives" to represent themselves to themselves. They are terms and concepts that are close to the experience of the people being studied, so close, in fact, that unless the anthropologist is patient and persistent, he may never learn them. To do so, he often needs to "get inside another person's head", so to speak, in order to catch a glimpse of how the world looks from the natives' point of view.

In this essay I shall present a number of paired terms from the Amharic language, which are also found in Tigrinya. These terms, or core symbols, constitute an integral part of the Amhara-Tigrean or, simply, Ethiopian understanding of the world. Since, as mentioned above, there is no difference between Jews and Christians in regard to languages, I am assuming that points taken from the more general Amhara-Tigrean culture also have specific relevance to the Beta Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia. I shall relate each of the key terms to its source in traditional Ethiopian culture, and indicate its applicability for fuller understanding of a variety of characteristic behaviors that have been observed frequently among Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. While the particular terms that I have chosen to explicate cannot cover the entire panorama of Ethiopian culture, they do represent central aspects of the Amhara-Tigrean world of meaning, and what they symbolize has surely been internalized by every native Ethopian.[4]

1. *chäwa-bäläge*

It is essential to the upbringing of every Ethopian male child that he learn the proper forms of obedience and respect for elders and for authority figures in general. The entire social order rests upon the success of this kind of socialization process. As soon as he is old enough to understand his wider world, he is made aware that all individuals older than he, and all those in higher social positions, must be shown the utmost deference. This understanding is not taught from infancy. Rather, the first 3 to 4 years for every child are a time of indulgence and freedom to roam and do as he pleases. Very few demands are made upon a child before this time. Thereafter, however, he is subjected to a regime of discipline, punishment and often repression in order that he may begin to acquire the traits of character which are included under the rubric of *chäwa*. In its most general sense, to be *chäwa* means to be free, not a slave (*baria* in Amharic). This free condition is marked by being well-behaved, well-mannered and soft-spoken, graced with courtesy and refinement. In particular it is evinced by reserved, quiet and respectful behavior in the presence of all figures of authority: father, elder siblings, priests, village chief, local officials, governor, and, in former times, of course, the Emperor.

Great effort is put into training a child to be *chäwa*. He is taught to stand quietly whenever guests are present, or even to stand facing the wall. He is generally fed only after all adults have eaten, which means that he must learn to settle for leftovers from the meals of others. When he is addressed by his elders, he is expected to reply in a barely audible whisper. From an early age he is shown how to use the various forms of respect, and the polite forms of address that characterize Amharic. Besides inculcating an automatic habit of reserve and seeming subservience in later life, this training is

aimed at preventing a child from developing into a *balägе*: one who is ill-mannered, impudent, insolent, rude, rough, vulgar and disrespectful. It is a commonplace understanding that without the strict discipline that leads him to become *chäwa*, there is the strong possibility that he will become unduly aggressive, abusive and potentially dangerous, all of which are part of the inclination of the uncontrolled *balägе*. The typical Ethiopian parent is not oriented, as parents elsewhere might be, to encourage behavior between these two extremes, as, for example, to bring out spontaneity or initiative in children.

The positive aspect of this training to be *chäwa* is that a young Ethopian is able to sit quietly, accept instructions readily, and expects to be ordered by his teachers and elders what to do in any particular situation. In addition, he often speaks, dresses and moves in a polite and refined manner. As has often been noticed here in Israel, even if an auditorium or cafeteria is filled with Ethiopian youngsters, there is apt to be almost complete silence, with little of the horseplay or rough-housing that might be expected from other groups of the same age. The negative side of this training is that being courteous can take precedence over the expression of real interests and needs, or can be used as a way of hiding the truth. An Ethiopian is thus prone to do the polite thing, which can mean saying what he imagines another person wants to hear, especially a teacher or other authority figure, rather than saying something that might sound rude, or contradictory. He is also likely to say "yes" rather than "no", as is being discovered by non-Ethiopian Israelis, as for example when an Ethiopian accepts an invitation to visit and then does not appear. This distinction also accounts for the "culture shock" reported by Ethiopians during their initial encounters with veteran Israelis whose style is loud, aggressive, pushy and straightforward, all marks of the *balägе*, and thus a way of behaving that the Ethiopian has usually tried to avoid at all costs.[5]

Ultimately, to be *chäwa* is to have the earmarks of urbanity and even of nobility, in contrast to the *balagär*, a villager or rustic, and to the *baria*, or slave. What is remarkable about the Amhara-Tigrean social order is that those at the bottom of the social pyramid – as the Beta Israel were, due to their occupational caste, could nevertheless envision themselves able to rise in status with a change in fortune. Were this to happen, then the training of the child to be *chäwa* would be bound to stand him in good stead. There would be no fear that he would not be able to comport himself properly were he to rise suddenly in status, for he had already received training in civility. This same sense of competence and bearing can help explain how it is that the Beta Israel can abandon their conditions of life in backward Ethiopia, and arrive in Israel imbued with confidence that they can readily find their place within the fabric of Israeli society.

2. *guabäz–shifta*

A representative of the Youth Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency in Israel recently addressed a gathering of the *kohanim* (priests) and other elders of the Beta Israel. He spoke movingly about all of the positive virtues of the young Ethiopians that he worked with, and praised their parents for having raised such "well-mannered" (Heb: menumasim), "quiet" (Heb: shketim), "refined" (Heb: adinim) children, who are "respectful of others", (Heb: notnim kavod lazulat), and serve as an "example to other youngsters" (Heb: dugma leacherim). If he had known of the concept, he undoubtedly would have congratulated them for having imparted the proper sense of being *chäwa* to their children.

All of this was translated by the official translator into Amharic. At the end of his translation he paused, as if to consider what else was involved in the description. In conclusion, he added the sentence *batam guabäz nachew*, "they are very *guabäz*." This term, *guabäz*, constitutes an important core symbol for all Ethiopians. To be considered as *guabäz* is to have achieved something rather different from just having become *chäwa*.

In Wolf Leslau's Amharic-English Dictionary, the entry for *guabäz* states: young man, fine young man, manly (like a man), smart, brilliant, clever, strong, brave /and, finally/ quite a fellow." Every Ethopian boy (and girl, in her own way) desires perhaps more than anything else to be considered *guabäz*. It is the great Amhara virtue that, traditionally, embodied bravery, fierceness, hardiness and general male competence. In regard to actual behavior, this term would be used for someone who had trekked many days through the mountains, subsisting on only a pocketful of dried chickpeas, or occasional snacks of small bread balls. The *guabäz* could be someone who had trounced an opponent in a stick fight, or had bested him in some other kind of battle. He was someone able to stay awake the entire night praying, or spend the whole day fasting. In another context this person would be able to memorize all of his lessons, and stand at the forefront of his class; or he might be adept at coining a beautiful phrase, whether as part of a spontaneous poem or as a veiled insult directed toward some unsuspecting personage.

Without doubt, for an Ethiopian to be *guabäz* is a very admirable thing. This trait can be seen manifested in the fierce determination with which the Beta Israel, as a group, are going about actualizing their intention to become, as quickly as they can, "just like Israelis". This is part of the reason why Israeli teachers must plead exhaustion when their Ethiopian students refuse to go out on coffee breaks, or beg to be able to continue their Hebrew classes even during holidays. It is an aspect of the fact that a number of Ethiopians have joined the army, where they seem to be making an impressive showing for themselves, while others have gone, as soon as possible, to study at university.

The Beta Israel's survival in their homeland stems partially from the fact that they were able to make things that worked: their plows and their pots were appreciated, and there was always a demand for them. The Beta Israel were *guabäz* in their craft work. They were also *guabäz* in terms of their bravery and hardihood, and all else that was required to escape from Ethiopia, trek to Sudan and overcome all of the dangers and hardships of life in refugee camps.

Although there is obvious merit in being *guabäz* – merit that can surely be translated to their advantage as a group contributing to Israeli society – there are also potential drawbacks. In Ethiopia, an exceptionally fierce warrior could not always restrict himself to serving the common cause, or to being subservient to a particular chieftain. His alternative was to rebel, flee from the constraints of society and become a *shifta*. The dictionary defines this term to mean "outlaw, bandit, brigand, rebel". It was applied to anyone who committed a crime and then fled to the wilderness, thereafter living by stealth and cunning, if not, as was more than likely, by killing and highway robbery. As often as not, the *shifta* was also admired for being *guabäz*: for his courage and manliness, and, perhaps most of all, for his daring in flouting the norms of the society. Hence, this social order where emphasis was placed upon obedience nevertheless had a cultural hero with which it identified precisely because he rebelled and refused to abide by norms of respect and subservience, and was willing to transgress clerical and even imperial decrees.

As has frequently been pointed out by anthropologists, those who break social boundaries are apt to express this through some form of bodily symbolism. The *shifta* in Ethiopia could readily be identified because of his penchant for letting his hair grow wild, so that it framed his head in *gofare*, or "Afro" fashion. This extraordinary hairdo distinguished the *shifta* from all less daring, law-abiding persons who, much as they might deplore his criminal acts, were wont to extol his bravery, fierceness and even personal handsomeness.

Although there is little likelihood that Ethiopians in Israel are going to consider becoming *shiftas*, there is some evidence of an inclination, whether conscious or not, to take on some characteristics of the *guabäz shifta*. For example, if one looks carefully at pictures of young Ethiopians holding up signs at demonstrations protesting the fact that their relatives are still in Sudan or Ethiopia, or demonstrating at the Western Wall against decisions of the rabbinate, it is possible to discern that those in the forefront frequently sport "Afro"-style hairdos. This contrasts sharply with those pictured receiving rabbinical instruction without a murmur. Moreover, it appears that in regard to the formal religious demands being made of them, a widespread rebellion is taking place, in which individual expressions of living outside of the laws of society are being adopted by young Ethiopians who have internalized a cultural model that includes the *shifta* – the person who can become a hero in the eyes of others if he dares to act against the dictates of the civil and religious establishment.

3. *tänkwäl–silttane*

For people who grow up speaking Amharic and Tigrinya, the idea of being precise with language is a foreign one. Ethiopians, perhaps Amharas more than Tigreans, are always on guard with others, suspicious about the motives of almost everyone, and on the alert for verbal assaults of one sort or another. The Amhara does not assume good intentions – he expects people to harbor disruptive inclinations. He deals with authority cautiously, always seeking to perfect his verbal means for giving vent to his criticisms and frustrations, but without incurring the wrath of powerful superiors.

Language becomes, for many Amharas, their primary means of both self-defense and also of offense. One must live a long time in the midst of Ethiopians, speaking with them in Amharic (or Tigrinya), in order to begin to appreciate how much calculation is invested in each phrase, each answer to a question, each overt response to a situation. That he who desires to do harm may always be polite, or that he who wishes to deliver an insult may include it in a finely-wrought compliment, is part of a general understanding of human nature. When a person speaks, he wants to do so subtly, being able to make his point effectively, yet not so directly that he might find himself involved in an altercation or worse with some equally sensitive opponent.

The master of this sort of subtle use of language is called *tänkwälenya*, "one who possesses *tänkwäl*". According to Leslau's Dictionary, *tänkwäl* includes "trick, ruse, subterfuge, devious ways, guile, /as well as/ foul play, malice, mischief". The person who is *tänkwälenya* is "crafty, sly, sneaky, foxy, malicious".

Although at first glance, such traits might seem totally negative, this is not necessarily the case. There is a positive aspect to being *tänkwäl*. This trait is part of every individual's efforts to take care of himself, to look out for his own self-interest. Being cautious in his dealings with others, and not holding high expectations of anyone's honesty, is part of a basically realistic, even healthy outlook on life, for someone who has grown up in highland Ethiopia. In regard to the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, this

kind of realism can be seen in their generally rapid rate of recovery from "culture shock", and realizing that not all that they were promised is available for them.

The other side of *tänkwäl*, which is less positive in its implications, is its use for offensive rather than defensive purposes. One of the negative signs of *tänkwäl* is when language is made into a weapon to attack or disrupt others. One form of this is an Ethiopian penchant for backbiting, known in Amharic as *chiqechiq*. This appears when personal interests are asserted in the midst of group undertakings, often leading to the downfall of the community plan or project, and the disruption of joint undertakings. Another form is the studied use of hyperbole in order to magnify a case, or to gain attention for one's cause, even if this requires wild exaggeration of the truth. Sometimes the *tänkwäl* individual uses his skills behind the scenes where he strives to convince others to do his bidding, or to believe that they are about to perform a "good deed", when in fact they are only being manipulated to fulfill his devious, or possibly even malicious, purposes.

Although political activity anywhere is frequently rife with *tänkwäl*-like behavior, when this is made into the dominant style of politics it can be a major handicap to positive action. In Ethiopia, where *tänkwäl* behavior tends to be endemic, there is also a concern for its opposite, which would be "truthfulness" in personal as well as in political relationships. Traditionally, the concern for truth is indicated through the use in everyday speech of a notable number of expressions that denote "truth". Speakers are always interjecting into their statements oaths that seem to attest to the truth of what they are saying (one of the most interesting is the frequent use of *yemut*, "may so and so die, if what I say is not true").

This interest in "the truth" is part of another concept which can be looked at in relation to *tänkwäl* – the notion of *sïlttane*. In its most general sense this term means "civilization". In Ethiopia the term has long been used to refer to new ways, the ways of modernity, in contrast to the "faith of the fathers", or the path of traditional behavior. The verb form of the word means "to be proficient in, be skillful, become trained, become acculturated". *Sïlttane* has come to mean the acquisition of technological skills and the attainment of higher education; it connotes the use of modern appliances and conveniences in place of more traditional ones; and it suggests a concern for straightforwardness and truthfulness in communication, as being the basis for public as well as personal exchanges, rather than deviousness or hidden meanings generally.

Along with other battles that he has had to wage, the modernizing Ethiopian has had to come to grips with his propensity to lie, or to make light of the truth in the pursuit of his goals – something that may well apply to those who have come to Israel as well. It is clear that the Beta Israel are eager to become part of the *sïlttane*, the "civilization", of their new homeland. They are clearly not interested in involving themselves in the ways of their fathers, as, for example, the occupations of farming and manual crafts. These have been spurned for new vistas, so much so that it is said to be difficult at times to convince young Ethiopians that they can't all be physicians or pilots! At the same time that they are insisting they wish to be trained in modern occupations, at least some of the Beta Israel are asking for something else as well, albeit not so emphatically or precisely. That "something else" I heard expressed recently by a particularly perceptive individual, who is a leader of one of the many Ethiopian groups currently active in Israel. After commenting on some of the problems existing within the various Ethiopian groups, problems that could be categorized as due to uncon-

trolled *chiqechiq*, he went on to say, with some feeling: "You Israelis must teach us how to tell the truth".

I took this statement as a call to whoever might listen that it is vital to make efforts to encourage the politically-active Ethiopians to be straightforward and truthful in their negotiations with Israeli authorities. This can be achieved only if trust is a key factor. Clearly, the Ethiopians arrive imbued with the faith that they have finally reached their promised land. Even when reality is not exactly as it was imagined, they retain a powerful desire to become integrated into Israeli society. Yet, as various cases of conflict have shown, that trust can be reduced, or even lost. Once this occurs, there is every reason to believe that there will be a reversion to more traditional patterns of behavior. This would mean that encounters may well come to be characterized, as they so often were in Ethiopia, by suspicion and by a clever disregard for the truth in order to achieve individual or group objectives. Should they feel themselves placed on the defensive, whether by the rabbinate or by the civil authorities who deal with them, the Beta Israel may well conclude that they must protect the "faith of their fathers", and means employed to this end might include strengthening the use of *tänkwäl* rather than the pursuit of the truth and the furtherance of *sïlttane*.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Several recent "popular" works (Kessler, 1982 and Rapoport, 1980) are indicative of this skewed perspective, but even the work of the anthropologist Messing (1982) deals only peripherally with the shared culture of the Beta Israel and their Christian neighbors.

[2] This approach to the study of culture has many sources. In this paper I follow the path laid out by Clifford Geertz (1973, 1976) and Lloyd Fallers (1969, 1974), both of whom were indebted to the pioneering work of Max Weber in particular.

[3] Another effort to deal with core symbols can be found in Rosen (1979), in which the focus is on Tigrean political symbols.

[4] A broad, insightful depiction of traditional Amhara-Tigrean culture can be found in Levine (1965) and my own account here is indebted to his work.

[5] Problems of "culture shock" and clashing styles are discussed throughout Ashkenazi and Weingrod's study of immigrants in Beersheva (n.d.).

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