

# The Ethiopian Diaspora in the UK: Material Religious Culture, Sentiments of Heritage, and Identity

Research conducted by Marco Pozzi

Supervised by Dr. Jacopo Gnisci



## Introduction

Ethiopia is the second most populous African country and counts about 15,500 nationals in the UK. For long, however, Ethiopia has been overlooked in research despite its fascinating history, religion, and culture. About 44% of Ethiopians are Tewahedo Orthodox, and it is this faith which my research explores. Specifically, this research discusses the ways in which the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo community in the UK expresses its religious identities and retains a strong sentiment of heritage despite residing outside of Ethiopia.

## Methodology

The primary method of research for this project was interviewing and document review, my greatest thanks go to Reverend Father Abate Gobena and Reverend Father Michael Hundesa for their enthusiastic participation. The interviews consisted of showing them the images that are scattered on this poster and discussing the significance of these objects in a semi-structured manner, letting the conversation flow naturally all the while retaining a certain direction in mind.



## On Exceptionality

Ethiopia as a culture is like no other. Their crosses are different, they have a unique liturgical language from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, are the only Christian African country before colonization, have never been colonized etc... However, as fascinating as that is and as important as it is for their heritage/identity, there is danger in obsessing over exceptionality. Interest for Ethiopia should come for what she is, not for how different she is from others.



The Four Gospels, Opening to the Gospel of St Mark

## Summary

Despite only being a growing group in the UK, the Ethiopian diaspora have been more than capable in expressing their identity, whether that be through intangible or material aspects of heritage. There is hope for the diaspora to keep growing and to establish themselves further. The ideal, in their perspective, would be to reach a point where they may build their own churches and create their own cultural establishments, aiding their ability to express an Ethiopian identity



Church of Genetta Maryam

## Material or Intangible?

There exists extensive debate over whether heritage originates from intangible or material aspects of a culture. As much as Ethiopia is rich in material culture, they still manage to express authentic Ethiopian identities despite practicing in old Anglican churches (through rent or purchase of the buildings), thanks to their culture's many intangible aspects such as language, knowledge, and skills. Perhaps it isn't a question of either or, but more of a balance between material and intangible that creates a sense of heritage.

## In Public History

Much like many other African nations, Ethiopians have seen a large part of their national treasures looted and brought to European museums to be displayed. In the context of a diaspora however, it means they now have access to artefacts from Ethiopia readily available nearby. It is true that this means the new generation of British born Ethiopians will get to experience part of their culture despite living abroad, but little can take away from the violent history these artefacts now carry, and never mind the fact that many of these should never even be in the public eye according to Ethiopian customs – creating a conflicting situation with regards to identity.

## Ge'ez and Crosses: Symbols of Ethiopian Identity

Ge'ez, despite not being a commonly spoken language outside the liturgy, is still a crucial part to Ethiopian identity, with approximately 90% of Tewahedo Orthodox adherents understanding the language to some extent. Similarly, most Orthodox Ethiopians will carry a cross, whether by hand or on a necklace. This is typically seen as symbolic for Ethiopians, forming a crucial part of Ethiopian identity.



Asmat Prayer Manuscript