

# ***THE LEGEND OF THE GREAT DRUM***

## ***(The "NEGARIT")***

*By G. E. GORFU*



*"I hid in its wet hollowed trunk,  
used it for liquid and shelter.  
I called it mother.  
It stood strong against the sun  
with branches spread yards beyond  
its bulging womb. I slept  
beneath oblong fruit and knew the promise  
of food."*

(Excerpt from the "The baobab tree", 1996 by Susan Hahn)

The baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) or ባምባ (bamba) in Amharic

## ***INTRODUCTION***

***This is a legend about the Negarit, an Ethiopian drum! In ancient times, we are told of a drum built in Ethiopia, - a drum so large that, a four-horse-drawn-cart was required to move it from place to place. And when the drummers beat the drum, legend has it that it could be heard from as far as fifty miles away. This is the story of that drum.***

***This legend was handed down to me by three independent storytellers, who narrated the story, first when I was a child, and then in my youth. The two were men in my family, who told me the story in my early childhood. The third was an old woman in our village, not related to me by blood, but she told me the very same story when I became a boy of about fourteen. Each one told the story in a slightly different way, but they all told the same story. I will now tell the story as faithfully as possible, without wavering to the right or the left from the original. Where there have been some discrepancies in the narrative, I will point these out to the reader.***

***G. E. Gorfú, Los Angeles (1997)***

## ***THE DRUM***

This 'Negarit' was no ordinary drum that some local craftsman, or your average run of the mill drum builder would make. This was a special drum, one commissioned by a king. Which king commissioned the making of the drum has been lost in antiquity.

But it was known that it was commissioned by the king, and on completion, it was kept at the palace, and served the king for many purposes, and for many years, and passed on from one king to the next, for many generations.

**First the size:** A cubit being the length of a man's arm from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow, approximately two feet in length, the drum on its front, or its major mouth, where the skin was stretched, was about four cubits in diameter. That would be roughly eight feet in width. Its minor mouth, or the smaller end, measured about two and half cubits, approximately, five feet across. Then the length; from the front end of the drum to the back end measured seven cubits, or some fourteen feet. In plain and simple words, it was just one 'humongous' drum, the like of which has not been seen in recent memory.

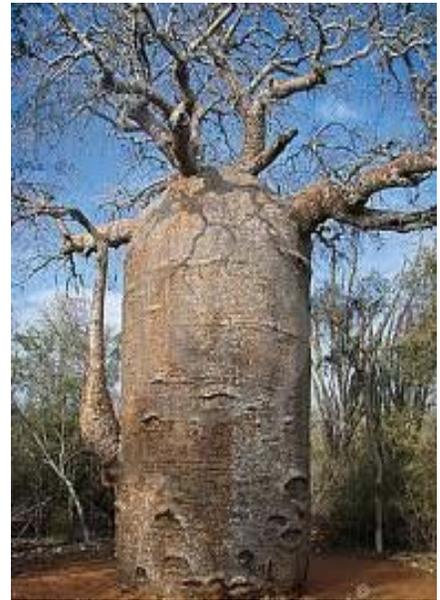
It was used only in special ceremonies that the king held: to usher in the new year, to make special announcements, to call the people for the beginning of harvest, to call the Rasses and advisors for a counsel of war, or to march the army into war... etc. Its significance might not be readily apparent to us now, where radio, TV and telephone, have become commonplace even in the most rural areas. But in those days when the king's messengers used to travel on foot, or on horseback, to deliver oral notes known as 'Afe quelatie', (afe qual hatsie, literally translating to: mouth word of the king,) which took days, or weeks, to travel even short distances due to the absence of good roads, especially during the rainy seasons, a drum that could be heard over long distances was of paramount importance. It is the equivalent of a cell phone in today's technology.

## 2

**Selection of Skilled Craftsmen:** Legend has it that the king invited all the artisan drum makers in his kingdom and held a feast. In the feast the king asked each and every drum maker about the size of the drums they usually made, and whether there was a limit to the size of a drum that they could make. Most said there was no way to exceed the largest drums that were being built for churches at that time. The largest of these drums, though pretty large and heavy, could easily be picked up and carried by two, or three people. Most can, in fact, be even taken up by one tall and strong person. But there were two drum makers, from all those invited, that told the king that it all depended on the thickness of the tree and the size of the skin, these were the two determining factors which limited the size of the drum; and, if these limitations could be overcome, they assured the king, that they could build any size of drum his majesty wanted, - if only the materials could be provided.

The answer pleased the king. He dismissed all the drum makers and hired these two. His majesty then, requested that they start working together, and cooperate to making him the biggest and loudest drum ever built. To this they agreed and the search for the largest tree in the kingdom began. Scouts were sent throughout the land to find the largest tree fit for the king's drum. In those days, it took a good six months journey just to get from Tigray to the Southern most tip of the empire. People traveled on foot, on horseback, on mules, on donkeys, and camels. That was the only means of transportation.

It took two years before the head of the scouts reported that the largest and most suitable tree was found. A 'dima' tree, (a species of the baobab tree) was located three days journey to the west of the Gibe River in the South of the country. They said that it took five men, with arms fully outstretched, and touching finger to finger, to embrace the tree. Estimating the distance between the middle finger tips of the outstretched arms of an average man to be between five to six feet, this would easily put the tree somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty five to thirty feet in circumference, and around ten feet in diameter. Furthermore, it was smooth and evenly rounded, unlike most other trees that were rejected. This made the tree suitable for the purpose.



### 3

**Initial Work:** Cutting the tree was no great problem. With ten axe-men assigned on the job, it took some three weeks to remove the top branches and the lower unusable parts and roots at the base, and get the section that was to be made into a drum. This done, they had to figure out how to move this solid piece of log to where they could work on it and turn it into a drum. That was a great challenge among many challenges that they were to face. They decided that the best way to move the log was by floating it down the Gibe River. But it was three days journey up and down several hilly-terrains to get to the river. They had to try and roll, push up hill, drag it anyway they could to get it to the river. Getting the log to the river, took the best part of a two months. Once in the water, they had to tether ropes around the log, harness ten horses, or mules, on each bank of the river, (a total of twenty animals,) and pull it on. Their destination was northward, but the Gibe River flowed south. That meant the animals had to pull against the flow of the river. And then there were the cataracts they had to overcome. All told, it took the best part of six months to get to the northern most end of the river that could safely be negotiated. Finally, they had to haul the log out of the

water. That required the twenty animals, (ten on the right and ten on the left,) and fifty more men pulling on ropes tied to the log. While floating in the water for so many weeks, the log like a sponge, had sucked in absorbed lots of water, and had become much heavier than it originally was.

It was then that the king arrived with one thousand of his court entourage: several dozen noblemen, a couple hundred bodyguards, and soldiers, foot men and hangers on, to see the log for the very first time. And when he saw it, we are told, he was very pleased with what his men had picked. A solemn ceremony was held there. The "Lique-Papas" head of the Ethiopian Church, with six "Abunas" and many high priests and Echegies, who had traveled accompanying the king, took turns to pray, bless, and sprinkle holy water over the log. They killed many cows and bulls, and a great feast was held. The people sang and danced for three days there. Now the arduous work of turning the piece of log into a drum can begin.

#### 4

**The Construction:** They pitched many semi-permanent tents and assembled their workforce. These consisted of fifty craftsmen, one hundred and fifty men and women to prepare food and beverages, to gather and cut fire-wood and fetch water, and fifty armed soldiers, which the king left behind, for the protection and safety of all those in the camp. The log was placed under the shade of another big 'dima' (baobab) tree and the long and hard work of careful chiseling and hammering to turn the log into a drum began. It took them well over two and half years of slow, continuous and arduous work, just to cut out the heart of the log, leaving a two and half inch thick perimeter of a well shaved, smooth, solid wood, eight feet across on the major mouth, fourteen feet in length, and five feet wide on the smaller end. Next, these front and back ends were to be covered with skin.

It was realized very early that no cow or bull-hide, no matter how large, was going to be large enough to be stretched across the major mouth of the drum. The king dispatched his best hunters to kill the largest bull elephant in the land, and the skin, the thighbones, bones of the forelegs and hind legs, and, of course, the ivory tusks, to be recovered. The hunters were instructed to take special care as to where they strike the elephant so that they do not ruin the skin. It had to be a direct hit on the head, or a spear thrust upwards from under the belly. But they should not aim for the heart from the sides or the shoulders, as that would ruin the skin, and make it unusable for the purpose. And most hunters, it was known, preferred aiming for the vital organs, (the lungs or the heart,) taking positions from each side of the animal. But for this special task that method of hunting was not allowed. This hunt took place long before the arrival of gunpowder in Ethiopia, and they used spears, swords, axes, and knives for

hunting. So, a brave hunter was needed that could courageously stand facing the elephant, and aim the spear directly into the head or the eyes of the animal.

## 5

While the hunters were gone, the most important, and probably the most critical, work on the drum was undertaken. This was the six months period of smoking the wooden shell with a variety of fragrant chips of wood. This process helps to dry out any remaining moisture from the wooden shell, (which by now was some three years since it was cut down,) and gives it a unique quality of hardness and durability. While the smoking was taking place many mixtures of gums, oils, and hardening fluids, were poured on the inside and outside of the wooden shell. One, among many of these fluids, was an extract of aloe mixed with the milky fluids obtained from "b-e-rirr" and the "quolqual" tree, (the pen tree, and the African version of the Sewaro tree, respectively). This was much like basting a turkey on an open barbecue pit. It is here that a great deal of care, knowledge, observation, and thorough understanding of the wooden shell, is needed. Too much, and too fast, smoking, without sufficient application of the basting fluids, would dry out the shell too fast and result in immediate cracks. And all that hard work would be lost. And too much basting, without sufficient application of heat and smoke, would prevent the moisture inside the log from drying out, and would also result in the cracking of the shell later on during the initial drum beatings. This was where the real experience and expertise of the two master craftsmen was tested. Once this step is completed successfully the drum is as good as done, and the rest, though not easy, by any means, could be regarded as relatively simple, straightforward, and plain sailing.

After weeks in the forest, the hunters returned with their great prize:- an enormous hide, which required to be carried by twenty men on some wooden contraption, resembling a make shift ladder; two enormous elephant tusks, carried by four men each; two huge thigh bones, and eight pieces of smaller foreleg and hind leg bones. The hunters reported that it had taken them almost three days just to carefully skin the animal. They also brought two more huge ivory tusks that needed to be carried by two men each from another kill. Some of the hunters also carried two wounded men, with a leg and an arm broken in the skirmish, while four others carried the remains of the great hunter, Nega. He had stood fearlessly, waiting for the elephant, hiding behind a tree, and had speared it, with the spear going straight through the right eye all the way through and coming out on the left eye, rendering the animal blind. But Nega was instantly killed, when the elephant caught him with its trunk and crushed him under its feet just before it fell down and died. He was one of the two chief hunters leading the campaign, and had become the only, and most serious, casualty of the entire "Great Drum" project. He had sacrificed his life for the project.

Then came the turn of the best hide and pelt makers in the land, who were assigned to work on the skin and prepare it before it could be stretched on the drum. As it was laid out in the sun, it stank for miles around, as it had been rolled after being skinned off the dead carcass with just a few sprinkles of salt. And the pelting process took a good six months to complete. Having stretched and nailed the skin on the ground with small wooden pegs, they had to stand watch over it as the eagles and other birds would have loved to come down and with a single peck, reduce the entire enterprise to dust. It was carefully cured with salt, ox urine, alligator liver-bile, fats, suet and various other mixtures, and allowed to dry in the sun over several weeks. Then it was immersed in various mixtures of liquids, oils and vinegar, to remove the odor and to soften it back to just the right consistency, to the satisfaction of the master drum makers. The skin from the trunk and the legs of the elephant was also cured, stretched, dried, and made into leather ropes which would later be used to lace the skin tightly on to the wooden body of the drum.

There was a lot of work during the stretching of the skin on the wooden shell to make sure it was done evenly, and that no creases would form. Finally came the initial strikes on the drum to test the sound and resonance. A good drum should resonate. The thickness of the wooden shell, the proper preparation of the skin, the right tension during the stretching, all need to be just right to produce the resonance with the right quality of sound. There were final adjustments on all determining factors, even to the point of shaving off some sections in the thickness of the wooden shell, until the master drum maker was fully satisfied with the type and quality of sound produced.

The judgment of the master craftsman, however, was not the last word on the quality of sound the drum produced. Those who were going to perform on the drum, and especially the chief drummer, were those with the final word. Unless the drummers are satisfied with the drum, it does not matter how much the drum maker might be satisfied with the resonance produced. And the chief drummer was called upon to test his skills on the drum and see how he liked it. The best of drums must reproduce the five basic sounds of excellence. The best of drums must echo like the mountains, growl like a hippopotamus, howl like a hyena, roar like a lion, and most importantly, have the mighty thunder of the clouds. Without these five distinct qualities of sound, a drum might still be a good drum, but not an excellent drum, not an outstanding drum, a great drum worthy for the great king.

The chief drummer spent a couple of weeks with the master craftsmen testing the sound of the drum, readjusting the tension of the membrane, while final sanding and shaving were being made on selected spots on the sides of the drum. All this was done with the master drummer constantly striking the drum, carefully listening and trying

to reproduce all the varieties of sounds he wanted to produce. All this was done until the chief drummer with a final nodding of his head indicated that he was fully satisfied with the sounds he could produce from the drum.

At long last, the drum was handed over to the artists to do the finishing touches on the drum. Six artists worked under a master artist, painting beautiful and inspiring pictures on the drum. The artists had fifteen assistants who mixed and ground paints, and kept a stack of reed pens and brushes clean and ready. Two of the best artists in the land worked on the main face, or the skin on the major mouth, of the drum. They painted beautiful scenery of sunrise with the king seated on his throne, under a large dima tree, the symbol of longevity, while his subjects were seated below him, eating the "gibir," a traditional feast thrown by a king. This picture proclaimed of an era of peace and prosperity in the kingdom. Two other artists worked on the minor mouth of the drum. They painted battle scenery with the king having just won a war over his enemies, and of his army having vanquished the enemy and returning carrying spoils and marching the captives. Two more artists worked all around the drum, painting among flowers and vegetation, the daily life and activities of the priests, the peasants, the merchants and artisans, with all types of traditional symbols and motifs. Finally the drum was ready, but the work was not completed. A cart was needed to carry and transport the drum from place to place. It had to be a horse drawn cart on wheels to carry the drum and all its drummers.

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While this work was going on, other craftsmen worked on the elephant thigh- bones, forelegs, and hind leg bones. These too were cured: the contents of marrow drilled out and removed, then filled up with some special salts and ashes, and finally sealed with bees' wax. These huge bones then became drumsticks. Leather handles were crafted and beautiful motifs cut, to decorate, as well as to balance for the easy handling of these enormous bones, making them convenient for the drummers. All in all, they worked on twelve pieces of bones and turned them into wonderful art works of drumsticks. Five drummers would use ten drumsticks at any one time, with two drumsticks to spare – for standby.

Last, but not least, they built a cart on four wheels to carry the great drum. It had sufficient room for four men, one on each corner of the cart to stand and play. Then they put a ramp and pulled up the finished drum very carefully and gingerly on to the cart. Though the drum was now a mere shell of what it used to be in size, and was only a small fraction of its original weight, it was still very heavy and required four horses and two dozen men to pull it up the ramp and onto the cart. Finally, they secured it with four wooden wedges on each corner, and used the leather ropes made from the trunk and legs of the elephant to strap the drum on to the cart to prevent it

from rolling. Last but not least, they mounted the huge ivory tusks, one on the right and one on the left side of the cart, as arching bridges and decorative above the drum, with the two additional smaller ivories, one in the front, and one in the back of the cart. All four ivories were touching end to end, forming like four arching edges of a canopy, with a white cloth spread above the cart like a tent to give shade from the sun.

That done, the "Great Drum" project was announced to have come to completion, and the king's messenger was dispatched to deliver the good news and tell the king that the drum was ready to move. Now, preparations for the long journey home to Axum, the capital city of Ethiopia at the time, where the king had his palace, began. They had to pull down all the tents and shacks, but a small village had already been established on the site and some people chose to remain behind and settle there.

## 8

**The Journey Home:** The army of workers and soldiers, after spending the last two to three years in tents by the Gibe river, were now quickly converted into an army of engineers, (for lack of a better word,) to clear the way ahead, removing rocks and debris, filling up holes, constructing a makeshift road and temporary bridges where bridges were needed. Only those who prepared food, fetched firewood and water, and other hangers on, remained on their old task. A temporary road was cleared ahead of the cart, just wide enough for the two columns of animals to walk through. Sometimes they used horses, and at other times mules, to pull the cart. They had a continuous team of animals to change for drawing the cart, and keep it moving. It took a good six months for the cart to make it over the hills and mountains to reach the city of Axum.

This was the journey that introduced the drum to the rest of the country. Fifteen of the best drummers in the land, hand picked by the king, were put into three teams of five drummers, directed by the chief drummer. Each team had two very tall, muscular, and very large men, two men of average height, and one dwarf. These drummers were men who had played drums all their lives and knew all the sounds, the combinations and rhythms of drumbeats. And a sure proof of this was that all fifteen had already gone, either partially or fully, deaf. But then, drummers were not known for their sharp hearing. All a drummer needs is the sense of timing and rhythm imbued throughout his entire body, from the tip of his fingers to the ends of his toes. These fifteen men needed no training to play the great drum. Within a couple of weeks the teams had integrated, and could perform as single units, and play and perform for hours on end.

The thighbones of the elephant were the drumsticks for the two large men, who performed standing on each side of the major mouth of the drum from the front. Each man held the huge drumstick on his right hand. On his left, each man held the lighter,

but longer, foreleg bones of the elephant. These two men were dressed, each in two whole leopard skins covering their front and back, with their right hand and right shoulder fully exposed. They also had a lion's mane tied around their forehead. The other two men of average size stood on each side of the minor mouth of the drum, at the back of the cart. They each had very large bones from the forelegs of the elephant, and were dressed like regular foot soldiers.

Finally, there was the dwarf in each team, who would sit at the top of the drum, legs straddling the drum, well above the two giant drummers. The dwarf would dress in the skin of a Gureza or Chilada, (Colobus monkey, and the bleeding heart monkey respectively) the black and white or gray hair flowing down and blowing in the wind, and with a bright red turban tied on his forehead. In his hands, the dwarf would have two smaller drumsticks, very thick bones and pretty heavy, - from the hind legs of the elephant. That completed the team of five drummers.

## 9

The teams played in turns. The first team would start in the early morning, when the move began, and play straight for three or four hours, till around the mid-morning, when the sun started to get pretty hot. After a short recess of about twenty or thirty minutes, the second team would takeover and play till the mid-afternoon, when the heat of the sun became rather unbearable. The third team would follow them and play till the late after sunset, when they would set up camp for the night. The drummers played many different drumbeats and rhythms. Sometimes they played slow and soft beats, lethargic, church like, ceremonial beats, at other times they played loud and fast beats. When the two tall and muscular men hit the drum full force with the drumsticks of elephant thighbones, the earth shook: boohh, boohh, tirrrrim, tirrrrim, wahou, wahou, boom, boom, tzzuum, tzzuum, boohh, boohh, tirrrrim, tirrrrim, wahou, whaou, boom, boom, tzzuum, tzzuum... One felt the trembling in ones' heart. It felt like an earthquake. And people from as far away as fifty miles or more could hear the drumbeats. It was a great accomplishment.

These haunting and rhythmic beats, and the news of the "King's drum," as people began to call it, passing through their neighborhood, brought out hundreds of people every day, lining up along the route to see the drum. All kinds of rumors began to spread about the magical powers of the drum. People walked for miles just to see and touch the drum or the cart on which it was mounted. Some attributed the drum to have a power to dispel evil spirits. Others said it had the power to enlighten and make one wise. If an expectant mother touched the drum, some said, the baby would grow up to be a great leader. Still others said it would bring good luck just to touch the drum. What is more, this was an experience of a lifetime. The drum would never pass this way again. All who saw it were amazed with its sheer size and power. They would

walk along the side of the cart for hours, dancing with the beat, watching as the drummers performed, the sweat glistening on their shoulders, and flowing freely from their brows, their noses, neck, chin, and their exposed shoulders. "Playing the drum is a pretty exhausting occupation," peasants would say to each other. We work all day but never with so much intensity or sweating. What is more, in the fields, we can rest whenever we are tired. But a drummer has to keep up with the beat and continue playing even when he is completely exhausted. Unless the performance ends there is no rest for a drummer. And they have to play day after day! "Better remain a peasant and work on the land," They would say. "We used to think our life was hard, but a drummers' life is far harder."

But the womenfolk had a different take of things. They saw the sweat drenched body of the drummers as very attractive and sexy. Many local songs spontaneously started to be heard being sang throughout the regions where the drum passed by, in praise of the drummers:-

"Take me with you, Oh, Mr. Drummer,  
Give me the word, or a wink would suffice...  
And I would pick up my shawl and come,  
Without a word of farewell to my friends,  
Not even a 'Good bye' to mom and dad.  
I'd sneak out of my home and follow you to Axum....  
And rather be a concubine to the king's drummer  
Than a wife to a boring, lousy farmer..."

Another song went something like this:-

"Every one knows the drummer stole my heart  
There really is no question or doubt about that.  
Would someone, kindly, ask his wife,  
As to what he might have done with it?  
Or, where in the world he has hidden it?"

Word was out that the king had ordered all the peasants along the way to bring food and drink for the refreshment of the king's drum band as they came to see them perform. And this, Ethiopian native hospitality being what it is, many farmers did happily, bringing out cooked food, fruits, milk, other beverages, and refreshments for the troop, but especially for the drummers. It was, and still is, the tradition of the people to entertain and welcome passing guests, and expect nothing in return. But these were drummers who entertained, fascinated, and intrigued them. What is more, they were the king's drummers. And many that did not, or could not, bring food or drink, would work for a couple of hours or so, and help in clearing the path, carrying

rocks and dirt, digging ditches, and hauling logs. It was a happy and memorable event for all who came to see the king's drum pass by. This was history in the making, and all felt lucky to participate in it in however small a part.

## 10

When the drum arrived at the outskirts of Axum, the whole population of the town came out and assembled in the marketplace to receive the drum. The sound of distant drumbeats could be heard for the last three days now, as the cart could only cover about ten or so kilometers, or five miles a day. And the four horses drawing the cart could pull it only at a slow and laborious pace: no galloping, no trotting. Neither the weight of the drum nor the condition of the road allowed for any of that.

Just as the lead-group became vaguely visible in the horizon, sometime around mid-morning, the priests led by the Lique Papas of Ethiopia and the Nebure-ed of Axum, (the blessed one,) dressed in their most beautiful church finery, and carrying the Ark of the Covenant under the most colorful church debabs and umbrellas, came down to the marketplace and took center stage in the middle of town. The sound and fury of thunder was coming closer and closer by the minute, but there was some four more hours of waiting before the four-horse drawn cart and the drum arrived early that afternoon, when the sun was at its hottest.

Finally, the cart drawn by the horses, the drummers playing: boohh, boohh, tirrrrim, tirrrrim, wahou, wahou, boom, boom, tzzuum, tzzuum, boohh, boohh, tirrrrim, tirrrrim, wahou, whaou, boom, boom, tzzuum, tzzuum... arrived. These were the closest we could express the five distinct sounds made by the drum, as those who narrated the story to us had vocalized. Besides these five however, there were many levels, for example, the "boom, boom" could be struck. It could be made to sound from the faint level of a whisper to the loudest fury of thunder. And the same applies to each of the five sounds. So, the various combinations of these sounds could be made entertaining to hear and listen to all day. All the city people and all the priests were in awe as their hearts trembled and the ground under their feet shook with the thunder of the drum. The four horses slowly pulled the cart round and round the market place three times, until they came to a stand still close by where the Ark of the Covenant and the high priest and his entourage had taken position. The drummers continued to play the drum for another hour or so until the arrival of the king.

The king came out of his palace mounted on a white horse, followed by a dozen of his Rasses and Dejazmatches, all riding horses and dressed in their impressive war regalia, arrived in the center of town. Many high-ranking courtiers and officials followed after the king and his Rases, some riding horses, others jogging on foot. The

king dismounted from his horse and took position to the right side of the priests and directly in front of the great drum. It was about three years since he had last seen the huge log by the Gibe River, which has now been converted into this magnificent drum. Throughout the work, he had kept close contact with the workers through his messengers. He was fully informed of all the details and the progress of the work. But still, he was very impressed with what he now saw.

The king walked over to the cart and carefully inspected the workmanship and the paintings on the drum. It was beautiful. He called for the two master drum makers. They stepped forward and fell at his feet. He picked them up with his own hands, and hugged and embraced them. This was a rare honor for artisans. On the spot, both were named honorary Dejazmatches, as they were craftsmen and not real warriors. Then he called for the lead hunter. He stepped forward, and he too, was given the title of Dejazmatch. The king then called out the name of Nega, the other brave and courageous hunter, who was killed in the hunt, honoring him posthumously by naming the great drum "Dejach Nega." Nega's family would certainly benefit in land entitlements from that recognition. The king then called and honored the master artist, who had designed all the paintings on the drum, along with the six artists who had done the actual paintings on the drum. All six were given the title of Blata, and the master artist was made Blaten Geta. The king also named several of the soldiers that were found to be admirable in protecting the camp from enemy raids and from wild animals, over the last three years. He gave them land titles and promoted them within his army. That done, the king turned to the Nebure-ed of Axum, the Lique Papas, and all the gathered priests, and gave them a sign for the "burake," the blessing ceremony to begin.

## **THE DEDICATION CEREMONY**

### The "Burake"

Now it was the turn of the priesthood. The Lique Papas stepped forward, followed by the Nebure-ed, several Abunas and Echegies, about a dozen in all, dressed in black robes and with their round capped head gear, started a soft, low voiced, and mumbled long prayer in Geez. The entire market place was hushed into silence. He then raised his right hand, which held a golden cross, shrouded in a white silken handkerchief, and pointing to the drum, made the sign of the crucifix. This, he repeated three times. One of the priests came forward and held up a silver water basin. The Lique Papas having laved his hand in the basin, then sprinkled holy water, first in the direction of the king and those around him, and then followed by his clerics, he walked round and round the cart and the four horses three times, sprinkling them with holly water and uttering his blessings in mumbled Geez. One of the Abunas followed the Lique Papas,

shaking the censer to the right and the left, with the smoke of incense rising high up into the air. He dedicated the drum for peace, prosperity, and to a very long reign to the king.

Having completed the prayers and dedication, the Lique Papas and his abunas withdrew to one side, while the priests took over. They were dressed for the occasion: long flowing white robes, their heads wrapped in white turbans, a long pole, (mequamia) in one hand, a brass cymbal, (tsena-tsil) in the other. They marched with their debabs and colorful umbrellas following those who carried the Arc of the Covenant, and circled the drum three times. After that, those who carried the Arc of the Covenant stood to one side, while the priests readily formed into three rows of twenty men on each of the four sides of the cart, and started to perform. They sang and danced, walking to the right and then to the left, towards each other, and then away from each other, and all throughout at intervals shaking their cymbals in a happy sound, raising their voice and their mequamias and then lowering them in unison. The beat became faster and faster until they finally broke into a lively dance. This is one of the most beautiful forms from the series of Ethiopian Church liturgy known as kidasie, aqua-quam, mahlet, etc. Everyone was in a festive mood. The performance went on for a good couple of hours, till just about sunset.

Finally, when the singing and dancing ended, the Lique Papas came forward and uttered closing prayers. The entire gathering was again hushed into silence, and you could hear a pin drop. After the closing prayers were done, the people began to disperse. The king mounted on his white horse and headed for his palace, with the cart and the drummers following him, beating the great drum with enthusiasm.

That night a great feast was held in the palace for all those that had taken part in the making of the drum. The two artisan drum makers were honored and made to sit on the same level of seats as the real warrior Djazmatches and feast from the kings' table. After dinner, the king and his guests sat on the balcony of the palace and the drummers resumed their performance. This went on until very late into the night. It was repeated night after night for several days until the whole neighborhood became accustomed to the sound of the drum and the different sounds and their meanings. There were beats of joy and celebration, beats of alarm, beats of "Hark, Hark, Listen", which would precede an announcement, beats of "beware, beware," beats of call to arms, beats that growled like the hippo just to frighten the enemy, and many varieties of beats with multiple messages. There were also some beats just frivolous and playful, without any special meaning, just to entertain the listeners.

The great drum became the most prized possessions of the king and all the kings that followed him. It was used in all major events and court occasions. After every performance, it used to be cleaned, polished, the tensions adjusted and maintained, and always kept ready for the next performance in a specially built bungalow in the

palace grounds. We are told that this drum was passed on from king to king and survived over many generations and for several centuries. But no one seems to know its whereabouts today. And it is here that our three storytellers seem to have the most discrepancy in their narrative.

One of the men said he suspected that after the death of Atse Tewodros, Robert Napier's army might have taken it to England when they stormed and looted the fort of Maqdella, while the other storyteller said that the Negarit was still around until much later, and that during the Italian occupation, along with the obelisk of Axum and many other trophies, they stole it and took it to Rome. But the woman narrator said that the drum had been missing since much earlier times, and that it was at the era of Ahmed Gragh that it had disappeared. She said Gragh probably destroyed it along with many historical and religious artifacts that he burnt, or might have sent it to his Turkish and Arab supporters as present.

Another interesting anecdote this lady added was that the word Negarit was, in fact, a corruption and a new word coined into the language from this drum. People had started calling the drum, "Dejach Nega," as the king had ordered, in honor of the dead hunter. But after many years of use the name became too long, and they started calling it just, Nega, which further corrupted and finally turned into: Negarit, as the drum was a 'talking' drum. All we are left with today are two things: this legend and the word Negarit, which might or might not have originated from this drum. Discrepancies aside, there is little doubt that this legend is based on truth, and until a careful and thorough study is conducted about this matter, the final chapter of this great drum remains yet to be written.

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