

## **Aba Hailegebresilasse - Lalibela's tree planting monk**

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In much of Ethiopia church and monastery forests are unique depositories and often the last refugia of the hundreds of native tree species. As deforestation proceeded these small island of semi-natural vegetation have remained and from a distance they appear during the dry season like a green spot in a sea of yellow. A Darwin Initiative Project implemented jointly by the Society and the University of Wales and in association with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) is currently looking at the status of some of these woodlands as well as their conservation. Some preliminary findings would suggest that the attitude of the local clergy and that of specific churches and monasteries towards trees and woodlands is highly variable. During our field studies we came across Aba Hailegebresilasse Kidane in the world famous heritage site of Lalibela.

Lalibela is a complex of churches where little of the original native tree cover remains with just a few large dying trees standing here and there. Much of the site has suffered from severe soil erosion thus exposing much bare rock. If one looks carefully there are islands of young trees scattered here and there around the various sites. We were rapidly informed by a young boy that these trees had been mainly planted by a local monk

Unlike most monks Aba Hailegebresilasse is a very active man, living in poverty and spending little time begging for coins to make ends meet. Besides his religious activities he spends much time tree planting and looking after his trees. This is a unique activity among Lalibela monk and thus he is known to everyone living around as "the plant man". Aba's tree planting ability is widely appreciated, however, when we interviewed him he pointed out that there were few people who helped him in planting the trees and looking after them. Nevertheless he gets the help of some of the guards.

To mention a few Aba's daily duties, they consisted in digging the hole to plant young seedlings, spread dry grasses under seedlings after they are planted to protect them from the sun, this to prevent desiccation and reduce watering requirements. Fencing is an important activity to ensure that the young trees are not damaged

or browsed. Watering of young seedlings must be carried out daily during the dry season and this task is a hard and laborious. At one of the plantations, the water is found at the base of 10 m high cliff in a depression excavated from the rock next to the Bet Amanuel Church. There, he fills six 5l plastic oil containers with murky water and after tying them to a rope he proceeds to the top of the cliff through the church's passages. Once at the top and from the precarious edge of the cliff he has to pull the whole load. Then he goes around watering the younger trees but once they are more than 1.5 years old he only needs to water them once a month.

In other parts of the Lalibela site he builds fences to protect his seedlings and saplings from being grazing by goats and, as far as *Olea* saplings are concerned, from twig harvesting by people who use them as toothbrushes. Since there is no nearby available fencing material Aba needs to carry over 1/2 km all the necessary branches to regularly re-enforce his defences.

Under the shade of a centenary olive tree Aba was asked why he planted trees and he replied quoting the sentence from the bible. He said: "God ordered everybody to plant trees around the church". Then he explained the importance of a woodland around a church as a fence, giving grace to the church. He continued, as written in "Kristos samra", plants give grace to a church and a church surrounded by a woodland is more respected than if it were denuded of trees.

He thought that his tree planting activities are appreciated and that everybody respects him. He has managed to convince people to plant trees around the church saying "the church can not be bare therefore everybody has to grow plants to obey the God's law". People agree with his idea, sayings and believes because Christians have to respect the sentences as he quotes from the bible.

Trees planted consist in the main local tree species now so rare in the surrounding landscape. He has planted *weira* (*Olea europaea* ssp *cuspidata*) and *Habesha Tid* (*Juniperus procera*) and *Wanza* (*Cordia africana*). Unlike many other church and monastery yards the Darwin Team has visited, he does not plant exotic

species. To our question as to why he didn't he stated that he does not like them. He only likes planting trees that his ancestors have traditionally used and his dream is to grow many more indigenous plant species.

During our stay in Lalibela we were fortunate to be able to spend half a day with Aba Hailegebresilasse. We thoroughly enjoyed his company and spent a few hours carrying branches and water through the streets and monasteries of Lalibela. It was a privilege to be able to help this eager tree planter and, as part of this Darwin Initiative Project, we hope to return to Lalibela. Hopefully we will be able to provide him with some more substantial help so that he can we can both ease his daily arduous tasks as well as expand his tree planting activities.

Desalegn Desissa, Pierre Binggeli and John Smith

### **Aba Hailegebresilasse Kidane - a profile**

Aba Hailegebresilasse Kidane was born 60 years ago in the rural village of Wogara (Dabat, Gonder). The son of a farmer, he lived with his family and tilled the land until the age of 20 when he became badly sick. His right ankle became severely infected and a doctor advised him to have his foot amputated. Supported by his father he refused to carry out this procedure and sought treatment with a local traditional healer. The infection eventually receded but his ankle never recovered and was left permanently invalidated. This severe disability has not prevented him from being a keen active walker helped by the use of an iron bar but his career as a farmer was at an end.

Aba Hailegebresilasse became a monk and over the next couple of decades the Aba made a meager living visiting various churches and monasteries. Some 13 years ago he came to Lalibela and has lived in some of the small and Spartan dwellings in one of the Lalibela cliffs. Aba is outgoing and funny, telling his concerns about other monks.

In Lalibela the Aba is a well-known character especially because of his endless energy and keenness to grow trees. He is also very knowledgeable about the plants grown in and around Lalibela's numerous churches and monasteries.