

## **BRIDGING GENERATIONS: SOME POINTS ON THE CAREER OF ŠÄYKH LÄGAS ADÄM AS INDIGENOUS MEDICAL EXPERT IN GONDAR CITY**

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### **Abstract**

*With few exceptions the study of social history has largely been overlooked in both Africa and Ethiopia. Based on primary and secondary sources, this article has attempted to provide insights on certain aspects of the career of Šäykh Lägäs Adäm, a prolific Islamic scholar, wali, herbalist and court figure. In doing so, the paper specifically examined the role he played in society as an herbalist and how community of Gondar responded to his career. In addition to healthcare, this study has examined his social role in the community as a role model for promoting unity, humility, charity, and friendship across religious and ethnic boundaries. This study aimed to illuminate and address gaps in the social and cultural history of Gondar City and its surrounding area. The research highlights Šäykh Lägäs Adäm's exemplary career in fostering coexistence and cooperation across community boundaries. The researchers hope that the study of this iconic figure will benefit future generations by providing insights into the lived experiences of esteemed scholars and traditional healers like Šäykh Lägäs Adäm.*

**Key words:** Šäykh Lägäs, Wali, Herbalist, coexistence, Christians, Muslims, Ethiopia, Gondar

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1 Principal investigator.

2 Co-investigator.

## Introduction

ቅጠል ሥራሥሩ አፈርና ሞራው፣  
ጤናን የሚመልስ ቁስለኛ ሚያክመው፣  
ዘፈቀደ አይደለም ስሌት ልኬት አለው  
አገር በቀል ዕውቀት ጥበብ የቀመረው<sup>3</sup>

Through the leaves, roots and the fat,  
They treat the wounds and restored health,  
This is not just by chance but through examination,  
Which is the result of time-tested knowledge.

Although the precise origins of Ethiopia’s medicinal history are difficult to trace with certainty, it is believed that indigenous healers have played a significant role in identifying and utilizing the country’s natural resources to treat human and animal diseases for centuries.<sup>4</sup> However, it is believed that Ethiopia, as part of the ancient world, has a very ancient and diverse medical culture. The country, like many other countries in the world, East and West, is endowed with untapped indigenous knowledge of various types and experts. Be it indigenous or modern, knowledge is usually the result of human environment interaction from near and far. Experts in the field argue that Ethiopian indigenous knowledge is a combination of acquaintance from home, the Mediterranean world, the Middle East and partly the Far East. This was due to the geographical proximity of the country and the continuing cultural and historical contacts.<sup>5</sup>

For several centuries, the natural environment, such as plants,<sup>6</sup> has been an important source of indigenous medicines. Ethiopian oral

3 Yāzna Worku, *Yāzāmān Māstawāt: Poem collection*, 2014 E.C, P.17.

4 Assefa Balcha. 2024. “A Dilapidated Wisdom: Historical Retrospection on the Manifold Career of Herbalist-Healers. “ *Journal of Afro Asiatic Languages, History and Culture*, Volume 13. Number 3, p.5፤ ብርቱካን ደባይ “ሀገረሰባዊ የዕዕዋት መድኃኒቶች እውቀት፣ አዘገጃጀት እና አሰጣጥ በሸዋርቤት ከተማና አካባቢዋ ‘ከመድኃኒት አዋቂዎች አንጻር’ “፣ ማስተርስ ቴሲስ፣ አዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ፣ 2012 ዓ.ም፤ ገጽ፣ 1-5።

5 *Ibid.*, p.8.

6 As elsewhere reported these indigenous plants used for many purposes such as for cleaning and good odor. This can be substantiated in the following poem composed by renown author from Gondar:

“የሕጻን ልጅ ልብስ ታጥቦ ታጥኖ በጥንጁቱ ጠረኑ ደስ ይላል፤

በወይራ የፋቀት ጥርሳቸው ንጣቱ ልብን ያማልላል። “ Yāzena, p.61.

For the best odor of kids’ cloth, a plant called Tenjut used,

tradition, written sources and European travellers who visited Ethiopia at various times over the centuries have recognized that Ethiopia uses a wide range of herbal remedies. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, observation of Alvarez and Almeida mentioned the existence in Ethiopia of medical practices widely.<sup>7</sup> For example in the later centuries the British consul in the court of *Ras* Ali II and later Tewodros II, Plowden admired the country in such a way that ‘no country in the world comprises in so small a territory, so rich herbal as Abyssinia, owing to its various elevations’.<sup>8</sup>

Healing practitioners were, and still are usually religious persons or mostly affiliated to that institution. However, there were exceptions in some fields. On the basis of their knowledge of the location and intrinsic properties of herbs, the herbalist-healers in Ethiopia collected the medicinal herbs from diverse climatic zones. These climatic zones might be Däga , Wäyna Däga, Qola and Bäräha (cold, temperate, hot and Deseret zones respectively). However, there Bäräha and the wurch hottest and coldest zones of the agro climatic regions still were important. The presence of diverse climatic zones enabled Ethiopia to hold a variety of therapeutically important native plants. This benefited practitioners and patients in large extent. As they travelled to various places to learn the art of medicine, the practitioners had opportunities to discover and collect numerous medicinal plants.<sup>9</sup>

The vast majority of healers had some use of herbal substances as part of their approach to treatment. The term ‘herbalist healer’ encompassed a wide range of practitioners. From those who combined herbal and non-herbal remedies to those who used only herbal treatments. This posed a significant challenge in terms of determining who should be considered to be a fully-fledged herbalist healer. In

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Another indigenous plant Wäyira also used for cleaning teeth.

- 7 Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford (edited) , *The Prester John of the Indies: A true relation of the lands of the Pester John being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520 written by father Francisco Alvares*, Vol. II Cambridge University Press, 1961, p.509; Steven Kaplan, “Traditional Medicine”, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, Siegbert Uhlig(ed.) Vol.3, Harrassowitz VerlagWiesbaden, 2007, pp.902-904.
- 8 Ibid.pp.16-17; see also Simon D. Messing, “Interdigitation of Mystical and Physical Healing in Ethiopia: Toward a Theory of Medical Anthropology “ Behavior Science Notes V. 2, 1968, 80-105; Assefa Balcha, “Reflective Appraisal on the Historiography of Indigenous Ethiopian Therapeutics, “ Journal of Afro-Asiatic Languages, History and Culture, 9 (1), 2020, Pp. 90-96
- 9 Ibid.p.17.

practice, the term ‘herbalist healer’ encompassed both secular and spiritual healers. Their therapeutic approach included the use of herbal remedies. Titles of cleric–spiritual healers such as ‘*Šäykh*’, ‘*Märgéta*’, ‘*Däbtära*’, ‘*Aläqa*’, ‘*Abba*’, ‘*Dua Adragi*’, Emété,<sup>10</sup> and also there were female herbalists as well.<sup>11</sup> These titles are indicative of healers’ religious (i.e., Christian or Muslim) and educational background or qualification (i.e., cleric/non-cleric) as well.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the treatment of ailments for which they openly claimed to be effective was sought by genuine herbal healers of high reputation and proven experience. Some of them practiced medicine as a full-time profession. They made their living solely from the healing profession. Others may have had other occupations. Those who had community reputation and acceptance as skilled healers did not attempt to treat all ailments, even referring patients with ailments beyond their capacity to other healers or modern health facilities.<sup>13</sup> In this case according to informants the *Šäykh* and the *Däbtära* were treated some illness together through spiritual remedy.<sup>14</sup>

Still studies report that nearly or more than 80% of the population Ethiopia relies on traditional medicine to meet their daily health requirements. This is partly due to issues of accessibility, efficacy on treatment and affordable cost compared to Western medication.<sup>15</sup> This implies, the importance of indigenous healing practices in the country to date. Most of such knowledge seems to be still in the hands of the traditional healers. This knowledge of the healers is either lost or passed

10 To mean formed Female mothers .

11 ታምሜ ከርሜ አዝኛ ስኖር፤

ዘነሱን አገኘሁ “እግዜር በምድር።” “

I was sick for long and disappointed for that,

One day later I have got Zänäbu who cured me .

For that I called he “God on earth “

Wäyärö Zänäbu was and still is renown herbalist in Addis Aläm Gondar. For her profession the following informant gave their recognition.( informant: Qés Zäwdu Täkätäl; Asäba Nägaš). The message according to informant was to recognize her knowledge the herbalist to treat sickness such as skin disease.

12 Assefa “A Dilapidated Wisdom ... “ p.2 6.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Informants: Ato Bayuh Bāzabih and Ato Asäbä Negaš 20/2/2023.

15 Meaza Gidey, et al. “Traditional medicinal plants used by Kunama ethnic group in Northern Ethiopia, “ *Journal of Medicinal Plants Research*, Vol. 9, 2015, pp. 494-495; ተመስገን በየነ፣ በባህላዊ ህክምና በሽታን የመለያ ዘዴዎች፣ የመድኃኒት ቅመማና አሰጣጥ በግሼ ወረዳ፣ ለኤም.ኤ ቴሲሰ፣ ኦዲስ አበባ ዩኒቨርሲቲ፣ 2003 ዓ.ም፣ ገጽ፣ 1-3።

on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The traditional medical system of Ethiopia is mainly related to the religious systems due to the close interaction of the traditional medical system in the country with the religious systems.<sup>16</sup> In Ethiopia, the traditional medical system is mainly related to religion, called medico-religious systems. This is due to the close interaction of the traditional medical system in the country.<sup>17</sup> Ethiopia has an abundance of traditional knowledge, passed down through the oral tradition.<sup>18</sup>

In Ethiopia, as Assefa (2024:16-27) explained in great detail, people have cultivated and maintained a variety of prophylactic, diagnostic and therapeutic techniques to deal with illness and disease. Even after the introduction of cosmopolitan medicine in the early 20th century, this was the dominant medical practice. Moreover, there was little to undermine public confidence in indigenous therapeutics from the uneven and very slow spread of modern health services.<sup>19</sup>

Like other parts of Ethiopia, Gondar was one of the centers of various traditional healers. They treated not only the people of Gondar, but also various patients from different provinces of the country and even from neighboring Sudan. Some of the well-known traditional herbalists include: *Qés* Kassa Märša, *Šäykeb* Abdälla Muhammed, *Hajj* Endris Jämil, Mämhir Bälay Tadässä, Hajj Yäsuf Gäbäyaw, (his son Aminu Yäsuf now live in Azäzo), *Šäykeb* Ebrahim, *Hajj* Mohammäd Seid *Šäykeb*, and Lägas Adäm.<sup>20</sup> One of the most famous traditional healers of the imperial period was *Šäykeb* Lägas Adäm, who cured various diseases and continued to serve society with his knowledge until his death.<sup>21</sup>

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16 Gidey Yirga, “Assessment of traditional medicinal plants in Endrta District, South-eastern Tigray, Northern Ethiopia” (African Journal of Plant Science, July, 2010) pp. 255-260, Vol. 4. No.7, p.255.

17 Assefa “A Dilapidated Wisdom ...” p. 27; Mekonnen Bishaw, “Integrating Indigenous and Cosmopolitan Medicine in Ethiopia “ Unpub PhD Dissertation, (S. Illinois University, 1988), pp.81-84; Spencer Trimmingham, Islam in Ethiopia, (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1965), p.1-6

18 Gidey Yirga, “Assessment of Traditional Medicinal Plants in Endrta District, South-eastern Tigray, Northern Ethiopia” *African Journal of Plant Science*, July, Vol. 4. No.7, 2010, p. 255.

19 Assefa “A Dilapidated Wisdom ...” p.16.

20 Informants: Ato Asebe Negash and Haj Mohammed Aman.

21 Informants: Bazezew Gedu and Ato Birhanu Chale.

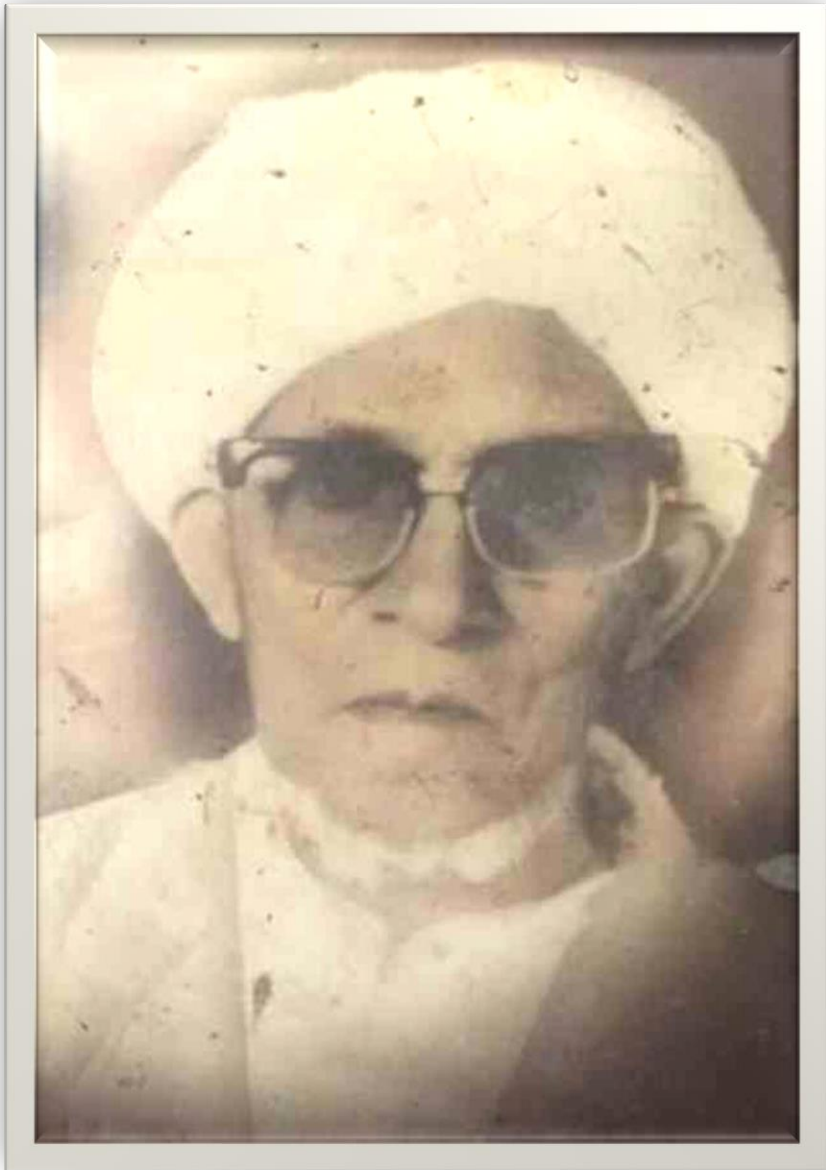


Figure 1. Šäykh Lāgas Adām from his family collection in Gondar collected in 2023.

## Early life of Šäykh Lāgas Adām

### Birth, Growth and Education

*Šäykeb Lāgas Adām* was born in Gondar city *Islamgé*<sup>22</sup> later known as Addis Alām,<sup>23</sup> to his father, Šäykh Adām Abdir, and his mother, Wäyzäro Märéym Šifa, around 1869 AD. Šäykh Lāgas Adām was closely related on his mother's side to Emperor Yohannis IV (1872-1889).<sup>24</sup> His father Šäykh Adām Abdir was one of the leading Islamic scholars of his time in Addis Alām and the wider Gondar region. He had a wide range of knowledge and skills. He was also a cleric, an herbalist, a farmer and a religious leader with a great reputation.<sup>25</sup>

### Educational back ground

When he reached the appropriate age, as in most traditional Muslim Ethiopian society, Šäykh Lāgas was sent to Quranic school or 'Quran Bét'. The young Lāgas was favored to learn *ilm* or Islamic knowledge from his nearby village due to the presence of many Šäykh in Addis Alām.<sup>26</sup> After completing the basics in Islam from the Quranic School, he kept his further study under various scholars in various fields. He also studied under his own father and others like *Šäykeb* Mohamed Seid Raya and *Šäykeb Šifa* and specialized in Islamic jurisprudence (Šäria), *täfsir*,<sup>27</sup> grammar in Arabic, morality and so on). *Šäykeb* Lāgas was one of the few high achievers among his class mates of 72 in total. As the result he became one of the chosen three to study astronomy by his mentor. He completed all these with success. *Šäykeb* Lāgas's versatility and diverse

22 It is the combination of two terms 'Islam' and 'Gé'. Islam denotes the religion whereas 'Gé' refers to the village where the Muslim reside. The quarter sometimes also called *Islam bét*. Later it assumed another name ,Adis Alām.

23 One of the oldest quarters of the city of Gondar most affiliated to Muslim residences, trade and Market.

24 Hasän Taju, pp. 79- 104, A letter from *Fitawrari* Bäqälä Zäläläw to the Täqilay Gizat Bétkihnät Šefät Bét Number 3/9/58/60 dated Meskerem 24 1960 E.C; Informants: Šäykh Hussén Muhammed, Qés G/ Mäskäl Chäkol and Ato Salih Taju.; Yohannis's sister's nephew named *Wolete Hawariyat* for the detail story see Haasen Taju, *Yä säMénu Hayal...* pp.79-102.

25 Hasän, *Šäykeb Lāgas Adām...*pp.53-55.

26 Interview with Ato Asäbä Nägaš, *Šäykeb* Šämsu Musa and Qes Gädu Mulat, Ato Baeäzäw Gälaw, Ato Dässé Ebabu, Haj Mohammed Aman and Salih Taju

27 The ability of interpretation of the message of the Quran to other languages.

knowledge clearly reflected in his career including in his religious books (*Kitabs*) and prayer poems written and compiled by himself:

ኪታቦቻቸው የሃንፍይ፣ የሸፊዲ፣ የፊቃህ ኪታቦች፣ ቁርዓንን ማብራሪያዎች፣ የነሀውና የሶርፍ ድርሳናት፣ በእጅ የተጻፉ የቁርዓን፣ የፊቃህ፣ የነሀውና፣ የዐረብኛ መዝገበ ቃላት፣ የትንቢሃ ሰልዋት ማለትም ነብዩ መሐመድን የሚያወድሱ እንዲሁም የባህል ሕክምና መጽሐፍትን አይቻለሁ።<sup>28</sup>

[Various Islamic books like Quranic interpretations, other literatures, handwritten manuscripts, Arabic dictionary, praising literatures about Prophet Mohamed, medical books were in the collection.]

As clearly indicated by Assefa in the medical history of Ethiopia, there were reciprocal scholarly influences between the Middle East and Ethiopia. This was also true in the various works of Šäykh Lāgas. For instance, Hassen reports that the books written by Šäykh Lāgas related to medicine were influenced by Imam Ibinul Qāyem, a medieval Arab Islamic scholar.<sup>29</sup> The possession of such books by Šäykh Lāgas helped to facilitate his medical knowledge. He presumably passed them down to some of his sons: Hajji Taju and Šäykh Kāmal.

The late Šäykh Kāmal, as we shall see later, was remembered by many as the leading herbalist, continuing his father's legacy, until his recent death in the summer of 2021. *Šäykeb* Lāgas follows the Hanafi sect of Islam the most dominant in north west Ethiopia. He was also well informed of Šäfi.<sup>30</sup> In Ethiopia from the four schools<sup>31</sup> of Islamic thought, Hanāfiya and Šäfi were the dominant one. “ሼህ ለጋስ በሃይመኖት ጉዳይም ቢሆን ትልቅ ተጠየቅ የሚባሉ ነበሩ” [*Šäykeb* Lāgas was also one of the leading scholars in Islam]. Although his religious knowledge permits him to engage in teaching Quran and other related things, his interest was towards studying and became an expert in health sector and traditional medicine. The other hobby and experience *Šäykeb* Lāgas had next to healing practice was the legal sphere defending his right and helping others in need to do that.<sup>32</sup> These all inform us about *Šäykeb* Lāgas's resourcefulness in his career. As such it was reported by both informants

28 Hasän, 2007 E.C, pp.59-61.

29 Hasän , p.58

30 Ibid.

31 The four schools are Maliki, Hanibali, Hanāfiya, and Šäfi.

32 His court experience such as litigations over *rest* land and so on is not the subject of this paper which by itself is a huge topic to deal with.



and secondary sources that the *Šäykb* was also religious devotee. Among the people he was respected and believed that God heard his prayers. Prayer was one of the most important aspect of the *Šäykb* Lägäs's life for that God rewarded him in many occasions.<sup>33</sup>

## Marriage Life

**Šäykh Lägäs** got married around the age of thirty. Up until then, he was consciously learning and seeking knowledge. He was survived by his sons and daughters, such as Tuahir Legass, Juhar Legass, Kemal Legass, Taju Legass, Jemal Legass, Ali Legas, Hawa Legass, Halima Legass, Hukmu Legass, Zubeyda Legass, Ruqya Legass, Shemsiya Legass, and Nurit Legass.

## Šäykh Lägäs Adäm as a ‘Doctor’

አላህ ለገሠ አሉት እውነት ነው እንዴታ፣  
ለኸልቅ መዳኒት አድርጎታል ጌታ።<sup>34</sup>

They rightly called him the gift of God,  
Since, he is there to heal the wounds of the people.

This was a poem dedicated to the prolific knowledge and proven healing practice of Šäykh Lägäs. He was also sometimes called “የፈውስ ንጉሥ”<sup>35</sup> [the most healer].

In a letter written to Bägémdir and Semén Governor General in Genbot 27/1953 E.C, Šäykh Lägäs presents his profession in the following way:

ከቡር ሆይ:- ስሜ ሸህ ለጋስ አባቴ ሸህ አደም እናቴ እመት ማሬ እድሜየ 63 ሥራየ ህክምና ዘሬ እስላም ትውልዴ ኢትዮጵያዊ<sup>36</sup> [Your Excellency: my name is Šäykh Lägäs, my father's name is Adäm, my mother is Maré, I am 63 years old, my profession is healer, my religion is Islam and my nationality is Ethiopian.]

33 Hassen, p.59; Informants: W/ro Rehmet Usman Haj Mohammed Rayah and Hajj Maeruf Nurhusen; G/ Mäskäl Chäköl and Säfäraläm Molla.

34 Informant: W/ro Säwnä Aklilu, and Asäbä Nägaš

35 Ibid.

36 Former Gondar Province administration Archive office, folder የከ/ሰ/9, File number 14, Šämiz, number 1, serial Number, 5, the letter from Šäykh Lägäs Adäm to Bägémdir and Semén Governor General Dated Genbot 27/1953 E.C.

As discussed above Šäykh Lāgas was one of the prolific scholars of Islam in many standards and had other possibility for his career however he preferred medical practice. The letter is an important primary source that witnessed Šäykh Lāgas's loved profession.

As indicated briefly in the preceding paragraphs one of the many gifts of Šäykh Lāgas Adām was his skill and knowledge of indigenous medicine which he inherited from his father and Šäykh Ebrahim and Šäykh Mohamed Seid in Addis Alām. His father Adām Abdir was well known in the field of traditional medicine who served the society from different ailments like liver, cannabiṣ, skin diseases, wounds, evil eye, abdominal pains, ear, eye and etc. As Šäykh Lāgas spent most of his time with his father, he learnt the knowledge of traditional medicine from his father. In addition, he learns medical knowledge and healing practices from the Quran, Islamic holy Book. The quality of Šäykh Lāgas' healing was widely reported by informants. They used to say “በዐይናቸው ብቻ አይተው ይፈውሱ ነበር”<sup>37</sup> [just by looking at people, he had the power to treat them.] Šäykh Lāgas was relied upon by most of the people of Gondar, both Muslims and Christians, for medical care. All the elderly people who were interviewed in the city of Gondar said that he was the “doctor” of their family. The informants further appreciated his career to the extent that they said, “he had medicine for all diseases except death.”<sup>38</sup> He received later certificate nationally in recognition of his expertise in the field.<sup>39</sup>

The therapeutic career of Šäykh Lāgas was not without challenge from the so-called “modernist”. The most important periods were the Italian occupation and the Dārg period. According to informants, he was asked by Italian officials to cooperate with them and share his knowledge of traditional medicine with Italian doctors during the five years of Italian occupation. He was not willing to cooperate with the fascist authorities. As a result, they ordered him to stop his medical treatment of any patient and arrested him inside the hospital.<sup>40</sup> Still informants further narrate that while he was imprisoned in the hospital, he looks one patient who

37 Informants: *Qes* G/ Mäskäl Chekol and Ato Täsfahun Mähari; w/ro Wäsän Yeäleäṣ sitotaw, Šäykh Šikur Hussén Gondar , 13/3/2023 .

38 Informants: *Ato* Abäbä Aragé and Dr. Amarä Habté.

39 A recognition letter written from Addis Ababa University Public Health College Hospital, Dr. Mulugeta Mengstu number 60636 dated 6/10/70 G.C to Šäykh Lāgas Adām.

40 Informants: *Wäyżäro* Ehitnat Degu and W/ro Momina Yasin.

suffered with ‘*Chifé*’ or one type of skin disease and the Italian doctors examine deeply and later they told him that “we cannot cure your disease and beyond our capacity, the only chance is amputate your leg to save your life.” Šäykh Lāgas was around there and watching the event. He pleaded the Doctor to give him the chance to cure that patient suffering from such disease through two weeks only. Fortunately, after some discussion over the matter the doctors agreed and give the chance for the Šäykh Lāgas. He then treated the patient by his indigenous medicine for seven days and the wound was cured but the wound has scuff on it. He still continued his follow up in the next one week eventually the body of the patient cured and well recovered.<sup>41</sup> After wards Šäykh Lāgas and the cured patient went to hospital by covering his leg with a piece of cloth. When the group of doctors pay a look the patient, they were surprised with all the activities Šäykh Lāgas. Ultimately, they recognized his skill and knowledge of indigenous medicine. Following that incidence, the doctors took time and discussed it and eventually allowed him to keep on his profession, serving the people.<sup>42</sup>

During the time of the restored government of Haile Selassie I, Šäykh Lāgas was recognized for his expertise in indigenous medicine through a letter dated November 1943 (1935 EC) with reference No. 509/43/45 from the Ethiopian Public Health Institution which was written to Bägémdir Täqlay Gizat Šäfät Bét. The institution guaranteed and issued a certificate for Šäykh Lāgas Adām to legally treat external skin diseases for the wider community.<sup>43</sup> During the Därg Regime Šäykh Lāgas also continued to prove his career in all encounters of the regime until his final days. He had successfully overcome the challenges faced one after another.<sup>44</sup>

## Aspects of specialties of Šäykh Lāgas Adām

As briefly indicated in the introductory paragraphs, in many countries of the world, different medicinal plants have been used as remedies to cure diseases. Most of this knowledge, especially in developing countries, is still in the hands of traditional healers. The knowledge of these healers is also passed down from generation to generation, primarily through oral

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41 Informants: Šikur Hussén and Ato Salih Taju, 12/2/202023

42 Informants: Ato Sulāman Šikur and Säfäralem Molla.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Informants: Qés G/Mäskäl Čäkol and Ato Dässé Ebabu.

tradition within the same kinship groups.<sup>45</sup> In Ethiopia, most of the people have developed the habit of visiting the houses of traditional medicine healers rather than seeking modern health treatments to cure from sickness. Similar to other parts of Ethiopia, the people of Gondar have been used to relying on traditional medicine to cure various types of diseases.<sup>46</sup>

As widely mentioned above, Šäykh Lāgas Adām was one of the famous and skilled traditional healers who had the knowledge to cure people suffering from different types of diseases. Many informants argue that his treatment was done with special care and attention. He tried to examine patients by different means. Sometimes he encouraged people to go to modern health centers to get further diagnosis and testing through laboratory. According to informants, he used to say: “በሽታህን/ሽን ስም አስወጣለት/ጭለት ከዚያ ና! ነይ! ይሉ ነበር”<sup>47</sup> [May you go and have name for your sickness and come back for treatment].

Informants further remember the crowd of people around Šäykh Lāgas Adām’s homestead, which was always present in the morning to receive his medical treatment: “አርሳቸውን ለማግኘት ዘወትር ጠዋት በኑር አምባ መንደር የነበረውን ... ረጅም ሰልፍ በህይወት የሚገኙ ጎረቤታቸው አሁንም ድረስ ባድናቆት ያስታውሳሉ። ... በሽተኛውን ሽንት በዐይናቸው ብቻ በማየት ያውቁት ነበር”<sup>48</sup> [around the Nur amba village, there was a long line of people to see Šäykh Lāgas... He identified a disease simply by observing the nature of urine].

Šäykh Hussén the *Murid* or *agafari* (close associate) who served Šäykh Lāgas for thirty years greatly explained the deep knowledge of Šäykh Lāgas in traditional medicine to cure liver disease and cannabis (substance abuse) by observing the urine, eyes, and skin of the patient. Similarly, the people of Gondar would visit the house of Šäykh Lāgas Adam when their children suffered from head wounds. They would usually find a solution within three days.<sup>49</sup>

Individuals from rural areas and surrounding regions traveled to seek Šäykh Lāgas Adām’s expertise in traditional medicine for their health issues. Šäykh Lāgas Adām provided his services to everyone with

45 Gidey Yirga, “Assessment of traditional medicinal plants in Endrta District, South-eastern Tigray, Northern Ethiopia” (*African Journal of Plant Science*, July, 2010) pp. 255-260, Vol. 4. No.7, p.255.

46 Informants: Dr. Amare Habtie and W/ro, Momina Yasin.

47 Informant : Šäykh Šikur Hussén, Asäbä Nägaš;Hassen

48 Informant : Grazmač Addis Zäläkä, pp. 136-137.

49 Informants: Ato Birhanu Chale, Ato Dessie Ebabu and Sheikh Shikur Hussein.

impartiality and fairness. His reputation for treating all patients equitably, regardless of their background or location, attracted a diverse clientele. This inclusive approach ensured that his practice was accessible to a broad spectrum of people, fostering trust and respect among the communities he served. The people from Šäwa and Tigray visited the house of *Šäykeb* Lāgas to get cured from their health problems. *Šäykeb* Lāgas had traditional medicine that cured diseases such as Chifé, Liffé, Šärärit and others within a week or so.

An informant reported, “I remember the heart-breaking pain while I suffered from Liffé, but after I took the medicine from *Šäykeb* Lāgas Adām, the blessed father, my pain disappeared, and I was cured once and for all.”<sup>50</sup>

*Šäykeb* Lāgas Adām’s house was visited by all segments of people, including authorities. As to informants and written sources, Abäbä Arāgay, the renowned patriot in Šäwa during the Italian occupation period and one of the key ministers in the restored government of Emperor Haile Selassie I visited *Šäykeb* Lāgas. He suffered from various ailments, including overweight and other internal one. He visited the modern medical centers in different places including the capital, Addis Ababa. Unfortunately, the treatment was not cured him. Since his wife was from Gondar, she was informed of the medical and spiritual knowledge of *Šäykeb* Lāgas Adām. Ras Abäbä was called to the *Šäykeb*’s house to be examined. The *Šäykeb* treated him, and within a week, his health situation improved. For all the service provided, the Ras Abäbä offered 100 Birr to *Šäykeb* Lāgas, but the *Šäykeb* refused to accept the payment.<sup>51</sup> It has been known that payment, though not exaggerated in the modern medical sense, was paid to traditional healers for their services.

As for the informant, *Šäykeb* Lāgas was a highly spiritual and God-fearing person. He was the same everywhere and at all times. Everyone believed him to be a *Walīy* (a pious and virtuous person).<sup>52</sup> *Šäykeb* Lāgas was not received money for his medical service. Presumably in the old days receiving money might not be the tradition of Ethiopian indigenous

50 Informants: *Ato* Takälä Enyāw

51 Hassan 2007 E.C reported that he refused to received money whatever 100 or 50 Birr. But some informants the shaykh had taken only 2 Birr . He used to give medical treatment without money unless *jäbata*

52 One who knows something different from the rest of the people such as prophetic character. Allah/God. His prayer heard and answered

healers be it Muslim or Christian.<sup>53</sup> Even for that matter, Šäykh Lāgas did not receive *jabata* (gift) after an individual healed from any kind of illness; he ordered the money to be put somewhere.<sup>54</sup> Even his son and successor in this profession Šäykh Kāmal Lāgas was not taking more than two birr in our contemporary time.<sup>55</sup> For his knowledge and humility, the local poet and azmari musicians attributed the following poem to Šäykh Lāgas's career.

በቂ ቃል አጣሁኝ የምገልፅበት፣  
 ያንተን አዋቂነት ያንትን ሃይማኖት።  
 Oh! Dear [Šäykh] I do not have words to tell about,  
 Your knowledge and moral life is different  
 ይፍረድ አዲስ ዓለም የጥንቱ ከተማ፣  
 ሰርክ ቅዳሜ ይፈረድ የፋሲል ባድማ፣  
 መድኃኒትነቱን የሊጋስ ከራማ።  
 May Addis Alām the ancient town give witness,  
 May Qedamé Fasil village bear witness,  
 About the healing power of the prayer of Šäykh Lāgas

The poem testifies to the public view towards the Šäykh in that everyone from the palace down to the ordinary people in the city of Gondar, including Addis Alām (Tači kätäma) and Lay kätäma (the palace area now called Arada) Jantäkäl and all others, were well informed of the Šäykh Lāgas Adām's knowledge of healing ability in many respects. This was just to emphasize the good role the Šäykh played in the society elsewhere who visited him for their medical purposes. As such, it does not mean that his treatment was limited to the city of Gondar.<sup>56</sup>

The above couplet sums up Šäykh Lāgas' career, his relationship with the Almighty, the people around the city of Gondar and beyond. There could be three themes here. One is his medical knowledge and ethics, the religiosity of the Šäykh and his humility. His love and respect for each

53 As quoted by Assefa, Walter Plowden the British consul in the court of Ras Ali II and Tewodros II wrote: 'The doctor [healer] in Abyssinia takes no fee unless he cures.' In a situation where patients had nothing to pay for treatment, healers did not refuse to provide their service even to those who came from outside of their neighborhood. However it has to be noted that things are dramatically changed with the passage of time see Assefa Balcha, 2024, pp. 20-37.

54 For more see Hassen 2007 E.C, pp. 131-136; 54 Informants: Ato Birhanu Chale, Ato Dessie Ebabu

55 Informants: Qes G/Meskel Chekol and Ato Dessie Ebabu.

56 Informants: Hajj Mohammäd Aman and Abba Gété Alämu

and every human being and animal is addressed in the content of the poem. On the other hand, the poem, composed by an artist of local importance as the “voice of the people”, shows an advanced culture of giving feedback to teach others about role models and recognition. Although informants failed to identify the name of the Azmari ‘poet musician’ in the study area, it seemed clear that she or he was there communicating the kindness and allegiance of the wider public to Šäykh Lägas.



Figure 2. Photograph of Sheikh Legass Adem’s Khelwa(prayer room) (Hassen, 2007 E.C, p.70)

## Social life of *Šäykb* Lāgas Adām

As indicated elsewhere in this paper, *Šäykb* Lāgas was a very respected and accepted person in the community of Gondar and the surrounding provinces. He was one of the elders who could better resolve conflicts and misunderstandings between people. He prayed to God when calamities such as epidemics and lack of rain occurred. Apart from his knowledge of traditional medicine, it was his knowledge of history and traditions of his country that made him respected.<sup>57</sup> He was helpful and generous. For this, people from different parts of the country and Sudan pay homage to him. These visitors were both Muslim or Christian.<sup>58</sup> *Šäykb* Lāgas was a naturally gifted person who had a special wisdom and knowledge to listen to the advice of the young, the elder, whoever he or she was.<sup>59</sup> He had good interaction with whole group of the community in the principle of humanity. For instance, he had a close friendship relation with his Christian neighbors and country men reputable ecclesiastics and scholars of Gondar such as Alāqa Māzmur, Alāqa Yohannes, Qés Tamru, Alāqa Taddässä and more. Due to his good neighbor line as in most part of the country some of his Christian families donate some tract of *rest* land for Mosque building. W/ro Tiruneš was good example.<sup>60</sup> Top secrets were shared normally among *Šäykb* Lāgas and his Christian friends and families. It was reported that he was rational and reasonable. Though there was claims and counter claims over *rest* land and so on with some institutions and people his personal public relation was always the same. *Šäykb* Lāgas and his Christian friends used to visit each other's house. They were also sharing their happiness and sorrow together. *Šäykb* Lāgas used to advised the youngsters to live with love, help each other, to respect the elders and to do good deeds for their country and her people.<sup>61</sup> He was also the one heard and respected due to his morality. As the result of these all, *Šäykb* Lāgas Adām was an icon and a role model in his life time in the city of Gondar and beyond.

The public reflected the deep feelings and affection towards the *Šäykb* especially on the occasion of his death through the wellknown poetic expression tradition of the study area if not all over Ethiopia. On such occasion the positive social relationship he had with the public was

57 Informants: *Šäykb* Šämsu Musa and *Šäykb* Hussén Mohammäd.

58 Informants: *Hajj* Mohammäd Aman and Ato Kädär Taju.

59 Informants: *Šäykb* Šikur Hussén and Ato Abdu Kämäl.

60 Ibid; Hassen, *Yäsäménu*. pp.115-116

61 Informants: Ato Asäbä Nägaš and W/ro. Ehetnat Dägu.



reflected in traditional utterances composed by the voices of the voiceless, *Azmarī* and others who were capable in this art. Although it was forbidden in Islam, however, the members of the Christian community lament by turn taking through fukkära as one of the traditions of the Gondar region in funerary .

The following poems were some of the poems dedicated to *Šäykh* Lägas.

አርበድብድ ለገሠ ብጠራው ዝም አለኝ፤  
እውነተኛው እንቅልፍ ወስዶታል መሰለኝ

Legese the powerful prefer silence

It seems true that he has slept for no return

መድኃኒቱ ለጋስ ጉልበቱን ደከሞታል፤

መነሳት አቃተው አፈር ተጭኖታል።<sup>62</sup>

Šäykh Lägas, the healer of the sick, seems exhausted,

He hasn't been able to get up since he entered the cemetery.

ዱዓው ሙስጃብ ነው በላ የሚረፋ፤

እግዜር ለገሠ አልነው እኛማ በይፋ።

His payer heard faster and quicker,

In that we call him the gift of God.

መድኃኒቱ ለጋስ እንደምን ባጅተሃል፤

ፍጥረትህ ልዩ ነው ሆዴ ይወድሃል።

Healer! Šäykh Lägas, how have you been?

Your humane character is so unique that my heart is impressed by it.

እንግዲህ ልናገር ሥራውን ባዋጅ፤

ሸሽጎ የሚያጎርስ ለባድ ለዎዳጅ፤

ችግሬን የሚያውቀው ሺሁ ነበር እንጅ፤

ደስታ ይጠብቅህ ከላይኛው ደጅ።<sup>63</sup>

Let me recount his deeds in public,

His hands were generous to all,

Exclusively for my problem,

May God bless him in his life here after?

እንዲህ ወደማታ ባላየው ሺሁን፤

ደሀና የባጀውን አመመኝ ዐይኔን።<sup>64</sup>

I missed the *Šäykh* in the late afternoon,

My eye, which had been healthy before, got sick.

62 Informants: Haj Mohammed Aman and Ato Merqo Ali

63 Informants: Haj Ebrahim Taju and W.ro Rehmet Usman

64 Informants: Ato Asebe Negaš and Ato Merqo Ali

The couplets were composed in honour of the aforementioned *Šäykb* by the local *azmari*, who are typically known for their ability to express the feelings of the common people towards who ever they want to praise and vice versa. In this case the above couplets were composed to praise and in some extent farewell of *Šäykb* Lāgas in a concise and precise manner. *Azmari* art was also known for its subtlety and humour. From the poem above we can understand the extent to which the *Šäykb* was respected, loved by all, regardless of religious difference or else. His name continues to have great significance, particularly for his indigenous knowledge of medicine and his ability to foster friendships that transcended religious boundaries.<sup>65</sup>

### **Šäykh Lāgas character transcends: His son and successor, Šäykh Kāmal Lāgas**

Šäykh Lāgas' knowledge of indigenous medicine, humility, scholarship and other humane traits seem to have been passed on to his families and generations. Especially the healing service was inherited by one of his beloved sons, Šäykh Kāmal Lāgass.<sup>66</sup> It was believed that Šäykh Lāgass passed on the Bārāka or Tufta to Šäykh Kāmal Lāgass. This included not only the formal 'gift' of therapeutic information to the son or other favored person, but also the spiritual power. So Šäykh Kāmal was fortunately chosen by his father for such medical purposes. How and why he was able to inherit all the arts of medicine and so on was not the purpose of this paper, as it could be another full-fledged study.<sup>67</sup> Under Šäykh Kāmal, not only the medical legacy of Šäykh Lāgas continued, but also his name. Šäykh Kāmal was sometimes called Šäykh Lāgas.<sup>68</sup>

65 Informant: *Šäykb* Šikur Hussén, Ato Bayuh Bāzabih.

66 Informants: Ato Seid Worqye and Ato Mākonān Alābačāw.

67 Informants: Teacher Bazāzāw Gädlu, Ato Abābā Aragé

68 ለኛ ጥቅም ብሎ እግዚአብሔር ለገሠልን፤

አንተን የሠጠንን እኛም አመሠገን።

መዳኒት አንደትሆን አስተልጅልኛችሁ፤

አብስቶ ጌታችን ሺህዬ ይባረከህ።

እንዲህ አይደለም ወይ የተኖረው ታገር፤

አንተ ትብስ አንቺ ተሳሰሮ በፍቅር።

God bless us with you.

We are grateful.

May you shine through those who follow.

My God blesses you now and then

This is the way we used to live.

Where everyone's prayer was answered.



Figure 3. Photograph of Šäykh Kämäl Lägass from his family possession, 3/4/2023)

### **Conclusion**

Šäykh Lägäs Adäm was born of his father Šäykh Adäm Abdir and his mother Emät Märém Šifa around 1869 A.D. in Bägérmdir and

Semén Teqlay Gizat in one of the old quarters of the city of Gondar, Addis Alām. He was well educated in Islamic studies. Most importantly, he studied indigenous medicine, which made him well known in and around Gondar and beyond. He inherited most of his knowledge from his father Šaykh Adām Abdir and Hajj Juhar, his mentor. He was respectful person by everyone around him and was the wider community. His skill and knowledge in healing proved prolific for the people of Gondar and other provinces. He was the one assumed as a symbol of unity and family hood in the society. Šaykh Lāgas was an icon and a role model for the community of Gondar in his good social interaction with other religious community. The Šaykh was involved in traditional conflict resolution, and in many other social and cultural practices. His close relation with ecclesiastic personalities such as Alāqa Māzmur, Alāqa Yohannes, Qēs Tamru and Alāqa Tadässä was unique and exemplary. They shared meals together, as it is common in most Ethiopia tradition especially the ordinary public in the daily life of Muslim and Christian social relations. Šaykh Lāgas and the priests mentioned above also shared their happiness and sorrow together. He advised his family members to follow his footsteps regarding social and cultural interaction with the wider community, such as Christians, Muslims and the Bétä Israel. He served them with his knowledge of traditional medicine. He was very generous and honest.

Generally, the works of Šaykh Lāgas Adām as a medical practitioner and community leader in Gondar City exemplifies the vital role of bridging diverse religious and ethnic communities through his medical expertise. His commitment to equitable healthcare, combined with his extensive knowledge of traditional medicine, has made a significant impact on the well-being of diverse populations in and round Gondar. By serving people justly and fairly, *Šaykh Lāgas Adām* has not only addressed individual health needs but also strengthened the connection between medical practice and the community, fostering trust and holistic care.

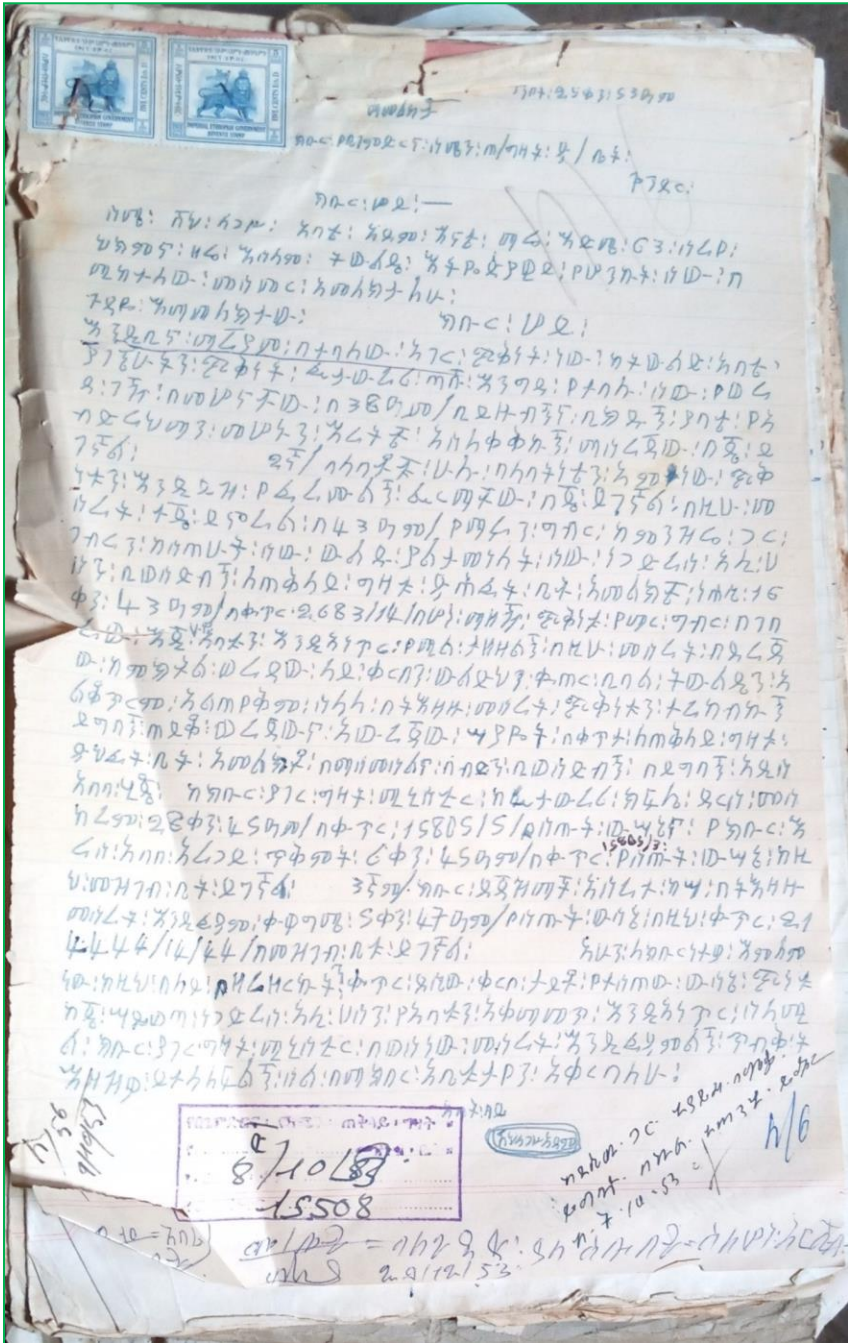
Šaykh Lāgas Adām was a renowned healer, an *Alim* (Ar. Islamic scholar), teacher, generous and virtuous person, protector of the poor and the helpless, and a guide to many people. Šaykh Lāgas Adām was a sociable and a charismatic person.

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Appendix



[Application / Compliant/ June 3, 1960.

To Your Excellency, the Governor General of the Bägémdér and Semén Administrative Office. Your Excellency, I'm called *Šäykh* Lägás. My father's name is Adám. My mother is Maré. I am 63 years old. I am a *healthcare professional*. My religion is Islam. My nationality: Ethiopian. Your Excellency, I'm writing a compliant letter to your esteemed office about my cause which is presented as follows..... ]. The letter is long that go beyond our interest here. In general, his letter of compliance was concerning the hereditary right of the office of *Chiqášum* in a district called Endäbina Maryam..... Gondar Zuriya Awurajja. His litigant was Nägadras Ali Hassan. As We understand from the body of the letter that *Šäykh* Lägás took the case for justice beyond the province of Bägémdér and Semén to Addis Ababa as it was common such kind of protracted litigation in imperial Ethiopia related to rest (hereditary land) and other things related to inheritance such as holding office. From this we can understand the fact that the multiple engagement of *Šäykh* Lägás other than being health professional.