

Text, Cuisine and Politics in 16th Century Ethiopia

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In 1520, the chaplain Francisco Álvares and the members of the Portuguese embassy to the Kingdom of Ethiopia cast their anchor in the Red Sea port of Hergigo. Their very first meetings with Christian Ethiopian officers lead them to discover an unknown food culture. According to the historian Anthony Rowley, these food encounters constitute an unexpected experience, between princely rituals and archetypal ancient and Christian meals. Álvares' travel relation is certainly considered as an important historical text about early modern Ethiopia. Coming to food history, its contribution to our knowledge needs to be studied in depth. Of course, Álvares brought with him in Ethiopia his own culinary background and representations and they should influence his own description of local meals. However, the churchman produced an apparently faithful depiction. First, he seemed to identify singular food cultures, such as the one of Tegray (Northern part of the Ethiopian kingdom) or the common diet of Ethiopian monks. Second, he understood the weight of Christian food rules on Ethiopian cuisine, describing the distinct recipes used in days without meat. These evidences coming from an external source are particularly valuable when being compared with informations embodied in the local written sources. Contemporary Ethiopian royal chronicles regularly dealt with food, almost always in the same stereotypical combination of *enṡarā* (pancakes made with fermented dough), *wat* (stew) and beverages such as mead or beer, those being unseparable elements to compose a princely meal. The presence of such elements in royal banquets (the *gebr* institution) which punctuate Ethiopian Kings' chronicles acts like *topoi* in hagiographic literature: they are landmarks defining the kind of text we are reading. They could refer to a defined rule for noblemen's contributions to the King's table, as defined in a 15th century text, the *ser'ata gebr*. Then it is striking to read that the first traveller describing an Ethiopian royal banquet experienced something completely different: Álvares' meal was boned and stuffed poultry. Who should the food historian believe? We could consider that the Portuguese embassy was an opportunity for a real culinary encounter, of course implying two active entities. The Ethiopian royal Court used food to unite the kingdom and the Ethiopian Christianity. Portugal was in a crucial moment, the expected encounter with Prester John, supposed to be the powerful Christian ally of the Indies. These two different perspectives could have led to some misrepresentations on both parts expressing strong political issues in food, and the literature dealing with it.