

# A Comparative Study of Historical Cultural Exchange between Iran and Ethiopia

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## Abstract

Iran and Ethiopia have had bilateral relations for almost two thousand years. These relations were accompanied by cultural exchanges among the people, resulting in the acceptance of both nation's cultural elements by the other. A thorough knowledge of these cultural exchanges is not only important in understanding the history of the bilateral relations between the two countries; it would also be helpful in planning future relations between Iran and Ethiopia. Therefore, this paper aims to study the important subject of "cultural exchanges between Iran and Ethiopia" through an analysis of the way in which each nation has culturally influenced the other. Based on Lahsaeizadeh's theory of "Cultural Exchange between Different Ethnic Groups", and through a meticulous observation of Iran-Ethiopia relations throughout history via library and field research, this paper attempts to examine the bilateral cultural influence of one nation on the other. The analysis of diverse historical documents as well as comprehensive field research indicate that while both nations have culturally influenced each other, it was the Iranian culture that had mostly influenced the Ethiopian culture for centuries in the field of language, architecture, religion and music. The reason for this strong influence is mainly the wider dominion of the Iranian civilization and culture.

**Keywords:** Afro-Iranians, cultural exchange, Ethiopia, Iran.

## Introduction

Iran, with its ancient history and civilization, has experienced major highlights and challenges in national relations with other countries. These relations date back to the time of the ancient Persian Empire, as well as the post-Islamic era; they have sometimes coexisted with war and strife, and sometimes been peaceful. Yet, they have all resulted in significant changes in social and cultural spheres both in Iran and in other nations. This paper therefore aims to examine cultural and civil relations between Iran and Ethiopia in the past as well as the present times.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper is constructed based on Lahsaeizadeh's theory of Cultural Exchange between Different Ethnic Groups. According to this theory, one of the main outcomes of international communication is familiarization with different cultures and civilizations. This could eventually lead to cultural exchanges as well as the creation of more sublime cultures. While Lahsaeizadeh argues that economic goals are the main forces of immigration among the people (Lahsaeizadeh, 1368 [1989 A.D]: 65-68), he specifies that people in a culture adopt cultural elements from other nations when the other culture has specific dominating features. It depends on who are the immigrants, where are they immigrating, why they are immigrating and what are the consequences of the immigration? (Lahsaeizadeh, 2001: 54-55). Lahsaeizadeh's theory, argued by other scholars, has certain opponents: several scholars such as Portes believe that the culture of immigrants has not always been dominant on the indigenous culture, and in contrast, in most cases, immigrants are deeply affected by the host country and therefore may lose part or all of their cultural heritage and practices (Portes & Hao, 2002: 51). In the case of Iran and Ethiopia, considering that

Iranian immigrants had a higher cultural level than Ethiopians, the theory of Lahsaeizadeh gains full credence in this particular issue.

The main questions discussed in this paper are therefore the following:

1. What are the main characteristics of the historic-contemporary relations between Iran and Ethiopia?
2. In this relationship, which component and country has played a dominant role?

The main hypothesis drawn from the above question is therefore as follows: Culture has been the main component in the Iran-Ethiopian relationship in the course of history (which has continued to the contemporary period). Hence, Iran has played the dominant role in the cultural bilateral relationship between the two countries.

The methodology of this library-based research is a qualitative content analysis as well as a historical analysis using a field research. However, having struggled with a severe shortage of available resources, first hand infield experience and observation have provided pristine research data and information on the topic.

Apart from a rather dated paper by Dr. Alaaddin Azari, which discusses the relations between Iran and Ethiopia before Islam<sup>1</sup>, no research has been conducted about the relations between the two ancient countries of Iran and Ethiopia independently at home or abroad. As a result, the researcher has attempted to collect scattered information available in order to present a general and comprehensive image of the relations between the

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1. This paper was published in 1971 in "Historic Studies magazine" and the author has largely discussed about military campaign of the second Achaemenids king, Cambyses, to the north of Ethiopia and Iran's attack to Yemen in Khosrow Anushirwan Sassanid kingdom.

two countries through the course of history, and provided invaluable information to the local researchers. Although the author has no claim on the novelty of this paper, it can be argued that studying the relations between Iran and Ethiopia, especially in their cultural dimensions and their impact on each other, which includes original information, is counted as the novelty paradigm in this paper.

### **Relations between Iran and Ethiopia through the Course of History**

Ethiopia is one of the few African countries whose relation with Iran dates back to thousands of years. There is no available information on the account of the relations between Iran and Ethiopia in the pre-Achaemenid era, and there is almost no evidence of relations between the two countries before the establishment of the Achaemenid dynasty in ancient Greek and Roman sources. There is only one pale trace that can be linked indirectly with relations between Iran and Ethiopia. In his book *From the Persian Sea to the China Sea*, Dr. Ahmad Eghtedari has quoted "Agatar Philus", the historian and director of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt in the year 113 BC. Based on this quote, an Iranian man called "Eritrea", the son of "Paivizis", who lived on the coast of the Pars Sea in the Medes era, was struck by a severe storm in the north of the Persian Gulf and was carried to an island, today's Qeshm Island (Philus, A, 113 BC. as quoted by Eghtedari (1364 [1985 A.D]). Eritrea established a small state called "Yoft", which later changed to "Loft", today's "Loft Bay" (Dezhgani, 1384 [2005 A.D]: 53). This person (except for the common names) has no affaires with the country of Eritrea. But considering the fact that Eritrea in Greek and Roman languages means red sea, (Eritrea, n.d.) and that Eritrea has long been part of Ethiopia, a person with this name in Iran, unique in the ancient history of Iran, is a wonder (Arabahmadi, 1393 [2013 A.D]: 289).

The relationship between Iran and Ethiopia began during the reign of Cambyses (529-522 BC), the second Achaemenids king, and his expedition to Egypt. Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenids Dynasty, failed to expand his dominion in Africa. However, further expanding the empire in the west and conquering Egypt and beyond were of primary importance for Cambyses, Cyrus' successor (Amini, 2001). After undertaking the conquest of Egypt and the modern Libya, Cambyses decides to invade Abyssinia or modern Ethiopia (Pirnia, 1345 [1966 A.D]: 258). Due to his unfamiliarity with the circumstances of the country, he sent his delegations with gifts and blessings in order to gather information about their military position. According to Herodotus, the delegates received humiliating rebuffs by the Ethiopian king. Without considering the logistics, necessary supplies, and the potential risk of his expedition to Abyssinia<sup>1</sup>, Cambyses set off to this mysterious land at the head of an army<sup>2</sup> (Munson, 2013). However, he was only partway through when he was forced to end his expedition and return to Thebes<sup>3</sup> due to lack of supplies and a sand storm, which caused the death of a significant part of his troops (Budge, 2015: 88). Returning to Egypt at that time, Cambyses later conquered the Northern Abyssinia and annexed it to Egypt. The Abyssinians were afterwards used as soldiers in Iran's Army. In certain references, it is stated that Cambyses founded a city in the north of Sudan on his expedition to Ethiopia and named it Merowe, after his wife (Amini, 2001: 65). Yet there is no such name in Iranian resources; it is presumed that on his stay in Egypt, he took an Egyptian wife called Merowe, hence naming the city

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1. The fact that the brave and farsighted Achaemenid king invaded Abyssinia without planning and preparation, is based on biased accounts of oral tradition in Egyptian resources, on which Herodotus relied on without considering to verify them.

2. There were mysterious narratives going around about Ethiopia and its people that era, some of which Herodotus has pointed out. For instance, it was said that Ethiopians had long lives, and due to the abundance of gold in that country, prison chains were made of gold (Beloe, 1838: 143).

3. Thebes is one of the famous capitals of Egypt during Pharaoh's monarchy.

Merowe. The small town of Merowe is now a historic town in Sudan and a short distance from Eritrea (which was part of the Ethiopian Kingdom).<sup>1</sup>

Relationships between Iran and Ethiopia continued during Darius's reign (521-486 BC). Along with expansion policies, Darius issued a decree according to which the Persian emperors based in the Egypt subjugated parts of Abyssinia, Napata and modern Somalia to their country. In that era, "Elephantine" in the north of Abyssinia was Iran's strong garrison and Abyssinians paid their tributes of ivory and ebony to Iran's court; Darius cites Kush (Abyssinia) as part of his empire in "Behistun *Inscription*" (Dandamaev & Lukonin, 2004; Zarrinkoub, 1391 [2012 A.D])<sup>2</sup>. Using ivory by Kush people (Abyssinians) is substantiated in an inscription in Darius's palace in Shush (Kent, 1950: 143), and proves that receiving these gifts were in turn valuable. On the south-facing wall of the staircase of the Apadana Palace, one can also see pictures of representatives of different countries with their tributes in their hands. Each section of these sculptures belongs to different countries including Abyssinia (Dandamaev & Lukonin, 2004: 102)<sup>3</sup>. Ethiopians are illustrated as three Abyssinian officials who present an animal called "okapi" (a kind of short giraffe) as well as gifts such as gifts such as ebony and ivory to the Achaemenid king, Darius<sup>4</sup>. In Herodotus's book, Ethiopia has

1. It is definitely wrong information that Cambyses named this city after his sister. Because the name of his sister was Atousa (Whom he married after becoming the king) and it is not clear why this is attributed to his sister (later wife).
2. In Naqsh-e Rostam, King Darius says: "As requested by Ahura Mazda, except Parse, countries that were under my rule paid me with tributes, and did as I ordered. They have survived with my rules. Mad, Elam, Part, Herat, Sughd, Khwarezm, Zarang, **Arakhozia**, Sette Goush, Kandahar, India, Scythians Home Noush, Scythians Tiz Khod, Babylon, Assyria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Sardis, Greece, Scythians on the other side of the sea, Macedonia, Shied-on Greeks, Lybia, Abyssinia, Mecca, Kari (Sharp, 1346 [1967 A.D]: 45)
3. Interestingly, the rock-reliefs of Persepolis are representatives of nations, including the Medes, Greek, Hindi and Africans; all carved as independent and self-reliant characters (Pourabdollah, 1386 [2007 A.D]: 74)
4. Of course today, Okapi lives in central Africa. The aforementioned inscriptions show that in ancient times this short giraffe was aboriginal in Ethiopia, and maybe

been mentioned as a satrap Achaemenid dominion (Kent, 1950: 143). However, Ethiopia was not colonized by Achaemenid kings; Ethiopian kings granted valuable presents such as gold, ebony, and ivory to the Achaemenid government. Yet, what is clear is that only parts of Abyssinia were dominated by Iran and the rest of the country was independent.

The relationships between Iran and Ethiopia continued during Xerxes's reign (486-466 BC) and according to Herodotus, a group of Abyssinians, dressed in leopards and lions with bows and long javelins, took part in the great Iranian expedition against Greece (Morkot, 1991: 328). After Xerxes, there has been much less account on Kush or Ethiopians in reference books; it was only after the Persian Empire was overthrown by Alexander, and when this Greek conqueror entered Iran, that one finds references to the presence a group of Ethiopian in Babylon.

### **The Relations between Iran and Ethiopia during the Time of Sassanid's Dynasty**

There is no information about the relations between Iran and Ethiopia during the Parthian Empire. Although the Axum Empire was established in parts of modern Eritrea and Ethiopia and was one of the greatest empires of the world at that time, there is no reference of relations between Parthians and the Axum Empire<sup>1</sup>. Relations between Iran and Ethiopia expanded slightly during the Sassanid era (226-652 AD) and commercial, maritime and religious matters were somewhat effective in the

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for the respect Abbyssians had for these animals, they offered one to the Achaemenid King.

1. Axum became a great kingdom in the North-East of Africa in the early centuries AD. In addition to Ethiopia, in the fifth and sixth centuries AD it temporarily conquered Yemen and parts of Sudan. The capital of Aksum at that time was the big city of Adolis in Tigray highlands that is now called "Zola". After the advent of Islam in the seventh century and the expanding sphere of influence of the Islamic, Axum Kingdom gradually became isolated and its power was reduced (Kobischanov, 1979: 55).

expansion of these relations (Huyse, 2012). In the early Sassanid era and during Shapur's reign, Mani, a social reformer (also known as prophet), refers to the Axum Empire as one of the four greatest empires of the world and one of the great centers of trade. According to him, marine trade routes cross trade ways, which lead to Africa's mainland (Munro-Hay, 2002). One of the rare instances of relations of the two kingdoms was during Kavadh I's reign (488-531 AD), when the then Abyssinian Emperor sent clergymen to Iran to settle the disputes between Iranian Christians. During this period, Ethiopians, who had the world's largest navy, became Iran's rival in trade in the South Seas, and as they were of the same cult as Romans, they always took their side in sea-related trade/ conflicts (Azari, 1350 [1971 A.D]). During Khosrow Anushirwan's reign, when the rivalry in trade, especial silk trade became fierce, and dominating the marine routes led to the seizure of Yemen by Ethiopians for a short time, a war broke out between the two countries in Yemen. As a result of this war, Iranians conquered the country of Yemen, until it was later seized by Arab Muslims (Bosworth, 1983: 604-7). The two countries therefore broke their relations for hundreds of years, which persisted from fall of the Sassanid Dynasty to the seventeenth century. In the mid-seventeenth century, during the Safavid Dynasty, the relations between Safavid Kings and Ethiopian Emperors was restored, but was restricted to the presence of two Ethiopian panels in Iran. The aim of these panels was two expand trade relations, which were welcomed by Safavid Kings<sup>1</sup> (van Donzel, 1979: 139).

The initiation of new relations between Iran and Ethiopia dates back to 1950s and 1960s. In 1329, an extraordinary Iranian

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1. In the seventeenth century a messenger from the king of Ethiopia, Fasilides (rule 1632-1667) presented gifts to the Shah Abbas II, but was expelled from the court (van Donzel, 1979: 36). A few years later once again an Armenian messenger from Yohannes, king of Ethiopia, was sent to Safavids and presented gifts including a zebra. Shah Sultan Hussein Safavi asked Yostos, king of Ethiopia to send him a zebra (Petráček, 1957: 36).



ambassador was sent to Ethiopia; messages and gifts were exchanged between the governments of the time. Ethiopia's minister was presented in Tehran in the same Year. In March 1961, Iran's embassy was established in Addis Ababa and the first ambassador of Iran was sent to Ethiopia. However, in September 1962, Iran's Embassy was closed due to financial problems and consular matters were handed over to the Iranian embassy in Saudi Arabia as before. In 1962, an Iranian panel was sent to Ethiopia to evaluate the possibilities of expanding economic and political relations with this country, and in 1964, Iran's embassy was reopened in Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie I traveled to Iran in September 1964, which was a trigger to sign a trade treaty and laid the groundwork to strengthen and expand bilateral relations (Asserate, 2017: 265). In 1968, the former king of Iran visited Ethiopia, meanwhile the treaty of amity and friendship between Iran and Ethiopia was signed and actions were taken to expand the economic and commercial relations of the two countries. In 1971, Emperor Haile Selassie took part in the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire and other high-ranked officials of Ethiopia and Iran traveled to the two countries alternatively. With the rise of Mengistu Haile Mariam, his associates to the Eastern bloc (union of the Soviet Union and Cuba) and the former king's support of Somalia in Ogaden war, the relations of the two countries became strained, and the Ethiopian government announced that a considerable portion of US help to Somalia, will be at this country's disposal through Iran (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1355 [1977 A.D.]).

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, considering the strained relations between the Shah's regime and the government of Ethiopia, and the fact that the Ethiopian government considered itself as revolutionary, the relations between the two countries flourished; the foreign minister of Ethiopia sent his message of congratulations to the foreign minister of the Islamic Republic

of Iran. Having established the foreign policies of the country, and prioritizing Africa and third world countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran decided to have friendly relationships with Ethiopia, which was located in a sensitive and strategic area in the Horn of Africa. The importance of this matter was highlighted by the Organization of African Unity. In addition to the strategic position of Ethiopia, the fact that both countries had anti-imperialistic positions and that Ethiopia sided with Iran in the imposed Iran-Iraq war, made Iran more eager to expand its relations in 1980s. During these years, although the two countries expanded their relations, the Islamic Republic of Iran endorsed Eritrea's cause, which was a major obstacle to further expand the relations. In a visit with Iranian Officials, Ethiopian authorities tacitly referred to these matters as the main barricade to expand the relations between the countries<sup>1</sup>. After the fall of Haile Mariam and the arrival of the new government in Ethiopia in 1991, the negotiations for expansion of relations between the two countries began once again. The same year, the director of the Middle East and North Africa visited Addis Ababa and met with Meles Zenawi, the President of the Transitional Government, to whom he sent the oral message of the President of Iran (Hashemi Rafsanjani), which conveyed the willingness and readiness of the Islamic Republic of Iran to expand relations with Ethiopia. Ethiopian government welcomed this message and their embassy was reopened in Tehran in 1992 (Arabahmadi & Karimi, 1397 [2018 A.D]: 253).

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1. After the Islamic Revolution, there were relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and some Eritrea liberation movements such as the Eritrean Liberation Front. In line with this there were warm relations with Eritrean Liberation Front which had a major part in politics of Eritrea's war with Ethiopia and the Office of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front was founded in Tehran. However because of Marxist-Leninist views of the leaders of the Front gradually bilateral ties deteriorated. So the Islamic republic of Iran supported the Liberation Front of Eritrea that most of its members were Moslems, and the representative office of the organization was established in Tehran within the first years of 1360s HS. However, following the changes in the positions of the movement the Eritrean Liberation Front representative office in Tehran was closed after a while and their relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran became limited (Arabahmadi, 1393 [2013 A.D]: 22).

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Short after the reestablishment of the Ethiopia's embassy in Tehran, "Tamrat Layne", the Prime Minister of Ethiopia visited Iran and during the visit, four memorandums of understanding on collaborations in the fields of trade, construction, fisheries and oil were signed between the two countries. In addition, during this trip, a meeting took place between the middle ranked managers of the two countries (Abhari & Alamooti, 1374 [1995 A.D]: 91). In 1999, following the meeting of foreign ministers of Iran and Ethiopia in the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Durban, South Africa, Ethiopia's foreign minister traveled to Iran and met with the president of Iran, Mr. Khatami, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the same year, the Ministry of Energy and Mine of Ethiopia traveled to Iran as the special representative of Meles Zenawi, and submitted the written message of Ethiopia's prime minister to Iran. Short after that message, Iran's vice president traveled to Ethiopia; he met with the Ethiopian prime minister, the deputy of Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Head of the Organization of African Unity, and signed a memorandum of understanding of economical, scientific and technical collaboration between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Having signed the M.O.U Summit of the Joint Economic Commission between Iran and Ethiopia, the two countries formally began their economic, scientific and technical activities and collaborations.(FRAN, n.d.).

In the 2000s, the two country's relations continued efficiently and a Summit of Joint Economic Commission between the two countries was held in Tehran and Addis Ababa with the presence of the senior officials of the two countries. During the presidency of Dr. Ahmadinejad, the relations between the two countries expanded and panels from each country traveled to the other, the last one of which is the attendance of Ethiopia's

Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Non-Aligned Movement in Tehran in 2012 (Arabahmadi & Karimi, 1397 [2018 A.D]: 254)

The importance of Ethiopia's strategic position in the Horn of Africa and the considerable number of Muslim minorities living in that country on one hand, and the country's geopolitical position in the political geography of Africa as well as the cultural and historical affinities of the two countries on the other hand brought Iran and Ethiopia closer to each other. Currently, the political & cultural relations of the two countries continue in a pleasant manner.

### **Cultural Exchanges**

The relations and cultural exchanges of Iran and Ethiopia date back to the ancient times. According to Professor Shojaeddin Shafa, discussing the cultural results of Cambyses's expedition to the North of Ethiopia, "there is still a tribe called 'Din Gol' with fair-skinned people and ancient Iranian names like Rostam, Shirin, etc. living in a mountainous area in former headquarters of the Iranian camp. It is possible that they are the descendants of the same Achaemenid army" (Shafa, 1342 [1963]: 3). In 524 BC, when Cambyses set off on an expedition, vine trade came into vogue both in Ethiopian references and in the narrative accounts of native Africans on the coasts of the Red Sea and the surrounding areas. In those references, Iranian were referred to as "Fars" (Fors) in ancient times, who occupied important areas on the coasts of the Red Sea and installed vine tanks, some of which still exist. In traditional native narratives, "Soaken" in "Dehlak"<sup>1</sup> archipelago is known as an area in which these tanks were found. In these narratives, it is also mentioned that the Fars had cereal and banana plantations in a magnificent city known as the "Adga" at the sea front Mountains. In Dankali traditions, it is believed that the great bay of Asab was the main area of

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1. The Dahlak Archipelago is in the Red Sea and belongs to the Eritrea.

Fars residence, which was later demolished by the invaders of the “Songo” tribe. According to this account, the Fars filled and hid the tanks while leaving Asab (Rossini, 1928: 295-296). The authenticity of these narratives however, is not validated, as there has been no evidence of whether or not the Fars were related to the Iranians who were in Yemen when it was conquered from 572-629. The “Roi des Rois” meaning “King of kings”, was a title used by Ethiopian monarchs. In the inscriptions found in Axum, it was associated with the glorious title of the Shah of Iran (Vycichl, 1957: 23). Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove that this title was taken from ancient Iran and used by the Axum Empire.

After this era, and through a course of one thousand years, when a group of Iranians travelled to this country for trade and were based in Deira in the Hararite, cultural relations between the two countries entered a new phase. The Iranians’ business practice, gradually resulting in a remarkably friendly relationship with the indigenous people of these areas, led to cultural influences and the Iranian culture and civilization were introduced to the Ethiopian people (Mehrnian, 2016). One of the most prominent cultural influences of Iranian immigrant on Ethiopia was borrowed words from the Persian language to the Amharic language. Ethiopian natives welcomed these words in such a way that in spite of the faint presence of Iranians in a small part of Ethiopia, those words are still used in the Amharic language. The most important words in Persian, as part of a permanent Iranian cultural heritage in the Amharic language are listed Table 1.

It is believed that tens of modern Persian words are used as main terms in the Amharic language, all of which are the remnants of the presence of Iranian immigrants in this country in the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD (Kane, 1990: 1418).

**Table 1. The most important words in Persian in the Amharic language**

<b>Amharic</b>	<b>English pronunciation of Amharic words</b>	<b>Persian</b>	<b>English pronunciation of Persian words</b>
አንዴ በእርግጠኝነት	Min Albat	البته	Albate
አናናስ	Ananas	آناناس	Ananas
ሙዝ	Mooz/Muzi	موز	Moz
ዝንጅብል	Zinjibli	زنجبیل	Zanjebil
ባቄላ	Bakela	باقاله	Baghale
ሱካር	Sikuar	شکر	Shekar
ወቅያኖስ	Wuqiyanos	اقیانوس	Oqiyanos
ማር	Assal	عسل	Asal
ግጥሚያዎች	Kibrit	کبریت	Kebrit
ቁልፍ	Kulifi	قفل	Ghofl

Source: Amharic Teacher, n.d.

Among other cultural and civic influences of Iran in Ethiopia is construction of buildings and structures in the cities of Dire Dawa and Harar in the seventeenth century, which were very similar to the Iranian architecture of the time, and were preserved despite the passage of hundreds of years. The most prominent of these structures is the Mashhad Mosque in Harar, in which the Islamic architecture is evident (Mehrnia, 2016).

Iranians had a part in indirectly introducing Islam to Ethiopians. A Yemeni-born scholar known as Sheikh Hussein Ballet (Sheikh Nur al-Din Hussein Ben Malka), who was in

contact with Iranian scholars, introduced Islam to certain natives of Sidamo in the South-East of the country for the first time. He is known to be the founder of Islam in parts of Ethiopia (Bale in the Oromia Region). He is also a Sayyid Hashemi, whose antecedents go to Imam Musa Kazim (AS)<sup>1</sup>. Sheikh Hussein stayed in Ethiopia until his death and guided many natives to Islam. After the death of Sheikh Hussein, Ethiopian Muslims built a splendid tomb for him, and gradually founded a small town called “Deira Sheikh Hussein” (Ethiopia Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2011). This town is now in Ethiopia’s Oromia Region. The tomb of Sheikh Hussein is now one of the most important religious buildings in Ethiopia, and Muslims go on a pilgrimage to the tomb of this Iranian cleric from everywhere across the country<sup>2</sup>. Ironically, in the eighteenth century, Prince Abdul ben Joseph, the ruler of the city of Harar, built a shrine for Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani, the Iranian-born leader of the order of Qaderieh, adjacent to Sheikh Hussein’s tomb; this is also an important religious center in Ethiopia (Trimingham, 1952: 256). Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani’s shrine is in Baghdad. However, what is clear is that the establishment of this shrine is mostly out of respect to the followers of the order of Qaderieh who enjoyed a firm position in the towns of Muslim residence in Ethiopia including Harar and Deira Dawa<sup>3</sup>.

Although there is no further information about the cultural relations between Iran and Ethiopia in the seventeenth century to the present times, the similarities between the musical instruments of the two countries indicate the direct or indirect influences of Iranian music on Ethiopian music. Among these

1. Ethiopian Muslims believe Sheikh Hussein to be of the Hashemite generation and his antecedents go back to Imam Hasan (AS) and Imam Hussein (AS) (Mehrnia, 2016).
2. Sheikh Hussein City and the Tomb of Sheikh receives more the 50 thousand Moslem visitors in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah and Rabial-Awwal who gather together from everywhere with a little cane and cherish his birth and death. They take pilgrimage on his shrine and honor his efforts in publishing and expanding Islam (Trimingham, 1952).
3. Field observation of the author, 2016, Addis Ababa.

similarities, one can refer to tonbak in Iran and its equivalent, “kebero”, in Ethiopia, Harp and its equivalent, “karar” in Ethiopia, violin and its equivalent, “Masinko” in Ethiopia, Ney and its equivalent, “Washint” in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>. In addition, considering the antiquity of Dastgah in Persian art music compared to African music, and the fact that the Iranian music was brought to areas off the coast of East Africa by Shirazi immigrants from 10 to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, one can almost certainly say that Iranian music has left impacts on the Ethiopian folk music, the roots of which date back to ancient times.

### **Ethiopians in Iran**

In Persian Islamic texts such as Keikavus’s *Qabus Nameh*, it is mentioned that Abyssinian slaves were sold in Iranian markets in early or middle Islamic ages. The arrival of African slaves - including Ethiopians - to Iran in the early centuries of Islam, began mainly with the aim of working in sugarcane fields in Khuzestan. Arab and Portuguese merchants were the main importers of these slaves to Iran. Most black-skinned slaves in that era came to Iran from modern Tanzania as well as the Autonomous Republic of Zanzibar, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Malawi (Mirzai, 2017: 164). Ethiopians and other slaves from the Horn of Africa (modern Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti) were also sold in slave markets in Mecca and Medina, and were purchased and transferred to Iran by Iranian Pilgrims (Adamyat, 1354 [1975 A.D]: 85). In the mid eighteenth century, there was a growth in the imports of these slaves, and in 1820s, 1830s and 1840s, a significant number of black skinned slaves were transferred to Iran mainly from East Africa and Sudan, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Most of these slaves were categorized as “Bambasy”<sup>2</sup> or “Zangīds” of Zanzibar and the surrounding areas

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1. Field observation of the author, 2016, Addis Ababa

2. Probably modified from Mombasa (current port of Mombasa in the south of Kenya)



(Lake Nyasa), "Nubia" from Sudan, and "Habshy"<sup>1</sup> from Ethiopia, and were usually concentrated and sold in Shiraz (Adamyat, 1354 [1975 A.D]: 165).

African Diaspora entered Iran as slaves, but after the gradual termination of slavery, they spread among Iranians in the south and the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, and gradually became members of the Iranian community. Today, the presence the Afro Iranians<sup>2</sup> is evident in southern Iran, particularly in Ahwaz, Khorramshahr, Abadan, Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, Chabahar, Lashar, etc. Despite their black skin, fizzy hair and broad nose, they consider themselves Iranians and rarely classify themselves through their African origin. This is while certain local people still call them Abyssinians, and correctly or not, refer to them as Ethiopians. What is certain is that the slavery of Africans ended in the Iranian community, and the remaining slaves lost most of their cultural heritage and adopted the Iranian culture. On the other hand, Afro-Iranians in turn still have certain influences on the indigenous communities in southern Iran and spread parts of their cultural features such as music, songs, celebrations, beliefs, and superstitions, among the people living on the coast of the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea<sup>3</sup>.

Zar tradition, which is common today in the southern regions of Iran, especially among the Iranian Baluch population living on the coast of the Oman Sea, is one of the traditions that African slaves (especially Ethiopian slaves) introduced to Iranians, and gradually entrenched in the local traditions of these areas. Given the similarities between the old Zar tradition in Ethiopia (rooted in the history of this ancient country) and southern Iran, one can say without a doubt, that this tradition was taken from Ethiopia and other African countries and

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1. Slaves from Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Somalia, and the south of Sudan

2. "Afro-Iranians" is a broad topic and black slaves who dissolved among Iranians out of fear, had significant impacts on indigenous people of the south, which can be in itself the subject of a detailed research.

3. Field observation of the author, 2016. Qeshm Island, Iran

accepted by Iranians in these regions. Zar, in the Ethiopian language, refers to the evil spirits or demons that haunt people's body, especially women's body, giving rise to disease and problems. The belief in the existence of evil and mischievous spirits and their role in the everyday life of the people is among the traditions in Ethiopia since ancient times (Molvaer, 1980: 106). Zar in Iran is generally interpreted as adverse winds that cause disease or problems in the lives of human beings. On the southern coast of Iran, from Khorramshahr to Chabahar, these winds are called Maturi, Šayk Šangar, Dingemāru, Omagāre, Bumaryom, Pepe, Bābur, Bibi, Namrud (Blukbashi, 1381 [2002 A.D]: 14). There are undeniable similarities between Zar tradition in Ethiopia and Zar tradition in southern Iran, which demonstrate the influences of the black skinned slaves on the people in the South of Iran, and the fact that indigenous peoples of the southern coast of Iran accept these superstitious traditions.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain features of the African music, including traditional Ethiopian music, were accepted by the Iranians living in the southern coast of Iran. "Sabalu", "Liva", "Zar" are among the traditional music of the southern parts of Iran, that have roots in the countries of East Africa and Ethiopia; undeniable similarities between this music and the music of African tradition reflect the not-too-faint impact of African slaves on people in southern Iran<sup>1</sup>. Africans, especially black skinned Tanzanians (and Zanzibarids) had a part in the introduction of the Swahili language and culture to the people living in southern Iran.

### **Finding and Discussion**

Cultural relations are reciprocal, non-coercive transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a wide range of activities within the space of cultural and civil society. The general results of cultural relations are better connectivity,

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1. Field observation of the author, 2016. Qeshm Island, Iran

enhanced mutual understanding, more widespread and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and improved sustainable dialogue between peoples and cultures. These cultural relations, especially when a group of people migrates from one country to another, lead to the establishment of the best form of interaction with natives and cultural synergy among different cultures. The relations between Iran and Ethiopia, especially during the ancient times, is an outstanding example of these mutual cultural ties.

The relations between Iran and Ethiopia are divided into pre-Islamic and post-Islamic era. Although to a certain point, they are due to the expansionist policies of the Iranian Kings, on the whole, they indicate the expansion of the Iranian culture and civilization in areas beyond the origin of the Iranian culture. In fact, after the historic migration of a group of Iranians to the East African coast and islands in early Islamic centuries, Ethiopia became one of the countries with traces of Iranian culture and civilization. This is while Ethiopia is among the African countries with rich culture and civilization, bearing the legacy of great civilizations, such as the Axum Empire.

Given the relations of the two countries in the course of history, the two cultures had bilateral influences on each other. Although the Iranian culture had major influences in different aspects on the Ethiopian people, and these influences are still evident after two millenniums, there are also traces of the Ethiopian culture on southern Iran. It is evident that the influences of the Iranian culture on the Ethiopian society outweigh the Ethiopian cultural influences on the Iranian society in this exchange, considering the fixed application of Persian words in the Amharic Language, and the important role of Iranians in introducing Islam in Ethiopia. Yet, the influence of native Ethiopian traditions and beliefs (and other African countries) have penetrated among the people living in the

southern coasts of Iran, which also proves how fluid the Iranian culture is in terms of exerting and accepting influences. This flexibility toward other cultures and adapting faint features of seemingly less important countries is an evident feature in the Iranian culture, which, without a doubt, is considered as one of the great mysteries of the survival of the Iranian culture and civilization throughout the history of this land.

The above-mentioned interesting observations regarding the ties between the two countries have been discussed based on the Lahsaeizadeh's theory of "Cultural Exchange Theory between the Different Ethnic Groups". The main questions examined in this paper were the following: "What are the features of historical-contemporary relations between Iran and Ethiopia?", and "In this relationship, which component and country played a dominant role?" The Iranian culture as a dominant culture has had significant impacts in different fields on Ethiopian peoples including: deep historical links in the ancient era, penetration of the Persian language to the Amharic language, construction of palaces and buildings in Harar and Dire dawa according to the Iranian architecture, introduction of Islam, and enrichment of traditional music. From the other side, diminutive features of the Ethiopian culture have also affected the southern regions of Iran: the presence of Ethiopians (as well as other Africans) known as "Afro Iranians" in today's southern coasts of Iran, and infiltration of several African traditions to southern Iranians in the field of music, song and even superstitions. The main hypothesis of the paper, that is, "culture has been the main component in Iran-Ethiopian relationship in the course of history" has also been proven.

Although, both sides have had direct and indirect cultural influences on one another, according to the extent of the influence of the Iranian culture on the Ethiopian society, these interactions have clearly been to the benefit of Iran. In the

research methodology, in addition to the qualitative content analysis as well as a historical analysis, field research has also been used operationally and valuable data has been gathered through fieldworks and observation.

This paper is an attempt– in spite of the pristine subject and acute shortage of resources– in the discussion of relations between Iran and African ethnicities and civilization from the ancient times to the present era. It is hoped that other Iranian scholars undertake the effort to reveal the other honors of the Iranian culture and civilization in this relatively unknown field.

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