

**Ethioscoop (15/08/2013) - Emahoy Welete Mariam Gelaw by Nassir Mohammed**

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Emahoy Welete Mariam Gelaw

**Key Achievements:**

Founded monastery in East Gojjam, dedicated to sustainable farming, environmentally conscious living and forest preservation; has developed a 24 hectare piece of land into forest, farm and community for 70 people

**Current Position:** Nun and leader of a community of about 70 residents

**Birth Place:** Quashiba Kirkos, Machakel, Gojjam

**Birth Date:** 1968-1970 (Approx)

**Current Home:** East Gojjam, Ethiopia

**Primary School**

No formal education

## **Primary Work Area**

Environmental farming; community welfare; religious service

## **Life Story**

Emahoy Welete Mariam Gelaw is a nun who leads a community of about 70 residents and practices and teaches environmentally sustainable farming and forest conservation, in a rural part of East Gojjam.

Born and raised in a farming family in East Gojjam in Machakel woreda in a village called Quashiba Kirkos, Emahoy was the fifth child in her family. She was uninterested in school, even though she was punished for failing to attend the Derg's mandatory basic education program. At the age of ten, she was given in marriage to a husband, with whom she bore two children by her early twenties; she lived a rural life, farming and raising her children. But her family had had a tragic history, and many of her relatives had died young because of illness and she believed her life too would be short. When she recovered after an illness that she had believed would result in her own death, she came to believe that she had been born for a different purpose.

Deeply convinced that God did not want her to continue in a worldly life, she left her family to live in a monastery serving God. Although she longed to go far away from her village to Lalibela and Gishen, she had a dream that recurred many times about a cave and came to believe that God was telling her to go and live there. Emahoy had been coordinating the construction of a church in the area called Geraram Mariam. After the church was inaugurated, having heard that there was a cave near the church, she went to visit it and found it exactly the same as the one she had seen in her dreams. The cave had spring water nearby and was full of wild animals, including tigers and hyenas, among others. She began to live in the cave, unafraid of the animals and living peacefully with them for nearly two years and because of the presence of the animals, no one else came to live with her. After two years, on Easter Day in 1991, all of the remained in the surrounding area, and Emahoy took it as a sign that God's plan was to make the place a monastery. In 1993, with two 'Tabots' (Abune Tekle Haymanot and St. Urael), the cave and its surroundings was inaugurated and recognized as a monastery. Many people begun to flow to the monastery in search of spiritual guidance and salvation.

Unlike many monasteries in the country where only religious duties are performed, the monastery Emahoy founded and administers performs other societal functions. The nuns are hard workers and they work to improve their own and lives of others'.

In 1995, she filed an application with the 'agriculture and land use office' to conserve a twenty-four hectare tract of land that had degraded into almost desert land. She was

given the land to protect the natural surroundings, even though there were villagers in the surrounding area that were cutting down the remaining forests and killing wild animals. Ever since she was given the land, she has been working effectively to protect it. Some farmers continued to try to plough the land she had been given and to try to cut down trees or graze their herds in the forest she replanted. However, through a combination of prayer and persuasion, she was able to secure the cooperation of the surrounding villagers in preserving what has become viewed as a community asset. As a result of conserving the land and rebuilding the forests, some varieties of animals that had never before been seen in the area have moved in to inhabit the forest.

Supporters observing her efforts donated four grain mills and a bakery in the nearby town of Emanuel. The regional government is in the process of paving about 12 kilometers of road connecting the monastery to the main road and is also planning to extend electricity to the monastery and the village.

Committed to conserving the environment, Emahoy Welete Mariam had heard about fuel-saving stoves and traveled to Addis where GTZ staff members told her about an environmentally conscious farming couple nearby, (Muluaem Berhan and Wub Alem Mengist,) who were producing such stoves and were the first winners of the Green Award from the Form for the Environment. Taught by Wub Alem, Emahoy's community now produces fuel-saving stoves themselves and sells them at affordable prices to the surrounding farmers. She owns modern bee hives and is the first in her area to raise cattle in a modern way. In the community of about 70 men and women, both nuns and monks work very hard on the farm to produce an array of different fruits and vegetables as well as sugarcane. They provide their produce to retailers to raise funds to support the work of their community. Among many other charitable works, the nuns help people in need and are raising about seven orphan children.

After several years, Emahoy designed and oversaw the construction of a church for the surrounding area, with pillars clad in stone like the stone in the holy cave; her community also has a 'kollo temhari bet', a small religious school for young men.

Emahoy has a very big dream: she is planning to build a house for the nuns, and to open a theology school, a 'kine and Zema' School plus, a modern elementary school and a clinic for the whole villagers.

She is also planning to buy a car in order to transport their produces directly to the wholesalers, so that they could get a higher income.

She has faced many challenges, but she believes that she wouldn't have achieved all her successes had the obstacles not been there. The monastery has now become a model to all of the villagers, who in the past used to waste resources, thinking only about their current needs.

Emahoy is an exception to the rule regarding the way Ethiopian monasteries operate. She has a strong spiritual life and believes that God wants us to work hard, to use our own capacities so that we can be useful to those who are in need. Emahoy advises others that a person who works hard will be rewarded in the future. She derives great satisfaction from her work.

Asked whether young girls continue to come to the monastery seeking her guidance, Emahoy answered, 'Asking such a question is like asking whether the Renaissance Dam will be completed or not'. Her advice to young women is: Be strong and you will overcome your challenges. Take care of yourselves as you grow up. Live your lives so that you develop your own God-given gifts and devote yourself to God contributing to your community.