EXPRESSIONS OF SACRED PROMISE: RITUAL AND DEVOTION IN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX PRAXIS
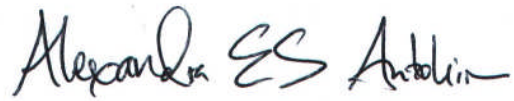
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I, Alexandra E.S. Antohin, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the notion of sacred promise, a grounded devotional category for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. It is based on ethnographic research among urban parishes seeking to gather the often dispersed memberships of local Orthodox communities in Dessie, a city of a quarter million residents in north-central Ethiopia. The central thesis contends that the spaces and methods of engagement by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are organized by the internal dynamics of archetypal promises. I consider the wide spectrum of social and ritual activities contained within the domain of "church" to be consistent with a developed socio-theological genre of "covenant". Covenant is narratively defined as a dialogic of bestowal and responsibility and it is also expressed in performative, material, and associative dimensions. Starting from an investigation of the liturgical praxis of *temesgen* (the ethic of thanksgiving), each chapter explores variations of covenant: as unifying events of human/divine manifestation (e.g. feast days); as the honour of obligation within individual stances of paying respect on an interpersonal and meta-relational level, at church and during visits to mourning houses; and through customs of reciprocity by confraternities and the blessings such practices confer on the givers and receivers. Lastly, pilgrimage presents a context where personal commemorative events transform into "traditions" due to their ability to sustainably influence broader communal commitments. Analysed collectively, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians creatively distil a core monotheistic precept through their everyday devotional acts. Rather than interpreting covenant as exclusively an ethno-historical idea of "chosen peoples", this research advances a meta-argument concerning the processual nature of creation within tradition. Presenting an original perspective on the rupture/continuity paradigm within the anthropology of Christianity, I trace how this doctrinal principle originated through an inventive merging of culture and ideology, demonstrated through the synthesis of Old and New Testament in ritual and allegory and by local conditions of religious heterogeneity within Ethiopia.

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Hyun Jin Cho, what will be one of the highlights of my doctoral years. To the Material Failure group and the Anthropology of Christianity reading group, with special thanks to Tom Boylston and Anna Strhan. To Patty Gray who was a pivotal figure for my movement into anthropology and whose pedagogy I keep drawing from. To my editorial and moral support team: Kay Anderson, Andrea Kim Taylor and to Maureen Sullivan. To Medeia Csoba DeHass, my fiercest ally and my guardian angel of academia. For my sake, it was fortuitous that we crossed paths and remained close friends since our graduate days at UAF. It was your encouragement that charted my course to UCL and I devote the fruits of this professional apprenticeship to you. May you have returned to you the countless, selfless energies you have devoted to me.

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

Amharic is a syllabic alphabet of 231 characters, with seven principal vowels sounds that pair with consonants (for example: አ - a (short), ኡ - u, ኢ - i, ኣ - a (wide), ኤ - aye, እ - i', ኦ - o). I follow a simplified transliteration of Amharic to correspond to the closest approximation of vowel sounds in the Latin alphabet, using a single apostrophe for elongated a sound and pronounced break between consonants and vowel sound.

Consonants and stress marks

q- explosive "k"

t' – explosive "t"

a'a- separation between characters (i.e. *sa'atat*)

Short Demonstration of Pronunciation

a *mahaber* [like **ha**ppen]

u *subaye* [like **u**lulate]

i *fitat* [like **e**agle]

aye *hudadaye* [like d**ay**]

e' *fetena* [like f**e**ll]

i' *hig* [like f**i**g]

o *tabot* [like **o**pen]

Terms employed consistently in this dissertation have being made plural in certain cases based on English grammar rules (i.e. *tabot* (ark) becomes *tabots* in plural), due to the terms analytical use and to make the foreign word more portable. When quoted in speech, these Amharic words correspond to their articulation (i.e. the plural of *mahaber* (association) is *mahaberoch*).

The dates of events in the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical calendar were designed to correspond to the Church calendrical system, with the Western (Gregorian) calendar cited in brackets (see Appendix A).

Chapter One: The Prism of Promise

1.1 Introduction

"Wait until you see the ark."

A girl in her teens made this statement to me as I was searching for ways to answer her broad question: "How do you like our church (*wudeshew bet kristianachinin*)?" Several moments prior, a group of teenage girls from the school where I tutored English had clustered around me, fidgeting, giggling, texting on their mobile phones. A tentative and slow conversation started, the girls asking what I thought about Ethiopia and its Church. They were not referring to the location in front of us, Trinity church, nor its principal distinguishing attribute, the ark of Abune Aregawi, a Syrian saint credited with evangelizing the vast territories of highland Ethiopia in the fifth century. They wanted to know what I thought of the Church as a whole, that is, its place in the country's landscape, history and culture. From my perspective, the way the question was posed to me was impossibly broad and ambiguous, and likewise, I re-joined with broad superlatives such as "It is beautiful and great." This was the most appropriate response I could muster and found myself unequipped to lend opinions to a topic as vast as the nature of "church."

The feast celebrated that day was in honor of Abune Aregawi, and we were waiting for his *tabot* (ark) to come out of the church. We sat on the ground waiting for the procession to close the liturgy, with people trickling in and out. It was as bustling and active a place as the market less than a kilometer down the road. The students and I began to edge our way closer to the front of the church, out of the shade of the trees.

Most people arrived by the pinnacle of the liturgy, when the procession commenced; the compound resembled a city park, with groups huddled on the patchy grass and a few men carrying children on their backs. Everyone was jubilant, and popular devotional songs (*mizmur*) were sung full force. People braced themselves around the main doors – simultaneously pushing in to hear, but also making way for the clergy who were chanting the Psalms as they began to process out of the building. The principal chanter hovered on a series of half tones and complete silence ensued. To achieve this degree of undivided attention was a marvel for anyone who observed the frenetic energy at this very same location not thirty minutes earlier. Turning back to me, the girls added their commentary: "how great" (*endet girum new*), or "how exceedingly wonderful" (*bewenet asdenaqi new*), accentuated by one of the teenagers expressively touching her chest. "Why weren't you smiling?" they inquired. It was with exuberant curiosity that they scrutinized me throughout the service, an experiment to see if an outsider could "get it."

This jarring aspect of difference emerged from scenarios such as these, channelled through my failure to not behave, respond, or receive this moment as the girls had. Yes, indeed I was missing something here; repetition is not repetitive, as the company I was with experienced, as if for the first time, what Eliade articulates for the cosmic realism of archetypal rituals, as "an absolute beginning, the plentitude of a present that contains no trace of history" (Eliade 1954:75). Could going to church be this overwhelmingly emotional, expressive and engaging, compared to the more austere, composed scenes of church in other global contexts? It was precisely this enthusiasm and effervescence that I set out to document as the characteristics of worship, yet I intuitively knew that to achieve this objective, the dynamism with which Orthodox Christians live their faith, would be hard to pin down as a contemporary phenomenon, due the religion's

entrenchment with traditionalism. I prepared to be inundated with a religious culture enshrined within a symbolic armoury. Foremost among these symbols is the *tabot*, which is a material representation of the Ark of the Covenant, known by Ethiopians to be in Axum, in northern Ethiopia. As the girls and I participated in a scene of transcendent quality, I saw a potential tension of a brimming social vitality competing against its "container," a tradition revolving around ritual and symbol. Yet as the girl indicated to me: Pay attention to the ark. And rather ironically, given my stated cautions, this thesis is about that ark.

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Due to my unabashedly diminished sentimentality towards all things arcane in religious studies of Ethiopia, the last thing I wanted to write about was on the topic of covenant. Indeed, I almost missed this argument entirely. This bias formed as a result of the copious output of generations of scholars, journalists, novelists and explorers who recorded their impressions of this geographically barricaded cultural sphere in the Horn of Africa. The imaginary of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as a fossilized religion, where one could step back into the Middle Ages and recover a lost world, was perpetuated in popular European literature such as James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790) and Samuel Johnson *Rasselas* (1759) (see Pankhurst 1985). This accumulated impression of mine, however, was not only a critique of romanticism by foreign fascination but also directed to Ethiopians as well. My research experience alerted me to the fact that the Orthodox Church was prone to its own essentialism. If this sounds a touch sensational, a quick survey of popular literature on the humble poverty of its believers and a material culture of manuscripts and relics that gripped onto its antiquity confirmed my commentary of a Church enshrined by its history. I perceived another essence of the religion via the dynamic of worship by vast

cross-sections of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Therefore, I was eager to approach the subject matter as an anthropologist, which would enable me to investigate these aspects that failed to attract much focus.

As such, I felt justified from the inception of this project to avoid deep entanglement with the traditionalism of the Church because I feared it would quickly become a deterrent to understanding the Church's social character. However, individuals constantly presented me with bundled imagery and codes. My interaction with Wondwossen, a deacon, provided such an occasion. As he gave me a tour of the church, we stopped at what at first glance resembled an icon of St. Mary, a technicolour production of blue, red, purple and green, holding the map of Ethiopia positioned near the lower part of her body (Figure 1.1). "You know the ark is Mary's womb," he stated to me. At the time, I was operating with only one level of information: that the ark was the reliquary that contained the Ten Commandments, fabled to have come to Ethiopia in the 10th century BC, and replicated into material arks that are housed in every Ethiopian Orthodox church. Wondwossen continued matter of factly: "Because Mary is Zion." Wondwossen had attended *mesehaf bet,* a specific level of religious schooling, and could explicate the various strata of interpretation required to chart these symbolic connections. However, what he was communicating was not an especially nuanced theological idea, but a basic fact understood by most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. To trace the reference points of COVENANT IS MARY'S WOMB or COVENANT IS ZION required a perspective that treated covenant as "metaphorically structured" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:5); its multi-dimensional essence is constituted and accompanied by a set of concepts, actions and vocabulary.

Figure 1.1 "Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God," as inscribed to the right of the painting. Kechine Medhane Alem (Addis Ababa)

Still, I was convinced that the decision to position "covenant" as the central topic of my dissertation would unavoidably be weighed down by the baggage of the antiquity trope and pre-established ideas of Ethiopia's connection to covenant, no matter how alternative a portrayal I documented. Books like *The Sign and the Seal* by Graham Hancock (1997), an Indiana Jones/DaVinci Code amalgam that chronicled the search for the lost Ark in Axum, has contributed to notions of a country self-possessed by its history. Such a charactierization is true to such an extent that one can conceive of how the Church, as a principal contributor to national image-making, adeptly continues

to perpetuate the spinning of mysteries, however plausible or implausible. The last pages of Hancock's quest for the Ark are a rehearsal of an oft-exercised exchange of the disappointed Westerner who is refused entry into the church sanctuary by the monk, the sole witness to the Ark's existence. The subsequent dialogue between the two characters essentially represents archetypal positions on objective and subjective constructions of reality, and underscores how searching for a common object in diametrically opposed ways can transform the nature of the object entirely. The conclusion of the journey for Hancock results in a consolation, as he attempts to elicit details from the monk about the ark; how does it look, what does it do, is it real and when can I see it? The response from the monk is flat and direct: "I believe that the Ark is well-described in the Bible. You can read there" (1997: 512). On this last question, the dialogue indicates the crux of the encounters with the covenant:

> 'Tomorrow evening', I continued, 'is the beginning of *Timkat*. Will the true Ark be brought out then, for the procession to the Mai Shum[1], or will a replica be used?'
>
> As Hagos translated my words into Tigrigna, the guardian listened, his face impassive. Finally he replied: 'I have already said enough. *Timkat* is a public ceremony. You may attend it and see for yourself. If you have studied as you have claimed, even though it may only have been for two years, I think that you will be able to know the answer to your question.'
>
> And with that he turned away and slipped into the shadows and was gone. (Hancock 1997:512-513)

To rephrase the monk's advice, "to come and see", is a classic Christian maxim (John 1:46) and speaks volumes about the many ways to search for faith, and one that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has kept at the start of any proposal to encounter the sacred.

For Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, these symbols, tokens and signs are the channels that constituted their relationship to the world, but nevertheless required them

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[1] Mai Shum is the lake that is used in Epiphany celebrations as a symbolic river Jordan.

to labour these connections between this world and the other. The painting that Wondwossen showcased to me had inscribed on its side a textual reference to Psalms 68:31, saying: "Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God."[2] This quotation marks Ethiopia as a land of chosen people; Ethiopia is signified by Mary in this case, and consequently presents another metaphoric formula: COVENANT IS ETHIOPIA. Furthermore, this image and quotation adorned the opening pages of religious books and parish media and assumed a creed-like position on display in church museums and outer ambulatories of churches. These metaphoric constructions of covenant began to reflect what Briggs and Bauman propose as an "ideology of inter-textuality and their associated practices" (1992: 596). Such strategies of approach to "structure, form, function and meaning are seen not as immanent features of discourse but as products of an ongoing process … not centered in speech event or creation of a written text itself but lies in its interface with at least one other utterance" (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 582). Therefore, these circuitous pathways and entailments of "covenant" gave me pause. I judged the pervasiveness of the concept as signalling a creative process that enabled Ethiopian Orthodox Christians to cite, reference and express "covenant" in these layered ways. Covenant was not just a thing (a material ark that rests in Axum) nor a historical narrative (the story of Ethiopia as the chosen land), but also something else entirely. Taking seriously the unfolding nature of covenantal language and interpretation in the Ethiopian Orthodox context, this thesis suggests that what may

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[2] "Ethiopia" in biblical text does not correspond to the current geographic boundaries. Briefly put, historical consciousness for many centuries considered "Ethiopia" or Abyssinia as connoting the territory south of the Nile basin in Egypt, which included the Kingdom of Meroe in Kush (Sudan). Based on my conversations with Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, I can assert that they interpreted this quote literally and the broad category of "Ethiopia" in Biblical text only helped to underscore the claims of encompassing cultural influence, akin to the legacy of prior civilizational significance.

have once been a ritualized symbol is now a grounding metaphor through which Orthodox Christians are able to relate to the world and each other.

Waiting for the *tabot* to come out is another refraction of this singular idea: a performative ark, an event that circumscribes a community of believers, and a textual object of fascination. The persistent re-articulation and re-configuration of a singular message illustrates the central subject matter of this dissertation, namely tradition as a site of creativity. Not only is this an ethnography of actualizations of this statement of promise, "Ethiopia stretching her hands unto God," but also how inspirations by contemporary Orthodox Christians play a significant part in reinforcing and propagating metaphors of "covenant". The presentation and reiteration of such bundled imagery and interpretation can then be seen not as an exercise in carbon copying tropes of antiquity by members of the Church but a methodology of being inspired by its tradition. This quality of being inspired came through in Wondwossen's tone and demeanour as he parsed out layers of knowledge, authoritatively confident but also as if sharing secrets with me, which matched a similar sense of discovery and revelation for how individuals unearthed narratives and symbols of the tradition of their Church. I had to learn quickly to take the contemporary impact of the legacy of the Church seriously. As such, the revised objective of this thesis is to critically examine these compounded symbols, tropes and metaphors. This thesis takes these to be included within a vast spectrum of devotional expression, including: liturgical rites; acts of charity; modalities of veneration; and social customs of paying respect. Each of these modes of expression are examined in this thesis, and are seen to be refractions of the covenantal symbolism used by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

As the encounters with the young girls and with Wondwossen already have begun to demonstrate, 'covenant' is a highly complex concept to pin down in Ethiopian

Christian practice. While *tabot* is an object, it is more than an object. It is more than one object, and it is a highly fertile concept of religious and social invention. Because of its complexities, I address the Ethiopian covenant in much the same manner as Pesman does the Russian soul (2000). In her exploration of the soul, *dusha*, Pesman refuses to call it a thing. Rather, she takes it to be a multidimensional idiom, as a means for understanding "what human flexibility and incoherence look like or what they become when molded by belief in a model of the center, of depth" (2000:5). Throughout the course of research, I came to see covenant as such a multidimentional idiom. Such multidimensionality, however, means that its nature cannot be demonstrated through empirical rigour. Instead, the ensuing chapters carefully delineate what Rodney Needham (1985:161) calls the "lateral values" of a complex concept. Following Needham, I have laid out the argument in this thesis in such a way as to elucidate the concept through each successive element of ethnography in order to establish the complementary relationships within the concept of 'covenant' as it is practiced by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Dessie.

Within this thesis, I arrange the movements between aspects of covenant as a prismatic configuration, a crystal formed object, "whose faces are parallel to one axis" (Webster dictionary). I implement this device as an organizational mechanism to sub-divide what I identify as four key instantiations of covenant: textual, liturgical, material and associative. These instantiations I pursue by a focused ethnography of standard forms of worship as engaged by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, specifically focusing on archetypal activities that represent key domains of lay Orthodox engagement: a) feast day celebrations such as Timqet, the feast of Epiphany; b) the patterns of participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, *qidase*; c) the social forces of church planting; and, d) the roles of *mahabers* (religious associations) in community affairs. Taking covenant in this

manner, within a socio-theological genre, to be a methodology of forging relationships, lay engagement with the trope can be seen as coordinated action toward the facilitation of social order. By using the notion of "prism" within this thesis, I foreground the parallelisms between the various lateral values of "covenant", but also push the reconceptualization of "covenant" forward, drawing on the instrumental capacity of a prism as a refracting object. This aspect of prism proves useful for analytical purposes, as it provides insights into how an idea as traditional as "covenant" has survived by elaboration.

   This introduction condenses the dissertation's argument as a whole in order to efficiently orient the reader to the bodies of analytical approaches necessary to observe the points of convergence within covenant as a multi-dimensional figure of thought. This study's analytical paradigm is part of a scholastic tradition in Ethiopian studies, inspired by Levine's (1965) classic ethnography. Levine cogently demonstrated how a linguistic tool within church aesthetics called *semena worq*[3]—a skill of constructing layered communication—reflects broader cultural predilections for intrigue and secrecy. Making use of this cultural aesthetic, Levine uses this key idiom as a lens to evaluate values of individualism and social stratification. In addition to demonstrating the breadth of covenant as a concept, the interactions between covenant's prismatic dimensions are the zones that offer the potential for learning about the driving logics of social commitments. This research consolidates around a question of "what binds promise," on inter-relational and meta-relational scales of interactions. Following Levine's model, wherein he deploys an aspect of Ethiopean cultural aesthetics in order to understand wider cultural practice, this thesis considers the ways in which the

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[3] *Semenaworq* (wax and gold) is a rhetorical aesthetics in church arts that is loosely translatable as a double entendre, that is, two layers of meaning contained within a single statement, wax being the surface and gold being the hidden and deeper implication.

essences of sacred promise can illuminate the performative force of obligation and commitment in everyday life. These qualities represent the essential components of covenant as a type of metaphorical promise-making, which extends beyond the confines of religion, out into the quotidian means of how people relate to each other.

1.2 The field: urban Orthodoxy in Dessie, South Wollo

I conducted eighteen months fieldwork (2010-2012) in Dessie, a city of nearly a quarter million people and the regional capital of South Wollo. Dessie was selected because its demographic composition of nearly equal portions Christians to Muslims represented a microcosm of the whole region. Therefore, the political condition of Dessie and Wollo as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious populace, assured that Orthodox Christianity was one of several active social institutions. This feature I planned to study alongside a concentration on urbanization as it affected the social fabric of religious organizations such as the Orthodox Church. Dessie was most often described as a market town and transportation hub due to its position on the main roadway that situated it as the midpoint between the capital city, Addis Ababa, and the next biggest city, Mekele, in the north. The surrounding highlands were one of the most affected during the famines of the 1980s, and, as such, Dessie was a major centre for several NGOs and charities in the poverty relief and humanitarian aid sector. This legacy was reflected in recent studies on Wollo centred on livelihoods, poverty reduction, and land use management. As such, this project was committed to an urban outlook, informed by the understanding that traditionalist features would diminish in "modernizing" locales such as cities due to increased pressures, such as economic and migration, to keep apace with the country's development aspirations. Dessie's specific location offered a context

of intense church-building projects, accompanied by a competitive zeal that reflected the national Church's diminishing position as the hegemonic religious authority.

Figure 1.2: St. Gabriel Church, the main church of Dessie city

The original plan was to study parish organizations, their integration into local political structures, and the roles occupied by the laity. My primary focus was on the lay participants of the Church who may or may not hold positions with the diocese administration (*bete khenet*) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahado Church (EOTC). I followed the pathways of engagement, by focusing on the mechanisms of mobilizing the contemporary parish in domains such as advocacy and fundraising and its political role in local infrastructure. However, in these pathways, I encountered rather "folk" archetypes of devotion. Customs of the "folk" (*bal'agar*) were popular in the city, such

as models of charity, a culture of honorary lay associations, and even the manner in which pilgrimage and oaths to the church drew from templates of devotional practices that were typically reserved for generations of believers exposed to church traditions more directly. An expansive matrix of activities that composed parish life had commonalities that motivated investigating the patterns between their shared aspects. There was a pronounced parallelism of ceremonial culture between lay meals and hosting and church services (i.e. Eucharistic liturgy) and the notion of grace and blessing that transferred into both activities. Similarly, sacramental aspects of time/space manifest in processional customs were traceable in narratives of devotees that detailed divine presence in local environs. These "templates" of lay engagement encapsulated how the church functioned as a cultural force, as reservoir of influences on people's everyday life, which corresponded to the analytical paradigm of "lived tradition" (Makris 2007). Therefore, I noted a shift from my original research plan of studying the Church's impact as an institution, as one of several pillars in social life, towards studying recurring motifs in devotional action in urban and semi-urban parishes.

As my ethnographic focus began to narrow, I observed two analytical tracks that emerged from the research data, which predicated a more precise definition of "church." Methodologically speaking, these distinctions, Church as social institution and church as a cultural force, were necessary to effectively indicate how covenant acts as a socio-theological genre rather than a political ideology (to be detailed in Chapter 2). I do not support the idea that these categories are indeed mutually exclusive but I do want to emphasize that these two tracks have been delineated by academic inquires that reify the boundary of religious/secular. As Michael Lambek (2012) has argued, the strength of the anthropological approach that it is "inevitably both sympathetic to and sceptical of

varieties of religious practice while being both in practice secular and in principle

sceptical of secularism" (Lambek 2012; par. 29). To be devoted to an objectivist

perspective would position "the religious" and "the secular" as a working binary,

thereby interpreting how the Church implements its structural foundation, covenant, as

analogous to how the state enforces its constitution. However, the methodological

direction I pursue entertains de-political possibilities of religion as "one of the few

locations from which it is possible to stand outside politics or to regulate or ground the

political in a different kind of order. Religion must be treated in a way that neither

excessively politicizes nor excessively depoliticizes it" (Lambek 2012: par.11). Had I

decided to subscribe to the track of "religion as politics" and study the Orthodox Church

as an actor in the public sphere (which it is), I would have produced an entirely different

dissertation. My choice shifted to concentrate on templates of worship as the vantage

point of critical analysis, which I was convinced was a richer spectrum of observation

for studying how a repertoire of behaviours and modes of sociality were tools of

encountering the world. This direction enabled a radical reconfiguration of covenant,

heretofore analysed as a one-dimensional object. Consequently, this dissertation aspires

to present covenant as a methodology of apprehending reality, via a genre of metaphoric

constructions I outline in four key ethnographic case studies. This analytical position,

that "covenant" possesses multiple dimensions that interact with each other in prismatic

fashion, has correspondingly facilitated the outlines of a position that conceives of the

multi-scalar properties of "church". The argument I explore, therefore, blurs the

distinctions between secular and religious. And, regarding the circuitous path of the

sceptical anthropologist spoken of above, I follow Lambek's concesion concerning

anthropological studies on or about religion, where he says: "perhaps [anthropology] is

attracted, after all, to the order provided by ritual, the seriousness afforded by the

transcendental, and the play enabled by symbolic classification" (Lambek 2012: par.29).

So, in spite of my preparation to be sceptical, I became attracted to this trifecta of ritual,

the transcendental and symbolic classification, all key factors that motivated my pursuit

to redefine covenant.

1.3 Towards a Conceptual Design of "Covenant"

Most informed members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are eager to remind

outsiders that their country, the land beyond the river Ghion (Genesis 2:13), is

mentioned thirty-eight times in the Bible (see footnote one). The emphasis on Old

Testament traditions has long been observed as a method to underscore the importance

of Ethiopia in the Biblical imaginary. It was also demonstrated by how Orthodox

Christian Churches characteristically apply a holistic incorporation of the Scriptures: as

a body of laws and prophecy unified and preserved by the Hebrew Bible. This feature

of holism has been significant in the context of "covenant scholarship," as it blurs the

dividing line between Old and New Testament, and thus divergent understandings of

this concept in Jewish and Western Christian theology (see Chapter 3). In Alter and

Kermode's introduction to the *Literary Guide to the Bible*, they emphasized the

ambiguity of the label of the "Bible," specifically the implicit notion that the "Old

requires completion in the New or is actually superseded by the New" (1987:11).

Covenants have also been approached in taxonomies of archetypal promises.

Encyclopaedic entries of "covenant" typologized various agreements entered into

between God and a chosen exemplar (Abraham, Moses) while emphasizing how the

textual exposition of these binding events cross-reference previous covenants (i.e. David

to Solomon)[4]. To begin with a working definition, I cite the Sinai covenant as it contains a direct imprint on the uniquely Ethiopian material object of the *tabot,* the vessel that contains the tablets (*tselat*) of the Ten Commandments. To refer to *yekidan Muse* (Mosaic covenant) is then to recount the event of *Egzeiabher* (God) offering to protect the "children of Israel," conditional upon their obeying the Law, as described in the Pentateuch, of the first 5 books of the Old Testament. Its base definition is a mutual relationship of honour and responsibility, a theologically-developed idea of protection as expressed through the narrative of "chosen people."

Covenant, as a theological-historical narrative, has a particular development in the Ethiopian popular tradition as the transference of the distinction of "new Jerusalem" from Israel to Ethiopia. The journey of the ark (*tabot*), the vessel that is reputed to hold the Ten Commandments, is most commonly articulated through multi-framed panels displayed on walls of churches that depict the fabled encounter between Queen of Sheba and King Solomon (Figure 1.3).

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[4] Nor is "covenant" an exclusively Jewish or Christian idea. See Boyce (1989) on Zoroastrian tradition and *mithra*, an unbreakable promise or pact.

Figure 1.3. The Kebre Negest legend (a ceiling mural at Ghion Hotel) which recounts the story of Queen Sheba's trip to Jerusalem and the subsequent journey of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.

As the story goes, in search of Solomon's wisdom, Sheba travels from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, and in the course of their meeting, engage in a seductive play of wits and forge a romantic alliance, producing a son, Menelik. After passing his youth away from Jerusalem, the son is reacquainted with his father and upon his return to Ethiopia, decides to leave with the ark. In his introduction to Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) liturgy, Abune Yesahaq (Patriarch in exile, 1974-1994) states that

based on attentive reading of Scripture (1Kings 11), it is clear that "in the last years of his life, King Solomon 'did not keep what the Lord had commanded'"(cited in Daoud 1991:3). Here, the narrative feature of the broken promise signals the legitimacy behind the covenant's transfer from Israel to Ethiopia. Therefore, bestowal has a divinely-directed order but is also contingent on righteousness of those being granted with this honour and responsibility.

As I attempted to understand covenant, I encountered a significant issue of translation, namely that the word for covenant in Amharic "*kidan*" did not reflect all the variants of that I encountered in my ethnographic data. This issue is similar to etymological specificity of the Hebrew word for covenant, *berith (*lit. to cut, to eat), which connotes a narrow definition of formal treaties, the covenant of circumcision, and the commemoration of God's law (the Sabbath). By contrast, the dictionary entry of the word "*kidan*", elicited twenty-three definitions (Kane 1990), stemming from the root *takayada*, meaning to enter into a pact or bonded with other by contract, by the sacrament of marriage. Permutations of the term refer to legal oaths (*kal kidan*) and relationships (i.e. adopted children—*yekal kidan lij*; allies of World War II—*yekalkidan ageroch*) as well as "wicked people" who are not bound by an oath or have not taken Communion (*kalachew lekalkidan afechew leqwarban yaltegaba*). Certainly covenant, *kidan*, is an instantly recognizable term for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, primarily as the "testament" between God and His people, yet is not identified in its multiple domains of devotional culture. The task of delineating classifications from action provided a mapping of covenant as the consistent metaphor, observable in practice yet not reflected lexicographically as one identical term.

I began to consider the theme of covenant critically when I realized that I could not reach a unified lexical term. The convergences of what I investigate in this

dissertation as the associative dimension of covenant emphasized this dilemma. During meetings of *mahabers* (lay associations)[5], a festive meal was offered in honour of the association's namesake, St Michael. A covenant analogy was underscored by a presiding priest, who pointed at the table of ceremonial items, the *mesob* (a common name for "basket" as well as the paten which holds the sanctified host) and the *tsewa* (chalice), holding *t'ela* (home brew), and a framed picture of St. Michael, and said "this is *kidan* (covenant)". Such scenarios reflect what Fernandez (1974) terms as the "quality space" in ceremonial scenes, where metaphors are mobilized by enacting actors, such as the sign image of the Eucharist, "we are the living body of Christ" (1974:125). Viewed from this perspective, the metaphor "*kidan"* fills frames created through paradigmatic associations, that is, "the capacity to occupy that same frame in the chain of experience" (Fernandez 1974:126). What this domain of devotional activity showcased was that "covenant" was also a praxis-heavy idea. The task would be to organize and represent these various instantiations in a way that would facilitate the formation of an analytical lens to examine the characteristic values of Ethiopian Orthodox worship.

Therefore, the need to look closely at epistemology and how it is organized on local terms became crucial. Bateson's work on systems theory that approaches ethnography as "explanatory data" has been instructive for how I have considered the potential designs of this dissertation. This is particularly of his analysis of juxtaposition and analogy-making by Iatmul groups in Papua New Guinea (Bateson 1936). His delineation of the recursion within epistemologies has garnered attention , as Jensen and

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[5]Confraternities are a corresponding form, popular in the Middle Ages in Europe, particularly well established in research on proliferation of guilds in Catholic Italy and Spain. Unlike these contexts that show a parish church having about one confraternity attached to it, and usually given a ceremonial role in an annual feast day, EOTC *mahaber*s appeared active in a more frequent basis and were incorporated in parish dynamics.

Rödje (2010) note by citing the heuristic device of the rhizome as similarly gleaned from imprints of cultural figures of thought: "natives see their community, not as a closed system, but as an infinitely proliferating and ramifying stock ... The idea that a community is closed is probably incompatible with the idea of it as something which continually divides and sends out offspring 'like the rhizome of a lotus' " (Bateson 1958: 249 in Jensen and Rödje 2010:21). It is with this same quality of proliferation and ramification that covenant must be seen. The multi-essence of *tabot*, a definitional sub-category not found in dictionary entries of kidan, alerted me to the necessity of constructing the heuristic device of the prism. In one aspect, *tabot* is textual: the Sinai covenant (the Ten Commandments). In another, it is material: the altar slab upon which the communion hosts are consecrated. It is metonymic: the altar is dedicated to a saint and this altar is the establishing entity that confirms a church. It is also an orientational metaphor for human/divine manifestation reflected in popular parlance: "when all the arks leave [the sanctuary]" (*hulum tabotat wutwal naw*), as experienced on the great communal worship event of *Timqet* (Epiphany). Furthermore, it is ontologizing: the act of removing the *tabot* outside the sanctuary is removing its sacred component, effectively removing the church from itself.

The material dimensions of covenant are best understood as a refracting object, which aligns with Wagner's analytical paradigm of the holographic (2001). In order to pursue a set of organizing principles that will maintain the integrity of representation of emergent parts to a conceptual whole, Wagner's (2001, 1986, 1975) discussions of trope and metaphor appears most instructive for framing the phenomenon of covenant in EOTC devotional culture. To illustrate this, he describes the spokes of a wheel, as analogues, saying, "[a wheel's] design [is] always moving retrograde to the direction of its application." This, for Wagner, is convertible to "pragmatic afterlifes" within the

holographic (2001:15). EOTC praxis encompasses the variables that compose

reproductions of a concept communicated through diverse applications, the agency of

metaphor (Wagner 2001:5). The diversity of this concept emerged by asking a question,

"what if we treated rituals (and objects) in their own right?"(Lévi-Strauss in Handelman

2004). Applying this approach to another dimension of covenant, to take *qidase* as only

literal or textual (i.e. symbolic translation), or phenomenological (transcendental) was to

severely limit the possibilities of envisioning a localized methodology of maintaining

and inscribing cultural values such as obligation, respect, and protection. To position

"covenant" as the nexus point for how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians establish

connections in their world in various dimension and refractions enables a method of

studying relationships between relations.

Throughout this work, I explore the heuristic potential of refraction as developed

in anthropological thought and with specific inclusion of linguistic theory (e.g.

Durkheim 1982, E.E. Pritchard 1956, Herzfeld 1987, Bakhtin 1981). This was famously

employed by E.E. Pritchard in his studies of segmentary organization of of *kwoth*

(Spirit) in Nuer religion, interpreted as "refractions of God in relation to particular

activities, events, and groups" (Herzfeld 1984: 653, see also Evans-Pritchard 1956:51-

52). Previously, the impact of grand systems to function as totalizing structures,

particularly regarding the role of human agency, has called into question theoretical

approaches that reify form-content relations. To amend this caution to the analysis

presented here, I have ascribed to the methodological attentiveness of "things as

heuristic" vs. "things as analytic" (Henare et al. 2007) within two theoretical tracks I

pursue. One is the incorporation of genre theory that enables conceptualizing actions as

referring to common logic as well as amending its working parameters. This focus on

elaboration within Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is discussed alongside paradigms of

cultural innovation that permits conceptualizing concepts as contingent on processual change. As such, my working premise, that cross-cutting narratives, materialities and articulations of covenant possess distinctive characteristics of a unitary idea, is both an argument about how a concept facilitates observing cultural coherence within an encompassing cosmological outlook as well as how this concept promotes strategies of negotiating social order.

1.4 Refractions of Sacred Promise in Ethiopian Orthodox praxis

Discussing how to present the church as a living tradition with Yohannes, a well-versed lay member, I spoke about the spheres of activities I researched, such as my activities with *mahabers*, the phenomenon of pilgrimage, and individuals' sacramental lives. While these were all noteworthy topics to explore, Yohannes figuratively waved these preoccupations aside and asked: "Do you want to know why we go to church?" He told me that it is "our duty" (*giddeta*) as Christians, first and foremost, to "give thanks" (*temesgen*) every day, for "the gifts of Holy Spirit and to honour the house of God." To understand why Ethiopian Orthodox Christians go to church with such intensity and steadfast endurance is to comprehend that they are paying respect. This is exhibited in the metaphysical posture of *mesalem*, the act of crossing oneself and greeting (i.e. kissing, genuflection) the doors of the church, an intimate custom that involves more than a nod of recognition to the church in one's nearby vicinity. The stress on the reflective gesture by making the sign of the cross, in similar testimonies of the facts of the faith by Greek Orthodox Christians (Hart 1994), was punctuated by her informant's disposition to "abandon all other ideas of significance" (1994:267). In the

Ethiopian context, the unceasing, reflexive act of giving thanks signalled a particular regime of practice between Christians and their Church, of acknowledging always.

My approach towards everyday devotional enactments of covenant by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians focuses on a modulation of performative stances. I categorize the liturgical domain as one of these dimensions of covenant. For Ethiopian Orthodox, the call to worship, such as hearing *qidase* (liturgy), is a near social reflex and provoked questions about distilling the essential drive that inspires such regularity of liturgical participation, one key attribute of this bond with Church. The associated posture of paying respect is a specific, individualized approach that is intentional, reflexive and manifest in bodily posture, is itself conceptualized as sacred, a devotional imitation that is non-mental and sensual in quality. Hann and Goltz (2010) effectively encapsulate individual acts of veneration as "the ethical and liturgical interaction of men and women with God in the medium of the icon" (2010:12), referring to the *Philoxenia*, the Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah. They stress the reflexivity of "serving the Trinity at the Holy Table," to the left and right of how celebrants stand during service. Studying the requisite movements of paying respect in Ethiopian Orthodox praxis through liturgy as a starting point provided a pathway for envisioning how parish communities are shaped by particular regimes of engagement.

Sangren's ethnography on territorial cults of Ta'-ch'i (1987) in Taiwan accomplishes a balance between analysis of local social structures as well as illustrating how local worship is informed by a deep consciousness of Chinese civilization and its institutions. Ritual diversity between villages is explained as being determined by relational networks (e.g. ranked bureaucracy of spiritual pantheon of Jade Emperor down to City-gods), while still being considered as part of a unified set of

"cosmological assumptions," namely a belief in the concept of *ling*, a mediating power between order and disorder. Abuna Yesehaq (Daoud 1991:3) defines worship:

> the Eucharistic Liturgy as the supreme act of communal worship. Through it, devout believers hold intimate communion with the Living Lord, through the consecrated elements called "qurban." This is not, however, the manna which Israel ate in the wilderness, but the Holy Communion, the Lord's Table, the Eucharist, the Flesh and Blood of Christ, who said, "Amen. Amen. I say unto you. Moses gave you not that bread from heaven but my Father gives you the true bread from Heaven." (John 6:32)

Here, *qidase* (liturgy), as the commemoration of the Last Supper, which memorializes the "everlasting covenant" of Christ (the blood sacrifice), as well as the rite of communion (*qurban*) are refractions of covenant as structurally proposed. Though versions of the sacramental appear in different forms, liturgical participation as a direct partaking is indirect and negotiated, as well as embodied in individual stances in context outside church time/space.

Therefore, Ethiopian Orthodox worship can be characterized as a holistic approach to remembrance, attached with particular conceptions of sacred time and space. There are regimes of presentation contained within the liturgical dimension, such as greeting the church at all given hours of the day, accompanied by a display of surrender manifest in gestures at various points of its exterior and matched by formulized prayers or statement of personal petition. These acts are done individually and publicly and contain a cyclical quality of repetition, what Rappaport regards as the "obvious aspects of ritual" (1979), "a set of common procedures and features: conventionality, repetition, fragmentation or "parcelling," fixity, framed-ness, condensation or fusion of meaning, numinous experience (cited in Houseman and Severi 1998:181). To observe templates of worship necessitated a focus on veneration that attends to its performativity force.

The place of rituals in the activities of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians I analysed by referring to theories on sacrifice as a type of agreement-making. The situated-ness of honorific presentations, the colloquialism of showing and offering to God, are qualities of offering that Hénaff (2010) includes in his evaluations of ceremonial gift-exchange. Hénaff's analysis reorients classic ceremonial gift-exchange theories to address the mechanisms of pledge, alliance, and their public qualities that cement the definitions of a community. The discussion highlights a crucial paradox: to maintain relationships, it is obligatory to keep offering, "the end of the gift is neither the thing given (which captures the attention of economists) nor even the gesture of giving (which fascinates moralists) but the creation or renewal of an alliance" (2010: 140-141). Generosity and commensality are less about the gift but what Hénaff terms as "the launching or continuing of a procedure of reciprocal recognition (in the sense of *recognizing one another*) expressed through precious goods and services. Although the gift is addressed to an individual, what matters is not the individual as such but what he or she represents" (114-115, his emphasis). Within the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, paying respect, doing *mesalem*, represents an expansive set of diverse practices but what makes this custom obligatory to continue this cycle? Do formal stances and auto-reflexive behaviour indicate an estrangement to ritual to its performers, a way of paying attention yet detaching any internal relations to the event in question (Gerholm 1987, see also Lewis 1980)?

The formats of devotional behaviour likewise supply the outlines of lateral values that move between various contexts. Social obligations of paying respects are necessary to highlight in order to relate how positions to Church in liturgical actions are negotiated by individuals. There are motivations revolving around ideas of salvation and religious merit. Reflecting upon the strong undercurrents of covenant dimensions

in Ethiopian Christianity, the terms of the dialogic relationship resided in a mutuality and continuity of promise. This rather canonically-friendly, pietistic assumption finds occurrence in inter-personal obligations, I argue. Sitting for *leqso* (mourning house) is an activity that is communal and reflexive (i.e. people's schedule literally freeze), and offering condolences implicate individuals beyond kin relations, as well as echoes a certain ritualized characteristics of the liturgical domain. More salient for the argument is the underlying ideology of responsibility, similarly founded on the custom of "offering oneself," the person being symbolic (i.e. reciprocal recognition on a supra-human level). This is a productive juxtaposition, based on a particular expression and bind to this "obligation." both to the "house" of the person as well as to a cosmological outlook on mortality. The acuity with how these social obligations are adhered to provides a pathway to understanding how people implicate themselves on an interpersonal level. Such moments that totalize humanity as one body occur in funeral sittings, as death as an event is respected (lit. it could happen to me, God has acted in this moment), and is similarly articulated in the act of giving alms, such as offering charity to strangers (*yene beete*, lit. one like me, as if they were myself). Respect and an unfailing bond that is larger than the person frame actions of responsibility in conceptual terms in domains outside the purely "liturgical," represented so far as exclusively grounded by church time/space.

Furthermore, the internal properties of covenant as it is circumscribed in social practices contributed to the decision to resist labelling covenant as a type of exchange. I reached this conclusion based on the quality of *tabots* as sacra that are "inalieanble possessions" (see Weiner in Hénaff 2010), defined by its circuit of communication that is strikingly a-economic. These dynamics of material covenants are crucial for arriving at how individuals and groups are implicated and work in collaborative fashion to

actualize a spiritualized landscape. "*Tabots* speak," Kassu informed me, when discussing local church history and the spiritual endowments of his community's environs, demonstrated by local legends of how prayers of the residents to Qidus Kirkos (St. Cyriacus) were eventually fulfilled by consecrating a *tabot* in his name. Mythologizing neighbourhood arks relies on feedback of unceasing devotion of bonds to saints, through their unrealized *tabots*, and is activated by sustained recognition by their devotees. Stewardship to the *tabot*, I argue, is a synecdoche for collaborative ventures of promise. As an edifying property of churches, *tabot* legends and popular support they engender, transforms them into political mobilizers. The proliferation of churches is commensurate to proliferation of *tabots*, given how EOTC increasingly shares a space in the public domain with Islam and Pentecostal Christianity. The concept of covenant is then capable of translating into agreements of applied devotion, a dialogic relationship that holds *tabot* emergence as contingent on mutuality of responsibility towards ensuring permanence of church communities.

To consider devotional actions as part of repertoire of practice has directed distinct proposals for how individuals orient to the Church, which I have synthesized as formal structures of promise. A set of key characteristics define this act of bonding: as divinely authorized, establishing a dual-directional motion of protection; as recognition on supra-relational and interpersonal levels; as implicating collaboration for actualizing sacred presence; and promise as socially circumscribed. In turn, by proposing that covenant is synoptically defined as a promise, via personal and communal commitments that establish and consistently reassert traditions, facilitated unlocking an active methodology of cultural cohesion, what I term as a socio-theological genre for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

I connect the vast expanse between the covenant as Biblical texts and as a commemorative meal so commonplace in everyday lives by distilling the shared aspect of remembrance, a credal behaviour that is supplanted into the code of responsibilities of Orthodox Christians. Linking formalized promise as citing covenant taxonomies, as allegorical "houses of Abraham" or evoking the sacramentalizing acts of commensality, proposes the transferable nature of the genre that contains templates for customs that are accessible to distribute. The specific interdependent and authority-laden roles it promotes is a re-application of a beholden relationship, a patterning of offering and presenting oneself, one's "house" to others. These units of commemorative societies are a means to self-organize and participate in a cultural framework that personalizes as it socializes. The trope of "chosen people" functioned as one interface among several, starting with the phenomenon of the *mahaber*.

Thinking about the liturgical, what recent anthropological studies of Christianity would categorize as the epitome of historicized ritual (Robbins 2010a), it regains its contemporary identity through these processes of interpersonal relevance and re-commitments, rather exclusively defined as a convention of adhering to what has been passed down in perpetuity. Assuming certain facts about the efficacy of ritual, as a mark of life cycles as sacrificial regeneration (Bloch 1992) or as cosmological demarcation (Douglas 1984), Lévi-Strauss' statement that the "ritual condenses in a single concrete form procedures which would otherwise have been discursive" (1971:600) only covers part of the story. The macro and micro versions of *bereket* (blessing) are accessible and productive due to the character of the transactional relationship. Evaluated from the perspective of more newly converted Christians for whom ritual often represents a lack of sincerity and a dependency on clerical authority, the power of ritual provides a similar opportunity for moments of "synchronized, intersubjective activity" that create

"thick social webs," often cited as one of the key pathways towards change and revitalization of the Christian person and community (Robbins in Bialecki 2010:699).

The liturgical as I have explicated possesses the potential to function as a method of preservation. The phenomenon of tabot tekele contains a loose subjectivity (i.e. in the informal 3rd person, "he plants an ark"), suggesting a strikingly horizontal subsistence of the canonical (Girma 2012:25, Persoon 2010). This imaginary of the immaterial covenant as organic is similar to Turner's illustration of the genesis of a Hindu temple. Citing verses of Virasaiva poetry, the ritual of building Hindu shrines starts with planting a pot of seed in the earth, then emerges to correspond to all bodily appendages, representing a cycle of transformation, a model that becomes submerged and forgets its "moving originals" as time and a hierarchized mediation to spiritual realm is installed (Ramanujan in Turner 1975:282). The temple as the human body is like the tabot, the edifying character of the house of prayer (bete mekdes), as speaking through believers' constant recognition and appeals. The shape of an Orthodox community, then, is determined by communal causality that concretizes covenant as endowing and re-activated by referencing pre-existing covenants. Sourced from a specifically Ethiopian Christian ideology to preserve and protect its role as elected partners of sacred sanctuaries on earth, the tabot performatively aligns with salvational promises of Old and New Testaments.

The recursive image of temple=body=temple, what Turner synthesizes as the structure/anti-structure binary of standing and moving, "stasis" and "dynamis" (1974:282), corresponds with initial forms of corporate bodies of early religion, hierarchized power as definitional to cosmologies in their temporal forms. Conceptually, the covenant operates both as a type of superstructure of Church, as a textual conglomeration of the Word as well as its edifying property. The installation of

the ideational, the "virtual" sanctuary via its ark, is situated as a dual covenant of Old (the tablets) and New (the sacrificial altar), its material, performative, and textual dimensions are part of what Wagner theorizes as the failure to get "rid of the metaphor," its survival as "the boundary condition of our inability to do so (2001:20)". To preserve a promise is a process of exemplification on the part of its bearers, such as "living by the Word" (*kalkidan*), but more mechanically, through responsibilities of an Orthodox Christian to her/his community.

The prismatic, therefore, is an apparatus that emerged out of praxis. The controlled breadth of activities, is a reflection of traditions' safeguarding against "petrification," a messy and chaotic territory within the place and space of Church. Referring to the aforementioned 12th century *bhakti* religious movements, vitality of tradition is predicated on "spontaneity hav[ing] its own rhetorical structure; no free verse is truly free...without a repertoire of structures to rely on, there can be no spontaneity" (Ramanujan in Turner 1975:289). Similarly, emblematic conflicts arise in materialities of covenant, as *tabot* emergences are what drive future of churches yet their shrouding are a necessary modulation of distance. To preserve and keep loyal to a tradition without radical alteration presents a challenge to balance dynamic components necessary to keep the vitality of form. Therefore, in this context, tradition and continuity, often positioned as the antithesis to rupture and dynamism, and conceived as incommensurable to the modern Christian project of self re-invention, reveals capacities to be appropriated into guiding logics of how communities maintain their contemporary forms.

1.5 Methods and Data Collection

The project was designed to follow points in the liturgical calendar, the fast and feast seasons, in order to analyse two principal themes: one concerned participation in an often-faceless church by focusing on commemorations as one reliable way of observing flows of activity; the other was to investigate the character of the canonical in social experience and to chart the capacities for tradition-based domains to inspire creativity in expression.

Conducting fieldwork in Ethiopia as a somewhat "native anthropologist" (Narayan 1993) was a much more challenging task than I could prepare for. Ethnographic research has been describes as stepping in and out of society (Powdermaker 1967), this imagery is suitable for my experience except I inhabited several societies simultaneously, as an Ethiopian (on my mother's side)[6], Orthodox Christian who was raised abroad. My identity as an American was the most dominant face that individuals attached to me, as I was commonly mistaken for a NGO worker. This is particular for Wollo, given its history as an administrative centre for humanitarian aid. The presence of aid workers who collect research on methods of subsistence by rural communities and peri-urban neighbourhoods is still common today. In fact, the nature of my focus on the laity was to interpret this aim as a form of resource management. As one postgraduate student at Addis Ababa University relayed to his colleagues, "she is doing

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[6] I have not employed ethnic categories in this dissertation and instead remain consistent to the territorial boundaries of where my contacts reside. Identification along ethnic lines, while utilized consistently for national demographic/statistical purposes (i.e. bureaucratic sector request all citizens to claim ethnicity according to their father's), is a very fluid category. My ethnic definition as an Ethiopian follows Tigrean, Oromo and Amhara categories, with further sub-categories within each of these broad headings. My interlocutors mirrored similar compositions of mixed ethnicities, and therefore I refer to them as Dessian or Wolloye to refer to a larger, more culturally-defined area.

"grassroots" research on the Church", using the English word. To broadly summarize, it was unusual for my contacts to remember that I was Ethiopian, much less Orthodox Christian, highlighting the genuine insularity many Ethiopians manage to maintain, even in light of increased immigration to Europe and the West

The role most crucial for my informants was my Orthodox identity. As I began to take a regular interest in the details of church in everyday life patterns, those friends and family members I would accompany would naturally begin to ask questions about my own spiritual orientation or health ("have you prayed today?", "do you pray at night?"), bringing into focus the fieldworker's own religious positionality vis a vis religious practice (see Fabian 1995, Stewart 2001, Blanes 2006). I encountered significant personal tensions while conducting research on liturgical life specifically. On the one hand, I was a willing participant as an Orthodox Christian believer and yet I was also detached from rites of worship, partly owing to the fact that it was unfamiliar to me, as a Russian Orthodox. An awkward disjuncture developed with how I understood belief operating for myself versus how I conceived this term applied to others. Evaluating the emphasis on meaning and identification as this term evolved in the primarily Western Christian context (e.g. the institutional component of creeds), Ruel (1982) observes several key differences in practical application regarding how other religious traditions define "belief", as "the quality of a relationship, that of keeping the faith, having trust (1982: 22)." To bracket off these characteristics as distinctly outside the conceptual realm of "Christian belief" would be misleading, particularly as Orthodox Christians live their belief in precisely these ways, as a consistent re-appraisal and commitment that facilitates the strength of their connections with the divine. This issue of being attentive to a complexity that I selectively ignored for myself resurfaced when my

failure to be "allowed" passage on pilgrimage (Chapter 7) will argue how Orthodox Christians define the character of their devotion as forging links.

I was charged with a responsibility to accurately document and in some ways correct misconceptions about the Church through my dissertation work. This was largely guided by my initial introduction in Dessie, facilitated by family who had connections to the South Wollo diocese and Patriarchate office in Addis. I had an extensive network of personal contacts at my disposal. I was also vested with a unique responsibility as a person closely related to a royal lineage, as a great-granddaughter of the last governor of Wollo, who was the final heir apparent to the monarch. Most of the royal family escaped during the Revolution (1974), were imprisoned or executed, and their return was very tentative, as being associated with Emperor Haile Sellassie was still politically charged until the early 2000s. As I note in Chapter 2, my activities with Weizero Siheen Polytechnic College, on a restoration of the former palace grounds was a direct result of my public and highly visible profile. Therefore, I rarely if ever acted as a free agent in Dessie and felt a responsibility to be as transparent as possible in order to avoid judgements of conflicts of interest based on my family connections.

However, there were certain sensitivities I was attuned to. For instance, there were early complications regarding the limitations of studying the inaccessible (i.e. I could never ask direct questions about the ark) and the positionality of the fieldworker. When I would stress that I wanted to learn about how people affirmed their faith and depth of devotion, the Church as an intercessor, I got a few wrinkled brows and was told that I was pursuing the wrong degree, according to my male friends enrolled in church educational programs, and to go the Trinity College, the seminary in Addis. The

traditional church schools were also a good place to start for such objectives, but I would have to become a church student, and start at the beginning of the schooling, with Ge'ez language. This assertion also emphasized the thin line I could tread between researcher and Orthodox believer. For example, it became far more understandable why I wanted or was allowed to go to Gishen, a pilgrimage site 80 kilometres away from the city, when I explained that my grandmother was baptized there, both because it was a personal and comprehensible story for my fellow pilgrims. In this way, it became clear that there was an arrangement being determined regarding how I was to navigate my questions and topics of interest. Points where I was initiating queries that were not permissible for scientific inquiry magnified for my interlocutors that to approach faith as a guiding mode of living, one had to actually live it.

As I was closely affiliated with the Church, I followed demarcated channels of gate-keeping, stressed by the many letters of permission for me that were written and passed through diocese administrators, preachers and chairmen of Sunday school programs with whom I interacted. As I proposed a study of parish relations and organization around the church, I was advised by these individuals to focus my activities on Medhane Alem church, the oldest church, and as a contrastive, I added the newest, St. Gabriel's. Speaking with Abune Atnateos, the Archbishop of South Wollo, about presenting the breadth of everyday religion for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, his principal suggestion was to spend time at Hayk Estiphanos, an important monastery 40 km away from Dessie city. This aspect of emphasizing holy centres as pivotal for lay spiritual life reflects an Orthodox perspective of learning from monastics as a devotionally grounded aim (see Hann & Golz 2010, Halloy & Naumescu 2012). Newly opened tourism offices provided some data that was concerned primarily with the

number of pilgrims attending the festivities, particularly in September, the peak season.

In addition to World Vision tents at Gishen, that was set up for TB testing and awareness campaigning, a UN health report on the water and hygiene risks in 2010 places the estimated number of visitors at nearly half a million. The number of pilgrims arriving at Gishen inspired much bragging by locals (i.e. the numbers of buses that succeed to make it up the treacherous roads), yet little investigation of the movements of individuals to sacred sites and how parish life influences these patterns has been conducted. I also studied the active nature of lay associations (*mahabers*) in local affairs. *Mahabers* are well-established models, organizations that would meet regularly, on a monthly basis usually, to collect funds for mutual assistance or for projects that support churches and monasteries, but principally to host meals in honour of their patron saint. As well as the authority they wield in local parish relations (feeding the poor or traveling pilgrims, fundraising, the main foot soldiers of financial and moral support and PR in local media), they are dynamic institutions of how Christian sociality is cultivated. It is in these group settings that I became further incorporated as a member of the St. Gabriel's Sunday school (i.e. as a student), donating my time and resources to assist in meetings, as well as conducting informal interviews with *mahaber* members.

Lastly, I greatly benefited by living with the Catholics sisters of the Ursaline Order. Initially, I was dissuaded by some friends and relatives to move into their compound, due to the Italian legacy in Dessie (see Chapter 2). However, the Catholic church functioned primarily as a charity[7] rather than a missionary force, as only about thirty

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[7] Catholic Relief Services were active in Dessie and Kombolcha, a small town 20 km south. For example, a women's cooperative training course operated on the monastery grounds and had mostly Muslim and Orthodox enrolees.

parishioners composed their church congregation. For the majority of my fieldwork, I resided with the Catholic sisters, who ran a boarding house for female students (ages 5-14) of the adjacent elementary and secondary school. Approximately twenty to thirty locals attended Sunday mass regularly and nearly all the students who board at the adjoining boys and girls dormitories were Muslim or Orthodox. As a member of the Catholic congregation, I participated in daily evening prayers and mass and served as a conversational tutor for the children. This environment, in addition to serving as a studious refuge, provided an excellent mixture of perspectives on religious diversity, as most of the students were Orthodox Christian or Muslim and several sisters came from Orthodox Christian background themselves. Throughout my doctoral research, I was constantly encouraged by the Catholic church and Institute in Addis, who expressed keen interest in my research topic as it suited their ecumenical aims, supporting ongoing scholarship on the Orthodox Church.

1.6 Thesis Outline

The analytic apparatus of prism, as a spectrum of dimensions, organizes the various manifestations of covenant that are refracted in this dissertation's chapters. Chapter Two contextualizes Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia in relation to religious demography, with specific attention to Wollo's fabled history of harmonious pluralism and the cultural and theological syncretism of Judaic customs within Orthodoxy. These conditions will be correlated with current scholarship in the anthropology of Christianity, currently populated primarily by studies of Pentecostalism. I propose that Orthodox Christianity as a living tradition and its historical attunement to religious heterogeneity contains a consistency and expandability of its framework, which speaks

directly to recent calls for an "assembled approach" (Bialecki 2012, see also Coleman 2010) to Christianities cross-culturally.

The remaining five chapters represent case studies for the proposed dimensions of covenant. Chapter Three presents the ultimate celebration of the covenant, the feast day of Epiphany, over the course of the three-day procession that connects several key players in a parish dynamic. I propose this event represents a performative enactment of covenant that serves as a dialogic code of blessing (i.e. protection) and responsibility (i.e. commitment), through various mediums employed for envisioning the unity of humanity and divinity. I argue that the shape of an Orthodox Christian community is reaffirmed through engagements with performative realities of the covenant (i.e. feast days).

Shifting to the "mundane" of everyday church time, Chapter Four positions individuals' alignment with liturgy (*qidase*) as contrast of the covenant as sacrament as it is disengaged with, given that partaking of the Eucharist is a sociologically conflicted domain. I arrange a paradigmatic symmetry between the serialized drama of *qidase* with how death is memorialized on the common basis, the funeral (*leqso*). I argue that establishing such a dialectic exposes several key features that are essential for understanding why collective representations, the totalizing essence of the Orthodox community, is held with high esteem, principally the process of mourning as a reminder of the individual/social connections as passing through a divine order. Therefore, the ethic of thanksgiving (*temesgen*) operates as the honour of obligation within individual stances of paying respect (at church, during mourning).
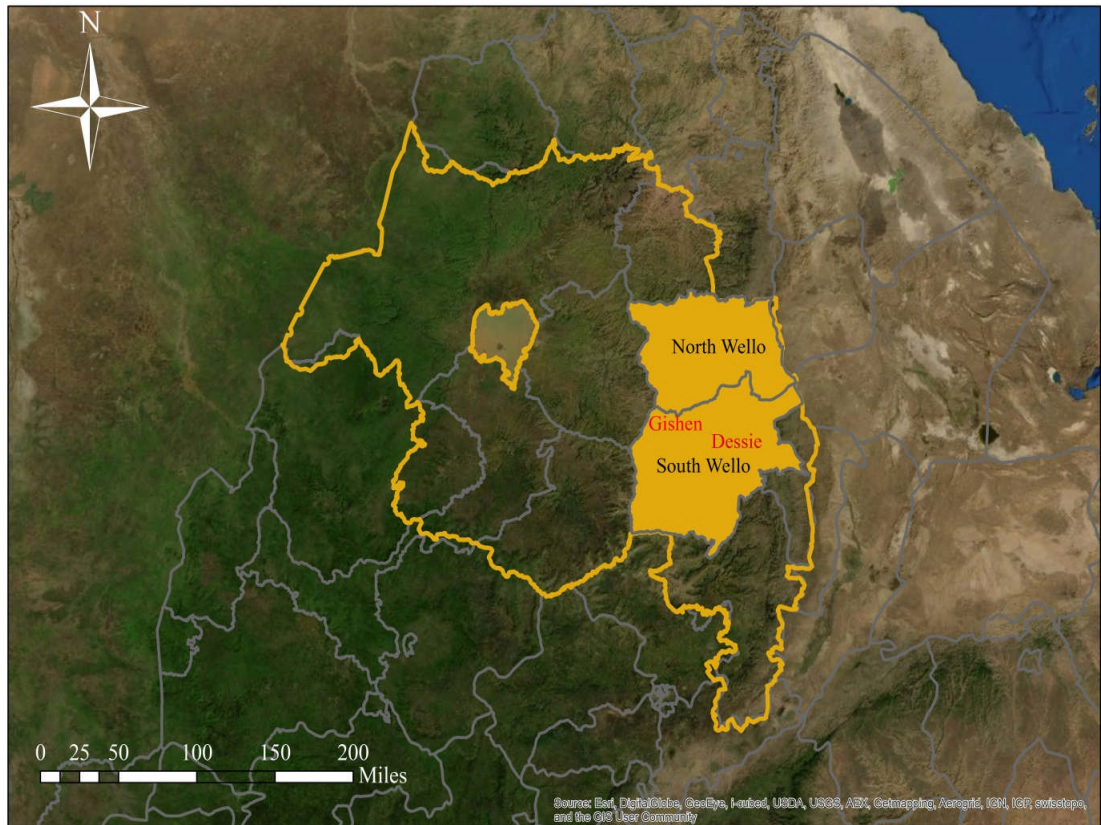
Figure 1.4 Map of fieldwork locations.

Chapter Five examines how Orthodox Christians orient to an encompassing divine presence in concrete terms, as located in their neighbourhood environs. To arrive to this conclusion, that material dimensions of covenant can be mobilized to ensure the proliferation of churches into the future, requires an integrated analysis of the prismatic application of this cultural concept. As evidence, the issue of the "*tabot* in waiting," from its multiplication that erupts from the conceptions of devotees to implications of its representation in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian sacred landscape, will be examined. How do the analytical themes of textual and/or liturgical dimensions of covenant, assist in explaining the extreme variation in *tabot* emergences, as items transient and agentive. Covenant, in its material form as *tabot* (altar slab), implicates Orthodox Christians to be responsible for enriching the spiritual landscapes of their communities (i.e. building new churches through devotions to saints).

The concluding chapters focus on the social definitions of the church and the associative features of how the genre of covenant is incorporated by Ethiopian Christians. Chapter Six presents the proliferation of lay associations (*mahabers*) as groups that are capable of exercising ritual charisma through roles as community exemplars. They are major centres for blessings and grace-filled activities, suggesting that these brotherhoods and sisterhoods act as a domain of a sacramental life that is accessible through rotating roles and cultures of commensality. Due to their semi-autonomous existence outside church territorial bounds, issues of power dynamics and control emerge as key topics of discussion. Such domains of charity and participation have direct repercussions for the web of social relations that group together on pilgrimage trips. I propose that customs of reciprocity confer blessings on the givers and receivers and create authority for lay members to mobilize charitable works (the grace of offering). Chapter Seven considers these differing scales of "church" in discussing a pilgrimage event and returns to the paradox of tradition-keeping (as shrouding/revealing) as emphasized in the first half of this work. The case-study presented here concerns the "safe-keeping" of sacred objects (i.e. relic of the holy cross), tying together several themes of this dissertation: the elaboration of Christian history (i.e. through the chronicling of Gishen in the canon/popular literature), the mechanism of liturgical time as cyclically commemorating and establishing continuity, to the unbreakability of traditions to continue Gishen pilgrimage. The drive of pilgrims will be related to the trope of *Kidane Meheret* (Covenant of Mercy) as a method to ground individual discipline behind pilgrimage vows. Correspondingly, the pilgrimage's strategic integrative capacities present a contrastive perspective of the future directions of the Church. Pilgrimages, then, are contexts where personal commemorative events (i.e. memorials or vows) transform into "traditions" due to their

ability to sustainably influence broader communal commitments. The conclusion will consider how the notion of sacred promise, as an expressive category for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, in performative, material and associative dimensions, gives shapes to visible boundaries of religious communities (i.e. parish).

Chapter Two: Religious Pluralism and the Genre of Covenant

2.1 Splitting covenant into two essences

"Covenant", as a pact of chosen people and nation, is a powerful idea that has long been evoked as framing national ideologies. Likewise, the distinction of Ethiopia as a last bastion of Christianity contributes to these discourses of exceptionalism. A case can be made that the Church had remained at the cultural epicentre—the crown imbricating itself within the chosen people thesis, making "covenant" a type of manifest destiny of Ethiopia. It is in the essence that covenant has been commonly approached and envisioned from a political perspective.

However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has encountered threats to its central position throughout its long history. A novel approach to the investigation of covenant requires contextualization that is attuned to the political dynamics of pluralism and cultural hybridity developed over the longue durée. I have noted that covenant as an object of inquiry has occupied the domain of political philosophy rather than in disciplines concerned with cultural invention. The particularities of the Ethiopian case study, a region of an intense thoroughfare of various peopling due to trade, war, and migration, requires the consideration of how its Christian culture is defined by its interactions with cultural influences. Therefore this discussion attends to the intersections of these factors and realities of populated religioscape, as reflective of a continuous condition rather than a recent trend with the emergence of the nation-state.

In agreement with recent calls to de-objectify Christianity in an effort to

accurately reflect its heterogeneity, a la Deleuzian assemblage and virtual imaginings (Bialecki 2012), the proposal of this dissertation, to treat narrative or textual citations as instrumental in praxis, necessitated a study of the dialectical encounters with other religious traditions, both demographically and historically. In this chapter, I advance an analytical vocabulary that takes genres to be the products of an interplay between discourse and praxis. To do this, I drawing principally on the work of Hanks (1987), who fuses Bakhtinian sociological poetics and Bourdieuian practice theory. I engage the domain of devotional culture of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in this manner, in order to articulate a distinction between types of covenant.

This discussion surveys the historical trends, addresses the context of religious pluralism in Ethiopia, and speculates on how covenant developed as a socio-theological genre. Section 2.2 presents the story of how institutional Christianity was introduced to Dessie in the late 19th century. It is necessary to consider the broader field of "Ethiopians" within the contemporary discourse of religious pluralism, such as the modulating position of Muslims in national politics, where patronage and community aid emerges as a dominant aspect to local relations. The discussion then narrows to address the nature of religious mixture between Judaism and Orthodoxy and provides the historical evidence to support this thesis' claim: that covenant is a central concept that organizes a cultural system and inspires as range of expressive forms (as epic, as style of veneration re: *tabo*t). I return to the holistic notion of genre again in the concluding ethnographic chapter when I consider the ability of covenant to communicate social values such as commitment to protection. I then close the discussion by reviewing how Orthodox Christianity has been studied anthropologically in relation to these themes.

2.2 Dessie's Religious Demography

My original motivation for selecting Dessie as a field site was to shift focus away from church antiquity and to present new avenues for exploring how religious influences became grounded in local thinking and practice over time. However, this objective was difficult to vocalize with individuals who would consistently advise me to study historic Christian centres to the west and north. Tigray and Axum were more appropriate settings by many people's standards as these locations represented the seminal periods of the Church's development of monastic schools. The administrative district of South Wollo[8] did make significant contributions to church history, such as Hayk Estiphanos monastery established in the 13th century by St. Ewostatewos, located 60 km from Dessie near the small town called Hayk. However, in personal interactions, most attention was directed to Lalibela (North Wollo region and diocese), the site of rock-hewn churches built by the Zagwe king Lalibela in the 12th century, as a place of unparalleled architectural innovation. Throughout this project, the deep focus on antiquity to the point of exhaustion manifested into a personal bias as I saved this location for the very end of my fieldwork. The popular attention on deep historicism communicated volumes about the value of "longue durée" as inscribing an authenticity to Ethiopian Orthodox religious culture while also emphasizing that the church was seldom studied as an ethnographic project. However, consistent reappropriation of the trope of survivalism of ancient Christianity in Africa would be mobilized to great effect for the emerging tourism sector of which the Church is a significant participant.

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[8] South Wollo is a territorial division that was established with the configuration of the Ethiopia Federation, and represents the jurisdiction of the diocese. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to Wollo as a cultural area as well as when discussing the pre-Revolutionary history when this area was considered one region

Similarly, the provenance of Islam in Ethiopia is referred to the legend of al-Nagashi by defining the religion's rightful place in the region and appeals to the image of ancient religion. This narrative details the plight of the persecuted followers of Prophet Mohammed in the 7th century, who sought refuge from the Axumite king[9], effectively portraying Ethiopia as the land of the first *hijra* and progressing an "inclusive citizenship" within its territories (Feyissa 2013:42). This appeal to "time immemorial" sentiments within histories of Islam and Christianity, as this chapter will detail, has been effective for canonizing political ideologies yet these narratives mask the movements of dominance and insecurities within such management of religious pluralism. Ideologically, Islam is both friend and foe, brother and enemy. The following discussion weights these dynamics via the specific development of religious institutions in Dessie's early history, by examining how Wollo was incorporated into the Ethiopian centralization in the late 19th and early 20th century. Alliances and conversion by ruling elite are reviewed not simply as a top-down acculturation of religious identification (to be discussed further in 2.3), but as a potent means by which the role of patron (*bete kristian agelgaye*) is exemplified, a role that has been reclaimed by the current generation of church advocates. Moreover, this combination of political affiliation and cultural adoption of Orthodoxy proved a key component for the common foundation of memorializing, preserving traditions via acts of commemoration.

By selecting Dessie as a fieldwork location, I was able to directly challenge the assumptions of Orthodox antiquity in ways I would not be able to in places like Axum and Gondar. My previous work on Orthodox Christianity in a Russian city in the Far

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[9] Al-Nagashi is the Muslim name given to the Axumite (Northern Ethiopia) king in the 7th century. According to certain accounts, the king went beyond offering exiled Muslims sanctuary in his kingdom, and is reputed to have converted to Islam. Desplat and Ostebo (2013) suggest that this narrative, its subverted position in Ethiopian mainstream consciousness, parallels the essence of alterity of Ethiopian Muslim in the contemporary public sphere.

East (Antohin 2008) set up a similar experiment, from a more institutional perspective. As a city founded during the Soviet era, it lacked historical roots to the Russian Orthodox Church. It was this lack of "roots" that inspired the diocese to exercise greater efforts to pronounce the city's connection to a religious heritage, exemplified by an enormous cathedral project that demonstrated how "religion" was mobilized to give authority to a developing discourse on post-Soviet identity making. Therefore, we must pay attention to the ways that Orthodox Christianity refered to as a political ideology as much as a cosmological orientation. By contrast, Dessie was founded during an era of political centralization, when the boundaries of what we know as "Ethiopia" as a modern nation-state, began to form. As I examine more closely in Chapter Five, the Homily of St. Urael (*Dersan Urael*) serves as one textual example of the manipulation of covenant narrative to structure the provenance of local religion while legitimating the expansion of the monarchy in the 19th century.

In addition to proposing alternative premises for the positionality of EOTC as a hegemonic political authority, Dessie has provided an environment to study the social conditions of multiculturalism. The following section provides the key historical themes necessary for envisioning the propagation of the political discourse of pluralism by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), 1991- present. Moreover, I review these tenets of cultural co-existence with the knowledge that recent social tensions have called its "success" into question, though I argue that supporting tropes continue to be popularly deployed.

Narratives such as covenant or pluralism (*behere behereseb*) are grounded in their capacity to be repeated and by this collective act "reactivate lost origins—origins which only become origins which have been lost through their narrative articulation— and reassign practices to new or 'forgotten' ends." Berstein, invoking Ricoeur's

"Narrative Time" (1980), summarizes that "to prohibit grand narration is to prohibit narrative repetition, and to prohibit narrative repetition is to prohibit us from 'living' historically" (Berstein 2002:119). Covenant has often been framed as a grand narrative, by presenting an emblematic story of expectionalism. To what extent is this narrative shared, which groups of people are included in this vision, and how does this story transfigure according to conditions such as cultural contact, and consequently, do these queries challenges the essence of "covenant" as an inclusive or exclusive social principle?

2.2.1 Selecting Orthodoxy

To consider that many territories were introduced to the Orthodox Church in the mid to late 19th century not only presents an amended perspective on the deep historicism of Christianity in Ethiopia but also illustrates that the Church has not always assumed a dominant place locally. In fact, it has periodically had to negotiate its position with other religions. For an illustrative case, the introduction of the Orthodox Church in Wollega (West Ethiopia) in the mid- 19th century, was a transparent assessment of the positive and negative attributes of the Christianity's political and cultural force. According to Abba Gebre Mariam, a Catholic priest who grew up in Nekemte (the capital in the East Wollega zone), Kumsa Mororda, the leading chief of the Oromo[10] kingdom, held lively debates in his court, having Orthodox priests and newly arrived Protestant missionaries (The Swedish Evangelical Mission) each present

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[10] "Oromo" as an ethnic and cultural identification is distinguished by regional settlement (i.e. traditionally Western and North-central Ethiopia), Kushitic linguistic roots, particular models of egalitarian political organization, and cosmological order of Waq (monotheistic with animistic components).

the major tenets of their doctrines. This liberal and relatively peaceful approach to

adopting religions[11] has left a significant legacy in Nekemte today, with the Protestant

Church in particular firmly established due to their pioneering work in translating the

Bible in Afan Oromo language and in the process developing its phonological script

(Bulcha 1995). Therefore, the introduction of a religious institution was a strategic

decision, one that was measured against several options available to select from which

political leaders used to their advantage.

Most salient for this analysis of the dynamics of religious pluralism, the political

pressure to install the Orthodox Church as a central local authority could be described a

creation of hegemony, as compared to prior history of the church in highland Ethiopia,

where the patterns of offering tribute and slow and syncretistic acculturation indicated

that prior to the 19th century, there was a lack of deliberate effects of "orthodoxy" on

local life. By hegemony, I am not using a particularly Gramscian definition, but broadly

referencing how the expanding Ethiopian nation-state demanded adherence to a

religious affiliation, the Church. While Church and monarch have been intertwined

institutionally since the 4th century, this concerned only northern Ethiopia, specifically

Tigray, Gondar and Lasta (north Wollo).

Wollo during the imperial period spanned an area west of Gondar, east of

Ogaden, to the west of Somalia, north of Showa and south of Tigray. It came to be

called Wollo after the dominant tribe of this region of migrant pastoralists and sedentary

agriculturalists, as the terrain included both highland and lowland climatic features.

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[11] Legends of conversion events that were prompted by a political figure (i.e. king) typically contained an element of negotiation between indigenous customs and imported religious ideas. In the case of imperial Russia's official acceptance of Orthodox Christianity in the 10th century, the strict prohibition against alcohol in Islamic dogma was considered too contrary to cultural habits. In Christian colonial encounters among Western African societies, the notion of placing the burial remains away from the family compound to a cemetery was seen as incompatible to local religious beliefs.

During the time of expansionism in the form of tributes and alliance-making events in the mid-1860s, Wollo constituted approximately thirteen Oromo lineages. Hussein Ahmed's historical analysis (2006) offers several likely scenarios of how Islam became grounded locally. Ahmed provides evidence that Islamization occurred as early as the 16th century as a result of the success of the fifteen year reign of the military invasion by Imam Ahmad bin Ibrahim, or Ahmad Gragn (the Left-handed) as he is popularly known. However, he stresses that, in reality, geo-political barriers kept Oromo clans in Wollo distanced from the Islamic power center in Harrar (to the southeast). This permits Ahmed, corroborated with other historical accounts, to conclude that populations in Wollo began to align with the Muslim faith in the 19th century. A leader of the Warra Himano clan, Mohammed Ali, rose to prominence as he hedged shifting alliances that permitted his ruling family to maintain a degree of local sovereignty. His conversion to Christianity in 1878, a pattern several key Oromo ruling clans followed, and his marriage to the daughter of Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) signalled the changes that incorporated Wollo as part of the power centre.

The start of early modern Ethiopian history was commonly attributed to the reclaiming of the King of Kings title by Tewodros in 1855, a seminal moment that marked the stages of incremental centralization, to be continued by Yohannes IV (1872-1889) and Menelik II (1889-1913). Prior to this, the centre of Ethiopia's "dominion" was positioned in Gondar but in effect the monarch was largely a figurehead, and principalities of highland Ethiopia behaved semi-autonomously, characterized by the name of this 86 year period, *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of the Princes). Western and southern regions were unexposed to these northern political forces and the cultural influences of the Orthodox Church. Eastern parts of Ethiopia and its mercantile power base there, principally in Harar, succeeded to maintain their independence until direct

confrontations with Mahadist forces brought this region into direct contact with Yohannes' army in 1885-1889. The broader repercussions of this allegiance with the Orthodox Church were experienced at the council of Boru Meda in 1878. This council was called to settle a doctrinal fracturing that occurred over several centuries, a dispute between interpretations of Christological origins, coined as a debate between "Sost Lidet" and "Hulet Lidet" parties[12]. Incidentally, this historical moment served as an opportunity to install new edicts of the Church, which effectively propagated it as a tool of political expansionism. Boru Meda was a turning point for how Orthodox Christianity assumed a hegemonic position in South Wollo, by an ultimatum that enforced on the local populace to convert to the Orthodox faith over the following two years (Zewde 1991). Zewde's historical account contends that this command was largely symbolic, encapsulated in the anecdote of the new coverts praying to Christian God by day and Muslim God by night (1991:48). The policy of Christianization by Yohannes IV (1872-1889) was noted as especially vehement and subjugating. Forced baptisms, which caused defiant ruling elite to flee to Sudan, and the burning of important Islamic manuscripts were a few principal examples that demonstrated the aggressive marginalization of Muslims (Hussien 2001; Ficquet 2002). This was heightened in Wollo as it represented a problematically heterogeneous region to control, and thus motivated a concerted effort by the monarchy to install Christianity as the hegemonic identity. The scars of this drastic sea-change were to be reflected in a

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[12] The division stemmed from two factions within the monastic tradition, one based at Debre Libanos (Shoa) and the other in Gojjam and Tigray. The argument revolved around the mystery of Incarnation, the Unction or Three Births faction progressing a doctrine of deification of Christ though the Father from eternity, from the Virgin Mary and at the moment of incarnation by "regaining the state of grace which Adam had before the sin" (Teklehaymanot 1999:235). This was rejected by the approved Hulet lidet (two birth) position which supported the thesis that in Christ, there were only two births, from "eternity without mother and in this world of the Virgin Mary, without father", arguing the second birth is in fact "incarnation of the Word with humanity, the unction (glorification)" (255-256).

marginalized yet sharpened counter-hegemony of Muslim clerics (see Ficquet 2002),

who were to serve as pivotal figures in times when the Ethiopian monarchy was

threatened, particularly during the Italian war (1936-1941).

Figure 2.1: Portraits of the Emperor Menelik and his son-in-law, Negus Mikael, beneath depiction of Mary and Child (Medhane Alem Church, Dessie). The composition is in the style of Axumite iconography where monarchs were represented following a hierarchy of celestial to earthly domains.

The legacy of legitimating regional leaders into the Ethiopian nation-state

framework was evident in the consecrations of churches in Dessie in the early 1900s

(Figure 2.1). The city of Dessie was established as the base of Negus Mikael's

operations in 1882, and the construction of churches by imperial authorities had served as an important method of shoring up political influence (Crummey 1972, Marcus 1994, Tamrat 1972, Donham and James 1986). I observed the lasting effects of this colonization of the socio-cultural landscape during the centennial celebrations of several churches in the city during the time of fieldwork (2010-2012). These commemorative events emphasized the tradition of royal patronage of the churches, demonstrated by the superior quality of their interior and exterior structures and the stores that housed jewels and material gifts bequeathed to the church. These benchmark occasions also exposed the claimless essence that formed as a result of post-imperial reconfiguring of public institutions. In the case of Dessie, memorializing the recent past revealed the entangled condition of local history.

The position of Wollo in the hinterland and the specific characteristics of its political counter-culture that continues to exist are important factors to keep in mind, especially when considering the tensions between religious groups that play out in contemporary issue of political representation. While it would be too expansive a task to detail the specific attributes of Wollo, as a socio-geographic territory and its independent spirit, explored with more precision and historical contextualization by Ficquet (2002)[13], my involvement with Weizero Siheen Polytechnic College and their campaign to rehabilitate Dessie's historical legacy provided a context to observe the features that distinguish the city in popular perceptions. As a relative of a prominent local figure, the last governor of Wollo, Crown Prince Asfa-Wossen, I was recruited to

[13] Ficquet (2002) examines the linkages between the social trauma of aggressive Christianization in the late 19th century, the Italian strategy to promote the political status of Muslims as one means of undermining the Orthodox Church, and the impact of the famine in regional politics. I would also add that many literacy campaigns (*zemecha*) were conducted in Wollo during this, characterised by intense revolutionary rhetoric and indoctrination. This has influenced the political character of Wollo, leaving a strong independence streak, and unusually lower support for Meles Zenawi (Prime Minister from 1994-2012), as compared to other areas of the Amhara zone.

help assist as a committee member to revitalize the governor's compound, known as "Meroe Gibe." In 2011, the Amhara zonal office (the equivalent legal subdivision to a state government) had charged Weizero Siheen College with the responsibility to administer the property. College officials on the project's steering committee devised plans to convert the residence into a museum and to develop a horticultural station that would feature the bio-diversity of the grounds. The Meroe Gibe reflects patterns of social change in twentieth century Ethiopia, as I observed in similar states of ambiguous ownership of historic buildings (e.g. in Nekemte, Bishoftu. The compound in Dessie had been commandeered by the Italians to serve as their base and their occupation was to have significant effects on development of the city, such as the development of an Italian quarter (Balcha 2009).

There was an ironic twist behind the decision to bequeath the remnants of imperial legacy to Weizero Siheen College. On the one hand, it was entirely logical as Weizero Siheen was a pioneer who initiated the first college in Ethiopia, named after the mother of Empress Menen. However, the college graduates and staff produced an elite intellectual circle, many of its members who were represented in certain popular perspectives as harbingers of revolution, first via the failed coup (1966, assisted by the Crown Prince) and then successfully in 1974. In the interim years, Meroe Gibe was used as a military station for the Ethiopian Marxist-revolutionary government, referred to popularly as the Derg (lit. "The Committee"), and after the regime was overthrown in 1991, the parts of the grounds were eventually converted into a business college. This example serves as an illustrative case of the changing of hands that impacted local histories, in particular Dessie's shifting political allegiances.

How the Church responded to these radical changes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. I relate the separation of church and state to an increased self-

sufficiency that has motivated the diocese to place the responsibility of stewardship to the laity. The climate of politicized religion had seen incremental shifts over the course of the 20th century, where the political balance had steadily moved towards the centre and the dominance of the Church was viewed as a co-symbol of the national idea. This reality manifested onto the still contestable figure of Negus Mikael, lauded as an innovator who built Dessie and elevated the status of Wollo as a critical player on the national stage, but also characterized as betraying his Muslim roots. These conflicting narratives clashed in 2010 when a debacle ensued over erecting the statue of Negus Mikael. I attended the celebrations of the feast day of St. Mikael in November, this annual event also functioned as a tribute to Negus Mikael, who built this church in 1899. Several *mahaber* members re-accounted recent disruptive events as they lobbied for my assistance to repair their church's bell and to coordinate with development organizations to fund a project to install electricity from the town of Tenta (40 km from Dessie) to the church. Recently, a cast-iron statue of Negus Mikael was produced and was about to be installed in Piazza, a roundabout in the centre of Dessie city. Incidentally, the proposed location was in front of the "Al Amoudi" building, a commercial high-rise constructed by the most successful business man in Ethiopia, a high-profile Ethiopian Muslim, and one of the richest men in Africa, Sheik Al Amoudi who had roots to Wollo (his mother was originally from Woldiya, 100 km north of Dessie). According to Ato Girma, the disquiet among local residents, vocalized by detractors who he identified as Muslim, was so intense that the object was whisked away in the middle of the night in his pickup truck to Tenta, where it now stands, in order to protect it from being defaced or destroyed. A similar hysteria erupted surrounding conversations about plans to build a statue in honour of Ahmed Gragn by the local Islamic authority (*majlis*). Such news did not gain much ground locally, but

Wolloyes in Addis mentioned this rumour to me as it made local press. This imagined threat of an emerging antagonistic Muslim contingency and their resistance against the brutal imposition of Christian hegemony highlighted the heighted tension over religious authority and representation. So far, it has been established that the mobilization of political power was facilitated through the material representations of a dominant religion, such as church constructions and affiliation. This trend resonated with one of the greatest concerns in contemporary Ethiopian affairs: a fear of a Muslim majority. In my conversations with Wolloyes, Christian and Muslim alike, this issue was placated by appealing to the inter-religious and inter-ethnic mixture for which Dessie is known. In order to elucidate how religious pluralism has been managed under a universalizing rubric of "greater Ethiopia" and "ethnic federalism" I will examine the narratives of tolerance as an indigenous ethic, with specific reference to the diversity of the Wollo region.

2.2.2 The Trope of Harmony and the Notion of Polity

Wollo has often been described as harmonious, diverse, and a place of peaceful co-existence between religions and ethnicities. Partly owning to its geographic positioning in the Ethiopian hinterland, it historically was considered a semi-neutral zone, detached from the Christian centres and seat of the monarch to the west near Gondar, yet separated from the power elite in Muslim-dominated regions surrounding Harrar. Its pluralist dynamic developed organically, a consequence of its geographic positioning between several tribal groups. As I embarked upon this research project, individuals were quick to share idealistic stories of Muslim-Christian cooperation, exemplified by one friend who spoke of the practice. A few generations back, he noted,

it was not uncommon for Orthodox Christian communities to give the keys of the church to their Muslim neighbours in cases of internal disputes, thus communicating the trustworthy relations extended between the two religious communities. The following text from an environmental study of this region presents a characterization that matches popular perceptions of the region:

> "In Wello, attitudes towards religious differences are exceptionally good. They are characterized by mutual respect. Not only do Christians and Moslems live next to each other in perfect harmony and absolute peace, but even within the same family half may be Christian and half Moslem. Moreover, intermarriage between religious groups is rather common. It is a region where bigotry is hard to find, and where the only taboo is inhibition. (Wolde-Mariam, 1991: 18)

This idyllic depiction suggested that pluralism demands a degree of harmony, particularly at the micro-level (i.e. households). This essence of communal cooperation and hospitality without borders was represented in certain Oromo traditions of tempered egalitarianism, where customs of hosting and settling disputes were contained within a judicial code of resolutions through elders' tribunals. In Dessie, the evocative symbol of the grand hall of Ayiteyef (meaning "a hall of no segregation") embodies this encompassing unity of all under one roof, with huge banquets held to accommodate the broader community and local clan authorities and their territorial domains.

Considering this traditionalist ethic of tolerance in contemporary application, peaceful coexistence among co-religionists and multi-ethnic communities was most readily visible in customs of commensality. Data Dea (2006), studying the interactions of Pentecostals and Orthodox neighbours, summarizes the general tenor of relations as a need "to keep socializing across religious boundaries" (2005:13). As both Muslims and Orthodox Christians have rigidly conservative dietary proscriptions, Ficquet (2006) poses an alternative picture where religious boundaries are maintained. These

distinctions are adjusted by a personal ethic of accommodation (i.e. having cutting boards so that Muslim and/or Christian meat can be prepared), though *ch'at bet* (salons of homes that host the chewing of *chat*, as mild stimulant) in Dessie function as an ambiguous space where Christians and Muslims socialize without barriers or taboo, as this activity is not regarded or deeply enforced as heterodox behaviour. Sharing meals is a rich arena for observing the embodiment of religious identification, often manifesting in playful competitiveness. On one occasion when attending a local restaurant with a cousin and a mutual friend, as he left the table to wash his hands, my cousin quickly blessed the platter of *gored gored* (raw meat chucks) we shared and chuckled that we managed to trick him before he can "say his Muslim prayer" over the food. Among Christians and Muslims, there is a common orientation and adherence to purity rites unlike Pentecostal Christians[14] who possess fewer sympathies with such codes of conduct. In a slightly less benign episode, a Pentecostal host, holding a tea party with Orthodox Christians in attendance, confused which cakes were made with non-dairy ingredients during a period when their Orthodox guests were fasting. A person who unknowingly breaks a fast is forgiven, but the hosts chose not to disclose their error not to preserve their Orthodox kin from *knowingly* breaking the fast, but rather, they said, because customs such as fasting were in accordance to laws they [Orthodox] should not be following in the first place. They reached this conclusion, reasoning that such proscriptions are not found in the Bible. This episode highlights a common thesis on Pentecostal Christians rupture (Meyer 1998), which is salient for

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[14] The colloquial term "Pente" is not employed by Pentecostal Christians (Wengelawi Kristian) to refer to themselves or their congregations. Instead they would identify themselves as part of a local church denomination, (e.g. Mekane Yesus Church, Beza Church, Kale Hiwot, etc). Therefore, I follow this form through the dissertation unless the specific Pentecostal identity is unknown. The word "Pente" is a powerful way to discredit the Christian foundation of this religion. For example, it is common of Orthodox Christians to remark, in response to the question "Is so and so a Christian?", "No, they are Pente."

Ethiopian Pentecostals as it gives them a way out of tradition, a topic that will be explored further in Chapter 3.

Local patterns of intermarriage between Christians and Muslims are commonly evoked as evidence of mutual cooperative spirit and religious harmony. I refer to my own family relations in Dessie as an example of the imprint of Muslim heritage in genealogical terms. I initially settled into the city in September 2010 with the household of Dejazmatch Belai Ali, a military commander for Haile Sellassie I (1930-1974). This family was well-known locally because of their lineage to Lij Iyasu, who was emperor for three years and gained much notoriety on several accounts, most controversially through his rumoured allegiance as a Muslim. Apart from the significant threat this alliance posed to the image of Ethiopia as a Christian nation, Lij Iyasu's orientation to Islam should not be surprising given that his father, Negus Mikael was a Muslim before converting, as were many recent ancestors of contemporary Wolloyes. However, the grandchildren of Dejazmatch Belai Ali who lived in Dessie were all Orthodox Christians with no particular engagement with Islamic faith or its commemorative customs.
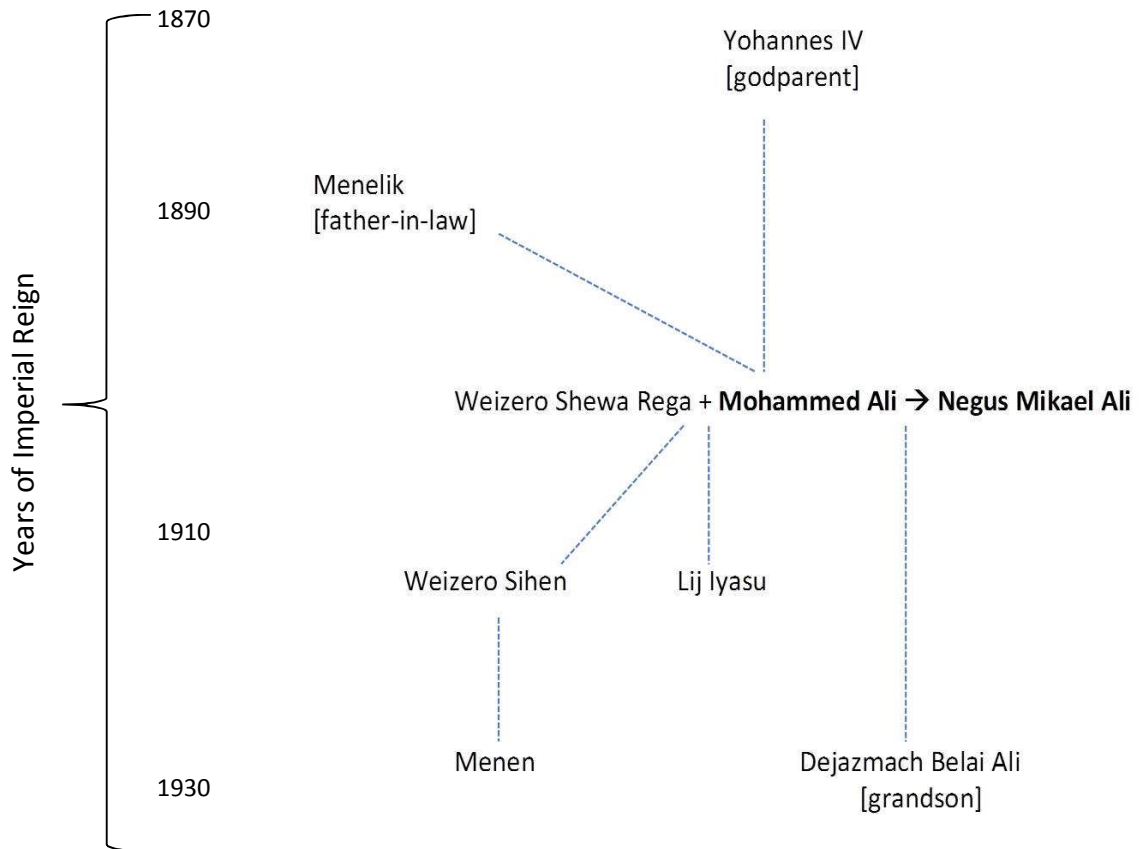
Figure 2.2 Patterns of alliance making in Wollo (1870-1930). Using Negus Mikael as the central common ancestor, the integration of offspring of prominent families remained fused by marriage. For example, Dejazmach (Commander) Belai Ali was a first cousin to Menen, who became empress in 1930 with the coronation of Haile Sellassie. This component of close kinship ties facilitated that individuals in high post remained in consistent allegiance to the royal houses. There were exceptions to this, such as the battle of Segale (1916), where Negus Mikael fought against Showan factions (region near the capital) that sought to overthrow his son, Lij Isayu, ruling monarch from 1913-1916.

 I repeatedly asked about mixed religious heritage in light of the current marginal position of Ethiopian Muslims in the public sphere and the episodes of antagonism between Muslims and Orthodox Christians (see Chapter 5). To summarize, individuals who responded to my query would say that I am posing an improper comparison. The recent violent extremism was, they said, a corruption of Islam, an aberration of exported

discourses of "Wahabism"[15] from outside Ethiopia. The trope of harmony in Wollo was alive and well, I was consistently told. All I had to do was observe Muslims celebrating Christian feast days of shared saints (e.g. St. Mikael and St. Gabriel)[16]. According to Dawit, a zonal tourism official in his early 30s, he lived his dual religious heritage by learning the Koran as a child and visiting mosques with his cousins. While I did find people who had Muslim roots to be cognizant of the features of the religion, on the whole I was very surprised how unaware Orthodox Christians were about what certain Muslim national holidays represented. This trend included my family in Dessie, which surprised me since their recent ancestor was a Muslim. For example, Id Arafa, which commemorates the mercy of Allah to the sacrifice of Ishmael (Abraham's son) and is also the concluding day of the hajj, was a day when all municipal services where closed and audible Koranic readings where streamed in certain busy streets, representing some indicators that might inspire broader mainstream awareness. Even my most integrated Orthodox informants could not provide a fuller description than to say it was a Muslim holiday or Muslim thing (*islamawe b'al, islamawe neger*). Such antipathy may be contrasted to local Muslim appreciation of Orthodox feasts. For example, one Muslim family, with whom I watched Timket (Epiphany) from their storefront, anticipated the key ritual movements and knew what was being celebrated. This revealed that the

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[15] For instance, Ethiopian Muslims returning from business abroad have been actively campaigning against local traditions of "Sufi mysticism," and have been linked to recent activism by fundamentalists who were allegedly responsible for the burning of 80 village mosques (Abbink 2008).

[16] To offer a contrastive perspective on the established tradition of shared shrines, on Ramadan 2011 in Addis, I noted a large celebration of the feast day of Tekle Haymanot which spilled into the roundabout near the entrance to Merkato. I asked Ato Tesfai, a family friend whether this level of intensity was a common occurrence (e.g. the volume of people, the high volume of the amplified liturgy), and he offered his opinion that it was particularly loud for the audience of the Muslim in worship at Anwar mosque further down the road. This reflects commentaries I received in the capital that I would not find peace as it used to be in the past because Islam has become too politicized, this view was corroborated by academics with whom I spoke as well.

legacy of a dominant and more public religion imprinted a base public consciousness of religious minorities, though Islam can scarcely be classified as a minority, both locally or nationally, as speculation that Ethiopian Muslims represents more than the cited 34% of the country. Nevertheless, in conversations with several elders, they could not understand or sympathize with why Muslims were arguing for improved political relations and cries of being "outsiders" in their own country (see Desplat and Ostebo 2013). One woman in her late 70s referred to the fact that we all, as Orthodox Christians with Wolloye roots, had Muslim forefathers, therefore a policy of intolerance was not possible, as if such an act would be going against oneself.

The trope of harmony had its limitations in my fieldwork encounters, this phenomenon behaving rather mono-directionally, as shared religious occasions failed to involve Christians in joining Muslim rites. Similarly with intermarriage, it was Muslim spouses who converted to Christianity more frequently. Within the first few months of the beginning my study in Dessie, I sensed indications that I would not be able to devote equal-time to both Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious spheres without jeopardizing my relations with the local diocese. My initial plans to work with the local Islamic council and community organizations around the mosque would be considered suspicious by my Orthodox interlocutors. This was due partly to my close affiliation with the *bete khenet* (diocese), not only officially in a research student capacity but through my connection to Wollo royal lineage. Nearly immediately upon my arrival, testimonies from parishioners from St. Gabriel Church and other churches in the surrounding neighbourhood noted agonizingly how there were now more mosques than churches and I noticed with my family members that they spoke about my research interests changed according to the audience. For instance, my cousin Senait knew about

my project more intimately than most and acted as an engaged facilitator of my field

activities in the initial stages of research. When spending time with her Muslim friends,

rather than state that I was studying the Orthodox Church exclusively, I would hear her

emphasize how I was interested in all religious creeds, Islam in particular. However,

this angle of pluralism was eliminated when she discussed my work with the church

officials, and because my research plans were reviewed by the Patriarchate's office in

the capital, my activities had institutional endorsement as well as inbuilt expectations

that the result should (ideally) support the Church in a positive light. My contacts that

had Muslim backgrounds offered positive stories on local religious relations, such as

instances of Muslims donating their organizational skills and funding for rural churches

(see St. Mikael's church and several examples of Muslims helping Christians in Chapter

5)[17]. Throughout my field schedule, I noted contrasting conditions of peaceful and

fraught coexistence; the contestation over public spheres of religions were battled

through construction projects and the politics of soundspace between Muslims,

Orthodox and Pentecostal Christians, while simultaneously, locals would still to point to

evidence of love between co-religionists. While these sentiments varied greatly from

individuals and their attentiveness to the state of religious freedom in Ethiopia, the trope

of tolerance remained functional as a future imaginary for a return to a more

harmonious past.

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[17] Given the shifting relation between Muslims and Orthodox Christians historically, this aspect of sponsorship has a dual connotation. In addition to the past traditions of Muslims being forced to pay tribute to newly Christianized kings in the 19th century, such acts of community investment were also understood as tactical manoeuvring to communicate the wealth of local Muslims. It is seen as a tactical power game. During one discussion about raising funds for the church in Tita, 10 minutes outside Dessie, a member of the parish council laments to me in passing how Pentecostal Christians do not have such problems as they receive help from abroad and Muslims have business investments to draw from, causing him to wonder aloud why Orthodox Christians are the poor ones.

The political discourse on diversity, from imperial, Derg and EPRDF, defines Ethiopia as a pluralist society[18] due to its approximately eighty distinct ethnic categories and languages (Tronvoll 2000). This condition has likely contributed to a national population whose largest ethnic group does not number more than one third of the country. Since the political restructurings after the collapse of the imperial (1974) and Marxist (1991) governments, the Ethiopian nation adopted the federalist system of ethno-linguistic nationalities[19]. This transition into a liberal pluralist system has been problematic, in some cases causing more social division than was experienced before (Feyissa & Hoehne 2008). The main critique has been that new nationality groupings are often incongruous to social realities. In the case of Wollo, the geographic area is mostly contained within the Amhara zone, though the population is composed of an Oromo majority. Kymlicka (2006), a political philosopher, suggests that ethnic or multinational federalism has served as one of the more viable option for countries like Ethiopia who have a large population of ethnic minorities (Kymlicka in Turton 2006). The country's peaceful and relatively tolerant polity (Markakis 1974) would seemingly suit such a criteria, due primarily to the government's policy that states minorities are acknowledged and allocated representation in the public sphere. The consensus among scholars of contemporary Ethiopian politics conveys a different reality. The Ethiopian government is considered in mainstream opinion to be over-represented by one ethnic class, Tigrean (7%). To promote the idea of rule by ethnic majority, such as Oromo (33%) or Amhara (30%) is also problematic since those figures hardly a more representational composition of the greater population (Ethiopian Census 2007).

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[18] The statistical breakdown of religious affiliation in Ethiopia is 43% Orthodox Christian, 34% Muslim (Sunni), 19% Protestant (Pentecostal), 3% traditional religions (based on 2007 census data).
[19] The nation was officially reconfigured as the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1994, which includes nine states as its main administrative divisions: Afar, Amhara, Binshangul Gumuz, Gambela Peoples, Harari People, Oromia, Somali, Tigray, and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (Turton 2006).

Allocating power based on ethnicity becomes a debate about ethnic representation or reclamation, and as ethnic mixture via inter-marriage[20] in Wollo has shown, such categories are difficult to rigidly employ[21]. For Marcos, a masters' student in Addis Ababa, social cohesion in the form of positive multiculturalism was a governmental policy in name only. This viewpoint was offered in a sarcastic fashion on a trip walking down a busy street in the capital. A large billboard near the university campus trumpeted the diversity of Ethiopia in a kaleidoscope display of faces (defined by face ornamentations and traditional hairstyles). Designed to advance a positive statement on ethnic pluralism, Marcos rolled his eyes, and muttered "propaganda," using the English word, and vocalized the transparent political mobilization of EPRDF's mantra of pluralism (*behere behereseb*), effectively more divisive in marking difference than a unifying political philosophy. The inauguration of Dessie's St. Gabriel church in 2011, when a line of dignitaries and high clerics from the major religions were represented, from this standpoint of political consciousness, inter-religious harmony was projected for maximum public visibility.

Constitutionally, the Ethiopian Federation is more stringently secular than Russia or Greece, who both have clauses for national religions. In Ethiopian Parliament, Muslim, Orthodox and Protestant authorities each have an appointed

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[20] Within studies of nationalism, intermarriage is often theorized as a counteragent to intolerant leanings of nationalist ideologies, yet also understood as highly problematic for maintaining ethnic nationhoods (i.e. could be viewed as "anti-nationalist" to intermarry) or as a tool to weaken minority ethnicities (Hastings 1997). This will be a dynamic angle of research within this project, not only because intermarriage has often been used as a strategy of alliance building (Sereke-Brhan 2002) and for land acquisition.

[21] There is a wide variety of literature that discusses ethnic tensions in Ethiopia over the last quarter century (Baxter 1994, Benti 2007, Gnamo 2002, James et al. 2002, Freeman and Pankhurst 2002, Vaughan 2003). Considering how variable regional and ethnic identifiers can be in this context, my approach has been careful to note how these regional differences, however slight, are formalized, paying attention to the instances when local demands of boundary enforcement are articulated (Barth 1969, Verdery 1994).

representative position in place. Article 27 of the Ethiopian constitution affirms the freedom of religion, conscience and thought without any specified religion, as long as it does not impinge on secular nature of the state. In the case of Russia, it is defined in its constitution as a plural nation, this principle transferring into the religious context by a policy that recognizes four historically traditional religions (i.e. Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism). It is this recognition of multiple identifications that the state authorities use to counter charges from minority groups that protest the favouritism extended toward the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the reality is that Orthodox Christianity is used for ideological purposes (Oushakine 2000), specifically as a symbol of recalling civilizational greatness (i.e. 'Holy Rus'). The Russian Orthodox Church is appropriated as a national symbol, whereas in Ethiopia, using the Orthodox Church as a marker of encompassing common culture is generally avoided. In a symmetrical anecdote that illustrates this theme, a slight controversy began when "Yes" bottled water company displayed a women dressed carrying a water jug on her back, with a small cross visible on her forehead, a typical tattoo ornamentation in the northern parts of Ethiopia. Not long after, certain public opinion formed, vocalized on the radio, that this was imposing Christian, Amhara oppression, causing this cross to be removed. However, the marketing of bottled water in Russia, as I witnessed in 2007, unabashedly had church monasteries emblazoned in the background, suggesting that the mobilization of the Church as a national symbol was deemed politically acceptable to a majority of the population.

Crummey (1980) speaks briefly about an Abyssinian (*habasha*) consciousness that has served as the enduring rationale for ethnic pluralism. He makes a point of delineating this shared culture to a specific geographic and ethnic concentration

including parts of Wollo and notes characterizations such as *ityoppyawi* (Ethiopian) used in local speech by Amhara and Tigreans. Such ideas resonate with Levine's *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (2000[1974]). In his preface to the 2nd edition, Levine highlighted the recursive movement of his thesis since its original formulation at the brink of the Ethiopian revolution. In this span of time, what was deemed hubristic in light of the momentary collapse of a harmonious polity depicted in his seminal work, experienced a critical re-evaluation during the conceiving of a new political state in 1991. Levine, in the following statement, proposes the relevance of Ethiopian pluralism in contemporary politics:

> …the image of Amhara ethnic oppression overlooks the fact of Ethiopia as a historic multiethnic society, united by ties of intermarriage, trade, migration, multi-ethnic religions, ceremonies, and pilgrimages—a major lesson of *Greater Ethiopia*. It must be readily acknowledged that Ethiopia's peoples are enormously more similar and historically connected than are the different nationalities that composed the Soviet Union….Many Ethiopians are aware of this. That is why Ethiopians from so many ethnic backgrounds have found it galling to hear their nation's political discourse pre-empted by talk of ethnic liberationism. They cherish the historic reality of Ethiopia as a genuinely multiethnic society. They fear the mobilization of ethnic hatreds that made a corpse of Yugoslavia and killed thousands in the former Soviet republics like Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan, and, closer to home, in Rwanda. They dream of a future where Ethiopia's transformation to a modern, pluralistic democracy can be completed. (2000[1974]: xx)

Despite the appeal of this encompassing civilizational concept, it is a difficult task to extend to the greater populace of the federation, many of whom were only incorporated into a political framework a century prior. This factor is further evidenced in the southern regions of Ethiopia, where Protestant missionary impacts on social and economic livelihoods complicate the picture of a unifying Orthodox national idea spreading into the country's territories. The politics involved in the display of the national and federal state flags demonstrate both the effectiveness and failure of glorifying difference as a means to shape a healthy polity. While adopting regional

state flags were a fairly benign affair, the use of the national federal flag caused some disgruntled reactions from Orthodox parishioners I knew. In 2012, a regulation required churches to switch their tricolour banners of green, gold and red, to the current official flag, nearly identical save for the central star-shape that emblemized the unity of nations. Reactions to this mandate were not positive, viewed as a corruption of the integrity of a national symbol that was borne from the extended alliance between church and state up to 1974. Ato Tesfai stated outright that this amendment sullies the image of the Conquering Lion of Judah that was previously featured and scoffed at the reappropriation of this symbol in Rastafarian paraphernalia, especially noticeable in mainstream youth culture (i.e. minicabs that had both the EPRDF flag and a sticker of the imperial stamp). Specific individuals with differing political and historical reference points observed such current trends as a sign of confused times. It is therefore fair to suggest that far from a cohesive national idea of *ityoppyawinit*, national symbols and global doctrines of Pan-Africanism (i.e. Ethiopia as a bastion of African sovereignty and political might) and multiculturalism were refashioned with mixed results among certain sub-groups.

On a more discursive level, the language of unity was also evident in the proliferation of interfaith dialoguing initiatives, promoted by the significantly sized NGO and diplomatic sector in Ethiopia. In 2011, I sat in on a workshop, under a large project entitled "Harnessing Diversity for Sustainable Development," sponsored by UNESCO and UNDP, among others. Based on my communication with its organizers, the objective was to train religious leaders (eighty participants were involved) to then foster community events at their local *kebeles* (neighbourhood associations) to promote cooperation and understanding among the diversity of religions present. This course was particularly timely as that same year, a massive destruction of over sixty

Evangelical churches occurred, reported by media as an attack by members of a radical Islamic group. Purported to be instigated by the burning of the Koran in the city near Jimma (west-central Ethiopia), this pivotal event signalled for the government authorities and community leaders the increased demand for interfaith dialogues. Based on a review of the manual devised for this training course, the material referenced religions from different global contexts (as diverse as Norway and India) as well as establishing the legacy of Abrahamic faiths in the Middle East, largely to emphasize the potential of various spiritual orientations to coexist peacefully. The manual's content was presented in textbook-like fashion (e.g. Biblical quotes highlighting the charity of Christ, the importance of the Prophet's teaching for Islam, the Trinity concept for Orthodox perspective). There were rare instances where the text was Ethiopia-specific apart from a short reference to the utility of "a common value" to keeping the unity of past generations who lived together in cooperative spirit. While the event was prepared for a local organization, the material was modelled on generic information that fit into programmatic articulations of ameliorating conflicts as part of a global dilemma of conflict.

Given the prevalence of *mahabers* (lay associations) and the communal ethic it promotes, it is surprising that these recent development initiatives have not harnessed already present "grassroots" mechanisms of organization and cooperation. The phenomenon of *iddir* (funerary organization) a secular form of *mahaber*, provides further examples of how non-denominational membership (i.e. along neighbour residency rather than religious affiliation) can be fostered around mutual-aid, as Pankhurst's historical survey (2007) on this metropolitan, 20th century social institution has shown. Drawing from cross-cultural examples of urban religion, Baumann's

ethnography of Southall (1996), concerned with multicultural initiatives designed to accommodate and democratically structure ethnic minorities, re-examines several key concepts that apply in the Ethiopian context. Baumann evaluates five main community groupings in this district of London, studying the ways people agree with, reject and/or manipulate ideologies that define the boundaries of their multicultural "community." In this context, narratives of encompassment are one strategy of how diversity is ordered, such as the example of a young Hindu asserting that Jesus is a "reincarnation of Brahma" (Baumann 1996:185). Another strategy for Southall residents that follows the established contemporary models of multiculturalist discourse is a belief in a unity in difference, the metaphor of "many lamps, one light." In Ethiopia, ethnic diversity is a prized quality in certain domains, showcased in the florescence of VCDs (e.g. music videos) on sales in street stalls and blocks of programming on Ethiopian Television[22], which feature musical stylings from each major ethnicity. As each of these cultural definitions became distinguished performatively, and produced a reification of traits that transformed into an exercise in essentialism, casually illustrated in a game of "Guess the Ethnicity?" that was commonplace around TV viewing times. Based on language, accent, traditional dress, beat of music, and dance movements, viewers were able to discern in seconds which ethnicity the performance was supposed to represent. The awareness of cultural diversity in artistic form similarly manifested in how youth were familiar with these identifying character traits, as demonstrated in exhibitions of cultural shows at school assemblies or celebrations.

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[22] Television programming is broadcast in five languages. In my immediate circle, only Tigrinya news hour elicited attention, while news programs in other languages were treated as background noise. This anecdote illustrates a broader point regarding the advantages of pluralism as it addressed in a "pick and choose" manner, rather than an encompassing coherence of cultural differences.

Considering these key characteristics of pluralism (*behere behereseb*) as they have played out in the 20th century, paradigms that communicate the intricacies of social cohesion are appealing and useful political tools. The work of Mohammed Girma (2012) represents a fresh perspective for how the concept of covenant is mobilized into persuasive political ideologies with surprisingly alternative versions, as the case studies of apartheid in South Africa and Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia demonstrate. Girma's philosophical treatise on the hermeneutics of covenant narrows in on the paradox of chosen people narrative, which is ultimately a divisive ideology and in his assessment used irresponsibility. "Responsibility" is framed in the covenant idiom as "an interpretative project that takes God's invitation for a responsible relationship and commitment as a conceptual matrix to understand the rich vein of created reality" (2013:190).[23] This suits broader a consensus of literature on covenant in political philosophy (Smith 2003, Walzer 1985) that posits covenant as a mutually agreed-upon relationship, granted only upon willingness of both parties. This dissertation does not pursue such an ethical agenda, nor does it position its nucleus in political discourse. Within the parameters of this ethnographic study, I cannot argue that covenant is a unifying ideology for all Ethiopians ipso facto, given the trajectories of religious integration I have outlined. Despite the disciplinary differences, Girma's discussion of diversity as an intrinsic yet disabled component of the covenant concept is powerfully argued and is salient for this discussion of effectively managing religious pluralism, and will be explored further in Chapter 5.

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[23] Girma's (2013) positions on created reality and a relational God rejects the nexus of legitimacy as bound to claim of children of God. I am in agreement with Girma that the Kebre Negest is a problematic historical source, yet I interpret its development as national canon as part of a feature of cultural innovation, as it composes a broad corpus of envisioning human/divine manifestation and becoming. As a national epic, I did not find it cited in everyday articulations by members of the Church. It is less crucial if its contents can be confirmed, as most scholars who approach this opus cite it with caution.

So far, I have outlined how covenant can be constituted and constituting as a political discourse, which I have deduced from a rich history of multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence in Ethiopia. From a scholastic standpoint, to complicate the trope of harmonious pluralism corresponds with what Fabian (1985) has identified as a disciplinary issue in the social and political sciences, that is, as tension of etic prejudices to perpetuate "positive negativity" of pluralism that "affirms order and harmony from a point superior to unresolved strife between a multiplicity of groups, classes and nations" (1985:140). However, I argue that there is an alternative application of covenant, as a socio-theological genre which is elaborated in contemporary practice. I propose that this argument can be supported by an attentive reading of the history of cultural contact between religions, primarily Judaism and Orthodoxy. I delimit popular assumptions of the absorption of Judaism into Christianity in Ethiopia, most strongly mobilized by Ullendorff (1968), and offer a fresh approach that contextualizes the development of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition in relation to historical trajectories. For example, syncretism as an analytical approach has been in practice for some time, as I will briefly illustrate by a discussion on traditional faiths that indicate that cultural responses to cultural changes is nothing new. Emphasizing this thematic recurrence for an exceptionally pluralistic country will assist to treat the recent growth of Protestantism in its relative scale. The approximate geographic borders of what is recognized as Ethiopia today has maintained a condition of religious intermingling, fluid migration from outside the continent, and until the centralization of its state in the 19th century, has remained isolated from neighbouring countries. For the aims of the anthropology of Christianity and its comparative potential, these details are crucial components to keep in mind when studying social response to cultural change. Therefore, to further the work on new Christianities in African context, I outline a few suggestions for defining the

qualities of "Abrahamic faiths" and "tradition" as it has developed in Orthodox theology.

2.3 Historical Development of the Covenant Genre

Before detailing the key developments of how covenant emerged as a socio-theological genre, it is necessary to preface this discussion by briefly attending to the variations of syncretism in the Ethiopian religious landscape. This enables delineating the particular patterning of how Judaic ideas and customs merged with Ethiopian Orthodox worship. The topic of "traditional religions" in Ethiopia is vast and contingent to specific ethnic groups and regional domains. In colloquial speech, these cosmological sensibilities are referred to by the name of the beliefs and customs (i.e. Oromo *haymanot* or *bahelawi haymanot* (traditional religion), rather than to a composite "belief system." This is partly because participation in these rites is not viewed in opposition to Christianity or Islam but part of one's cultural background. This flexibility of cosmological perspectives I noticed with particular strength with individuals from Wollega (Western Ethiopia), owing to factors such as a late introduction to Christianity (see 2.2.1) and an ethnically homogenous population that was predominantly Oromo. The Tourism and Culture chairman in Nekemte (the regional capital), Ato Amsalu, discussed the genealogy of Oromo lineages, and he spoke about the uniting force of a common ancestral faith, Waq. Named after the wild fig tree endemic to the region, Waq refers to a specific ritual of prayer and offering to these trees (e.g. milk, butter and other valued consumables), understood as sacred and possessing intercessory force with the sky-God (*Atete*). In Dessie, individuals spoke of offering rites to *Atete*, an intensive event where animals were slaughtered and participants (elders and occasionally priests, according to one informant's knowledge)

engaged in a purification period of three days at the start of the new year, in September. Such instances of traditional religions intersecting within over-arching cosmologies such as "organized religions" has been evaluated as adaptations to effectively bridge several cosmological perspectives that are present (Aspen 1994, Gascon and Hirsch 1992, Tadesse 2005)[24]. For a majority of individuals living in Dessie, they oriented to celebrations such as *Arecha* (festivities in gratitude of a plentiful harvest) through broadcasts on Ethiopian television that documented frenzied dousing and submerging on the shores of Lake Bishoftu (30 km outside Addis), and ritual practitioners anointing clusters of celebrants with water-drenched bundles of reeds. The Catholic sisters with whom I watched this televised programming behaved mildly shocked at these proceedings, in a parallel way that they would remark about news stories about tribal peoples in the South, such as the Hamer, followed by a comment or two about its primitive nature, yet in the case of Arecha, a curiosity was maintained to continue watching. In its mainstream position, Oromo traditions represented the gray area of relevance, as these activities were seen as neither Christian nor Muslim and opened up possibilities for individuals to demonstrate an affinity without fear that this would signal heterodoxy.

It is important to emphasize further the tendency of Orthodox Christianity to absorb and incorporate pre-existing cultural concepts, a theme that has studied

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[24] A necessary distinction to underscore how offering customs, based with traditional religions, are seen as supplemental rather than supplanting Christian or Muslim identity. When speaking about Waq, Kejela (from Wollega and Orthodox) describes it as *bahelawi imnet* (traditional faith) rather than religion and emphasized its cultural grounding. He described how he continued the practice of his ancestors of going to 11 mountains in the area to slaughter sheep, offer prayers, pray for blessings and recall the ancestors at each mountain. He noted these activities required total physiological cleansing (i.e. abstaining from intercourse, no lighting of matches). Kejela stated that God understands why we have to do this, and rationalized that his recent misfortunes stem from the fact that he discontinued this tradition temporarily.

consistently across geographic contexts. In Ethiopia, traditional ceremonies, particularly at the turn of the calendrical year (end of August to early October), affirming a reputation of Orthodoxy as a permissive cosmology. An ethnographic study such as Aspen's on spirit worlding of Amhara in Genet (Shoa) provides such a context where death of wild animals are given mortuary rites of forty days remembrance (*arba*), with clergy serving as an integral link in fusing Christian traditions with animist praxis. Orthodoxy is the "base coat" on top of which various rituals and symbols are joined and slotted in as a way to reconcile cultural contact. In light of how various cosmological influences coordinate in contemporary social applications, how should claims of the "Hebraic" qualities of Orthodoxy be evaluated critically? Such a classification rehearses many perennial questions posed regarding why Ethiopian Orthodox Christians follow certain Judaic customs, such as circumcision *before* Baptism, and the observance of both Saturday and Sunday as holy days. Both are institutional acts of keeping God's law, and incidentally, both are types of covenant. Yet for many Ethiopians, Orthodoxy is not especially Jewish (*ehudoch*), and this fact is demonstrated by how Jews and Orthodox Christians are strictly understood as separate identity groups. I will show that these customs, based on how they have developed in Orthodox doctrine and how the theology considers Old and New Testament as sources of keeping God's Law, as reflecting the religion's approach to tradition. I also propose the category of Abrahamic as more appropriate given how this integrated approach to religious development in cultural framework has not been exclusively Judaic/Hebraic, but rather a shared quality in common with several world religious traditions, such as the Eastern Church and Islam.

During periods of fieldwork that I spent in Addis Ababa, I selected my local church at Medhane Alem, near Siddist Kilo, which possesses a large Jewish (Bete

Israel) [25] population of about fifteen to twenty thousand (Seeman 2009:2). I was told by Qes Yonas that here are instances where Bet Israel will attend the Christian liturgy, but only on Saturdays, up to the point until the proclamation of the Gospels. Still, this zone of cosmological overlap did not denote shared affiliation as there were two local synagogues exclusively for Ethiopian Jews, with no evidence of inter-religious observance. However, the fusion of Judaism into Orthodoxy is often emphasized in popular scholarship, and in once instance inspired historian Tibebu (1995) to coin the phrase "tabot Christianity." In an especially emphatic proclamation of the intermingling of Judaism and Orthodox Chrsitianity, Tibebu states:

> The cultural universe of Ethiopia's tabot Christianity is one of indissoluble linkage between Judaism and Christianity in which a church is identified more by the tabot inside it than by the Cross sign on the roof top of its building. In Ethiopia, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity is so obliterated that when people say Christianity they might as well have Judaism in mind, or vice versa. It was in this sense that Walter Plowden made the remark about "The strong odour of Judaism clinging to the nation [Ethiopia] and its customs (1972, p53). (Tibebu 1995:7)

These noted attributes have composed what has been accepted as the historical basis for Ethiopian Christianity's connection to Judaism. I am not equipped to evaluate or recount the various working theses on the presence of Judaism in Ethiopia, an enormous scholarly field. However, I focus on several key pieces of evidence of its Hebraic essence, the veneration of the *tabot* and the style of liturgical chant, in order to propose that the particularities of their genesis and elaboration permit an analytical

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[25] Communities of Bet Israel have historically been a degraded social class (see Freeman and Pankhurst 2003). A local writer and activist based in the Kechene Medhane Alem neighbourhood in Addis was researching bet Israel history and spoke of forced conversion of Ethiopian Jews (specifically in the Shoa region), which caused them to worship in hiding in secret synagogues. The identity of "Ethiopian Jews" extends into several categories, made more ambiguous as a result of the campaigns of repatriation to Israel in the 1980s which contested the authenticity of their religious membership. These distinctions are outside the scope of this study, but research is numerous on Feres Mura, those forcibly converted to Orthodox Christianity, and Qemant, a further traditionalist form of Jewish and animist cosmologies, attributed to Agaw populations in Wollo, Gondar and Tigray.

approach that considers these as parts of a genre, in particular the "the stylistics of genre" combining the form and content of the social life of discourse (Bakhtin 1981). In the following passages, I explore the historical features of religious change that promotes this significant restructuring of covenant in Ethiopian studies. Tracing covenant as a genre in this fashion permits redirecting the focus from syncretic remnants, the classic explanation of Judaism in Ethiopia, towards an approach of this cultural concept as a continuous elaboration of narrative refractions, which reflect the interaction of Orthodox Christianity with multiple religions over the course of its history.

Tabot as an artefact of a well-deployed grand narrative of "chosen people" and a legend that is chronicled in the Kebre Negest (Figure 1.3), which scholars have categorized as a national epic akin to Arthurian legends, connecting the "glorification of Ethiopia through its association with the Ark of the Covenant, this showing Ethiopians that their country was chosen by God to be the new home of the Ark and that they are God's chosen people (Budge in Lee 2011:71). The chronicle was composed to legitimate divinely mandated dominion, by proving genetic relatedness to the Solomonic line[26]. The Kebre Negest served as a canonical text of the national idea, making sure to delineate its Christian imperial objective rather than a promotion of Judaic theology (i.e. certain passages are explicitly anti-Semitic). Somewhat misleadingly, the consistency of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity to the religion and civil culture of early Judea gives the impression of the foundational quality that has helped inspire theories about the religion's Hebraic flavour, most principally by Ullendorff. The following excerpt from his classic study, Ethiopia and the Bible

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[26] The work (circa 14th century) was compiled during major political restructuring, referred to as the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty , which claimed ancestral links to Moabite, Philistines, Egyptians, Persians, Babylonians, Byzantines (Lee 2011), a line of 225 monarchs of rulers from the reign of Menelik I (son of Sheba and Solomon) to Haile Sellassie in 1974.

(1968), emphasizes the ingrained aspects of the chosen people narrative that transposes a diffusionist reasoning of Judaism integration into Orthodox Christianity:

> The story of the Queen of Sheba...in all its manifold ramifications, has been given rise to, or possibly provided the *ex post facto* rationale of such deeply rooted traditions as the Aaronite origin of the Axumite clergy, the reference to Ethiopians as däqiqä əsra'el[27], and the consciousness of having inherited from Israel the legitimate claim to be regarded as the chosen people of God. It stands to reason that these and other traditions, have been an integral part of the Abyssinian national heritage before the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century. For it seems difficult to imagine that a people recently converted to Christianity (not by a Christian Jew but by a Syrian missionary Frumentius) should *thereafter* have begun to boast of Jewish descent and to insist on Hebraic customs and institutions. (1968:24-25)

Arguing for slow diffusionism, Ullendorff posited that this occurred progressively and linearly from Judaism to Christianity. He conceived of this hypothesis based on the westward migration of Sabean tribes, reputed to be Jewish, in the first century (Ullendorff in Kaplan 1992), which corresponded to political and economic movements in the Horn of Africa. This region was a major thoroughfare of peopling due to the Red Sea trade routes that propelled the dominance of the Axumite kingdom from the 3rd to 10th century. However, the territory was defined as a Christian empire by several principal benchmarks; the conversion of monarch Ezana in 330 AD, the consecration of the first bishop Frumentius two decades later and the proliferation of monastic centres in the fifth century by the nine saints. Furthermore, what Ullendorff identified as Hebraic customs and institutions are not "remnants," but an introduction in the 15th century to stamp out paganism by firmly installing Orthodox Christianity of a top-down syncretism (Meyer in Shaw and Stewart 1991:19).

Gamst (2007) has deflated this popular thesis of remnants of Judaism and proposed that parallels in socio-cultural practices such as circumcision and dietary laws (e.g. prohibitions on swine) are not uncommon to many neighbouring African societies,

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[27] Literally "little" or "minute," signifying the children of Israel.

Douglas' (1984) scholarship on purification rites and pollution taboos being the most classic example. Similarly, the stress on Old Testament textuality is not unique to Ethiopian Orthodoxy and can be found among Coptic and Syrian Christianities and Eastern Christianity more broadly (McGuckin 2010). For example, the art of liturgical chant, modelled on the hymnography of the Levites, a particular order of Jewish clerics, is often cited as clear evidence of the Church preserving its supposed Jewish roots. This assumption glosses over conditions in which liturgical chant developed, in the 7th century, centuries after any migration of alleged Jewish tribes and ignore also the content of this liturgical art. The hymnal forms are stylistically inspired by Jewish songs of David (*Mizmur Dawit* or Psalms) but its contents extol Scriptural messages from the New Testament, these hymns reaching their zenith of liturgical significance during Easter season, the Hebraic aesthetic is appropriated towards a Christian doctrinal message (Chapter 4).

Brakmann (in Gamst 2007) proposes these amendments to worship were elements introduced or re-learned rather than a continuation of Jewish worship that was locally entrenched. King Za'ra Yacob was highly instrumental in reforming the church and campaigning to further Christianize to outlining peasant classes in the monarch's and nobility's domains (northern principalities) address the pervasive qualities of folk customs and beliefs. Such reforms included instituting the observance of Saturday as a holy day, as well as the custom of *senbete*, a type of lay association (see Kaplan 1992 and Haile 1988, see Chapter 6). The liturgical calendar was further elaborated, having direct consequences on social-cultural patterns of saint veneration.[28] Unlike syncretism

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[28] This can be defined in popular articulations as the "forty-four *tabots*", an iconic number modelled after the churches of Gondar (north-western Ethiopia). The Synaxarium (*Meshafa Senkesar*) commemorates holy personnages and events of Christian history in the course of the liturgical year.

of Arecha with contemporary "organized religion," a fluid negotiation of local cultural values and cosmological ideas over a gradual period of time, these "Hebraic additions" to Christianity occurred as a calibrated merging through edict, nearly as engineered as contemporary discourse of pluralism and interfaith dialoguing. This historical moment demonstrates a management of religious pluralism in the political sense. It is dually fascinating, given the recent trends to install hegemony via a sharpening of differences between co-religionists, between Catholics and Orthodox interactions, as well as Protestant polemics in the turn of the 19th century. Stirrat (1994) has noted the historic fluctuations of phenomenon branded as cultural or religious in Sinhalese context, using the example of "Buddhist" elements in the Catholic Church (e.g. white dress, drumming). These features were adjusted according to the political climate that dictated muting or amplifying aspects that might engender linkages for broader social acceptance (1994:10). In surprising fashion, the Ethiopian context in the 15th century initiated the EOTC to blend Jewish traditions to be a stronger Christian mission church.

It is during this period in the 15th century that the veneration of the tabot was introduced. The ideology of covenant reached its integration into practice as reforms stipulated that each church required to possess a *tabot* as mandated in a canon such as the *Fetha Negest* (Law of the Kings). Considering how these material covenants are dedicated primarily to a Christian saint, it is surprising that scholarship has not examined the simultaneous Christian and Judaic theological attributes as they coalesce in this particular institutionalized practice. Kur and Nosnitsin (2007) advance a plausible thesis, that the flourishing of this form of covenant as a performative rite closely aligned with features of a feudal society at the time, effectively mirroring

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According to Fritsch (2000), only about 8-10 feast days find popular adherence on a monthly basis. See Appendix A for liturgical calendar and seasons.

patron-vassal dynamics (see Tamrat 1984), a prototypical interpretation of intercessory human-divine bonds. This deduction corresponds to an established formula of covenant (*kidan*), defined as a solemn promise given by Jesus Christ at the end of a saint's life. Kur and Nosnitsin overlook how *kidan* is commemorated alongside a particular tradition of veneration. Their summary discussion does not incorporate the praxis of *tabot* as part of its literary form, the hagiography (*gedl*), in particular the liturgical component of reading the acts of the saints during their feast day or the processional movements that guide the *tabot* outside its sanctuary. Therefore, it these gaps in the scholarship that have inspired my analytical outlook to include how a tabot represents one significant instance of Orthodox Christian innovation, through its that takes the "story" of covenant and "encodes" it into practice; from legend, to materiality of the *tabot*, to performative realities of liturgical rites, to interpersonal approach of bonded relationships as the subsequent chapters will present.

Hanks (1987) observed a similar phenomenon for 16th century Maya documents and the multiple discourses contained within them (i.e. quoted speech, descriptive narrative, testimonial and persuasive rhetoric). This analytical approach examines how "works are also oriented toward the action contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and received" (671). As I have profiled here, the dominant representation of covenant in textual forms has been disconnected from long-standing devotional actions that have served as constituting elements to this socio-theological idea. This insight allows interpreting participants in traditions as not mirroring ideology but "adopting them to concrete social circumstances" (1987:671).

Given the nature of religious contact as it has been negotiated by Orthodox tradition in Ethiopia, the question remains how should Christianity be defined or

delimited in light of a more populated field such as the increased presence of

Pentecostal Christianity? The character of worship and its performative, artistic and

materialist contributions is what distinguishes the Orthodox church from Pentecostal

Christianity, who eschew ceremonialism and discourse such as "tabot Christianity."

Despite my encounters with Pentecostal Christians who emphasized their source of

Tradition as defined by the New Testament exclusively, and therefore by the new

covenant of Christ (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of these typologies), the

relationship between Pentecostal Christianity and Zionism is apparent, if not somewhat

fringe, in its cultural significance as I witnessed from several churches in Kechene

neighbourhood (Addis). The Pentecostal approach is scholastic and literary which has

served as one aspect that has attracted converts.

The Catholic Church has played a significant role in Ethiopia and has

successfully arbitrated ecumenical initiatives. The legacy of Catholicism is a pertinent

topic for this discussion of the management of religious pluralism because it has up

until recently, served as a cautionary tale of the dangers of Western missionaries.[29] In

my experience, the Catholic Church is less pointed and judgemental about canonical

differences. Such differences was once reflected around the kitchen table by Sister

Tsehaitu, the huead nun, who illustrated the slight differences in worship and expression

by picking up a glass of water, drinking from it with her right hand and then switched

and sipped from it her left. "It's still the same water," she said. Mass was said in Ge'ez

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[29] Tension reached further back to the 16th century and replays a similar vacillating tenor between interreligious brotherhood and antagonism, a narrative directed towards Ethiopian Muslims. The closest Ethiopia has ever reached a missionary encounter was in the 16th century with Portuguese fleet of civil advisers, providing military assistance against the Gragn invasion, managed to successfully convert King Susenyos (1607-1632), which initiate massive re-baptisms campaigns of Orthodox Christians. This precipitated a major civil war and severe ruptures with the ecclesiastical authorities, with the eventual execution of the monarch, replaced with his son, Fasilidas (1632-1667), who instituted stringent codification of Orthodox hegemony and Catholic presence was expelled until the 19th century.

and I learnt *kidase* (liturgy) in this community. Elements such as the *tabot* and excessive

adherence to their liturgical calendar do not exist. The icon praxis had some interested

cross-over as I observed with certain older congregants at Dessie's Kidane Meheret

Catholic church. For instance, certain individuals would engage in intense genuflection

in front of icons inside the church as well as kissing the sides of the images in a manner

similar to Orthodox ceremonial orientation, bypassing the candle stands that are

positioned and that mark a physical barrier between supplicant and the holy person they

are addressing. Therefore stylistics in the liturgical domain, along with a "mutual love"

of Mary, is what keeps these two religions at an amicable distance.

As the category of Christianity becomes more expansive in Ethiopia, the theme

of "tradition" as a theologically discursive term will require further elucidation. In

relation to other religions that adhere to different models of scholasticism, "tradition", a

category under which I include traditional schools of Orthodox church arts (i.e. from

liturgical chant (*aqwaqwam*) to poetry (*qene*), "is silence" (Lossky1974:7). The

historical movements of "covenant" reflects what The description of "tradition" by

Russian theologian Fr. Vladimir Lossky illuminates this discussion of "covenant" as a

recurring concept :

> The several examples of these traditions offered by St. Basil all relate to the
> sacramental and liturgical life of the Church (sign of the Cross, baptismal rites,
> blessing of oil, eucharistic epiclesis, the custom of turning towards the east during
> prayer and that of remaining standing on Sunday and during the period of
> Pentecost etc.) If these "unwritten customs" (*ta agrapha tôn ethôn*), these
> "mysteries of the Church" (*agrapha tês Ekklesias mystêria*), so numerous that one
> could not expound them in the course of a whole day are necessary for
> understanding the truth of the Scripture (and in general the true meaning of all
> "preaching"), it is clear that the secret traditions point to the "mysterial character"
> of Christian knowledge. (Lossky 1974:5)

Defining "tradition" in these terms, the comments of Ato Teferi, a church administrator,

becomes properly contextualized in a theology that approaches the Abrahamic faith

holistically. Ato Teferi defined the principal distinguishing feature of the EOTC as one of the few Christian churches globally to effectively bridge Old and New Testament. Chapter Two investigates this perspective with more depth, positioning the notion that "Tradition is the *unique mode* of receiving it [Truth]" (Lossky 1972:8, his emphasis), demonstrated in feast day contexts like Timqet as well as during regular liturgical space/time.

I retain these perspectives on truth and tradition as a theological discourse in my subsequent examinations of archetypal activities of devotion by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. I present various scenarios where traditionalism is maintained in contemporary forms of sociality and governmentality. As an example, I refer to the strategy of conflict resolution that involves *shemagale*, a form of elders' council that is active at the local and national level. As one legal clerk explained to me, the *shemageles* are honest Christians and know the laws of the Old Testament, which he reasoned further, no amount of legal training can teach this and instead must be lived.[30] This domain serves as one possibility for observing how "religion" can illuminate on how societies establish and make truths, a query that Lambek (2012) notes has thus far been analytically arranged as a tension between religion vs. secularism, which disregards the legal perspective in truth-making. Lambek inquires further, saying, "my question is less how law circumscribes or competes with religion than with how we might analyze the differences between the ways in which religion and law respectively construct their truths (Lambek 2012: par. 30)." As I have outlined that unlike many Western Christian

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[30] Elders usually propose use resolutions and involve priests to preside over such gatherings. Peace talks are treated as legitimate recourse for settling serious disputes for courts and law enforcement, divisions of government that are overwhelmed and understaffed. The decisions of *shemagele* arbitration are not always abided by but are weighed as supporting evidence in legal decision or police matters. Even in "peace talks" that do not lead to cooperation, the effort made is considered successful. Ultimately, one is making peace for God, to please Him, and to not remain close to the person who has wronged you.

churches that regard tradition in a binary position to Scriptures, Orthodox Chrisitanity holistic integration of its doctrinal content should permit disciplinary frameworks to change the axis of investigation that places "religion" as a means of accessing and constituting one's relations in the world. In the following section, I briefly discuss the ways ethnographies of Orthodox Christianities have or have not accomplished this aim.

2.4 Conversing with Tradition

This chapter has discussed several significant movements of change within religious customs: top-down as ideologies of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and legitimation of a national expansionist project and as bottom-up ideologies of harmonizing local approaches to patronage, commensality and honouring traditions, whether Christian, Muslim or traditional to ethnic identity. From either direction, horizontally or vertically, there appears to be an overt interaction with multiple cultural contacts at any given time. Despite these known factors, there remains a particular indefinable status of cultural hybridity that has played such a crucial role in the development of religious traditions in Ethiopia. When forced to summarize the essence of Orthodoxy, its Hebraic characteristics are so entrenched in devotional praxis as to appear unremarkable to Orthodox Christians; while on the other hand, this very quality of worship is isolated as an indication of its archaism by "newer" Christians.

Considering this discussion on the particular legacy of covenant that has developed in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, might its features, rich in Old Testament sourcing but expressly not Judaic, be possible to appropriate as a powerful means of the religion's ability to straddle the domain of Abrahamic faiths? A similar question was posed in Stewart's (1999) considerations of the challenges of "syncretism" as a

productive analytical category, asserting that owning up to cultural mixture and merging might not be a bad thing to be explicit about.

> Denials of syncretism, whether by academic analysts or the people under study, are every bit as interesting as cases where the compositeness of religious traditions is recognized and accepted….the syncreticness of all religions may be an unexceptional fact, but pointing this out socially often amounts to an expression of power, differentiation and social control. It is a term that has historically been applied to someone else's body of religious practice. The bearers of a given tradition rarely acknowledge that it might be syncretic (although I think they can and should). (1999:55)

This is a provocative suggestion, one that is only partly taken seriously in current debates on pluralism and now assemblage theory. Delineating how this theorization of covenant as genre has developed in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity permits conceiving how scholastic attention on Ethiopian Pentecostalism might consider more seriously the domain of Orthodox tradition as a site of innovation that focuses on the methods of participation as a key factor in the processes of renewal, which are initiated via personal and communal levels.

As we reach the second wave of engagement within the anthropology of Christianity, a running theme of establishing a common definition has re-emerged as central. Bialecki (2012) evokes a now classic phrase borrowed from Ortner, where he illustrates culture as a thing of "shreds and patches", to speak of its ephemeral centrepoint:

> The anthropology of Christianity takes as its object something with no fixity and yet is in need of being rescued from essentialism. It must be spoken about at once in careful historical terms and yet is ahistorical, immaterial and suffused by idealism yet overrun by Foucauldian subjectification and regimes of power; finally, it is too ethnographically diverse yet too centered on a single exemplar. (2012:301)

The movement towards assemblage frameworks, then, appears to undertake a dismantling of an almost-Marxist notion of institutional religion. This, Bialecki, proposes, would require rejecting Christianity as a totality and instead working towards

its virtual form, "an abstract topology, with various axes granting it various degrees of

freedom and certain capacities" (Bialecki 2012: 311). Such proposals are suitable

complements to a perennial issue, particularly within anthropological studies of

religion, that is, the seismic shifts between the global and the local. Bialecki cites Zigon

as a case study of defining and manipulating what Zigon call "multi-aspectual"

composition of the HIV rehabilitation centre run by the Russian Orthodox Church,

which draws together "the Soviet language of the 'new man,' neoliberalism, and secular

western therapeutic techniques" (304). The appeal of the assemblage—heterogeneous

and ephemeral (Marcus and Saka 2006:102) is its extractability of constitutive parts and

its utility in the creating frames that are optimally suited for comparative analyses.

Referring back to Zigon, any semblance of a totality occurs only fleetingly, as an

"aftereffect of an enunciation or action that follows a moment of breakdown," the

subjectivity of a rehabilitating person as defined through almost-confrontational

intersections of Orthodox moral discourse and the stronger pull of neoliberalism. I

present this analytical interpretation to provide an alternative articulation of how

cultural mergings are defined by multiplicity of influences that if not acknowledging in

the way Stewart identifies in syncretic contexts, is aware of the "assembled quality" of

the object in question. I briefly highlight two themes that carry over from this chapter's

content to studies of mostly Western Christianities: 1) ideology as institution bound; 2)

the direction of power (i.e. vertically and horizontally) as disentangling uniformity. By

briefly elucidating on these two themes, a recommendation emerges, based on how

ethnographies of Orthodox Christianities conceptualize "tradition" as a type of control,

in the Wagnerian sense of the *controlling context,* for it is this context and this symbolic

mode that controls his attention by restricting the field of awareness" (1981: 40). This

achieves what the post-modernist project is seeking (Marcus and Saka 2006) while

attending to the centripetal force and encompassment necessary in all projects on cultural logics: coherence.

As an institution, the Oriental, otherwise referred to as non-Chalcedonian churches include Armenia, Egypt, Eritrea, Malankara Orthodox Syrian [India], and Syriac, who recognize the first three ecumenical councils. The division stemmed from Chalcedon pronouncement in 451 of the two natures of Christ, considered too close to the Nestorian [heretical] interpretation. These churches follow the formula of St. Cyril: "One incarnate nature of God the Word (*mia physis tou theou iogou sesarkomene*) or "one nature of the divine Word incarnate (*mia physis tou theou logou sesarkomenoa*) (Bouteneff in McGuckin 2011:428)". Eastern and Oriental represent branches of a family of churches, common in faith and of one apostolic tradition. They are in dialogue and ecumenical exchange but not in communion with each other. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was confirmed as one autocephalous body in 1959. Prior to this period, it was the sister church of the Coptic [Egyptian] Church, as part of the Patriarchate of Alexandria since 328 by the consecration of the first bishop Frumentius or Abuna Selama (Gebru 2010:20). Tewahedo ("unity" in Geez) signifies the incorruptible nature of Christ, His humanity and divinity in one nature. For Hart (1993) studying the incorporation of Orthodox tradition into their everyday lives (i.e. life-cycle rituals, orientation to fast and feast and the agricultural seasonal ebbs and flows), two components of the religion consistently reoccur as central to local religious conceptions and practice. She identifies the ritual calendar (the cycle of minor and major festivals commemorating revered figures like Christ and Virgin Mary) and the importance of saints in various domains of the Orthodox Christian cosmology, such as their roles as intercessors, their representation within iconography and the symbolic

connection with local churches' namesakes (Hart 1993). I would add the significance of monastic exemplars in Ethiopian society (Bushnell 1995, Newman 1998, Persoon 2002, 2003) and Marian devotion (Marcus 2002, Wright 2004). I note these features to stress the manner in which canonical elements manifest in popular religious culture, the internal parts of the structure of the Church.

Certainly, these two themes, ideology as institutionally bound and its directionality as vertical and horizontal, spurred early inquiries into how global religious systems were incorporated into small-scale societies. "Great" and little tradition" was coined by Redfield (1956), who studied how villages in the Yucatan peninsula managed, between "Indian" and "Catholic" influences. Similar analyses of patterns of local level integration sought to record, and in some ways to typologize, rituals, symbols, and various paradigms in order to understand local interpretations of tradition. At the time, this was referred to as the study of "folk" culture, elaborated by Foster as "a circular phenomenon in which folk culture draws on and is continually replenished by contact with the products of intellectual and scientific social strata" (Foster 1953). Marriott's (1960) discussion of Kishen Garhi, a village in India, charts the two-way interaction between local culture and Sanskrit traditions, through processes labelled universalization and parochialization. Weissleder (1975) who studied marriage among Amhara groups, noted that marriage rites were the least practiced sacramental form. The union between husband and wife was interpreted as more contractual, a matter of land right transfer as well as alliance formations between certain families. Avoiding church involvement was also seen as aiding the process of divorce, which is fairly common in Ethiopia (i.e. reported around 30% by Tilson and Larsen 2000). The salient point from such an analytical binary is that doctrine does not universalize or install uniform practice.

This discussion has concerned the ways Orthodox Christianity has been studied in Ethiopia and has emphasized a focus on its influence as a cultural force. I have argued that this approach needs to consider the key term of "tradition" anew given that the domain of everyday religion, in particular a devotional culture, is grounded in this idea, "a continuous hermeneutic interaction in which individuals are guided by the Holy Spirit toward consistent interpretation of both Scripture and the existing body of tradition" (Stewart in Hann and Goltz 2010: 2). Conservative in its self-representation, the Church as it is encountered in Ethiopian Orthodox communities' reveals that this body of tradition is amenable to addition; scripturally bound yet driven by tradition-making that accounts of its cultural dynamism. Recent ethnographies on Eastern Christianities share a link to this essence (Bakker 2013, Boylston 2012, Csoba DeHass 2009, Naumescu 2008), all about tradition with a capital T. Therefore, I would argue that Eastern Christianities are attentive to hybridity in ways not always acknowledged in academic analysis.

I advance a theory of covenant as a socio-theological genre and a site of cultural creativity based exclusively on the doctrine and features of worship as contained within Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. The thematic vectors that emerge from this central pivot, namely the liturgical domains of procession, commemoration and obligation, merge in commonality of essence of this core idea of "reciprocal recognition" (Henaff 2010). This is not a holistic study of Ethiopian life, but a refined investigation of one sphere, albeit expansive and permeating, of a select community. By selecting Dessie as a fieldsite, I set out to delineate key issue of urban religion, a new trend as infrastructural changes of Ethiopian metropolises are fairly recent. In line with this goal, my informant base was composed of a mixture of laity unaffiliated with the Church as well as individuals directly involved with diocese affairs such as preachers,

Sunday school chairmen and participants, and administrators. This particular cross-section of Orthodox Christians demonstrates the institutional changes of the Church since 1974 and contributes to how I analyse its position as a key player in the shaping of national discourse.

Regarding Pentecostal Christianity and its interaction with Orthodoxy, I suggest that there is a bias that is rehearsed that reflects a rather unrevised great and little tradition framework of the Orthodox Church's cultural impact in Ethiopia. Recent literature on Pentecostalism offers limited coverage of the detailed interplay of religious communities, with few exceptions to this trend (see Dea 2005, Haile 1998, Eshete 2011). Scholars who study Pentecostal Christians do not spend sufficient energies thinking through the entangled nature of Orthodoxy in popular culture, either lifting wholesale an image of an imperialist hegemonic Church or as passive part of the social landscape. This trend I relate to the broader disciplinary issue that has failed to fully theorize "church" as a social institution that inhabits multiple scales and essences. Recent research on Western Christian Churches has been more numerous, particularly as they have related to social and economic empowerment and models of liberal individualism (Donham 1999, Ellison 2009, Kifleyesus 2006). The tendency within this literature has been to depict Orthodoxy as the status quo religion, adding little analytical focus to how Orthodox Christians structure their cultural logics and how these influences frame individual's cosmologies.

To reflecting upon the circumstances of Christian-Muslim harmony/discord as an effectively mobilized trope, it is revealing how absent the place of Pentecostal Christians are in this conversation and whether this is coincidental. This is not to say that persuasive narratives do not exist for Pentecostal Christians in Ethiopia. On the contrary, the trope of the converted Christian is grounded in narratives emulated and

repeated by Pentecostal Christians, the Pauline rejection of Jewish law and identity as characterized by commentators.   Robbins has written about the importance for Urapmin Christians (Papua New Guinea) to initiate a break that is a seemingly endless process, where individuals seek to "reject the past and the same time curating it so that its rejection can continue to motivate commitment to the event of conversion in the future" (2010a:647). I reference this well-acknowledged interpretation of Christian personhood in relation to the imaginary of the collective as I have detailed, given how an evaluation of the sociological and cultural impact of the covenant is a proposition of a particular viewpoint of the social. It also reconfirms a tension inherent in universalizing narratives as I have demonstrated here, that tropes are highly contingent to their mobilizations. This factor, in turn, contributes to the fluid process for how an idea such as "covenant" contains heterogeneous essences to its internal composition.

To conclude, conventional discourses within Orthodox Christianity are subject to constant reappraisal, revising notions that its traditionalism determines a structural stagnancy. Boylston (2013) relating the "celebration of paradox" to Ethiopian and Syrian hermeneutic traditions refers to the often contradictory readings within the same discourse as resisting a trend towards authoritative ideologies. This quality of the consistency (and I would emphasize *expandability* of tradition) finds correspondence to Wagner's articulation of trope as hinging not on

> a haphazard assemblage of customs, ideas, objects, institutions, words, and the like, but a coherent flow of images and analogies, that cannot be communicated directly from mind to mind, but only elicited, adumbrated, depicted. It is constituted not of the signs of conventional reference, nor of the individual's private percepts of 'things in the world,' but within a reversible dialectic that moves *between* these limits. This makes possible the phenomena of collectively elicited trope as well as of the embedding of conventional reference within the private worlds of individual perception (1986:129).

How this idea plays out in devotional praxis will be investigated in the following

chapter, which asserts a certain patterning of interpretation via cultural idiom of covenant as a holographic object.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has assessed several key premises necessary to approach covenant in the prismatic formulation I propose. The central objective was to delineate "covenant" as internal to gradual accretion of cultural influences which inspired the exploration of covenant as a genre in the current form I examine, based on the naturalization of the symbol "via replication of the form in practice" as a "resource for acting and for understanding" (Hanks 1987: 689)). I have assessed that there has been a deficit in critical thinking about the connection between Judaism and Christianity that has focused squarely on certain historical assumptions that demand more contextualizing perspective. Furthermore, this synthesis has permitted to address the place of "Tradition" as devised by Orthodox theology, as integral to anthropological studies of Abrahamic faiths specifically.

The focus on genre has provided a broader transecting insight that might inspire amending notions that govern harmonious pluralism in countries like Ethiopia. By discussing key historical trends of Dessie as a reflection of Muslim-Christian relations, I have demonstrated that the state of inter-religious harmony, while contained as a trope that is cited colloquially in a rather static fashion, has in fact been managed with respect to the power dynamics of the given historical moment. This might appear as a rather obvious conclusion. However, to define its usefulness as a trope conversely permits employing it as a discursive benchmark that measures evidence of cultural decay. By

continuing to refer to more glorious times, the perpetuation of a trope pinpoints political tension active today.

Grand narratives have fuelled these tropes that have functioned as operative frames for the legitimation of religious representation. From a political standpoint, tropes of harmony have been susceptible to manipulation into narratives of the vulnerability of Orthodox Christians in the face of geo-politics that have begun to favour Western and Middle Eastern influences. Humanitarian aid via Protestant missionaries and infrastructural development through Arab businessmen are two concise and powerful figures in the political cache of what is now becoming a competitive cultural climate. In Dessie, this was showcased by internet cafés and libraries run by Pentecostal churches and media outlets furnished by a rising base of Muslim clerics and advocates. Therefore, established tropes of inter-religiosity are successfully reversed in order to portray Ethiopia commonly being depicted as a nation "in a sea of Islam" (Østebø 2013) and Islam as a hostile force in sections of mainstream political consciousness.

The fraying of pluralism as an enviable discourse was reflected once in a conversation I had with an economics professor in Addis. Remarking on the state of government initiatives to integrate its fourteen major federal states successfully, he was sceptical of the federalist project, and concluded that Ethiopia, as a nation-state, was ungovernable in his eyes. In what domain will pluralism be managed then? In subsequent chapters, I will investigate the multiple forms of association-making and strategies of mutual aid that have been imbedded in "religious domains", such as the *mahaber*. The amplification of the political power of religions such as Pentecostalism and Islam only further supports this trend. If one considers how weak the public sector has been at serving the interests of an almost vacant, or perhaps relocated, civil society,

such non-governmental sectors will continue to address social issues.

Lastly, I have elucidated that the development of covenant can be approached in two analytical tracks: as a foundational concept of national ideology-making and as a socio-theological genre that facilitates social cohesion. As I have stated previously, I consider it useful for the purposes of promoting a new approach to delineate the trails this dissertation seeks to explore. If I am to persuasively argue that covenant is a socio-theological genre that is elaborated and exercised in contemporary life, the construction of the argument requires the components of the experiment to be restricted to "the authors" that continue to hold claims to this idea, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahado Church. Therefore, from this point forward, the ethnography will focus exclusively on how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians access covenant through their devotional actions. In the following chapters, I investigate the participation in feast day celebrations, the regularity of going to church, the production of local tabot legends, and the leadership roles in religious associations. Each of these forms of activities I argue provide a diverse yet consistent field of activities that establish an anthropological paradigm for the incorporation of an abstract concept into the qualities of social interactions.

Chapter Three: Threading Theologies with *Tabot*

3.1. What do *tabots* have to do with Timqet?

To approach the entangled web of metaphor and symbol in commemoration of the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, I evoke a well-worn paradigm offered by E.E. Pritchard regarding the manifestations of the spirit in Nuer cosmology (South Sudan). In his analysis, when the Nuer state that "twins are birds," a relation is drawn between the ambiguous character of the sky and the earth, the creatures of the above (birds) and persons of the below (twins), with the "spirit" being the basic logical operator that cojoins this metaphoric expression (Turner 1991:143). I begin with this classic paradigm within anthropology to help encapsulate a pivotal observation that emerged from piecing together the various dimensions of covenant on Epiphany (Timqet). Observing the rites of Epiphany produced similar cultural analogies between the ark and divine revelation. The height of its commemoration occurred when all *tabots* in the city were processed to a central pool of water, signifying the river Jordan (Yordanos) and the representation of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist. This act and the spirit of *communitas* it established was a pivotal moment of the founding of the Christian Church, where Christ's baptism made real the salvation for all humankind. The staging of the *tabot* in their plural form and the emphasis individuals placed on this feature of the celebration inspired further investigation regarding the embedded-ness of covenant in Ethiopian Orthodox praxis and theology. I initially interpreted the textual and performative aspects of Timqet to be separate categories, which I abbreviated in my simplified, rhetorical question to several interlocutors as "What do arks have to do with

Christ's baptism?" If this feast day commemorated Christ's Baptism at the River Jordan, then why are the *tabots*, replicas of the Ten Commandments, ushered out of their sanctuaries as the main signifiers of the textual message of this event? As I attempted to draw a united narrative thread, I arrived at a state of confusion as to how this feast combined the performative, material and narrative essences of covenant as doctrinal statements did not directly corresponding to the performances observed.

This chapter presents an ethnography of Timqet, one of the most spectacular feast days in the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, and argues that the material representation of covenant, *tabot,* served as a building block for the event that corporally unites parishes into a singular worshipping community. This is achieved due to the *tabot*'s ability to refer to its explicitly compounded definition, as an assemblage of theologies that I have argued undergird the prismatic nature of covenant in liturgical orientations. As I found curious, pernicious resemblances of *tabot* to Timqet, symbol to ritual I outline here, went virtually unnoticed by celebrants. In one incident, Memhir Aklilu, a well-respected preacher and a rising star of the diocese of South Wollo, sought to clarify the theological import of Timqet, through his response loosely aligned with the design of the holiday, a spectacular, three day processional journey that holistically tied the diocese of South Wollo together as one. Memhir Aklilu took my query as prosaic and proceeded to explicate the key points of Epiphany, focusing dominantly on John the Baptist (Metmekiya Yohannes).[31] By coming to St. John, he said, Christ was asking permission to be baptized (Mt.3:15), stressing that humility and consent was what composes the essence of this sacrament (*mistir)* of Baptism. Several Gabriel Sunday School students, who were overhearing our conversation, listened intently. One of them,

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[31]John the Baptist (or John the Forerunner) is a mirror figure to Christ (see Hart 1994, du Boulay 2010) as well as last prophet of the Old Testament. In this feast season, his figure is featured prominently in music videos that recreated the baptismal event.

Haile, revealed to me privately that the question I was posing about the sacramental place in Epiphany festivities was a valid question that never crossed his mind. What I observed and framed as tensions between canon and popular interpretation actually offered an opportunity interrogate the dimensions of "covenant" in ways outside its classified definitions.

Fernandez (1974) in his article "The Mission of the Metaphor" argues that the study of metaphor is based on the mastery of predication, such that "Symbols are abstracted sign-images which have lost their direct link with the subjects on which they were first predicated in specific contexts, developing thereby plausible links with multitudinous subjects in multitudinous contexts" (1974:120). The standard reply on the "meaning" of Timqet was a symbolic refraction; emptying the sanctuaries of their *tabots* produced what was expressed by celebrants as an amplified spiritual event, that is, the baptism of Christ is the granting of grace for all. By the *tabot* materially acting as sacred presence, a sacramental moment is made possible through this object's physical movement and narrative positioning into a specific liturgical context. Incidentally, through my initial analytical failure to compartmentalize aspects of the event into separate categories, this holiday synthesized the multi-dimensionality of a theological concept, guided and directed by my ethnographic naivety (Devons and Gluckman 1964) that narrowed the line of inquiry based on my lack of familiarity with theological or cultural concepts.

Reconciling ritual customs with textual or doctrinal statements had been a persistent challenge for this project and corresponds to broader issues in anthropology of religion, were components of everyday religion and highly developed theology are often intertwined. The search for an authoritative answer, I quickly discovered, was futile and more crucially, conceptually limiting. Sister Tsehaitu, head nun at the Catholic monastery where I lived, listened to my attempted summaries of the festivities

and my desire to connect symbols and metaphors of the sacred on display. Ironically, her musings "on the true meaning of Epiphany" appeared most palatable for me and easiest to digest. In her humble manner, she stated the following as a supposition: Perhaps ("I have always thought" was how she phrased it) that by bringing the *tabots* out of their churches, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians were representationally connecting the old covenant (i.e. the tablets (*tselat*) of Moses) with the new covenant (i.e. the blood covenant of Christ) and by aligning these narratives, they were effectively forging a united covenant. Her hypothesis was theoretically consistent to Orthodox Christian perspectives[32] that purported that the EOTC is an uninterrupted Christian tradition, from Judaism to Christianity and accomplished a holistic answer that verifies the covenant as a theologically conglomerated category. However, I could not dismiss that this succinct interpretation was voiced by a Catholic nun, an appreciator yet not a participant of this particular religious community. The fact that she offered her commentary, aware that it was an interpretation, emphasized further that the performance of rites are subject to the standpoint of those doing the observing. In a parallel example, Scott (2005) related the allegory of Abraham by Arosi Christians in Solomon Islands, who reinvent biblical creation stories to reconcile with indigenous matrilineage systems by building "ontologies of coherence" (see Chapter 6 and 7, for the incorporation of prototypical covenants in communal and personal terms). Similar to the task of fusing textual and performative aspects of *tabot* and Timqet, Arosi Christianity, according to Scott's analysis, endeavours to compose logics suitable to local historical contexts:

> People embark and re-embark on the diverse logical trajectories that constitute Christianity. Clearly, this latter precept implies that the logical trajectories of Christianity can lead Christians in different times and places to formally related

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[32] The Epiphany mass at the Catholic church in Dessie included a ceremonial blessing by grass reeds (*ketema*), similar to Orthodox Christians, but does not exhibit other resemblance, principally because the Catholics do not include the *tabot* in their dogma.

conceptual and practical outcomes that lend themselves to instructive comparisons. But this final comparative endeavour should allow the data of Christianity from various historical and geographic contexts to inform one another laterally, not force the data into predetermined hermeneutical dichotomies and frameworks. (Scott 2005:118)

Unlike juggling discourses of newly converted Arosi of Solomon Islands, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been referencing base interpretations and canonical models for much further back in their history. Still, the various "data of Christianity", as we see in both cases, form instructive comparisons. As we have discussed thus far, *kidan* is both the Old and New Testament, it is the dwelling of God, it is Mary's womb, it is Noah's ark, it is the Second Zion. Given the plethora of interpretative possibilities of *tabot*, this chapter argues most directly for a conception of covenant as a holographic objective. The various instantiations of covenant reflect the mechanisms of a prism, its illuminative qualities contingent on how it is manipulated. *Tabots*, as they are engaged with on Timqet provide such a multispectral effect of covenant in multiple dimensions, in its textual, liturgical, material dynamics. Moreover, these qualities do not usurp each other in a hierarchized scale and instead interact with each other to express a unified centrality of covenant as a lived concept.

In the case of the Epiphany ceremonies, I propose that the procession and its expressive medium are less about *meaning* and more about *definition*. By considering the broad social composition of this event, I utilize Schieffelin's (1985) engagement with dramaturgical terminology to conceive of ways to approach the various substantiations of "church" as they are mobilized by its celebrants. Schieffelin contests how analysis of ritual symbols are uncritically assumed to provide meaning. Anthropologists too readily apply importance on symbolic constructs as a model for actors to "make sense" of complicated realities (1985: 707), which in turn suggests that transformation is self-evident. He proposes that "symbols are effective less because

they communicate meaning (though this is also important) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them as knowers" (Schieffelin 1985:707). As I will argue throughout this chapter, the integration of *tabots* on Timqet are not flat affirmations of the symbolic currency of covenant, but an active process instituted by participants to realize through affective drivers that compose their Church.

3.2 Recasting Covenant's Materiality

To begin to define how the church is conceived by its adherents and how it is intrinsically tied to a materialized subjectivity of Biblical covenants requires disentangling its principal artery, the *tabot*. As I intimated previously, it is a symbol in popular imagination of Ethiopia's religious supremacy as guardians of salvation for the whole world (see Figure 1.1), and has served as a central anchor for this archetypal, dialogic relationship to the divine for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. For outsiders looking in, the shrouded ark, the treasured item spirited away from the Temple of Solomon in 10th century BC according to the Kebre Negest, a 14th century epic, has garnered much fascination both inside and outside Ethiopia, for rather mutually exclusive reasons. The general tenor in foreign surveys of the Orthodox Church is one of bemused curiosity. Fortescue, in a book titled *Lesser Eastern Orthodox Churches*, states that the *tabot* has "puzzled" many people, and writes: "it is copy of the ark of the Covenant" and "[t]hey pay enormous reverence to the tabot, they carry it in processions, bless with it, bow down before it. What then, exactly, is this ark?" The author ruminates on its possible origins, looking towards the Egyptian or Syrian churches for

what the item might be modelled after. Deciding on its probable identity as a box-like

container (similar to liturgical usage by the Coptic Church, where the chalice is placed

during liturgy), he tries to convince a priest to open it for him. Unsuccessful, and

without much empirical proof of its physical characteristics, he disappointedly

concludes, that in the end, "the modern *tabot* contains nothing at all" (Fortescue 1913:

314-315). This narrative represents a long precedent set by foreigners asking to see this

mysterious venerated object. In regards to the proper identification of the item, this

author was incorrect as it is most closely related to the *tablith*, from the Syrian church.

However, discovering its ceremonial purpose would still leave unanswered the

metaphysical import that the *tabot* establishes.

At the heart of the problem of objectifying covenant are the various symbolic

reference points that are juggled simultaneously, in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox

tradition, a corpus of Tradition, divinely-inspired sourcing from the 4[33] century[33], which

counted the conversion of Ezana (4th century AD) as the marked date of imperial

adoption of the Church. On a fundamental level, the item was understood as the Word

of God (*kalkidan*), the Law as it was revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. It takes its

physical form as a modest size tablet, approximately 50 cm by 30 cm, made of wood or

stone, dedicated to God under the Trinitarian formula, and concluding with inscriptions

to a particular saint. This item sits inside the sanctuary of the church and is the altar

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[33] Several informants were insistent that they, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, had accepted the law of God before any formal religious institution. One individual, speaking about Ethiopians in the civilizational sense (highland Tigrean-Amhara) cited the law of consciousness (*hig lib*) as evidence that they accepted monotheism organically, rather than through the Church or early traces of Judaism, as it has been roundly hypothesized by Ethiopianists, Ullendorff (1967) principally credited with this thesis. *Hig lib* I have also heard sourced to Moses, who is purported by certain accounts to have lived or passed through Ethiopia, due to his wife being cited as Ethiopian (Number 12:1), thus by local opinion, proof that Ethiopians were already living by the laws of God.

from which the Eucharist is consecrated[34], whereby establishing its definition as the blood covenant of Christ. It is also the sanctifying component of a church; a bishop consecrates a *tabot* instead of the church proper.

What can be noted is that there are alternating scales of visibility, predicated on concealment that is materially mediated. A *tabot* leaves the sanctuary for select times of the year, such as the feast day of Timqet, and is always covered and enveloped by ornate ceremonial umbrellas, in a mark of reverence and to protect the people from its power. It must never be seen, since seeing God directly would be too powerful for the human senses. Inside the sanctuary (*bete meqdes*), there are copies of the *tabot*, to prevent robberies and ensuring that not all clergy can identify which are the true ones, (*maddabanna* – lit. main). There are also *tabots* consecrated but without a church dedicated to their saint and sit inside the sanctuary, called *dabbala* (lit. "roommate"), literally meaning one that is on top of one or doubled up, signifying one without one's own place. As we will see, these refracted screens to what is believed to be divine locale was reflected into scales of visibility in moral imaginations (Chapter 5).

Inquiring about its physical characteristics yielded reserved responses as it was generally regarded as an unseemly topic to raise, affirming a trend about acknowledging this ritual item's materiality. Among those who might have an opportunity to attest to its traits, such as middle level priests (*qesis*) or advanced deacons, I would skirt the question. I posed various open-ended questions such as "how did the *tabot* arrive," "how was it found," "how did the *tabot* come to be," or "what *tabots* does your church have," avoiding the words "create" or "made," based on what I knew about the

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[34] An equivalent term in other Orthodox Churches would be the *antimension*, a ceremonial cloth representative of the shroud, where the Eucharist is consecrated. However, there is only one such item to a church, whereas a church can have more than one *tabot* (See Raes 1951 "Antimension, Tablith, Tabot").

personification of these items.[35] Memhir Ephraim, was a church scholar and museum director and was particularly passionate about speaking on the topic of local histories of churches. The circuitous path of gathering details about *tabots* showcased the "sociology of telling a story", on that played upon tropes of the exceptional aspects of its genesis, which will be investigated further in Chapter 5.

Abera, a deacon and parish coordinator at Medhane Alem church in Dessie, was eager to present the church administration as accessible to the public. Like most explicit requests for information, Abera advised that all my questions be put in writing so that he could precisely construct his response, and he offered to document all the aspects of the *tabot*. Therefore, he readily offered a direct response about the *tabot*'s materiality, stating that it is made of selected acacia wood (*wanza*) and is consecrated by the Archbishop in a rite called *tabot negs* (the crowning or enthronement). He prepared his own written statement on the meaning of the *tselat* (tablet), which read:

> From the time that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God at Mount Sinai, when he spoke to him in person saying from the wood carved the words Alpha Omega and since that time Moses had praise the name of God is this way. This was the way of worship in that era known as the era of *Abew* (Patriarchs). Now however and after our Lord Jesus Christ has come to us {born} from Saint Mary, to save the Son of man and he became man. He gave his flesh and blood to us. Our way of worship is known as *Mewatse Hadis* (New Sacrifice) and the era is known as the era of the flesh.

Somewhere between the recitation and writing, the materiality of the object disappeared, and my question became interpreted again in its textual form. There are

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[35] Getachew Haile (1988) in his historical study of one *tabot's* history in the Amhara region, (Atronesa Mariam) speaks of its attributes as synonymous with the saint: "Since the tabot personifies the saint, 'it' takes the gender of the saint. Mary the tabot is a she and, being Mary, she performs miracles...In fact, people often seem to forget that the object is a tabot, or a slate and its container. It becomes Mary or Gabriel, etc, endowed with a supernatural power to heal or kill. It is terrifying to see a tabot. It is like coming face to face with a deity; at the occasion one prostrates oneself to the ground in awe, dread and respect" (14). I found similar phenomena, one example being when onlookers remarked on the approach of the Epiphany processions, articulated as certain saints approaching from directions of town.

several aspects to unpack of this fairly representative statement on the *tabot*, including the interchangeability between vessel containing the Word of God and the Law itself. The focus on the textuality of Old and New Testament is a recurrent theme and holds importance in defining the covenant as it is objectified. The closest indication of its physical definition occurred when I asked how these *tabots* were consecrated. Aware that most crafts and fine technical skills were traditionally done by Ethiopian Jews, *Bete Israel* (Pankhurst and Freeman 2003), it was nonetheless surprising to learn how *Bete Israel* continued to be implicated with these venerated items. In a neighbourhood of Addis (*Kechene*) known for its heavy concentration of Jewish communities,[36] Ato Shemeles, an outspoken advocate of Jewish-Christian cooperation fused the *tabot* crafts with theological content, namely its Old Testament composition, the common heritage of the Orit, as he stated. According to him, it is the law of God as honoured by Jews and Gentiles, further underscored locally by the trend for certain Bete Israel (or "Falasha", a more pejorative term) to come to service on Saturday, leaving before the conclusion (i.e. when the Gospels are proclaimed)[37]. Ato Shemeles represents a more outspoken perspective, though a consistent comment on the Hebraic heritage within EOTC is the uni-rootedness of Abrahamic faiths. What is revealing about this commentary regarding the possibilities of the simultaneity of Jewish and Christian worship in this particular locale is that rather than treat monotheism as historic continuity as it often is (e.g. "1,000 years of Judaism, 2,000 years of Christianity" as the late Patriarch Abune Paulos would often proclaim), it assumes a manifest of a web of

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[36] It is important to note that there are diverse sets of variants to Bet Israel in this community, having proper synagogues (2) and generally do not intermingle with Christian identification and practice.

[37] Ato Shemeles explained "Senbet" (Shabat) as an organic accommodation within the framework of Christianity (the *bete meqdes* is the "original" Jewish synagogue), as he suggested un-problematically. An Orthodox preacher at this church also confirmed this pattern, though he was less tolerant, stressing how special educational programs were currently in place to combat what he stated was apostasy (*haymanot yakada sew)*.

constitutive parts of revealed truth. Grounding these theologies in the object of this

project, composing a cosmological map of the covenant, as developed and culturally

articulated by EOTC, the importance on Old Testament is not only about maintaining

linkages of tradition but an examination of prophecy, a fulfilment of Christ's coming as

it was foretold (see Getachew Haile 1988b). This also emphasized an important aspect

of the legacy of multi-religious relations in contemporary context. Having presented

historical evidence of the tabot as a syncretic amendment to EOTC doctrine, my

engagement with the Kechine Medhane Alem parish showed that "church", as a cultural

force, has managed still facilitate a zone of tolerance and negotiated acceptance.
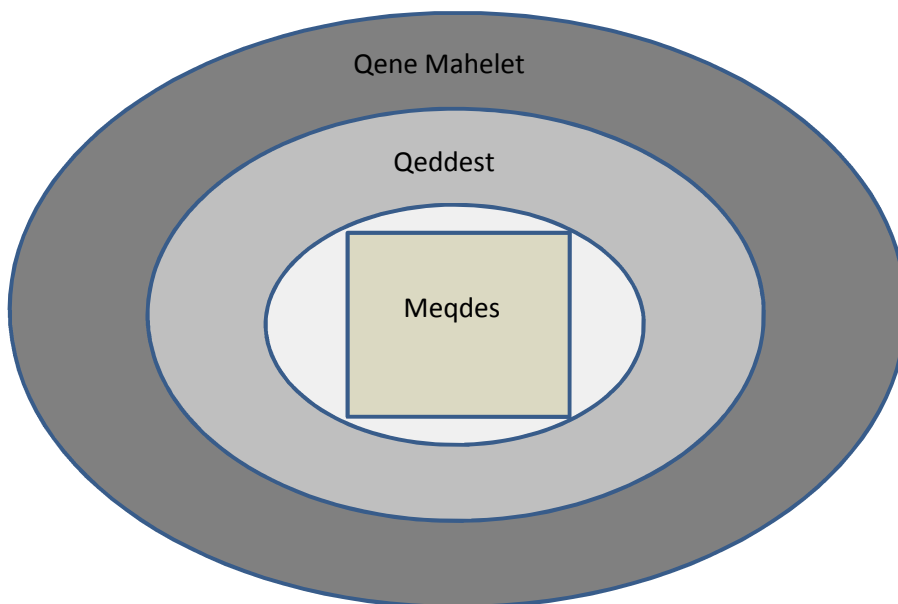
Figure 3.1 Diagram of the interiors of a typical circular church, defined by three ambulatories: 1) Qene Mahelet (lit. chanting of liturgical poetry) where responses to the liturgy is sung by debteras (cantors); 2) Qeddest (lit. holy) were priests are administering to those receiving communion; 3) Meqdes or bet meqdes (lit.house of prostration), the sanctuary where the tabot is kept.

Clearly, the material form of the *tabot* is of inferior importance than its textual

form, the Word (*Kal*). To understand its edifying potential, I was presented with a

fortunate contrastive scenario between a church and a non-church, as St. Gabriel, the diocese's "star project" was about to be consecrated anew. When I became acquainted with this parish, all attention was directed to the large basilica-style church, modelled after the grand Bole Medhane Alem in the capital. However, it was *tabot*-less. The actual church in operation was dwarfed by comparison. I had never been in a church under construction so I did not know how to behave gesturally. I was initially confused about where was the sacred ground. After covering my head, motioning to remove my shoes, I was quickly corrected when I was told that where I was entering was not a church. Apart from the cross at the pitch of the roof, the real church of St. Gabriel continued to look like a house, with a verrandah and windows covered up with icon posters (i.e. Greek Orthodox-style chromolithographs). Its history before consecration in the 1970s had been as a *tej bet* (honey wine bar) and then as an office of the *kebele* (neighbourhood association). This contrast between the humble church, the *tselat* (tablets) being the "resting place of God," and the hollowed-out cathedral used for pledge drives and diocesan meetings, illustrates how this edification is composed in practice.

These various qualities of covenant promote the relationship between church and *tabot* as metonymic. As we will observe with the orientation of participants in the Timqet procession, Wagner's (2001) conceptualization of the holographic is suitable to relate to how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians engage with covenant in the various essences I have proposed. However, while the multi-spectral quality of this concept is most vividly demonstrated during a feast such as Epiphany, I stress that these relationships of predication, that is the sign-image taking the form of the other (Fernandez 1974) reflect what Wagner describes as "to get rid of the metaphor":

> The whole power of a trope of any kind—metaphor, metonym, synecdoche—lies in the identity it states, however it came to be stated. The identity is its own lesson and its own context; to turn it in any way into a relation it is necessary to invoke other identities and misconstrue them in the same way as one intends to do with the original. This is as much as to say that what the identity is and what it means is never recoverable by virtue of the very efforts made to recover it, that the meaning has already happened as the identity and that thereafter we "happen" to it as its "interpretation." A metaphor is born of an attempt to get rid of metaphor, and it survives as the boundary condition of our inability to do so. (2001:20)

This perspective assists in conceiving a worldview that is "holographic", demonstrated by the ability of core ideas to be socially and phenomenologically apprehended (e.g. *tabot* obscuring). In the following extended ethnographic description of Timqet, I will consider how this celebration demonstrates a covenant encounter as an immanent "event". While canonical definition can readily inform such as summary definition of the meaning of this liturgical feast, I focus on the experiential aspects to the best of my ability to represent the perspective of lay participants. Furthermore, the method by which *tabots* are an integral part in all feast day celebrations provides some indication that the quality of the event deserves further focus. Here I draw from Whitehead's work on sensory perception in metaphysics, which proposes that:

> along with subjects and objects, space and time are also reified entities that are to be explained by the contingent and changing events from which they are abstracted. An enduring entity - such as a molecule - does not move through time and space, nor do changes occur in space and time. Instead, motion and change are attributable to the differences between successive events, each with their own durations. (Fraser 2010: 63)

The durations of Timqet as performed through the three-day procession signals that covenant as a sacramental reality similarly manipulates time and space, which for the purposes of academic inquiry, assists in understanding how this event confirms key truths for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

3.2.1 Churches moving

Previous studies of feast day celebrations in Ethiopia have evaluated its political importance as a platform for national identity-making (Kaplan 2008, Marcus 2008). I employ a different approach by focusing on the aesthetic and experiential features of the grand procession. I argue that the topography and movement of the processions on Timqet initiated two opposing processes simultaneously; it both marks the diocese's jurisdictional bounds, through the passageways to and from the baptismal pool, the symbolic core of "Jordan," and deterritorializes any notion of a singular institutional body of the church. The *tabots* in the tent in a football field, viscerally illustrate a portable church, moving through town on a serpentine stage. A lingering question after recounting the sequence of this three-day event concerned the anonymous character of the participants. Who are the *amanyoch (*the believers) and what sort of participants are they? My central problem focused on the procession as a conglomeration of the church, and the performative implications of people "assisting."

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Looking down from the Catholic monastery on the more elevated parts of Dessie city, I saw pockets of figures in white, the church attire of fine cotton, walking into town from the side streets in the neighbourhood of *Bwanbwaha*. This flow of movement was directed towards St. Gabriel's church. I observed from my vantage point as the plateau of the church compound began to fill up with people. Timqet was consistently described as the ultimate celebration, to wear one's best clothes was to dress like one does during Timqet time, the equivalent of "Sunday best." To greet and arrive to the holiday (*enqwan abra deresen*) was rife with ethics of dressing the

occasion. For my household, the mandatory activity was to bake bread in the traditional fashion in our residential compound, that is, dough wrapped in banana leaves, into a steel disk, and grilled over a charcoal fire. Reeds (*ketema)* were usually purchased from street vendors and scattered around the common living area, or any threshold as I saw in local cafes, hotels, and restaurants around town. This was the ceremonial accompaniment to the coffee ceremony to any and especially grand holidays, as I noted while smelling whiffs of ground coffee being pounded from living quarters.

As discussed previously, the shrouding of *tabot* presented a refracted positionality of material arks as movable centers. On the eve of the holiday, the *tabots* were taken out of the church, that is, "released" from the sanctuary (*bete meqdes*). At this stage in the late afternoon, individuals had steadily been accumulating and began to gather around the outer edges of the church, waiting for the *tabot*. This anticipation was prodded on by clapping and singing devotional songs that were specific to the church's saint, or more generally, that extolled Timqet's central message, the revelation of the Trinity upon Christ's baptism at the river Jordan. People shadowed the *tabot*, described colloquially as "assisting" (*meredat*). It extended into the more ritualized and canonical acts that occurred inside the church that provide material and sensory evidence of the impending release of the *tabot*. A muffled drumming of the *merigeta* was heard from the sanctuary, and the singing of *mesbak* (Psalms). This was the signifying sound for those on the outside that the prayers required for a *tabot*'s release have been said, after which the singing and clapping crescendos and ullulating started. Despite being close to the front, it was nearly impossible for most people to get a good glance at the *tabot*, whose movement was principally noted by the many brightly coloured umbrellas that served as a canopy for the clergy who carried the sacred object and the "waves" of deep bowing or full prostrations which wrippled through the crowd as it passed. On top of

their heads, the priests carried the *tabot*, wrapped in brightly embroidered cloths, and large icons of St. Gabriel were positioned at front of the line. These were paintings that were primarily displayed in the *qedest*, the second ring of the church (Figure 3.1), and on most instances remain inside. We watched this ceremony, a verifiable "emptying out" of the church, until its conclusion, an action of circling around the church three times, after which point the *tabot* and its supporting clergy and parish volunteers had set off and left the church, onwards to the asphalt road.

The collective surrounding St. Gabriel's *tabot* moved towards the final destination of Hoté, the stadium in the center of town. As time elapsed, distinctions between groups became harder to make as collectives merged as *tabots* and their processions joined together. The St. Gabriel Sunday school students hovered around the roundabout near *menafesha* front of the municipality building and gave way for Qwasqwam and Sellassie *tabots* to join up. After some reconfiguration of the *tabots* to the front, the swarms of people piled onto each other and continued the steady march towards the central junction, Wollo Higher Clinic. This was the meeting point for all the fourteen local churches and their tabots to merge and to initiate the movement towards Yordanos (Jordan).

Climatic bottlenecking of energy of *tabots* and people young and old were amplified with a mad dash to the field. My improvised party of cousins and neighbourhood acquaintances made a run towards the slope of grass by the chain-link fence, and secured a decent view of the ceremonial deposition of the *tabots*. These culminating moments were what people meant by "all the *tabots* come out" (*hulum tabot wutal naw*), which established this "mega-church" in a football field. The *tabots* were stationed in a defined line behind the Archbishop and a dozen high clergy, at a marked distance of about 10 meters from the public, who had now overflowed the

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stadium. The *tabots* moved inside the tent and an announcement to return the next day

for the celebration of Timqet was made.
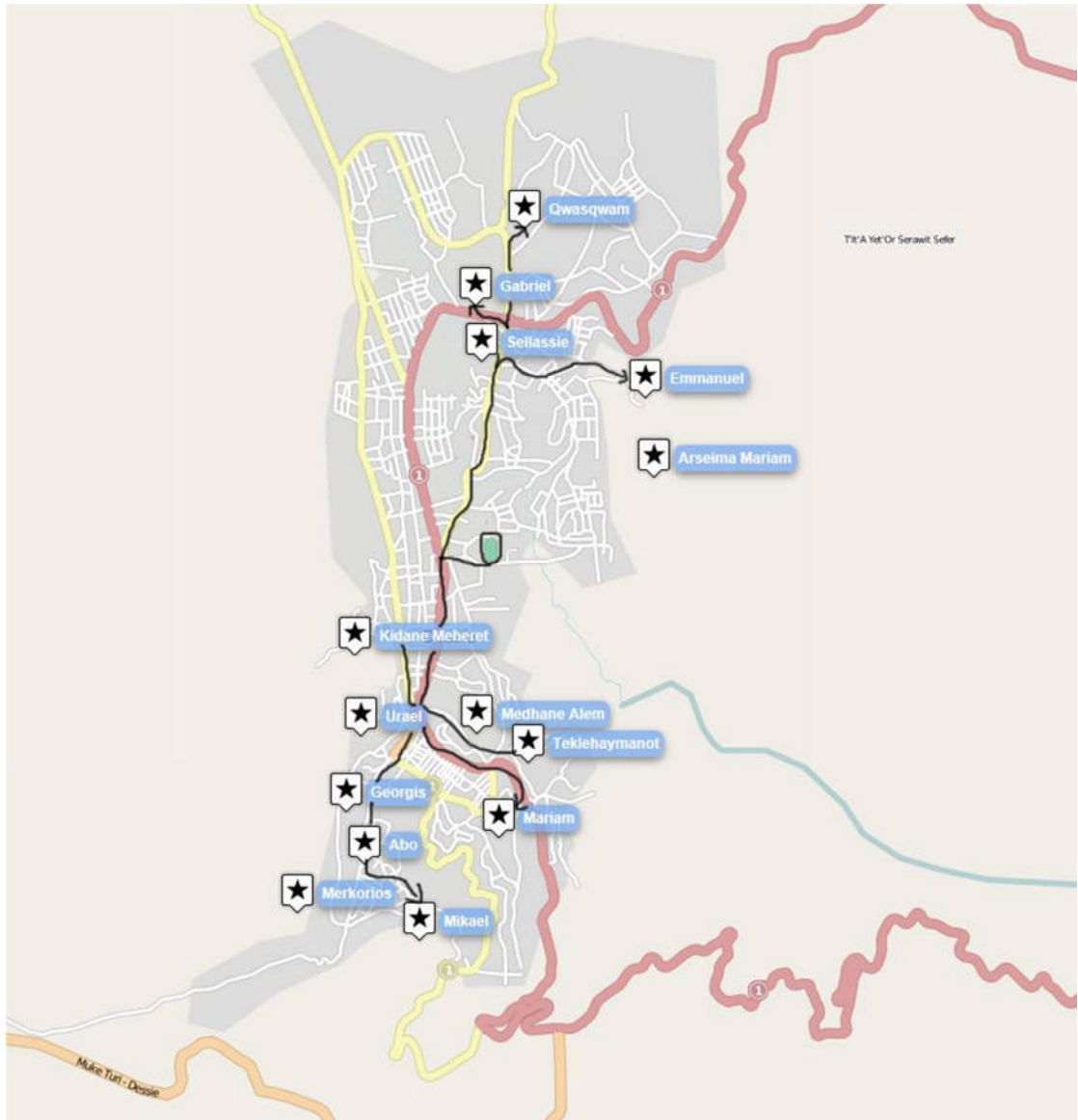
**Figure 3.2 Directions of *tabots*' movements during Epiphany festivities in Dessie city
(January 19-21)**

The complex was arranged with several key nodes of activity, principally oriented

towards the *mahaber* culture of hosting and liturgical approaches on the part of

individuals. We walked along the perimeters of the field that are lined with canvas

tents, each representing the churches of Dessie. Genet, who worked at the Catholic

monastery where I lived, had followed her church, Qwasqwam (Flight of the Holy

Family), here and was part of the *mahaber* that manned the tent operations, which

included the distribution of tea, bread, a light snack of *kolo* and fasting food. They were

also hosting fellow attendees who would be spending the evening and night. My

Gabriel neighbour, Eteye Ma'ta, motioned for me to join her to "greet the church"

(*mesalem*), the tent with *tabots* that only clergy were allowed to enter. Along the

outside walls, cuttings of grass were strewn and individuals came by, knelt and

prostrated, some absorbed in extended prayer. Many appeared to be simply standing

around and "looking," visually directing their attention to the tent. It was not

uncommon to have a few people flip out their mobiles and snap a photo of this indexical

sign of covenant, this "abbreviated sanctuary" captured and veiled behind this mundane,

humble-looking army tent. Not many paces away were the more rambunctious buzz of

attendees passing by as they would on a common street anywhere. This feeling of

"being in and out of focus" in relation to sacred presence was not unlike the typical

church compound experience, where all sorts of "discouraged" activities take place,

such trading, gossip and verbal confrontations. The same case existed here, where one

sensed the fringes of this holy centre.

Figure 3.3 The tent and greeting the church

The following morning, the program of Timqet began at 10 am with the service of the liturgy (*qidase*). Attention began to heighten at the first occurrence of ritual of *aqwaqwam*, a liturgical chant and movement[38]. It was at this point where my usefulness as a researcher was most apparent to my companions as I was whisked and pushed far to the front of the procession to document. This moment was defined by stillness, composure, discipline, concentration, was received with awe by the people and those nearby would cut in with a phrase or two of commentary. The admiration of

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[38] It is often problematic to term these church traditions of music and dance as "performance" as it equates too readily with a form of entertainment. All expression, according to the liturgy of the Church is to "dramatically present to participants…and beckon us to the wedding feast of the Lamb of God in His coming Kingdom, unto the ages of ages (Dauod 1959). The expression of *aqwaqwam* (movement of the prayer staffs), *shibshiba* (bodily movement corresponding to the musical mode) are skills mastered over the course of many years and a form of liturgical worship particularly mastered by *debteras* .

aqwaqwam prayer was akin to remarking on the aesthetic mastery of a painting. It was a meditative time span of nearly 40 minutes, between *debteras* (cantors) and Sunday School students who alternate *aqwaqwam* performing duties. The liturgy then concluded and initiated the action of reinstating the return of the *tabots* to their homes. Trumpet horns are blasted and a chaotic reordering of processional order commenced again, a symbolic reversal of the day before.

Pickup trucks amplified the *mizmur* (devotional songs sung by the city's parish choirs) that figuratively cleared the path for high clergy who made a steady stride up the road towards Wollo Higher Clinic. *Tabots* were stationed to the East and a red carpet had been laid out and served as the stage where another volley of *aqwaqwam* was entoned. Two parallel rows of twelve *debteras* faced each other were led by a head cantor (*merigeta*) and a drummer. The *merigata* was the leaders of the choir of *debtera*, and tended to behave jovially and act as the conductor of sorts. I was standing alongside other photographers, feverishly snapping and video recording the whole *aqwaqwam*, each typically twenty to twenty-five minutes in length. It is a nuanced prayer, sung in Ge'ez by the *merigeta*, in elongated tone. The twenty-four *debteras* accompanied the chant by several key movements which I was prodded by my fellow onlookers to capture, such as: when the *debteras* shook their sistra from backward to forwards; the point when the staffs were lifted up and swung down; and the drum beaten on the beat of each conclusory moment. These were all segments Misgan, the chairman of St. Gabriel Sunday school told me later took years to master in the traditional schools. In contrast to the opening of the ceremony, solemn in tone and ethos, which judged from the utter deep fixation by the active public, either looking directly at the *aqwaqwam* or their heads bowed down, within twelve minutes, the beats gradually began to come closer together. *Shebsheba,* a specific mode within the *aqwaqwam*

performance when the participants began to move in a circular fashion and swayed their bodies back and forth, was a distinctively uplifting turn of events. I had been told that this moment was the highlight of *aqwaqwam*, when the *debteras* move towards each other, one set moving towards the line, returning, while the same action was repeated from the other set of participants. This was when the public became very engaged, the chant verse now having a more melodic structure and faster in tempo, punctuated by the pounding drumming, turning with dervish-like motions and intensity.

Completely lost on how to read this symbolic field and the experience I was meant to receive as a result of my participation, I was grateful for informant-led commentary and direction. The *aqwaqwam* "mise-en-scene" became clearer with the amount of times I witnessed it increased, though rarely did individuals I accompanied articulate why or how these moments were important, just that they were. Church students more easily recited the normative interpretation of *aqwaqwam*: that is was a ritual representation of the Passion of Christ. With more queries about how this was a demonstration, I typically had a decoding of the ritual objects themselves: deriving "meaning" via the symbols meta-symbols. I was eagerly told by many that the strappings of the drum were the lashing of Jesus by Roman soldiers, that the rings of the sistrum were five altogether, representing the number of the mysteries of the faith (i.e. Sacraments), and the sound symbolized the seraphim and cherubim that St. Yared met in heaven. Imnet, a relative with whom I attended Timqet a year later in the capital, was more attuned to my curiosity about the ritual movements. She took over video recording duties. The staff coming down towards the floor was the lashing of Jesus and the removal from the Cross. The contraction (*asragacha*), with the *debteras* coming towards each other and backwards, was the pulling and pushing and physical torments of Christ upon his Crucifixion. The particular stylization of the *merigeta*'s intonation

was what impressed here the most (*"The Son of God was baptized in the river Jordan in order to redeem us"*).

Figure 3.4 *Aqwaqwam* mise-en-scene (graphic from Damon 2006).

Reigning in the boundaries of dissipated grace, I suggest that there are frames of perspective. As we observed with the three-day processional ceremonies, people spent significant attention looking and listening, which spanned total of eight hours of nearly straight clapping, singing and trekking. Being directed to record aspects of the procession and the sound performances by my interlocutors I interpreted as their articulation of cultural significance, a striking contrast to the resistance of photography and documentation of the *tabot* and even the church itself. People's prodding for me to photograph movement that cannot be captured, such as *tabots* in a tent or the crowd's sensory attachment to chant that stretches back meters away from the site of the performance, underscores the Russian Orthodox theologian Florensky's thoughts on perspective of symbolic planes in spiritual space: "This is characteristic of that other, spiritual space: the further away something is, the bigger it is; the closer it is, the smaller. This is reverse perspective" (Florensky in Tugendhaft 2009).

After the *aqwaqwam* prayers between *debteras* and select Sunday school members, this part of the ceremony concluded and there was some noise-making, scuffling and frenzied rearrangement. *Tabots* were now being positioned according to the direction of their churches and the energy of the general public shoved and pushed to help establish the processional lines of movements. The front of the line of the *tabots* and motorcade of the Archbishop, special invited guests and other high clergy were flanked by the *tabots*, material indexes of these otherwise indistinguishable items, as well as by the large icons of the saints of each church's namesake. The performers of the refracted object of covenant, via chant as praise-giving, were also indexes of church's institutional identity, such as the Sunday School choirs, all with colour-distinguishing uniforms. As we narrowed into the neighbourhood streets, there was a distinct "handing off" of performative leadership from the clerics to these youth groups as the principal

sound had switched from liturgical chant to popular devotional songs, the Sunday

Schools' artistic genre and domain. It was not hard to see the mirroring of these clusters

of action, particularly as each church's procession carried its own programme of songs

and distinct staging: a cluster of twenty four main performers, not as tightly bound as

during *aqwaqwam* due to the confines of the road, but led by their own mini-van whose

head chorister was singing into a microphone. All the groups were singing their own

songs, maintaining a semi-autonomy in a sea of masses.

Figure 3.5 St. Gabriel Sunday School accompany their *tabot* back to *bete mekdes*

Unlike the eve of Timqet where the bodies of the churches were anonymous yet

fairly coordinated (i.e. moving towards a defined and anticipated sacred ground), the re-

deposition of the *tabot* on this day exposed sharper social differences. As we were

stopping to drop off the *tabots* at their six churches in the northern part of town, we

paused extendedly at a junction and sung more praise songs before sending off the

church to continue along the road. On the way, houses in the neighbourhood would

watch from their verrandah, in a pattern much like a parade. Women and men dressed

in celebration clothes, more extravagant than the simple church shawl, which turned

into a sort of exhibition as this activity and invited passing comments and compliments.

There was a more pronounced presence of young men who were singing folk songs, the

kind usually done in front of bonfires. These groupings stood out as the peripheries of

these neatly defined roles of the actors and spectators. Were they participants with the

procession or some alternative space in this rowdy revelry? All these multiple

components of social segmentation spilled into the foot of St. Gabriel church. It was an

accelerated rush to the front to church door, followed by a short benediction by the head

of St. Gabriel church, Abba Tsige Sellassie, second position in the diocese. All that

followed was extended singing, drumming and abbreviated *shebsheba (*swaying

movements), from the choir and the people present who clapped and followed along

with the chorus.

Thinking about my ethnographic question, "what do *tabots* have to do with

Timqet?" I was faced with further cultural elaboration by the extension of an additional

holiday. As I was walking back home, I bumped into Ato Teferi, secretary to the

diocese, who asked how I found my first Epiphany. Upon relaying how impressive,

grand and uplifting an experience it was, he remarked how I have not seen anything yet,

as tomorrow would be even more spectacular than today. People throughout the day

continued to tell me how St. Michael's *tabot* had not joined the processional activities

on Timqet and instead would remained in Hoté for an additional day. Broadly, this was

explained as a result of the commemoration of *Kana ze Galila*, which marked when

Jesus performed his first miracle at Cana, turning water into wine. Since the day after

Epiphany was St. Michael's feast, the placement of these two events on the same day

predicated that a special procession takes place based on Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition.

These extensions to the narrative of Timqet theatrically illustrate how participants

literally refuse to part with sacred time, suggesting its duration contains a point of

expiration. Tomorrow, once again, will be a replay of today and hence suggest a

cyclical quality to how these processions are socially performed. However, the aspect of

assisting Qidus Mikael *tabot* promoted even more rigorous participation. This recalls a

Durkheimian collective effervescence, underscored by his characterizations of

"massing," powerfully stimulating events such as Aboriginal totemic rites that produce

a momentary emotional and transcendental affect via "extraordinary degree of

exaltation" (Durkheim in Chau 2008: 498). This interpretation of collective rituals is

common within classic anthropology. As an alternative, Sangren (1987) proposition of

"collective testimonialism" of Mazu festivals that "confirms and authenticates an

individual worshiper's faith in the magical efficacy of the deity" (Chau 2008: 500) finds

an appropriate correspondence to how *tabot* revelation has been characterized as a

reunion of divinity and humanity. Likewise, the aspect of collective watching as I noted

is addressed in Chau's (2008) discussion on Chinese festivals. How audiences watch

and witness the *honghuo*, a sensory trait translated as "social heat" or "red-hot

sociality", finds appropriate parallels to "watching" the modes of *aqwaqwam*. Chau

amends the ecstatic potentials of "collective effervescence" as a totalizing

transformation by charting the range of affective span of those watching honghuo:

> Many festivalgoers look excited, happy, and engaged, while some others are quite
> calm; some look awed, even disoriented and confused; many seem not to know
> where they are or where to go, and are simply being pushed by the momentum of
> the crowd to wherever there is action; and some look tired or simply exhausted.
> (Chau 2008: 499)

His references to mana of Melanesian celebrants finds parallel to attendees of EOTC feast days, who speak about feeling cleansed (*nesu*) and light (*kalal*). What Chau concludes is that "to watch the *honghuo'* somehow makes people continue to regard themselves as mere spectators while they have actually become full participants" (2008: 498). I note that the perspectival opportunities, the sound of heaven (*lisan, dimse genet*), contained within the procession, particularly when *aqwaqwam* is performed, as well as the act of traveling collectively, indicates how active listening, watching, and following can be and facilitates participation and authority in performance space.

3.3 Performativity and corporeal realities

In order to devise a practical theory as to how covenant and sacred presence are made apparent, I focus on one dimension of devotional culture, veneration as it is aurally manifest. The corpus of St. Yared, 7th century monk credited with creating an extensive hymnography for which all Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical chant is derived, is one of the most cited innovations of broader Ethiopian culture. The St. Yared tradition draws its main inspiration scripturally from heralding of the Levites, a particular class of clergy (Psaltists) that finds modern-day application in Ethiopian rites. Here, we encounter additional evidence of imitation of Old Testament grounding. Take this classic and oft-reproduced vignette:

> The scene of David and all the house of Israel playing before the Lord on harps and lyres, drums and sistra, dancing with all their might, and bringing up the ark with shouting and the sound of the trumpet is a spectacle that is eminently alive in Ethiopia and can be seen each year at Timqat and on many other occasion. (Ullendorff 1968: 3)

Veneration is a fundamental character of Orthodox devotion, the dimension of sound being an integral component of prayer as it is sung and responded to within liturgy. This same reference to David, soothing and quieting of "the moody mind of Saul" with "the witchery of music" is noted by Frazer, in his very brief comment on the evocative power of religious music:

> for we cannot doubt that this, the most intimate and affecting of all the arts, has done much to create as well as to express the religious emotions, thus modifying more or less deeply the fabric of belief to which at first sight it seems only to minister. Every faith has its appropriate music, and the difference between creeds might almost be expressed in musical notation... A different spirit breathes in the difference of the music. (Frazer in Hann 2003:223-239)

Among other Orthodox cultures, this dimension of worship, its aural expression, emphasizes an intrinsic characteristic of Orthodox Christianity's "conciliar ideal and constituting a religious territory through sound" (Engelhardt 2010: 108). Unlike the East, the tradition as it has developed in Ethiopia, with bodily movements and instrumentation, proposes that sound assumes an iconographic stance. It is not only about recognizing beauty of glory but also being a participant to this performative prayer.

This parallelism, between the tradition of sacred music and sacred image, invites a cross-cultural comparative between Orthodox devotional characteristics. While the phenomenology of praying singularly will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3, this discussion is devoted to establishing the aestheticizing of sacred space, the indwelling of iconographic time, as has been introduced by how the *tabot* is framed in religious imagination. In this section, I use the basis of the hymnography of St. Yared, one of the most frequent model for Orthodox Christians of modalities of devotional expressions. My aim is not to set a firm opposition between sacred chant and iconography, aural and visual culture, in Orthodox matrices; without doubt each Orthodox tradition has

particular historic and theological development to these domains within their devotional cultures. The innovative quality of *zema* (chant) is that it has the ability to draw together theological principles that attests to a practical theology that "communicates" and communitizes worship. Here, I refer to Rappaport's approach to ritual as "auto-communicative—the transmitters of ritual's messages are always among their most important receivers" (1999:51). The St. Yared hymns are particularly effective at instituting this vocabulary of veneration.

I propose that liturgical chant contains recursive elements within prayer dynamics, an alternative interpretation in light of conventional analysis that cites *aqwaqwam* as an additional confirmation of Old Testament textuality of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Recognizing the performativities of divine presence, what I propose as "iconographic performativity" helps to explain certain rules to worship space. I aim to address two main concerns: an Ethiopian Orthodox approach of church aesthetics and notions of witness through modalities of perspectivial participation.

The notion of collective blessing carries direct materialist import with Epiphany, where the culminating moment centers around the dispensing of holy water. The diminished aspect of water is scaled down rather dramatically, at least in Dessie and Addis where I observed urban variations of the celebration. How does a participant come in contact with this holy water as a sacramentalizing medium? Realistically, it's a distant by-product. My cousins and I were blessed in contact with the substance as bottles of water passed down to deacons dispensing from teakettles. A partitioned and fought-after product, as the mad dash oftentimes yields disappointed celebrants who failed to shove themselves properly to the front. Most people persuaded those who managed to have bottles filled up, most always sharing obligingly (in Addis, they

address these high numbers by firing a hose attached to the Timqet pool). This lead one

to observe that material blessing is not the central pivot of the holiday.

 Feast days are significant time periods when an intensified dimension of veneration

is made manifest. The Ethiopian Orthodox division of time follows a canon stipulating

a vast number of liturgical observances. While fasting occupies an enormous amount of

the year (over 200 days), feast times, days devoted to events in the lives of the Holy, are

understood at the popular socio-cultural level as a concentrated period of holy essence, a

duration of plentiful blessing. Holy water, ash (*imnet* – to be applied to the face or

mixed with grains to be eaten), and blessed bread then results as material after-effect for

the feast day being celebrated.

Sound in Orthodox Christian liturgical traditions has not received much analysis for

its aesthetic form and affective experience on the audience, as compared to the

performer (see Engelhardt 2010). *Zema* (liturgical chant) is a discipline within Church

arts that is a representation of immanence through sound and establishes aural

performative realities. With this definition in mind, Florensky's analysis of reverse

perspective in visual art has more poignancy and applicability for studying *aqwaqwam,*

as a symbolic performance that is as much a locus of revelation as it is representation

(Florensky in Tugendhaft 2009). "The task of perspective, as with other artistic

methods, can only be a certain spiritual excitement, a jolt that rouses one's attention to

reality itself. In other words, perspective if it is worth anything, should be a language, a

witness to reality" (Florensky 2002 [1920]: 254). Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical

expression, which I note as de-materialized in its pictorial forms (Chapter 2),

necessitates additional attention to how rituals mediate these realities of earthly and

heavenly. *Aqwaqwam* prayer, the highlight of feast day liturgy, is performed always

when a tabot is scheduled to be released from the sanctuary and so presents a marked

time of blessing. Handelman's project (2004) for studying ritual as an isolated project is instructive for the aim of locating the process of participation and thereby the transformation of the laity (*amanyoch*) who are present and witnessing. Looking for the autopoietic qualities of self-organization and complexity within ritual forms, these two functions as opening up the possibility of the "capacity of the ritual for temporary autonomy from its sociocultural surround" (Handelman 2004: 12). A complete separation from symbolic field-context as Handelman and others advance is near impossible as the ritual is prescribed by liturgical calendrical order but for a rite such as *aqwaqwam* so self-organized and sophisticated, there is little reflection on its externalizing properties. The following is a consideration of capacities of aurality in Ethiopian Orthodoxy to "interiorize the distinction between itself and its surround and so to act on the latter from within itself, through the dynamics of the ritual design" (Handelman 2004:12). There is utility in such theories for identifying drive and magnetism, its semi-autonomy from the symbolic form.

This pinnacle moment of *tabot* as it is performatively represented will be considered in its semi-isolated form, in order to constitute the rhythm of participation of grand processions, establishing the building blocks of how larger events like Epiphany coalesce to institute realities of human-divine re-unions. This is consistent with what has already been theorized about *tabot* and *kidan*. Segmented roles and phenomenology of liturgical sound as amplified on Timqet served as strong indexical signs for how social space, patterned by the manipulation of symbols and metaphors in performance, what Lakoff and Johnson categorize as an "imaginative rationality", that is, "a way of comprehending reality that draws on "our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness" (1980: 193). Here we can refer to the aesthetic arrangements of liturgical space such as the role of religious art to perform miracles:

"Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for the very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine" (Panovsky in Tugendhaft 2009). I refrain from using the vocabulary of "perspective" in a committed fashion as this term is a theological concept not scholastically progressed in EOTC or greater Orientalist Orthodox discourse. However, transcendental expression is a cultivated art (i.e. sense of art as Godly beauty); therefore, before reaching the ritual of aqwaqwam, I present several core components of a feast day liturgy to establish a phenomenology of dimensionizing symbols.

Engagement with performative realities, as Schiefflin proposes, permits evaluating the points of audience convergences as more than confirmation of doctrinal statements. Kaluli seance events are characterized as a method of problem solving (i.e. curing strategies), a means of "galvanizing social realities" (1985: 712). Spectators to the medium's ambiguous and inconclusive revelations lead to techniques of deciphering, thereby making "on-lookers" far more active, a dialogic and interactive process of performance participation. It has been argued all along that interpretation is a constitutive part of the dynamism of Ethiopian Christian traditions. However, the conservative nature of performative prayers such as *aqwaqwam* align more closely with what Bloch posits as the delimiting capacity of ritual in the restrictive sense, its "illocutionary" force of linguistic form rather than semantic content (Schieffelin 1985:709). In the EOTC ritual order, such events are scheduled and their schema follow a regularity.

What follows this ritual accompaniment is a performance from the *melk'e*, praise of St. Mary, accompanied by *aqwaqwam*. The text is sung in several successive versions, each to a set musical category class, seven in total. It is the same text throughout but in altering melodies, rhythm, instrumental accompaniment and gestures (Damon 2006). This whole system of aural glory is a transposition of the revelation of St. Yared. This excerpt from the Synaxarium on feast commemorating the death of St. Yared in May, describes the principal outline of the story of the chant tradition's introduction:

> And God, wishing to raise up to Himself a memorial, sent unto him [Yared] three birds from the Garden of 'Edom, and they held converse with Yard in the speech of man, and they caught him up, and took him to the heavenly Jerusalem, and there he learned the songs of the Four and Twenty Priests of heaven. And when he returned to himself, he went into the First Church in 'Aksum, at the third hour of the day, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Hallelujah to the Father, Hallelujah to the Son, Hallelujah to the Holy Spirit." The first Hallelujah he made the foundation, and called it "Zion." In the second Hallelujah he showed forth how Moses carried out the work of the Tabernacle, and this he called a "Song of the heights." And when they heard the sound of his voice, the king, and the queen, and the bishop, and the priests, and the king's nobles, ran to the church, and they spent the day in listening to him. And he arranged hymns for each season of the year, for summer and winter, and spring and autumn, and for festivals and Sabbaths, and for the days of the Angels, the Prophets, the Martyrs and the Righteous, in three modes, that is to say, the first mode to be used on ordinary days, the second mode to be used on fast days and days of mourning, and the third mode to be used on the great festivals. (Budge [n.d]: 503-504)

These narrative details, including the instruments that were invented to replicate the sounds heard in this revelation (the sound of seraphims and cherubim)[39], are described as consistent to the testimony of St. Yared. This is how the clergy and laypeople, the performers and participants respectively, relate to the devotional character of all hymnography and its capacity for immanence, the reality of St. Yared's visit to heavens, as he has transcribed and replicated every liturgical rite. This includes the iconography

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[39] Symbolism of seraphim and cherubim are a common trope; angels being present during liturgy is one reason for resisting major disruptions, physical manner needing to be controlled.

of invention itself, as not only are the components of this prayer regarded as treasures but the also the notation of the hymnography.

Schieffelin (1985) devotes analysis to concentrating on active roles of receivers of a medium's information, as a code to uncovering current dilemmas, such as determining the direction of the lost pigs of the village. A search for meaning as it is created through the discursive potential of ritual, in and of itself, not unlike the proposal advanced by Handelman (2004) and such pathways to the inner content of rituals are its vital capacities. As he posits,

> when self-organization becomes highly complex, a ritual has more to live on, or rather, to live through, and we may speak, rightly so, of a separate world of causation and action, one in which, perhaps, all tenses exist simultaneously within self-same space…As Bateson (1977,242) implies, phenomenal forms "survive through time only if they are recursive. They 'survive'—i.e., literally live upon themselves—and some survive longer than others (2004:14).

In Ethiopian Orthodox *debtera* performance, the decoding necessary to derive "meaning" via the symbols' meta-content was complicated by the fact that lay people would rarely be able to articulate why or how these moments were important. Church students readily recited the fundamental interpretation of *aqwaqwam* with a few aural and visual indicators of its hypertextual composition: the strappings of the drum were the lashings to the body of Christ by Roman soldiers, the contraction back and forth by the performers are the physical torments of Christ upon his Crucifixion, the rings of the sistrum were seven altogether, representing the number of the mysteries of the faith (i.e. Sacraments), the sound that symbolizes the seraphims and cherubim. This last symbolic dimension is the most stressed aspect and one that elicits the most emotional attachments. People are hearing something visual. This prayer in movement and sound inhabits grace as it marks heaven on earth, thus connoting a union of humanity with its Creator. It is prayer that is distinctly vertical and horizontal, achieving a transcendent

moment socially, this coming together being crucial for a contemporary church

contending with its corporative identity that constantly ebbs and flows.

The process of shaping these symbols is a sensorially totalizing experience, argued

fully by Feld (1990), whose analysis of the ecological and ontological holism contained

within Kaluli song, constitutes "a cycle of evocation and response moving between

weeping (emotion), song (aesthetic and emotion), and weeping and anger (in empathy

and appreciation triggered by the aesthetic), one in which performance, aesthetics and

collective emotion continually overlap and converge" (Feld in Born 2010:83). Viewing

aqwaqwam is a similarly affective event, a span of twenty minutes that ranges from

deep concentration and stillness to exuberant euphoria and giddiness. The performance

also elicits response of appraisal, similar in fashion to Schiefflin's discussion of seances,

where those watching are actively involved by their interplay with the performance, in

particular the display and outpouring of deep sorrow as well as their in-the-moment

reflections and comments regarding the veracity of the performers' skill, assessments

regarding their ability to assist in drawing the reality of the spirit world. There is a

qualitative difference with the aesthetics of the *zema*, aesthetics of representation and

revelation, beauty as heaven (Werner 1984) and an art that is specialized (i.e. mastery

by special class)[40], unlike singers of gisalo (Papau New Guinea) of Schieffelin and Feld

studies. In the case of *aqwaqwam*, there is a radical narrative dynamic to the

constitutive parts of *aqwaqwam*, as the *debteras* are inhabiting the roles of the

persecutors of Christ, performing the beating. However, Shelemay and Jefferies' study

of Ethiopian Orthodox chant (1994) astutely note Western Christian sensibilities to

suffering and guilt in foreigner accounts have conflated of mournful responses of the

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[40] Space does not permit full analysis of the cultural debates of signing in secular domains, as "folk" arts or professions are considered low-grade. The emergence of the devotional songs of Sunday School movement represents a safe middle-way for such expressive medium.

Ethiopian Orthodox celebrants as self-evident demonstrations of human betrayal. Moreover, I would stress that decoding as a participant's strategy in such ritual context over-privileges the importance of transparency knowledge (i.e. the content of the communication) at the expense of the ritual's affective force. Schieffelin makes a similar assessment (1985), but insists that strategies of performative realities are able to serve as mediums for "solutions" to spiritual authority, locals disavowing their own drive (Miyazaki 1999 argues similarly on abeyance and avoidance, see Chapter 5). In my context, I would summarize the ability to identify the stratum of symbolic field as optional but not required, as was proposed in 1.2 with the multiplicities of *tabot* interpretations. I would entertain the possibility that this functions as a thematic simile of veiling and obscuring of knowledge (see Levine 1965), a return to my opening paradox about broad paradigmatic veiling of Ethiopian Christian tradition.

In this crystallization of divine presence through segmented liturgical rites, the *tabot* provides the space, the benediction of the domain to hear and visualize, to witness a revelatory episode, but the actual positionality of the venerated object is off to the side (i.e. Celebrants are "watching" *aqwaqwam*, the stage for the *tabot*, itself located several meters away), more presiding over the scene than being performatively central. If this observation is extended beyond this specific event and relayed to the other examples I have presented of ritual language of veneration, it is evident that variations of shrouding are constantly apparent, suggesting that performative realities also function as a mediation of social space. Schiefflin (1985) proposes that the ambiguities of uncovering coded knowledge are precisely the conceptual gaps necessary to initiate interpretation and action on the part of laymen. Considering the performative realities of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, this material shrouding, in its complementary structure to reverence, appears through these emblematic modalities of sacred

indwelling, or the amplified exhibitions of glory when assisting a *tabot*, as well as witnessing the testimonies of recited miracle stories; These are all ways to know God better, but while maintaining a separation, a need to keep the nature of the relationship a mystery. The space of separation permits individuals, and Orthodox communities more broadly, to arrange a relationship that requires their continuous commitment and attention.

3.4 *Tabot* ≠ Salvation

This dialectic of how the Word is materialized and objectified is encapsulates one dimensions of the disjuncture between Christianities in Ethiopia, the tabot serving as one representation a domain of Orthodox tradition that is critiqued by Pentecostal Christians as overly dominant by ritualism and mysticism. This contrasts from what we have witnessed with Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, whose objectified covenant is presence, an edification through a modulated screening of materiality (sound), as *tabot* never exclusively stays as *tselat* but are metaphorized to actual *kidan,* covenant as Testament by God.

An antagonistic encounter with Ato Getachew, a Mekane Yesus preacher visiting my family in Dessie, serves as a window into these issues of difference among local Christianities. He discouraged me from the course of my research project ("What is there to study but culture? Nothing to do with faith."), and then launched into a critique of saints and feast days. He referred to the custom of offerings given on these set occasions, when a *tabot*'s namesake is honoured, and the impetus for individuals or collectives like *mahabers* to participate with focused engagement. He spoke of "deal-making," connoting an economic/exchange dynamic. It is crucial to note the content

shift, to speak of saints and their representation as aligned with *tabots* departs from

Judaic frame of sanctuary-temple. Ato Getachew's comments stem from refusing to

conceive of covenants as acts of promise available by reference, akin to quotation in

ritual language (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, Bloch 1992). Saints made covenants

(see Fritsch 2001) and most hagiographies (*gedl*) must contain/refer to a *kidan* made

with God by the saint-martyr. A genre of Christian, New Testament covenants framed

principally as relations between vassal-lord, consistent as Ethiopia, a vast, loosely-

networked territory of semi-autonomous principalities until the 19th century, politically

functioned under feudal order. All hagiographies contain a *kidan*. As Chapter 7 will

argue, archetypes of individual promise draw upon saint covenants such as *Kidane*

Meheret (Covenant of Mercy, see Chapter 7). These arrangements I argue, do not

follow transactional conceptualization of humanity to the sacred order as understood in

certain Western Christian traditions. As outlined in Chapter One, covenant as a mutual

commitment confirmed by formalized agreements, finds its common reoccurrence in the

"Pentateuch," the first five books of the Torah, and align with Near Eastern historical

traditions of legal arrangements (approximately from 20th to 10th century BC). These

were oral and written documents, following practices of inscribing on tablets[41], with

various mechanisms of binding. The ritual aspects of covenant-making were typified as

agreements as codified through public presentations[42]. The feature of the communal

meal functioned as the seal of covenant ceremonies is also stressed. These two features,

the performative and the associative, will feature strongly in material (processional) and

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[41] The history of tablets as legal documents have a similar history in Ethiopia, as *tabots* (arks) have
functioned as treaties, containing declarations of land-holdings etched into the wood or stone
material(See Tedla da Hebo 1994, Fritsch 2001).

[42] Thematically, Weinfeld summarizes the varying linguistic range of covenant as categorized between
oath and commitment to love and friendship (Botterweck et al 1977:256).

social (commemorative meals) dimensions of covenant as they have developed in Ethiopian Orthodox Church traditions (see Chapter 5 and 6).

Scholarship on typologies of covenant have abided by a trend to organize covenants into sets of typologies, such as conditional/unconditional, obligatory/promissory. I first refer to the Abrahamic and Davidic, as archetypes of gift of land and gift of kingdom respectively, as they correspond closely with the above description of covenant at the inter-personal level. In Weinfeld's encyclopedia entry on *berith* (covenant in Hebrew), he characterizes these two covenants as promissory to exceptional individuals, based on historical patterns of the royal grant as gifts accorded due to "truth, righteousness and loyalty": in the case of Abraham, the promise of land (Gen 26:5) and for David, "the grace of kinship" (Weinfeld in Botterweck et al 1977: 271). This type of promise contains a commitment, extending to future generations (i.e the "promise of the "house" connoting descendants of the line). By evaluating the etymological roots of key regional languages such as Hebrew, Akkadian, Aramaic, Hittite, who associate "kindness" to covenantal relationships, Weinfeld elucidates the theme of steadfast love as a pivotal undercurrent, in the Davidic example, "they shall not abandon the grace... their positions shall not be removed (Psalm 89:20 [19]) and with Abraham, "to a thousand generations," those who keep his commandments (1977:271-272). It is a popular colloquialism among Orthodox Christians, to refer to themselves, sometimes in the group devotional context, as "bet Abraham," as well as the idiomatic expression of being the seed (*zer*) of Abraham is a common trope, which becomes significant in Patristic commentaries on the covenant.

Given how developments of covenant evolved in the Near East, and the ritual aspects of this arrangement, its binding agent (e.g. reading the Acts as testimonies during feast days, followed by memorial meals at the premises of the church or in

peoples' homes), resonates with analysis by Haran (1997), who argues that scholarship on *berith* (covenant, in Hebrew) remains too textual. As I propose, a certain modality to covenant in legal tradition remain to be relayed, such that the citability of the saint covenants for Ethiopian Orthodox believers is crucial in the constructions of the oath for committing pilgrimages. What these features indicate are that covenants are not analogous to contracts, since pledges to saints are intercessory and thus represent an alternative legalistic tenor of relations.

These definitions of covenant and the bonds that they put into practice or facilitate that are implicated have properly instantiated the emergent dimensions of reciprocal recognition that are contained within this socio-religious category. An additional variation of covenant remains to be evaluated, that of Western Christian interpretation. Hahn (2005, 2009) in his expansive review of covenant disassociates himself from established norms in New Testament scholarship, what he refers to as covenant nomism, a viewpoint that purports the superiority of the New Covenant (instituted by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) over the Old Covenant (see Gal 3:15-18). This reflects the entanglements between which is the primary covenant that is to be fulfilled, the Abrahamic, and by association, Davidic (the promise of "house", without condition) or Sinai. This crucial distinction appears strongly in commentaries among Pentecostal Christians in Ethiopia, regarding whom the *kidan* is with, on what terms and the necessity to refer to the Old Testament in any fashion (see Chapter Two). Hahn posits a critique, saying that interpretations of Pauline epistles are not contextualized as a bridging of prophecy between Abraham and David to Jesus. The component of curse is important to note as a rationale for "decomissioning" the Sinai covenant, as Christ's death expiates the curses of the Deuteronimic (treaty-type) covenant, thus opening access for all mankind to "the blessings of the covenant with Abraham" (2009). This

leads to further inquiry into the amalgamating aspects of covenant in EOTC such as when *tabot* rituals (Old Testament) liturgically sanction the sacramental event of the feast of Epiphany (New Testament).

Living by "the Law" and to which interpretation runs parallel to a more juridical definition of covenant. During this same visit, my friend Negus interrupted Ato Getachew, in response his statement that the Old Testament should be thrown out. While Neguse was more of a culturally definitional Orthodox rather than an avid attendee, he became vocal as Ato Getachew became more outspoken, stating that there was nothing to be gained from the Old Testament, as it was a covenant that "failed" or broken, echoing covenant nominalism of Pauline interpretation Biblical exegesis (Hahn 2010). This comment irritated the guests, who were all Orthodox, and when he left, several commented such opinions were not shockingly new. Negus did speak up, particularly on the issue of law (*hig*) and its indivisibility from the whole of the Bible: "We live by the law of Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Isaac. How can you suggest that this be thrown out?" This corresponds to periphery remarks made by numerous Orthodox I spoke to in Dessie who observed the bookstands which sold the New Testament only, translated into all major Ethiopian languages. Given what has been described about the *tabot*'s embedded covenantal continuities, this trend can be seen to be even more detrimental to Orthodox sentiments of Christian fidelity to Divine Truth. Neguse was referring to the Old covenant/testament as a code of ethics and moral fibre.

In analysing the immanent materiality of *tabot*'s properties to an objectified textuality of the *kidan*, Neguse's adamant remark about the content of the total Bible is strikingly ironic given how few Orthodox Christians read the Bible regularly. In fact, this is part of the reason why Senait invited Ato Getachew in her salon. A particular "liberal" as compared to Neguse's culturally defined Orthodox, she noted how she

appreciated this friendship because it made her evaluate her faith in more educational fashion, relying less on traditional or "folk" ways of the past (i.e. pamphlets on the Gospel messages easier to penetrate than portable media offered by the Orthodox church, see 1.3)[43]. To establish a controlled ordering of approaches to various responses simple to appeal to Orthodox theology to impose a tight system: "the incarnation of the Word as Redemption" (Florensky in Gebru 2013:138). Based on local liturgical elaborations and the schisms that emerge from various interpretations as illustrated above, an all-encompassing statement does not satisfy a synthesized approach to the praxis among Ethiopian Orthodox.

I submit these patterns of allegorical constructions of the "covenant" in the various ways I have outlined serve to shape interpretive logics within Orthodox cosmology. So far the covenantal events that have been referenced are that of Moses and Christ (i.e. Ten Commandments and blood sacrifice of Christ). These are the principal covenants, as well as the Law of the Patriarchs (*Haymanot Abew*) which Abera referred to when structuring his object to objectified definition of the *tabot*. This also was what Neguse was referencing to when he recoiled at the implication that the Word as Law becomes half-thrown away. Covenants made by the saints are a version that is both indicative of replication (chain of connection to God as vessels and embodiments of the Holy Spirit).

It is challenging to provide a straight response to "what then exactly is this ark?" based on the multiplicity of interpretive responses as the *tabot* refers to a much larger territory of expansive ideologies of revelation. There are qualitative differences between *kidan* and *tabot* yet prototypical identicalness. The outlines of these two

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[43] Moving into territory of Bible as entity, it is implicated in argument through its oath-making item capacity, and as highly ascribed to as holy object (see Divine Liturgy celebration). Texts are materials to be shrouded, kept in glass cabinets, some are wrapped in special decorative cloths, to be read for occasions of public blessing (see Chapter 4).

concepts, one an archetypical embodiment of Judeo-Christian bond between God and humanity and the other an earthly manifestation of divinity, are related and rooted to one another and cannot be separated out from each other, yet signal distinct engagements.

The manner layers of interpretation have been offered to fuse tabot with Timqet serve as stratums of definition that are not levels in the vertical sense but references all within the part/whole. It is a method of stockpiling connected metaphors, what I argue is the socio-theological genre of covenant. Mosko's analysis on "base-body-tip-fruit recursion" through the botanical metaphor of the yam is an apt correlation, from constructing food stuff heaps to metaphysics of Trobriand self-image. He argues that "systemic pervasiveness and enchainment as holographic substitutions or transformations" indicates how cultural recurrences can constitute key templates for meaningful social action (Mosko 2010:152). In a fractal frame of the covenant, immanence is "shorthanded" through the *tabot* as a performative expression of edification of Christian metaphysical bonding, both an "outgrowth" of the ideal-type (the Word of God), and stabilized by its relational properties to the whole.

3.5 Conclusion

At the start of this study, I was frequently asked about whether other Orthodox Christians, non-*habasha* people that is, existed. This was a sufficiently direct inquiry to relate to and I used my identity and life experiences as an Orthodox Christian to illustrate that the religion has a wide geographic coverage, from northern most parts of the Americas, through Asia, parts of Europe and the Near East. This response, however, did not completely satisfy the question regarding the porous definitions of the

Orthodox membership worldwide. We could agree that it was rare, though not impossible, to have a Greek go to an Ethiopian Orthodox service, or an Ethiopian attend a Russian liturgy, their linguistic, ethnic and cultural determinants giving preference for individuals to remain in their own Church traditions. For most of those I had a version of this conversation, we settled on several core commonalities; that it was one faith, with the same theology of triune God, one in essence, three in person, and that the Church placed a high importance on tradition that was passed down faithfully since the early days of Christianity.

One defining difference that emerged most dominantly as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians discerned the differences and commonalities, was whether these other modern-day Orthodox Churches, had the *tabot* in their sanctuaries. As time went on, I learned of the multitude of options to interpret this question. This entity is pivotal in devotional culture, at moments such as the procession that concretizes the church as its body of believers. It was also living artefact of Ethiopian exceptionalism and cemented the Church's place as guardians of national history. To note that such a ceremonial item had no corresponding place in other Churches not only confirms a distinctiveness and honour for my fellow inquiring Orthodox, it initiated a honest appraisal of alternative Christian perspectives on divine presence elsewhere. To ask if others had a *tabot*, too, meant if other Orthodox Christians were also endowed to commune and possess an intimate relationship with God, the accessible realities of heaven on earth.

As much as the question is concerned with possession, guardianship and responsibility and the gifts those bear, it also contains implication for what Cannell (2006) posits as the economy of salvation encased within what she informally refers to as "transcendent Christianities". The dynamism of transcendence in Ethiopian Orthodoxy is simple enough to grasp. Any visitor to a feast day who witnesses this

"*tabot*" being processed can quickly assess how fervent Christians engage with their religion, thoroughly enchanted one might say. How does the importation of Christianities into local knowledge and practices radically alter the composition of selfhood? The legacy of Weber is not difficult to discern, the intersection between religion and modernity as composing his thesis on the modern man and disenchantment and the operable logics between worlds, the one living in and the other looking towards the next. I propose that the multiplicities of the covenant idea in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, as this dissertation argues, invites considering how these Christians understand transcendence and salvation thinking.

Yet the point as it was posed, do they have *tabots* in their churches, implies the potential for a dialogic relation to the sacred within the concept of the covenant, as contained and tied up with the church and within its social composition. With this modifier of Christianity as a corporative body, contemporary studies appear less equipped to discuss this social character of the church, preferring analytical directions of Christian self-fashioning and individualism (for alternatives, see Harding 2010, Coleman 2000). To pivot on the problem of modernity is nonetheless crucial for an understanding of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahado Church as their dominance in the religioscape recedes to the increasing popularity of Islam and Pentecostalism in the country. Traditionalism is the churches' and their believers' distinctiveness; they lose their intrinsic qualities/traits otherwise. Through the central concept of covenant, the subject becomes centered on the real borders/boundaries of church. To suggest that the *tabot* is meta-communicative of church and its people presents an ecclesiological problem, but an anthropological one as well. With this concern about how the "vitalism" of Orthodoxy is reconciled into "modernity," I came to understand that *tabot*

implied the future of this much-valued tradition, making their question all the more consequential.

My hesitation throughout this project was to avoid superimposing this ultimate symbolic narrative of covenantal peoples, all the more romanticized in literature of the past several centuries, to explain all, including the loose and ever-enduring approach to redemptive time. The "economy of salvation" is a condition that is problematic, both for Filipino Catholics who do not participate in confession (Cannell 1999) and for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who refrain from sacramental life in the formal sense (to be further discussed in Chapter 3 and 4). However, the biting urgency of eschatological thinking is certainly not absent as this question is not solely *if* one possesses the *tabot* but *when* it will emerge, thus nearing a response to Weber's question about salvation drive. *Tabot* does not equal salvation but connotes a reunion. It is a multi-layered field of interpretation and social space making of performative realities. The shape of the Church and Orthodox Christian community is reaffirmed through engagements with performative realities of the covenant. This chapter proposes a theory of covenant imaginary that provides a dialogic code of blessing (i.e. protection) and responsibility (i.e. commitment). Broadly speaking, this dissertation argues that the covenant serves as a baseline concept for envisioning union of humanity and divinity, inspiring various mediums for maintaining these bonds in sustaining ways.

This chapter is grounded in how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians speak of the *tabot* as an imaginary of their church, in theological thinking this being a time/space of reunion with divinity (*Egzeiabher* – God). The material presented concerns the various intersections of the objectification of the *tabot*—not about how people see it, revelation is a matter of faith, but this chapter is concerned with how believers actualize the virtual presence. I argue that this activity is less about the environmental or circumstantial

components of being in union with God (*Egzeiabher*), or modalities of presenting (i.e.

metaphysical approaches to veneration), but about the roles that this confers for the

participants. How the *tabot* is made manifest on the part of believers has implication on

covenant ethics as a social category for my broader dissertation argument. Taking a

holistic approach of how the church is organized around its social inter-relationality

yields to answer new questions and a framework of how an idea of the covenant is

actualized beyond its abstract term as "chosen people."

Chapter Four: Liturgy and Stances of Giving Respect

4.1 Covenant-as-liturgical

In order to chart the ways Ethiopian Orthodox Christians take inspiration from the Church as a domain of relating to their social world, a significant part of the ethnographic task was to describe and characterize the rhythm of their engagement with the liturgy service. "Going to church" to worship (*masqedes*) is a crucial activity that spans a wide cross-section of generations and represents the most doctrinally supported instantiation of covenant: that of covenants as divine gifts bestowed upon humanity enacted through the sacrament of communion (*qurban*). The culminating point of any Eucharist service of many Christian churches is to hear the proclamation of the offering of the blood and body of Christ to the disciples[44], its salvic significance being the remission of sin and the promise of entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. I propose that liturgy, a habitual commemorative event at the "altar of sacrifice", can alternatively be interpreted as the ultimate demonstration of covenant in praxis.

However, there are sociological challenges to take into account that disrupt this one-to-one equation of covenant=communion, particularly because taking communion in contemporary Ethiopia is relatively rare. As such, the liturgical context is not exclusively about *qurban*, though sacramental characteristics of domestic memorial events will be explored later on in this dissertation. The act of coming to church is a

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[44] As paraphrased from the Anaphora of the Apostles from *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (2010). Other variations in liturgy include specific statements of "the blood of the New Testament" in the Anaphora of St. Cyril (356) and in the Anaphora of St. John Chrysostom, the ""blood which is indeed the drink of life" (334).

highly variable sphere of engagement that takes people outside direct participation of its formal rites but is still very much contingent on keeping the locality of the church as the centrepiece of devotional expression. However, I argue that "church", based on the vectors of activity that are grounded within worshippers' experiences, should be classifiable as "space/time" (Munn 1994:105). This will be explored by tracing several common characteristics of devotional commitment, which involve aspects of veneration that are removed from liturgical rites. The multi-dimensional qualities of church-going come to the fore when observing how people seek out encounters with church, in any degree or form, as an indispensable part of their lives.

To enliven this definition of church as a space/time, I briefly refer to how Senait taught me how to pray, and in turn, showcased how stances of worship contribute to a well-developed pedagogy of how to offer respect. Senait, a resident near the St. Gabriel parish church, avoided liturgy (*qidase)*, mostly due to the physical strain for her. However, early one evening, Senait announced that she wanted to go to church. Since she had to take taxis everywhere, the local drivers knew her very well, allowed her to stop anywhere she pleased outside the established bus route. Senait, though, insisted that we walk to church, dangerous at this time of night. It took us some time to arrive, due to the rough incline of the path, jetting with boulder rocks, and because I was supporting most of her weight from her right side, causing us to take breaks every few minutes. Finally, making our way to the main entrance, we presented ourselves to the women's door (to the left of the *bete meqdes*) and kissed its right, left and bottom panels, repeating the same to the icon of St. Mary and St. Gabriel along the wall. I then stood in front of the icon of Mary, prayed silently for a few moments before sitting down at the bench to the side, as I sat and waited for her to finish. What Senait performed that late evening is termed *mesalem* in Amharic, a stance of worship that

directly translates as prostration or genuflection, but what I argue connotes a broader repertoire of worship. Moreover, to consider prayer as part of a repertoire of practice is a legitimate supposition, given that praying, often done communally, is a cultivated technique, a fact Senait often teased me about. As it happens, on that occasion at St. Gabriel's, only the two of us kneeling in the darkness, she remarked in a light and non-judgmental manner that it looked like I did not know how to pray. She made similar comments in her living room, when she would ask me to offer the blessing before the coffee was served to her friends and guests. I phrased my prayer-speech in the only way I knew how, in conversational voice and in short declarative statements (i.e. "I wish for health and spiritual guidance", "We are thinking of those especially in need and far away, like our relatives living in America"). This was not unlike a performance at many Western dinner tables before starting a meal: short and sweet. Senait often smiled and said that she would soon teach me properly, but gradually refrained from deferring to me for offering the blessing. For her and many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, praying was a dialogue of pleading and suspended expectation, with no illusions of grant-making in the way I constructed my admittedly secularized "I wish" phrases. To witness the moments when individuals do *mesalem* is to observe a conversation that is extremely sacrificial. At church that late evening, I heard the majority of the content of Senait's prayer, pronounced softly but aloud, as she knelt by the mat by the women's door, her upper body faced upright and her hands outreached. She was distinctly intimate and dialogic in her approach; her head tilted and turned to the side as if in deep engagement as she pleaded about her weak body, her deceased mother and the family, especially the brothers that she missed in California. Each of her sentences was punctured by a mournful meter, a "tick" of the voice that was a colloquialism among Amharic speakers as a demonstration of empathy. She then

concluded by leaning face down on the floor and mumbled a few barely audible prayers, what I gathered to be Our Father (*Abatachin Hoy*) and Our Lady (*Emebetachin*). This mundane yet critical act of *mesalem* for Ethiopian Orthodox adherents such as Senait underscores the various physical means by which one addresses God, and thus, themselves. Ideally, to know how to pray well to God is to know how to offer respect to one another.

In this chapter, I outline the various modes of church-going that highlights this necessity of acknowledging always, what I synthesize as an ethic of thanksgiving (*temesgen*). I argue that the manner in which this is reflected in popular devotional behaviour can be classified as a formal approach towards the sacred, what Hénaff (2010) terms as "reciprocal recognition". To give respect is a practice of offering oneself, an aspect of liturgical approach that finds correspondence to the underlying ideology of covenant as a dialogic relationship of mutual protection. This chapter considers individuals' alignments with worship as acts of "covenant as liturgical", in order to position the ways that Orthodox Christians approach the church as directly external to its liturgical programme (i.e. scheduled rites located in its physical compound) yet indirectly related to its liturgical essence, that is, to give honour. Furthermore, the requirements to follow a disciplined relationship of giving thanks are rife with social and personal dilemmas. Unlike Chapter Three that incorporated phenomenology to discuss how the church moves as a holographic object, the discussion here focuses on performativity and aesthetics of personal rituals to delineate how covenant is a way of making relations. I propose that the ways people learn to honour God composes a broader repertoire of promissorary acts. In context such as the non-liturgical domain of mourning houses, modalities of generating respect follows several key patterns for how illocutionary acts are self-referential (Austin 1962). I posit

that individuals, as they participate in certain demands to honour customs, are recalling other knowledge bases that inform their notions of social obligations. While this analytical arrangement is positioned as a convenient symmetry between *qidase* (i.e. the serialized drama of Christ's death and resurrection) and the memorial customs of death, my principal aim is to investigate how colloquial action within both domains, are intertwined, down to their common performative qualities. What I propose is that the potency of ritualized behaviour of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is not a reflection of an overt replication of symbolic forms, but rather indicates the ability of ritualized actions (i.e. prayer as bodily inhabited, customs of offering condolences) to communicate and demonstrate how honour is conferred individually and communally. This quality of maintaining relations, that is, offering respect through liturgical and non-liturgical contexts, permits envisioning covenant as a way of approaching sociality.

4.2 Encountering Liturgical Omnipresence

The contemporary experience of the call to prayer is a classic feature of the soundscape in countries with dominant religious representation in the public sphere. This aspect of religiosity in the mainstream communicates a totalizing omnipresence of a socio-political body such as the Church, as well as from certain perspectives, its hegemonic presence in a locale such as Ethiopia. However, it is misleading to accept wholesale that common rituals, such as communal prayer, reflect unified action among its adherents. Bandak's (2012) analysis of the feast of the Holy Cross in Damascus illustrates the complexities surrounding the category of "devotees" and behaviour that carries the assumptions of pious character of individuals. The pilgrimage context provides an excellent ethnographic occasion to chart how Orthodox Christians approach

their religion, which he proposes cannot be "reduced to any single feature but can instead be seen as a bundling effect, where issues ranging from the existential to the structural are brought together in different kinds of tonalities in which the Christian specificity can be both figure and ground" (Bandak 2012:542). The ethnography featured here primarily follows individuals who are on the fringe of active lay engagement or are otherwise highly mobile actors who dart in and out of the church sphere. Therefore, to reiterate anthropologists who study Christian and Muslim lifeworlds, contexts that are often bound to a commitment to traditions, activities that contribute to an adherent's self-definition is patched together based on a variety of factors and disposition.

My objective throughout my fieldwork was to study the negotiation of "tradition" and "modernity" by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians via their individual and communal orientation to their Church and its tradition. More precisely, my questions centred around how individuals revise their commitment to their faith in relation to changing political conditions of their Church in the public domain, namely the emergence of competing religions in Ethiopia. Therefore, part of my daily participant observation of patterns of church engagement was to chart the presence of prayer as it emanated throughout the day, following closely the order of the liturgy of the Hours (*sa'atat*)[45] that has vanished from many Western Christian traditions. At 6 am on a typical morning, a deacon will intone the entrance antiphon over a crackling microphone. A collection of two priests and three deacons, the minimum requirement for administering the liturgical service, will then proceed to the rites in preparation for the Eucharist (*qurban*). On the very rare occasion when no feasts or fasts are observed

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[45] The Liturgy of the Hours (Horologion) is its own office and is performed seven times a day, the chief being the 3rd, the 6th and the 9th hours. At monasteries, the Divine Liturgy is heard every day, and certain exceptional churches also hold this service daily.

(see Appendix A), the prayers are amplified, uninterrupted, until the conclusion, shortly before 9 am. If it is a feast day, an evening vigil will be broadcasted. If it is a major season of fasting, then similarly the night service will be heard over the airwaves. It is common to have several ongoing *qidase* audibly overlap with each other on any given morning, creating cacophonic, dissonant sounds ringing out into the streets.

This feature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a throwback to romanticized narratives of the country's stake on antiquity (see Introduction), demonstrated the adherence to tradition that is prized particularly by contemporary theologians. A Jesuit scholar in the 1980s recounted the sensation of hearing monasteries at night, sunrise and sundown and the resounding affirmations of the faithful: "During the nights of Advent… the Church prays her true Advent prayer, Matins… with a ring of joyful confidence," and again, "At sunrise the Church call out to us: 'Watch zealously; the Lord our God is near at hand;'" and, "At sundown the Church sings: 'You have appeared, O Christ, the Light of Light'" (Parsch in Taft 1986: ix). This testimony was presented to an ecclesiastical council of the Catholic Church in the 1980s, when one of the central problems was the poor state of parochial engagement with the canonical rituals of the Church. These hourly prayers were disappearing in the public space, and with it, the communion of worship it signified, which had long been integral for serving to set the tone for Christian orientation and reflection towards the sacred.

Yet for this participant, my outsider position once again helped crystalize a commonplace idea; that through common faith, there is one voice, akin to St. Paul's "many candles, one light" truism. Initially, the sensory experience of overlapping sounds from the church was jarring for me. The inundation of the liturgical prayer that enveloped all corners of consciousness, a mode of daily life that felt clamorous to me, possessed a naturalistic presence to most that lived in the neighbourhood. My common

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membership to other Orthodox Christians did not denote a familiarity with its internal characteristics. This personal challenge and disorientation to perform as a supposed insider, fits alongside Hammoudi's (2006) dilemmas as Moroccan anthropologist and as a "lapsed" Muslim embarking on pilgrimage to Mecca, who was particularly concerned with his interlocutors' expectations to seamlessly fit in as a liturgical participant. These are nuances to the "emic" assumptions of the "native anthropologists" that highlight methodological issues encountered during fieldwork where participant observation can result in moments of fruitful friction.

Reflecting my disorientation to liturgical prayer, I asked Selam, a regular parishioner, why it was not confusing to hear the *qidase* chanted at one part, while hearing a priest from a neighbouring Orthodox church recite the prayers slightly behind or ahead of one another? Her response echoed many non-pulsed reactions from individuals to my sensorial surprise, not comprehending why it would be confusing at all; "it is all the same Church" (*hulum and naw*). The lasting message of the *sa'atat* is to pray in "one voice" and to subscribe full-heartedly to the Christian "modus operandi" to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). What was key to consider was how individuals and communities of churches responding to one formal, script-regulated rite in multitude of ways and how this reinforcement of ritualized worship, demonstrated by Orthodox Christians who interact with the formal rites of the Church, are instantiations of the "covenant as liturgical." The sounds of liturgy were as significant to regimes of worship as the materiality of devotional space. In the following section, I discuss the interplay of devotional space and physical acts of giving respect, what I refer to as dynamics of veneration. I address this first by presenting the approaches to veneration that reflect the church as a deterritorialized space. Thereafter, I pursue a detailed investigation of what I label "the liturgical stance", that is, individuals' orientations to

space/time of the church within and outside its liturgical programme. By considering "covenant-as-liturgical" as a sub-category of a socio-theological genre, I attempt to move away from the prolific interpretability of covenant's symbolic potency and instead focus on the affective qualities of worship that influences how individuals handle the passage of lifecycles, specifically death, and the role that sustained respect-giving plays in their social ethics.

4.2.1 Dynamics of Veneration

The church arts, particularly liturgical chant as discussed in Chapter Three, are an essential component of what comprises an individual's worship experience in the public domain of *qidase*. To verify this statement requires delineating the material aspects of worship in liturgical time/space, as these details serve to foreground the impact of both visual and aural qualities of veneration as a form of conferring honour towards the realm of the Holy (Qidus).[46] To accomplish this aim, I refer to Williams and Boyd's (1993) incorporation of aesthetic theory, within their analysis of Zoroastrian ritual acts. They propose that "art is not a decorative addition to ritual" nor is ritual "a decorative addition to religious belief and practice." These analytical positions are

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[46] I classify "The Holy" or the divine as a pantheon of personnages and events due to the inexact definition of exclusively God and the saints. The Ethiopian Orthodox Synaxarium, the text that designates the commemorations of the entire liturgical year, is composed of the standard dates that mark the death, birth and important acts of martyrs, but also celebrate the dimensions of the divine. Jesus Christ and St. Mary have several types of commemorations, as well as days that mark events in Christian history. Also, there is a significant classificatory nuance in how these material representations of divinity are defined as intercessory forces. The distinction is most clear when aligned with how individuals pray to the miracle-working icon of St. Mary, of several variations in Eastern Orthodox cultures, as compared to the Ethiopian tradition which prays to the Flight of Qwasqwam (The event that commemorates the refuge of the Holy Family (Joseph, Mary and infant Jesus, fleeing the persecution of King Herod). One represents the person/character of the divine while the other refers to the dimension of life history of the divine, a bifurcation of the holy personage as elaborated in the liturgical calendar and Synaxarium.

motivated by their aim to study artistic forms as internal to rituals, structured

simultaneously by "emotive force" and "theological content" (1993:142). For example,

the gesture, as part of a slew of "ritual images" (i.e. bodily, spoken) is complementary

to the rites that are encoded by symbolic references. The ritual image is a pertinent key

term to associate with practices of veneration, and I refer to one lively conversation with

Fisseha and Haile that justifies its place in this discussion. Observing how I cross

myself, the two young men asked why my gesture was different from theirs. I balked,

what can be more fundamental and orthodox than the Sign of the Cross, three fingers

that form a point (the Trinity), then the fourth and fifth resting in the palm to signify the

dual natures of Christ. Ah, they reasoned victoriously, but by the Ethiopian way, the

whole hand is the cross (this would require a diagram to illustrate), and I was not

moving my hand down enough, to connote the womb of Mary. Therefore, in a simple

act that is intrinsic for all Orthodox Christian expression, the ritual image is an

extension of the "vital movement" (Williams and Boyd 1993: 19) that is dually emotive

and liturgical.

A few essential notes on EOTC visual and aural culture are necessary to

explicate to reach a working order of veneration. Unlike the Eastern Churches' (i.e.

Russian, Greek) response to the iconoclastic movement (10th century), which resulted

by sharpening the doctrine on materiality and religion, the visual culture of the

"Oriental" church in Ethiopia underwent a strikingly late evolution. Specific customs or

instructions on veneration of holy representations are minimal in EOTC. This is in

striking contrast to another Orthodox Christian contexts, such as Russia in the late 90s

and early 2000s, where popular literature on proper religious conduct was disseminated

vigorously, which included topics such as how to cross yourself and how to read an icon

(Antohin 2008). In the case of Russia, the focus on orthodox worship was a matter of

significant cultural preoccupation given the long dormancy of the Church during the Soviet era and the re-indoctrination some believed needed to take place on a grand scale to revive the moral fibre. In Russia, there is a heavy stress on the fact that icons are not mundane art and works of spiritual motivation, reflected in the grammar of its expressive form; one "writes" an icon (*iconopesatle*). In response to the iconoclasm movement that swept through Byzantium from the 8th century onwards, was that the Orthodox Church canonically developed a more pointed doctrine of the veneration of images. In their survey of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the language used by Wondmagnenu and Motovu (1970) reflects this character in Orthodox theology:

> The Orthodox venerate flat, two-dimensional icons; they do not pray to three-dimensional statues because these representations may be too realistic and may become in themselves idols of veneration. Images of our Blessed Virgin Mother, Her Son Jesus Christ, the Apostles, the angels and saints are not worshipped at all. The Orthodox adore no one but God. The image of the person venerated is honoured only as a means for directing and increasing our homage and veneration towards that person and through him to God by whose grace he became what he was. We do not adore the figure of the sacred cross. Offerings of incense and light are given to the figure of the cross, to the holy books of the gospels, and to other sacred objects in order to do them an honour which passes to the person represented. By kissing or uncovering heads to the images of Christ, the Cross, the Virgin Mother of God and other saints we adore Christ and honour His mother and saints and angels. (1970:91)

The English terminology that is used interchangeably, between images and icons, in fact has one word in Amharic, *se'el*, which connotes both earthly and sacred art. Despite the fact that canonical vocabulary has not been developed, at least for mainstream discourse, the emphasis on sacred objects that pass honour to the person represented is a consistent feature of Orthodox approach to visual, material culture within contemporary regimes of practice.

Taking a historical perspective reveals that icon veneration was introduced as part of the repertoire of worship in the 15th century, part of radical broad-scale reforms of the EOTC instituted by Emperor Za'ra Yacob. Considered a golden age for the

Church, the indigenous development of icons has been identified as crucial factor for the primacy of St. Mary in church tradition during this era. Heldman (1994) posits that the sophistication of aural veneration, contained primarily within the hymnography of St. Yared, continued to be developed and even argues that the artistry of the visual culture of Ethiopian Church paintings[47] borrow from verses in liturgical chant. In summary, the icons of the Ethiopian Church were late introductions and this historical condition is important to note in order to help position how non-visual media take primacy in Orthodox worship.

Alternatively, how representations of the Holy are featured in contemporary liturgical rites follow a pattern of "aural procession" as it is encoded in the St. Yared hymnography, rather than parading the icon of the celebrated figure to the majority of the worshiping public, though this component of *qiddase* does occur in the *qeddest* and *qene mahalet*, the inner rings of the church (see Figure 3.1). Instructions in the Miracles of Mary (*Tamera Mariam*) state that three hymns of praise are to be read on all Sundays and feast days of St. Mary (thirty three in number), and that all churches must contain her icon, to be censed, properly positioned and displayed on a *menber* (throne stand), and that all prostrate[48] before it (Heldman 1994: 166,170). Historically, icons[49] were

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[47] For example, Heldman (1994) identifies visual motifs such as the grey dove of St. Mary and the head-dress of Mary, which mirrors the sanctuary of the church, as direct citation of "the Praises of Mary" (i.e. on the 2nd Sabbath entry, where St. Mary is referred to as the "Second Tabernacle") that serves as evidence of how aural aesthetics predate visual forms.

[48] These compulsory requirements, widely understood as programmatic of a reformist trend to establish more of a missionary zeal to EOTC, found objections from the monastic centre of the Stephanites, who consequently severely persecuted (See Tamrat 1966).

[49] *Se'el* (lit. painting) ''may properly be termed icons, in the sense that they are portraits of saints imbued with the spiritual presence and force of the saint depicted," from miniatures to murals (Heldman 1994:21). Icons in Ethiopian Orthodox Churches are conventionally commissioned by a benefactor to talented clergy, for private collection or church walls, and are not often a personal devotional item for the masses. It is more typical that homes are modestly decorated with chromolithographs, printed and laminated reproductions of Greek icons (Simmons 2009). In Ethiopian

commissioned by patrons and in contemporary practice, one finds far more mass produced paper icons than locally crafted objects, which are traditionally made from wood or cow hide (Simmons 2009). Most modern churches do not have ornate iconography painted on their stucco walls, but the physical approach to them connotes their sacred presence. On a feast day, a standard presentation of an icon located on the outer walls of the church, will have the lace or satin curtains pulled to its sides, and initiates demonstrations of respect by the devotee. As such, the mediation of contact takes on vocal forms, through hymns, and representational forms of the Holy are framed by canonical directives that predicate layers of material distance (e.g. veiling) towards the supplicant.

The particularities of icons in popular religiosity of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, what I have argued is decidedly muted in its visual representations, further underscores the immaterial nature of a key component of the religion, the material covenant. During my first few months in the field, I attempted to make analogies with other Orthodox devotional customs and found parallels between icons and *tabots* as ill-fitting. There is a pivotal distinction between the two. While icons are understood as a window into the heavens, such that through mutual gaze there is a dialogical encounter (i.e. God is looking back), the *tabot* initiates a performative shielding (i.e. God is actually here) by the supplicant bending in deep prostration and avoiding all visual contact and/or vocally praising by ululating. To refer back to the analysis of Timqet (Epiphany), the material covenant was interpreted as a refraction of its core textual definition, the agreement of God to a chosen people, both as a testament (e.g. Ten Commandments) and as a binding offering (e.g. the altar of Christ). Based on its

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Orthodox families, the family heirloom, rather than a crafted icon, would typically be leather bound copies of particular canonical books, scrolls (amulets) and crosses.

elaboration in ritual, I reasoned that to translate *tabot* as a "replica" effectively abandons the tight relationship between *tabot* and *kidan*, and thus, materiality to text/narrative. Moreover, to apply the label of "replica" misconstrues how Orthodox Christians oriented towards *tabots*, both behaviourally and linguistically. The idea of the sacred relic, an item that is often displayed or processed in Eastern Orthodox liturgical rites, follows an alternative trend in Ethiopia by being embedded in the church itself; this idea finds further support as relics or cherished icons often take a buried form. The travel journal of Diana Spencer (2003) presents a rare account on the material culture of EOTC. An enthusiast living in Ethiopia in the 1960s, Spencer was commissioned to view and occasionally photograph relics, icons, manuscripts that were stored in deep cellars of churches. This process of displaying visual culture required extensive purification rites to guard against fears of corruptibility. One of the principal concerns was that non-believers would look upon the item and tarnish its sacred essence. The documenting of Timket provokes similar concerns, as I was never clear if I was allowed to photograph processions when the *tabots* were in visible sight. On one instance, I irritated clergymen who remarked that my close proximity to the *tabots* was inappropriate, that it is unspeakable that a woman should be standing so close to the *tabot*. Therefore, positional distancing marks an important aspect of how performative prayer mediates similar orientations, which in turn initiates a dimensional presentation of sacred space

The classic action among Orthodox Christians to do *mesalem*, the custom of greeting a church and by such means, greeting God, is a daily act of addressing. This can range from a brief bowing and sign of the cross thrice while en route by foot or by car; this can be signalled by approaching the gates of the church, kissing and tapping

one's forehead three times, in submission, against the metal surface; it can also invite

full prostrations at particular doors of the church; there are many features to note

Figure 4.1 *Mesalem* at Medhane Alem Church

regarding how devotional expression is intimate and tactile and represents a spatial-

temporal approach to locating divine presence.Orthodox Christians regard church not as

a locality exclusively, but as a ritual image, a behavioural reaction and a temporal

condition. This definition relates to what Kapferer (2004) in the context of Sri Lankan

Buddhism, terms as "cosmic habitus"; to describe a physical location as having force;

"as an aesthetic form itself, it works through participant perception, drawing

participants within its space, reorienting and, effectively, re-ontologizing, embodying

within participants the Buddha doxa that the cosmic building and the development of

the ritual context in which the building is set come to articulate" (Kapferer 2004: 42).

To establish *bete kristiyan* as connoting an array of sensory expressions (i.e. liturgy as a

vocal and physical experience) is a characterization that assists to evaluate the way individuals orient to church as a sort of compass of devotional activity-making. Church, then, is simultaneously a domain that is deterritorialized by its "media" (i.e. liturgical chant being a core example movement) and is territorializing as it individualized programs of worship into a coherent unity in action through the ontological presentism of *qidase*.

4.2.2 The Liturgical Stance

Gezachew, a night guard, conducted his morning prayers on the verandah of our house. He started praying at 4 am, when matins (*mahalet*) was chanted by the clergy at the neighbourhood church. Gezachew demonstrated how he would stand with his palms facing up (because "we hide nothing from God") when hearing the chants. Psalms as they are spoken in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are determined by the three variations of chant mode as composed in the *Mesbak* (Psalm-versicle) of St. Yared[50]. Psalms hold a particular high place in Orthodox worship, as these hymns were often conceptualized as "lessons". As a general practice, individuals entering the church are advised to read three psalms (*mizmur Dawit*, lit. Songs of David) as indicated by the day. However, people who were not aspiring clergy and did not possess the catechist books such as the *Yemezgib Tselot* that would inform them of this schedule relied on the chanting of the Psalms during the various offices of the day. Individuals like Gezachew, an ex-soldier in his mid 40s, projected confidence that he could follow the hymns, without hearing the cantors' voices, an assessment of his mastery of this art of prayer.

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[50] This classification of *araya, ge'ez and ezel* is frequently cited by Sunday school students and *memhirs*. The principal significance of these distinctions are the times of the liturgical year it is performed: *araya* (fast beat for celebration), *ezel* (slow beat, with fewer instruments, during fast seasons and funerals) and *ge'ez*, for ordinary liturgical time (i.e. neither great feast nor fast).

On the occasions that I went to church during matins, always with women as worship space is gender divided, individual responses dwindled at moments when electricity would cut off and the volume would diminish. After listening and repeating the verses of the hymn and the conclusion of *mahelet* with various antiphons and particular benedictions pronounced solely by the clergy, people would enter into their routine of prayer. For Gezachew who prayed away from church, in the mornings usually he would say the penitential psalms that he marked in a devoted book of Psalms. Any prayer, especially if corresponding to Scripture, would always be preceded with the prayer of the Cross, which would also signal for him to kneel and prostrate, always facing the East, mirroring the position of the clergy and the consecration of the sacramental hosts. When the 12th hour arrived, the start of the Eucharistic service, he would read the devotional books, which he explained all had specific purposes (i.e. the books of St. Mathew to be read accompanying medicine for a set amount of days). He then would read from the Book of Praise of St. Mary according to passages proscribed for the days of the week. This combination of prayer program (*yetselot mezgeb*) alongside the chants conducted at the church was as he described as daily "nourishment", the metaphor of spiritual food often employed by Orthodox Christians. This is one example of the pattern of prayer as it corresponds directly with the liturgy, a formula that is abided by and individual enactments that are structured around it, despite the distance away from the centre of the ritual, the church.

Variation of devotional embodiment via physical distance (Getachew) and microphone silence, the visibility of one's deliberate act of going to church. Donning the *net'ela* (white cotton shawl) was an unmistakable mark of church attire. As a foreigner, I elicited shocked reactions from people I would pass on the street upon my return from church. Senait, one of my key interlocutors, would inspect the way I

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wrapped the cloth, content that I did it well enough but judging from her critical face, it was a sub-par job. Getting the wrapping arranged the right way was a mark of authentic presentation, akin to showing respect to the sanctity of the occasion.

The consequences of visible liturgical time had problematic effects for individuals who had nine-to-five jobs that required that they alter their devotional programmes. This theme, of the clash between "traditionalism" and "modernity" has addressed in the ethnographic work of Data Dea (2006) and Dena Freeman (2012), who note the success and pitfalls of Ethiopian Protestant converts to break from the tyranny of tradition. I found a similar commentary from Fuad, a Muslim shop owner who was keen to discuss issues of religion and politics. It was his assessment that if one wanted to observe the productivity of Ethiopia and get a sense of its progress and dynamism, I should steer clear of the Orthodox and Muslims, especially in the Amhara region as it had, in his view, too many cultural complexities (*wusebseboch*).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Ethiopian Orthodox Christian canon recognizes both Saturday and Sunday as honouring *senbet*, though in practice, Sunday is the more stringently observed day. One Sunday morning, Senait had already laid several piles of clothes and linen out on the grass, alongside metal basins with clear and soapy water. As she was instructing Tareke the order of which piles to start on first, she simultaneously confessed to me how it was not right to engage in manual labour on a Sunday. However, making Tareke wash her clothes, it was he who was breaking God's law not her, she added. Incidentally, this anecdote speaks to a broader commentary that I heard voiced by several employers in Addis Ababa, about the great difficulty of reconciling cultural habits with labour demands. On certain popular feast days, it was not uncommon for some workers to object and refrain from performing specific tasks (e.g. sewing, digging) as acts that "denied God", as I was told was mandated in the

Meshafe Qidus (Bible). During Lent, I heard the complaint of a manager of a top

supermarket complain exasperatedly that her employees were half-asleep and moved

sluggishly, due to the demand that no substance except water be consumed until mid-

afternoon, when the liturgy is conducted. As such, the flexibility in Ethiopian Orthodox

ritual praxis accommodates individuals who, by restriction, engage with *qidase* in a

piecemeal fashion.

A full-bodied commitment to worship that Orthodox Christians adhere to plays

out most dynamically within the discipline of fasting particularly intense during the

season of Lent (*Hudade*). To return to Gezachew and his prayer program, he regretted

that he could not commit all day to concentrated prayer. His adherence to the fast,

paired with his structuring of prayer time and space, is an amendment to this

"disappointment." To fast is considered an opportunity, to reach a higher state of

consciousness of the soul, by weakening the flesh. The established conventions during

this season were to have nothing but water pass the lips until 3 pm, as compared to

Sundays when fast would be broken after church service concluded. During Lent, all

committed "fasters" would go to church, as this is when the Eucharist service would be

administered. Gezachew, who also had a day job and could not hear *qidase* in the

afternoon, amended this part by saying the prayer of thanksgiving, washing his hands,

and then broke the fast by eating a meal of lentils or boiled vegetables. Fasting, in

addition to being a popularly imagined part of the pathways for gaining "religious

merit" (Buitelaar 1993, Mahmood 2004), was an activity that facilitated the

'seriousness' of the prayer and meditation by the supplicant. Senait, who was enduring

severe health problems and could not fast, felt that her commitment to her faith might

not be taken as strongly because she was not about to completely sacrifice herself. For

her, corresponding to the liturgical was missing in her devotional program. Senait

commissioned a priest to recite prayers from the *Tamera Mariam* (Miracles of Mary) and other canonical books at her home during the first week of Lent. The dimension of liturgical prayer is extended to acts of fasting as a corporal manifestation of devotion, aligned with routine of prayers as enunciated at home and at church.

Also, the vigorous ascription to fasting can be viewed as a deliberate act of sacrifice and therefore suitable to place within a typology of covenant as a type of commitment-keeping that is ritually marked by a demonstrated offering. Situating this fact within how individuals illustrate their devotion through a range of expressions, we can then consider that the sacrificial offering in this liturgical context is the person themselves. This relates to the relationship between the sacrificer and the victim, and the substitution of the person through the gift offered. Parry (1988), who draws from Hubert and Mauss' (1964) analysis of the moment of sacrifice, posits the identification of the donor with his gift is made most obvious by an elaborated motion that enables a "weighing" of the valuable substance before the final transfer of the offering. Not only is religious fasting a crucial means to seek spiritual purity of a polluted body, as it is dogmatically defined, it is also raises a personal consciousness of how the individual carries within them ability to offer themselves. On individual terms, I encountered this regularly when I consistently broke the fast before participating in *qidase.* The night before, when I announced that I would be leaving early for church, the Catholic sisters would insist that I eat before setting out, worried that by delaying breakfast I would feel faint with hunger (which I often did). However, I was aware that I should not, as an Orthodox Christian, eat before the proclamation of the Gospel, even if I was not planning to take communion.[51] To break the fast before I would go to church to pray

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[51] The nuns and the children who made up the congregation at Kidane Meheret Catholic Church did not eat before their liturgy services; these primarily occurred on Sunday mornings, and therefore it was not

serves as a strong example of the theological underpinnings of liturgical activities. To commit fully to participate in liturgy was an embodied covenantal action, classifiable as an act of sacrifice, and identifies the donor with the gift, the gift, as understood in Orthodox Christian theology, being grace.

To refer to specific devotional positioning by Orthodox Christians also signals the importance of fasting speaks to varieties of "sincerity" (Cannell 2006) as constructed by individuals. This convention of maintaining "the Great Lent" (*Abiy T'som*), was changing, as Gezachew noted in comparison to his younger co-workers who did not fast (they lack "spiritual strength"- *mefes tenekare,* he stated). He acknowledged though this is the modern age where he had to work, unlike in the generations before him, when all work virtually ceased during this period. Senait, in her early 30s, had only her mother's generation to compare with and similarly considered the time before her as stronger in faith. Observing some of these variations of abiding to the norms of the Lent season, we can begin to shape what underlining intentionality formal prayers can possess for the supplicants. When introducing the theme of liturgical prayer and its strict adherence socially, I propose that the phenomenon as a mode of renewed commitment, as being beholden to a "responsibility".

Formal prayer, as I have characterized it as a liturgical ritual, is constitutive of several components: cues by doxology of hymns, through routines of prayer as gathered

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habitual for them to consume breakfast before 9 or 10am. According to liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as stated in the Anaphora of the Apostles, "after partaking of the Holy Communion a man shall not wash his hands or feet, shall not take off this clothes or bow down or kneel, shall not spit, or let blood, or cut his nails or cut his hair, or go in a journey, or sue in the court or go to a bathing place, or eat too much or drink too much, or lie with a woman. None of these or the like should be done after receiving Holy Communion"(2010:137).

together as a "collection"[52] of readings and responses to the liturgy, and bodily demonstrations via practice such as prostrations and fasting. One theme that is common between these modalities of "devotional articulation" is its performativity. Rappaport's approach to ritual is worth relating at this point, not only due to his emphasis on "acts and utterances" and their enactment that brings rituals into existence, but also regarding the order (i.e. sequencing of actions) as intrinsic to what formalizes it, making it of a "liturgical" nature. Rappaport describes the ability of liturgical orders not simply to coordinate social life but to provide a well-marked road along which each individual's temporal experience can travel (Rappaport 1999:177). The *sa'atat* or the rituals that make up the Lent fast are illustrations of how marked ritualized action manifests in the public space. However, I have included perspectives from individuals who were rather self-conscious about their failure to fully follow the order. For a vast majority, such as the elderly or those many who are unemployed, coordination to liturgy follows similar rules as described by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994). Attempting to account for the lack of an authoritative theory of *puja*, a Jain commemorative ritual conducted in western India, they drew similar patterns towards specific sequencing and literal re-enactments, that is, a performance that is "scriptural". Just as the recitation and repetition of *namaskar* mantra upon entering the altar of temple god, the action carries a formula resemblance to the end of the Eucharistic service of reciting *maherene Kristos and ye egzio Mariam maharene Kristos*, in stanzas of twelve, while counting each on the creases of one's finger joints, is a similar example of ritualized action. They identify concerns with structuralist approaches to ritual that are geared exclusively to "constitutive rules of ritualized action", the going from act to act, which diverts

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[52] Individuals devise their own program of readings and personal rituals based on the time in the liturgical calendar and their own appeals towards alleviating trouble. Such strategies will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

attention away from the action in between (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:117). The following section will examine the place of reading during liturgy as a ritualized and performed action and a potential mode of inter-subjectivity towards concerns of the liturgical.

In summary, the patterns of individual orientations to church that do not engage with direct partaking of sacrament (*qurban*) permit examining the alternative mediums available for liturgical engagement. Personal "modernity" dilemmas, such as labour demands, reveal that failing to take *qurban*, while key for arguments that consider spiritual striving of bodily and metaphysical purity, involves additional issues such as constructing a encompassing regime of worship, such as in the case of Getachew, that propose to see why people do not take Eucharist, due largely to their lack of being inducted into a process that requires their continuous, attentive involvement.

4.3 Subjectivities in canonical ritual

Observing how people read at church is an indication that this activity tends to deviate from the rather template-based programs of prayer corresponding to liturgical rituals as I have described so far. A theme that appears in particular branches of anthropological analysis on ritual is to view "ritual as communication", and this interpretation finds nearly identical recurrence in the Ethiopian Orthodox canon, that "prayer is a word by which man communicates with his Creator in Faith, thanking and beseeching Him for the forgiveness of his sin" (Fetha Negast 14). This canonical statement would then correspond closely to Rappaport's idea that "the idea of ritual as communication is really people communicating with themselves" (Rappaport in Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:77). The activity of reading from canonical books and the

psalms, as the Scripture were exclusively recited by clergy during service times, is laid out via recommendations given by a *memhir* (cathechist) of which most people know at least several. Reading lists are assigned according to what books should be read for which purposes. One may do this at home, but people generally reserved time during the *qidase* to read from these books[53]. During times of the service that are considered canonically to be particularly confessional (i.e. when Eucharist is being prepared), it is common to see people pull out their books such as *Mezgeba Tselot* (lit. registry of prayers). The passages are read in silence or mumbled aloud, individuals often running their fingers along the lines of the page. The act and rituals of reading correspond to how books are treated as sacred objects and are elevated with certain ceremonial features. For example, the Bible is presented to the congregation after the reading of the Gospel is concluded. It is covered in decorative, deep crimson cloth, of the same type that covers the *tabot*, and is kissed by parishioners. This part of *qidase* is one of the most universally engaged with. The covered Bible makes its way outside the church and deacons diligently walk with it and a ceremonial umbrella to all reachable attendees. The rigor with which this segment is participated with is on par with receiving holy water that is distributed at the end of the service and the blessing by the cross, also at the conclusion.

There, unlike the rebuke by Friday Masowe Apostolics of Zimbabwe against the materiality of the Bible as simply a book like any other (Engelke 2007), religious text is a crucial component of worship and is a channel of communication that is incorporated

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[53] Bibles generally are not read at church. Consistently, *memhirs* told me that all prayer is Scripture derived and that the *qidase* is all from the Bible. One could interpret this reiteration as in some part a response to Pentecostal critiques of the "hollow traditionalism" Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, that its worship has become too detached from "the Word." Concurrently, these books are regarded by certain Orthodox Christians themselves as the remnants of more "folk" followers (*balageroch*) of the Church. Several Wolloye talked about how they read the Bible and not the hagiographies like their parents and grandparents.

into individual's regime of practice. Relating to individual programs of prayer, certain parts of people's prayer books are written in red, these words being the names of the Holy, relating to a similar practice of bowing and sometimes prostrating every time the name of God is pronounced aloud during liturgy. After every passage is read, supplicants cross themselves three times and then bend and remain on the ground in prostration for as long as they need to. This moment, at a semi-conclusory segment of prayer during liturgy, provokes a degree of emotional release from individuals, such as light sobbing, wiping away tears as they rise up, which inspired an affective state through the supplicant's interaction with the words and script of *qidase*[54].

Returning back to the notion that formulas initiate "sameness" of ritual performance, Shoaps (2002) analysis of two modes of religious speech, replication and transposition, in Assembly of God (AG) church services speaks directly to this concern about reliance on liturgical formulas and whether certain religious practitioners consider it an obstacle to their spiritual development. The preference for more spontaneously recited prayers and invocations, the understanding of rote rituals such as reciting the Lord's Prayer is considered by AG pastor as "not a prayer to pray but a formula that Jesus used to institute the elements of proper prayer" (Shoaps 2002:53). To rely exclusively on the formula would become too mechanical. Here, authorship is conceptualized differently. For an Orthodox Christian parishioner like Assefa, he expresses "love through prayer" and talked about reading Scripture as a form of supplication based on the robust-ness of the Orthodox tradition, honouring those before him who lived earnestly ("with pure faith"). In comparison to the Evangelical Christians

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[54] It is worth noting the popular retelling of two saint stories that speak to common ideas of intense prayer. One is the tale of St. Tekle Haymanot who prayed so fervently that his leg fell off. The other is of St. Yared who upon singing hymns to the royal court, was stabbed in the foot by the king, and continued singing.

in the U.S., "earnest-ness" is presented through spontaneous outbursts and personally constructed witnessing, the only deviation from this individuated approach to prayer being through devotional songs.

Despite the difference in approach towards the theologies of personal prayer during the time of the liturgy, these situations illustrate that prayer is a personal act and in many ways anti-structural. In the Ethiopian Orthodox context, ritualization of prayer reveals parishioners who are fairly literate, who rely on form based text that is performed in rote but that can inspire emotional responses. Reading as well as aural performances during liturgy are initiated as sensory experiences, and how individuals enacts these forms in spontaneous ways is a fundamental component of Orthodox Christian worship in the public space, that I argue is irreducible from one another. This combination of scriptural and sensory alignment, finds its most dynamic instantiation during the season of Lent.

4.3.1 Symbolism and Ritual Action during Lent

In order to observe the internal and somatic manifestations of form and spontaneity in the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical rituals, it is instructive to examine church prayer and the general mood of austerity during Lent. Cities like Dessie are large transport hubs and merchants passing through did not abstain from entertainment, though weddings were never carried out during this time. I spoke to a few elders about this topic, who predictably offered retrospective viewpoints on how much cultural decay had rendered commitments to follow religious regimes as shallow (i.e. the contradiction of going to a cinema house and eating *t'som* [fasting] snacks, one action cancelling the other out according to one perspective). I myself often noted the tension

between the strictness of worship exhibited by some individuals while in the same context (i.e. liturgical space/time), other actions that I judged not abiding to norms of "virtuous comportment." For example, I was verbally attacked during a Lenten service because I dared to walk out of the church grounds during *Seklet*, yet it completely acceptable to answer and engage in a phone call in the middle of prayer (this goes for laymen to clergy). Once again, the realities of "urban religion" necessitate that orthodox notions of worship confronts the "experiences of subjective and cultural fragmentation" as individuals' devotional orientations serve as pathways for constituting coherence in their lives (Strhan 2013: 317).

One fundamental component to formal prayer is the enactment of prostration, *segdet*, the utmost demonstration of Christian humility and characterized by certain individuals as protection against evil ("the shield" against Satan). Prostrations are more articulated than usual during this season and in particular during Holy, or Passion, Week. During this time, there are no blessings offered by priests, no baptisms or funerals can occur, and no kissing as a greeting should transpire, and these prohibitions are consistently observed during this suspended period. As the time towards Easter Sunday nears, individual worshippers proceed to prostrate towards the altar to the East. Passing by the busiest streets in the capital, men and women standing by the doorways of the churches will proceed to prostrate, criss-crossing themselves with both hands along their shoulders, tapping their knees, knelling and then bowing to the floor. What this shows is the codes of paying respect expand beyond passive reactions to church's spiritual locality, the mundane act of *mesalem*, but instead necessitate full physical surrender.

The refrain of *Kyrie Elesion* ("Lord, have mercy" in Greek) is intoned continuously by the public throughout this week, hundreds of times a day, though

parishioners would note to that monks and hermits would do many more through the course of the season. On Holy Thursday (*Selot Hamus*), I arrived at church with Almaz at 11:30 am, shortly before the liturgy service was to start. This was the first *qidase* since Palm Sunday four days earlier and the last Eucharist service until Easter Sunday. We arrived in order to secure a space to lay out our mats on the asphalt ground. There were already many people lining the expansive courtyard and several had already started prostrations. To describe the general mood, mostly people in attendance outside were standing, and to my mind, everyone looked bored and dazed looking. At this point, people have been severely fasting for 53 days already, part of the whole lethargic mood that developed the closer to the conclusion of Lent. The litany "Lord have Mercy" began, followed by a series of forty-four prostrations that were instructed by the priests over the microphone. The significance of the number was a symbolic ritualization of the thirty nine scourges, the crowning and the piercing of Christ upon crucifixion. Certain individuals would elongate the response, in particular elderly women, who were in my vicinity. These phrases were pronounced purposefully and were accompanied with certain physical performances, such as waving outstretched hands and heads tilted up. I was particularly transfixed on the prostrations of the elderly women; I observed this had to be physically difficult for them. Women in their age, starting from mid-50s, typically had hip or knee problems from years of physical labour, yet they were hardly out of breath, though preceded with each prostration slowly. Almaz, a housekeeper, did find it physically difficult, but her participation was fairly novel as workers do not get much time off from work to attend services in their entirety.

The rapidity of up and down movement, exhausting to watch as I myself was long unable to keep up, reached a fever pitch on Holy Friday (*Seklet*). Spontaneous prostrations are occurring at all moments of the service; young women were doing

about 30-50 at a time, often not in unison with those around them. On this day, there was no lament refrain uttered by the congregation, and priests were intoning specific psalms at each hour, yet individuals were compelled to cross themselves and prostrate, more than the forty-one times that the clergy assigned as penance. The spontaneous prayer "in movement" manifested in a rather reflexive manner, coupled with the numbing pain of prostration and fasting. It was fairly common for people to eat nothing for the last 36 hours before Resurrection Sunday, the expressions of emotion (e.g. moaning, light crying, exaltations of pity), particularly intensified.

Outside the boundaries of the church grounds, the performative tone of the "Big Fast" was extended into the already highly-trafficked airwaves. Liturgical chants composed for Lent were blared from street corners. Compared to Hirschkind's study of Islamic sermons in Cairo (2006), these types of chants, though employing similar characteristics of modern religiosity, provoke interactions that create a religious aesthetic which is different in nature from performed rhetoric (i.e. preaching). During Holy Week, *zema* (chant) in the Ge'ez mode, typically reserved for funeral masses and times of great national calamities, is played throughout the day. It extols the suffering of Christ's crucifixion and corresponds to the overall atmospherics of the liturgical time, such as the liturgical drum not being beaten during most of the duration of Lent. The solemn chants during Holy Week were elaborated to me by Assefa. These prayers were held in special esteem to which he was "listening with the heart" (*ke lib yemesemat*). One hymn in particular arose a spiritual connection, as he mimicked the slow and deep-throated cadence of Tezekere, meaning in Ge'ez "remember me in your kingdom." The hymn has been broadcasted by street vendors who sell these CDs as well as cafes and tire shops and garages. Ethiopian Orthodox church parishes now have started to rely heavily on sermons, but they are created and distributed for the principal purpose of

creating greater public visibility to counter the increased representation of Pentecostal Christians in popular culture, vastly changing the nature of how devotional culture is connected with by devotees.

Figure 4.2 *Seklet* **(Good Friday). A worship space that is mixed by gender and age, clustered according to individual and/or group acquaintance. A typical Sunday service is more stringently gender divided and religious apparel is less formal.**

As a concluding note, I refer back to my phenomenological experience of a moment in common engagement to underscore the sensorial effects of worshipers as they endeavour to align with liturgical time/space. Prior to my participation in Easter services, the dissonance between the clergy and the worshippers was a fairly jarring auditory experience. Not being accustomed to liturgical chant, I used to suppose that the laity, and sometimes the priests, deacons and cantors themselves, somehow lacked training, refinement, or talent that would explain the variations in these performances. On some occasions, the congregation can sound hauntingly beautiful, while at other

times the symphonic discord can produce extreme sonic confusion. However, my

sensory reaction to the climax of the season on Holy Saturday, that "we are all one

voice", was spurred on by the mechanical failure of the sound amplification system of

the church. Hearing only the chorus of voices from inside the sanctuary, I was stunned

to experience a strange coordination of sounds that began to become sensory for me.

Standing a couple of meters away from a row of people near the banisters of the church

exterior, a group of women were entering at different pitches, "off" by a couple of

seconds from one another, yet the aim is not to achieve complete synchronicity with the

form (i.e. the moments of intoned prayer). To understand the idiosyncrasies of the

chorus is a sign of expression, of the exact moment when people are moved, the "vital

movement of ritual," as Williams and Boyd (1993) have articulated.

On one level, this liturgical order, as demonstrated during Lent, was adhered to

on a massive scale and its significance in Orthodox Christians' lifeworld was stressed

and underlined, the grand metaphor communicating that "Christ shed blood for us," and

"Died for our sins." The visceral-ness of the symbolic memorializing and how it

resonates emotionally with people was demonstrated to me by Miseret, who highly

valued the ritual on Holy Friday of the "washing of the feet" by the clergy. It is a

commemoration of the day when Christ washed the disciples' feet and revealed the

mystery of the Holy Eucharist. High priests of churches bring water in a basin to the

outer ambulatory of the church, recite the prayer of thanksgiving, and wash the feet of

the faithful. Miseret mentioned it to me the day before as a beautiful occasion to be a

part of. As she was describing the dramatized action, her eyes became bleary as she

beamed with joy as she recalled witnessing this event. This testimony corresponds to a

foundational attribute of this dissertation's approach, that is, to take seriously the

theological import of Orthodox tradition (i.e. in the form of ritual, symbol, metaphor) as

articulated by the devotee themselves. By pursuing this aim, the possibilities for how symbolism is made alive through various energies of the faithful makes possible an investigation of the ways activities of worship, much of it laden with meta-discursive forms, assist in establishing a reality which from people can makes sense and connect with the human condition.

Thus far, the content of this chapter has established that *qidase* follows a pattern of the covenant prismatic, a refraction upon a refraction (i.e. the Word of God as testament codified). It is also a domain that is elaborated by Orthodox Christians as they memorialize and celebrate within its virtual space and via its expressive mediums (i.e. the ritual image of sound and physical stance). What we have learned is that this sphere of devotional praxis is a rich collection of little rites that compose the larger ritual. The discussion has shifted from an analysis of ritual reflex of *mesalem*, to collectively affective mediums of liturgical space and time, towards what I will now consider as a communally modulated responsibility to worship as one community. We begin to see the depth that these practices possess for people, as more than simply a normative cultural response to established modes of church engagement. Having elucidated the character of spontaneity within Ethiopian liturgy as coordinated by the laity, we will now turn to the ways in which the liturgical as it is exercised habitually replicates this adaptive ritual flexibility to the sacred.

4.4 *Leqso* as a mutuality of social obligations

In the urban environs, a funeral is firstly noted by the call of death, a trumpeter who roams the neighbourhood, at the crack of dawn. This is an unmistakable sound that cuts through all other peripheral noises and signals the subsequent actions of a

mourning community. At the home of the departed, a large military tent is erected and resources such as seating and food provisions are gathered together by the *iddir*, an association that is specifically dedicated to provide funeral assistance for its fee-paying members. The *mahaber* associated with the family will also fill in support roles. A public mourning period at the residence is set in place from the time the death is announced until the three day commemoration after the burial. This is the time frame when social pressures are most stressed to attend and "sit" at the funeral house. It is preferable to go inside the house itself, to be observable[55] by the principal mourners or outside where close relations typically note who has made the visit and what they brought, usually food that can be used to support the visitors such as coffee, sugar, biscuits, or grains. The closer the relation is, the more pressure to participate in this custom, as failure to do so is considered an insult on the "house" of the family. However, whether one is connected in some kin capacity to the deceased is less crucial than to acknowledging the death itself. These acknowledgments required public demonstration, since condolences cannot be passed on verbally and instead require addressing the mourners personally. To illustrate the rigidity with which this social custom is upheld, I was told of a case of an elderly lady who visited my family's home to communicate her grief over the loss of my grandfather, who died in 1995, for whom she worked as an employee over forty years prior. After wailing and deep prostrations upon seeing my mother, the visitor explained that she could not properly acknowledge my grandfather's passing until this moment because his residence has been confiscated by the government. This was the reason she had delayed her visit, since it was only until recently that a close kin relation began to reside in Ethiopia. Her amendment, to address

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[55] The death of Meles Zenawi in 2012 inspired similar rules of conduct. In that instance, a registry was collected, signed by mourners who visited their neighbourhood associations that all installed funeral tents.

the representative of his line, reflects how the deceased person's remaining heirs are considered the party to present the condolence. Therefore, the custom of sitting for funerals requires a physical location to present oneself and recognize the loss of the member of a family. Furthermore, the event of death, in this instance detached by the distance of time, space, and subject-position of the deceased, is refigured by the mourner who required herself to a commit to formal acknowledgement, without which, the passing of the honoured person hangs in perpetuity.

The ritualized aspect of offering respect to the memory of the departed individual includes the lament as essential in the performance of recognition. I propose that such embodied devotional action, what I have summarized as the liturgical stance, is systemically referenced by mourners, in order to successfully display and communicate a deepened recognition of the social crisis, such as losing a member of a community. Drawing from Mauss' paradigm of the tie between souls, or 'hau' (Mauss 1954), Hénaff reconfigures the definition of the "object" of the gift as, in essence, "to become a pledge and substitute [is] that it is an extension of the very being of the giver who gives himself through it; it is part of him that is mobile but not distinct from him" (2010: 134) He elaborates further:, saying: "A public aspect of ceremonial gift exchange is a relationship: a public act without which there is no community; from the perspective of ceremonial gift exchange, to wish for a gift that remains unknown is to wish for the death of reciprocal recognition" (2010: 141). As I have outlined, the various lay engagements and the subjectivities that are captured as individuals interact with liturgical space/time, I have addressed the physicality of sacrifice in people's testimonies of how they interact with the rhythms of the church. However, the public act of coming to church likewise underscores the point emphasized by Hénaff, the

futility of keeping ceremonialized presentations and gestures secret, which undercut its symbolic effectiveness that denotes the passage of the exchange.

More than the similitudes of "meaning to mean it" actions (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) such as presenting oneself at church and presenting oneself to the family of the deceased, I found that the obligations to adhere to a principle to respect bonds that tie people together, provided an even stronger foundational clue to this chapter's argument, that "covenant-as-liturgical" is a mode of committing and being responsive to a mutuality of honour. As I proposed at the outset of this dissertation, the working definition of "covenant" as a mutuality of honour and obligation, is underwritten by a responsibility to behave reflexively, what Hénaff terms as form of social action, "reciprocal recognition" (2010).

These features help propose an analytical repositioning of "covenant" as reflection upon how cooperative relations are maintained, through specific expressive mediums, what I have pursue in this chapter as the modalities of liturgical stances. I attended a funeral of a man killed suddenly in a car accident, his young age of twenty-four being one of the most emphasized aspects of this loss. The specific circumstances of his passing were fairly vague as most youth deaths incite more scrutiny[56] regarding their causes, as compared to funerals of individuals in a more probable mortality bracket (i.e. average life expectancy according to the World Health Organization (2009) is 62 for females, 59 for males). This particular occasion represented a particularly heightened occasion for the social obligation to attend funerals. It was a massive reception of people who arrived for the burial day, upwards of one hundred individuals,

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[56] Suicides on two occasions by youth in their late 20s/ early 30s, were a subdued affair. Sentiments of regret and empathy are centrally directed to the surviving parents in the two cases I observed, as evidenced in mourners laments that obscured the identity of the deceased (e.g. avoiding to call them by name), reflecting the theological outlook that suicide is a sin.

who knew the family of the young man. However, the large number of individuals in attendance was representative of the expansive network of family connections, not a direct connection to the deceased. As I observed through two mourners who accompanied our party on that day, mourners' knowledge with the person could be marginal. Particularly affecting, I had met Samuel four days before his death, as I knew his uncle well, and on that day, a taxi driver hired for the day and a legal expediter hired by my family, sat with us for lunch. Upon hearing that Samuel had died, both men insisted on attending the funeral. One of them was particularly overcome with grief, tearfully recollecting his memory of the young man, and was rather involved with procession of the casket as it made its way in the ground. This component of the burial custom was the most accentuated, as the mass of people crowded around the grave to witness the deposition of the body. The act of burial is the most pivotal aspect of the funeral custom not only because of Orthodox Christian belief that body and spirit must remain intact (i.e. to ensure resurrection of souls at the time of Second Coming), but because this marks a finality of mourning as the person has effectively departed at this point (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Burial Procession

This is underscored further by the fact that graves, post-burial, are not incorporated into customs of honour and caretaking[57]. Some noted that much time spent by the final resting place might spur irreversible melancholia, thus underscoring the purpose of *leqso* as a social event to guard against loneliness.

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[57] There is a memorial feast offered 40 days, 6 months and one year after death called *fitat*. Attention to gravesites was less marked. For example, St. Yohannes, a famous graveyard in Addis Ababa was being dismantled in 2011. Media attention or outrage was generally non-apparent. This cannot be characterized as an issue of political will, as many individuals with influence and funds preferred to move the remains; the only individuals outraged being those who lived many years abroad and in some cases had funeral plots outside Ethiopia.

The mortuary customs of Orthodox Christians are capable of illuminating a vast array of subjects critical to the human condition, such as the state of mortality and resurrection in the afterlife. As elaborated by the church, this is ritually emphasized by symbolic parallelism (e.g. how the body is wrapped in white cloth, the 40 day commemoration) and the feast to feed all, in honour of the one departed, thought to curry favour of them in the next world (du Boulay 2010). However, the social aspect of grieving likewise provides a critical angle from which to observe how inter-personal responsibility is underscored by a quality of mandated requirement, echoing ritualized characteristics of the liturgical domain. Predictably, *leqso bet* is a zone of intense emptions but in ways markedly contrary to the affective responses to liturgy as detailed in the prior section. As I have noted, the neighbourhood is alerted by a trumpet call the morning of the death, individuals or small groups who approach the *leqso bet* yell and scream and exclaim laments, this activity primarily done by women. This aspect of the initial mourning can be seen as a substitution of the principal grievers who usually exhibit subdued behaviour throughout the event. This composure was less adhered to in the case of Samuel's funeral, many of those paying respect being young men and women. While publically grieving was encouraged, it is also monitored by priests who are quick to tell off those expressing grief, this occurring in the case of Samuel's aunts. Upon entering the house to check up on the head of the family, the priest walked over to the groups of inconsolable women, and while empathizing with their pain, stated firmly that there should be no longing as their nephew is in God's hands. The point of surrender and powerlessness of life is consistently emphasized, as mortality cannot be manipulated by humans, and it can be interpreted as complementing the liturgical essence of giving thanks for life. However, the emotion that spills out into the open as a type of uncontrolled effect must be compared to how feelings are channelled during

qidase, such as the intoning of chant and its "feedback" on Holy Saturday (on ritual emotions see Berthomé and Houseman 2010). This dynamic of expression that is unstable and needs regulation, such as with the priest who chides the aunts for grieving too hard or the general practice of watching over the family, lest they slip into madness, indicates how interventions by the broader social circle of relations are a means of placing controls on a space that it influenced by liturgical forms yet does not contain its ordered fixity.

The social cue for reciprocity during funerals precipitates immense commensality, which in turn produces an ambiguous and flexible zone to relieve personal and family tension. Mourning is treated as a social event and is a domain that includes turning the home inside out, from private to public space in order to fulfil cultural standards of unreserved generosity in the deceased person's honour and thus representing the respectability of his/her ancestral line. The marked presence of outsiders in the home, what Hénaff (2010) relates to Greek mythology of the presentation of gifts to the stranger (*xenios* defined as both stranger and host), adds to this occasion's liminal quality to deconstruct social tension. For example, just as it is a requirement that a person must acknowledge the state of grieving by presenting themselves to closest mourners (the family), no matter in what form that the visitors are socially linked to the deceased or their family, the host of the *leqso* must never refuse a person, even if that person is a rival or enemy during ordinary circumstances. This suggests that the period of *leqso* is a virtual space that carries communal obligations as well as opportunities, such as cases when peace talks are initiated between warring individuals or families. Therefore, recent criticism that the customs of commensality that accompany the mourning period, such as the decreased popularity of the funeral commemoration three days after burial, reflect not only social pressures to conduct full

commitment of honouring the dead but also cuts out the potentiality for alleviating strife that persists locally. To respect the *leqso bet* is an opportunity to strengthen social relations.

Sitting for *leqso* and offering condolences is an activity that is communal, reflexive and implicates individuals beyond kin relations. More salient for the argument is the underlying ideology of responsibilities, facilitated through customs of offering oneself that counts the person as symbolic. As I have stressed consistently, I do not insist, as a grounding experiment, that the two domains of church and mourning house are synonymous, that paying a deceased person respect carries the same soteriological foundation of offering oneself to God, as mediated via church. This would be grossly improper metaphoric arrangement. However, I have hypothesized, based on a careful analysis of the social obligations built into customs of sitting for *leqso*, that there is a particular ethical quality that binds individuals to be obligated, both to the "house" of the dead as well as to a cosmological outlook on mortality. This interprets liturgical actions as part of a structural *gestalt* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) of relating the interactional properties of social obligations and the commitment required to recognize and maintain these community relationships.

I have proposed a consideration of liturgical rites as outside their ritualized context, which has entailed an engagement through with theories of ritual in their own right. Humphrey and Laidlaw, among others, ask whether ritual can decontextualize context or whether "people are quite unable to connect what they see or what they are told to do in intelligible ways with the prototypes and schemata they have about the way they see the world (1994:146)." Similarly, I have asked whether embodiments of covenant as demonstrated in virtual space of *qidase* and the personal commitments to worship, can be elaborated into social obligations of giving respect to the dead? The

logic of covenant as liturgical is then transfigured into the character of relations that is a potent dynamic that connects ritual and non-ritual contexts. What I aimed to examine was the relief of grief as a space and time where social bonds are strengthened and the possibilities for relationships between individuals and families to their broader community are locally re-assessed in moments of crises.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to defining the genre of covenant as emergent in personal and communal ethic of respect-giving that flows within social obligations. Given the stringent qualities of these devotional actions, it has been fruitful to utilize "offering" as a symmetrical term that is thematically consistent within the two domains I have examined, *qidase* and *leqso bet*. These types of offerings, as sacrificial, as symbolic representations (i.e. the self as a token), has permitted an evaluation of the communicative feedback and interplay within devotional space and the demonstrations of giving respect. This exploration of how individuals go to church and mourning houses and the ways these actions interconnect with each other has also offered a new lens from which to interpret and position "covenant" as a social principle, covenant-as-praxis, as I have proposed. The analytical decision to concentrate on the metaphoric and performative power contained within stances of offering oneself reflects anthropological debates on the relationship of symbol to social structure. Sahlins, in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) phrases the debate in relation to the legacy of Durkheimian social theory: "The 'symbolic' has been for the most part taken in the secondary and derivative sense of an ideal modality of the social fact, an articulate expression of society, having the function of support for relationships themselves formed by real political or real-economic processes. Thus incorporated in the received dualism, the

symbolic order becomes the ideology of social relations rather than their quality" (1976: 117). The practicalities of coordinated communion-making inspired this juxtaposition of liturgy as part of "cosmic habitus" alongside the non-liturgical domain of attending *leqso bet*, and other symbolically similar activities, in order to showcase the means by which modalities of worship, as theologically interlaced as "covenant-as-liturgical", reflect within social behaviour, thereby signalling an analytical shift away from the literalism of covenant. Consequently, I put forth a proposal to think about how the social values of obligation and responsibility might be sourced from a code of behaviour, as socially indoctrinated through church. Thusly, covenant is also an ethic that keeps traditionalism relevant. This is a theme that will be explored further in Chapter 6 through the ritualized roles of the members of *mahabers* (confraternities) to influence local decision-making, such as political favours. By organizing these templates of worship in a prismatic arrangement, human productive capacities can be positioned in relation to how "the cultural scheme is variously inflected by a dominant site of symbolic production, which supplies the major idiom of other relations and activities" (Sahlins 1976: 211), "covenant" being one such idiom.

However, it is important not to disconnect the evocative force of church engagement with church often representing the last remaining place of refuge from daily life. For Senait, to give thanks in the liturgical sense was not achievable, and this fact was made visible, as a believer who heard the *sa'atat* from her home and not the church compound, and arrived to church as a compromised commitment. Here, I refer to Jackson (2005), who discussed how life for many is about expressing a deep sense of "I cannot" : "to be human is not only to have intentions and purposes, which one strives to consummate, despite limited possibilities, finite abilities and scarce resources; it is to be thwarted, conflicted and thrown by contingency and circumstance... though human

existence is relational—a mode of being-in-the-world—it is continually at risk"

(Jackson 2005:xvi). The following chapter will discuss local idioms that communicate

this condition of instability and will propose how the qualities of autonomy, both

personal and collective, are impacted by political shifts in the social landscape.

Chapter Five: Constructing Church Futures

5.1 Legends of *tabots*-in-waiting

As much as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians marvelled at the celebratory force of ceremonies that include *tabot*s as their central anchor, celebrants likewise enjoyed recounting stories of its genesis and supernatural properties. The fabled history of the Medhane Alem *tabot* in Addis Ababa can be considered an example of a popularization of covenant legends. As the story goes, in 1936 when Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Sellassie and his immediate family left the country to Bath, England until the conclusion of the colonial occupation in 1940. During the imperial government's five year exile, the *tabot* of Medhane Alem was transported abroad to follow the emperor's movements, principally to enable the liturgy to be conducted near his residence. The monarch's return to Ethiopia and the *tabot*'s re-deposition into the church reproduced a similar triumphant moment in the nation's history four decades prior. The *tabot* of St. George was culturally recognized as instrumental in the defeat of the Italians at Adwa (1896), as it accompanied Emperor Menelik's imperial forces into battle. The reputation of Medhane Alem's travels to England and back into Ethiopia has circulated as modern legend so broadly that the story's features have been imprinted upon the *tabot*. The title Sedetinya, "the exiled," was how the *tabot* and church are popularly referred to. This legend also represented an archetypal narrative of the material covenant as a talisman and a potent symbol of national heritage and sovereignty.

Evaluating how these legends contain powerful means of resistance invites interpretations of "covenant-as-material" as representing a domain for contestation, a

catalyser of social tensions in ways discussed by Boddy (1988) and Taussig (1977). The role of the *tabot* in social history also suggests that it encourages the development of a particular cultural and political imaginary of synchronic interaction between heavenly and earthly realms. Predictably, my argument is drawn from the multi-dimensional refractions of covenant as developed in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. The following discussion integrates dynamics of textual and liturgical nature, as historicized narratives of mutual cooperation and sustained ethic of recognition. Curiously, the material qualities of covenant genre become complicated to synthesize based on the case studies presented here. In Chapters Three and Four, I outlined the ways covenant is spiritually acknowledged as manifest in the *tabot*, both in performative settings (i.e. Timqet as human/divine manifestation) and rites of worship that address divinity (i.e. the virtual space of church). However, there is another category where genre of covenant is apparent. The legend of Sedetinya represents a conclusive end to a *tabot*'s indeterminacy given that *tabots* are divinely manifest and not humanly created. It is through prayer, sustained devotion and miraculous events that a material covenant is consecrated and can subsequently be housed in a church's sanctuary. Therefore, the issue of the "*tabot* in waiting," is contingent on its multiplication that erupts from devotees' love and commitment to a saint. What this tells us is that a *tabot* acts as a metonymic church, since no church can exist without a material covenant. I consider this theological premise as it is employed by local parishes as intertwined with contemporary implications of the Patriarchate (the central EOTC organizational body), who seek to increase the Church's representation. Therefore, *tabots*, by this paradigmatic relation to church expansion, are objects that are mobilized to respond to a national religioscape that has become more populated by mosques and Pentecostal

churches, and thus, by association, plays a part in the state of harmonious pluralism in Ethiopia.

This chapter examines how Orthodox Christians orient to an encompassing divine presence in concrete terms, as located in their neighbourhood environs. I argue that churches are fundamentally always in flux, given the prismatic nature of the *tabot*. Here, I draw upon categories of covenant that I have established: its internal capacities as a holographic object (Chapter3) and its liturgical undercurrents that precipitate devotees to exhibit codes of behaviour of "reciprocal recognition" (Chapter 4). Keeping these dynamics of covenant at the forefront enables the analysis to contextualize the forces at play when Orthodox Christians maintain sustained commitment and devotion to saints. I present several case studies of *tabot* emergences in relation to the state of land in Ethiopia, as foregrounded in political affairs during fieldwork time (2010-2012). I propose that the indeterminacy of *tabot*s, considered alongside current social anxieties over inheritance and autonomy, can be considered as emblematic of displacement in their search for permanent homes in sanctuaries of their own. The events that result in *tabots* deposition into permanent sanctuaries are memorialized in local histories and therefore their transformation into repeatable legends are often crucial, what Lévi-Strauss termed as an activity of prospective historical legitimation of "the past as the beginning of a future that is in the process of taking shape" (1972:280-281). Therefore, the ongoing nature of faith is located in theses materializations of a concept (i.e. covenant) and is utilized as evocative forces to challenge local representation and authority.

The landscape of Ethiopia has been radically reconfigured, in particular by external influences, such as economic investments and development schemes that have ploughed through the country in great force over the past twenty-five years. Models of

"modernity" have been exploited to maximum effect, under the platform "development", which has inspired reforms to notions of autonomy (i.e. land tenure and labour opportunities). It is a phase in their history that Ethiopians simultaneously anticipate and are debilitated by, as the speed of development implementations are often uncoordinated to conventional approaches to life. I consider this condition alongside the altered definition of the benefactor in local politics. To assign the guardianship of churches to the laity reflects the legal and bureaucratic changes since the 1974 revolution and permits examining the political essences of covenant in diocese's affairs.

5.2 Church planting

When I was introduced to the diocese of South Wollo, Dessie, St. Gabriel church was on the cusp of its inauguration by the anticipation of the transfer of the tabot from the old to the newly erected building. The process for the complete consecration of the new church, was principally marked by the installation of the *tabot* through the rites of the *tabot hig* (Law of the *tabot*), which renders an altar slab into a *tabot* proper. This inauguration was also accompanied by efforts of the local diocese (*bete khinet*) to comprehensively construct the church's history. These details I heard during sermons and fundraising initiatives as well as among parishioners eager to relay the imminent accomplishment of decades of community campaigning. The origins of the *tabot* of St. Gabriel were idiosyncratic. The historical account of the St. Gabriel *tabot*'s movements indicates a particular subjectivity of a material covenant. It came from Ras Mekonnen's *s'il* bet (icon/painting studio) in Harrar, a city in eastern Ethiopia, then went to an Addis Abba church, then was "requested in Dessie," where it was housed in the main diocesan church from 1924-1976. Analysing the commemorative booklet released by the local diocese, the most cited detail of this story is the struggle to gain cooperation and

approval for erecting the church. According to the story, in 1929, Abune Petros (Archbishop of Eastern Ethiopia) discovered an ideal location for a church and inquired with the land's owner, Dejazmatch Gugsa (an army commander) to release the hilltop property in exchange for a comparable replacement. After disagreeing with this proposal, the Archbishop is reputed to then utter these words: "Dear Dejazmatch, at this place, St Gabriel's Church will be built and Christ's Holy Communion will be served. However, neither I nor you will live to see it (Dessie Church pamphlet 2011:12-13)". The trope of hardship and sustained challenge begins to be apparent, not reflective of churches receiving little administrative support in a country of 20,000 churches (Ancel 2011). The prophetic words of the archbishop in 1929 fuel contemporary retellings of the significant events and in some ways serve to substantiate the fact that permission to transfer the *tabot* was granted only in the 1970s. The role of the elders' council and their lobbying efforts are emphasized as well as this endeavour being of multi-confessional character. The elders' council was composed of several Muslims, and according to one founding member of this group, there was a vocal co-religionist desire to have the *tabot* of Gabriel or "Jibril" (Arabic), constructed in such a co-joined manner in the booklets text, be installed, which had so far resided in Sellassie (Trinity) church since its deposition in 1924. The completion of the church, including an eighteen-year cathedral construction, was fitted around the statement that this vision would occur long after the time the intention was set, expressed through the language of fulfilment. The complications of completing such an ambitious vision for St. Gabriel church was in this way affirmed by how far into the future Abune Petros saw the realization to transpire.

In 2011, the deposition of the St. Gabriel *tabot,* and effectively the church's consecration through the rite of *tabot negs* (lit. enthronement), was conducted with much fanfare, and the event served as a presentation of interreligious harmony in

Dessie. The church that took fourteen years to build was based on a blueprint by the architect who designed Medhane Alem church in Addis Ababa, the capital. Such undertakings are considered a template of 21st century Orthodox re-vitalization after the Marxist-lead government (1973-1991). This formulation of the Church's image is itself contested by many Orthodox Christians, who interpret these trends as a major deviation from the Church's indigenous integrity. This tradition of religious cooperation had a strong basis historically. St. Gabriel's *tabot* is regarded highly by Muslims, the archangel representing an elevated figure in the Koran, and thereby reflected locally by Wolloye Muslims insistence to support the sponsoring of this particular *tabot*. Their assistance follows a noted trend of benefactorship, such as financially sponsoring priests to serve rural churches or assisting in rebuilding church (see Chapter 2).

However, the dynamics of religious representation was particularly tense during the time of fieldwork (2010-2011). A year before my arrival to the city, there was a public debacle over the building of Arseima Mariam church. Local Muslims considered the land where the church was designated to be erected as sacred ground because it is an Islamic gravesite, and they led a massive protest. As such, land and its visibility appeared as an antagonistic item, which I learned as I attempted to take photos of churches and their compounds. On one occasion, visiting another historic church in Dessie, the principal priest-in-residence severely cautioned me against photographing the church compound, despite its establishment since 1908. Revealing the location would greatly increase the possibility of mosques being erected next-door; similar territorial arguments over religious space occurs frequently in the capital as well[58].

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[58] The classic example of the shifting nature of Muslim-Christian politics was highlighted by the recounting of recent attempts to build a mosque in Axum. Even progressive opinions were vocal about the impossibility of such a proposition, stating that it has always been a holy Christian city and that this fact should remain unchallenged.

Concerns over confessional competition from mosques and Pentecostal halls, was a recurring theme in conversations about EOTC representation in the contemporary age.

Pertaining to the regional dynamics in what is often bracketed as highland Christianity and lowland Islam, there was a sharpening confrontation between these two religions, though most individuals articulated this as external interference not representative of local politics. Speaking to a local tourism official, himself of Orthodox and Muslim heritage, about the proliferation of churches to the equally increased trends of building mosques, he affirmed that this picture of flourishing Muslim communities is a reflection of funding from Saudi businessmen active in Ethiopia. To focus purely on the subject matter of installing infrastructure of authority, this commentary about mosques marking the local landscape found even more friction in the capital. Complaints from locals in Farensai and Siddist Kilo neighbourhoods in Addis Ababa found the proliferation of mosques (*mesgid*) were being built in areas where few Muslims lived as a sign of brute force, a way of imposing influence that was otherwise restricted from a government that limits representation of Muslims in high positions[59]. Furthermore, it was not considered a reflection of active, localized devotional community: presence by proxy.

It should be noted that several *tabot*s can be housed in one sanctuary[60], in addition to copies of the main *tabot* (*medebenya*) that rest in the sanctuary, placed there

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[59] Ethiopian Muslims represent about 33% of the country's population based on the 2007 census, though independent analysis reports that this number is underreported (International Religious Freedom Report 2007), which has been speculated by some of my interlocutors as strategic to avoid disturbing the national image of a ''Christian Ethiopia.'' In Dessie, the ratio is slightly under 50%. Several large scale protests in 2012 were instrumental in highlighting the political tensions of governmental interference in religious affairs, further illustrated in personal commentaries that religious harmony was only espoused if Islam remained in a 2nd place position relative to the Orthodox Church

[60] On average, I heard churches have 3-5 *tabots* at a time. The principal *tabot* of the church's namesake is the article which permits the rites of the Eucharist to be sanctified. However, I have heard of instances

to guard against robberies. It is the understanding that a secondary *tabot* (*dabbala*, meaning roommate, or lit. "living on top of another") will someday have a church dedicated in their name. It is usually in contexts such as visions and petitions from local visionaries and broader community that enable these *tabots* are "willed" to break free and take up a new home. How does the Church assert itself in this climate of claiming the landscape? I will argue that a *tabot* emergence is an interplay between people and divinity that grafts devotional intentionality in engagement with the land and community endowment.

Liturgy
d

The Word
a ------→ b
Altar

Tabot   Church
c

e

Communion
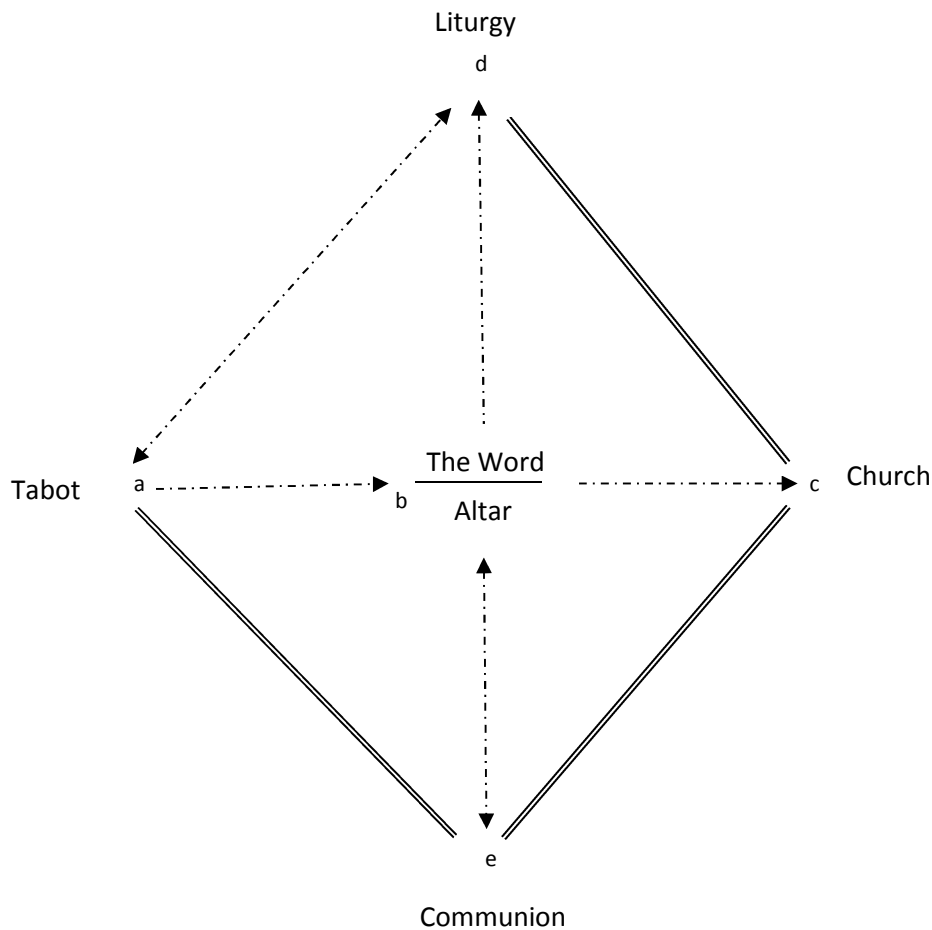
Figure 5.1 Diagram of covenant refraction, through *tabot* represented in three segments. A) *tabot makel* (ark planting), which refers to a saint's manifestation into the earthly properties B) *tabot hig* (law of the *tabot*), a material transfiguration

where more than two Eucharist services can occur at once in a single church building. This is predicated by having another tablet house (*tabot menber*) inside the chambers of the sanctuary (Fritsch 2001).

(stone or wood) into an altar C) t*abot negs* (crowning the ark), the ceremony making the church consecrated. Between points A and D represents the spiritual immanence as prismatized into liturgical sound (e.g. "hearing the *tabot*", see Chapter 3), while the relation between Liturgy (D) and Communion (E) is mediated through worship regimes to the church as a spiritual locale (see Chapter 4). The double lines between points reflect metaphoric and ritual parallelism (e.g. the *t'sewa* and *tabot* rotation), which will be analysed in Chapter 6.

The terminology for the manifestation of a *tabot* is ark planting (*tabot makel*) and represents a segment within the process of *tabot*s edifying churches (see Figure 5.1). Using the allegory of nature which was often employed in rhetorics of the communication between earthly and heavenly realms, the seed one sows continues to feed the community spiritually, but this action must be constantly repeated, for the earth of spiritual fruitfulness needs to be feed and replenished. This is the covenant idea modified, amended and creatively elaborated, having direct effects for how church and communities of believers are defined. It is God that lives with the people and is located in the environs around them, tangibly (the hills, the earth) and intangibly.[61]

5.3 Revaluating Covenantal Narratives

On this topic of *tabot* representation and the composition of the parish of Kombolcha, an IT instructor and recent resident originally from Addis Ababa named Solomon freely discussed the names of the *tabot*s contained in each church of this small town 10 km outside of Dessie. In particular, he wanted to share the story of *Kirkos lij* (Cyriacus the Child), whose *tabot* garnered much local veneration due to his curative powers. About ten to fifteen years ago, the prayers of the people living in the

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[61] Messay on the transcendent and non-transparent God: "The lack of transparency in his will pushes the visible world towards *independence* and *self-sufficiency"* (Messay 1999:183 in Girma 2012:7) . However, Girma underscores that this should be interpreted as an interpretive freedom and not independence in the ''Western fashion.''

neighbouring hills "were answered," as he stated. The area had been plagued with many diseases. He referred to them generically as malaria and HIV, though people habitually suffer from hepatitis, typhoid, cholera, to name a few. Certain communities, outside the city limits as he described it, began to appeal to *Kirkos lij.* This concentration of local devotion urged the priests and locals to appeal to the Kombolcha parish council to have *Qedus Kirkos* represented, in the form of a *tabot* dedication. The way Solomon phrased it, the consecration of a *Kirkos lij tabot* and its installation inside the Church of St. Gabriel, along with an already existing *Kidane Meheret tabot* inside the sanctuary, was a result of the "*tabot* speaking." While there was no specific vision directed by Kirkos towards an action, the collective dedication to him initiated a further installation of his presence locally, and given a voice through the love of the people. This relationship with *Kirkos lij* was acknowledged once the saint was consecrated as an altar of the sanctuary. The annual feast-day of *Kirkos lij* is especially celebrated every January when the *tabot* comes out, and it is reputed people have been cured of ailments and alleviated of illness on these events. The exposure to the *tabot* and the respect and honour, via the appeal to Kirkos himself, spurred on the positive effects, constituting a particular sort of material healing. Kirkos would cease to exist without him being acknowledged, this logic extending to all holy personages: to worship is intrinsic to relationship, thus permitting to be part of the miracle.

A (con)fusion between the divine will that initiates sacred presence on earth and the materialization of that presence in the form of a *tabot*, ergo church, is an issue at the heart of these *tabot* tales. The case of Kirkos lij, narrated in a typically mystifying logic, infringed on the limitations of empirical inquiry, along similar sensibilities of secrecy concerning the subject of *tabot*s, which I noted previously while documenting the processions (see Timqet analysis, Chapter 3). In regards to *tabot* action and witnessing,

"it" just appeared. There are connections and "leaps in faith" thinking that the listener/believer is meant to make, and I, as the researcher, was not permitted to ask. There is a process of establishing a *tabot's* materiality, but this part of *tabot* tales are typically left out. It would seem that attention to its genesis supersedes the logic of witness in devotional practices.

Solomon was refreshingly open about this topic and offered his additional interpretations about how churches might emerge, through the spiritual intercession of St. Uriel. Arsema Mariam, a secondary *tabot* of St. Mikael's church, was example of a "*tabot* that can go where it likes," he volunteered. He then directly launched into a version of the authoritative doctrine of how churches proliferated in Ethiopia, based on *Dersan Uriel* (The Homily of St. Uriel). It is widely known that St. Uriel is attributed as scattering the blood of Christ over certain points in Ethiopia, notably nine historic church centres in northern and north-central Ethiopia[62]. According to Solomon, it is St. Uriel who sows the seed by this blood, and where the blood of Christ dropped, a church will be permitted to be built. Using the canonical account of how monastic centres in Ethiopia were specifically selected for a sacred pact with God, through the flight of the archangel, Solomon relates and extends this action to how a *tabot* may emerge in any given terrain. This seemingly abrupt eruption of divine presence is based on his presentation of this design of pre-ordination, and it is from this logic that Solomon can substantiate newly accounted-for *tabot*s.

The patterning of the saints to which a *tabot* is to be consecrated is highly variable, idiosyncratic and almost reproachable when scrutinized. And while every

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[62] The variations about the actual story and where it came from (Book of Enoch only), and two variations, that St. Urael, along with all the other archangels, at the time of Christ's death, collected his blood in a chalice. Another is that St. Urael dipped his wings in the blood. The archangels are also known to be the guardians of the *tabot* of all churches (see Wondmagegnehu & Motovu 1970).

locale will most certainly have a St. Mary, St. Mikael and St. Gabriel, the most pivotal intercessory figures in the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian worldview, this town of 50,000 had two Arsema Mariam[63]. In the case of *Kirkos lij*, even though Solomon phrased the events as emanating from the devotion of a particular set of individuals, he never ascribed credit of the *tabot* consecration to human will, that is, all energies reflected the subordination of the believers' love and respect to the saint. Through direct influence and accountability of the devotees is diminished, the significance of witness ("He heard their prayers") accounts for a crucial factor of the dialectical movements contained in these *tabot* legends and relates to the taxonomical features of archetypal covenants.

Implicit in the sanctioning process of the churches, from their specific locations of provenance to *tabots* waiting to be revealed through devotion, is the concept that any church equates to a *tabot*, the earthly representation of the holy personages. Churches do not communicate; saints via their *tabots* do. This connection is fused organically in the homily of St. Urael. For example, in the episode where the archangel descends over the monastery of Abba Yohanni and institutes a covenant, by blood seal, the next paragraph speaks directly about the installation of the *tabot* and the various accompanying glory-making actions that are attached (Caquot 1955). In the chronicle, there is frequent reference to how the natural world now bows forth toward the Almighty God and to the exaltation of the *tabot*. This suggests a pre-ordained conception of sacred landscape and indicates the theme of "taming the wild" by ordering sacred and profane space, a category of the moral imagination active in Orthodox Christian cosmology (see du Boulay 2010; Stewart 1991).

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[63] Arsema Mariam is particularly revered in South Wollo. *Tabots* are historically personality driven, as explicated by Getachew (1988). Battles between Christians were staged by their respective patron saints. He also suggests how tabots and place names merge in identity. The context he refers to is medieval Ethiopia (14-16th century).

In order to properly place the position of these visionaries who so boldly, and perhaps with some vesture of authority, voice these intentions, I propose examining the covenant idea as it developed in Ethiopia that permits individuals to turn imagination into mission and drive. I incorporate the writing of Smith, who in *Chosen Peoples* (2003) argues for the binding solidarities of nations and the sustaining and edifying power of nationalism as most dynamically cemented by "sacred foundations." I have presented historical evidence of how covenantal thinking developed in Ethiopia in what I define as a conservative adjustment to the paradigm of divine election, from an ultra-hierarchized to a more communitarian form. As explicated previously, the covenant is an allusive, complex, and vast cultural idea; for the most part, analysis adheres to grounding the concept in the historicity of the Ark as it is reputed to journey from Jerusalem to Ethiopia and its configuration into Ethiopian legend, the Kebre Negest. Scholars such as Smith (2003) interpreted Ethiopia's claim to the banner of covenantal peoples principally through this ideology of divine election, extrapolating its endurance and cultural rootedness as part of his thesis on the sacred qualities of national unity. Smith defines the Ethiopian category of "covenantal people" as "dynastic rather than communal myth of election": "The kings rather than the people are the recipients of the heavenly treasure and the guardians of the true faith, and theirs is the glory under God of sustaining the covenant through the possession of the sacred Ark" (Smith 2003:75).

The importance of the kings cannot be understated, and the role of national epic, chronicles, or other similar canonical writings precisely install the responsibility of this covenant in the hands of the rulers. To return to the *Dersan Urael*, a similar pattern can be observed. It is a work that is sourced from a 14th century account, orally preserved but recorded in the late 19th century, during the reign of Menelik II (1889-1913), who was a modernizer, sanctioning rigorous Orthodox Christian standardization during his

era. The references to Addis Ababa and greater Shoa in the homily are instructive given

the capital being scarcely over a century old. This post-medieval rearrangement of

divine sanction over imperial domains perhaps buttresses Smith's interpretation of the

Ethiopian variation on the covenant idea, which was that the imperial rulers were the

purveyors of this claim and mandate. It also reflects what Briggs and Bauman (1992)

analyse as ideological strategies of intertextuality that facilitate "negotiations of identity

and power—by invoking a particular genre" that enables the authority to

"decontextualize discourse that bears these historical and social connections (i.e.

utterances) and to re-contextualize it in the current discursive setting" (1992:148). As I

discussed in the Introduction, covenant in its historical-narrative dimension is a concept

that has been configured and assembled from various operative tropes. As articulated by

Abune Yesehaq (1986), the covenant's transfer to Ethiopia is a divine sanction and

logical act, given how Israel, under the leadership of King Solomon and his subsequent

corruption during his later reign, precludes the title of "righteous nation" to be modified.

In contrast, Girma interprets covenant as it was employed by the Ethiopian model as

antithetical to its base definition (i.e. the monarch usurped the notion of divine

agreement to move through hierarchical channels as opposed to a more Scripturally-

consistent definition of a mutual agreement between as supreme deity and a group of

people).[64] The concept of covenant was still successfully mobilized in Ethiopian

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[64] Smith assesses that despite the Ethiopian claim to the historic Ark and the lengths taken to suffuse the genealogical link to the children of Israel, the emulation of the covenant form is superficial (i.e. too hierarchy-centric, essentially a covenant with a church (re: Armenia)), and furthermore lacks millennial or "Exodus politics" (see Walzer 1985). He draws a precise distinction between the sorts of covenantal models available, surmising that based on the pattern of renewal, the Ethiopian interpretation of the covenant was more Abrahamic, defined as an "unconditional promise" offered by which God supports and protects a newly chosen people as compared to the "Mosaic" or Sinai covenant which is predicated on conditions to uphold "ritual and moral law" with a more emphasized stress on abeyance (2003:52-58).

medieval history (12-16th century), effective not only for political consolidation, a major impetus for the chronicle's construction (see Chapter 2) but also as possessing a capacity for moral and cultural renewal. In addition to tamping down pagan beliefs, a common code of social definition was instituted, indicating the pathways established for the survival of the church and broader social cohesion. I would like to revive Girma's conclusion, that covenant as a political discourse was improperly mobilized, as I believe it has interesting correspondences with the nature of social mobilization in local politics. In his political tretise on covenant as a political-philosophical discourse, Mohammed Girma (2012) argues that the emperors of Ethiopia in fact failed to employ the notion of the covenant properly, for several reasons: their inability to capture the dynamics of reasoned discourse, reciprocity and the acceptance of "other" and instead used their providential status for state expansion and consolidation of power. Interestingly, he imagines that the potentialities of the covenant as an organic social mechanism are yet-to-be realized. He proposes a reinterpretation of covenant as centred on "real people" (non-elites) that use the "metaphysical imperative" of divine election to compose a collective identity that is bonded by a "spiritual order" (Girma 2012:144-145). To suggest that the Ethiopian modifications to covenant is less Scripturally-based signals that "covenant" is defined in more horizontal terms, that is, between God and a group of people. Therefore to remain consistent to *this* definition would inscribe honour and responsibility not to rulers but to an elected community, though Girma does not specify with whom covenant is bestowed to, only that a imperially-mediated covenant is a limitation of the concept's performative potential.

This consideration of a reformed, "grassroots-led" covenant in certain ways connects to the condition that has affected Ethiopia since the separation of church and state, that is, how is the Church supported without the crown? I detailed the intricacies

of the introduction of Orthodox Christianity to the newly founded city of Dessie. I noted

that political unification and religious alignment occurred in concert with one another,

such that churches and palace residences were constructed simultaneously (1900s-

1920s). Observing the current state of each domain side-by-side, the differences

between the two structures were stark. After the confiscation of all church and imperial

land holding during the revolution (1974), the Patriarchate instituted gradual reforms to

gain revenue for supporting local church infrastructures, such as the establishment of

the parish council and treasury. Ancel's (2005, 2011) survey of the episcopate history

of the 20th century marks this shift that effectively handed over responsibilities of

stewardship to the laity. Curiously, the ways in which diaspora funding is funnelled

into fundraising campaigns and how financial support is lobbied suggests that the

system of sponsorship and benefactor status is being adapted to contemporary economic

dynamics in Ethiopian cities and towns (see Gondar and its city and church

revitalization as another case study).

In relation to the historic churches of Dessie that were well-maintained and

managed and potently symbolized Dessie's establishment as a city, the palace grounds

of Negus Mikael and his grandson Lij Iyasu, ruling monarch from 1913-1916, were in a

state of neglect. This derelict area was positioned between Medhane Alem (1912) and

St. Mary's church (1914) and served various usages over the ensuing decades after the

revolution in 1974, as a radio transmission station and a munitions store, ideally suited

due to its position at the highest point in the city. Of the unclaimed sections of the three

principal buildings that managed to have working enclosures, these were occupied by

squatters (*dabbaloch*), while the rest of the compound's interior was unsafe to explore,

as most of the floorboards and wood reinforcements had been stripped for firewood or

other miscellaneous reasons. By 2011, the Tourism and Culture Bureau of the Amhara

Zone (a subsidiary of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture) began to charge admission of five birr (equivalent to 30 cents) to tour Ayiteyef, a grand banquet hall built by Negus Mikael. The popularized history of this building reflects an era when the powerful king constructed this 2,000 square-meter building that was fabled to be supported by eggs as mortar, this detail emphasized as an indicator of the king's largesse. In 2011, Ayiteyef was used as a venue for graduation ceremonies by Wollo University and the manner in which the provenance of the building is evoked suggest that segments of Dessie history are being mobilized in heritage parlance. What this contrast between churches and palaces in contemporary dynamics of "heritage management" indicates is that churches function as self-sustaining institutions in ways imperial grounds cannot. Revenue from these tours do not generate high yields and the appeal of royal history is being effectively captured by churches who are rapidly constructing stand-alone buildings, which displayed clerical vestments and church treasures to a paying public. This transition to income-generating activities has ensured that the Church can be supported across its vast network nationally and has provided models of self-sufficiency for communities that lacked strong local leadership or parish involvement. Moreover, community initiatives to improve the upkeep of the local church compounds demonstrate how this pivotal aspect of bestowal as a public responsibility is mobilized in certain domains and is absent in others.

Given how covenant as bestowed authority has historically developed, it is necessary to link these ideas to the patterns of spiritual endowment as I studied in Dessie. In order to propose a functioning logic to how these churches are generated based on divine intervention, I will draw from the language of covenant theory once more, in order to argue for a particular type of revelatory experience espoused by devotees. Smith (2003) provides a multivariate characterization of the covenant, divided

into six working aspects: 1) a community of choice, a relationship selected by God and entered into actively by the people; 2) divine promise; 3) sacred law; 4) collective sanctification, to live by the law as a holy community; 5) conditional privilege, revoking the "promise/blessing/favour" if laws are not followed/lived by; 6) witness, such as revelations through signs and miracles, as an establishment of "its unique claim and justifies its role in the covenant" (2000:53-55). The sixth component of witness is essential for this discussion regarding the mechanisms of generating a renewing relationship to the *tabot*. Revelations through signs and miracles are integral for maintaining the right to and justification for the import of covenant and being witness to this claim establishes "a special relationship of intimacy with and faith in God, and hence a special status as servant of the Lord" (Smith 2003: 59). The point about intimacy is important as I have suggested that the inspiration, and thus revelation, is always devotionally centred. With *Kirkos lij*, the *tabot* was sanctified, never created, based on intense and sustained prayers of the local community.

A justifiable counterpoint would be that these circumstances can instead be considered as contractual and here we approach the particular mechanics of covenants as not operating along logics of exchange. The pantheon of saints, angels and other holy figures that are grafted onto the ark naturally invites the conceptual reference to talk about patron-client relations. The *tabot* arrangements are a unique cross-fertilization of spiritual legalism. Walzer (1985) elaborates on the "radical volunteerism" that is implicit in the dual-directional character of the covenant entered into by the early Israelites. Relating the covenant model to various later peoples, such as the Puritans, the "long-term work required to make deliverance permanent," is intrinsic to the understanding behind the Sinai covenant, that it is both a combination of "divine willfulness and popular choice, providence and covenant, determinism and

freedom (1985: 80-81)". In a related point, Smith talks of the imprecision of making

contract synonymous with covenant, suggesting that a contractual relationship has

inbuilt an expectation of return, or else such relationships fail.

As I have presented in the case studies of *tabot* emergences, not all of these

events or relationships have miraculous expectations attached. As with the customs of

vows that will be discussed in this chapter, there is often little to no expectation of direct

return and individuals are primarily concerned about maintaining a relationship,

representing a different sort of patron saint relationship than to other Christianities. In

this chapter, I present the idealized scenarios for when spiritual connections work. The

dynamic of "making deliverance permanent," sustained through the community, is

operational in EOTC religious consciousness: the belief in a positive future that permits

the conviction of people living in the present.

5.4 *Tabots* as referencing covenant metaphors

The following discussion draws inspiration from stories of church plantings, as

these events were narrated to me from various sources, as witnesses or indirectly

through parish representatives. There is a particular abstract approach to *tabot* genesis

that strongly indicates how knowledge of the realities of spiritual presence is closely

guarded and socially circulated and shaped. Asking about "*tabotat*" is a very rich arena

for observing how people narrate their local histories. It was also a predictably sensitive

topic to broach due to perceptions about what sort of information I was looking for.

Was I asking to know about a *tabot*'s miracles and/or wrath or was I wanting to "see it,"

the classic foreigners' trap (Chapter 3)? Despite the plausible curiosity of learning of

these wondrous tales, suspicion was a dominant sentiment and part of the secrecy and

delicate nature of discovering the foundations of *tabot* emergences. To know further about a material covenant's whereabouts might invite harm. Historically, this sentiment propelled a church community to protect these items in various actual and metaphoric layers of shrouding against fears of the possibilities of these prized entities abduction (see Chapter 7 for a similar discussion on the relic of the Cross at Gishen). These patterns of guarding and guardedness are attributed to the central paradox of the covenant as a exercised idiom: the *tabot* is a shrouded item to maintain its sanctity, yet its importance as the edifying property of a church, requires its revelation by a larger community of believers in order to emerge.

Evaluating the genesis of new churches such as St. Gabriel, the political pressures to keep building churches and to maintain a presence in urban space was a persistent concern. I consider the political implications of these church stories using the Mediterranean region and its archaeology of sacred landscapes as a comparison. Studying Sphakia in southwest Crete, Nixon (2006) relates similar phenomenon of "pre-historic histories" in south Oxfordshire, arguing that landscape "can be thought of as the manifestation of social relationships, relationships which physical effort, as well as rhetoric, can keep socially active" (105) and considers the physical and metaphysical labour of maintaining these structures, which includes "rituals such as the burning of incense, lighting of candles and oil lamps and church services" (2006: 105). This pertinent observation finds similar patterns in Ethiopia, a country of an estimated 20,000 churches, many of which are deep and dormant in the interior of the rugged terrain and require perpetual reengagement from the laity (see Chapter 7 on *mahabers* and pilgrimages).

How then do *tabots* emerge, based on terms recognized by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, and how can the drivers of this action be evaluated? As I discussed in

Chapter 3, the removal of the *tabot* is performatively enacted by the procession as a concretizing and sacramental moment where people watching are actually participants in creating immanent frames, as metacommunication (Bateson 1972). A further refracted form of agency enters into the picture when a church's construction is predicated on the provenance of *tabots*, as waiting in a sanctuary or existing in the spiritual environs of local landscape, a recursive process of the anti-material (the other-worldly presence of the Holy), turned into the material (the sanctification of an ark/altar), and transformed into the immaterial (a veiled, ritual object). To spur the emergence of a *tabot* to arrive, are devotees' waiting on signals from God? Miyazaki (2000) analyses a similar phenomenon with Methodists and Adventist congregations. In the Fijian context, deliberate manipulations of dialectical relations serve as strategic ambiguity (see Herzfeld 1990, Keane 1994) that perpetuates a productive indeterminancy. The endpoint for Fijian Christians is to be inadequate as participants deem themselves to fail to interpret God's messages properly because they do not possess a preacher's gifts to respond in proper rhetorical form. Returning to the indeterminancy of *tabots* as denoting a modulated proximity between God and devotees, these are aspects of a cosmology that idealizes, from a theological perspective, future realities as defined as a heavenly reunion that assists in articulating their actions as "Christian subjects". As Chapter 6 will present, this genre extends to individualized promises to saints (a pilgrims vow), thereby illustrating how a concept is employed in action.

Given the *tabot*'s position in the character of the local church, it becomes a poly-vocal affair to represent the various perspectives articulated in these popularized legends. To sort through the anecdotal evidence of a *tabot*'s subjectivity, I frame the following two cases through the proposal advanced by Sally Falk Moore (1987),

referred to as the "diagnostic event" to "foreground preoccupations of actors" (i.e. an individual's fate in protracted battles over property) with "background conditions that inform the situation at hand" (i.e. scarcity of land and vulnerability as marginalized land owners), in order to permit arguing against one single operating episteme but several that inform social action (1987:731-735). For our ethnographic investigation, signs to confirm a *tabot*'s planting require a similar adjustment to conjoin anecdotal incidents within their political currents and historical context.

5.4.1 The *tabot* anti-reveal

In order to formulate what it takes for a community to be bonded with a *tabot*, I will describe a case when a *tabot* refused to "come out" (*tabot alwetam*). The church of St. Mikael was an established church, but a problem surfaced when local parish politics interfered with the community's commitment to expand; what I suggest is disrupting the order of relations encoded into the *tabot* as it is culturally idealized. The tensions apparent in parish communities expose the associated issues of power and authority as parishes strive to fulfil their churches in transition.

The drama over the stalling and protest of St. Mikael, in Farensai, a northeastern district of Addis, crystallized during the Timqet procession in 1995. Mamo, a cab driver and local resident, described a story replete with intrigue, all about local politics, as he summarized. There was bureaucratic obstruction to the community's request that a larger church be built in St. Mikael's name, and that this refusal to come out of the *bete mekdes* was a clear response by St. Mikael. "How could a *tabot* refuse to come out?" I inquired. As he described the incident in the mid 1990s, the priests came to release the *tabot* out of its sanctuary on the eve of Epiphany, and they were prevented from coming any closer. The member of clergy that was holding the *tabot* on top of his head became

locked in a state of paralysis, not being able to talk or move. Asking a few

neighbourhood folk, they all immediately knew what *tabot* I was talking about, that

Chikun (the repressed) Mikael in Ras Kassa area. The reputation it had was that it did

not join the rest of the procession of the Farensai neighbourhood, which included Yesus

[*Genet Le Yesus*--Heaven of Christ] and Mariam churches, the road acting as a formal

jurisdiction of church community units. All of this was discussed in third person; it was

Mikael that refused to join Yesus and Mariam to Jan Meda where the baptismal pool

and Epiphany festivities in Addis primarily take place. By this "threat", the

communities of this neighbourhood would be robbed of the privilege to assist their

Mikael to his sanctuary in Entoto hills; only a select number of St. Mikael *tabot*s have

this honour in Addis, the capital. The event of local repute was that there was a

revoking of the honour to assist and follow the *tabot* of St. Mikael.

Figure 5.2 Constructed facade of St. Mikael church (Chigun Mikael)

Curious to know more details about this local legend, I visited St. Mikael's church to learn the version of the incident as narrated by the church representatives themselves. Coincidently, I bumped into Tsedal, whom I met and saw frequently as a guest at the Medhane Alem *zikir,* an occasion that involves the *mahaber (*see Chapter 6). In response to the moniker, she seemed to skate over its reputation as being "repressed."[65] She was of the opinion that this grew out of partisan perspectives on the debacle of the church construction; community members were trying to instigate a legend (*afe tarik*) to support their cause ("*Sow sime awetalet"* --The people named him/it). Based on the intensity of how the story was told, in particular its nickname, I had assumed that St. Mikael's *tabot* was not "living" in his own church, perhaps one of those *tabots* "in waiting" I thought. To my surprise, not only was there a compound dedicated solely to St. Mikael, but there was a massive basilica-style church supplanted on top of what I learned to be the original church. I was aware the matter had been resolved, as Mikael had joined the *tabot* procession at Jan Meda shortly the year after the incident of refusal. However, if an isolated church was already established, where does the characterization of "repressed" come from? This qualifier was a reflection of the local displeasure of tampering with a promise, a commitment of sponsorship that was voiced publicly and the ramifications of the interference. A local entrepreneur pledged a substantial sum of money to erect a larger church for St. Mikael. This commitment galvanized the local entrepreneur to champion for local support for an expanded church. Mamo in his retelling, aligned these positive developments and subsequent thwarting by Yesus church with why Mikael stalled; a clear response to the "injustice" in his opinion of being denied the honour that was being bestowed by his

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[65] The tag of "repressed" is a trope within tabot legends. For example, the "exiled" Medhane Alem (*Sedetinya*) is a well-known church, whose tabot also has a similar history of indeterminacy.

devotees. This series of developments denotes an active agreement between people and St. Mikael, sidelined by jealousy, rivalry and political squabbling.

Tsedal suggested two reasons behind Yesus church's antagonistic reaction. By leading their own procession, proceeding to the baptismal pool at Jan Meda independently and not co-joining with the other churches in front of Yesus church, St. Mikael's was exerting an independence from the local parish network. She was sympathetic to the viewpoint that the shift in dynamics might be interpreted as contrary to the whole spirit of how Timqet was celebrated, as a communal event of churches coming together as one. Still, the point could be made that Yesus interfered by their obstruction, instituting inequality, or certainly disrupting the balance. From the perspective of St. Mikael church, to initiate its own path of procession is fitting of its elevated status as a *deber*[66] church of Farensai. This poses a contrastive point to the expressed communitarian spirit of churches of Timqet, this vacillating tension between hierarchization and interdependence. This neighbourhood's fear of change relates to why Yesus church tried to obstruct this project of expansion. The independence of St. Mikael's church would diminish the authority of Yesus parish council, and installed anxiety that it would surpass Yesus in local importance. The representatives from St. Mikael's insisted that there is no lingering animosity, that all churches are united again and any internal conflict is an exaggeration, fuelled by propensity for gossip. Despite the harmonious conclusion, few people at the church or people from the neighbourhood, most of whom frequented other churches, corrected me when I referred to the church as *Chikun* Mikael, the repressed Mikael. Righteousness and vindication, by way of retaining the name suggests that there is a certain sentimental attachment of struggle in

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[66] The classification of churches consist of g*edam* (monastery), d*eber* (large parish church), g*eter* (ordinary or village church).

fulfilling devotional promises among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. In addition to maintenance of relationship of honour, there is also a suggestion of the *tabot's* wrath. This story illustrates the affective power of refusing to be revealed as a community threat.

An insistence of a state of powerlessness signals the dilemma over responsibility to this revoking for trust and the privilege of revelation, transcendence, and renewal. At St. Mikael's in Ras Kassa in Addis, they have been building for over ten years, and got more than a little offended when I asked when it would done. "How are we to know? It's based on God's will!" the construction workers shot back. In the case of St. Gabriel's in Dessie, the determinism of parish community in their desire to complete the church was also positioned in similar uncertain terms, as I was told by the head monks there to pray to *Kidane Meheret* (Covenant of Mercy--St. Mary) if I want such a definitive answer. These are the delineations and the limits to the bond between God and people, as Miyazaki (2000) argues in his "abeyance of agency" from issues regarding the reception of responses and their interpretations by participants in preaching programs and gift-giving rituals in Fiji. Statements that do not satisfy are framed as limits on human "capacity to make sense of events or even the capacity to act (2000:32)," suggesting that this strategy speaks to a method of anticipating a more satisfying end. This passage approaches the idealization of the covenant from a perspective of when the relationship is in tension and highlights how veneration and sustained devotion are as crucial as the emphasis on god-fearing.

Figure 5.3 The Tabots at Timqet (Jan Meda, Addis Ababa)

Knowing these particular qualities of *tabot* behavior, we can frame the popular

legend of Medhane Alem in Dessie, whose legend is well-circulated locally. It covers

the misfortunes and miraculous events that transpired when Medhane Alem was listened

to and respected. Asking how the *tabot* came to this particular church, the monk I spoke

to asserted it was special because it came from Jerusalem. The two young church

officials were more eager to talk about the circumstances and events of how this *tabot*

insisted on being built in another location. The plan was to build in the southern part of

town, near where Giorgis *bete kristiyan* is situated today. Plans proceeded to begin

construction, and workers noticed that each morning the lumber assigned for the

building had been mysteriously moved to the hilltop of the present-day Medhane Alem

church. The material kept being found away from its designated location, followed by inauspicious occurrences such as workers being injured and unusually long delays in construction. Finally, Negus Mikael, King of Wollo province in the late 19th to early 20th century, decided that these were signs that Medhane Alem was fated to be built at this other location, and his decision was also mythologized in his bold act of inserting a nail into the foundation of the church, this event itself entering into the local canon of legends. The accounts of this story persistently stress the speed of construction, three months and 14 days exactly, and the care to which the construction took place. It was soon realized that the workers progressed faster when they stayed inside the church grounds[67]. Therefore, the king ordered that certain purity standards were enacted; Workers to be kept inside the church, including the iconographer, remaining clean and undefiled from the outside world. This legend represent a formula that is modelled in similar miraculous events of church's histories, grounded by a series of ecstatic events, with a fair degree of embellishments that illustrates the sociology of how the story is told and disseminated.

We have discussed that "*tabot* planting" has its political implications, as do these eruptions of *tabot* emergences. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the social drivers that contribute to instituting these changes. In the case of Kassu, he tangentially analyzed these correspondences by noting the problem of health epidemics locally, with the devotion to a particular saint and the emerging series of events of the *tabot* of Kirkos lij. This was underscored by his judgment as a young and aspiring local

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[67] Stewart's analysis (1991) of myth as afforded a role in spiritual order: in a similar story of an embodied spiritual presence of a saint, Panagia Protothronos, reputed to repeatedly leave the church, signalling a change in building location by this "transcendent intervention," and local encounters of difficulty without the cooperation of the icon (Stewart 1991:84-87). "A cosmogonic myth in which supernatural forces are accorded a role in establishing the social and spiritual order that parish church founds within the community," a village "ordained by higher powers, a fact that is symbolized in their church, the product of divinely directed communal effort" (1991:87).

preacher, that there was a systemic moral malaise by the younger generations, his general outlook on social trends being rather negative. In the case of Chikun Mikael, there are similar alignments with this analytic interpretation, as the breach in *tabot* refusal was framed as a reflection of fractious state of local diocesan politics. In the case of the moving lumber of Medhane Alem, the event is of supernatural character, effective because it demonstrates a certain incomprehensibility of divine force and suits a particular pattern of myths of church foundations, but it's orchestration around social particularities of early 20th century Dessie is more unclear.[68] These activities are about interpreting divine messages, and these are subtle and contingent on ideologies of divine promise. I propose an argument about the knowledge system in place that enabled the *tabot* to emerge, based on an active commitment-making.

5.5 Beholden to a promise

Given the parameters of how *tabots* and thus churches can be edified, figures such as Abba Mefekeria Seb in Dessie are lauded by residents and representatives of the diocese as instrumental in the future of the diocese. A well-known monk and often treated as a local celebrity, his admirers estimate he is responsible for helping initiate over fifty church projects all over Wollo, as well as and serving as an avid campaigner for planting of acres of indigenous trees. One story as he narrates underscores some of these critical themes I have proposed so far: prophecy, spiritualized landscapes, political impetus, and indeterminacy.

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[68] Negus Mikael was newly incorporated king, converting from Islam. A particular divisive figure locally for his acquiescence to the oppressive Christianization campaigns of the late 19th century (see Chapter 2).

Discussing the revitalization of churches in Dessie zuria (outer Dessie) Abba Mefekeria Seb phrased many of these foundation stories as scenarios in the exercise of steadfast conviction. I had been prompted by one of his admirers' to ask about how the church of St. Mikael was envisioned, with Abba Mefekeria Seb as the primary driver. Abba Hadis, a local priest fifty years ago, saw a hillside location known as Gerar Amba and suggested that St. Mikael should be moved there, instead of the lowland swamp where the saint was stationed. Abba Mefekeria Seb saw the place and was emotionally enthralled, convinced that this was the providential location. News about this intention began to circulate locally and about 40 people pledged to give 1000 Birr each to construct a church. Abba Mefekeria Seb states rather pointedly that the Bishop, Abba Samuel at the time, and the clergy as well saw the advantage of having a church of St. Mikael be in a more visible location, as it would bring them more revenue. After giving his permission to break ground, the church council faced interference by a pair of influential individuals who were strongly against the move. In one heated exchange, Abba Mefekeria Seb proclaims to the detractors "when you die, St. Mikael will receive it/you," a quintessential "wax and gold" (*semenaworq*) statement, dually predicting the man's encounter with St. Mikael from his earthly departure and St. Mikael's rightful glory on earth by assuming a place in his sanctuary. Soon after, the high rains began flooding and graves on the lowland where the original church started to wash away. The people in the area took this as a sign that unless St. Micheal is moved similar destructive actions would continue. The residents of this outlying community asked Abba Mefekeria to intercede on their behalf and take this problem to the city administration. The significance of his words is etched into the dramatic memory of the story as Abba Mefekeria states his actions to the administrators. Refusing to be seated for the meeting, he recalls proclaiming: "I can not sit while St. Mikael is standing. His *tabot* is buried in

the swamp. We need his miracle and we must free him." Shortly thereafter, the administrator approved the move in 1986 during the Derg[69] period. The prophetic part of this narrative was that the main instigator of the resistance, died on *Tselot Hamus* (Holy Thursday) and this was seen as an ordaining moment for the foundational story of the church.

This story was transformed with a mythical aura but it was also an interesting relationship to St. Mikael, since the actions of the community are not reliant upon divine intercession or carving out a space for divine presence in the labour of realizing a church (i.e. Medhane Alem). As Abba Mefekeria Seb characterized, twenty years of consistent praying was what actualized the *tabot*, a devotional commitment to acknowledge always. Furthermore, the interpretation of the circumstances such as flooding as an impetus for carrying out the plan and the promise of St. Mikael's potential miracle are all setting up a position for the holy figure, but with a stress on human responsibility.

This story concerns an imagined church, as plans to built St. Mikael's church are yet to be completed as of 2012. However, this cannot be surprising, to have an imaginary church, given all that has been stated about the indeterminacy of the yet-to-be-realized but pre-ordained tabots? Churches are fundamentally always in flux, given the nature of the *tabot* and its ability to replicate. In the case of St. Gabriel in Dessie, I was told it had in its sanctuary *Lideta* (the Birth of Mary) and *Kidane Meheret* (the covenant of Mary) in addition to the saint of its namesake. As the pattern goes, a time

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[69] Officially called the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army, "Derg" (The Committee) as referred to popularly. These years where religious activities were discouraged but not criminalized, does not connote categoric religious repression. As the examples provided here show (e.g. St. Gabriel Dessie), churches were lobbied and instituted as well as discouraged. The constitution of the Federation of Ethiopia has a irreligious outlook (no state religion).

will come when these individual *tabot* will have homes pledged for them, raising the question how this replication is realised. We never find out what the *tabot* of St. Mikael does beyond the fact that he refuses leave the sanctuary, and this is information relayed from the clergy, the only ones allowed into the sanctuary. At this point, we are meant to connect the narrative links based on local hearsay as to why Mikael blocked his exit by the clergy.

A proliferation of churches faster than can be built[70] suggests a constant engagement with the spiritual world. Leaders are bequeathed this responsibility to "plant churches," indicating that while there may not be supernatural visions or major enigmatic episodes, modern-day visionaries, both mundane and spiritual, are afforded a role that facilitates these church constructions that require "miracle" narratives. In the cases presented, it is the determination of archbishops and their moral imperative that provides the sanctioning voice for establishing houses of worship. It is tempting to look solely at the principal actors anticipating *tabot* emergence yet there are indications that this legitimation of *tabot* presence is contingent on a human partnership that is communally structured and maintained. For individuals to envision a sacred landscape populated by divine presence that is unrealized (i.e. not made concrete via miracles or *tabot* consecrations) should not be confined to "imaginative" reasoning but perhaps to a metaphysical conceptualization of covenant that is constituted by events of "witness", which I note carries tropic relation to covenant as a form of constant dialogic engagement.

The placement of the preaching programs at the front of these churches-in-progress, primarily for fundraising purposes, function as a signifier of the responsibility

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[70] This urban condition presents parallels to Addis and Amhara zone development (2010-2012), where building frames were constructed but only the first floor was occupied to help finance the completion.

to fulfil this promise. This patterning of adjusted orientation to church space is thematically consistent with how Dessie St. Gabriel positioned its inauguration in 2011. Even when there are large donations to initiate the construction, in the case of Chikun Mikael the funds from the Patriarchate office and several private donations, most churches have to produce the remaining funds and thus constructions stall for many years. This interplay between the demands to complete a promise and the enthusiasm to render that promise fulfilled was on display nearly every Sunday and feast day of St. Gabriel, every 26th of the month. I was asked what I thought of the spirit with which parishioners gave to the church, initiated by the speech of the preacher to fast and do without breakfast and instead give to the church. In addition to the shock of suggesting that those in attendance should deprive themselves more than they already do (i.e. standard ethics is to break the fast after liturgy), I was moved by the severity of the response to the call, including people removing jewellery from their hands and necks as donations. The staging of these calls at the front of the church, a shell of concrete and construction material, relates to what Felman (2002) describes as the promise of consciousness, as postulating "a noninterruption, continuity between intention and act" (2002:34). The condition of incompleteness plays a significant performative role in these fundraising activities, as a display of the community's desire to be defined as spiritually strong and as a means of locking in commitment, via public pledging, to reach this ambition.

The idea of the pledge as a technique of pooling local support will be a crucial element to consider as the tempo of development in Ethiopia proceeds at an accelerated pace. The fundraising for the Renaissance Dam project, a massive construction to harness energy from the Blue Nile, represented an instance when the citizenry were called upon, a coordinated effort that collected from nearly all corners of society; at

secondary schools, through deduction from civil servants' salaries, "persuasive" appeals for business owners to purchase bonds to name a few methods. While these calls for pledges were highly emotionalized, essentially a citizen's duty, the results of these activities as I witnessed it in 2011 was that this mobilization was not voluntary but coerced and hedged all aspirations of a better Ethiopia into the future. To position the opportunity for social improvement as existing in the future speaks to a theme similar to other African locales. Other indicators of "progress" in the form of roads, clinics, schools, farms, injected an element of courting the highest bidder for local investment initiative. Sadly, this "goldrush" mentality that has followed tipped the scales towards foreign businessmen, demonstrated most detrimentally over the past few years via mass scale dispossession of populations who main source of livelihood is to live off the land. Development, in certain application, can presage a significant loss of autonomy.

There is a tension between citizens asked by their states to sacrifice for the sake of development and who currently receive few assurances that their lives are improving or more secure than yesterday. I refer to the issue of land tenure as potent example of this assessment, one that resembles the strategy of "co-opting" as proposed by Nielsen (2014). The pattern of building houses in Maputo, consisting of constructions without foundations for Mozambiqian urban dwellers, Nielson posits, is a method to establish their survival by co-opting their participation in a system that fundamentally does not serve them (i.e. in this context land tenureship that is nationalized and class-contingent). He proposes "approaching time as duration" in order to "understand how social transformations might occur in non-linear and non-progressive ways" (2014:178). The collapsing of futures in his assessment is an "internal doubling so that the future exists both as failure on a linear scale while also serving to open up the present in potentially productive ways" (Ibid). While a seemingly pessimistic viewpoint on political

disenfranchisement, if we were to consider the Ethiopian-specific approach to indeterminancy, that is, a future pregnant with expectation yet resistant to be containable to linear progression of resolution, *tabots*-in-waiting can be cited as a frame to critically address these social dilemmas. To wait for a *tabot*, directed by the agency of its saint, serves an analytical, rather than a literal, point, as an orienting metaphor for recognizing virtues of patience and perseverance. This might sound like a trite comment to tack on to a serious discussion on the condition of dispossession, but it is precisely the experiential content of "waiting indefinitely" that furnishes such metaphoric constructions (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) as guiding lights for how to rationalize these existential dilemmas of waiting.

5.6 Conclusion

Jimenez (2011), discussing the negotiation of information and thus trust in New Corporate Ethics, speaks of a "movement in and out of opacity and diaphaneity," working off cultural notions about "real relationships" being based on an "ethical and trustworthy sociality" whose value is self-evident, self-describable, and visible (Jimenez 2011:192). The ways in which the *tabot* as a concept holds a dominant place in the moral imagination and the contingencies behind its mobilizing capacities suggests the concept of covenant in EOTC devotional approach may very well expose the instabilities of social knowledge that requires a constant "emptying out" or externalization (Jimenez 2011:193) to maintain a functioning and meaning-filled relationship of trust. This point is particularly pivotal in light of the concluding discussion on volatility of land claims reforms in 2011. Religious authorities as alternatives to government's total ownership over all land will become more essential. As Ethiopians lose out on opportunities for personal inheritance, communal ownership

will become more pronounced. A member of a religious community has the potential to be guaranteed a claim to the land, since private title deeds have become highly dubious documents. To navigate this field requires manipulation of power via social and economic means that are not available to most, aside from an active network of interpersonal bonds that are accessible through the *mahaber*, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

This chapter has centred on the legends behind how saints manifest into tabots based on mutuality of promise that is collaborative. Unlike similar tales of local miracles, such as the seers of Catholic Spain in the early 20th century whose visions and call to action are treated as a threat to the larger Church (Christian 1996), there is a diminished verticality of authority with these *tabot* legends. As these stories have shown, the accounts and call to action come from an array of witnesses, from a collective of believers to a charismatic monk. The factor of believability that so often inserts tension and antagonism in parish politics when claims to legitimizing extraordinary events are contested hinges on unrevealed knowledge that people are constantly disentangling and setting into motion.

Chapter 6: *Mahaber* and the Blessing

6.1 Outside the Collective

This chapter addresses the prolific presence of *mahabers* in Ethiopian society. *Mahabers* are associations run administratively, with membership dues, codes of conduct, and a collegiality among its participants. This category of social life represents a significant social resource in the tradition of a mutual-aid society and is an environment where leadership roles are cultivated. It is also noteworthy that a *mahaber* can be either religious or secular and it is this ambiguity in categorization that has inspired a discussion that considers the flexibility of "*mahaber*" as a model of community-making.

I further propose that particular forms of Orthodox Christian lay associations contain within their templates an element of charismatic order, a "spiritual giftedness" of being part of a collective. Within the Orthodox Christian cultural tradition, these associations are organized under divinely-inspired foundations, such as sacramental ceremonies or tribute societies arranged around a patron saint. These formulate as "ritualized" relationships that are bestowed with a sacred order that people gravitate towards, contribute to, and rely upon, and represent an intrinsic part of social life. I dedicate a focus on the symbolic and ceremonial attributes of *mahabers* in order to outline key themes of Christian fellowship, which further assists in this thesis' aim to conceive of more horizontally-oriented definitions of church. This objective maximizes the analytical framework of covenant as a socio-theological genre that conceives as discourse and praxis operating in a dialectic fashion, with reference to Hanks (1987),

that envisions this relationship as "Ideological creations [that] become part of practical reality by being realized in action and this entails adapting them to concrete social circumstances…. Genres then, as kinds of discourse, derive their thematic organization from the inter-play between systems of social value, linguistic convention, and the world portrayed" (Hanks 1987: 671). *Mahaber* is not only a strategy but a forum for self-definition, as participating in the activities of the group instills a consciousness for greater community involvement.

An episode I heard on the radio of the downfall of a youth without the support of a *mahaber* illustrated the point stongly. The tale was of a recent bachelor's graduate in civil engineering whose life spiralled out of control because he missed his appointment for a civil service exam that would secure him an entry-level post in a governmental office. Depressed by his diminished prospects at a successful career path, he turns to bad company and *ch'at*, alcohol and cigarettes and hangs out with the other *duriyes* ("no- good bums"). Then the narrator sympathetically speculates—if only they could assist him or if elders could intercede on his behalf. What was striking about the conclusion of this cautionary tale was how little blame is placed on the young man for his neglect, and the commentary's tone presents him as a victim. The path to destruction is considered a foregone conclusion due to an absence of proper cultural virtues such as never losing faith, keeping strong, and having patience, these being critical for personal well-being. The predicament of being "*mahaber*-less" suggests that a person's success is dependent on collective support and thus one can never stand alone. It is unspecified the type of *mahaber* that should help him, whether an association of engineers, local businessmen, a parish collective, or an elders council. Often, such distinctions between secular and religious are not made. There is an understanding that *mahaber*s have the capability to be more than mutual aid organizations or societies of prestige. Therefore,

they are properly understood as social structures that equitably facilitate resources in a cooperative and egalitarian mode, what Mauss would label a "total services" system of the elementary kind (Mauss 1990[1950]:7-8)? To study the internal logic would necessitate looking closely at how members are organized and under what mandates.

It is important to elaborate on the social environment from where such institutionalized sharing develops. As I have summarized so far, traditions of ritualized relationships in Ethiopia facilitate a spirit of expansive reciprocity and cooperative community relations. This is in striking contrast to another Orthodox Christian context, Greece, where ideologies of kinship are purposefully narrow in order to guard against competition for the scarcity of resources. For du Boulay (2010), the antagonistic social climate boils down to "harshness of environment," interpreted as the difficulties of survival in the rural terrain that determines the limits of cooperation, one where exchange with the wider community is characterized as "a disinterested and symbolic act" (du Boulay 2010:186). I would agree that similar socio-economic tensions exist in urban Ethiopia. As the derelict youth story showcases, it is a harsh world, of very limited opportunities, in the case of my informants, this means access to networks which would guarantee employment, bureaucratic favours, or sheer cooperation administratively. Such travails are especially reflected upon by *mahaber* members and this condition is a real driver for *mahaber* popularity and necessity. Du Boulay acknowledges that the obligations to "give freely" are opportunities at transcending the fragmentation of society, if only momentarily (du Boulay 2010: 187). I suggest that similar patterns of ritual relationships operate, but with greater longevity and sustained cooperation, in Ethiopia. The terms of kinship expand to an array of contexts, such as *mahaber* meeting. *Yené beete*, translating as "one like me," is a colloquial expression that is used to connote sympathy and elicit actions for giving and taking care of others

in need. *Mahaber*s can be interpreted as an innovative social mechanism to creatively temper competition and strife, by essentially making everyone related, even more important in an urban environment.

6.2 Establishing spiritual kindred

Consistent with this dissertation's analytical premise, that the spaces and methods of engagement by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are guided by particular internal dynamics of archetypal promises such as covenant, I present *mahabers* as social institutions that correspond to this ideal. I focus on religious associations as my principal case studies because they enable a more direct comparison of generic forms of covenant and its refractions. For example, the comparison between *ts'ewa* of the home and the *tabot* of the church is appropriate on another dimension, regarding the authenticity of the immaterial material. This is a potent analytical alignment given *mahaber*'s influential position on neighbourhood and municipal levels. In the following case study of the revived honorary feast (*zikir*), we can observe how customs of remembrance and charity represent a continuance of personal traditions that have been disrupted during the Derg (1974-1991), a period of near abolishment of any religious assembly. *Mahaber* meetings were not banned as they straddled a grey area between secular and religious activities. Despite heavy intimidation to public worship, the Church did not encounter mass structural devastation as compared to the Russian Orthodox Church, as the local church continued to be in operation. Efforts to break apart religious allegiances were most transparently signalled when *kebele* (equivalent to the local council) meetings were scheduled on Sunday mornings, a time when liturgy would be conducted and *senbete* (parish affiliated *mahabers*) would gather. As the

church had its public force undercut, religiously-geared assemblies persisted in domestic realm, such as feasts in the home.

Pitt-Rivers (2011[1992]) broaches the topic of the "legitimizing concepts" of the rituals of exchange, employing the theological term of "grace," as an uncalculated, uncontainable and a genuinely "free" gift, contesting Mauss' axiom that "there is no such thing as a free gift." However, by suggesting that people can only return blessing and not generate grace (Pitt-Rivers 2001: 446), the question of authority reappears. *Mahaber* participants would wholeheartedly agree that the objective of these meetings is to give thanks and be humble in the eyes of God. Any blessing is a residual of this pure intent, yet it is this "charismatic" energy that is the force that continues this tradition. These groups and the various reasons for why they convene are engaging in more than literal reciprocity. The case studies presented in this chapter will propose a conception of charisma of a different sort, drawing from Weber's "routinization of charisma" (1964), a framework that accounts for the formalizing or rationalization of charismatic power. *Mahaber*s are a traditional authority rooted in a sacred order. This order is guided by several patterns delineated within the EOTC domain, such as memorials and allegories of Christian living, as well as local ideologies of offerings and blessing. It's the collective that is charismatic, the charter that permits their formation and their importance in society.

On one occasion when Yared, a friend, concluded his family's turn as *mahaber* host, he made a deliberate visit to deliver "*ts'ebel tsadik*" (lit. pious holy [water], meaning an item that is blessed), a modest portion of flat bread (*injera*) to our household. Yared considered it part of his duty as a host of this gathering and insisted we share of the blessing that his family participated in. Considering the pathways involved in this ritualized setting, to who can this blessing be sourced and attributed?

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On the one hand, it is typical for a priest or two to preside and offer benedictions over the meal and over those gathered, matching ideas of the charisma of office that envisions its transferability via acquired skills, such as the "laying of hands" by a priest (Weber 1964:366). This disassociating process of charisma signals its possibilities as a more movable category, contingent on the circumstances of time and context. Items are blessed every day for a wide variety of reasons, yet there are circumstances that are considered more auspicious and sacred than others. Major underlying component of these *mahaber*-contexts are an amalgam of giving and receiving that produces a spiritually gifted quality to time and space, one that members of sanctioned collectives such as *mahabers* are particularly skilled at initiating and facilitating.

What I argue is that customs of reciprocity confer blessings on the givers and receivers and create authority for lay members to mobilize charitable works (the grace of offering), due to its evocative force as a domain of protection via the "blessing" of this social activity. The *mahabers* effectively establish relations of spiritual kindred, bonds that extend into contexts outside celebration events, beyond the "virtual space" where a mutual devotion is expressed between patron saints and their devotees. I conclude this chapter by relating the covenant-as-associative as reinforcing the ability of the genre of this pervasive concept to forge sustaining commitments to individuals on interpersonal terms.

6.2.1 A family's sacred history

In Greece, ritual kinship within the Orthodox Christian traditions exists, such as god parenthood and wedding sponsorship, though against the backdrop of an aggressively competitive ethos in the rural political ecology. Campbell describes wedding sponsors in Sarakatsani society as a variation of inter-community networking,

ideally constructed with an outside circle of recognized contacts. The utility of such traditions of spiritual kinship is that they are the most effective; the ritual sanction "locks" the relationship (Campbell 1964:223). Du Boulay delves into the mechanisms of this bond more precisely, oil as the legitimating bond as "an organic force capable of transcending individuals and binding them into a wider communion" (du Boulay 2010:220). Throughout all these presentations of ritualized relationships, normative kinship, via blood, is accepted as a transitory movement, one that will eventually drop out of memory, save for the fidelity to opportunities of renewal, as intrinsic of the living generations who breathe life into the past (du Boulay 2010:200).

This last depiction is crucial for understanding spiritual kinship in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. The obligations of giving extend beyond the living and this is where another integral component of the Orthodox Christian domain appears: the rituals of memorializing. Spiritual kinship is tied to the related ideology for establishing a version of charismatic authority, through the spiritual potency of "remembrance." *Mahaber*s members' responsibilities are often inherited, thereby effectively dictating that a guardian of this family tradition remains loyal to the spirit of the gathering as it was established before their time. I start with one particular case as it demonstrates the interconnected relationship between honouring the patron saint and reliving the family name, with particular emphasis on the integral role of the expansive household.

Herani was known locally for holding a monthly *zikir* (various methods of food offerings) for Medhane Alem (lit. Saviour of the World) in Addis Ababa, an occasion when she would serve a meal for invited guests and her neighbourhood church community of *Genete Le Yesus bet kristian* (Heaven of Jesus Church). Her involvement in this custom only began based on the intercession/insistence of a family contact, a *bahetawi* (hermit) named Abba Gabre-Meskel. It all started from a reoccurring dream

the hermit had about how Medhane Alem cannot be stopped and that Herani will take it on. Abba Gabre-Meskel served Herani's grand uncle, a decorated nobleman, who continued this family tradition from his father, who started this sometime in the 1890s. Herani presented photographs from the 1950s and 1960s of past *zikir* gatherings, the scenes showing groups of middle-aged men huddled around tables full of food and drink. The men, her grand uncle's relatives and acquaintances grew up together, and at that time many were colleagues in government ministries. After the revolution in 1974, this practice altered. Herani's grand-uncle was captured by the Derg government, imprisoned, along with many other members of her family, including herself. The family became effectively scattered, some escaping abroad while others lived in disguise around the capital. The family home was left in the care of *Weizero* (Mrs) Bezunesh, Herani's grandmother, who carried on hosting the *zikir* continuously until her death several years ago. At which point, Abba Gabre-Meskel began to see visions of Medhane Alem's message, prodding Herani to start up the custom again.

A culture of commemoration that is activated by memorials, feast days and anniversary events formulates the means parish communities are bestowed the responsibility to behave as *bale habt* (benefactor). As the previous chapter discussed, the role of the benefactor has been reconfigured as the result of the political change of the last 25 years. During the Derg, the Church implemented major reforms that had affected its financial and bureaucratic structure. Additionally, the impact of Ethiopians migrating abroad produced a base of wealthy supporters that wield considerable influence locally as a member of "diaspora", referred to colloquially using the English term.

In many ways, the task of reviving this *zikir* involved piecing together a household from the rubble. The family had irrevocably been disbanded, only a few of

the contemporary generations living in Ethiopia. The period during the Derg (1974-1991) literally separated members of the family from each other, in the most dramatic fashion possible. When the authorities came to arrest Herani's parents and siblings, due to their standing as nobility, the officers mistook Herani as a servant (i.e. speculated by relatives due to her opening the front door, her dressed down attire that day or just sheer chance).

Figure 6.1 Herani's *zikir*

She watched her family being carted off to prison while she stayed behind. One could see this from the elongated showcase of photographs of children and grandchildren living in the West who likely never entered this house that was on display in the master bedroom that remained undisturbed since her grandmother's death. Before her commitment to hold monthly gatherings, the house was empty and this feeling of abandonment lingered in the background. The rooms were closed off, gathering dust

and stale air; the rooms did not appear to get much light as curtains were partly drawn. The kitchen was furnished with sparse equipment, signs that it was a house unused. The only permanent member of staff was the guard who watched over a compound of overgrown grass. Herani's decision to hold the *zikir* here and not at her own residence seemed fitting to her. It was her grandfather who held these meals in honour of Medhane Alem and so, she explained, it made sense to hold it at his house.

Given the emphasis on how much these traditions are a fulfilment of past work (i.e. patronage of a previous generation) it is fair to ask if this activity is a version of a well-developed custom of memorial rites, rather than an example of the charismatic gravity of *mahaber*s. There are conclusive ways in which *zikir*s are not a memorial tradition, principally due to the fact that no service of the dead is read. *Fitat* is only carried out on the 40th day after the death, then on the 1st year anniversary, and then the 7th year. Moreover, while *zikir*s are conventionally a continuation of an established custom of a deceased host, though arguably it represents an indirect way to Herani's great-grandfather's memory. I integrate this memorial association as part of the system of "charismatic collectives" because it aptly underscores the social dynamics that are core to the *mahaber* form. In particular, creating the imaginary of the household, perhaps more intensified by the absence of a full-functioning house in Herani's case, represents the construction of the conditions necessary to enact a collective charismatic moment in time and space.

The people in attendance were arranged in a circular fashion, around circumference of the rectangular salon. As host of the *zikir*, Herani's position on the sofa indicated the head of the room, as well as the fact that a hermit, Abba Gabre-Meskel, the most honoured guest, was seated to the side of her. I surmised that he held a distinguished position because she was fussing over him and kept plying him various

items of food, finally negotiating a satisfactory meal of boiled banana and honey. Several guests were carrying items such as bread and *kolo* (roasted barley grains) inside the house. The invited guests were lined up against the wall in somewhat descending order from the hermit. They in themselves were a motley crew. Several priests and deacons were scattered around the room, engaged in dogmatic arguments such as whether the *Tsige tsom* (fast of the Flight of the Holy Family) was to be as strictly observed by all Christians. Herani was rather quiet and not at all engaged with the squabbling and more preoccupied with serving all the guests, busy running around with the staff brought in for that day. The component of familiar household dynamics, light fighting and fussing was revealing given that they are a group of people who otherwise have no occasion to get together. This is an attempt at replicating a family, so essential in a *mahaber* gathering.

Near the end of the salon were seated a rotating group of several women and an occasional elderly man throughout the course of the morning, parishioners from Yesus church. There were referred to by the guests I was sitting with as the *yene beeteoch (alms-seeker)*. Based on how they were dressed and how undernourished they looked, the two ladies I was sitting next to, cousins of Herani's, speculated that this food was likely the only good meal they would receive for the day. There was most definitely a marked class distinction for this group of people, most evident in the very low bows they gave to Herani upon receiving their plates of food. The food was modest, only two to three dishes; potatoes, meat and/or vegetable stew, sometimes cracked wheat, and always homemade bread and *t'ela*. This part of the room was most circulating and for the duration of the times I sat at these meetings, I saw several new people that kept coming, receiving the meal, and leaving with gracious thanks.

The act of giving thanks and receiving blessings is a major component of the *mahaber* event as well. Abba Gabre-Meskel was given the role of the offering the opening prayers; the Lord's prayer, ending with "Igze'o, Maherene Kristos" (lit. Lord have mercy), and Be'ente Mariam Maherene Kristos (lit. For the sake of Mary, have compassion upon us, O Christ Lord). Then a senior priest gets up and prays for the souls of the family that are deceased. Herani facilitated this part of the ritual by preparing a sheet that listed all her family members that passed away. It was laminated and adorned with religious symbols (an icon of Medhane Alem) and typefaced and passed to the clergy present giving the prayer. Afterwards, the commemorative sheet was placed back along the wall, until the following month. A brief teaching lesson is dispensed and concludes by proclaiming about how good it is that this *zikir* is being held for so many years and the *bereket* it gives to Herani and those participating. The ceremonial part of the event ends there. Abba Gabre-Meskel was given the role of providing the official blessing, though there were many variations of this same ritual act. After *zikir* feasting, the clergy and others who were present will upon their departure give a long line of blessings to the host.

Kefu ayenkash	May evil times or intent be unable to hurt you
Medhanyalem Ayasatash	May this saint or the other prevent you from being without
Yih bereket bet yehun	May it be the house of plenty
Zerish yebarek	May your 'seed' (descendants) be blessed
Yetefetefyistesh	May you receive multitudes
Yakberelegn	Be honoured
Edmey, tenayestelegn	May you be given long life and health
Yedegochu, yeabatochesh ennatochesh amlakyete bekesh	May the God of your kind forefathers and foremothers protect you
Amet amet yaderselegn	May you reach from year to year

The religious rhetorics of "blessing" is high art in Ethiopia, akin to indigenous traditions of oration and poetry, a vast topic independently (see Levine 1965). Treating this action as part of the sequence of the *mahaber* event, the "charismatic collective" as I argue, is this principally a form of "giving thanks," the return of grace (Pitt-Rivers 2011:424)? After all, these are intercessory words, wishes for bounty, the avoidance of evil, protection over ancestors and the "house," honour; essentially "May such kindness and generosity demonstrated by "my lord" or "my lady" (*yene geta, yene immebet*) be repaid." However, I want to point out the importance of the participants' roles in this event, extending beyond the position of the host. One interpretation is that these pronouncements are a form of prayer, prayers taking on an adjusted and stronger weight when done on behalf of someone else. This public exhibition of giving offering also connotes an allegiance between the two parties, in a pattern similar in domains of local politics, such as manoeuvring administrative channels (i.e. in the courts, police, land administration). A conventional perspective on dynamics of stratified power relations in Ethiopia, particularly Amhara-Tigrean, would posit that the rhetoric of blessing is a transparent vassal-lord structuring that has been in operation for centuries. As I analysed in Chapter 2, benefactorship has been seized by emerging leaders, such as businessmen, financiers from the diaspora and influential civil servants, and therefore requires re-examining the structural modelling of power. Related to the case of offering protection, being someone's *dembeniya* ("regular," colloquially understood as a "man on the inside") or knowing a *mahaber lij* (a member of an association), serves as a secular variant of the blessing. While a more explicit *quid pro quo* is involved, such as the monetary kickback, referred to as "*shai/bunna*" (tea/coffee money), it reflects an active code of cooperation and an agreement to watch out for one another.

Another perspective concerning the departing blessings would be to recognize the ritual efficacy of sacred speech. Acknowledging that religious language is the mediator between the other worlds (Keane 1997:66), the ability of *mahaber* recipients to speak these words signals an authorship of a divine source as transmitted through individuals (i.e. the non-expert). The blessing is a response to a gift, yet what is offered in correlation is not an "equal trade" answer and response reflex of the ritual exchange. It is an exhibition of the recipient's own ability to engage in the spiritual action of a personally-voiced benediction, spurred on by the constructed context of the *mahaber* event. *Bereket*, the concept of blessing in Ethiopian Orthodox domain, as related term to "charisma", is detached from the person in the singular sense and suffused into the body of the collective.

How Herani assumed the position of host and custodian of this particular *mahaber* custom is instructive, because it abides by several patterns of ritualized kinship while also defying order of inheritance as practiced in Amhara conventions. The *zikir*, by status of seniority, should have gone to her father, or her older brothers. She was perturbed and constantly reminded of the same message, that Medhane Alem cannot be stopped and that she will have to continue it. At first, she was uneasy about being given this responsibility and thought it peculiar that it was she who was being "targeted". Since she was raised by Weizero Bezunesh, her grandmother and the previous custodian of this *zikir*, it was understood among the invited guests why Herani should assume this role, though it was nevertheless unusual.

At the core of *zikir* is a reprise of memorial and saint devotion customs. A family's devotion to a patron saint, this idea of bonding between the sacred and the human, is a linkage that is seen as unbreakable. It is about honouring a family's sacred history and special relationship to the saint in the absence of an actual household

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present. I sensed a conflation of Medhane Alem and the Gabre-Meskel name and I could never reach a clear demarcation of who we were celebrating. Were we honouring Ras Kassa's devotion to Medhane Alem or offering thanks to Medhane Alem via Ras Kassa's family's commitment to the saint, or both at the same time? Occasionally, the saint as the beneficiary one and the reason for this sourcing are of marginal importance, as I encountered with other *mahaber*s whose members assumed the tradition without much inquiry. For example, two sisters who took their mother's *mahaber* seat did not reflect the specific connection between the feast commemoration of the *mahaber*, Ba'ata (the entrance of Mary into the Temple) or why their mother chose to be a founding member of this collective. Also the wealth factor should be noted, since it is unusual for a family to be able to afford to pay and commit to hosting the monthly meal singlehandedly, and it is more common to do *zikir* yearly. Another point to address is the related practice of memorials for the dead. Tlingit communities (southeast Alaska) were attracted to Orthodox brotherhoods, according to Kan (1985), because they allowed "accepting it [Christianity] on their own terms," noting aspects such as prestige rules, mortuary importance, purity and pollution ascriptions as valued within the cultural logic (1985: 215). The idea of blessing (*laxeitl*) was similarly operable in ceremonial participation and their parish responsibilities (e.g. to hold candles during the reading of the Gospels during service). However, the ritual similarities between potlatch and memorial dinners were considered problematic by the religious authorities of the day, judged as a variation of ancestor worship. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian context, one can observe that such an interpretation would hardly apply and the relationship between the human and the divine can be viewed as simultaneous complements.

6.2.2 The traveling household

The above case emphasizes how ideas of family and ancestral ties are influential reference points for establishing and maintaining relationships of ritualized giving. Aligned with these ideas is the encompassing nature of the household, as exemplified in Herani's reviving of her family's custom, which entailed opening up the house to the community as a pivotal step in this process. The home prototypically presents a space where individuals frame their connections and expectations, conjuring up the presence of the divine in parallel with family life. Orsi's study of popular devotion (1985) of Italian Catholics of East Harlem serves as one illustration of how their relations to their guardian/patron saints, are structured around the home.

> They brought the holy into their homes, filling their rooms with the familiar figures of saints and the Madonna. They performed careful rituals of rispetto towards these figures and included them in the life and decisions of the domus. In this way, the divine was further involved in mutual responsibilities with the people. This was not a contract or patron-client relationship; rather, it was a domus-centered bond. (Orsi 1985:225)

Once again, the home is presented as an essential locality for performing rituals of respect, honour and intercession, as was demonstrated with Herani's revival of her family's *zikir*. As the principal inheritor and guardian of that tradition, she chose to conduct the gathering in an otherwise abandoned house, the setting being fundamental to the 'inertia' of her *mahaber* event.

The *ts'ewa mahaber* is another association whose ritual stage is the home, and the ceremonial nature of the occasion is public, dramatic, and echoes processions of a feast day at church and symbolism of the Eucharistic service. Near late afternoon, at the conclusion of the *mahaber* event, small groups of women dressed in white shawls can be seen along the road carrying several items universally associated with this association; the *mesob*, the receptacle for the bread, the *ts'ewa,* a goblet-like cup

typically made of clay, and a framed picture of the saint who the *ts'ewa* is honouring, covered by church ceremonial umbrellas. The *ts'ewa* and *mesob* are draped in thin cotton or knit decorative cover and are carried by the next host of the *mahaber* and any assisting members. A similar dynamic of religious associations, with the members as principal actors in the spectacle of religious drama, has been discussed by Driessen as one of the main characteristics of confraternities in Andalusia (1984). The procession as a demonstration of divine glory and majesty is religiously marked behaviour, a manifestation of holy presence as inhabited in these coded representations of the body and blood of Christ. Alongside the communal acknowledgment of this powerful Christian truth, this transferring of the "*ts'ewa*" is treated with great care, as if handling a delicate object. On one occasion, I assisted in the transfer of the *ts'ewa* in the front seat of my car. Various arrangements were made to make sure the substance would not spill. "Oh, it's such a blessing for you," the *mahaber* members commented as I played a part in the *ts'ewa*'s journey to the next household. As we will see, the *ts'ewa mahaber* most exemplifies the charismatic essence, additionally impressive because it is cultivated in the home by laypeople.

The *ts'ewa mahaber* is typically composed of twelve members. Apart from the symbolic significance of the Apostolic twelve, there are practical reasons, such as the feasibility of financially affording each *mahaber* member to host one gathering annually. Membership is fairly stable and expulsion from the *mahaber* is rare. *Mahaber* seats are typically inherited, the principal explanation for general consistency in generations present. Each *mahaber* unit is of a fairly comparable economic status, though of the four *mahaber*s I attended, I noted that they represent middle to lower class as compared to upper class who I found less abiding to *ts'ewa* traditionalism (i.e. no street procession, as it might be considered too "peasant-like" in character).

Figure 6.2 Ts'ewa in rotation

Using the Sellassie *mahaber* as an example, it is a collective that began in imperial times, comprised of employees of the palace. In the subsequent years, some members managed better standards of living than others. This difference can be evident in the sort of food that is offered in the houses of the hosts. For this reason, some *mahaber*s choose to stipulate restrictions on food served (e.g. a limit of 2-3 dishes only) and sometimes opt to hold gatherings in a hall, though I never encountered a *ts'ewa mahaber* outside of the house. The feast and how a *mahaber* is hosted, is an opportunity to confer wealth to the family name, as I saw evident in the Giorgis *mahaber* several times. The host, Giergis, of a *mahaber* of retired domestic workers (*injera* makers, breadmakers, *w'at* [stew] cooks) spent 1,200 birr, nearly $100 at the time, on a sheep, as well as baking bread after bread, a lavish show for a woman who had no income apart

from money sent from her daughter working in Saudi Arabia. "It's all for Giorgis," and "I hope he will be pleased with me," she kept saying, though a couple of guests sarcastically remarked how she grossly overstepped herself.

Each house is considered a unit, which can include wife and children or conversely husband and children. Male spouse participation is more unusual. Apart from helping to prepare, such as purchasing livestock, he vanishes on the *mahaber* saint day. Assefa made a light insinuation about his wife Fetleworq, spending too much time and money on her Mariam *mahaber* turn in October and not enough energy on his children. There is a moderate degree of advance preparation, fussing over the home brew (*t'ela)*, which assumes a corner of the room, where it mellows for approximately 2-3 weeks. This item is a chance to show off for the wives or patriarch of the house the expertise and high quality of household, good *t'ela* being a particularly source of pride. As principal managers of the home, women will be involved in *ts'ewa* preparations, even if it is not their *mahaber*. It is principally a family event, and it's common to find children helping, and the credit and honour is understood by the household designation (i.e. by full family name or lineage).

Having described some generic characteristics of the *ts'ewa mahaber*, it is appropriate to discuss how this type of association enacts ritual relationships via sacramental-type means. Colloquially, the expression "to drink *mahaber*" (*mehaber metetat*) refers to the communion chalice (*ts'ewa*) that members partake of when participating in a *mahaber* gathering. The *ts'ewa* is a clay container in which *t'ela* is poured and served during the *mahaber* meal, typically lunch. What makes it sacrament-like, apart from the obvious mirroring of communion chalice, is the holy water that is mixed with the *t'ela,* and at some point the cloths that cover it, in similar manner to the tabot in church, is removed so that the *t'ela* can be consumed by the *mahaber* members

only. Guests can drink the *t'ela* but not from the chalice. The *ts'ewa* can never be empty and is constantly being replenished with more *t'ela*. At the end of the *mahaber* gathering, the transfer of the *ts'ewa* is made to the new house at which point the new honoree and their family consume the *t'ela*.

The bread is similarly considered a sacramental item and is performed distinctively by the *mahaber* collective. The host takes the large loaf, places it on the *mesob* (straw-woven bread basket) and traces the outline with a knife. This round portion is reserved for members and the "scraps" are distributed among the guests present. The bread, like the *t'ela,* is created with intentionality, for Mariam, for Medhane Alem, etc, and is turned upside down[71] and motioned with the sign of the cross with the knife before cutting. In the tradition in the French Basque country in the 1970s (Ott 1980), bread-giving was an obligation of the female household heads and to bake bread[72] every two and a half years and distribute it to their neighbours during a special mass they sponsored. The custom is interpreted as agape symbolism; the rituals of commensality imitates the era of the disciples, when an era when informal gathering occupied the space when churches had not yet established (Ott 1980:50). The culture of offering in Ethiopia is expansive and a fair amount of literature on commensality exists, especially as exhibited in the custom of coffee ceremony as a style of blessing in Wollo

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[71] The reason that the bread in any religious ceremony is turned up-side down is to memorialize the story of Abraham and Isaac at the altar (Gen 22:1-19), imitating the action of Abraham making his son turn his head down (or up-side down), so that he would not see what he was about to do. The story encapsulates the act of sacrifice. The act of purity of heart and giving is what being evoked even in the simplest offering such as bread.

[72] Baking your own bread represents a great demonstration of household labour (see du Boulay 2010:152-155). Such deep symbolism, at least in Ethiopian cities, are less prescriptive, as one can buy ordinary loaves of bread for a birr, light a candle for the saint of that day, and it becomes "tsebel tsadik" according EOTC custom. This was commented by one *mahaber* member as a contemporary condition, who was dismayed to see lines of women getting their onions chopped by machine the weekend of Easter. 'Our women aren't women anymore', he remarked.

(Ficquet 2002). However, since the social environment concerns Orthodox Christians, the idea of "folk communion" are relevant frames to apply. Tax Freeman who alludes to this term briefly, primarily as it regards gifts of bread, turns her attention more to the structures of turn taking and rotative systems in Iberia. Such traditions are summarized by concluding that ritualized sharing is an institutional means of managing resources in an egalitarian-idealized society. Rotative logic to *ts'ewa mahaber*s can be applied, particularly in regard to specific codes to sharing. When being invited to *mahaber* meetings, I had been told not to offer to bring any additions to the lunch meal, since it was the host who was solely responsible for providing the food. If one wanted to supply food or contribute, then one should host their own gathering or be responsible for the whole meal in its entirety. It is not a potluck, which goes against the whole logic of the hosting tradition as it is performed in Ethiopia, often dubbed "hospitality." It is the proprietary role of the inviter to assume total responsibility and credit for the hosting occasion.

The *ts'ewa mahaber*'s strong potency is its sacramental bonding, and the ceremonialism of the departing 'hosts' is one manifestation of this aspect. After the Sellassie *mahaber* spends a few hours chatting, a few members express the need to start to head home. Eteye Almaz and members present stood up and walked over to the table where the *ts'ewa mahaber* items were placed, separate from the dining table that had the food we were eating. The members closed down the ceremony by huddling around the *ts'ewa* and sipped, leaving a little in the container to be added to by the next host. Dividing the dry food, like bread and cracked barley for each member to take and share with their household, they carefully bundled the items. Eteye Almaz carried the portrait of Sellassie (Holy Trinity) while leaving the candle burning inside the house. All the women begin to ululate while walking through the corridor unto the front porch and

then Eteye Almaz hands the icon to the next host. *Be Alem gebto be alem enquan wetalesh* ("May He (*ts'ewa*) go in and leave with fortune"), will be proclaimed by the next host. The phrase that is uttered when it arrives to the new home will be "*be Alem gebto be alem yewetalesh*" ("may no misfortune befall your house while the *ts'ewa* is in your house").

Figure 6.3 Baking bread

Ritual treatments of the holy, through the handling of powerful items such as *ts'ewa*, are segments of the *mahaber* custom that emphasize the vitality of charismatic force, particularly in the transfer of household to household. Ululation is expression of

glory, an automatic reaction to any "essence" of the holy, and an acknowledgement of the presence of the Holy Spirit, similar to how decorative umbrellas flank the *tabot* when it comes outside of the sanctuary (see Chapter 3). The comparison between the *ts'ewa* of the home and the *tabot* of the church is appropriate on another dimension, regarding the authenticity of the "immaterial material" (see Figure 3.1, p 91). Asking individuals about the original nature of the *tabots* of every church, some will admit they are replicas, but many will react defensively, as the question is an attempt at imputing doubt about the tenets of the faith. The general response about *tabots* is "We don't care if the rest of the world doesn't believe us. We know it to be true, so that is all what matters." It would discredit its essence by qualifying it as a "representation," as so all *tabots*, incalculable in number (though the most powerful is in Axum) are categorically all the same, no valuation of greater or lesser value. A similar articulation exists regarding the *ts'ewa*, as its domestic genesis was never noted. Though I heard no one refer to it as *qurban* (communion), *mahaber* members' expression of reverence bears little mark of its supposed representational status; it is the real deal, a blessed entity.

Regarding the ritual treatment of the lay performance, it is suitable to discuss confraternities and their ceremonial mirroring. Molonie (2004) describes the complex performance of Corpus Christi in Camuñas (Spain), which is an extension of liturgical rite, yet assumes a carnivalesque nature, leading to a series of diverse analytical approaches by the author that aim to draw out the embedded themes that reflect historical conditions of local political repression. It is acted out by confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, and rather than a proclaimed articulation, it is a "discursive performance" (2004:56) that presents significant markers of Spanish history (i.e. passage from Judaism to Christianity). However, the lay participants are actors in a "play," significant in that it is enacted in specific time (Holy Week) and space (church

interiors), along the lines of how I have presented the dimensional qualities of ritual as enacted in Ethiopia. Yet the nature of inhabiting charismatic roles assumes an alternative quality in *mahaber*s. Certainly, there is the symbolic resonance of the Christian community in its humblest sense. However, the center of gravity of the ritual, though far less accentuated and cathartic that the one performed in Camuñas, Spain, is in one's living room and directed by *mahaber* members. I argue that the ritual authority is of a more dynamic nature in the *ts'ewa mahaber*'s case. It is parallel to a liturgical rite but not incorporative such as in the case presented above. *Mahaber*s are the drivers of this ritual, and are in fact inhabiting positions as facilitators of charismatic process within ritual action, rather than assuming roles of representation. Priests, apart from providing formal prayers and offering spiritual guidance, are virtually in secondary roles, as this is acknowledged as not their domain.

The charismatic authority of *ts'ewa*, autonomous from rituals initiated by the official church, is evident in one occasion that was recounted about the healing power of *ts'ewa*. A friend, Yerusalem, told me of the recent events of the *mahaber* of her mother, who had passed away recently. The empty *mahaber* seat was expected by Yerusalem to go to her aunt, the mother's sister. Incidentally, on the 40 day memorial of her death, Yerusalem's sister's fourteen year old son fell very ill. As the Gabriel *mahaber* meeting was soon approaching, it was decided by his mom that she would make a *s'let* (vow) to Gabriel that his life be spared. On the day of the *ts'ewa mahaber*, the teenager was brought to the *ts'ewa* and it was placed on his head. After pronouncing the vow, she and him both drank from the chalice. For a few moments, the teenager stopped breathing and all (the *mahaber* members) thought he had died, until he revived himself. Based on these series of events, it was arranged that until adulthood, he would serve as a special member of the *mahaber*, under his mother's place. It was considered a special

arrangement since it was exclusively a female *mahaber*, thus cementing the hypothesis of how these associations have charismatic quality on their own, so much so that they overrode the conventions of the membership.

It is important to note *mahaber*s also are effective at instituting relationships of emotional support. Much attention is focused on the economic pooling or prestige of these associations but this is not the only aspect I encountered, particularly for the female[73] *ts'ewa* meetings I attended. Partly aided by their small size, *ts'ewa* meetings can fit into people living rooms. Members in attendance were relaxed with one another, joking, teasing each other, representing an otherwise social scene. *Mahaber* members, referred to as *mahaber lij* (kid), shared their vulnerabilities and worries. The issue of money appears often, but *mahaber*s do not lend large amounts. With the Abune Aregawi *mahaber*, they have a fund of a couple hundred birr, a small amount according to Galila, one of its members. Not enough to permanently solve problems, though sufficient for medical emergencies; as in one case, one member's husband had progressively failing eyes and collected money from several *mahaber*s they were affiliated with. Galila described *mahaber* dynamics as one family—"We love each other," "it is a place to feel safe and to share with each other," echoing one description of *mahaber*s as "learning to care for each other" (Habte Mariam Workeneh in Demeke 2011: 285). One Sellassie *mahaber* member was very direct about needing money, though done passive aggressively, suggesting she had no means to travel back home to her house. She was admonished by fellow members for complaining and not being grateful for what she had (i.e. her own home). She insisted she was not exaggerating,

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[73] *Ts'ewa mahaber*s tended to be gender-specific, as such I was never invited to a *ts'ewa mahaber* that had men as members. I asked the Sellassie *mahaber* members why men were not made members. In their case, they claimed they had no closed gender policy, concluding that men were not interested in joining. With the other *ts'ewa mahaber*s, this pattern was attributed to the fact that seats were inherited through mothers to daughters, fathers to sons.

but she was made to feel embarrassed by the others. It is evident that virtues such as bearing to be patient and waiting your turn, was to be enforced via outlets such as *mahaber*. Disappointment with family was also a topic scattered around the afternoon discussion. No resolution was reached but it was an opportunity to have a forum to be heard and air one's grievances.

6.3 The problem of *mahaber* categories

The trajectory of the discussion on *mahaber*s so far has been concerned with memorializing family history and the expansive nature of the household as an illustration of kin in broader terms. Relationships revolving around rituals of offerings ("giving freely"), and the spiritually gifted quality of this group context are intrinsic to a *mahaber*'s definition. I have argued that the people in themselves hold no special charismatic authority individually. It's their group participation that contains a spiritually powerfully quality. Speaking of a third form of *mahaber*, the *senbete*, is a variation on the themes so far. These gatherings are engaged in pure charity, with no exchange or return expectation, yet connote a spiritually endowed nature to the participant, the *senbete* member. To provide an illustration of a typical *senbete* (Sabbath) gathering, I include a visit to Ti'ta Mikael, a village church outside Dessie. After Sunday service, I was called over to share a meal with Qes Melke, his wife and any remaining parishioners, which numbered about a dozen. The meal was for the *senbete* members, he explained, while motioning to the one-room house near the entrance of the church compound. The female *senbete* members, were arranging the food on the injera trays, while Qes Melke was having an impromptu meeting with several members inside one of the church office rooms. I was the only guest as this was

a small *senbete*, suiting the size of the church congregation (an average of 30-50 on an average Sunday service). However, it was St. Mikael's feast day and while there was a meal to break the fast every Sunday, this preparation included sega wa't (beef stew). After a prayer of thanksgiving by the priest, all began to eat, with the biggest portion of meat with marrow, passed to me. Despite politely declining to eat such a heavy meal at 8:30 am, Qes Melke insisted. "It's *bereket* from St. Michael, how can you refuse?" The conversation revolved around how we could make the church beautiful for Mikael for his annual feast day the following month, the repainting of the tin roof being the highest aim. One *senbete* member, a deacon who served the church, committed to two cans of paint. It was a small *senbete* and always more difficult to fundraise for, Qes Melke noted to me. He was a very skilled fundraiser and made sure I left with blessed bread and the name of the colour of paint they needed, in case I should feel inspired to help Mikael. At first glance it appears like a normal gathering of individuals, not an allegorical relation to sacrament-taking or sacred continuance of saint devotion. Instead, the *senbete* assumes a role of guardian of the lay Christian and his or her "incorporation" into a religious community.

At the conclusion of the Eucharist service[74], a collection of parishioners gather at a building to the back side of the church or slightly outside the compound, to host a meal. The building is a rectangular house constructed in the traditional technology with mud walls and dirt floor, though nowadays roofs have steadily been replaced with tin instead of thatch. These spaces are funded and maintained by the *senbete mahaber* and outside of meeting times, the large room is used to house travelling clergy, such as

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[74] Attending the service of the day is an integral part of nearly all *mahaber* events. The meal served is then sequentially correct according to church proscriptions. For example, on St. Michael's day, apart from the regular rubric of liturgical script, part of his hagiography is read from the Synaxarium (Senksar), as well as his miracles (*tamera*) and a homily on his life (*dersan*) is presented (Demeke 2011:290).

iterant monks and deacons, or to conduct meetings for parish affairs. Unlike trends of other *mahaber* types, the *senbete* is the most consistently divided equally along gender lines, nearly half men and women and their economic class was not high (i.e. middle to low). One way to judge the economic status was the amount of monetary contributions, an average of 7 to 10 birr a month, while some *senbete*s have membership dues of 20 birr a month. A couple of members out of the total *senbete* are volunteer to bring food items such as specially prepared home brew, large round loaves of bread, and *kolo* (cracked wheat grain), to be served to the members present. Total membership in *senbete* can be very high as the individuals typically represent the community living in the same neighbourhood, nearing 100 people, but the people in attendance are much fewer, a little more than 50%. *Senbete mahaber* membership tends to be an older age-set, mid 50s and upward composing of the majority of the association body. Younger members, from mid 20s to 40s and representing every 1 in 10 members, were more likely to participate in *senbete* as its membership rules were more open and not contingent on inheritance like *ts'ewa* or *zikir*.

On the one hand, *senbete* is the most direct correspondence with religious confraternities as defined in the Catholic tradition, as a religious community that serves as an extension of parish council and acts as the church's grassroots support system. Similarly, one of the principal purposes of the *senbete* is to feed the poor, and the meals they served were generally modest in order to serve the largest amount of people possible. However, *senbete mahaber*s are also a melding of various influences. To return the charismatic authority of collectives, it is worth investigating further the embedded aura of justice and council that *senbete* tradition contains. This is important because it represents one major characteristic of what *mahaber*s engender to the broader

community. In Ullendorff's (1968) analysis of the etymology of the *senbete*[75], he mines the biblical references to reflect on the "Old Testament character" of Ethiopian Orthodox worship. These are many, though his discussion of the conciliar nature of the "community of believers," depicted as "elders under a tree resolving a dispute" (Deuteronomy 25:7-9) resembled a typical scene at a church, any time of the week, but particularly on Sunday at these *senbete* gatherings. The church is referred to culturally as a neutral ground of dispute settlement, and often times "peace talks" are staged in a church compound and elders (*shemageles*) are pivotal players in these "peace talks." On one occasion, a *shemagele* meeting was called to "reason with" a woman who refused to follow a court request to provide evidence of property ownership. This was an inter-family conflict, so it was in the interest of the "family name" to have this issue resolved peacefully and outside the public domain of the legal system. At Giorgis church, coincidently across the street from a major court in Addis Ababa, a gathering of two family elders and several other affiliated family contacts who were *senbete* members at Abo church were present. The situation was laid out and the chair of the meeting offered his assessment, making sure each side was equally appeased. In the end, it was decided among the *shemageles* that the woman needed to meet several conditions (i.e. cooperate with neighbourhood administration) within a "compassionate" timeframe. This was not agreed to and no resolution was reached. However, in the opinion of several of the *shemageles* involved, the incident was not a failure as those involved followed the proper cultural procedures.

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[75] The word itself is in reference to the day of rest, shabat (*senbete*→sebate, which is "seven" in Amharic). It is a point of theological confusion about whether Saturday *and* Sunday are honoured as days of rest among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians (Fritsch 2000). It was decreed by Emperor Za'ra Yacob that Saturday is equal to Sunday, yet church councils in the late 19th century appear to overturn this interpretation. While there are certain church traditions that assert that Saturday is the day of observance of God's creation (see Seventh Day Adventists), this detail is diminished in the *senbete* gatherings, which always occur on Sundays.

The frequency of appealing to *mahaber*s, particularly to its senior members, also signalled the limitations of families to solve their internal problems. Mequanent (1998), studying the patterns of *mahaber* formation in their religious and secular settings[76], presents several examples of how rural farmers appeal to *mahaber*s. Two instances illustrate these dilemmas of interfamily strife and the necessity to have public, unbiased recourse, and a means of retribution. In one example, Mequanent describes an incident where an old man asks a *mahaber* (unspecified which type), to send an investigator to find out if his children are stealing coffee from his field, including forcing the accused, his sons, to take an oath on the Bible if they deny it (Mequanent 1998: 506-507). Another cited case involved similar circumstances, where a *mahaber* chairman (i.e. *dagne* [judge] known also as "Muse") was asked to intercede in a theft of a father's farming equipment from his son. What makes the *mahaber* so authoritative, above the authoritativeness of a father over his own son? The "aura" of authority of *mahaber*s continues to maintain an elevated position in society, even when family relations have broken down.

So far, the charismatic collective as I have argued via several *mahaber* forms rests in their ritualization, that is their ability to achieve a spiritually gifted status through the manipulation of time and space via ritual and ideal types such as sacral "role-playing." With *senbete*, this formula begins to conflate with other cultural frames. *Mahaber* activities, especially as they grow out of professional work environments, present a dynamic fusion between the traditionalist templates of lay activities and a

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[76] Mequanent divides *mahaber*s into secular and religious, profiling associations such as *iqubs* (lending associations), *geberres* (farming collectives), and *iddirs* (funerary organizations), all as examples of mutual assistance at the grassroots level. It is not my contention that *mahabers* must be of a religious purpose. However, my proposition to study the context of how collectives form and under what circumstances and influences they operate necessitates loosening the categories between secular and religious.

desire to engage in community-making, such as Ato Tesfai's *mahaber*. Every 27th of the

month, this collective of army veterans meet at Medhane Alem church and bring

prepared meals in a rotative fashion, never meeting at home for their *mahaber* purposes.

Ato Tesfai's turn was on Patriots Day, a national holiday as well as coinciding with the

feast day of Medhane Alem, which he viewed as complementary as Medhane Alem is

the guardian of soldiers. The main objective of the *mahaber* was to distribute food

under the name of Medhane Alem *mahaber* of Army veterans, much like the aims of the

senbete, though the membership of this association was specific and not defined by

parish. Ato Tesfai was counted the value of his association as a way to continue

relationships among old friends and co-workers who have since taken different

professions and do not see each other regularly otherwise.

Figure 6.4 *Senbete* proceedings

The flexibility with which these institutions were inaugurated, as well as

people's engagement with several associations at a time, was a dominant pattern among

my informants, most of who were employed in urban centres. These religious

associations maintained member bodies that are penetrable, as new participants can be

endorsed through a guarantor recommendation system via existing members. The link

between work culture and association engagement is one pivotal component of how

*mahaber*s exist as such a wide-ranging activity and entity. Unlike *ts'ewa mahaber*s,

these *mahaber*s that grew out of the workplace were not gender specific. Marta, an

employee at a private enterprise, was approached by her co-worker, Azede, about a

cause she was interested in supporting, funding a monastery near Wenchi Kirkos in her

home-country. They spread the word among several friends at work, they helped sell

tickets at their respective parish churches, and on the significant feast day, many of the

participants went on pilgrimage there. The pooling of resources together and the

bonding and banding together for an event or cause, serve the foundational steps for

mahaber formation. Azede and a few supporters formed a Kirkos *mahaber* as a result

(they meet yearly since membership has not reached a high number), though Marta

decided not to join since she could not commit to one more *mahaber* obligation.

The variations and flexibility of how religious associations form in Ethiopia

indicates a contrast to similar traditions elsewhere, which tend to have rigid and

selective membership rules and marked initiation procedures. In the case of a

contemporary Orthodox association in Bulgaria (Baeva & Valchinova 2009), a

charismatic leader in the conventional sense and a miraculous origin story are key

characteristics to its elite position, one of only two sanctioned confraternities in Sofia

and founded at the turn of the 19th century. It is difficult to compare Ethiopian Orthodox

*mahaber*s cross-culturally because of the longevity of this cultural custom. The closest I

can date *mahaber*s as a distinguishable social practice is the agape meal of early

Christianity, though Emperor Za'ra Yacob's reforms in 15th century, an era of

development of indigenous Christian culture, are a likely period when such customs might have become institutionalized.

6.4 Anti-clericalism and Orthodox autonomy

The ways *mahaber*s stray from classic confraternities as they are understood in Catholic tradition is illuminating for several key reasons. A broad definition of confraternity is a religious community, principally male, organized under the protection of a patron saint that takes part on the feast day of their namesake, as well as holds a place alongside administrative councils in their local political economy. In large part, the prestige and charismatic authority of these associations is a key aspect of the appeal of joining and participating and these characteristics are generated from the pseudo-clerical ceremonialism that surrounds these associations. Terpstra's introduction to the collection of historical confraternity studies, *The Politics of Ritual Kinship* (2000), marks significant trends of these associations. In addition to serving as a window into alternative lay devotion culture, confraternities were the precursors of modern institution-making, specifically in the context of Renaissance Europe. Emerging with a vengeance during the Counter-Reformation, these brotherhoods, with a wide variety of types, had a reformist zeal that marked a shift from its more egalitarian origins towards a more aristocratic character (Terpstra 2000:7-8). These brotherhoods experienced a revival in the 19th century when the liberalization of governments forced the Catholic Church to assume a diminished and divested position, though the popularity of confraternities had largely diminished in lay Christian traditions.

Among contemporary studies of religious brotherhoods or communities, the theme of anti-clericalism reoccurs, as participants of these associations are understood

as attempting to negotiate a place, individually through the collective, into the new social order, particularly in colonial contexts. Antagonism with clergy was prevalent with the Tlingit brotherhoods, who re-appropriated the confraternity in order to preserve aspects of local memorial customs and moiety identity (Kan 1985). Similarly contestations over orthodox practice and the church institution's exercise of power were evident in Catholic Europe over the course of the 20th century, in France (Badone 1989), or Spain (Behar 1986), land ownership and management being a large point of contention. Driessen summarizes the divisiveness of these dynamics as it appeared in an Andalusian town in the 1970s: "one of the very values embodied in the *confradias* is independence *cum* local patriotism, which openly conflicts with bureaucratic authority and interference from outside in the *pueblo's* affairs" (1984:79). So while religious communities were originally intended as a cultural practice to supply parish support, they were conversely being used as a weapon and means to redress dilemmas unresolved by broader church-lay relations.

These examples of strong parish infrastructure among church communities is reflective of local historical developments of the symbiotic relations between Church and state, further entrenched in Eastern Christian territories where the emperor was head of Church. Several of the above stated issues correspond in Ethiopia, one major example being the feudal land system (Crummey 1972), a political-economic system that established gradational relationships between serf and lord, and for this dissertation's purposes reveals clues about vassal/land vs. patron/clientage of saint veneration (Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984). Due to recent reconfigurations of parishes, the power dynamics of authority has been modified to include more active parties. The lay collectives analysed as honorific associations offer an opportunity to view the personal dynamics between clergy and *mahaber* members. As such, members of the church

would be more resistant to espouse a categorical distrust of the Church as illustrated with the conservative Catholic communities of Europe. In some cases, priests and deacons can themselves be inducted into *mahaber* as members. What this says about clerical and secular roles as they play out in the local scene is that liturgical roles in secular and religious domain are not strictly divided. This aspect, of priests as participants, actually permits considering how their inclusion creates some kind of middle area for lay as vested with authorial qualities. This contrasts with clerical formulism in liturgical context, examined by Carroll's (n.d) ethnographic research on the materialities of Orthodox liturgical life-world in a London parish church community. This study features the methods and trajectories by which Orthodox Christians are transformed through sacramental engagements, such as the priest who assumes the office he holds through the vestments and community he serves or the initiate who through baptism becomes a person who "participates in the Priesthood of Christ, not through his sacred functions but by virtue of his sanctified being" (Evdokimov 2001:85). It is this vacillation between social stratification in this world and equality in the next that composes a key quality for how Orthodox Christians understand the transformative potential contained and facilitated via the church as "one Body in Christ."

The domain of commensality provides another means to observe the tensions of hierarchy and communitarianism in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, investigated by Boylston (2012) in the town of Zege (west-central Ethiopia). This study critically examines the paradigm of "individualism" as contingent on the mediation of substance exchanged that includes an expansive set of activities, ranging from hosting a *zikir,* partaking of *qurban,* and encountering *buda* (evil spirits). By identifying a fundamental premise, that "Social unequals should nonetheless be equal in the eyes of God, from

whom they borrow their worldly power (Boylston 2012: 212-213)", Boylston communicates the paradoxically essence of encounters on an inter-relational and super-relational level, emphasizing that " you can share substance with God, but not while sharing substance with other people. But perfect consubstantiality with God is unsustainable, while consubstantiality with people is unavoidable. This is a paradox and a tension that animates Orthodox religious practice" (2012: 212).

This discussion has positioned as its central axis the domain of the collective and the leadership roles it confers. I have explored this objective formally by studying the typologies of *mahabers* as they exist in an urban environment. The decision to devise an analysis of archetypal forms possesses the potential to consider certain universal principles that govern this domain of devotional activity. Furthermore, to study *mahabers'* organizational features enables examining how Ethiopians adapts to another collective institution that has gained local prominence, the NGO (non-governmental organization). My context of Dessie was a particularly saturated area due to the legacy of the famines that positioned it as an humanitarian aid and health station (i.e. most of the major hospitals and higher clinics of North and South Wollo zones are based there). But it is nevertheless accurate to state the prevalence of this sector in Ethiopia broadly given recent government directives of economic productivity and social development. During my time in the field, I often wondered about this NGOification that influenced "grassroots" politics, its cache contained and disseminated via buzz words like "empowerment" and along with other appeals to "social capital", a reflection of the deeply entrenched discourse propagated by institutions such as the World Bank in developing countries (Mosse 2006). I noted how these themes interacted with *mahabers* and found certain correspondences, such as *kebeles* (neighbourhood councils) that partnered with female *mahabers* and agro-business collectives. These features of

bureaucracy as they developed locally reflect greater political pressure for groups to achieve mobilization in the public sphere. While I have discussed the dilemmas of the representation in the structuring of the federalism in Ethiopia (Chapter 2), this climate of group rights at the micro-level corresponds to critique of the term "community", particularly vibrant in the U.S. political lexicon. For Joseph (2002) examining the trends in American identity politics, "community" has devolved into a rather noxious term, and reflects how "capitalism and, more generally, modernity depend on and generate the discourse of community to legitimate social hierarchies" while nevertheless arguing that "communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption" (2002:iix). These comments are instructive, and should be kept at the forefront of this discussion, given how religious *mahabers* are adapting to altered conditions, such as the Church's agenda of increasing the size of diocese and parishes that will rely more heavily on collective mobilizations of human and monetary resources.

In closing, I would like to suggest a uniquely Orthodox Christian interpretation of the religious collective. Nikolai Berdyaev, a philosopher and critic of the Russian Orthodox Church, wrote extensively on Russian spirituality and the un-institutional nature of the Church, among other subjects. His interpretation of the religious collective bears relevant correspondences to the manner in which *mahaber*s relate to the established authority of the Church.

> Individualism is foreign to Orthodoxy, to it belongs a particular collectivism. A religious person and a religious collective are not incompatible with each other, as external friend to friend. The religious person is found within the religious collective and the religious collective is found within the religious person. Thus the religious collective does not become an external authority for the religious person, burdening the person externally with teaching and the law of life. The Church is not outside of religious persons, opposed to her. The Church is within them and they are within her. Thus the Church is not an authority. The Church is a grace-filled unity of love and freedom. Authoritativeness is incompatible with

Orthodoxy because this form engenders a fracture between the religious collective and the religious person, between the Church and her members…the authentic freedom of religious conscience, freedom of the spirit, is made evident not in an isolated autonomous personality, self-asserted in individualism but in a personality conscious of being in a superpersonal spiritual unity, in a unity with a spiritual organism, within the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church. (Berdyaev 1952)

Focusing on this understanding of the embeddedness of the idealized Church, it is the religious collectives who seek and are truly able to achieve this "mystical transfiguration," not via a pathway that is an earthly institution, as I have demonstrated with ethnographic analysis of Timqet and Hudade (Chapter 3 and 4). This conception of religious authority, or lack thereof, is an elaboration of ritual patterns and arenas where charismatic energies, the spiritually qualities time and space, are de-centralized and assume a position of autonomy, (i.e. "the church is not outside of the religious persons"). Conversely, this interpretation of non-authority, correctly stated by Berdyaev as not an expression of 'individualism', should not be employed at the expense of cooperation and resolution with broader community and Christian fellowship. All the social benefits of *mahaber*s, the prestige, support, blessings, are all by-products, since at the core it is almost as though there is no self without the group. Discussing the necessity of sharing to perfect strangers on a monthly basis, Eteye Meseret, a *senbete* member, gave a reply that encapsulated the integrated nature of humanity: "The pieces without the entire bread are meaningless, they don't amount to anything."

6.5 Conclusion

Investigating the phenomenon of *mahaber*s in Ethiopia is a broad endeavour. It is a category with wide application in various social spheres, and its grouping under one category as I propose here has limitations. What I have argued has been that the forms and "subtext" of *mahaber*s as they have existed in the Orthodox Christian domain are

influential in a wider re-purposing of social organization. It is the improvisation upon this tradition in more "secular" environments that alerted me to the malleability of this social practice. Discussing the impact of Derg regime on strengthening or weakening religious institutions, Yeshi, a friend who lived in Addis in the 1980s and herself conscripted in *zemecha* (the educational campaigns), noted how *kebele* meetings (neighbourhood organizations) were forced to meet on Sunday mornings. Churches were open, though "bled from the inside": people were informed on if they were seen going to church and charged with "counter-revolutionary activities" for meeting in private spaces. Therefore, going to church was not illegal but severely discouraged. Scheduling meetings at that time would assure people did not go to church and that no gatherings such as *senbete* could occur. The logic was that to completely eliminate church activities would be severing a major artery of functional social support systems. Ethiopia is not a country averse to layering one ideology over another, but it is precisely because such overlaps exist that a more comprehensive analysis of broader cultural context is necessary. The above example on one level illustrates a socialist regime's tactics at paralyzing the effectiveness of religious institutions. However, co-opting the *mahaber* structure for non-religious aims does not totally expunge the participants' understandings of how the collective can work and be mobilized. Such an inquiry extends outside the aims of this study, though the themes of authority and their place in the judicial order indicate that there is a more intimate public relationship towards religious *mahaber*s than meets the eye.

My analytical decision to not isolate the purely devotional *mahaber*s from associations that have an expressly non-confessional focus (i.e. secular) stems for the condition that there are few domains that are purely secular in Ethiopian civil society. I ground this chapter in the values and frameworks from which the *mahaber*s initially

grew, within the EOTC domain, in order to better relate-the potency and binding force intrinsic to how these *mahaber*s function; its collective order and the spiritual gifted qualities of the moment in time and space it is able to initiate. *Mahaber* inductees consider it their inheritance, and a blessing to be part of a group. *Mahaber*s certainly exist that do not have a religious purpose, though how they form and with what strength their member ties are maintained suggests that individuals understand their membership ties in ways that are informed by traditional *mahaber* models, through ideologies such as ritual or spiritual kinship, so much so that *mahaber*s' can be more trustworthy than actual blood kin. One incident concerning a paralegal, Elsabet, demonstrated this pattern as it plays out in urban politics. Elsabet needed a set of documents transferred from one division to the next and to have it approved by a higher committee for a land permit. She counted at least two to three channels of passage, calculating that with bribing, called *shai/bunna* (i.e. coffee/tea money), it would cost somewhere between 7-10,000 birr. She discovered a *mahaber* lij working at the city administration office who was part of the same *senbete* at her neighbourhood. As a result, the fate of this case completely changed. However, payment for his troubles still needed to be offered, a substantial amount. I misunderstood this change of events and asked if money was still involved, how could this be labelled as such a wonderful intercession? Elsabet reasoned that it would be going to an honest Christian, going to "one of our kind," like family, she reasoned, and the payment was in thanks and appreciation, unlike the other officials, thieves she called them. I asked why she could not borrow the money from her family and she dismissed that option, because she did not want them to know her affairs. She considered these separate worlds and defined lines between blood and ritual kin. Here, the failures of ordinary kinship were being redressed in idealized relationships, similar to the blood brotherhoods in East and Central Africa in the 19th century (White 1994).

My argument about the malleability of *mahaber*s is that they are a pathway for creating alternatives, as an approach to work within the system rather than against it, even if it can be oppressive.

Though people may be attached to these societies for the respectability, spiritual gifts, and social support they facilitate, their involvement is also contingent on being beholden to a promise, characterized as an unbreakable bond for themselves and others, such as the memory of their family. Do these dynamics of community-making rely on a certain "enchantment", the "raison d'etre" for why people come together (i.e. the sacral ceremonial "giving and receiving freely")? Are these events determined by charismatic force such as "divine intervention" of Mary (Baeva and Valtchinova 2009) or fulfilling the wishes of Medhane Alem as in the case of Herani's *zikir*? The discussion has shown how blessing is seen as collectively generated and it is because of this collective dynamic that *mahaber*s continue to be able to transcend potential fragmentation by making everyone "related".

Chapter Seven: Movements of Sacred Promise

7.1 Scenes of Prismatic Covenant

Every year on the 21st of Meskerem (September), around a quarter of a million people climbed the mountain-top of Amba Gishen and celebrated the arrival of the piece of the True Cross in 1446. Located 70km away from Dessie, pilgrims from all over the country congregated to celebrate this event on the feast day of St. Mary at the church of her namesake. The legend of how the Cross arrived was a legend well-elaborated by Orthodox Christians, whether they had made the pilgrimage or not, and it connected various segments of historical epochs through several commemorative occasions. The basic timeline of this history are as follows: In the 4th century in Constantinople, Queen Eleni, mother of Emperor Constantine ("Konsta") vowed to find the cross of the Crucifixion. And after a half a year of excavation, it was found and eventually divided into four pieces, bestowed to the Christian Churches in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem and the right arm given to the Church of Alexandria. As a reward for Ethio-Egyptian military cooperation in the 15th century, the relic of the True Cross was transferred to Ethiopia, where it has remained since. A contributing factor for selecting Dessie as my fieldsite was its geographic proximity to Gishen. I was attracted to the fact that its celebrated status was rather muted compared to other locales on the church tourism circuit, such as Axum, Gondar and Lalibela. The simultaneous official, popular and commercial religion (Binns 2002) that was emerging at pilgrimage centers in Ethiopia was a reflection of the 'museumifying' of devotional space, discussed in Chapter 5 as part of the Church's model of sustainability. I believed this focus on pilgrimage would create more precise conditions of studying how Ethiopians perceived

and presented to themselves their Church's history. This focus revolved around a question about the valuing of cultural preservation and how activities by laymen supported this objective, which I decided to pursue by charting the movements of pilgrims. By adapting to the role of pilgrims proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. Since few tourists came to Gishen at all, my presence there generally mystified people. The idea that I would travel to participate in a devotional experience did not compute with most people. Why did I go through this trouble? Why not, I'm Orthodox, I thought? However, I overlooked that my motives and circumstances for this spiritual journey (*menfesawi guzo*) were not defined. I had not made a personal promise. This was poignantly reflected in a colloquial speech—"How did you arrive? How did Gishen receive you?"

The devotional seriousness of pilgrimage has been classically illustrated by outward manifestations of sin that are severe in their embodiment, Kulubi Gabriel often cited by Orthodox Christians of the phenomenon of penance in Ethiopia (Pankhurst 1994, Gascon & Hirsch 1992). These contexts were dramatic and evocative in popular consciousness, in particular the image of pilgrims who carry large boulders on their backs, akin to the spiritual and physical submission exhibited by supplicants to St. Mary at Tinos (Dubisch 1995), who likewise communicate their suffering by how they are received by a holy place. By the same token, pilgrimages were also events that encouraged intense social disorder. This domain of devotional activity was the most difficult to disentangle analytically and to apply a theme that effectively cut across the diverse profiles of Gishen pilgrims. What I learned from the various pilgrims I spoke to was that their arrival to a sacred place and the impetus for such their commitment gradually became cemented into personal tradition. Pilgrimage events possess the potential of becoming what Robbins calls "traditions of innovation", put more

intrinsically, domains that permit inserting "something new in something old" (2010b). Pilgrimages are contexts where personal commemorative events (i.e. memorials or vows) transformed into "traditions" due to their ability to sustainably influence broader communal commitments.

This final ethnographic chapter explores how Gishen Mariam is defined and circumscribed as a holy place by its pilgrims. I argue its narrative and its intertextual characteristics contribute to a domain of genre-elaboration that is active in the imagination of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. The return of the genre-framework as a way to illuminate on the question posed at the start of this work; the values of preservation and protection. I tease out the fine line between protection and guarding and examine the relationship of relic or *tabot* legends to furnish a sense of moral duty/social impetus/ call of arms, what I have dichotomized as a difference between covenant as a genre and covenant as an ideology, church as a cultural force and church as a social institution. While I consciously acknowledge how these rough categories slip into each other, I have found this distinction useful because it has permitted a focus methodology of "church" that envisions an alternative operating discourse, what I have been charting as archetypes of devotional activities. The value of Gishen has presented a context when promise as a sacred bond and promise as a divine mandate compete as the two essences of covenant (Chapter 2), which I reflect upon when considering recent trends that move the Church into the tourism sector. Such directions provide an analytical opportunity to evaluate the difference between how individuals and communities and institutions interpret "covenant." Put another way more simply, what are the tensions inherent in what covenant inspires in individuals or institutions? Are there significant tensions inherent in this concept for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians,

that is, as a grounded methodology of honouring relationships and conversely, as a discourse to legitimate autonomy and to encourage a spirit of exclusivity?

To remain consistent to my ethnographic base, I profile how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians evoke promises within the pilgrimage context. I focus on the form of the vow (*s'let*) which I mark as a detour from "covenant" as I have structured it as a genre and holographic object. The principal difference I identify is the capacity of vows to direct interventions that are proactively desired by the supplicant. However, the ways that tropes and symbols of covenant are implicated in pilgrimage journeys require foregrounding its roles as an accessible genre for individuals. I introduce the analytical possibilities of situating the prismatic refractions of covenant through a detailed exposition of how Fisseha and Haile moved through pilgrimage time/space. The ways that these two individuals move away from Gishen, and prepare to transition into the normalcy of their everyday lives, made this fact apparent; making a spiritual journey required full-fledged participation. Fisseha and Haile, their age and gender, disrupted the standard caricature of piety as young men who in a casual yet committed fashion, affirm and test their faith.

7.2 Applying the lens of covenant genre on Gishen

We had descended Gishen Debre Kirbe, a flat-topped mountain seventy kilometers from Dessie, after the conclusion of the feast of the Falling Asleep (*Erafta*) on Tirr 21 (January 29), which commemorates the departure of St. Mary's soul to heaven. The celebration began the night before with *wazema*, and *mahalet*. *Qidase* was proclaimed by early morning and built upon with the additional rites of glory and exaltation (*mizmur Dawit*) to St. Mary. The celebrants moved to an outdoor stage to witness the presentation of the *tabot* and preaching (*sebket*) by a few notable clergy. After being

released shortly after one in the afternoon, Haile and Fisseha, English teachers by profession and geology students at Wollo University, and I made our way down the mountain. They were eager to get back to the city; they both had term papers to write before having to return back from school leave on Monday. We said our goodbyes to the members of St. Gabriel's *mahaber* who maintained a lodging house near the church grounds and provided the meal and refreshments post-service. Most were busy lounging around drinking *t'ela* (Ethiopian beer) or lying down taking a nap from the long hours at service concluded by breaking the fast, nearly twelve hours if you count those who came for *wazema* the night before. As we make our way down the mountain, Asfaw, one of the leading members of the St. Gabriel Sunday School group, had yelled out to me "We're family now, the house of Abraham (*ahun beteseb nin, bet Abraham*)". We collected out *gabis*, backpacks and containers of holy water and set off.

As we set off down the first set of high steps, the energy of the environs has calmed. The populated paths were deserted, vendors that sold commemorative T-shirts a day prior were nowhere to be found, and booths that had blared VCDs of devotional songs for sale were inaudible. It was quiet except for a few people huddled around a small *madbet* (kitchen). Haile and Fisseha backtracked from their rushed pace to see the commotion and quickly figured out that it was a memorial of a middle-aged man's father. His family lived in Gishen and it had been a year since his father's passing. It was following Orthodox Christian tradition, wherein a memorial meal should be prepared one year after the time of death. It is a common practice to share the food by passing out the bread that was blessed and *te'la* prepared for this occasion. The host graciously and joyfully extended a bread basket and insists I partake. Haile and Fisseha hesitated to linger but suggested I taste some of the *t'la* offered, one of them remarking

that "You can't refuse such a blessing." We took a seat on the side of the road, sipped quickly from bull-horn cups, and quickly thanked our host.

On the climb down of the second set of steps, we encountered an old man who carried bundles of indiscernible items, likely his bedding and most of his essential belongings. He was a monk (*menokse*), I was told. "Look at the oversized cross around his neck and cross staff made of reinforced steel." His monastic robe was grey with dirt and age. Also, more noticeably, he had nobody around him, accompanied with no family or companions. This unremarkable fact, a monastic's solitude, was discernable and stark in relation to most others who travelled collectively. Physically, the Abba appeared tired but his energy seemed very determined and purposeful, as if on to his next task. It was a few weeks before *Hudade* (Lent) and it was his aim was to spend that time, 55 days of fasting and deep prayer, at Debre Libanos monastery, in Shoa, approximately 300 km south. After much protesting, the monk allows Haile and Fisseha to carry his things the rest of the way down to the base of Gishen. "Where is he going? How will he get there? How will he manage?" I asked. Reaching the bottom of the mountain, the guys started to ask him about how he planned to get home. "By transport? Mule?" "I'll walk," he said reluctantly, which prompted the guys to conclude the monk had no money to catch a bus. Haile gently slid a few 10 birr notes into the monk's hand, gripping his hand as to not allow him to refuse the offer. After a lot of tugging back and forth with the money, Haile suggested the monk bless us for a safe return as a fair exchange. In a hushed and mumbled voice, he recited the Lord's Prayer and Our Lady, followed by his own benediction, wishing us safe journey. Then he walked away.

The early-departers were milling around the buses, some of whose drivers were missing, others waiting to be unblocked from bad park jobs. Settling on the next bus pulling out, our original crew reassembled and we set out. The company I was with,

Haile and Fiseha's acquaintances from Dessie Gabriel parish, were genuinely tired yet the mood was more resolved, a palpable sense of calm. There was no reading from prayer books or counting of rosary beads (*mekuteria*), as it had been on the journey *to* Gishen; the tension of anticipation seemed to have dissipated. People started getting phone calls again as we began to approach more network towers, husbands and wives on the other line asking when they will be arriving, if they could pick up fruits along the road, cheaper than goods in the city. After less than twenty minutes on the road, we stalled in the intense midday sun caused by a bus that overturned on its side and blocked the road. Everyone from the caravan of buses ambled down to see the commotion. No one perished or was injured and all the passengers had found spaces on other buses. Several young onlookers start taking photos on their mobiles of the car. "Look at how close to the edge it is, how it barely missed the cliff" Fisseha exclaimed. Middle aged women looked on curiously, audibly lamenting. Fisseha prompts me: "don't you want to take pictures?" a facetious comment on my copious documentation that they witnessed over the course of two days. In this instance, I was horrified and a bit stern in my response. "No, I don't see why I should take pictures of an accident. People could have died." What I didn't say was how I believed this action glorified tragedy and a flippant reaction to the fragility of life. He looked at me blankly, not comprehending my indignation. "But it's a miracle (*tamerat*). They didn't die. This is proof of God's power and love. That's what we are celebrating, what people want to be grateful and thankful for".

After the shock of the incident died down and the requisite amount of time was spent theorizing about how best to extricate the vehicle from obstructing the road, people began to grumble about not moving and the traffic began to catch up with us. The solution was to have the mass shifted by about a dozen men by a couple of feet to

the side and leave the trouble for someone else to solve. Inside the bus, we continued our quiet mood for awhile longer, until it was noticeably silent. Abera, a childhood friend of Haile and Fisseha, exclaimed "How can we sit like this after reaching such a holy place?" almost rebuking our complacency, how quickly we forgot the gift of our safe passage. "Let's sing (lit. praise). Where's the *mizmur* tape?" he called out. The driver's assistant shuffled around for recordings of *mizmur* and comes up empty handed. "What shall we sing?" he throws back at us. There a few grunts from my companions, who laughed off his proposition. Mildly irritated by his friends' lack of support, Abera started off on his own, with a few people around him joined him at the chorus part. A few ladies several rows up began to rhythmically clap in synch with the melodic phrasing and threw out the missing words when Abera stalled over forgotten lyrics. Then I noticed Haile and Fisseha next to me mouthed the lines of the songs, their voices getting louder and more assertive. Before long, the bus was a raucous choir from this impromptu volley of exuberance, the singing became a seamless performance, principally from this collective of twenty-something men, one person started a new tune the moment another had finished. Despite the newfound energy, the young men about an hour or so in, started forgetting the words past the first stanza. The women who fed them lines earlier apparently channelled the lyrics down from a young boy seated in the front of the bus. The mystery chorister was revealed and made to take stage in center aisle, fully reciting six, seven, eight stanzas without pausing. "What about 'Emmanuel'? Do you know how 'Hello to You, My Lord' starts?" Abera and his friends yell out. Each time, for nearly three hours, the kid kept passing down the words, at the astonishment of his elders. My traveling companions were highly impressed by the ten-year old boy's fine memory, rewarding him with compliments and monetary tips, and beamed with delight at how much "ease and joy" (*q'lal ena desta*) flowed through him.

Tired and worn out from clapping so long and hard, we were nearing the outskirts of Dessie city as the sun was setting. The kid starts to sweetly sing the lyrics to the popular 'Our Virgin Mother, Come'. The guys around me are less energetic with their participation, but by each passing stanza, they become more convicted, bellowing the lyrics along,

The kid: *Bechighnet kefu angete yasdefale*
            cheineqatene ababeso lekefu yesetale
            anchi neye kegone kaleshe aleshenafem
            lazihe alem monynete ejene aleseteme

            Loneliness is harsh (lit. evil)
            Makes one bow one's head in suffering
            If you are beside me, I will not be defeated
            I will not fall prey to the foolish ways of this world.

Start of clapping and ululating:

Everyone: *Denegel enate neye dereshelenyi*
            wagane yalegnem ena yamiyatsnanagni
            kategebe hunyina ayezosh bayenyi

            Our Virgin Mother, come, arrive for me
            I do not have kin that will comfort me
            Be near me and strengthen me.

<center>****</center>

If I pursued a purely metaphor-focused analysis, Fisseha's and Haile's actions as they played out would render a rather accurate mapping of the features of the covenant genre as I have explored through the course of four ethnographic chapters. During the

walk down from the blessed grounds of Gishen and back to ordinary time (Eliade 1954),

they participated in a set of actions that suitably correspond with dimensions of

covenant outlined in this dissertation. The fellowship of the *mahaber*, glossed as *bete*

Abraham, was an important reference to the potent allegory of chosen people, what I

have characterized as narrative essence of the covenant genre. The roadside *zikir*

demonstrated the seal of covenant, an act of remembrance that produced blessing that

disperses to any and all passing through this event, a materiality of grace enacted via

social merging. Lastly, a demanded emotion to be properly grateful initiated a

spontaneous performance, idiosyncratic to each praise-maker, to give thanks

(*temesgen*). However, the thematic reoccurrences of covenant-in-praxis do not reify

devotional action as prefigured but instead showcase once more that it is body of

knowledge and a way of orienting to the world, via a repertoire of activities. To note the

pervasiveness of metaphoric thought is to recognize how imbricated theological ideas

are in cultural outlook, a result of processual interactions between discourse and praxis

(Hanks 1987). To argue that covenant contains organizational qualities for a socially

disordered/unstructured domain such as pilgrimage only provides further evidence that

social traditions that the EOTC has assisted in developing has nourished effective

gateways of social cohesion.

The following subsection tests my dissertation's argument, by challenging its

central premise. Does prismatic covenant "work" in other instantiations of devotion and

promise-making? How do people narrate Gishen, the journey of the cross to Ethiopia

and how do they understand their contemporary roles of bestowal and responsibility, as

tied to keeping traditions, which contains within them commitments and inspire

charitable acts? My rationale for this analytic track is to determine the dynamic

potential of covenant as a prismatic figure of thought, that is, whether it was a feature of

ingenuity of Church tradition or whether it continues to be a resourceful strategy for adapting to cultural change?

7.2.1 The holographic relic

The legends of Gishen are creatively articulated by a variety of sources and perspectives, making the holy place transform into a domain that inspires pilgrims to attach symbolic edification to amplify its spiritual grandeur. The patterning of intertextual references, in a manner I illustrated previously as "layers" of symbols to equate and buttress the potency of the ark (e.g. the *tabot* is Mary's womb), repeats itself at Gishen as a place, legend and relationship that is elaborated upon. Therefore, I contend that the legend of Gishen plays upon elements of the established socio-theological genre, what can be conceived as refractions, and serves as supporting evidence for how this idea is malleable to a multitude of contexts.

In order to understand the layered aspects of Gishen as a pilgrimage site, I orient to the celebration chronologically, via its placement within liturgical time, via the holiday of Meskel (The Cross). This is a feast and bonfire ceremony that celebrates the discovery or 'exaltation' of the True Cross by Queen Eleni in the 4th century. Not only is the universal Christian community recalling a pivotal event in Church history, but pilgrims to Gishen are stepping into their journey, four days later, at the heels of this massive, wide-scale celebration of the Cross and their participation serve as an endpoint in this religious narrative. Taken linearly, the connection between Meskel to Gishen is the excavation of the relic in the fourth century and then the deposition of that relic at Gishen in the 15th century by King Zara Yacob on the St. Mary's feast on the 21th of Meskerem (see Appendix B). As a temporal sequence, these commemorative

movements retain a tight continuity. However, several aspects indicate the recurring theme about the convergence of textual similarities that I have evaluated within the covenant genre in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.

Two details drew my attention to the curious temporal registers that behaved contrary to chronological logic. The place of Gishen was reputed as holy as it possessed the Cross. However, the church where this item is held is not regarded as a shrine to be approached, nor does the namesake of the church, Egzeiabher Ab (God the Father), celebrated the 29th of every month, elicit special attention (see Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1 Church of Egzeiabher Ab' (God the Father)

Instead, the focus was on the date of deposition, St. Mary's day (the 21st), and the alignment with her is what defined movements to Gishen, so much so that the location is abbreviated as Gishen Mariam, and not by any of the other three churches there. How

the legend of Gishen has been chronicled in popular imagination permitted envisioning that people were chronicling converged historical events. This issue became most obvious when I noted the confusion regarding who or what are we commemorating: Queen Eleni's assistance to uncover the Cross, and/or the help of another historic Eleni (sister of King Zara Yacob) instrumental in securing a place for the relic at Gishen, and/or St. Mary herself?

Pilgrimage to Gishen Mariam falls in the month of Meskerem, a time of renewal marked by the end of the rains and among several holidays marking a seasonal shift, such as Ramadan, Rosh Hashanah, or Ethiopian New Year on Meskerem 1 (September 11/12). Erecting bonfires is an act that characterizes this time of year and corresponds to the memorialized act of Queen Eleni's discovery of the Cross. Memhir Eshetu, a deacon well-learned in Church history, proceeded to tell me this story with tropic similarities to another nationally revered item, the ark in Axum (*tsion tabot*). Casting the dramatis personae as if he were himself an intimate eye-witness, Memher Eshetu stated that Queen Eleni was the principal figure who engineered, through advice of a holy man, to find the Cross, buried under a garbage heap for 300 years. The pageantry of the Cross during the Meskel celebrations on the 17th of Meskerem included a serialized play of this history, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's equivalent to the Stations of the Cross, with Negest Eleni (Queen Eleni) paraded out an open-pickup truck.

Figure 7.2 The exhibition of Negest Eleni during Meskel, September 2011

The culmination of this celebration is the bonfire (*demera*) which re-enacts the act of instructions to Queen Eleni to erect a large fire that way the drifting smoke can lead to the location of the hidden Cross. The narrative as performed is relevant to demonstrate the interlinked aspects, the pilgrimage to Gishen acting as a sequel to Meskel (i.e. the Archbishop and diocese's announcements urged celebrants to continue the commemoration four days later).

When piecing together all the details of the legend of Gishen Mariam, I was told by Memhir Eshetu, a deacon and theology student, to collect all the histories of Gishen, as all the legends are facts (*hulum tewufit ynetinyaw*). I was struck by the self-consciousness behind the multiplicity of historiography, in response to my question about which Eleni was responsible for the Cross' entrance into Ethiopia. In Memhir Eshetu's narration, Ethiopian Orthodox tradition fast-forwards to the 15th century when

the Cross reaches its present location (70 km north of Dessie), via subsequent stop-overs along the terrain, via churches in Addis and Debre Berhan (90 km north), an intertextual reference to another legend of miraculous endowment of *Dersan Urael*, the Homily of St. Urael (see Chapter 5). The identity of central character of the narrative, Queen Eleni, became ambiguous as I probed Memhir Eshetu further. I asked directly, who was the main proponent for having the relic deposited at Gishen, Queen Eleni of the 4th century or Queen Eleni of the 15th, thinking perhaps he misunderstood me or I miscommunicated to him. His reply that I was asking about one and the same person was found perplexing but matched other observations I formed about Ethiopian trends of historicity. For example, I had encountered works that purported implausible historical timelines, such as Belai Giday'*Ethiopian Civilization* (1992). However, how Memhir Eshetu structured the story of Gishen relates to the elasticity of Ethiopia's antiquity trope in popular imagination (re: "Ethiopia stretches her hands unto God", Chapter One). This literary manipulation relates to what Bakhtin has theorized about the novelistic genre and the interaction between the languages of the narrator and author, which he labels as a "dialogic tension" (1981:314). As I stress here, the chronicling of Gishen is a multi-authorial venture but it united under linguistic conventions influenced by "verbal-ideological history" that "is not a unity of a single, closed language system, but is rather a highly specific unity of several "languages" that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other" (Bakhtin 1981:295). Narrators of Gishen are actively engaging with a genre by their interpretations of miraculous provenance.

Memhir Eshetu's statement that all the legends are facts was hardly considered by him as a radical comment on Ethiopian historiography but rather pointed to the proclivity for creative retelling and layering of the past. The conflation of the refracted subject of the holiday and the manner in which historical overlaps substantiate the

importance of narrative similitude also demonstrates a patterning of historiography that departs from Western-guided orientation of linear time. Stewart (2012) examines the tendency for post-Enlightenment thought to produce a historical thinking which clings to chronology as a guarantee to manageably record and keep the past. As I evaluated in Chapter Six, the case of Herani's *zikir*, an issue of who was being memorialized was investigated (i.e. Medhane Alem or/and Herani's grandfather). The objective of honour in commemorations thus operated as a link in a chain, as the established relationship between the bearers of tradition, past and present (from grandfather to granddaughter), and their historical connection to the saint moved interconnectedly. The past was a resource to bring into the present by creating new order in the sequence of people's lives.

This foundational story was repeated in various ways, in preaching programs, on historical DVDs, in pamphlets and most frequently by the pilgrims themselves. Darge, a Gondare driver from Addis, knew the sole monk in charge of entering and guarding the lower chambers of the church of Egzeiabher Ab. There were three vaults of passage before reaching the guarded item, the right arm of the True Cross. Abba Hawas, the '*senter ayetam*' (lit. "he will not be in need of a splinter"), censed the second layer but never entered the third. Darge had the unusual opportunity to speak to this monk during a past trip to Gishen, casually amongst several other visitors to the church compound. Darge, though information he learned second-hand through clergy, spoke of corpses of holy men and deserving souls transported by eagles, symbolizing angels, that were interned on the grounds of the holy place as well as how saint relics, such as St. George's, showed no decomposition. Another legend was of how the current Patriarch tried to enter the church's chambers and a fire erupted in the entrance of the third level. To witness relics was restricted to all, even monarchs, this fact illustrated when

Emperor Menelik, who sought to see one of the numerous relics (i.e. soil from Jerusalem brought during the same expedition in 15th century) housed in the stores of the church, fell ill. "*Egzeiabher alasfekedum*", Memhir Eshetu stated to me. That it has to be God's permission was a sentiment that extended to contemporary pilgrims' journeys to Gishen.

The instrumental force of Gishen was reflected in material dimensions of Gishen as a place. Pilgrims often marvelled at the unique physical terrain of Gishen as a cross-shaped mountain, this fact spoken about nearly as frequently as the place's possession of the relic. At Gishen, a common activity is to trace the contours of the mountain, visiting and spending time at all four churches during the course of the pilgrimage (see Figure 7.3). Anthropological studies of pigrimages, such as Bowman (1991), emphasize the interplay of intersubjective narratives of experience, political histories of the holy site, and the construction of discourses by several interpreative communities.In the case of Orthodox communities, both in Jerusalem and in Gishen, more than the attachments to articulated sacredness of the place, via icons or holy water for instance, it is the fact of being in Jerusalem during the holy feast days that "significant realism of the holy places comes in play" (Bowman 1991:111). The crucial nexus that differentiates the various contestations of the Holy Land are how pilgrims direct their "mediatations of their imaginations"(Bowman 1991:114). For Ethiopian Orthodox pilgrims to Gishen, there is a literalism to holy places (e.g. Pilgrims sleep in churches, drink holy tea, and tred sacred soil to be further exposed to God), that is materially mediated. Laity are not mining for meaning or content, but instead searching for channels towards spiritual transfiguration.

Figure 7.3 At one of the "arms'' of Amba (Mt.) Gishen, with Abera, Fisseha and Haile (l-r), for the feast of the Dormition, January 30, 2011.

At Gishen, Memhir Aklilu informed me "Everything here is holy, even that cup of tea you're drinking", with similar statements by others that the earth and the air here contained pure and special properties. Regarding the holy water, consumed with immense vigour, litre after litre, like "taking medicine" as several pilgrims put it, pilgrims on the edges of the mountain pointed down towards the direction of a tunnel that connects the Gishen mountain to Jerusalem and from where the water is sourced from. This element in the Gishen corpus of tales serves as one example of the inventive conceptions of the place based on pilgrims' interactions with its popular imaginings and indication of the dimensions of the conceptual genre as continuously enacted. This part of the legend, of how the Cross had gone underground in multiple cases of gold and wood and chained down at the bottom of the church of Egzeiabher Ab', was retold with

particular animation. In the tale of the what Memhir Eshetu labelled the "cross' journey" to Ethiopia, each stop towards the final destination of the cross-shaped mountain is recounted with aspects of discernible sound and radiant light, until it reached its resting place. The relic's great power, radiating all over Ethiopia and curing all ailments and afflictions, was deemed too intense to be exposed to human eyes and has since its deposition been buried three vaults deep, the church's entrance was guarded by one monk. The sacrality of the place then has been buried, hidden, mystified, and uncontainable in a location and spread to all corners of the cross' terrain. This is the relic itself, the sacrality is relocated and points to how a material centre, a notion of a contained shrine, takes on new forms.

The Cross is hagiographified further by its textual complement, the chronicles of the Cross, called the *Meshafe Tefut*[77]. This book was cited often as the source of where all these miraculous stories came to be known and among people's descriptions about the treasures of Gishen. This book is afforded its own mini-procession on the pilgrimage event, being ushered unto the stage as grandly as the Holy Book. Parts of the legend, such as the trials of the kings and the Cross' journey into Ethiopia, are parsed out in short recited narratives and read at such select times of the year. These readings were considered part of the pilgrims' program, to hear these stories at this holy place, representing a creation of a sacred knowledge being disseminated in a manner reflective of how feast days are structured by reading of saint hagiographies (*gedl*), which contain testimonies of their *kidan* (Chapter 3). What is striking in the case of the *Meshafe Tefut* is that individuals treat it as a relic itself, recalling this dissertation's central apparatus, the covenant as operating prismatically, or a holograph of metaphor resemblances.

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[77] This book is well protected and only select clergy are able to read from it, though one of its few copies is available at the British Library.

It is a salient observation to note that I speak of tales of personal experiences and historic testimonies circulated second-hand. This corresponds to modulating of proximity and in my case, gender as a "corrupting component" to sacred space. Unlike Hayk Estephanos (40km north of Dessie)[78], where only men are allowed in, Gishen is not a monastery and so permits women to enter the grounds. Boylston (2012) studied the stratified hierarchies between people and their lived cosmos in Zege (north-western Ethiopia) and the materialities that mediate relations between this and the other world. "Pollution" in Ethiopian Orthodox dogma is a condition that perpetually requires what Boylston describes as "limiting social connection and social entanglements so as to facilitate contact and mediation with God (2012: 120)." Given the fact this is not sustainable for all, a standard applied primarily for clergy on the spiritual behalf of the wider community, a reconciling method is the domain of sharing. As I presented in Chapter Two, arenas of commensality, I argued, functioned as instances where firm boundaries are respected and adhered to. By examining the category of "Abrahamic faiths", the relations between co-religionists are emphasized through common approaches of sociality (i.e. common approaches to taboos of sacred/secular). This is a pattern of liturgical orientation that Pentecostal Christians reject and in return partly determines their excluded status in community relations. "Difference" is a social fact to be affirmed through acknowledgement of one's own impurity. On occasion, individuals feared coming close to the church building because they of an awareness of being unclean. Visiting a church with Mekonen, a masters student, he pointed out a few people standing next to graves on the outer ring of the church compound, in his opinion, a mark of conscious, polluted state being communicated (to God, to others, to

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[78] There is a separate monastery for women adjacent to the mens' on same grounds of the lake-side compound.

themselves?). Mekonen then reflected on how he typically felt more confident coming up to the church steps to do *mesalem* or celebrate *kidase*, when he is not sexually active. In one encounter, during the *wazema* of the Dormition [January], I was questioned on my state of purity by Weizero Wube, my Gabriel *mahaber* companions who I stayed with whether I was capable of receiving communion "Can you take *qurban*? Are you clean?" Weizero Wube coyly asked.

Due to its especially hallowed distinction of housing this relic of the Holy Cross at Gishen, as a woman, I would never be able to visit the church, relating to another legend of women turning into stone in their attempt to enter. Yemeselech, a young woman from Dessie who took me around the exteriors of the church was less concerned about our potential to corrupt[79]. We walked along the right side, typically the side reserved for women where they huddle together, through a short grove of acacia trees that are typical of traditional churches, though I saw no women in the compound. Not long after entering, a man dressed in a white *gabi*, not strictly lay clothing yet not a mark of any clerical authority either, sternly raised his voice at her, reminding her that I was not allowed in. She reassured him that we knew about the rule and that I was just being shown the outside of the church. Using the occasion to ask how this restriction made her feel, she first set my mind at rest, light-heartedly acknowledging how some people take themselves too seriously. However, she was unquestioning that these customs are there for a reason. As spending time in the church complex is part of the pilgrimage experience, the polluting position of women in Orthodox dogma influenced movements on the mountain, similar to how devotional space is altered for male and female pilgrims to the ziarats in Shiraz (Betteridge 2002), as Yemeselach noted how she and

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[79] Women are not permitted to enter the church when they are menstruating. Wright (2004) presents the dilemmas of flesh and spirit among female monastics who lament being restricted from devoting their bodies fully in their path to renunciation.

her friends spent more time at the other three churches. Reflecting on dimensions of Gishen as a place, legend and relationship to maintain, we can relate Yemeselach's action to how the place's "centre" is treated as its most dangerous property.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, the styles of veneration in Ethiopian Orthodox worship are characterized by a particular approach to its material culture. I refer again to the terminological issue of the ark (*tabot*) being conflated or flatly mistranslated as "replica" or "relic". In the context of Gishen, The Cross is a relic but is seldom displayed public, as compared to Eastern Christian traditions in Greece and Russia, where these items are often interacted with (i.e. glass case displays). The best way to illustrate how Amharic speakers define a holy object, such as how they defer to how the Cross is referred to, is to note the lack of a qualifier of relic (*qers*) or even the partial aspect of the item, since I never heard anyone refer to the Meskel held at Gishen, as "part of the Cross". This ambiguity of containment is similar to how a *tabot* is just a *tabot*, consistently classified in a schema of totalizing sacrality. The hologram has been used as a metonymic device for defining the *tabot*. From a perspective of the materiality of the cross as an object that emits radioactive energies resembles properties of isotope on the verge of instability. The subterranean position of the relic and the sense of abandonment I experienced when I approached the church compound re-emphasized the embodiment of reverence is a perpetual calibration of proximity to sacred space/time.

As described by many pilgrims journeying to Gishen, one must arrive in time to hear *wazema* (vespers), staying all through the night until the morning liturgy. Many who have not formulated an explicit devotional program articulated the opportunity of experiencing the liturgy at this special place and time. This resembles what Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) label as a "prescriptive ontology", that is, ritual actions that are

shaped by its established efficacy, which is analysed through various modes of making *puja* (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 103).The practice of sleeping in the church and its compound and hearing the hymns by the monks over the course of the night is popular because of the belief in gaining 'grace' by exposure to such concentrated prayer. This quality of liturgical space/time is consistent with notion of the materiality of prayer, which I investigated as sound as a type of iconography and physical movements as a type of ritual image (see chapter 3 and 4). In those case studies of ordinary and extraordinary events in the liturgical year, I showcased how the diversity of actors, such as the confluence of liturgies performed in a given parish, are phenomenologically and conceptually understood as one worshiping body. Amid the intervals of chaos that cluttered a pilgrimage event, participants always pulled together for prayer and celebration. At Gishen, middle-aged to elderly women who had come to receive communion went at the start of *wazema,* anywhere from 10 pm to midnight. At this stage, people begin to light candles outside and inside the church and this will continue until sunrise. Another group, younger men and women who are religiously conscious will secure a spot for themselves to rest and sleep in the church grounds, joined by their friends or other family members around 4 am. The rest begin trickling in from 6 am on, arriving from all parts of the mountain. The main point of attraction was St. Mary's church, where the Archbishop of South Wollo Abune Atnateos and other high clergy will preside over the service. However, the celebrants heard the service read from the other three churches of Egzeiabher Ab, St. Mikael and St. Gabriel. This surrealism yet holism of uniform ritual performed in a diversity of places on a location as remote as Gishen becomes the embodied 'centre' of the devotional experience. It was surreal because its intersecting echoes of the same encompassing object, the Divine liturgy.

The climax of the Gishen pilgrimage, the service of St. Mary on the 21st, was defined by its mytho-historical legacy and this reality served as the foundation for Gishen's 'spiritual magnetism' (Pruess in Morinis 1992). Therefore, the ritual commemoration of the relic's arrival assumed a more potent position in participants' engagement than any encountering with the relic itself. This would seem to go against established anthropological literature on pilgrimage, which identifies the focal point of holy sites to a locatable entity (e.g. shrine). The relic of the Cross supports what Bajc, Coleman & Eade (2007) describe the objectified destination of pilgrimage as being movable. The dispersing nature of pilgrims' movements in several essences, either as physical or through the narratives of their experiences, underscores the fractal-like "scales of complexity, as they both mirror the centring at archetypal destinations and express a potential for transformation. They may also begin to form their own patterns of centring" (2007:325-326). This phenomenon I have detailed via narrative, phenomenological and devotional encounters of Gishen pilgrims. The subject of celebration is immaterialized, as no one ever will witness this relic and people only know of its potency though its legends and more dynamically, through a series of calendar observances that illustrate and embody its encompassment.

From dissipation to communing in unified voice, devotion as incredibly diverse, the nexus of the sacred is "out there" (Turner & Turner 1978) but the centre point is the liturgical dimension of spiritual movement. Throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to propose an argument that essentially entertains how the praxis of Orthodox Christians transcends the limitations of sensory perception to render covenant as a one-dimensional object. What if the Church, via its Tradition, has elevated the symbolic and historical aspects of *tabot* into a domain of thought far more generative? The narrative elaborations and the liturgical orientations of Gishen pilgrims suggest that its generic

resemblances are a method of exemplifying a cultural idea but also an exhaustion of the resources of explanation in indigenous thought (Wagner 2001: 45). The muted fact that the mountain holds a piece of the True Cross perhaps makes more sense if other arenas of creative expression are brought into the fray of observation, such as the chronicling of the legend and charitable acts to St. Mary as gift to Gishen. These activities are also methods that allow the relic to live in the now, one that is discursively consistent, such that devotional activities contribute to a unified objective to honour the role of God in the daily lives of individuals and communities. In that singular aim, there is a multitude of ways that people are inspired to maintain that bond through principles of responsibility.

To arrange a paradigmatic symmetry between the Cross and the covenant underscores the dialogic nature of protection as a principle of responsibility that cuts both ways, as a blessing and a burden I refer to what Natnael labelled as foreigners' misconception about Ethiopian claims to holy relics. This conversation was spurred by an episode when visiting the outside of the church of Egzeiabher Ab'. Quiet and nearly abandoned, I raised my confusion to Natnael, a supporter of the Church and a native of Dessie, about the muted nature of the relic at Gishen, both in how it was materially oriented towards and the liturgical focus of what I initially considered a re-direction towards honouring St. Mary. "Of course, anyone could just take it [the relic of the Cross]" I was told by Natnael. This represents the crux of what Natnael took as Western ignorance about Ethiopia's claims to Christian treasures. Communicating in English: "I hate when they (foreigners) say we are guard the ark." This was a preposterous proposition to him. Ethiopia has been entrusted to protect the Cross and thereby is "protected by it" as Natnael phrased. One is not merely guarding but 'serving' the Cross. The fact that they, the community of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, continue to

hold this providential role is Gishen's re-occurring miracle, and the substantive essence behind the historicity of the legend.

For Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, particularly those who advocate for the protection of remote churches and monasteries, the fear of losing Christian treasures often appears in people's statements about how these places cannot be publicized openly (Figure 7.4). This relates to the approach of preservation, exhibited in intense protectionism bordering on paranoia. The fear of losing church treasures is real and provokes cataclysmic reactions. One such example was relayed to me in conversation about the incident when an ancient cross was smuggled out of the country by an art collector provoking a reaction of deep mourning by townspeople of Lalibela. As I have detailed, the covenant in its various dimensions is defined through techniques of linguistic shrouding and material obscuring (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 3) as well as the physical manifestations into churches being historically hidden from the public (Chapter 5).[80] One encounter illustrates the consistent suspicion that is applied to outside inquiry on Ethiopian Orthodox Church matters. On my last day before leaving from fieldwork, I was saying my farewell to my relatives and enjoying tea and biscuits in the salon of the house. A visitor had already been hosted by my grand-uncle, a monk from Axum who just returned from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This journey was well-discussed among my family members in Addis who had collected funds (a couple of 1000 birr each) to sponsor the trip, which the Abba had long asked to make. We had listened to him speak about his journey, most of the details consisting of his time in the Ethiopian neighbourhood in Jerusalem. The direction shifted more to general introductions, I began to share with the monk the basic details of my research in Dessie. At this point,

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[80] The road to Gishen for many centuries was fortressed. Prior to its development as a church complex, the location of Gishen was a prison (pre-15th century) where the local king locked up competitors to the throne, oftentimes his own kin.

Figure 7.4 Billboard of attractions in the Amhara region, reflecting a sea change in Gishen's access to the broader public.

I had learned to temper the language[81] of how I spoke about faith and the Church, a particular task with monastics in Ethiopia, most of whom were too conservative to have a young woman speak directly to them, thereby initiating a certain posturing of deference that I had to enact. With such instances, I tried my best to be honest about my intentions as a social science researcher, that I was applying "sociological methods", the more locally understood term, but I also felt compelled to indicate not just sensitivity but mutual agreement about the value, in the spiritual sense, of these research questions and domains. After my introduction, the conversation shifted to other matters, but after a long pause entered the conversation, the Abba turns to my mother and asked who I am and whether I am a Protestant missionary. "We have to be careful these days", he says,

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[81] Religion as a political marker: one with faith is more acceptable than one without. However, one did need to live it. I rarely spoke about religion (*haymanot*) in objective or neutral terms. Even among my Muslim friends, being imprecise about my religious leanings was not respected. It was better to say that I had an open interest or curiosity in all religions and truths but that I identified as Orthodox Christian, though I seldom scrutinized about what that meant to me, though among some of my friends and students I tutored, I was often told off about not wearing a cross.

"Ethiopia is slowly slipping out of our fingers." Then he turned back to me and inquired about whom I would share my research with and that I should know that in the wrong hands it could bring harm. Unlike Natnael's attitude which eschewed any pretence that human efforts can block the fate of divine election, the futility of "guarding", the monk espoused the opposite by his nervousness towards me, insisting on putting up walls to the outside (non-Orthodox) world. What both viewpoints represent is the moral imperative of covenant as a combination of bestowal and responsibility, burden and honour.

This discussion has attended to resemblances of generic repetition in order to explore the systemic undercurrents that frame articulations of sacred places. However, this still does not address the circumstances and individual subjectivities that establish the dynamism around a pilgrimage event. Before examining how vows structure movements to embark on a pilgrimage, I delineate how personal journeys to Gishen compose a corpus of popular legends that are circulated among pilgrims. Just as there are established stories of Gishen, tales of brushes with death in contemporary pilgrims' experiences circulated as widely. Here, I recall Haile's pointed remark to me as we walked down from Gishen about being thankful for witnessing "divine love", exhibited by the fact that as no one died on the bus. This episode relates to what Shenoda (2012) characterizes as being impressed by "gestures which God makes", borrowing Wittgenstein's phrasing of the "conception of the miraculous, one that is largely contextual, one that relied on interpretation and one's willingness… to be impressed by such gestures or accounts of them" (Wittgenstein in Shenoda 2012:481). The following section briefly evaluates the narrative trope of "miracles as a challenge to faith" and as a regenerative domain that adds new material to traditions of pilgrimage.

7.2.2 Miracles as testing faith

Gishen, as a recurring miracle, emerged in several essences. Firstly, pilgrimages are an activity of devotional culture that contains "exaggerated risks", where difficulties experienced by individuals effectively confirmed the exceptional (e.g. the merit in arriving successfully). One was sufficiently nervous by the time one arrived to the foot of the mountain, instigated by reckless drivers, blocked road, close calls and accidents. People also openly contemplated worst case scenarios and psyched themselves out about how dangerous a pilgrimage had been for their friends and acquaintances and so on. On several occasions I was shown a leaflet marketing the miracles of Gishen, showcasing photographs of buses dangling of the side of the mountain. Getting to the destination was a veritable relay race, with sheep and donkeys and throngs of people fighting for a meter and a half passage space. The threat of danger and the encounters of trouble on the road composed part of spiritual journey, interpreted as a form of penance in Turners' analysis of the liminoid experience, referencing Catholic folklore about extreme sinners whose moral decay was so great that they were prevented from completing the pilgrimage (Turner & Turner 1978). This aspect was made personal to me as I took a last minute chance to make an unscheduled trip to Lalibela, one of the nation's most holy sites. In all, it was an inauspicious journey for me, with several near fatal moments, and this was quickly explained to me as cause for my lack of intention, of not having made a commitment promise that was devotionally sourced.

The liminal atmospherics of the threshold is a mainstay belief in Orthodox Christianity regarding the ambiguous zones between sacred and profane space (Paxson 2006). The theme of cleansing and spiritual renewal as it relates to the sacred geography of Gishen was exemplified by the ritual at Teleyayen river, which translated

as "we are separated". At about the halfway mark between the Dessie and Gishen road, a river crossed the road and it was only traversable during certain times of the year when the rainy season had concluded. It remained a firm practice that all vehicles stop at this point in order for people to bathe at the river (Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5 Washing at Teleyayen River with Amsale and Hiwan

Some people wash their upper bodies, but most dipped their feet and waded awhile in the waters. It is believed that one must wash away all the sins and evil they carry before approaching a holy site. Therefore, a trip to Gishen is understood as leaving another world behind, the work of this act is punctuated by such phenomenological orientations.

The momentousness and merit of arrival intensified as the road became harder and people had to go the rest of the way "by oneself" (*berasachew*), effectively becoming an equalizing experience. A cultural code was enacted upon this last leg, the point where I

noticed a more pronounced performative dimension to the pilgrim's trail. As people began to pause more out of exhaustion, saying *ayzoh, ayzosh, ayzot* for the elderly, essentially meaning 'it's OK. Relax'. The significance of this phrase in Amharic vocabulary as a humanizing metonymy was later made apparent by Sister Teshale from Kobo Ursaline congregation, who enjoyed reminding me that *ayzoh*, 'be still' was repeated 35 times in the Bible. On the trail, these words were often kindly and compassionately uttered often by men who briskly passed the slower travellers. "You're almost there. *Berchi*" (trans. hang in there or be strong). However, it was those who were physically struggling that were breathlessly repeating this phrase to their travelling companions. I would often be a target for sympathy. *Ayzosh, Ayzosh*, I would hear softly behind me as I felt slight leans on my back, both pushing me up and grabbing unto me for support. Seeing the gates at the top of the mountain was an impressionable image often repeated to me, the joy and relief upon reaching that point. Older men and women would begin uttering *temesgen*, *temesgen* ("thanks be to God") successively and rhythmically upon climbing the stairs. Some would pause, raise their hands up emphatically, and begin kissing the ground. Similarly, Stanley's analysis of the Maharashtrian pilgrimage illustrates how the pilgrims' bodily movements are altered as the journey progresses, particularly as the individuals join together to form a mass unit, linked in their shared 'performance' (Morinis 1992: 74). Haile and Fisseha instructed our company to ululate as we approached the top, making sure to express the gratitude and joy at the reward of beholding such a remarkable site. These stages along the journey were used to mark one's relationality to God, through the completions of a promise to give thanks. The linguistic utterances were a form of embodied action, corporeal testing that is being enacted by the pilgrims (Coleman and Eade 2004:16). In

this pilgrims' process of passage, the journey and arrival to the place was sweeter than the reward of remaining at Gishen, the proverbial anti-climax to anticipation.

Lastly, just as these stories of fatefully overcoming danger evoked the trope of spiritual challenge, tragic occurrences also interacted with the conditions of sacred promise. A heartbreaking story circulated after the Ethiopian New Year 2004 [2011], of a wife and husband who had lost their young son in an awful accident, when the father not noticing the child, who wandered behind his car, ran him over. As devastating as the death was, the added injury was that the mother was en route to Gishen Mariam during this time, to conduct her yearly pilgrimage there. To engage in a positive activity while simultaneously having such destructive force occur operated as a central paradox for those remarking on this story; to exemplify the unknownability of God's intention in everyday life. It also served to stress Gishen as a place to be reckoned with. The hagiography of Gishen was continuously furnished with new material that is added onto its popular canon. The remainder of this chapter examines the impact of charity as it is catalysed by vows. These individual promises to give are a crucial transacting force behind the sustainability of churches and contribute to greater social impacts to continue pilgrimage as a personal or group tradition.

7.3 Individual Promises as Forms of Tradition-making

Vows (*s'let*) deviate from the forms of promise discussed so far, principally because they do not align symmetrically to our working definition of covenant, a mutuality of bestowal and recognition. An individualized promise, as opposite to one applied to a group of people, resembles more closely an oath in its unidirectional offering. Herzfeld (1990) proposes that "the oath intimates the terrors of divine

punishment…. A man whose word proves worthless is a mere husk, a body without socially recognized spirituality. It is through the hand" referring to the hand on the icon of the saint "that a man realises that spirituality (Herzfeld 1990: 308)." This characterization relates to how vows are agreements enacted by devotees to pledge oneself to God in exchange for a favour conferred, in a more economically-oriented bond. What becomes clear is that promise as an appeal is productive at fostering interventions.

Thinking further about promises as interventions that are addressed to saints and granted by them, inspires thinking about notions of disassociated will, discussed by Mittermaier (2012). Dream stories in a Sufi community she studied in Egypt engage with "idioms of being acted upon" that, in Chakrabarty's words, seeks "to account for histories that involve 'gods, spirits and supernatural agents alongside humans'" (in Mittermaier 2012:256). *S'let* for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is inspired by addressing everyday dilemmas but channelled through an ideology of charity. The first section will examine petitions to Mary as interacting with the dimensions of her covenant (Kidane Meheret). From this I will consider the motivations for coming to Gishen that evolve from a personal drive to give back to the Church.

7.3.1 *S'let* and the Appeal

Before making my first pilgrimage to Gishen, I had learnt of the place based on a story about my great-grandmother. Etye Marta, a close confidant to her, recounted how in 1934 my grandmother was not only baptized but given to the church of Mariam at Gishen. I was puzzled by this detail, how could one be 'given' to a church? I thought she might have meant St. Mary but I was mistaken. She was given to the *tabot* (*le tabot new yetesetechew*), the tabot of St. Mary acting as a god-parent, in place of a person. A

baptism by the *tabot* differs in that the child is given to deacons and priests at the altar. They receive her/him with a piece of the *tabot* cover which is used specifically for such baptisms. This custom is commonly understood as a result of a vow, an indication of the unusual circumstances that propel the person to make this bonded, formal promise. From then on, she, a *tabot* child (*ye tabot lij),* was known as the godchild of Gishen Mariam.

S'let to Mary continues to operate strongly for expectant mothers whose failed pregnancies caused anxiety and pressure from their families. One such case occurred on a pilgrimage to Moye Mariam, in Northern Shoa region (200 km south of Dessie) on the feast commemorating St. Mary's birthday (*Lideta*). A lady in her early 30s was featured throughout the service. The *tabot* had made its procession around the church and the offerings were being made to the church, such as grains, legumes, candles, chickens, perfume bottles, small change and a pair of goats. Some of these items were then immediately auctioned for the benefit of the church. However, one set of items, ceremonial church umbrellas, were exhibited to the small congregation and accompanied by the story of the lady who gave these items to the church. She had been barren for many years and her inability conceive had caused her great anguish as this inhibited her ability to start a family. She pleaded with Mariam for help, and once her pregnancy was a success she resolved to show her gratitude to Mariam's intercession at a church reputed for its miraculous *tabot*. Had this story not concluded so positively, she would still be bound to fulfil her promise to Mariam, since a prayer was proclaimed in her name and this promise was unbreakable.

These two cases of vows, both to St. Mary, contained a binding commitment to fulfil a promise and underscore St. Mary's importance as the bearer of appeals. This was stressed by Selam, a pilgrim I accompanied to Moye Mariam who turned to me during

service and with the deepest sincerity possible insisted to me to pray to Mary, as "she listens" (*Mariam semalich*). That St. Mary is the central figure is further substantiated due to the popularity of *Kidane Meheret* (The Covenant of Mercy). This is an apocryphal text that referred to the trials of St. Mary who came to pray at her son's grave at Golgotha ("place of the skull", Mark 15:22) and pleaded with God to allow her to do this peacefully and without persecution. She received protection from the angels and was taken to heaven, at which time the covenant of protection was bestowed her.

The potency of *Kidane Meheret* for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is the bestowed promise in this narrative that all who pray in her name will be saved from unfavourable judgement. The placement of *Kidane Meheret* in an already well-developed corpus permits reflecting on the Amharic terms for covenant and promise (Figure 7.6). Using this case, *kidane* is a straight translation of covenant in the way *tabot* is not, though its implication in baptism in the *tabot lij* case draws this material covenant closer to its etymological matrix. *Kidane Meheret* is a promise on a promise given to Mary, which she extends to all who appeal to her. Therefore the generic qualities of this covenant are elaborated as the driving movement of individual appeals and thus vivified by a slow innovation of the conventional form.
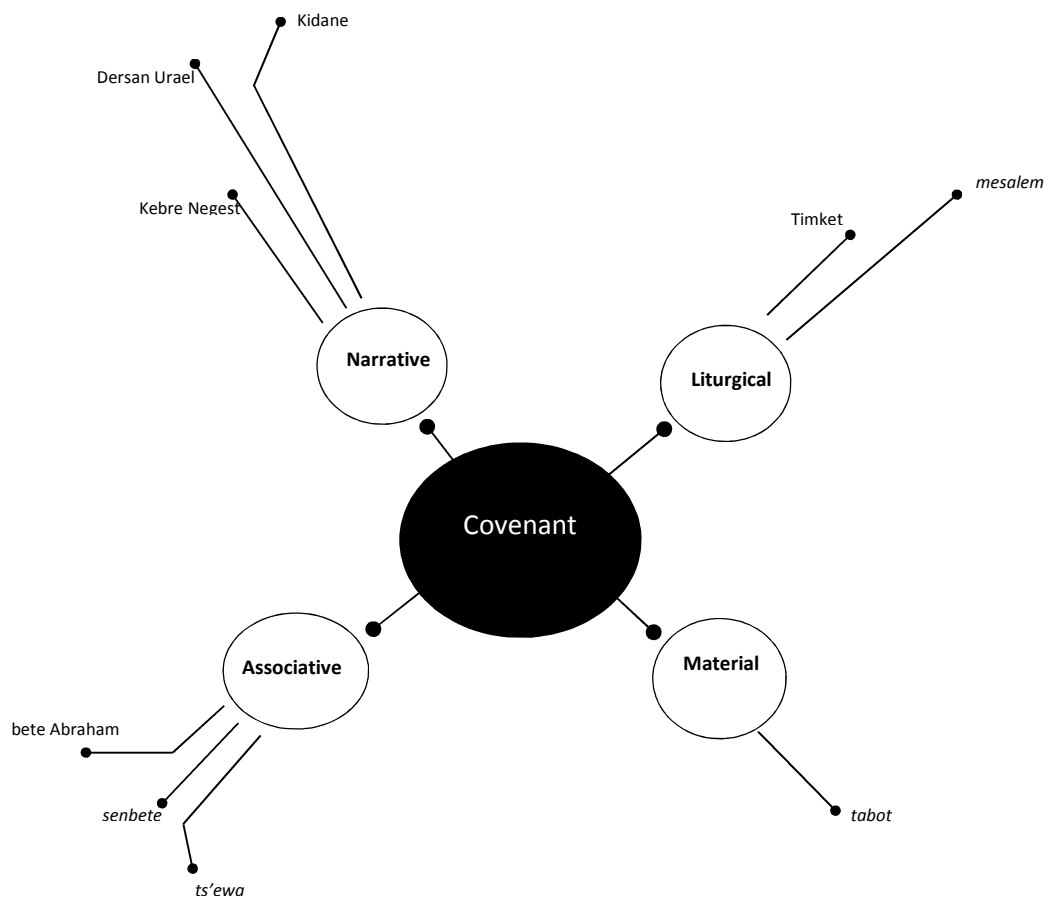
Figure 7.6 Diagram summary of the covenant genre

However, promises such as vows follow a distinctly different logic of practice, which I position within theoretical literature on the illocutionary power of promising. Felman (2002), as a literary critic, structures an analysis of the promise based on the figure of Don Juan, the myth of the promise as performative. Felman considers his multiple proposals of marriage as a prototypical speech act that exhibits the features of promise, drawing heavily on Austin's category of commitments (1962) which conceives of "speech acts that consist in the assumption of an engagement with respect to a future action (promising, contracting, espousing, enrolling, swearing, betting, etc.)" (Felman 2002:9). I have discussed the act of giving thanks as a part of the liturgical stance that reverberates into other embodied moralities of offering respect. I often did wonder, how

detrimental would it be to not attend *leqso bet*, apart from the pull of social pressure from transgressing a taboo? One crucial difference is that these commitments are not publically verbalized in the ways conceived as a speech act, though as I addressed in veneration stylistics, these actions serve as non-verbal communication of commitment. Nevertheless a performative difference does exist. The myth of Don Juan is instructive because it is "the scandal of the broken promise", that violates the constative element of promise, underwritten or referable to a certain order (i.e. swearing on the Bible), which guarantees "that meaning will last" (Felman 2002:21). This aspect of an underwritten promise corresponds to the narrative entailments of covenant, which figure into the formal features of enacting vows.

People construct their own vows guided by the established Orthodox Christian framework of time and place, a major feast day or a culmination of a major fast period, to journey to a place that holds special meaning to the person. To refer back to a direct citation of *Kidane Meheret*, I present Tiruworq, who was compelled to make a devotional promise to weave a basket for *Kidane Meheret*. She interpreted a recent dream of hers, where St. Mary exclaimed to her "Have you forgotten me" as an event as indicated her neglect to pay heed to the protective power of *Kidane Meheret*. She worked on the basket for many months, knowing that she will present this gift to Kidane Meheret on her annual feast day, Yekatit 16 [February] (Figure 7.7) While this is considered a tribute to the saint, she distinguished the vow by giving this item to a specifically well-known *tabot* of Kidane Meheret, as compared to the same one of its name in her neighbourhood.

Figure 7.7 Tiruworq presenting the *mesob* (basket) for Kidane Meheret on her day, Yekatit 16

I have remarked that once the vow has been communicated, it is unnegotiable, regardless whether the result is granted. This contrasts with Orsi's study (1985) of Catholic devotion in Harlem (New York) where one devotee refused to continue praying to St. George, because he stopped listening. On one hand, this rather human frustration reflects an intimacy between saints and devotees but also speaks of the character of relations intrinsic to devotion. I contend that for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians expectations of outcomes are deliberately left open-ended because the risks

of rupturing the links in the relationship are considered detrimental. For individuals like Tiruworq, the indispensable use of holy water by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians serves as an appropriate parallel that the indeterminacy of holy water represents about staying committed to the human/divine relationship. Holy water was a solvent for solutions in many daily predicaments. It enabled approaches of formulating know-how that equipped individuals with a deepened sense of awareness of their limitations at achieving control over results, and established and reinforced proximity to divine power. Holy water at one level is, then, a material intervention, which contains real intercessory power that places responsibility on individuals through an expanding sociality of problem-solving. It was a form of robust knowledge, formulated by allowing space for things to go wrong, a fail-safe to make sure the condition is not willed to fail. When Tiruworq's child got lice, her recourse was to go to holy water despite her knowledge and access to clinics and medicine. Her strategy was guided by a logical calculation, based on an efficacious deployment of this material in the past. Since holy water solved the problem, or I should say improved the condition over time, this made holy water a robust know-how based on its testing out on several levels, a material confirmed by a faith in the authoritative agency of human/divine cooperation. What her actions showed was that devotion to a saint via their curative materials was a condition of working at a relationship.

Devotion, as a characterization of driving action within expressions of sacred promise, has assumed prominent appraisal, as all connecting vectors to church are defined as committed participation, such as the customs of *s'let* and *mahaber* meetings, have indicated. Amit Desai (2010) discussing the nature of *bhakti* (devotion or devotionalism) in Hindu sects, establishes a similar mission to reapply practical experience into how devotees evaluate their moral stances in relation to their religious

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identification. One crucial means of "participating in God" is through understanding

suffering as managed through dependency (e.g. total submission). Continued crisis is

interpreted as a failure to keep this divine promise and the structural links of devotion

that bind it. Correct devotional practices also promote different grades of relationships,

as *bhakti* devotees reject and/or modify the nature of their commitment as part of the

process of refashioning themselves as stronger members of their *panth* (sect). This

dilemma is illustrated through one conversation that Desai recounts of a devotee

contemplating whether to donate for a village festival, rejected by this individual as a

too momentary to be taken seriously as correct worship, significantly due to its lack of

sustained participation beyond a few days to communicate unending resolve of the

devotees love. What this discussion shows is that the efficacy of the relationship to the

saint is reflected in continued commitment that is constantly reappraised. In the

following section, I provide examples of how individuals' commitments, through their

ability to influence others to make similar promises, as a type of "contagious giving,"

correspond to these aspirations to strengthen bonds that rely on dialectical, collaborative

effort.

7.3.2 Gifting as Mobilizing Orthodox Christians

On pilgrimage, the tradition of almsgiving is an integral part of the devotional

action. On the road and slopes around the rugged backcountry, deacons and priests with

ceremonial umbrellas and a poster-icon (laminated photo-reproduction) of *Mikael*,

Gabriel and/or *Mariam* would ask for alms. To not contribute to their outreached hands

would be a grave error on the part of traveler. This period leading up to a feast day

represents a special time where pilgrims must give, indicating a fellowship for the alms-

seeker, *yene beete*. The symbolism communicates how the giver is the same as the taker, we are all in need of something that someone will grant us, or I, as the giver, could end up as the seeker. On saint days in parish churches, the same pattern of alms-making exists. The main stations for donation, a large, often framed portrait of the patron saint of the church, with its side lace curtains unveiled in honour of the day, manned by a priest and deacon. They hold a church umbrella turned upside down, the same item used to cover *tabots* when they leave the *bete meqdes,* in ritual transfiguration of earthly tokens used for sacred purposes. Leading up to the church gates is always a long row of alms-seekers, calling "*se'le Mariam"* (in the name of Mary). People slot down their coins, for each person in front of a cloth or plastic strip, as if almost by duty and later I learnt that people would make vows, like Tiruworq and her basket, to divide a sum of money to the alms-seekers.

On their spiritual journey to Gishen, Haile and Fisseha approached the wandering ascetics and *kolo tamariwoch* in much this same way. A fixture on the pilgrimage circuit were the *kolo tamarwioch*, literal translation being 'grain students' as they subsist based on donations and goodwill. They are teenage boys of about 14-17 years old who are students of the traditional church schools and survive by the charity of fellow Christians. These students, often blind or maimed, travel in groups along the asphalt road and farm trails with knapsacks and their collection of religious books, hoping upon a free space on the back of trucks or buses. Several fellow travelers revelled in this classic image of the pilgrimage, imitating these students' focused devotion with their own bag of books which they read at defined points leading up the culmination of the pilgrimage event. To assist *kolo tamariwoch* or other disciplined Christians such as monks or nuns by giving them a ride was often considered a spiritually advantageous action. Helping these individuals on their admirable quest

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would reflect well on the person doing the assisting, as well as sharing thematic resemblances with the grace of giving and receiving as discussed in Chapter Six, except that in this context, charity as blessing is available to individuals who might not otherwise participate as *mahaber* members.

Embarking on the journey, an Orthodox Christian will perform *subaye*, typically for seven days. This is an intense period of time when individuals disrupt their habitual patterns and often detach themselves from their families (i.e. spouses may conduct *subaye* separately). This period involves a series of morning prayers, rigorous attendance of services, visiting monasteries, fasting, giving alms, and confession and consultation with their father-confessor (*nefs abat*—lit. spiritual father). This period of deep prayer is often scheduled during transitional periods, to be 'broken' by communion on a significant feast day. The effect of combining the spiritual journey (*menfesawi guzo)* with spiritual retreat (*subaye*) outlined the devotees' subjectivities, with what I argued in Chapter Four as the liturgical dimension of covenant, which is a public act, a sacrificial offering. An example of a person who habitually went on spiritual retreat is Meseret, who travelled from the capital city and accompanied her *mahaber* annually for the past 4 years. Her pilgrimage to Gishen involved each association member purchasing food stuffs and prepared meals for the poor, many of whom congregated at Gishen, which become massively populated on its feast days in September and January. These mahaber participants represent archetypal forms of pilgrimage conducted as a group, with alms-giving as a custom to continue annually.

Pilgrimages are contexts where personal commemorative events (i.e. memorials or vows) get incorporated into traditions due to their ability to sustainably influence broader communal commitments. Like Meseret, Seifu's story relates directly the search for spiritual support and an opportunity for almsgiving in the form of charity projects.

He described his life as successful, a land developer from Addis Ababa, yet he had his troubles. As a "diaspora" returnee from Sweden, he went through a divorce and separation from his daughter and put his business in a pivotal point of jeopardy. Though he did not communicate his actions as a *s'let*, he began to come to Gishen to be closer to God and to be assisted through a difficult time. As he began to make his way out of his troubles, he continued to come, in his case twice a year for September and January, and is one of the main financiers of the large iron and cement gate that was installed at the entrance a few years ago. These contributions he articulated as "gifts to the church". Several individuals whom I joined to Gishen spoke highly of Seifu. His actions were described by Eyob, a family friend, in terms of his love for Mariam (*mariam wodadje*), a characterization he offered to relate to what is understood as model behaviour of giving back to the church, *y betechristian agelgaye* (lit. server for the church). Gifts for the church are synonymous with gifts to the saint, and in Seifu's case initiated in gratitude for success and relief from years of bad luck. Giving under devotional pretexts then is imbued with vectors of meaning derived from several cultural sources, whether or not the actor intended to reference and perform these subtextual aspects.

Figure 7.8 Seifu and family during *wazema* of St. Mary's day, September 28, 2010

In turn, Seifu attracted other relatives to make the pilgrimage, though none of them were part of a formal association. Anteneh, a convenience store owner visiting from America, followed a similar lead by financing development projects around the Hayk monastery near Dessie as well as later financing a bell that functioned as a pivotal place in St. Gabriel church inauguration in 2011 (see Chapter 5). He talked to me in terms of giving thanks for what he was given and to be close to God again. For him, it was a return to a time and reality that cannot be accessed from his new home in the U.S. For his aunt, she expressed the experience as teaching or exposing herself and her teenage kids how to do pilgrimage as an opportunity for intensive devotion. Being there and communing together is the focus in people's discussions to me about what draws them to embark on these journeys (Figure 7.8).

On the one hand, what I conclude here is a reprise of a trend of reallocating benefactorship to the laity. Girma's (2002) research on the misappropriation of covenant as a political concept has carefully delineated this (Chapter 2) and research on the post-Derg bureaucratic reforms of the Church, has made it clear that the patrons of the church, now endowed as the responsibilities of the laity. The current objectives of the Church to maintain its public relevance subsists in this domain of political representations and increasing investment from local businessmen and foreign "diaspora" advocates. Anteneh's sentiments for getting a bell from America for the new Gabriel church was phrased as a kind of care-taking, as a successful resident of the city (Dessie *lij*) he felt responsible to give back. The distance from his hometown was narrowed through his acts of continuing to give to Gishen Mariam and the community he continues to contribute to as a participant.

It is important to bear in mind that motives to give are publicly voiced as driven by a preservation ethic I described at the outset. What drives this ethic is undoubtedly personal but is concurrently influenced by discourses on Ethiopian exceptionalism and saving the country from encroachment of the "other", whether by a rising Pentecostal population or a more empowered Muslim presence in the political sphere or both. National heritage sites like Gishen serve as a platform for airing such anxieties, as in Chapter Two I outlined a bifurcation of "covenant" as reflective in Ethiopian history and political discourses of pluralism, which I propose emphasizes the tensions inherent in interpretation and implementation of ideology. The Church's vigorous movement into the tourism market is explained by diocese administrators as a strategy of self-sufficiency. However, the wealth of the institution and the uneven distribution of funds by the Patriarchate have stimulated critique that the central agenda is to establish bolder forms of representation rather than supply a more horizontal support to the vast number

of churches already established. The ethnographic material presented in this study has argued for an alternative picture of "church" that is definable by a theological consistency of praxis to discourse, that is, covenant as grounded in the fabric of lay activities. In light of this, we can envision a Church potentially at odds with its own discourse. Another study more bureaucratically grounded and politically oriented would be able to provide the trajectory to observe how these essences of covenant intersect, if they are capable of coalescing at some balancing point in the spectrum of expressive possibilities.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has taken a more experimental approach by applying this dissertation's analytical devise to another form of promise-making, the vow. Pilgrims' journeys are directed by a desire to force interventions into the regular patterns of their lives. This intentionality is not exclusively devotionally inspired, given how pilgrimages are events of social catharsis. For the subset of individuals who do embark on these activities based on spiritual reasons, they often frame their acts around the pronouncement of a vow. Hence, they engage in what Nietzsche has encapsulated as an intrinsic human performance, man as the "promising animal": "To breed an animal with the right to make promises—is not this the paradoxical problem nature has set itself with regard to man? And is it not man's true problem?" (Nietzsche in Felman 2002:3). As we have seen, certain individuals double down on the promise, as vows often provide the spark to start a tradition (i.e. annual charity). The original intervention and the narrative that chronicles it are part of the elements that keeps traditions bound.

The more familiar territory has been to relate the features of the covenant genre towards a new context, Gishen Mariam, in order to consider how genre repetition communicates the cultural value of protection. I examined the ways individuals articulated the location's importance to the history of the Church, which for many Orthodox Christians, *is* a history of Ethiopia. I also discussed how pilgrims interpreted their own narratives of perseverance and encounters with fate, who refer to these miracle and tragedy testimonies in order to frame their understanding of sacred space.

Lastly, I examined the ideological undercurrents of how Gishen has been preserved as national heritage. For the entirety of this dissertation, I have proposed an alternative direction for studying covenant as guiding principle in social relations. The role of the "church" in the communities of devotees has been as a mediator of this socio-theological domain of practice, from which an expansive matrix of activities help facilitate Orthodox Christian live their faith. As such, the key term of "church" reflects a different essence, one more idealistic and subjective, that I have emphasized should be considered as distinct from conceptualization of "Church" as a political entity. What I have maintained throughout this work is not that covenant is a-political (far from it), but that covenant can also contain the ability to transcend its social exclusiveness and instead demonstrate a universal truth for Orthodox Christians about human relations. The way people narrated Gishen as an extraordinary place was another scenario where I felt a sense of déjà-vu, a set of tired symbols and tropes being rehearsed on the gullible foreigner. The issue of guarding a secret object falls into the rationalist trap that to see is to believe, rather than the other way around, or to phrase this truism in local articulation, "it is the Cross that protects us, not the other way around", as Natnael put it. It is the strength of devotion that is tested by the challenge to keep the faith. To interpret covenant as the divine edict that governs Ethiopia's exceptionalism is as

manipulable as a Janus-faced coin—is it an honour to be respected or does it inspires a righteousness to preserve that honour?

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Covenant has traditionally been evaluated as a grand narrative that is analogous to the ethno-historical concept of "chosen people". I have proposed that in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, this baseline principle has inspired a range of expressions that can also be characterized in performative, material and associative dimensions. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have creatively distilled a core monotheistic precept through their everyday devotional activities, chiefly by means of cultivating modalities of bestowal and responsibility, which I have attributed as the key qualities of covenant: as a mutual bond of recognition between divinity and humanity.

My approach has been guided by an ethnographic study of practices conducted by the Orthodox Christian laity, either directly or indirectly affiliated with their local churches. Opportunities for individuals to engage with their faith are plentiful due to well-established cultures of blessing. A commemorative culture, structured by an expansive church calendar, galvanizes spiritual occasions of reciprocal action, dynamically enacted on feast days (i.e. the reunion of divine/human manifestation) and memorial and tribute events that confer blessings to both the givers and receivers (e.g. within the domain of *mahabers*). An ethic of thanksgiving (*temesgen*) is central to the atmosphere of these events. I have delineated how liturgical stances, an embodied and reflexive orientation to the church, reflect a embodied principles of social obligation that is exemplified in visits to mourning houses, which effectively mirror codes of paying respect. Therefore, covenant as an emerging term has been grounded in micro-level perspectives. I have argued that this unifying idea has also been intrinsic to contexts such as pilgrimages, where individual acts such as vows contain the capacity to be transformed into traditions. Personal movements to inspire change, such as offers of

charity, contain the capacity to sustainably influence commitments among the broader community.

In addition to thematic resemblances visible within traditions of the Church, I have also posited that covenant is itself a prism through which to observe social action within a specific context, such as the regimes of worship by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. This has raised a methodological proposal to compose an analogy that flows as knowledge and as perspective, both in the plural sense. This discussion has presented covenant as refracting into the artefact of the *tabot*, which functions as a powerful presence of divinity. This item is housed in every church and performs sacramental functions as a processional and healing entity. It also provides the identity of local Orthodox communities: as vessels of the Holy Spirit, devotion to the saints permits conceiving of building new churches in the local landscape through a collaborative feedback of prayer and protection.

Given the deep integration of covenant as a concept within Ethiopian Orthodox theology and praxis, I have configured the analysis to reflect its multifaceted nature. While the prismatic has served an organizational purpose, I have aspired to manipulate the apparatus as an analytical technique for studying an idea from different perspectives. An appropriate parallel would be the effect of the *trompe l'oeil*, a 16th century artistic innovation that transfigured linear perspectivism by playing with objectification/subjectification (i.e. an illusion of point of view and vanishing point when a depiction is no longer in view). This conceptual device has been borrowed to great effect in order to illustrate the principle that any unitary concept or depiction is integrally linked to differentiation of "networked information" (Jimenez 2011b:142). As I have demonstrated, the material embodiments of the covenant with God and its refraction into "networked information" (i.e. saints as "stand-ins" for supreme holiness)

have produced a sphere of viable power positions that has circumscribed church planting as a manifestation of human/divine dialogic. Covenant, then, is the nesting doll of reference points that inspires celebrants to "run with the metaphor" (Wagner 1986), thereby making this principle not exclusively a narrative or ontological approach but a reservoir of practices that directs individuals to forge vital relations.

In light of this dissertation's alternative take on covenant, this concept's narrative potency as a metaphor of national exceptionalism has thus far been successfully mobilized in contemporary Ethiopian history to aid the sedimentation of political ideology. While tropes of harmony and community ethic have been denoted by the mutuality of bestowal and responsibility that the term engenders, the story of covenant has particular predicates, namely the condition of Ethiopia as a continuous Christian nation. Until in 1974, this fact has not raised fundamental concerns detrimental enough to inspire reconfiguring the national cultural metaphor. Religious pluralism has operated within the civilizational encompassment of Orthodox Christianity as a cultural force, buttressed by church and state. A post-1974, secular, political environment and an increasing representation of Ethiopian Muslims uncovered an always present adversarial trope of a religious tradition that survives against all odds. No more is this tension present than in current agitation about the "slipping majority". This heightened guardedness appears as masked comments, in sermons that laud Ethiopia as a land of peace, refuge, and independence against colonial encroachment in Africa and as reflected in the religious demography, yet in the same breath it is lamented how too much had been ceded (e.g. on one occasion, the legacy of inter-confessional marriage

was re-framed as trickery, to where Christian areas gradually became predominantly Muslim)[82].

These conflicting sentiments are reflective of a broader condition, namely the social adjustments to secularist policies over the past twenty years that, I suggest, obscures the dynamics of religious affiliations as they operate at the grassroots level. As outlined in Chapter 2, Ethiopia has long been noted (Levine 1974, Turton 2006) as an exceptional case study of harmonious diversity in multiple dimensions (e.g. ethnic, linguistic, religious). Yet recent trends suggest a regression of this success story, due to two key factors: a) the amplification of mono-identity categories, initiating criticisms of tribalism and political tactics of divide and rule as a result of the installation of ethnic federalist state after the end Marxist-led government (1974-1991) and b) the increasing politicization of religious membership, particularly Islam. This second point has been assessed in popular opinions, articulated in the press and as it was voiced to me, as the by-product of the cultural exchange caused by economic migration by Ethiopians to the Gulf States.

The conditions upon which notions of pluralism (*behere behereseb*) have been built are radically changing, and are challenged by external influences, such as economic investments and development schemes that have ploughed through the country in great force over the past 25 years. Abbink (2013), in his review of authoritarian reforms since 1991, suggests that the viability of Ethiopia's political framework, that structures citizen rights and representation around ethnicities, may no longer be viable as identity politics

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[82] In another instance of mining historical rivalries, Wubshet, an administrator at Weizero Siheen polytechnic college, spoke about Egypt constantly keeping Ethiopia in the dark, in his account, "our different calendars being a method to distance Ethiopia from the Middle East." This comment emerged in relation to why Egyptians (non-Copts) were furious about Ethiopia usurping their power to build a dam on the Nile in 2011, precisely during the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising.

take a backseat to development aspirations (2013:30). A recent study by Freeman (2012) on Pentecostal Christians in the Gamo highlands essentially proposes a similar scenario. In this case, it is only when the opportunity to generate sustainable livelihoods via a steady stream of income and entrepreneurial growth (i.e. facilitated by an agricultural development NGO and World Vision), that Ethiopian Pentecostals are then able to claim significant influence locally and move into new categories of identification that possess revised political currency. What this trend also highlights is that religious identification corresponds to economic and political conditions, thereby initiate its own transformations as categories of differentiation. This is evident in the economic cache of claiming Muslim membership for labour migration to Saudi Arabia, which has inspired certain Orthodox Christians to hide their religious affiliations or convert to Islam in order to secure employment abroad and ease integration there. The political conversation now becomes: what new identities and visions of the country are elicited from being Orthodox, being Pentecostal or being Muslim?

The changing tide away from Orthodox Christian dominance to increased Muslim influence is visible both as a result of incremental population growth and the integration of different exposures to Islam via Saudi and Turkish businesses operating in Ethiopia. Yet, these trends have not caught up to how the government arranges its institutional bodies. This reality has been the subject of sustained and sometimes violent protests by Muslims in Addis since 2012, over demands to have greater authority to elect their own representatives (i.e. rather than agree to candidates selected by the party of the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front). What we are observing is a crucial turning point in Ethiopia that has direct bearings on the management of pluralism. On the one hand, it is a secular state that relies on ideologies of its exceptionalism that typically involves indirectly citing the EOTC as a major supporting

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player (e.g. UNESCO recognition of ancient Orthodox churches is one such example). Preserving the sanctity of the Church as a national symbol was also expressed when vocal opposition against building a mosque in Axum (the city where the ark of the covenant is reputed to be housed) elicited nationalistic reactions from even the most progressive citizens I knew ("anywhere but there" was the general reaction), indicating the deeply engrained links between Orthodoxy and the Ethiopian nation. Meanwhile, the ethnic federalism project can be summarized as a contentious reform, maligned and critiqued by Ethiopians as dissolving a sense of common identity. Forms of social divisions are occurring, by the sharpening of religious categories that are injecting agitated relations between confessional identities, as each representing new implications for economic and social horizons.

   Coexistence between religions, on the ideological level at least, locates the future in past conflicts, namely the destructive period of Muslim invasions. Part of the reasoning behind keeping the remote churches of Gishen Mariam difficult to access was to guard against invaders, the damage wrought by Gragn in the 16th century being cited and evoked by Orthodox Christians as if it happened yesterday. Ironically, the covenant narrative is revised according to the present, political context; where once Ethiopians were the ones being protected *by* the relic of the Cross, it is the Cross that is being protected against others, thus signalling a narrowing definition of "defenders of the faith" (i.e. Orthodox Christians) within their own country. Therefore, the ethic of preservation as illuminated through the covenant genre is re-crafted by its adherents in order to respond to changing religious demographics that threaten the dominance of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in the mainstream.

   As such, covenant, given current tensions, is appealing to utilize as a framework for inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. Thus, an emerging question to apply to the

current political climate in Ethiopia would be what happens when the majority becomes the minority? Is covenant a set of practices and conceptualizations detachable from its "cultural background", or in the face of greater societal differentiation, will this principle fail as a mobilizing genre in the ways I have provided evidence for? Could it represent a form of governmentality, what Comaroff (2011) describes as individuals yearning to "live on sovereign terms (167)?" What emerges from this discussion is a recommendation within current research that has observed intersecting scales of authority and religious ideologies that have aimed to identify "ordinary epiphanies": "ordinary efforts to grasp a sense of future and secure viability (2011:172)". Is covenant a context-specific concept or is it malleable enough to stay as a practice-grounded principle?

Taken from another direction, analysing this concept as an elaborative genre can be interpreted as a heuristic method of scaling individuals' positions of engagement. The covenant-as-liturgical[83] in everyday lives of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians has assumed a focal position that adapts to the internal discourses of covenant as it is incorporated into devotional culture. It emboldens individuals to perform roles that bear lasting consequences to the broader social sphere. Theorized as a reflex of performative stances on interpersonal and supra-personal modalities (see Chapter 4), reciprocal recognition transacts a communication of respect that reconfigures the ritual centre. Similarly, pilgrimage and the elements that compose it, have been examined as scales of the commemorative, promises as ceremonialized arrangements that are authored by networks of kin and associates. This counteracts conventional understandings of

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[83] I refer here to Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) interpretation of Strathern's formulation of abstensions, "defined as the kinds of things that are also, at the same time, scales" (390). Taking things-cum-scales to its full analytical potential, they present the practice of comparison as geared towards a third (or infinitely plural) element of differentiation, taking abstractions from the thing in question as revealing "uncommon denominators" internal to the object being scaled.

liturgical engagement as synonymous only with canonical rites, the sacraments (*mistir*) of the Church. The covenant-as-liturgical, exercised in deterritorialized spaces by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, has the capacity to represent a movement of maintaining relationships. The muted nature of sacramental rites, particularly *qurban* (communion), indicates the liturgical context is a reflexive category, observable in the modulation of participation in church rites. Previous work on ritual theories of traditional religions often delimits worship as "a mere token being enough", that is, enactment as containing the possibility of the actor remaining the agent, both in an act of addressal to oneself as well as influenced by the role of the celebrant (or the host of a *mahaber* or a person carrying out a vow) to proceed with the ritual's stated definition (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 257-258). The cases examined in this study present "afterlives" of rites based on the bifurcations of *kidan/tabot* in multiple dimensions of praxis, such as Epiphany as a sacramental event (see Chapter 3). Such materialities of grace operate centrifugally, disseminating outside the sanctuary space and in gestures of veneration. Facilitated by how metaphors of covenant are implicated through a cultivated set of approaches and stances, the liturgical stands for a performative and expressive orientation that is phenomenological, material, and sacramentalizing.

I propose that in the final analysis, this has been a study of archetypes, given that allegorical citations of Christian fellowship and righteousness of the elect are universal tropes available among many tradition-centric religions. While I have cast covenant as a category of social action, formatted as a prismatic paradigm, this interpretative framework runs the risk of ascribing to generalities or bounded characterizations of cultural domains, at odds with disciplinary caution regarding macro-processes such as scripts, tropes and techniques. The "study of the particular" is predicated on ethnographic representation that, with precision, transects social phenomena, to provide

case studies attentive to ethnic, economic, and gendered components, a texturing of analysis that guards against generalizations (Bunzl 2008). Phrased another way, the issue of how anthropological perspectives define the object of study is contingent on redrawing methodological parameters, a discipline that is no longer "studying islands of culture but emergent rationalities or technologies", rooted in a difference between culture and the cultural (Rabinow et al. 2008: 107). This distinction is best illustrated analogically by Marcus, who considers the scales of relevance of a method such as "thick description" for a project on Korean shamanism as compared to the a study of capitalism in Korea, this second context containing "heterogeneous elements that are not subsumed within its rationalization into Korean context" (Rabinow et al. 2008:109). Defining the layers within ethnographic contexts becomes the central concern and as such "particularizing", in the view of Marcus and Rabinow, cannot be the exclusive reserve for anthropologists if they desire to create experiments of the strongest analytical potential possible.

To study "culture vs. the cultural" relates to this study of practices that maps archetypes in action. This work has been a look into the culture of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church but it can also be assessed as the study of the cultural within societies guided by Abrahamic traditions. Not losing the "site" of the context from which this central paradigm has developed, what holds true for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians inspires conceiving of a common framework that may yield new starting points for how co-religionists interact with the theologies of their faith

This reconceptualization of covenant, based on how certain Ethiopian Orthodox Christians articulate their tradition, has offered an alternative lens to examine what otherwise has been the domain of political and theological studies. Having reviewed its definitions and prototypes, the emblematic children of Israel or House of Abraham can

transform into tropes of national or ethnic determinism (see Puritans or Afrikaners) but these trends only cover a narrow scope of covenant as a genre. The vigour with which this idea is transposed in its various dimensions has highlighted how covenant as a site of cultural innovation dually serves as a sustaining narrative of social conviction. Outside perspectives commenting on Ethiopia's audacious claims to house the ark exasperatedly ceded, after a review of popular theories that the fuss over the ark essentially amounts to a matter of faith. An Ethiopian Orthodox response to such preoccupations would state that to search for or hold a relic is a useless effort unless it is bestowed through an agreement of mutual protection. As various commentaries on the Cross have shown, it is nearly as fool-hardy a request as to ask to be shown the ark. Nor does this conviction mean simply believing it is there, an implied trait of fear-driven secrecy to preserve the unknowability of divine knowledge. It is living the belief by making sacred relevance inseparable from all facets of daily life. Covenant for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is not reducible to a trend of deriving inspiration from early Abrahamic exemplars, or an engineered syncretism to draw affinity and legitimacy via Judaic customs, nor purely a cultural premium on continuity that envisions fulfilment of Biblical prophecy, as archived by the Church. The textual and performative cohesion of expressive logics facilitates a code of implication for the Church and its communities of believers, which, in turn, establishes a character of social relations that resolves pathways of remaining connected to one another.

Glossary

Abba- a mark of respect for a monk or priest.

aqwaqwam- from the verb to stand (*meqwom*), it is the style of prayer specific to Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.

bahetawi- hermit.

bereket- a blessing.

bete Abraham- "house of Abraham", an expression of united spiritual kinship.

bete kristiyan- "house of Christians", church.

bete meqdes- the sanctuary, the most inner section of an Orthodox church.

debtera- a distinct class of clergy, who do not officiate rites but whose extensive training in the church schools qualifies them as mastering the performance of liturgical chant as well as reading incantations.

fitat- a lengthy prayer for the deceased, read at the time of burial, at the 40 days memorial, and one year memorial.

fet'ena- a test, a spiritual struggle to overcome.

gedl- hagiography, the testimony of a saint.

haymanot- religion, dogma of the Church.

Hig –law.

Hudadae- Lent, a 55 day fast preceding Easter.

imnet- belief. Also, ash distributed from the censers used by clergy after service.

kal'kidan- "word of Promise."

kebele- a governmental association that administers at the neighbourhood level.

kidan- covenant.

qidase- the Divine Liturgy.

qolo temariwoch- students of traditional church education, denoted as the poorest of the poor by subsisting on grains (*kolo*).

leqso bet- a recently deceased person's house where their relations congregate to offer condolences.

mad bet- a small traditional, mud house or room where all the cooking takes place

mahaber - 'association', a communal unit fashioned for the purposes of a common goal, secular or religious.

mahelet- matins.

memhir- the title of teacher, referring also to individuals trained in traditional clerical schools and qualified to teach subjects in church education.

menfesawi guzo- lit. "spiritual journey", referring to activities such as fasts, attendance to church services that compose the actions during pilgrimage.

mequteria- a rosary.

menokse- a monk or nun.

mesalem- to bow down, prostrate and cross oneself when approaching a holy place, a specific way of greeting a church with reverence.

mesged- and prostrate forward, face down in response to specific liturgical moments and locations.

mesgid- mosque.

meskel- cross.

mesob- a large, woven basket that serves as a dining table during a communal meal

mist'ir- sacrament (lit. "mystery")

mizmur- spiritual songs or hymns, derived primarily from Psalms (Mizmur Dawit) as part of St. Yared hymnography.

net'ela- a thin, white cotton cloth and an essential church attire.

qirs- a relic, treasure

qetema- grass reeds distributed during Easter.

qurban- communion

sa'atat- the liturgy of the Hours

sebket- preaching, conducted following the liturgy and/or vigil service..

Segdet- prostration, specifically referring to the activity that is performed on Holy Week.

s'le- "in the name of." A call often heard among almseekers who will evoke a particular saint (i.e. "s'le Qedus Mikael"—in the name of St. Michael) to elicit donations from church attendants.

s'let- vow

senbete- an honorary association that supports the parish church and administers monthly meals for the public from the church compound.

shai/buna- literally translating as tea/coffee, used to refer to the monetary compensation given to one for his cooperation, an oblique term for a small bribe.

subaye- spiritual retreat, typically seven days before a major feast day

tabot- the ark that is housed in the sanctuary. Each Orthodox church contains several *tabots* (pl. *tabotat*). The rite of *tabot hig* (law of the *tabot*) transforms a stone or wood into an altar. *Tabot negs* (crowning the ark) is the ceremony making the church consecrated, and *tabot tekele* (ark planting) is the term referring to a saint's manifestation into the earthly properties, as an ark (see Chapter 5).

tamerat- miracle

t'ela- an alcoholic drink brewed at home from barley and hops. It is a common food that is blessed and given during monthly or annual celebrations of feast days, sacramental rites (i.e. marriage, christening) and memorials.

Timqet- "baptism", a feast day celebrated on the 23rd of January

ts'ebel ts'adik-- lit. pious holy [water], meaning an item (e.g. bread) that is blessed by a priest and given to anyone who has participated in that ceremony. These items are also given away to the poor, usually on a celebrated feast day.

*tselat-*tablet

tselot- prayer

ts'ewa- chalice, also the name of a type of Orthodox Christian confraternity.

ts'om- a fast

wazema- vigil service, conducted on the eve of most important church holidays.

yene beete- meaning 'one like me', an expression both used to refer to a poor person and to denote all of humanity who are essentially impoverished.

yenefs abbat- literally translated as "father of the soul" or spiritual father, typically a priest who guides and counsels a follower of the Church.

zikir- a ceremony involving at least one clergy whereby an offering is made for a particular saint.

Ethiopian Orthodox Liturgical Calendar
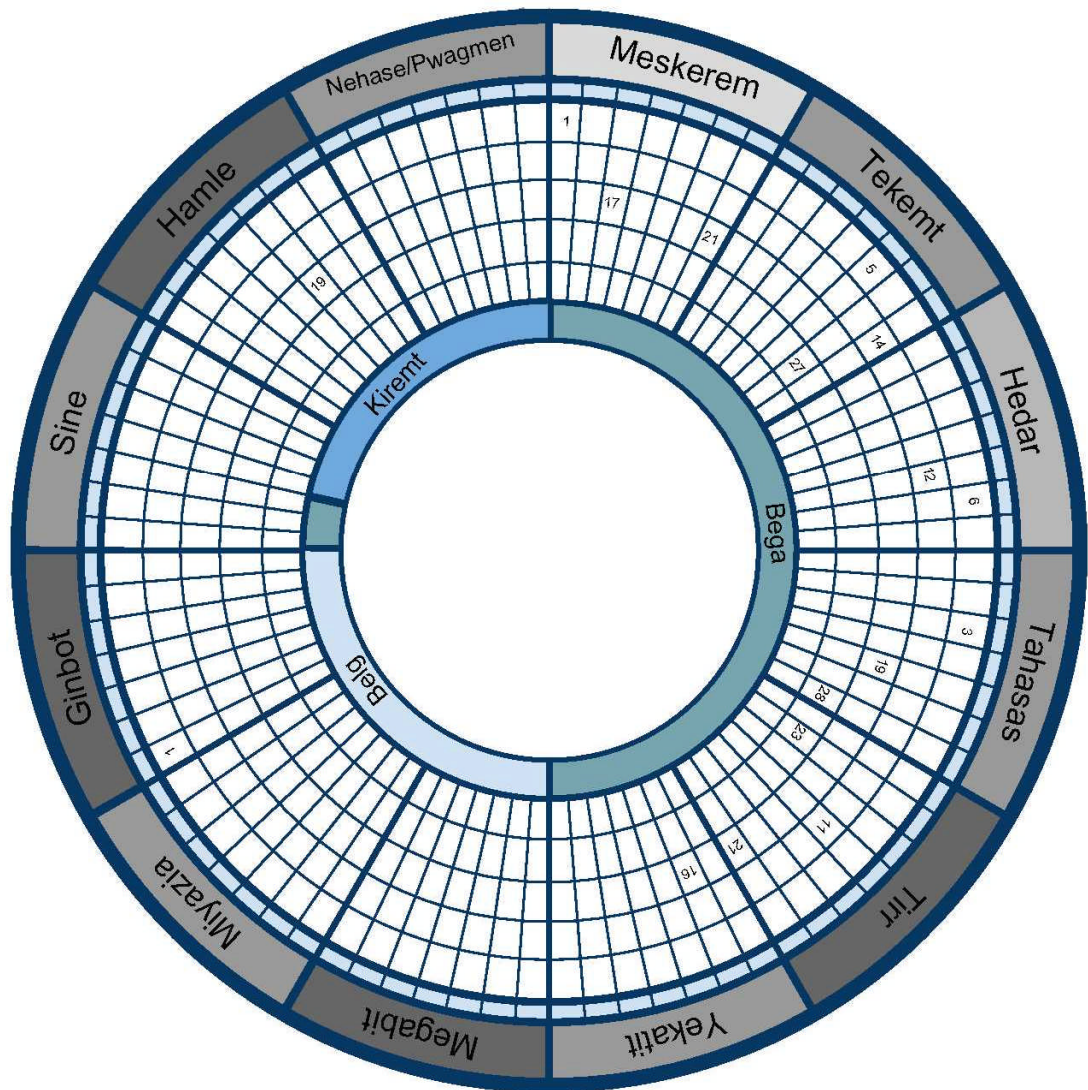
The calenderical year is composed of 12 months (30 days each) with an additional month of Pwagmen of 5 or 6 days if it is leap year. In addition to annual and/or biannual commemorations to saints, there is a monthly cycle of commemorative days that are celebrated (i.e. every 23 of the month is St. George's day). The first month is Meskerem [September] and the seasons are divided into three; *Bega* [September to June], a long dry season, *Belg* [March] a period of short intermittent rains, and *Kiremt* [mid-June-August], the season of heavy rains.

Most Popularly Observed Feast Days in the Monthly calendar

1. Lideta (Birth of Mary)

3. Ba'ta (The Entry of Mary into the Temple)

5. Abune Gebre Menfes Qidus or "Abo"

6. Qwasqwam (the Flight of the Holy Family)

7. Sellassie (Trinity)

12. Qedus Mikael (St. Michael)

14. Abune Aregawi

16. Kidane Meheret (Covenant of Mercy)

19. Qedus Gabriel (St. Gabriel)

21. Qedest Mariam (St. Mary)

23. Qedus Giorgis (St. George)

27. Medhane Alem (Saviour of the World)

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