

London School of Economics and Political Science

# **The Shade of the Divine**

## **Approaching the Sacred in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community**

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## **Declaration**

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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## **Abstract**

The dissertation is a study of the religious lives of Orthodox Christians in a semi-rural, coffee-producing community on the shores of Lake Tana in northwest Ethiopia. Its thesis is that mediation in Ethiopian Orthodoxy – how things, substances, and people act as go-betweens and enable connections between people and other people, the lived environment, saints, angels, and God – is characterised by an animating tension between commensality or shared substance, on the one hand, and hierarchical principles on the other. This tension pertains to long-standing debates in the study of Christianity about the divide between the created world and the Kingdom of Heaven. Its archetype is the Eucharist, which entails full transubstantiation but is circumscribed by a series of purity regulations so rigorous as to make the Communion inaccessible to most people for most of their lives. These purity regulations, I argue, speak to an incommensurability between relations of human substance-sharing, especially commensality and sexuality, and hierarchical relations between humans and divinity.

I situate the thesis in debates in the anthropology of religion about ritual and rationality, and the relationship between ideas and the world. The anthropology of Christianity to date has largely focused on changes in attitudes towards ritualism, text, ideas, and matter, wrought by the European Reformation and then disseminated and re-imagined in the colonial era. This dissertation stands as a counterpart to and a reflection on that work, asking what developments and new directions might be suggested by the in-depth study of a Christianity that still affirms the efficacy of ritual and the necessity of hierarchy. Accordingly, I set out to trace the articulations between ritual, hierarchical authority, and matter, through which Ethiopian Christians constitute and embody their relationships with each other, with the environment, and with the divine.

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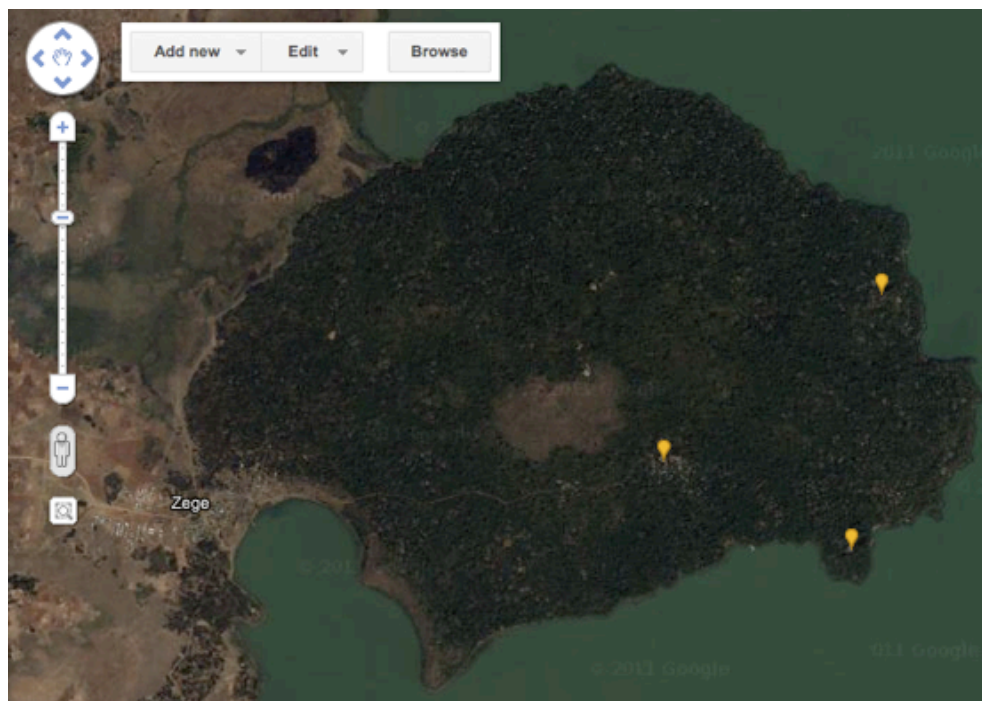
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## Maps



Map 1: Ethiopia, with pin indicating location of Zege, on shores of Lake Tana, near Bahir Dar. Copyright Google Maps 2012.



Map 2: Zege Peninsula, approx 5km end to end. Pins indicate monasteries, clockwise from top: Mehal Zege Giyorgis; Azwa Maryam; Ura Kidane Mihret. The area at the southwest of the peninsula labelled 'Zege' is actually Afaf town. Fure Maryam church is in the forested area directly to the south. Most fieldwork took place in Afaf and along the southern coast of the peninsula up to the monasteries. Copyright Google Maps 2012.



## Terminology

I avoid using diacritics for place and personal names, as per common Ethiopian practice, so the fieldsite is Zege (pronounced Zuh-GAY) not *Zegé*. Where an established spelling exists I use that rather than the transliteration system, e.g. Haile Selassie not *Hayle Selassé*, Addis Ababa not *Addis Abeba*.

*Béte Kristiyan*, ‘church’ is the common term for both the building in which the Liturgy takes place and the organization ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’. *Gedam* means ‘monastery’ but is used only when specifying the presence of monks. Otherwise people commonly refer to monastic churches as *béte Kristiyan*. Similarly, *qés*, ‘priest’ is used as a general term for clergy unless one wishes to specify a monk, *menoksé*.

‘Liturgy’, *qiddasé*, refers to the ritual service that surrounds the Eucharist (‘Mass’ has the same meaning in Roman Catholicism). *Qurban* refers to the Eucharist itself.

## Transliteration and Pronunciation of Amharic Words

To minimize diacritics and give non-specialists the best chance of approximating Amharic pronunciation, I adopt a slightly modified version of Alula Pankhurst’s system as used in *Resettlement and Famine in Ethiopia*.

Consonants are pronounced similarly to English with the exceptions of the explosives:

<b>q</b>	-	Explosive ‘k’
<b>t’</b>	-	Explosive ‘t’
<b>p’</b>	-	Explosive ‘p’
<b>ch’</b>	-	Explosive version of ‘ch’ as in ‘church’
<b>s’</b>	-	Explosive ‘ts’

- and the consonant **ñ**, pronounced as ‘ny’ as in the Spanish *mañana*.

The seven vowels are indicated as follows:

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Order</b>	- e – like the e in ‘hers’ or ‘perspicacious’ (with no ‘r’ sound)
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Order</b>	- u – like the u in ‘lunar’
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Order</b>	- í – as in Fiji
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Order</b>	- a – as in ‘man’
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Order</b>	- é – as in ‘fiancé’
<b>6<sup>th</sup> Order</b>	- i – a short sound like ‘i’ in ‘laminat’ or the ‘e’ in ‘wounded’
<b>7<sup>th</sup> Order</b>	- o – between ‘hot’ and ‘home’

A first-order vowel after the consonant ‘w’ may tend towards a soft ‘o’ sound, as in *wot’*. Doubled consonants indicate germination (lengthening or doubling of a consonant). Geminated ‘ch’ is written ‘cch’, geminated ‘sh’ as ‘ssh’. An apostrophe separates where two vowels appear together, usually in *Ge’ez* words.

## Introduction: Bodies, Boundaries, Matter, and Sacred Hierarchy

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### Prologue: The Sacred in the World

The afternoon trade was dying down in the veterinary pharmacy in Afaf village where my friend Tomas sometimes kept shop on his wife's behalf. I was showing Abebe, Tomas's teenage factotum and my de facto research assistant, how to play table football with three coins. A local man, Belayneh, in his twenties like Tomas and I, popped his head round the door to say hello. His face was familiar; I had seen him in Tomas's bar and knew the two were friends. Belayneh was chatting to Tomas when Abebe, talking to me but intending to be overheard, remarked, "Tom, this guy is *Penté*" – Protestant. He was the only Protestant I would meet in Afaf village or the adjoining peninsula where I conducted my fieldwork, although I knew the religion to be growing in the regional capital nearby.

Belayneh smiled and did not deny it. The exchange was light-hearted, and his religion did not seem a great impediment to his friendship with Tomas and Abebe, both, like the majority of the area's residents, Orthodox Christians. But Abebe was bored and saw an opportunity to use my presence to say things that he normally would not; "Tom, ask him who heals" (*Tom, man yadenal bilew*). In my role as the naïve but mostly harmless outsider, I asked.

Belayneh paused, still smiling, but did not respond. As he turned to leave, Tomas said quietly, *Maryam tadenallech*, "Mary heals." Belayneh appeared not to hear, but when he reached the door he turned around, raised both arms high and exclaimed, *Iyesus Kristos yadenal*, "Jesus Christ heals!" Then he walked away, leaving Tomas and Abebe scoffing and shaking their heads.

Abebe's choice of the question, "who heals" (or who gives healing) is instructive. It illustrates not just the importance of Mary as an intermediary in Ethiopian Orthodox cosmology, but the central and defining role of intermediaries in general. The notion of appealing directly to Jesus Christ for healing is for the

Orthodox an absurdity, tantamount to defilement. Even the casual use of the name clashes to the Orthodox ear; they prefer *gétacchin*, Our Lord, or *medhané alem*, the Saviour of the World.

In Ethiopian Orthodoxy, Christ as God is, despite his humanity, too pure and too sacred to be approached by worldly (*alemawî*) people. A sacred hierarchy of deacons, priests, monks, saints, angels, and Mary herself, mediate between God and the laity. This hierarchy and its sanctity are the topic of this thesis. Orthodox hierarchy, I will argue, relates to Christological arguments that we can trace to the schism of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD that split the oriental Orthodox Churches (including the Ethiopian, Syriac, and Coptic) from the rest of Christendom<sup>1</sup>. The argument hinged upon exactly how the divine and the human came together in the person of Jesus Christ. The non-Chalcedonian Churches rejected the notion that Christ had two distinct natures although, at least in Ethiopia, centuries of dispute have ensued on what precisely it might mean to say that Christ was of one nature (Ayala 1981: 67, 101, 118-19). What is clear is that Ethiopian Orthodoxy has maintained Christ at a distance from humanity such that specialist means of mediation between God and man, by clergy and by things, are not just accepted but required. Such mediatory hierarchy is of course not unique to Ethiopian Orthodoxy, but is particularly pronounced here and has retained special importance throughout the historical development of Christianity in Ethiopia.

The distance between God/Christ and humans does not make contact impossible, but requires rigorous standards of purity to be maintained. The

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<sup>1</sup> See Binns 2002 for an introduction to the various divisions of Orthodox Churches. The Byzantine Churches, including the future Greek and Russian, split from Western Christianity in the Great Schism of 1054 (Binns 2002: 10, 201). These are known as Chalcedonian Churches because they accepted the Council of Chalcedon. By contrast, the non-Chalcedonian Churches, including that of Ethiopia, split from the mainstream after rejecting the Council of 451. Confusingly, some sources refer to the Chalcedonian Churches as 'Eastern Orthodox' and the non-Chalcedonian as 'Oriental Orthodox'. Binns reports that a series of councils in the 1960s concluded that differences between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian doctrine was predominantly an issue of language rather than faith, leading to closer co-operation (2002: 30).

Eucharist, the centrepiece of Orthodox ritual, is regarded as a true transubstantiation, but any who take it or who are involved in preparing it must observe rigorous fasts beforehand, refrain from sexual activity, and be free from open wounds or runny noses. They must be holy in Mary Douglas's sense of whole, isolated from the outside world and from continuity with others (Douglas 1966: 54). And so communicants cultivate temporary separation from the outside world in order to achieve connection with God. This separation/isolation created by fasting and abstinence is mirrored by a physical separation in the form of the church building. Churches are built in concentric rings of ascending sanctity and ascending restriction, each surrounded by walls (see Fig. 13, p.266) The central enclosure, the Holy of Holies, where the sacred ark, the *tabot*, rests and where the Eucharist is consecrated, is forbidden to all but the clergy. And so Christians build divisions between parts of the world that accord closely with distinctions that anthropologists have drawn between the sacred and the profane, divisions it is the work of the clergy to mediate and to police.

In practice, most Christians are barred from taking Communion (*qurban*) for much or all of the time. You must give Confession before taking Communion, but this is the least of the restrictions. Pubescent people, menstruating women, and those who have had any sexual relations outside of a single spouse under the auspice of a marriage sealed by Communion, are all forbidden, as is anyone who for reasons of sexual activity, food, or any sin considers him or herself insufficiently pure. For such people other means exist of interacting with and seeking intercession from the Divine – holy water, for example, and vows to Mary – but all are mediated by some kind of hierarchical figure, whether priest or saint, and usually by some substance or material thing as well. Ethiopian Orthodox practices and concepts of mediation, I will argue, relate to the central, critical idea that all agency comes from God and all power in this world is, in a sense, borrowed (cf. Messay 1999: 185). Herein lies the most fundamental difference between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and, for example many Euro-American forms of Protestantism: religious action does not demonstrate the agentic faith of the individual (c.f. Keane 2007: 49); it mediates and disseminates the agentic

power of God. The effects of this conception have implications for the whole of Orthodox society, as I will aim to show.

For these reasons I place notions of hierarchy, mediation, and the sacred and the profane at the centre of my thesis. I will be arguing that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity raises questions of hierarchy that have thus far received little attention in the anthropology of Christianity. I will further argue that addressing these questions offers unique opportunities to reconstitute the established and possibly outmoded notions of sacred and profane as an analytic not of a dualism but of two states of being in the world. For while the sacred in Ethiopian Orthodoxy may be carry unworldly intimations – in its isolation and its bodily discipline – I will show that it is very much in and of the world. Sanctity, as I will describe, is produced in buildings of wattle and mud, under iron roofs, by people exercising control over and developing awareness of their bodies, their clothes, and their ornaments. In this understanding, the sacred is *not* equivalent to the ‘transcendent’ or ‘meta-empirical’ (Meyer 2008a: 707). Rather it is a domain of the mundane, empirical world which is built around achieving interaction with the ineffable. Sanctity may direct its attention at something beyond human perception and beyond the sensible world, but it is rooted in the lived space and the tangible things of this world. Tangible things, materiality, and lived space, are therefore essential to this view of the sacred.

I follow the work of Engelke (2007, 2012) and Keane (1997, 2003, 2007, 2008), as well as McDannell (1995), Miller (2010) and others, in pursuing the materiality of religious worlds as something important. In analysing the widespread use of holy water, the symbolism of church buildings, and the prevalence of various kinds of crosses, I draw on this literature to investigate the relationship between the materiality of things and substances and their potential to signify, especially to accrue religious or sacred significance.

I observe, however, that hierarchy remains somewhat under-theorised in this area. Accordingly I draw on a Durkheimian tradition that develops from discussion of the sacred and the profane (Durkheim 1915, Douglas 1966) to

work on hierarchy, ritual, and purity (Dumont 1970, 1986; Bloch 1974, 1992, 2005c; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Feuchtwang 2010). What emerges from the combination of a focus on separation and hierarchy on the one hand, and materiality and signification on the other, is something quite Maussian: a recurring emphasis, across the range of Ethiopian Orthodox practice, on the importance of things and substances in constituting social relationships. For as I have begun to indicate, a key aspect of the sacred as constituted in the world is the denial of shared substance or physical continuity or contact with other people, so as to enable physical contact – shared substance – with God. We will see repeated examples of a tension emerging between hierarchical principles – which, much like Dumont, I identify with separation – and commensality (sharing food), sexuality (sharing substance, or sharing selves), and the exchange of goods. I will show that this tension is an animating and formative force in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as practised in the Zege Peninsula where I conducted fieldwork. Hierarchy, I argue, is best understood in terms of the material substance of human social relationships, and very often of a denial of the shared nature of that substance.

Questions of shared substance relate to the general issue of human embodiment. Fasting is the central and defining aspect of Ethiopian Orthodox practice, the one thing Orthodox Christians associate with their religion more than any other, and certainly more than any considerations of creed. I was rarely asked what I believed during fieldwork, but many people wanted to know, “Do you fast?” (*s’ommiñña neh?*) This combined with its corollary, the feasts of Easter, Christmas and New Year, means that the dynamics of eating together and abstaining together, and their implications for group identity and group membership, are the principle formative forces of Ethiopian Orthodox community in Zege. Indeed Zegeña, the people of Zege, place repeated emphasis on the importance of eating together whatever the context. As my friend Antihun put it, “If you eat alone, you die alone.”

The primacy of fasting should not lead us to attribute too straightforward a body-soul dualism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy. People do often refer to

dichotomies of soul and flesh (*nifs/siga*) in something of a hierarchical relationship, but they also recognise the indivisibility of soul and flesh during life. The purity rules surrounding the Eucharist – strict fasting, no sex – do not, in my view, imply a negation of the body vis-à-vis the soul, but only an isolation, a closure. It is the connection of bodies to other bodies that is denied. The importance of fasting indicates a deep recognition that “the soul’s character and condition are subject to bodily influence, and therefore also to bodily management” (Shaw 1998: 33). As I will describe in detail in this introduction, churches are sacred spaces which humans inhabit with their bodies, and Communion, the ultimate manifestation of Divinity in the world, is of course achieved by the physical consumption of bread and wine. So while the sacred is certainly associated with purity, as I discuss below, and while it stands opposed to the profane world of production, consumption, and reproduction, it would be a mistake to reduce this opposition to a matter of sacred spirits and profane bodies. While the soul may be the pure, the higher part of mankind, Brown’s description of the body in early Christianity holds true here: “The body was no alien thing. It was the long-term companion of the soul” (1988: xlv). Human embodiment is problematic and paradoxical, as I will discuss further in this introduction, but the body is not the enemy.

The relationship between purity and hierarchy lies at the centre of Dumont’s analysis of India’s caste system, which remains the foundational text for the study of religious hierarchy: “The opposition of pure and impure appears to us the very principle of hierarchy, to such a degree that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior; moreover, it also governs separation. We have seen it lead at many levels to seclusion, isolation. The preoccupation with purity leads to the getting rid of the recurrent personal impurities of organic life” (Dumont 1970: 59). Ethiopian Orthodoxy is not a caste system, and people are not born into the positions they come to hold<sup>2</sup>; nonetheless purity remains central to Orthodox hierarchy in just the manner described by Dumont: priests

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<sup>2</sup> With the arguable exception of certain subordinate groups of craftspeople, although Alula Pankhurst dismisses ‘caste’ as an appropriate analytic in this case (A. Pankhurst 2003: 12-14).

and especially monks cultivate separation from society at large and, I will argue in Chapter 3, quasi-deathlike states, in order to be able to approach the sacred. Again in keeping with Dumont's account of hierarchy, the purpose of priests doing this is best understood in terms of the society as a whole, as part of a religious division of labour (cf. Dumont 1970: 92). Priests maintain purity so as to approach the sacred, which in turn they do in order to mediate the power of the sacred for the rest of the community. Angels and saints, I would argue, are construed in similar roles (cf. Brown 1988: 223-288, Kaplan 1984: 81), although more powerful because already dead and so liberated from sexuality and hunger, the drives that consistently re-emerge to tie us to this world.

Part of the necessity of hierarchy in this system is that purity, or sanctity, is not sustainable for every member of a community for long periods of time. People must eat, and they must reproduce if the society is going to continue. They must work in the fields, another practice that is kept strictly separate from church grounds, where no digging or cutting of trees is permitted. The hierarchical viewpoint allows us to view the clergy as maintaining long-term states of purity (although still not perfect, as even they have to eat, and priests are also entitled to one wife) on behalf of the community. For lay people, the sacred is a domain that you enter occasionally and temporarily, before returning to working the land and being fruitful. I will expand on this religious division of labour in Chapters 2 through 4.

### **Mediation Between Humans and God: Tangible Intangibles**

My title phrase, "The Shade of the Divine" draws on metaphors used in Zege to express the nature of the divine in the sensory world. The Amharic word *t'ila* covers the semantic range of three English words: 'shade', 'shadow', and 'umbrella'. The term has extensive religious connotations: its combined implications of protection and occlusion, presence and obscurity, the material and the ethereal, intimate the mystery and paradox of the Orthodox Christian God. Tangible but immaterial, shade has a moral valency, especially so for the



people I write about who live in and around a holy forest. Shade from the sun is a basic good from which other positive associations emerge. The coffee trees of this forest, which provide much of local people's income, themselves require the shade of taller trees in order to be fully productive. At the same time, ornate umbrellas (*t'ila*) are used in Church rituals, in particular to shade the sacred ark (*tabot*) whenever it leaves the church. The umbrella stands for the divine, above the world but tangible through the shade it casts. This semiotic density captures in expressive form much of what I will discuss in this thesis: the relationships between humans and divinity, and between spiritual power and the material world in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

This study is based on fieldwork in a single area, the Zege Peninsula, conducted from January 2008 to June 2009. It was not my intention on beginning this research to make materiality and mediation a central focus. My interests were in the religious structuring of time, and the articulation between official and unofficial traditions of religious knowledge (Christianity, witchcraft, spirit possession). These remain important to the thesis, especially in the claim that we cannot understand Ethiopian Orthodox practice without due attention to its temporal dimensions. But the practices and ideas around which Christians in Zege build their religious lives – fasting, holy water, the kissing of crosses, the Eucharist – have led me to foreground materiality, mediation, and bodily practice in my account. Unlike Protestant cases such as those discussed by Engelke (2007: 3-11, *passim*.) and Meyer (2011: 61), Orthodoxy does not frown on the notion of mediation or approve of the search for direct contact with God. See for example this passage from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century defence of images of John of Damascus:

“Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out

of lifeless things? And if God's body is God by union, it is immutable. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh created in time is quickened by, a logical and reasoning soul" (St. John Damascene 1898 [c.730]: 17).

Indeed, for a researcher as much as for practitioners, there may be no way to approach, experience, or think about the divine or the holy except through (material) media. Meyer's definition of media as "sensational forms...those artifacts and cultural forms that make possible communication, bridging temporal and spatial distance between people as well as between them and the divine or spiritual" (Meyer 2008b: 126) highlights that it is media which allow us to sense or perceive others, divine or otherwise, over any kind of distance. It is becoming a dictum of studies in material religion that even speech must be considered a material medium. As Engelke puts it, "All religion is material religion. All religion has to be understood in relation to the media of its materiality. This necessarily includes a consideration of religious things, and also of actions *and* words, which are material no matter how quickly they pass from sight or sound or dissipate into the air" (Engelke 2012: 209). To say that all religion is material religion, however, is not to deny the importance of discourses of immateriality. What it does is to force a re-examination of ideas of the transcendent, the immaterial, or the spirit (Keane 2006: 321; Shenoda 2010: 49). It is my hope that this thesis will make some contribution to this reconsideration through a consideration of hierarchy and its role in the production of the sacred in the world.

A growing body of work now emphasises the importance of concepts of mediation in the study of religion. Meyer (2008a, b, 2011), Engelke (2007, 2010a, b, 2012), Eisenlohr (2011), Hirschkind (2011) and Pels (2008), among others, have discussed the role of mediation in religion, working in various ways with the ideas of de Vries (2001). These scholars have focused in their different ways on religion as a means of mediating between visible and invisible worlds, a perspective I have found invaluable in thinking about Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Indeed in my chapters of the religious division of labour I will ask to

what extent we can think of Ethiopian Orthodoxy as a system for mediating between life and death. One facet of mediation that will have particular significance for this thesis is the enabling of proximity or contact with others, human or divine. It will become clear that Ethiopian Orthodoxy, and Orthodox Christianities in general, do not share the discomfort of some other Christianities with the use of material things to make tangible representations of the ineffable, but that these practices are integral to human-divine relations.

The God towards whom Orthodox hierarchy orients itself is entirely other and ineffable. Yet he himself manifested in the world at the Incarnation, and does so again at every Communion. Both manifestations are, in a mundane sense, impossible. They are sacraments or 'Mysteries' (Amh. *mist'ir* and Greek *mysterion* both mean 'sacrament'). Ethiopian Orthodoxy is dualistic because it posits an absolute divide between God and Creation, and it is non-dualistic because God and God's power appear, irrupt, or intervene in the created world on a regular basis. In this sense Bynum's account of paradox in medieval European Christianity applies as well to Ethiopian Orthodoxy:

"I argue that paradox lies at the heart of late medieval Christianity. And paradox, I suggest, is not dialectical. Paradox is the simultaneous assertion (not the reconciliation) of opposites. Because of the paradox not just of Christ's Incarnation (God in the human) but also of divine creation (God's presence in all that is infinitely distant from him) matter was both that which threatened and offered salvation" (Bynum 2011: 35).

I will describe how the divide between humans and God looks narrower at some times than others. At Communion (this Introduction, Chapter 2) it can be completely closed, while during funerary rituals it looks absolute (Chapter 7). I agree with writers who have identified Christianity as based on paradox (eg. Engelke 2007: 12, Bynum 2011: 35) and those who have emphasised the importance of mystery in Orthodoxy (eg. Levine 1965: 67). This thesis, then, will trace the movement, in time and space, of Christians in Zege between different attitudes towards this mystery and paradox, and different states of proximity to

and distance from the divine. I will refer frequently to animating tensions in Zege's religion, because I want to make clear that, in many different areas of life in Zege, paradoxes of materiality and spirit, and tensions between sacred and profane, are productive as much as they are problematic. As I describe in Chapters 1 and 4, sacred hierarchies and boundaries are not hegemonic but are tested, transgressed, and challenged in various ways as people investigate forms of spiritual power in the world other than those that emerge in the Christian Liturgy.

One more theme that will emerge in the course of the thesis, then, is hierarchy's counterpart, liminality. Taking a lead from Turner's famous work (1969), I investigate the power of the margins as an aspect of certain rituals (Chapter 1) and of social stratification (Chapter 6). Both of these chapters investigate the tendency of hierarchies to generate visions of their opposites (cf. Graeber 2007: 29-30). These chapters show that, both in ritual and in daily life, a view exists of the possibility of the sacred unbounded from the profane, and of sacred power at large in the world.

The material approach to hierarchy elicits a further observation, however, which is the subject of Chapter 2. This is that the clergy, the people who constitute the sacred hierarchy, are themselves liminal in important ways. Priests, deacons and monks live outside of towns in pauper conditions; they are subject to severe restrictions of their sexuality and their eating habits, and they must serve part of their careers as penniless and isolated mendicants. Turner identifies lifelong liminality of this kind with the Franciscans, as an anti-hierarchical movement based on *communitas* (1969: 145). But the ethnography of Zege suggests that a sacred hierarchy can itself be, in certain senses of the term, liminal. This is due to the sacred principles of isolation and closure discussed above, which are necessary to approach the divine in Ethiopia: maintaining priestly purity entails a certain social marginality. This recalls Dumont's arguments about differences between religious hierarchy and worldly power (1970: 74-75), a relationship that has proved contingent and mutable in the course of Ethiopian history.

## **The 'Ethiopian' in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity**

First of all, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not 'Coptic'. Coptic means 'Egyptian' (Binns 2002: 32-33). While the Patriarchs of the Ethiopian Church were Egyptian until Haile Selassie declared autocephaly in 1951 (ibid. 34), the institutions are in all other respects quite separate. Christianity is widely thought to have been brought to Ethiopia via the Axumite rulers in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by the Syrian missionaries Edesius, and Frumentius, who would become the first Patriarch (H. Marcus 1994: 7, Kaplan 1984: 15). From there the religion spread in top-down fashion, largely through the work of monastic missionaries (Larebo 1988: 375, Kaplan 1984: 28). The arrival of the Nine Saints, missionary monks from Syria, in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, brought the first major expansion of Christianity throughout the Abyssinian highlands, and further expansions under King Amde Tsion (ruled 1314-44) brought Christianity to Lake Tana, in Gojjam, where the monasteries of Zege now lie.

While the focus of this dissertation is on the religious practices of a specific place, Zege, questions of the relationship between religious and national (or political) belonging will always have importance. This is particularly so in a religion like Ethiopian Orthodoxy which, in common with other Orthodoxies, asserts essential ties with a particular territory and polity (Larebo 1988: 379). Indeed the territorialised aspects of various Orthodox Churches, in comparison with the comparative universalism of Protestants and Catholics, may derive from a particular communitarianism that is distinctive to Orthodox theology (Agadjanian & Roudometof 2005: 9-10, Roudometof 2008: 69-74). Throughout the Orthodox world there exists an ideal of political-territorial power and Church leadership in 'symphonic' and symbiotic rule (Binns 2002: 163). This ideal has been alluded to, in Ethiopia and elsewhere, by the anointment of Emperors after the fashion of King David (ibid. 165). At least since the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has only infrequently sought to missionize outside of its core areas (Donham 1986: 11). Orthodoxy was imposed from above on conquered regions

in the 19th Century, but as part of Imperial mechanisms of governmentality rather than out of any universalizing drive (ibid. 12).

Since the reign of Zer'a Ya'iqob (ruled 1434-68) and perhaps before, a strong association has existed in the Christian tradition of this area between true Christianity and the Amhara and Tigrayan peoples of what are now the central and northern Ethiopian highlands (Larebo 1988: 379). This association is delineated in the *Kibre Negest*, Ethiopian Christianity's great epic (Budge 2000), which asserts the descent of Ethiopia's Kings from the Union of Solomon and Sheba, and hence their relationship to Christ and their continuing legitimacy as the elect of God (Larebo 1988: 379). This ideology of the Christianity of Kingship continued, with various challenges and interruptions, through to the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Throughout this time, Church and rulers have engaged in various forms of mutual legitimation that have characterized political religion throughout Ethiopian history<sup>3</sup>.

The modern Ethiopian state took on its current form through the conquest by the Orthodox empire of the peoples to its south in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Donham 1986). From that point until 1974, the hegemonic meta-narrative of Ethiopia was that of a Christian nation, and the only state in Africa to have successfully resisted European colonization. Those two facts were, it has commonly been implied, not unrelated (Donham 2002). Periods of communism (1974-1991) and then ethnic federalism (1991-present) have done much to destabilize this notion, due in large part to the efforts of previously subaltern groups to assert their own competing historicities (see e.g. Holcomb & Ibssa 1990, Clapham 2002). Crummey sums up the situation thus:

“We may be confident that the Abyssinian peoples involved in this process, rulers and peasants alike, thought of a deep continuity of tradition which they rooted in Biblical times. There is no reason to believe that the millions of people whom they forcefully brought under their sway in the 1880s and 1890s shared that tradition. And we know that rulers and peasants, conquerors and conquered, were

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Diego Malara for helping to formulate this point.

all entering a world of transformation which none of them would control” (Crummey 2000: 201).

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 was a turning point in modern Church history. The uncoupling of Orthodox Christianity from state power, initiated by the Derg confiscation of Church lands in the 1970s and continued by the constitutional enshrinement of equality of religion in the 1990s was met by a re-invigoration of Orthodox institutions and popular practice at the local level. This revival was perceptible even in the first five years of the communist period (Bonacci 2000, Chaillot 2002: 40, Persoon 2004, see Chapter 3). Orthodox Christianity was now (and is today) something that had to be actively asserted, no longer relying on state patronage. This assertion has taken numerous forms: church-building (Marcus 2002, Persoon 2004), Sunday school movements (Chaillot 2002: 43), and in my own experience, new traditions of preaching, Orthodox hymns available on cassette and CD, and religious broadcasting on the radio and television. In Addis Ababa, for all its cosmopolitan diversity and secular government, Ethiopian Orthodoxy maintains an extremely conspicuous public presence as congregations in their white robes flood the streets and the churches broadcast the Liturgy over loudspeaker.

In Bahir Dar, capital of Amhara region and the closest city to Zege, Orthodoxy is prominent and public. The city lies well within traditional Orthodox heartlands, though it has long had a significant Muslim population (as has the market town, Afaf, which lies at the edge of the Zege peninsula). There is also a growing Protestant presence in Bahir Dar, the result of missionary work after the fall of communism. For Orthodox Christians in the area, Protestantism with its reserves of foreign money and patronage poses a real danger to their religion, whereas co-existence with Muslims is long-established, stable, and co-operative.

In Afaf, where I lived throughout my fieldwork, few converts to Protestantism have thus far been made, but Christianity and Islam do engage in a low-key competition for public prominence, as both the churches and the Afaf mosque have loudspeakers on which they broadcast the liturgy and the call to prayer

respectively. Relations between the Christian majority and Muslim minority are generally amiable, however, and attitudes on both sides to the often cacophonous clashing of religious chants is openly resigned and, even when people find their sleep disturbed, respectful.

Cressida Marcus describes a kind of 'Imperial Nostalgia' in the town of Gonder in which the Orthodox compensate for feelings of alienation from their loss of national prominence by engaging in major projects of church-building (Marcus 2002). The nostalgic element of this phenomenon is likely to be felt particularly keenly in Gonder, dominated as it is by the castle of Fasiledes, a potent and famous symbol of Orthodox political power. The feeling is less pronounced in Zege, but something akin to an imperial nostalgia is nonetheless perceptible. Ethiopia remains in the minds of many of my Christian friends and informants properly an Orthodox Christian country, although there is certainly space for ideas and practices of diversity and tolerance.

There are certain ways in which identification with Imperial Ethiopia expresses itself. People are far more likely to refer to themselves as *Gojjamé*, people of the old region of Gojjam, than as Amhara, the new ethnic federal designation. Although people do consider themselves Amhara, the *Gojjamé* identity is more expressive of local identities and loyalties, and it associates people more clearly with a particular Christian territory and tradition. But the most common way, in daily discourse, to express affinity with the old Christian empire is by praising the Emperor Tewodros (ruled 1855-68).

Tewodros is an interesting choice for a national icon, as opposed to, say, the far more successful Menilek II. Tewodros is remembered outside Ethiopia mostly for the hubris and misjudgement that brought about the Napier invasion and led to his defeat and suicide (see Crummey 2000: 205). Within Ethiopia, especially among young men, the suicide is seen as a noble act of defiance, and Tewodros's military defeat by the British a consequence of his being modern ahead of his time. Orthodox Christians remember him as the founder of the Ethiopian nation as a modern polity capable of standing on a footing with other nations and,



crucially, as a Christian state. For these reasons it is Tewodros who appears on t-shirts in Bahir Dar, and who, my friends eagerly told me, was voted “Ethiopian of the Millennium” in a national poll during my fieldwork. Christian kingship, then, epitomized by Tewodros, still holds a fascination for many young Orthodox Ethiopians. It stands for an idea of legitimacy and empowerment for which a cogent alternative has not (yet) definitively emerged.

The other important facet of the Ethiopian-ness of Ethiopian Orthodoxy is by comparison to de-territorialised Protestantism, known throughout the country as *Penté*. At least among priests in Zege, for whom tradition is almost coterminous with sanctity (see Chapter 5; on the traditionalism of Orthodox Churches see Stewart 1991: 139), *Penté* stands for the worldly, the unauthorized. As one priest explained to me, Orthodox hymns were created by St. Yared in antiquity, and he created them for the Emperor. *Penté* hymns have no such pedigree, no continuity or authorizing force. As such they speak for the will of the individual rather than the authority of God.

To date much of the anthropology of Christianity has concentrated on missionary Protestantism. This is quite understandable given the affinity between anthropologists and the post-colonial settings in which global Protestantism has proved such a force. Suggestions of a ‘Protestant bias’ (Hann 2012) are unwarranted; the scale of the transformations in which Protestant forms are implicated demands attention. This is even more so given the productivity of anthropological work on the relationship between Protestantism and modern understandings of the world since Weber (2001[1930], see e.g. Keane 2007, Cannell 2005). Protestantism has a significant presence in Ethiopia and has done since 1830 (Crummey 1972: 27). To make even the implicit comparison that an academic account assumes (between Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and the presumed understandings of a readership of anthropological scholarship) demands some attention to Protestantism, because Protestantism has played such a part in shaping the discursive and political arena in which Ethiopia finds itself.

Accordingly, when I draw comparisons to ethnographic work on Protestantism, I hope it will be clear that I do not consider Protestantism as a basis from which all other Christianities are to be compared. I hope to let the religious world of my Ethiopian Orthodox friends and informants stand on its own terms. But these are terms in which Protestantism is understood to be a vast global force, a threat, a point of comparison and contrast, and a focal point of resistance. Priests and lay Christians alike make this clear: among many things that modern Ethiopian Orthodoxy is, it is explicitly not-Penté.

Whatever form Orthodox identities and modes of belonging take in the Ethiopian state, it seems likely that fasting and the ritual efficacy of sacraments will constitute prominent elements. These are aspects of Ethiopian Orthodoxy that Christians choose to assert against ideas of what Protestantism represents. The Ethiopian Church finds new ways of achieving relevance beyond Ethiopian borders, as Afro-Caribbean people in several continents convert to Ethiopian Orthodoxy with missionary assistance from Ethiopia (Brahana 2000). But even this apparent de-territorialisation is premised around the particular *Ethiopian* quality of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

The legitimising authority and rhetoric of tradition, and in particular Ethiopian/Abyssinian tradition, lies behind much of the religious practice described in this thesis. When questioned, it is to this tradition in various forms that people refer (remembering that, in addition to ideological elements of the meta-narrative of Ethiopia as Christian nation, there exists also a rich Christian textual tradition that is inextricably associated with the Ethiopian highlands). However, as Binns describes, the practice of the Eucharist points to a super-territorial universalism: “At the Eucharist the Church is made complete and whole...it shows where the unity of the Church lies and how it is there can be so many national Churches, which are nonetheless conscious of sharing a common life” (Binns 2002: 41). Throughout this thesis I will discuss the mediation of the local and the universal in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, with special attention to the means by which a Christian framework becomes embedded within Zege’s environment as it is lived and experienced on a daily basis.

## The Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted with the kind assistance and permission of the Association of Social Research and the Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Addis Ababa and the Bahir Dar Culture and Tourism Bureau. I arrived in Afaf town by boat in January 2008, accompanied by a tour guide with family connections on the peninsula. With his help I was able to find lodging in the house of Tomas and Haregwa, a married couple who ran one of the bars in town. They looked after me with kindness and patience in the first difficult months, in which my main goal was to improve my Amharic to a serviceable level; I never used a translator in the field. I explained to people in Afaf that I was a researcher from London looking to study Orthodox culture (*bahil*, sometimes people used the English *culture*), which most people I spoke to seemed to take as a reasonable thing to learn about. After eight months I moved into a compound with a private room, where the other rooms were rented by teachers working at the local school.

I decided to focus on two of Zege's seven churches: Fure Maryam, just outside Afaf, and Azwa Maryam on the peninsula. This was in part because of access: through the help of friends I was able to develop a good relationship with priests and monks at these churches from an early point. It was also partly due to necessity: Fure Maryam is very close to the village I lived in, and Azwa Maryam is located just off the main path through the Peninsula, so these were the two churches I could find on my own without getting lost in the forest. Finally, the two places presented what I took to be an interesting comparison between a relatively poor church (Fure) and a wealthy and famous monastery with a steady stream of visitors<sup>4</sup>. Other churches that appear in this thesis are Ura Kidane Mihret, a large monastery lying close to Azwa Maryam, and Mehal Zege Giyorgis, the first church built on the peninsula in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (see map).

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<sup>4</sup> Each monastery contains a church, so 'church' (*béte kristiyan*) becomes a catch-all term for churches and monasteries.

Every week I would go at least once to each church to interview priests, and I developed particularly good relationships with Abba S'om and Abba Melake Gennet in Fure, and Abba Haylemariam at Azwa. Abba S'om in particular was a key informant, since most of the other priests in the area deferred to his knowledge on questions of exegesis and interpretation, although he is quite young, perhaps 35. He lives in a very modest hut outside Afaf, and is in charge of sermons and Sunday schooling, the two primary routes of religious education for the laity, for the area. One reason he appears so much in this thesis is that other priests, even quite senior ones, would often defer to him on matters of exegesis, part of a deferential habit that I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. Sometimes I visited churches with specific questions in mind, other times just to chat. Priests were understanding of my note-taking, and would take the time to explain difficult points if necessary. I always found it better to go to interviews accompanied with someone from Afaf who could facilitate discussion, and within a few months Abebe had become my de facto research assistant. Abebe was a teenager who did some odd-jobs at Tomas and Haregwa's bar, and showed from the start a lively interest in my research, and in the possibility of employment. He quickly figured out the sorts of things I wanted to know and how to explain my position to people less familiar with me, and so became an invaluable assistant and facilitator.

Apart from these semi-formal interviews with priests, I attended church services and the gatherings that followed them, and all major festivals. I spent time in the various public spaces of Afaf: bars, tea shops, and the house with the Playstation, where I would chat with whoever was around about whatever was happening. Sometimes people would take me to interview their grandparents, so I had some access to the very oldest people in Zege. While walking around Afaf I would frequently be invited for coffee, which allowed me chances to talk to older men and women in town, where in my daily life it was much easier to talk to younger men, due to their interest in the outside world and the universal language of football.

Public spaces in Afaf are not male-only, though I am told they used to be more so, and I was on friendly terms with a number of women in Afaf, especially those who worked in or owned the bars and tea shops, and those who shared my compound. But there were many aspects of women's lives to which I did not have access, as is the limitation of so many male ethnographers. I discuss women's religious practice in Chapter 2, but there is much more to be said.

Although based in Afaf, I wanted to work in the Zege forest as much as possible. My friends Menilek and Babbi frequently hosted me at their house in the forest and introduced me to many people in the area, but the lack of a place to spend the night meant that my time in the forest was usually limited to daytime visits, though I did stay over with Menilek's family for one Easter. The jetty where tourist boats come in provided a base for visits to churches and walks in the forest where I was able to chat with the young men who worked as tour guides, and the men and women running souvenir stalls. Mehal Zege Giyorgis was home to the senior monk of the peninsula, Abba Agumas, who took the time to explain the history of Zege's monasteries to me, but owing to distance I was able to visit only infrequently. I also spent some time and attended some rituals in the church of Ura Kidane Mihret, which is the home parish to several of my friends.

Finally, I regularly visited Beza, Zege's traditional doctor, in his home in the middle of the forest, for which I always required a guide. He was such a widely acknowledged expert on a variety of matters, especially those at the margins of religion (see Chapter 4), that I ended up visiting him simply because of the number of times people had responded to my questions with "Ask Beza". He has contributed enormously to my understanding of Zege, despite being continuously busy with clients.

The forest and Afaf town are continuous: many people in Afaf have land in the forest, and most forest-dwellers regularly walk to Afaf for market and for social reasons. The main path leading from Afaf through the forest, then, was as much my fieldsite as the village or the forest themselves. Inhabitants of the town and the forest both consider themselves in the special category of Zegeña, and I do

my best, within the practical limitations of fieldwork, to offer analysis that applies to Zege as a whole.

## **Introduction, Continued: Materiality, Church and the Body**

In the second half of this introduction I will explicate in more depth the main theoretical and ethnographic themes that inform the thesis, especially those of materiality and signification. The best way to introduce my conceptual approach to materiality is through ethnographic discussion of ideas and practices of the human body as it relates to space (sacred and worldly) and to other things. This will also allow me to introduce the geographical layout of religious practice in Zege. I propose that human bodies, objects, and space are best considered together as sharing a common materiality: bodies and things are constituted by a spatial dimension, and conversely we only experience space through the things that occupy, divide, or delineate it (at least at the ethnographic level of analysis). This juxtaposition of human body, thing, and space is influenced by Latour: “to have a body *is to learn to be affected*, meaning ‘effectuated’, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans” (Latour 2004: 205). Rather than worrying over definitions of ‘materiality’ per se, we are now discussing the interface between body-objects: “*an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements*” (ibid. 206, emphasis in original). This is not to say that there is no difference between human bodies and other kinds of things, but that we are interested in their shared capacity to affect each other through a shared resistance, a shared capacity to affect. In the ontology of Zege there are entities without bodies, it is true, including malign spirits and angels (though these are ambiguous, depicted as winged heads in church paintings). But these entities too are known by the way they affect other bodies, for example, by causing or curing sickness. Their materiality may be debatable, but their interface with the material is not. As I describe in Chapters 4 (bad spirits) and 6 (saints), the means for interacting with these entities are also wholly material, ranging from smoke and incense<sup>5</sup> to the exchange of gifts and money.

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<sup>5</sup> Although smoke, incense, and fragrance are in many cultures means of ‘material immateriality’, as ways of contacting or providing nourishment to immaterial or spirit beings (cf. Feuchtwang 2010: 60n, 62-67, Fuller 1992: 73, Engelke 2007: 240).

Talking about churches is a good way to illustrate my approach to materiality and space. All churches in Zege follow the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox design of being built in three concentric rings (see Fig. 13). The innermost ring, the Holy of Holies (*qidduse qiddusan*), houses the sacred *tabot* or ark/altar. Every church has a *tabot*, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant (*tabote s'ion*) which is consecrated in the name of a particular saint. This is the centre of the church's sacred power, and lay people are forbidden from ever seeing or touching it. This is where priests prepare the Eucharist. The *tabot* leaves the church only two or three times per year, at the feast of *T'imqet* and on annual saints' days (see Chapter 1), and at these times it is covered with an ornate cloth.

Outside the Holy of Holies are two further circles, the *meqdes* where the priests carry out the Liturgy (*qiddasé*) and give the Eucharist, and the *qiné mehalit* where priests and chanters sing the post-Eucharistic hymns. Beyond this wall is the churchyard, which is further hemmed in by one or two stone walls. During the Liturgy, large numbers of people gather here who for one reason or another are too impure to enter the church. Main reasons for impurity are menstruation, having consumed food or water, and having had recent sexual intercourse.

This progressive walling-off of the sacred has many classical anthropological resonances (Douglas 1966: 21, Lambek 2002: 33-35). The drawing of boundaries in space relates to the physical status of human bodies allowed in that space. Approaching the church as a constellation of materiality, human and non-human, produces this picture: the church building, made from mud and straw and great beams from ancient trees and with a thatched roof, demarcates three areas apart from the churchyard outside. These areas are increasingly restricted as you approach the centre, where you find the *tabot* occupying its space. Access by humans to the centre is regulated depending largely on the state of their bodies: those menstruating, or impure from sex, or who have eaten, or even those with open wounds or the 'flu, may not enter the church at all. Women and men come through separate entrances and are kept apart at all times within the church. Only ordained priests and virginal deacons may enter the central sanctum, and even then only after rigorous abstinence. The Eucharist, which carries the power



of the *tabot*, is available only to those who have maintained the strictest purity. The communicant must have never had extra-marital sex, and to have abstained for three days beforehand. They must have fasted for a minimum of eighteen hours, and be free of any cuts or sores. As a priest told me, if a fly has flown into our mouth by accident, you are no longer pure for the Eucharist. The sacred, then, is defined by the inter-relations of the church walls, the sacred *tabot*, and the bodies of Christians.

It seems to me that the underlying logic of sanctity has to do with physical enclosure and human bodily fluid or substance, associated with sexuality and by extension with death. Similar themes are found in cultures across the world, with a strong thread identifiable in Judaeo-Christian history:

“the literature of late antiquity throbs with fear of being fragmented, absorbed, and digested by an other that is natural process itself...death was horrible, not only because it was an event that ended consciousness, but because it was part of oozing, disgusting, uncontrollable biological process. Such process, beginning at conception and continuing in the grave, threatened identity itself. As Origen said, ‘River is not a bad name for the body’; yet in the topos known since Heraclitus, ‘you cannot step in the same river twice’. How then (asked ancient authors) do we survive the rushing stream of death within us?” (Bynum 1995: 113).

At least part of the answer is to divide the world into separate realms: one where bodily flow, interconnection and decomposition pervade, and another, the sacred, from which they are excluded, and in which eternal life is thus possible<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Bodily functions are problematic in Amhara daily discourse as well. Several have people have discussed with me the horror and social shame associated with flatulence, with one friend telling me, “If you fart in school, you just won’t turn up the next day. You will be too ashamed”. Even in very vulgar conversations I have never heard anyone use words for defecation, and I have known people to use the English terms ‘sex’ and ‘vomit’ as a way of distancing themselves from the more immediate Amharic equivalents. That said, all of this discomfort is trumped by the ethical importance of caring for the sick, with the result that, while people do not like to talk about bodily fluids, they are not at all horrified by potential contact with them.

I am grateful to Anita Hannig for first pointing out to me the importance of bodily flow, as outlined in Comaroff's discussion of apparently universal metaphors of openness and closure:

“the widespread association of categories associated with the perception of ‘orifice’ – a seemingly universal marker of the threshold between inside and outside, self and other and controlled (and hence cultural) process as against unbounded, asocial flux. The controlled, irreversible passage of substance through bodily orifices – ingestion, defecation, and sexual ejaculation – become universal metaphors for the culturally mediated transactions between bodies that mark participation in the social world” (Comaroff 1985: 546).

This is an extension of Mary Douglas's arguments associating sanctity with boundedness and wholeness, which have serious relevance in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, as I will discuss shortly (Douglas 1966: 51-54). What I want to develop here is the idea that bodily flows and orifices are not merely metaphors for social relationships. This description derives from a false dichotomy between body and society, and possibly between body and self as well. Where Comaroff says, “the crucial signifying role of the body here derives from its position as a primary mediator between self and sociocultural context” (1985: 541), it is now possible to regard the body as part of the self, and also as part of the sociocultural context, and not as a mediator or metaphor.

What emerges is a practical notion of the sacred as defined by an opposition between boundedness and discontinuity with the world, and openness or continuity, an opposition that Graeber has identified as characteristic of hierarchical situations, in which power attempts to construct itself as abstract from mundane details (2007: 18-19). The material approach I am working with suggests that the “irreversible passage of substance” (whether through bodily orifices or otherwise) is itself a part of the social process, not a metaphor for it, because society is composed of bodies (human and otherwise) affecting each other. For Graeber, hierarchy involves attempts to deny that passage or continuity of substance, an idea that Ethiopian Orthodox practices of the sacred bear out to a large extent.

Graeber's argument about discontinuity from the world and hierarchy makes for an interesting reflection on Douglas's equation of holiness with wholeness and Bynum's remarks on bodily fluid and decomposition. The comparison suggests a dichotomy between consubstantiality and hierarchy, in which the sacred stands in opposition to human connection and to the very substance of social life per se. I believe that this description applies to sanctity in Ethiopia: a continuum of discontinuity, individualism, and death (as Latour says, if you are not engaged in learning to be affected by others, you are dead) stands in continual tension with the ineluctable interconnectedness of human life. Consubstantiality (or commensality) and hierarchy both have great importance in Orthodox society, and I follow Feuchtwang in suggesting that the conflict between the two kinds of relations is central to the dynamics of ritual (Feuchtwang 2010: 65). To suggest that ritual hierarchy is opposed to shared substance and bodily flow is to suggest that it is timeless: "The relationship, then, of that which occurs in liturgical intervals to that which occurs in mundane periods is *the relationship of the never-changing to the ever-changing*" (Rappaport 1999: 187-88, emphasis in original). The apparent timelessness of hierarchy and its symbolic opposition to a world of flux and decay is also a theme of Bloch's work (1986, 1992). A complex of ritual, hierarchy, sanctity, and timelessness thus emerges from the anthropological literature, which displays strong resonance with Ethiopian Orthodox Christian practice.

The conflict between shared substance and sacred ritual applies to childbirth just as much as to sexuality and food sharing. In Ethiopian Orthodoxy, mother and child are both impure for forty days after the birth of a boy, and eighty of a girl. For this period they are said to 'bleed'; the rules come direct from Leviticus 12:1-7. The only difference is that in Leviticus purity is obtained by sacrifice, whereas now in Ethiopia it is gained by Christening and the sacrament of Baptism. Until the Christening, as my lay friends emphasised to me, though not aware of the textual basis for the rule, neither mother nor baby can enter the church. Abba S'om told me explicitly that this was due to the 'bleeding' (*medam*). The themes I have discussed are united here: continuity between people (mother

and child), bodily flow (bleeding), and sexuality and reproduction, are strictly separated from the church. Birth violates Douglas's principle of wholeness as holiness, and yet it is the very basis of human existence: shared substance cannot coexist with sacred hierarchy<sup>7</sup>.

The great exception to this is the Eucharist, the only kind of consumption that is allowed in Church. Ethiopian Orthodoxy adheres to the doctrine of transubstantiation: the bread and water miraculously become the body and blood of Christ. Compare this to the fact that you must not eat or drink before attending the Liturgy, and to the exclusion of mothers and newborns from Church on the grounds of 'bleeding': you cannot share substance with God while you share it with other people. Mother's blood and the blood of Christ do not mix. This, I think, illuminates the paradox around which Orthodoxy revolves. It is possible then to view the restrictions around the sacred as metaphysical walls between God-flesh and God's blood on the one side, and human flesh and blood on the other. But the walls never hold entirely fast, and this thesis is in part an analysis of how they become permeable.

By regarding bodies, things, and space as part of the same category or continuum, it is then possible to extend this analysis of bodies in church outward to the society of Zege as a whole: its houses, its marketplace, its coffee forest, and its people. In Chapter 5 I aim to describe the part that sanctity plays in the history and ecology of Zege as a whole. Demarcations between the sacred and what I designate 'the worldly' occur in many places in Zege, but the emphasis on bodies in spaces allows us to see these demarcations as part of the phenomenal world, and not abstractions separate from it. The picture that emerges is one of an Orthodox religion embedded in a particular place, and involved in biological processes and economic practices.

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<sup>7</sup> However, note that the Apostolic Creed used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church declares that "marriage is pure, and childbirth is undefiled, because God created Adam and Eve to multiply" (Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website: <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/faith.html#introduction>). This conflict between creed and practice highlights the paradoxical nature of human embodiment in Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

I do not want to deny outright the possibility of discourses of immateriality in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Both lay people and priests employ an opposition between flesh (*siga*) and spirit (*nifs*) in common discourse. As I describe in Chapter 7, this distinction becomes apparent at funerals, where the separation of body and soul is enacted. However, as I will show, people continue even then to use material things to memorialize each other. And in life, as recent historical work on early and medieval Christianity repeatedly emphasizes, the state of a person's soul is maintained and indexed by the condition of her body (Brown 1988: lix, Shaw 1998: 33). What Peter Brown says of early Christianity applies just as well to Ethiopia: "Far from being driven by a dualistic hatred of the body, the slow wisdom of the monks, between the fourth and early seventh centuries, marked the end of dualism as a conceptual tool with which to handle the complexities of human spiritual growth" (1988: lix). Bodily means of religious engagement and overcoming sin are likewise paramount in Ethiopia.

The human body in its sexuality, its physicality, and its biological needs, is the principal source of human suffering and death, it is also the means for overcoming that suffering and, ultimately, overcoming death. Good Christians are made by fasting; holy men are made by sexual continence. As I will discuss at length in Chapter 2, Christians in Zege describe fasting as a source of joy. But eating is just as much a source of joy, and especially eating with other people. When describing their culture (*yeZege bahil*) to outsiders, commensality is something that Zegeña overwhelmingly stress. Likewise, the religious disapproval of sexuality, which is certainly powerful, hardly describes the totality of Zege Christians' attitudes to sex. There exists in Zege, and in many parts of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, a tacit understanding that religious ideals are often unsustainable and that fleshly activities, especially eating and sex, are a part of life to be enjoyed. Christian life includes feasts as well as fasts. Likewise, while all attendants at church must fast completely (no food, no water) until the service's end, this is followed by the breaking of bread in the churchyard. People will sit together and discuss church business, especially financial issues. Celebrations of Saints' days are followed by a communal feast in the churchyard.

Churchyards and homes are places for commensality, and the church building itself requires strict fasting. Different spaces call for different bodily states, different states of flow, interconnection, or repleteness. The purity of the church is only half of a dialectic, a part of the balance between sacred and worldly which defines Orthodox life.

### **Matter and Orthodox Semiotics**

Keane (1997, 2003, 2007) has been instrumental in the development of a material semiotics based on the works of C.S. Peirce, insisting on the ubiquity of semiotic form. For Keane, semiotic form, although inescapable, has been subject to attack from Protestant movements and the “moral narrative of modernity” that they helped to foster:

“In some important strands of this tradition, the materiality of signifying practices comes to be identified with external constraints on the autonomy of human agents. Thus, this materiality can, in some respects, seem to pose a threat to freedom that demands a serious response. Freedom, in this light, seems to depend on the dematerialization of what is most definitive of humans, whether that be understood as the soul, thoughts, belief, or, say, the meanings of words. The religious background to ideas of modern freedom helps us make sense of the impetus behind what Latour ... has called purification” (Keane 2007: 7).

This is a development of the work of Pietz (1995) on the history of the fetish as a colonial missionary conception about the misplacement of agency and the subjection of ‘natives’ to superstition – the imputing of human agency to non-human things.

Furthermore, Keane explains,

“the moral narrative of modernity that concerns me here is part of a purposeful project. It involves the cultivation of and high value given to individual agency, and inwardness, the goal of individual self-

creation, and, paralleling these in the domain of the social, the devaluation of tradition in the name of historical progress. At the heart of this vision of modernity is the work of purification that aims to abstract the self from material and social entanglements” (2007: 201).

This passage pinpoints a critical difference between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and the modernist trends that Keane has studied: for the Christians in my fieldsite all agency is construed as coming from God (Messay 1999: 185), and so human agency, too, is often seen as borrowed. As such, the notion that material things, too, might act as media for divine power is much more readily accepted, for the Orthodox emphasis tends to fall on what people and things share, both being creations of God. There is a strong argument to be made that Eastern Christianities in general and Ethiopian Orthodoxy are more accepting of material semiotics and mediation than the missionary Protestantisms that have often been the subject of anthropological analysis. I will discuss some of the specifics of mediation in Orthodox practice in Zege in Chapter 2.

Gabriel Hanganu’s recent essay (2010) presents an elegant argument that Eastern Christian theology does not share the alienation between humans and matter that has developed in Western Christianity since, in his account, Augustine (2010: 43). This is due to a particular conception of Creation and personhood that, he argues, has ramifications in popular Eastern culture to this day (44). The crucial point concerns the potential sanctity of matter:

“Orthodox hold that on the last day, like the human body, the entire natural world will be turned by God into a qualitatively superior realm...Saint Maxim the Confessor...maintains that the Creator endowed each created thing with a *logos*, or inner principle, that makes each thing uniquely and distinctly what it is, and at the same time connects it with God in an essential yet invisible manner. It is through these subtle cosmic links, nourished by divine energies, that the world is preserved and developed... Matter is potentially holy by virtue of the original creation and the connections maintained with God through the divine energies. At the same time it has the potential

to fulfil this potentiality by being involved in human activity performed ‘in synergy’ with God” (44).

Rather than the self-contained individual personhood commonly associated with European Christianity, Hanganu argues, Orthodox understandings stand much closer to anthropological arguments developed by Gell (1998) and Strathern (1988) that describe an agency distributed between humans, and things participating in relationships between humans. As Hanganu puts it, “direct observations of religion-based social interaction can be complemented with a biographical study of the material culture elements involved in these processes, which are seen primarily as relational nodes connecting the material, social, and spiritual worlds” (2010: 51). This understanding of material things and substances as ‘relational nodes’ is one I wholly endorse in the Ethiopian setting, as I will go on to explain in this section.

Hanganu’s account of Orthodox personhood is summed up as follows:

“we need to take account of a distinctive Orthodox view of personhood, materiality, and relationship, according to which the agency of religious objects must be seen in relation to both their potential for mediating spiritual exchange with the prototypes they depict and the fulfilment of this potential by participating in social and material fellowship. Similarly, human personhood needs to be ascertained in relation to both the unique physical and biographical identity of each individual and the relation energy distributed within the material, social, and spiritual realms” (2010: 47).

Compare this to Keane’s account of modern semiotic ideology in which

“the materiality of signifying practices comes to be identified with external constraints on the autonomy of human agents. Thus, this materiality can, in some respects, seem to pose a threat to freedom that demands a serious response. Freedom, in this light, seems to depend on the dematerialization of what is most definitive of humans, whether that be understood as the soul, thoughts, belief, or, say, the meanings of words” (2007: 7, see above).



For the Orthodox, the materiality of objects is enlisted in a distributed human agency, part of a collaborative, corporate religious practice. Eastern Christian semiotic ideology thus seems to stand in direct contrast to that described by Keane.

It is not clear that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church shares exactly the tenets described by Hanganu; as I describe in Chapter 7, approaches to the world beyond in death ritual in Zege seem to suggest a rather immaterial understanding of heaven. However, I am nonetheless convinced that Hanganu's description of the potential sanctity of matter has relevance in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Church's website cites the following passage from the Apostolic Creed: "all creatures of God are good and there is nothing to be rejected, and the spirit, the life of the body, is pure and holy in all"<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, religious practice in Zege conforms to the principles that Hanganu elaborates. People do indeed enlist things as "relational nodes connecting the material, social, and spiritual worlds". This is evident in the use of holy water, supplied by a priest, to gain contact with divine healing power. It is evident also in the practice that I describe in Chapter 6, of responding to a saint who grants a personal favour by holding a feast for one's neighbours, where food is the material stuff of social and spiritual relationships.

The notion of humans and matter as co-creations, potentially perfectible, gives insight also into general Eastern Christian approaches to icons. As Luehrmann explains,

"The visual representation of spiritual reality is justified by God's own diverse image-making activities. According to the eighth-century apology regarding icon veneration written by Saint John of Damascus, God first formed images in his mind of the things and beings he was going to create (conceptual images), then created humankind in his own likeness (image as imitation). Most importantly, God authorized

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<sup>8</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/faith.html#introduction>  
Accessed 10/12/2011.

the depiction of uncreated divinity through its incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ, ‘the first natural and undeviating image of the invisible God’” (Luehrmann 2010: 57).

Humans are imitations of God, and the icon-as-imitation expresses a similar relationship. An implication, congruent with the argument I am developing, is that humans and icons are the same kind of thing, made of the same stuff.

This view of Orthodox approaches to matter lends support to my description of the sacred as a material realm in this world, for it elaborates the intellectual background to such a conception, and the potential for material matter to forge connection with divine beings and divine power. I think there is a further development to be made here, which concerns the nature of sacred signs in Ethiopian Orthodox practice: as Hanganu suggests that Orthodoxy views material things as nodes of relationality, we can say the same about (material) signs. Sacred signs, I will argue, are far more concerned with making contact, connection, or identification than they are with carrying information. Ethiopian Orthodox sacred signs are defined not just by the sign-signified relationship, but by the social connection between the person making or encoding the sign, the person receiving or decoding the sign, and the person or entity being signified (cf. Rappaport 1999: 61-62). Some examples will help to clarify this.

Ethiopian Orthodox religious practice, inside the church and out, is characterised by a quite abstract – I am tempted to say mimetic – form of signification. For example, crossing oneself with one’s hand is required when entering or passing a church, as in many other forms of Christianity. We can describe such semiotic acts as ritualised in that they are ‘prescribed’ (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 12). When people cross themselves, as with the other symbolic actions and forms described below, “the actors both are, and are not, the authors of their acts” (ibid. 5, see also Rappaport 1999: 32). Many anthropologists have stated that propositional content is not a primary aspect of ritual communication (eg. Bloch 1977, Rappaport 1999: 119-126), and the same applies to ritualised signs such as those described here.

In the example of crossing oneself the sign is the movement of one's hand from eyes to chest and from left shoulder to right, and the signified is the cross on which Christ was hung, which we can understand as a metonym for the person of the saviour or for the act of self-sacrifice. But this semiotic act makes no sense unless we take account of who receives or 'reads' the sign. In one way the audience for the sign is other people, who may interpret the message that the person making the sign is a Christian. But there are two other aspects to the reception of the sign. One is that other Christians also make the same sign when *they* enter or pass a church. So the sign-maker identifies herself with other people making the same sign (cf. Rappaport 1999: 52). Connerton discusses "that sense of imitation as mythical identification" (1990: 63), while Taussig takes the argument even further by attributing almost mystical powers of identification to the act of imitation (Taussig 1993: 47-50, 105-111). But the sign-maker herself must also by definition recognise that she is making the sign, and so she too is its audience. And what she is audience to, I would argue, is not a message but a connection: between herself and her Saviour.<sup>9</sup>

This connection exists in part because the sign relates to the signified not just by convention but by resemblance (iconicity) and by pointing or directing attention to the referent (indexicality), as well as the associations with the referent – sacrifice, resurrection – that exist by convention. Gell mounts an argument that indexicality in particular produces special relationships between persons and representations, and I think that the Ethiopian ethnography suggests that this relationship itself is the essence of sacred signs like crossing oneself. This suggestion of connection between representation and the divine entity signified appears also in Hanganu's essay: "In the particular case of Orthodox Christian icons, the theological assumption that the constitutive materials maintain an invisible connection with God is combined with the belief that the honour paid to the image passes on to whomever the image represents" (2010: 50). In this view, as I am arguing is the case in Ethiopian Orthodox symbolic practice, the sign

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<sup>9</sup> Latour, too, argues that 'religious talk' has more to do with producing proximity than bearing information (2005: 29).

functions mainly as a connector between the social entities represented and receiving or viewing the representation.

The semiotic relationship can also include human mediators between the represented and the recipient. When a priest gives blessing to a lay person on the street, they hold out their wooden hand-cross for the faithful to kiss three times. There can be no clearer indicator that the tangibility of the cross is crucial. People receive blessing by touching the cross with their lips. This stands, to my mind, as a potent exemplar of the indexical-iconic power of the hand-cross as a tangible connector to the intangible divine. It is not enough to look at the cross; you must have physical contact with it.

The construction of churches offers another example of abstract symbolism that is typical of Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Most churches in Ethiopia, and all those in Zege, are built in three concentric rings as I have described. When you ask a priest why this is so, they invariably say that it is because of the Trinity (*sile Selassé*) or a sign of the Trinity (*yeSelassé millikkit*). The church resembles the Trinity because of its three-ness: this aspect of its design carries no more specific message than that. Its primary purpose is resemblance, specifically a material-symbolic resemblance to an intangible entity. Similarly if one asks why the church's apex is decorated with nine large eggs, they will say "because of the nine saints (Ethiopia's first missionaries)", *sile zet'eñu qiddusan*. That 'sile', meaning 'because', could be translated as something like 'for the sake of'. The church design is iconic – being in three parts, it resembles the Trinity – and indexical – its being in three parts is due to the tripartite nature of the Trinity. It is a material imitation, a tangible model, of a divine being. People can enter and interact with this model and so, I argue, develop their relationship, and achieve contact with, the divinity that it represents. The church as a material sign is a "relational node" in a realm of interaction between people, matter, and spiritual or divine beings<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In Mary Douglas's terms this kind of sign is analogic rather than dialogic. Its truth claims rest on its resemblance to higher patterns or forms rather than from Aristotelian dialogic reasoning (Douglas 1999: 20-21).

In this sense sacred signs resemble the alms that, as a central tenet of Orthodox ethical practice, one gives to beggars. All Christian beggars seek alms in the name of a saint, calling *sile Maryam*, “Because of/for the sake of Mary”, *sile Selassé*, “Because of the Trinity”, or *sile Giyorgís*, “For (Saint) George”. And it is understood that those who give in response to such requests participate in a relationship with the figure named. This is evident in the story of the Covenant of Mercy (*Kidane Mihret*), after which one of Zege’s churches is named. The story describes a vision of Mary’s after Christ’s ascension, in which he promises her that any who pray in her name will be saved<sup>11</sup>. The request, in the form of the statement of the saint’s name, and the money given, are the stuff of a relationship between the giver, the beggar, and the saint.

Sacred signs, in this argument, also resemble food, and here it should begin to become clear how my accounts of material hierarchy, material signs, and the material sacred, are related. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, like people of most cultures, understand sharing food as constitutive of connections between people. This is particularly true of food which one feeds by hand to another’s mouth, known as *gursha*. One friend of mine who felt that another friend had cheated him expressed his sense of betrayal thus: “He took my *gursha*, but now he does this. It is not right.” That is, sharing food is seen not just to symbolise connection but to produce it. Likewise, the Eucharist is a means of achieving direct connection with God. Fasting, meanwhile, the refusal of food, can prepare one for this contact with God or can act as a form of discipline and penance, but it also constitutes relationships of identification between those who fast together, as I argue in Chapter 2.

Note, however, that the sacred symbols I have discussed here (signs that represent the intangible, the spiritual, or the divine) entail a hierarchical relationship between sign and signified: the signified is superior, then the sign, and then the decoder/recipient in an attitude of submission to the sign. Sacred signs, then, both mediate and constitute unequal relationships. The relationality

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 7 for another account of this trope.

of signs and representations in a hierarchy is crucial, as they are in Douglas's analysis of Leviticus: "lessons are given by analogies between one physical object and another. Nothing can be justified in this universe except in terms of the proper position in the spatial/temporal order whose rightness is the only justification for anything" (Douglas 1999: 39).

I contend throughout this thesis that 'belief' is not a particularly appropriate analytic for discussing Orthodox Christianity (cf. Lindquist & Coleman 2008). The Amharic verb *mammen* would be better translated as 'to trust' or 'to have faith in' (see Ruel 1997: 38). This is a correlate of the semiotic mode that I discuss here, in which the construction of relationships and connections between social actors, and not the transfer of ideas or information, is paramount. I want to push the implications of Hanganu's account of the Orthodox conception of matter and the work of Keane and Gell on indexicality and the materiality of symbols, to emphasise that, if we consider sacred signs as material things, they are best considered, like food and alms, as the bases of social exchange. Sacred signs are the stuff of social connection between people and the divine, and the physical connection between humans, saints, and God. That, I argue, is the basic principle of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian semiotics. I will be developing this argument throughout the thesis.

## **The Chapters**

The first four chapters deal with more normative aspects of Orthodox life in Zege: calendars and the regulation of time, fasting and ritual practice, the work of priests and other religious experts. While the focus is comparatively structural, these regulatory structures are not monolithic. I attempt to show how Orthodoxy as a whole incorporates opposing or incommensurate traditions, dynamism, and great variety in the possible religious life paths of Orthodox Christians.

**Chapter 1** concerns the Ethiopian Orthodox Calendar and the temporal aspects of Zege's religious geography. I describe how each day is ascribed religious

significance by the calendar and how, through ritual, local and superlocal Christian narratives are embedded into daily life. I will ask to what extent it makes sense to understand time in terms of sacred hierarchy, and will discuss the festivals of *T'imqet* (Epiphany) and *Mesqel* (The Exaltation of the Cross) in which the sacred 'leaks' out from its usual containment, with chaotic results. I will finish by arguing that sanctity in Zege's Orthodox Christianity cannot be understood without full attention to its temporal character.

**Chapter 2** focuses on fasting practice, which I argue is the defining feature of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. I discuss the ways that fasting shapes the experience of time, following on from the previous chapter, and argue that fasting is formative of Orthodox identity and personhood. I argue for a view of fasting as ritualised action, best analysed in the context of the anthropological literature on ritual. This literature helps to reveal the importance of deference as a dynamic of fasting practice, which in turn helps us to keep separate the interpretations of fasting from the role of fasting as an efficacious practice. In particular I draw out relationships between fasting practice and wider patterns of commensality, particularly those surrounding Easter. This chapter is critical to my argument that material connection lies at the heart of Ethiopian Orthodox practice.

**Chapter 3** concerns the work of priests and other clergymen. I describe the arduous apprenticeship served by all clergy, and the ways in which they accrue the knowledge necessary to do their jobs, which are construed as a kind of service. I also describe the purity rules they must obey, suggesting that Ethiopian priesthood entails a kind of permanent liminality, which is necessary for the priests to perform their main duty of mediating between the divine and the human. This chapter also illustrates how religious knowledge is distributed and implemented throughout Zege.

**Chapter 4** deals with traditions of knowledge whose relation to 'religion' (Amh. *haymanot*) is ambiguous. From traditional doctors to spirit mediums, 'witches' (*t'enqway*) and non-ordained Church choristers-turned-sorcerers (*debtera*), a

huge range of esoteric practices exists outside or at the margins of the official purview of the Church. There is no regular conceptual classification of such schools of knowledge, with most people simply referring to *awaqi* 'the knowers'. I also discuss the idea, shared by many lay people, that clergymen themselves engage in more or less occult practices on the side. My argument is that, seen in the light of the previous two chapters, what unites these diverse and semi-clandestine practices is an encounter between an expert and a client over an asymmetrical knowledge gradient. This will help to clarify the relationship between health, healing and religion, and allow me to investigate the blurred boundaries between the religious and the worldly, and between religion (*haymanot*) and witchcraft (*t'inqola*). The conclusion of the chapter considers the hierarchy of religious knowledge in Zege as a whole, and how the holistic approach to religious knowledge can incorporate competing or incommensurable discourses without resorting to prescriptive or static models.

From here the thesis focuses increasingly on the interface between ethnography and history, as I discuss the interplay between events recent and distant, and the ethnographic present in which I conducted fieldwork. In **Chapter 5** I investigate Zegeña notions of their own deep history and historical identity. In particular this concerns the inter-relation between the Zege churches and the environmental history of the Peninsula, particularly its coffee forest. I find that Zegeña emphasise the *longue durée* in accounts of their history, and that this conception owes much to the real links between the ancient churches and the preservation of the forest, in comparison to the surrounding farmland. This chapter investigates relationships between religious hierarchy and material history in the context of debates about ritual and adaptation, in order to explicate Zege's religious dynamics of power and continuity. At the same time I discuss the problems inherent in a historicity orientated toward the long-view, which tends not just to smooth over elements of fracture, struggle, dispute, or domination, but to efface them.

**Chapter 6** concerns one of the major signs of conflict during my fieldwork: an epidemic of *buda* spirit attacks that progressively worsened in the years 2008



and 2009, but later seems to have abated. My interlocutors unanimously attributed the 'epidemic' to 'trade' (*nigd*) – increased commodification and competition in the Afaf market, which was tempting traders to make secret visits to witches (*t'enqway*) in order to gain illicit advantages in the market. In doing so they were inadvertently causing *buda* attacks, which were blamed for at least one death. This was during the world food crisis of 2008 which, I argue, had an exacerbating effect on the epidemic and was perhaps its single most important cause. I discuss the ways in which this crisis gives insights into the morality of exchange in Zege, and the way people interact with and conceive of wider economic trends, pressures, and developments. Finally, I contrast the witchcraft epidemic with models for moral exchange, especially those between people and saints. The comparison between the *buda* crisis and sacred exchange illustrates a tension between individual and community which I have found to be a key dynamic of Christian life in Zege. I argue that commensality and the sharing of substance offers the best way to understand the variety of relations, between humans and humans and between humans and the spirit world, that I describe in this chapter.

**Chapter 7**, finally, discusses death, memory, and funerary ritual. I engage in a material analysis of the graveyards of Zege to discuss a trend of building concrete graves that lasted from 1991 or so until its outlawing in 2006. I argue that funerary practice highlights a broad problem of remembrance in Zege which itself relates to the religious discourse and practice of the material and the immaterial. This provides an arena for discussions of the semiotics of remembrance and hence, the relationship between signification and materiality, which I have come to regard as a key productive tension in Zege's Orthodox Christianity.

My **Conclusion** draws together themes of semiotics, connection, and materiality that have appeared through the thesis, and presents a case for understanding these recurring themes through the lens of indexicality, understood as the direct connection between a signifier and a shared reality. I discuss various ways in which indexicality characterises Orthodox symbolic practice, with emphasis on

the sign as a node of relation between social actors in the world. This understanding of Orthodox semiotics as the material instantiation of social connections, I will argue, helps to understand the particular dynamics of individuality and collectivism that are distinctive of Ethiopian Orthodoxy in Zege.

## Chapter 1

### **The Ethiopian Orthodox Calendar: The Temporal Dimension of the Sacred in the World**

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One of the aims of this dissertation is to demonstrate the embeddedness of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and the necessary linkages between environment and society, materials and symbols, and bodies and ideas in Zege. The religious control of time – both of tallying the passage of days, and of deciding what behaviour is appropriate on what day – is the principal way in which embodied experience and religious ideology come together and articulate with each other, and so establish the basic dynamics of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian life. As will be seen, the religious calendar determines when and what people eat, when they work, when they bring in the harvest, and when they get married. However, while it derives from a specific Christian history, the calendar cannot be understood as a purely historical construct unless one understands environment, climate, and biology to be partially determining factors. As in other Christian places, seasonal festivals that predate Christianity have been so totally absorbed into the Christian calendar as to become part of its fabric. In Ethiopia the liturgical prayers, although derived from the Bible, have come to reflect and to mark the passing of rainy and dry seasons (Fritsch 2001: 74). I therefore attempt to describe the calendar as it is lived, experienced, and practiced, as it articulates with rhythms of production, reproduction, and social engagement. I try to maintain an analytical distinction between representations of time – naming days after saints and years after disciples – and processes taking place in time: birth, death, and the movement of the earth around the sun; but also rituals, meetings, conversations. But I view representations and processes as interlinked, mutually determining, and sometimes inextricable: both rituals and conversations can represent time while being themselves temporal processes.

While the first half of this chapter deals with the role of the calendar in linking people and environments, the second discusses the temporal dimension of the

sacred. It will become clear that practices pertaining to relations between the spiritual and the worldly (Amh. *menfesawí*<sup>12</sup> and *alemawí*) vary over the course of the year. These variations of practice – fasting and feasting, and between different kinds of festivals – reflect on and contextualise each other, so a temporal perspective is indispensable for understanding what sanctity and worldliness mean in Zege.

The first part of this Chapter aims to show how the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar ties individual human bodies into an overarching Christian history. It does this through the co-ordination of ritual action, and also by bringing sustenance and commensality, work and rest, production and reproduction, into a framework where these basic acts of material life become meaningful and demonstrative of identity, by virtue of when they are prescribed, and when they are forbidden. That is to say, the calendar reframes the basic acts of life, especially consumption and abstinence, as Christian acts.

In the first two sections of this chapter I will describe the Ethiopian Calendar with reference to its co-ordination of ritual action, fasting, feasting, and work. I will show how, as well as making these actions regular, predictable, and co-ordinated, the calendar ties them to overarching themes and events in Christian history, and so incorporates more or less mundane events into a grand-scale history. The third section considers the relationship between the Ethiopian calendar and the Saints of Orthodoxy, and then moves to a discussion of the temporal aspects of sacred hierarchy in the world, in particular the possibility that certain exceptional festivals may provide crucial context for understanding the sacred in the world for the rest of the year. This shows in turn that to try to understand Orthodox life in Zege abstracted from its calendrical variations would create serious distortions, because different attitudes to the sacred at

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<sup>12</sup> In some usage, *menfesawí* translates equally well as ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’, like the more usual *qiddus*. *Qiddus* refers usually to specific things that are considered holy – saints, the Bible, the sanctum of the church – while *menfesawí* refers more generally to the spiritual or sacred realm, or as an antonym of *alemawí*, worldly/mundane.

different times of year reflect on and contextualise each other, and thus render each other meaningful by reciprocal contrast.

## **The Calendar**

The Ethiopian calendar originates from the Coptic, although with different saints' days (Appleyard 2010: 135, Fritsch 2001: 21) and orientates itself around the date of the birth of Christ. Based on a calculation of 5500 years from Creation to Incarnation, it differs from the Gregorian calendar by seven or eight years, with the new Ethiopian year beginning on September 11 by Gregorian count, September 12 in a leap year (Aymero and Motovu 1970). The Ethiopian year 2000 began on Gregorian September 11 2007, and my fieldwork took place in the years 2000 and 2001. Each year is associated with an evangelist in a four-year cycle, so Ethiopian 2000 was a year of John, 2001 of Matthew. It is a ritual calendar, arranging the Liturgical progression, fasts, and festivals of the Orthodox Church, but is also the predominant form of time reckoning in most spheres of Ethiopian life, including among non-Christians. The modern Gregorian calendar is used in some bureaucratic and government settings but is not widely familiar.

It is useful to think of the calendar in Rappaport's terms of:

“liturgical orders...more or less invariant sequences of rituals that make up cycles and other series as well...they constitute orders in the sense of such phrases as ‘the moral order’ or ‘the economic order’ or ‘the natural order’ – more or less coherent domains within which generally commensurable processes are governed by common principles and rules. As such they represent and maintain enduring relations among the elements they include...Finally and most obviously, they are orders in that they are more or less fixed sequences of acts and utterances, following each other ‘in order’” (1999: 169).

The description allows for the ways in which calendars bind ritual orders to other aspects of life, especially the environmental and economic, as I argue the Ethiopian calendar does in Zege.

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an exhaustive description of the Ethiopian liturgical calendar, in which every day has a designated saint, sometimes several, and lectionaries indicate the appropriate liturgical readings for any given day (Fritsch 2001). But it is important to give an impression of the density of the calendar, and its texture: the way in which certain days are more widely known than others, and the movement between fasting and feasting, between monthly and annual festivals, and the celebration of local, national, and Biblical saints.

Ethiopia has used a seven-day week since early in the Christian era and has recognised both Saturday and Sunday as Sabbaths since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century reign of Zer'a Ya'iqob in recognition of both the Hebraic and Christian traditions (Kaplan n.d.). This reflects a general pattern of respect for and emphasis on the Hebraic/Old Testament aspects of Christian tradition. The importance of Ethiopia's links with the Old Testament is indicated by the former Emperors' claims to Solomonic descent (Crummey 1988) and, in everyday life, in the preservation of a number of the rules of Leviticus including those concerning the eating of pork and shellfish, and the postpartum rules for maternal ritual purity, discussed in the introduction.

The first temporal cycle to become obvious when you live in Zege is the weekly round of markets. Afaf is the market town for Zege peninsula and for a radius of ten miles or more in the surrounding countryside farmland. The marketplace provides a regular venue for plough farmers, coffee farmers, and traders to come together, trading staples, vegetables, livestock, coffee, textiles (woven or bought in), consumer goods like jerry cans, batteries, nails, handmade furniture and a range of other things. Afaf's health centre and pharmacies tend to open only on market days and will see a lot of people, and veterinary pharmaceuticals are major business, with three stores in Afaf all usually full of customers from the

farmlands on any market day. The numerous bars in Afaf do most of their business on market days serving food and drink: bottled beer and liquor in the upmarket cafes, *t'ella* and *araqi* in more intimate venues, usually the living room of somebody's home. Some bars have televisions playing pop music and, depending on the current finances of the landlords, one of the two larger bars may have satellite access to Premier League football via one of the Arab television stations. A football match guarantees good business if Arsenal or Manchester United are playing, and to a lesser extent Chelsea.

Market days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday unless a major festival falls on one of these days, in which case the preceding market day will be extra-busy in preparation. The contrast in Afaf between market and non-market days is striking. The town has two dusty main streets and a number of back alleys, and is home to around three thousand people. On market days, especially Saturdays, both streets and the market place will be full of people, of noise, and of the smell of livestock and of the butter that people, especially from the countryside, wear in their hair. On non-market, non-festival days, however, the town is very quiet indeed. Some stores will stay open, and young men chat idly in the streets, or in the *ch'at* houses. Plenty of the younger people will complain that nothing happens in Afaf. The quietness becomes more noticeable during Lent, when there will be little livestock trading in the market, while market days around festivals are particularly busy. Prices vary greatly too, with livestock prices as much as doubling in the run-up to Easter and Christmas. Weekly and yearly economic cycles, then, are far from independent of the religious calendar. This is perhaps not surprising, but it helps to develop the point I want to make about the integration of the religious calendar with material life in Zege.

The calendar consists of twelve thirty-day months and an intercalary month, *P'agumén*, of five days, six in a leap year (the year of Luke), which co-ordinate with the Gregorian Leap Years. The intercalary month has certain liminal properties, and is associated with *zar* spirit activities. In Zege, *P'agumén* is a time for purification in preparation for the new year. People wash all their clothes in Lake Tana, and on *P'agumén* 3, Raphael's day (two days before New Year), the

archangel is said to turn the rain, and the entire lake, into holy water, in which the whole town will bathe.

In the twelve full months, every day is dedicated to a holy figure or saint in a repeating fashion, so the twelfth of every month is the archangel Michael's, the 19<sup>th</sup> is Gabriel's, the 23<sup>rd</sup> St. George's, and so on (see Appendix). Some of these days, like that of the Apostle Thomas on the 26<sup>th</sup>, are little known and little celebrated, while others including the aforementioned are marked in most churches and known by everybody. In every church the *tabot*, the central ark, is consecrated to a holy figure, and so the church will always conduct the Liturgy on that figure's monthly day. In most parishes, all work in the fields is forbidden on these days, and the major monthly saints' days like Michael and George. Coffee farmers in Zege and plough farmers around Afaf adhere closely to these regulations, while traders in Afaf town do not; it will be seen that the Orthodox calendar has strong links with agricultural production, and with a tradition that associates Christianity with the plough.

There is no general rule on what days the Liturgy will be held in any particular church: every Sunday, every day of the Lenten Fast, and on the eve and day of every major festival are standard, but all other days will depend on the size of the church and its particular local history. Large churches with many priests are able to hold the Liturgy (*qiddasé*) every day, but smaller churches will restrict this to days of local significance, such as the particular patron saint's day of that church, plus a few major and widely recognised days like Trinity, Michael's, Gabriel's, and George's.

The temporal dimension of the Liturgy is significant in establishing, not only a semi-regular focus of religious observance, but also semi-regular performance of the Eucharist. Whenever the Liturgy is performed, every Sunday and on other days of significance, Christ emerges in the world of the senses, to be consumed by any who have maintained proper purity (c.f. Binns 2002: 40). The liturgical cycle thus establishes the basic pattern of sacred emergence in the world. Such recurrence is, as numerous theorists have noted, a crucial aspect of ritual in



general. Recurrence produces a sense of eternity and infinitude (Rappaport 1999: 187-89, 234-35). As Stephan Feuchtwang has pointed out to me: the fact that, no matter how many times you take the Eucharist, there is always more to eat, is a potent indicator of God's infinitude and hence incommensurability with humans (pers. comm.), and so the bread and wine become "a finite manifestation of the infinite" (Feuchtwang 2010: 60). This is one of the ways in which the Orthodox calendar ties human daily experience into a much broader existential sphere.

The intervals between rituals, however, are just as integral to the calendar as the events themselves. This is particularly so in Ethiopia given the importance of fasting periods (see Chapter 2). I will be arguing that to experience the passage of time in Zege is to experience movement between different kinds of days: feast days to fast days and back, from saints' days to relatively unmarked days, from dry season to rainy, and from market days to non-market days<sup>13</sup>. It is the movement and contrast between these kinds of days, in economic, seasonal and religious registers interlinked, that lends temporal life in Zege its particular texture and quality, and that defines relationships between humans and divinity. The liturgical cycle establishes a basic pattern of days when human-divine relations come to the fore.

In addition to the monthly saints' days, there are a large number of annual feasts, including one for each major saint, thirty-three for Mary, and nine for Christ. Again most churches will not celebrate all of these, but will have a major festival on the annual day of their dedicated saint. These festivals involve a feast in the churchyard, and the ark (*tabot*) being taken from its sanctuary and proceeding around the church. Similar to these feasts, but larger and celebrated throughout the country, are the feasts of Epiphany (*T'imqet*/Baptism, celebrated on *Tirr* 11-12/January 18-19) and The Exaltation of the Cross (*Mesqel*, Mekerem 17/September 27). These are major public feasts that share with the major

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<sup>13</sup> I have been influenced here by Geertz's famous essay on *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali* (1973) and by the discussion ensuing from it, especially in Bloch (1977) and Gell (1992: 71-83).

saints' days features of collective exuberance and liminality that I will discuss in the final part of this chapter.

Of the 33 Marian feasts, five have special importance: the falling-asleep (*Asteriyo, Tirr 21*), The Covenant of Mercy (*Kidane Mihret, Yekatit 16*), the Birth of Mary (*Ginbot Lideta, Ginbot 1*), the Consecration of her church at Philippi (*Qiddasé Béta, Sané 21*), and the Assumption (*Filseta, Nehasé 16*). Of these, the falling-asleep (bodily death) is the annual festival of Fure Maryam church in Afaf, which Kidane Mihret (Covenant of Mercy<sup>14</sup>) is the yearly festival of Ura Kidane Mihret monastery on the Peninsula. *Ginbot Lideta* differs from other festivals; it is a relatively private affair in which family and friends gather to eat together in celebration of Mary and make promises to bring supplies – ten *injera*, or a chicken, or a pitcher of homebrew beer – to the next year's *Ginbot Lideta*. In this way people promise to be present to one another in a year's time, and thus establish the obligation to maintain mutual relations of exchange and commensality. People build long-term loyalties to each other, but also build ties between their relationships with each other and their relationship with Mary, the benevolent protector. This deferred gift exchange is one of the ways in which divine or saintly agency and long-term social relations become intertwined.

Christmas (*Genna/Lidet*), Easter (*Fasika*), and New Year (*Addis Amet/Inkutataash*) complete the cycle of feasts. Compared to those mentioned previously, these are private rather than public feasts, marked by commensality within people's houses rather than public ritual display. Every kind of feast, though, is preceded by a liturgical service in church on the feast's eve (*wazéma*).

The cycle of feasts articulates with periods of fasting, which Ethiopian Orthodox Christians consider to be definitive of their calendar and of their religious life. There are seven major fasts including Lent and Advent (see appendix), although in general only priests follow all of these, with the laity sticking fastidiously to

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<sup>14</sup> *Kidane Mihret*, the Covenant of Mercy, commemorates a moment in Orthodox tradition in which Christ appears to Mary and promises to save all those who pray in her name.

the Lenten fast and perhaps certain others. In addition, every Wednesday and Friday are fasting days (see next Chapter). These are almost universally observed in Zege and elsewhere. The Lenten fast lasts 56 days, marking the forty days of Christ's desert fast, plus a week in commemoration of the Christian hero Hirkal<sup>15</sup>, and a week for the Passion, leading up to Easter itself (Aymro & Motovu 1970: 63). Colloquially, I have heard numerous explanations for the duration of Lent: among these being that it included ten days for the Emperor, that it added on the Wednesdays and Fridays that would be fasts in any case. A lack of general knowledge concerning the official reasons for the timing of the fasts is a common aspect of Ethiopian Orthodox society that I discuss in Chapter 2.

Paul Connerton describes Christian festivals as commemorations that build 'mythical identification' between participants and the Biblical past (1990: 63). It is useful to remember this when thinking about Ethiopian Orthodox Festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Saints' days tie Christians, in a repetitive and predictable way, with the birth and crucifixion of Christ and with the acts of the Saints in an unfolding enactment of holiness in the world. By taking part in Christian feasts people assent to the Christian Order of Things - in which the history of the world revolves around the sacrifice of Christ two thousand years ago - and in assenting they become a part of this order (Bloch 1986: 195, Rappaport 1999: 119-124). The calendar ties people to a historical order in a process described by Munn as "the construction of cultural governance through reaching into the body time of persons and coordinating it with values embedded in the 'world time' of a wider constructed universe of power" (Munn 1992: 109). In the Ethiopian case we even have some evidence that the Christianisation of the embodied experience of time was a deliberate product of the reforming Emperor Zer'a Ya'iqob in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, as Kaplan reports: "He [Zer'a Ya'iqob] demonstrated an intuitive understanding of the routine and habitual in bodily practice... we shall document the manner in which he sought to transform the Christian experience of time so that each week, month and year became imbued with Christian content" (Kaplan

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<sup>15</sup> Mahibere Kidusan website: [http://www.eotcmk.org/site-en/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=56&Itemid=1](http://www.eotcmk.org/site-en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=56&Itemid=1) accessed 13-12-2011.

n.d.). Kaplan describes the Emperor's attempts "to Christianize the calendar and transform Christianity from an external system of beliefs and practices to a civilization which ordered time and dictated the rhythm of the believers' lives" (ibid.), which he achieved in part by instituting the 33 annual feasts of Mary and by developing the monthly saints' days.

Both Gell (1992: 306-313) and Munn (1992: 109) emphasise how control of the calendar can serve the exercise and centralisation of power. The case of Zer'a Ya'iqob cited above shows how this has been that case at times in Imperial Ethiopia. It is beyond question that the Christian calendar serves to embed and reinforce the authority of the Orthodox Church, and it is important to remember that in the Orthodox view of things, all of this serves to indicate the ultimate power of God over all things. But as I indicate in the introduction and at length in Chapter 3, the relationship between divine power, religious authority, and secular power is not at all clear-cut.

It may be correct, then, to argue that the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar plays a part in embedding "traditional authority" (Bloch 1974), as long as we remember that it is the authority of God first and foremost. The clergy may gain vicarious authority through their association with Church ritual, but ultimately they too adopt a position of submission, much as Feuchtwang states, discussing Humphrey and Laidlaw: "I am sure Laidlaw and Humphrey are right in claiming that the performer submits her or his self to this [ritual] prescription and therefore disciplines or objectifies his or her self" (2010: 61). While priests, I argue, mediate the divine power with which they develop contact in ritual, their authority and power outside of a ritual context remains very limited (Hoben 1970: 216). The calendar plays its part in forming power structures, but cannot be understood simply as an instrument in the exercise of priestly power.

## **Production, the Environment, and the Calendar**

In this section I want to move beyond the co-ordination of bodies and the calendar to discuss how the calendar also integrates environment, climate, and production together into Christian history, so that the experience of time and place as intrinsically Christian becomes naturalised in daily life in Zege. I view the relationship of calendar and environment as a continuation of that between calendar and embodied living: as regulating, demarcating, co-ordinating and measuring the phenomenal world.

The sanctification of the lake and the rain on *P'agumén* 3, St. Raphael's day, is a good example of ties between the religious calendar and the religious geography of Zege. Tana is Ethiopia's largest lake and the dominant geographical feature of Zege, and looms correspondingly large in the religious imagination of the area. Once a friend upbraided me gently for crossing the path of two elderly women who were walking near the lake, saying, "Don't you know Zege culture?" In passing the women I had cut them off from the water, something one should never do, especially to a senior. Discussions about the level of the lake are common, particularly at the end of the dry season, as this allows people to gauge how the rains have been throughout the area. At night, however, the lake becomes the locus of threatening spiritual presence. I have often been told that people do not approach the lake at night, partly because it is dangerous and partly because anyone found to be doing so would be immediately suspected of sorcery, conducting illicit relations with spirits. In this part of Ethiopia the term *jinn* refers specifically to harmful water-dwelling spirits that certain sorcerers can manipulate. Just before New Year, by contrast, the entire lake becomes holy and so takes on the curative and restorative powers of any other holy water. It therefore becomes a focal point for the community in the run-up to New Year and its widespread symbolism of cleansing and renewal. Calendar and environment enmesh with each other with great local specificity.

The Ethiopian year is divided, both liturgically and colloquially, into dry (*bega*) and wet (*kramt*) seasons, with the wet season running from *Sané* 25 to *Meskerem* 25, or roughly July through September (Fritsch 2001: 74). This is more or less

exactly parallel to the climatic seasons, in which it rains heavily from June through mid-September, and then rarely if at all from January through May. The end of the liturgical wet season is not the New Year on *Meskerem* 1 but the eve of the festival of *Mesqel* on *Meskerem* 25; in practice both New Year and *Mesqel* have characteristics of harvest festivals and can be seen as marking the end of the rains. In any case, the cycle of very wet wet seasons and extremely arid dry seasons defines the tone and rhythm of life in Ethiopia<sup>16</sup>, and the liturgical year reflects this. So the Liturgy said during the rainy season speaks continually of rain, replenishment, and fertility:

“Alleluia (twice). The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: the hungry are satisfied. The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: the poor rejoice. The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: he made the *Senbet* (Sabbath) for man’s rest” (*Mezmur* chant *dems’e igerí lezinam*, sung in the first week of the rainy season - Fritsch 2001: 307).

These rain and fertility chants and readings continue throughout the rainy season until new year and the *Mesqel* festival, which are closely associated (Fritsch 2001: 304). *Mesqel*, the Exaltation of the Cross, has close parallels in non-Christian parts of Ethiopia and appears to be a Christian development of a pre-existing festival (Kaplan 2008). Fertility imagery abounds, particularly in the yellow *Mesqel* flower that symbolises the feast and its designation as the opening of the ‘Season of Flowers’ (Fritsch 2001: 304). The *Mesqel* ritual as practised now places huge emphasis on the concept and form of the cross and the new life brought about by the resurrection. It also draws analogies between the renewal brought by the rains and the spiritual renewal brought by the crucifixion (Kaplan 2008). I will describe the festival in more detail in the final part of this chapter; for now I simply want to point out how religious and environmental/seasonal

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<sup>16</sup> This is as true in cities as in agricultural areas, as the rainy season makes it hard to get around, and the end of the dry season brings almost daily powercuts, since the country runs mainly on hydroelectric power. At the New Year in September, the reservoirs are full again and reliable power returns, allowing offices to get back to full speed. So the end of the rains marks the productivity of cities as well as the countryside.

ideas of renewal and replenishment take shape together. This contrasts with the fact that the Great Fast takes place in the latter stages of the dry season, when the land is parched and stores are getting low. In this season, “The theme of God’s mercy and forgiveness, together with man’s effort to reach out to them... prevails” in the liturgy (Fritsch 2001:74).

So, to some extent, the seasonal progression of the year from hardship to surplus is mirrored by the calendrical progression of the Liturgy from penitence to celebration or from suffering to joy, a transformation that, I will argue, is at the heart of much of Ethiopian Orthodox practice. But there are also ways in which the calendar shapes production in Zege and in Ethiopia as a whole. For one thing, it is traditional in agricultural Christian communities that one does no work on holy days, including the Sabbath as well as any monthly saints’ days construed to be important. So the coffee farmers in Zege do no work on the days of Michael (12<sup>th</sup> of the month), Gabriel (19<sup>th</sup>), George (23<sup>rd</sup>) and some others. It has become quite common among urban Ethiopians to cite the number of holy days as being detrimental to Ethiopia’s development, and as indicating the backwardness of the peasantry. A friend of mine in the forest who was attempting to update coffee production expressed similar frustrations at having to work around the religious calendar, despite being himself a practising Christian. It seems likely that controversy surrounding the calendar will continue to grow along with debates about how Ethiopia should ‘modernise’, but it remains the main measure, along with weekly market cycles, by which rural and semi-rural Christians co-ordinate their lives.

Meanwhile, those who work in the town of Afaf, despite having close links to the countryside, see no problem in working on holy days. This may have something to do with a pervasive understanding of ‘work’ relating specifically to activity in the fields. Interviews with priests make it clear that what they see as expressly forbidden on holy days is digging the earth and cutting plants. Both of these activities are forbidden at all times on church land. This suggests, on the one hand, a deep association between Christians and work in the fields, and on the

other, a conception of the non-sacred nature of this work, whose justification comes at least in part from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life./ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field./ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3: 17-19).

In accordance with this, ploughing and harvesting are forbidden on church land, while they are the basis for life everywhere else, so a spatial separation is drawn between the world of work by the sweat of one’s brow, and the world of the sacred, which aspires to Edenic status but cannot support bodily life on its own because of the fall. In parallel to this, a temporal divide marks off days of worldly work from days of ‘spiritual work’ (*menfesawí sira*, described to me in exactly these terms as what one does on holy days). Zege’s special status as the home of the ancient monasteries is indicated and protected by a permanent injunction against ploughing on the peninsula – see Chapter 5 – with implied parallels between the Zege forest and Eden, but coffee-related labour still comes under the temporal rules concerning work, even though it does not have fully agricultural status.

Zege is unusual in Orthodox Ethiopia, however, in not having its principal harvest after the rains. Coffee ripens from mid-*Tirr* to *Yekatít*, late January through February, some three to four months after the New Year. Here the mutual interdependence of the Christian calendar and the seasonal climate is at its clearest: coffee harvesting happens only after *Timqet* (Epiphany) on *Tirr* 12/January 19, regardless of when the coffee ripens. For the most part coffee picking only lasts for a week after that. No picking happens before *T'imqet* partly because such is tradition, and partly because people are occupied with preparations for the festival and the celebration itself. After this, large numbers of farmers from the surrounding countryside head to the peninsula to pick coffee for a daily wage of 25-30 birr (USD 2.50-3.00) plus lunch. The landowning



families pay the wage, which is on an informal and ad hoc basis, usually to people they know. Young men from Afaf town also join in the wage labour, as do all male members of the landowning families and many females. Women also prepare food for the pickers. Many men who live outside Zege return for the picking season.

Picking is the consuming occupation of the peninsula and Afaf for the week that it takes place. The atmosphere during this time is cordial and commensal; it helps that the labour is not too arduous, even though it continues from dawn to dusk with short breaks for food. There is jocular competition among men as to who can pick most – there is a certain trick to picking beans quickly without damaging the stem and preventing future regrowth. It is sociable work, which allows for relaxed conversation and banter, as family and day workers move in a group across the land. Many farmers have their own land and are working just for extra income for the week, and young men are not expected to have property (we are talking largely of teenagers) so potential resentments and inequalities are mitigated and the general atmosphere is of collective co-operation. People speak of a tradition of helping with the work on each other's coffee land, and from what I can tell land is distributed fairly equitably between families in Zege, although there are certainly some wealth differentials. I have been unable to access official data on land tenure, but when plots become available they are leased by the local government by public auction at affordable prices<sup>17</sup>.

After the picking people bring the beans to their compounds and dry them in the sun for a week or more, before the women peel the husks away and store them in large sacks for the rest of the year. They keep some for family use, and sell the majority on local markets and in Bahir Dar. Since coffee plants do not require a great deal of maintenance, most of the wealth of Zege's land is harvested in this one week in January. For the rest of the year people engage in petty trade of fruits and vegetables and keep small numbers of sheep and chickens, and many work in the tourist industry in various capacities, providing guided tours and

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<sup>17</sup> Although not necessarily in equitable ways (Tihut 2009, Rahel 1999).

refreshments to the steady stream of foreign and Ethiopian tourists who visit the peninsula's monasteries.

The week-long picking season is not the optimum for coffee harvesting. The beans do not all ripen at once, but over a six-week period from mid-January to the end of February. General practice in Zege, however, is to harvest all beans in the week after *T'imqet*, regardless of their level of ripeness. This leads to a reduced quality of coffee, but is the only economical way to do it. This is largely because, one week after *T'imqet*, the day labourers from outside the Peninsula need to return to work in their fields. There simply is not more time to spare. Furthermore, it is extremely time-inefficient to comb over the same land multiple times, picking off only the ripe beans, and on local markets this would not lead to enough increase in price to justify the extra labour input. So the picking season is determined partially by the timing of religious festivals, partially by seasonal conditions in the peninsula and elsewhere, and by labour availability.

Some farmers in Zege maintain the hope that picking practices are changing. If it is possible to export coffee – if foreign buyers can be found and export permits attained – then farmers will be able to gain a much higher price, but only if coffee is picked at full ripeness over an extended picking season. There are people trying to achieve this on a co-operative level, although it remains unclear what results will come. What is clear is that certain European merchants have identified Zege's coffee of being of high quality, and various efforts are underway to increase quality and productivity. These efforts sometimes clash with local farmers' ideas of proper practice, particularly the importance of observing holy days.

I would suggest that prohibitions against working the fields and the coffee forest on holy days stem from the same sacred-profane opposition that excludes eating, sexuality, and childbirth from church grounds. Working the fields produces food and so, like eating, is part of the mundane flow of substance that is associated with decay and the fall. Prohibiting work on holy days, then, is analogous to

building walls around the church: it creates the discontinuity or separation that is distinctive of the sacred as a spatiotemporal state of being in the world. In the next section I investigate certain festivals that entail a temporary crossing of the spatial boundaries of the sacred. This is the testing ground of the spatial boundaries of the sacred and the profane; it also offers insight into the relationship between spatial and temporal boundaries that constitute the sacred.

### **Sacred Leakage: Saints' Days and Antistructure**

I have described how the Orthodox calendar integrates phenomenal, embodied, and emplaced experience within the grand time of the Orthodox cosmos. This involves various progressions or cycles: between feast and fast, suffering and joy, death and regeneration. I have argued that certain conflicts or paradoxes between the sacred life of relations with the divine, and mundane life of relations with people, find workable solutions or mediations in the temporal variation of these cycles. In this final section I describe certain festivals of exuberance that may be read as challenging or testing the boundaries between sacred and mundane realms.

The feasts of Epiphany (*T'imqet*) and the Exaltation of the Cross<sup>18</sup> (*Mesqel*), in contrast to Christmas and Easter, take place in public, profane space. These are celebrated across Ethiopia, with particular visibility in huge festivals in Addis Ababa. Celebrations take place predominantly in the streets and the market place, and each has a symbolic focal point: in *T'imqet*, the procession of the *tabot* outside the church and the mass 'baptism' of the crowd with holy water, and in *Mesqel* the giant bonfire in the shape of a cross which is erected in the middle of the town and then burnt. At the local level, the annual Saint's day of the parish church (the day of the saint to whom the church's *tabot* is consecrated) sees a similar kind of public festival, described by a friend as "a little *T'imqet*". Crucially,

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<sup>18</sup> Technically distinct from, although connected to, the celebration called "The Finding of the True Cross", which is only marked in the liturgy, not by public celebration. Both mark the discovery of the true cross by St. Helena of Constantinople in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century.

like *T'imqet*, these also involve procession of the *tabot* and symbolic baptism with holy water.

I treat these events together because all share certain aspects of public spectacle, and a dynamic that we might describe as liminal: sacred things cross sacred boundaries, and a period of disorder ensues. These festivals, especially *T'imqet* and *Mesqel*, are significant focal points of the calendar year, which people anticipate keenly. By their contrast with standards prevailing for the rest of the year, they provide important contrast and perspective on that status quo. These are spikes in the temporal variance of the Ethiopian calendar, especially as it concerns local community and local practice. I want to argue for a relationship between two aspects of these festivals: Orthodox ritual performed outside on profane space, and an ensuing night of heavy drinking, exuberance, and violence. I describe this connection as due to “sacred leakage”: a ritual crossing of the sacred into profane space.

*T'imqet* marks the Baptism of Jesus and takes place on *Tirr* 11, January 19. In practice, the festival combines with St. Michael's day on *Tirr* 12, and celebrations start on the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup>, so the whole festival lasts for two and a half days and two nights. The first night is a candlelit vigil and procession of the *tabots* (Figs. 1-3). This is quite striking as most of Afaf town participates and there is little ambient light; once the sun sets all that can be seen are hundreds of floating flames. As Abebe said, *mebrat mett'a*, ‘The light has come’ (Fig. 3). From the vigil, teenagers and young men filter away into the bars, and the night becomes one of raucous drinking and fighting. I saw several arrests and a number of moderately serious fights. The main argument of this last section of the chapter will be that there is a connection between the fighting on *T'imqet* eve and the sacred *tabots* spending the night outside of church ground. This discussion offers key insights into how sanctity, time, and space relate in Zege. I will discuss the *tabots* first, and then the fighting.

Every church has a *tabot* or ark, generally described as a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, *tabote s'ion* (Binns 2002: 34, Hunt 2010: 412). The *tabot* is the altar

on which the Eucharist is prepared, and resides in the central sanctuary of the church, the Holy of Holies, *qidduse qiddusan* (see Fig. 13). This area is forbidden to all but clergy and deacons, and no lay person is ever permitted to see or touch the *tabot*. The *tabot* leaves this sanctuary only on *T'imqet* and on the annual feast of the saint to whom the *tabot* is consecrated; these feasts resemble *t'imqet* celebrations quite closely. At these times the *tabot* is always covered by brocaded cloth and carried by a deacon or a monk, because of their virginity. It is, then, the epitome of sacred restriction, and inhabits the innermost sanctum of the church.

On a saint's feast, the ark will leave the church in the late morning after the Liturgy and proceed around the outer walls of the church, surrounded by chanting clergy and followed by the congregation in celebratory mood. They take the ark to a body of water – Lake T'ana, in Zege and lay it to rest. The congregants assemble and many groups dance, play drums, and sing upbeat Amharic hymns, as the clergy perform the *aqwaqwam* chant around the ark and a monk says prayers while holding his cross over the body of water, rendering it holy. The priests then serve out this water to all comers, many of whom will take it away in bottles or jerry cans for the sick, infirm, and housebound. The priests also toss and splash the holy water over the entire congregation. Around this time, a gang of young men (*fendata*) coalesces and begins to charge around the area, often ramming people aside and waving their wooden staffs in the air. The rest of the crowd tends to ignore this or, if barged into, show annoyance but do not reprimand the young men. After the aspersion with holy water, the clergy carries the *tabot* back into the church, and the congregation gathers for a feast in the churchyard, supplied by contributions from various local donors, who gain social honour and favours from the commemorated saint for their generosity (For more on human-saint reciprocity, see Chapter 7). Both the potency of the holy water that people collect on these days, and the rambunctious actions of the young men are, I suggest, due to the *tabot's* unusual proximity.

The daytime celebration of *T'imqet*, *Tirr* 11, the day which comes after the candlelit vigil, resembles the above description quite closely, although *T'imqet* is

a larger festival and has many other things going on: it is a good time to find a wife (always described to me with the male as the agentive partner), especially if one wants to emphasise one's traditionality. While marriage has moved towards a western-style model of individual choice, both younger and older men in Zege have taken the time to explain to me the traditional model, whereby a man who wishes to marry a woman appoints three elders to visit her family and negotiate the union. This still happens on occasion, and *T'imqet* is traditionally the best time to do it. Women still put a great deal of effort into dressing up for *T'imqet*, and it remains a good opportunity for romance, to judge by the whispers I heard around Afaf town at this time.

One difference is that on *T'imqet* itself the aspersion with water is more clearly equated with the baptism of Christ. Another is that the *tabots* (or their replicas – see below) have spent the previous night outside the church, and that two or three *tabots* from different churches are kept together for the night, a sort of gathering of sacred power. If the ark is consecrated to Michael, it does not spend the first night outside, but is brought out on the morning of *T'imqet*, and returns on the next day, St. Michael's, *Tirr* 12, so that the festival ends with a final procession (Fig. 6). In Zege, the *tabot* of Michael comes from Wanjeta Mikaél church, about two miles inland, so the final procession returning the *tabot* to its home brings a large part of Zege's population out into the surrounding farmland. Once the *tabot* has returned, people finally begin to disperse and life returns to normal. Most people are exhausted by this time, after two and a half days of festivities.

When the *tabots* spend the night outside, they are kept in a tent under armed guard – by local police, in Zege's case. A second tent is set up for the vigil, filled mainly with elderly people, who spend the night there so as to be close to and pay respects to the *tabot*. Some younger and stronger people, if particularly devout, will spend the night directly outside the ark's tent. The security of the arks is a constant concern. They are often rumoured to contain large amounts of gold, and I have heard stories of *tabots* being stolen. One involves the would-be perpetrator found frozen to the spot in the act of the theft, struck immobile by

God's wrath. Of course, the secrecy which surrounds the *tabot* means that most people cannot know whether it contains valuable material; nonetheless concerns about theft are pressing, even though I am fairly sure nobody I know would even consider such sacrilege. I am told that some of the arks in Zege do not actually spend the night outside, that a replica is used and then the real ark brought out for the blessing of the water. Since this does not explain the presence of armed police, I am not sure to what extent this is true.

Outside the tent where the *tabotat* are kept under guard stands a cross with a lightbulb hanging from its apex (Fig. 5). The cross is surrounded by fencing, as if it were a model of the inner sanctum from which the *tabot* has come. The cross, the light (symbolising Epiphany) and the boundary mark something like a figurative church (a bounded sacred space) on non-sacred ground. As will shortly be seen, similar formations occur in the other major liminal festival of the Orthodox year, *Mesqel*.

To summarise: the *tabot* only leaves the Holy of Holies on the annual saint's day of that church and on *T'imqet*. On the saint's day it leaves for the morning, and on *T'imqet* it spends the night outside in proximity to *tabotat* (pl.) from other churches. There is always a crowd of people around it, and a ceremony in which the crowd is splashed with holy water. At each occasion, there are intimations of violence, either in the groups of young men charging around with their sticks, or in the outbreaks of drinking and violence on *T'imqet* eve. I have not heard an exegetical explanation of why the *tabot* leaves the church except that it is tradition, but I understand the practice as follows: the *tabot* is the most sacred object in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and as such its purity must be protected. Accordingly only the ordained, and virginal deacons, are allowed to see it; no woman may see or touch it. Observation of Ethiopian Orthodox practice more generally, as I try to show throughout this thesis, shows a pattern of attempting to maintain boundaries between the sacred and the stuff of human continuity in the world: bodily fluids, food, blood, sexuality. It is true that such things defile the sacred, but it is equally true that the sacred is a serious danger to the living (even after Mehal Zege Giyorgis church had burned down, women

were warned from stepping where the Holy of Holies had stood, for fear of their safety). As Douglas says, "Ritual purity is a kind of two-way protection, a holy thing is protected from profanation, the profane thing is protected from holiness" (Douglas 1999: 11, see also Douglas 1996). The secrecy and mystery of the *tabot* are a part of its power, and are necessary because it is a dangerous item.

However, if the *tabot* were to remain secluded at all times, its status would be quite different. It might retain some mythical authority among lay people, but this would be an authority with which they had no contact. In practice, however, the sacred authority of the *tabot* is enhanced by its occasional, fleeting accessibility. The *tabot* leaves the church and people can be close to it, can see its shape under its shroud, and can receive the blessing of the holy water created in the *tabot's* proximity. The boundedness and the aloofness of the sacred – even of Orthodoxy's most sacred material thing - do not, therefore, amount to a complete separation from public access. Arguably, were the ark never to emerge to public presence it would be something moribund, without influence.

The crossing of spatial boundaries also means that rules of bodily purity do not apply: unlike the Eucharist, people who receive blessing from the *tabot* are outside the church and not subject to stringent purity requirements. And so in this moment the boundaries of the sacred are partially removed. Exuberant celebration ensues but so, to varying degrees, does physical violence. I read this violence as an indexical demonstration of the chaotic results of mixing the sacred, *menfesawí*, and the worldly, *alemawí*. It is as if the priests, by leaving the ark outside for a night and allowing people to see what ensues, give tacit demonstration of the purpose of the sacred hierarchy and their guardianship of the *tabot*: to maintain order in the world.

There is one more festival to describe before I draw together this analysis of the crossing of sacred boundaries. This is *Mesqel*, the Exaltation of the Cross. Like *T'imqet* and the saints' days, a large part of this ritual takes place outside the church, and like *T'imqet* a chaotic night follows, although this time there is no



*tabot* involved. The bulk of the *Mesqel* celebrations, two weeks after New Year, take place on the eve of *Mesqel* itself, i.e. before the Liturgy. During the day townspeople build a bonfire, the *demera*, in the marketplace, at the crossroads of Afaf's two main streets, with a wooden cross rising some five metres from its centre, decorated with yellow flowers called *Mesqel* flowers and associated only with this occasion. Near the cross, the clergy and *debtera* (unordained chanters) form a wide circle around four drums arranged in a cruciform on the ground. A crowd begins to gather and at around four p.m. groups of children and youths arrive, some from as far as the end of the Peninsula and inland from Wanjeta. The children wear paper crowns bearing Bible citations referring to the Cross<sup>19</sup>, or the words "The word of the Cross is the power of God!!!" (*yemesqel qal yigzi'abhér hayl new!!!*). The children dance and sing Amharic hymns, and then Abba S'om gives a long sermon over a microphone (sometimes competing with the call to prayer from the Afaf Mosque). The sermon describes at length the significance of the symbolism of the cross, and tells the story of the finding of the cross by Queen Helena. Destaw, a former deacon standing in the crowd, tells me that part of the purpose of *Mesqel* is to ensure that Orthodoxy is passed on to the next generation, and hence the sermon and the educational crowns. It is my understanding that this didactic aspect of the festival is a comparatively recent development.

After the sermon the clergy and *debtera* begin to chant the *Aqwaqwam* votive prayers, moving from a slow lament to faster singing and dancing as deacons beat the drums. By this time a large crowd has assembled around the circle of clergy, with the more devout closer to the centre often joining in the chanting, and more casual onlookers further out. It occurred to me during the ritual that this gathering in the town centre, with its concentric circles (priests, the more devout, the less devout) around the cross very much resembles the layout of a church, transposed into secular space. The *Mesqel* ritual is not a true Liturgy – there is no Eucharist – but I do think there is special significance to performing

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<sup>19</sup> I noted Gal. 3.1 "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was crucified" and Matt. 16.24, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

church-like ritual, like a scale model of the Liturgy, in the marketplace where people usually buy and sell livestock.

The clerical ritual draws to a close at around six pm, as the sun is setting<sup>20</sup>, and the priests simply walk away, up the path leading out of town to their houses. They do not set light to the bonfire, as I had expected, and people disperse to their homes, and the men to the bars of Afaf. The local boys and teenagers gather together with a drum and run from house to house, and barge inside singing riotous religious songs until the inhabitants pay them to go away. A few people seem to enjoy it, but the police are soon out in large numbers to try and provide some restraint, although they do not attempt to stop the house invasions. The boys then gather in the bars and begin drinking. A good number of these are youngish teenagers whom I have never seen drink alcohol at any other time. Many older men are out as well, drinking beer, some chewing *ch'at*, listening to pop songs on the radio at high volume, or playing drums and making their own music. The boys fight with their wooden *dula* staffs, and while most of this falls in the category of play-fighting, some blood is drawn, and some fights get out of hand. One boy of about fifteen whom I knew to be fairly amiable was making lewd and inept sexual advances on the serving women at the bars, although nobody took this very seriously. Within a couple of hours most of the inexperienced drinkers have passed out, leaving the older men who continue to drink, chew and make music. On one occasion I saw a family move an older woman, bed and all, away from the house across from the bar and to another, quieter area of town. This is consistent with a pattern of people being disturbed by the chaos caused by young men, but not making any attempt to oppose it.

All the while, quieter gatherings are taking place throughout the town. Many households build their own *demera* cross-bonfires in their courtyards, where

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<sup>20</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox ritual displays a striking sensitivity to times of day, which are quite predictable this close to the Equator. So the *Mesqel* ritual finishes at sunset, while Christenings are timed so as to start in darkness in the western part of the churchyard, so that just as the ritual reaches the point of Baptism, the sun rises and casts gentle light directly on the mother and baby. I found the aesthetic effect in both cases quite palpable.

younger women, and younger men who are not riotously inclined, stay up through the night talking, eating and drinking. When the *demera* are burned, beginning from about four in the morning, many will choose to attend the burning of their private bonfire rather than the one in the centre of town. As the bonfire burns the cross falls, and if it falls to the east it means good luck for the coming year, while the west is bad luck. The small bonfires represent family fortunes, and the central *demera* those of the town as a whole.

On the occasion I saw it, the burning of the main Afaf *demera* was a distinct anticlimax. The structure had been the focus of the ritual celebrations that evening, and dominated the town. And yet, in the small hours of the morning, perhaps ten people gathered around and set light to the *demera*. Everyone was drunk, and one man lit a cigarette off the bonfire – smoking is generally frowned on in Orthodoxy, and absolutely forbidden on sacred ground. We sat for a while and talked and watched the fire, and people came and went, but never that many, as most young people were with their own small *demera*, and most older people were asleep. Eventually the great cross fell to the southwest, to general groans; somebody told me that it had fallen that way the previous year, presaging the massive increases in food prices that Zege experienced as part of the world food crisis of 2008. Abebe got up, seized the cross, and dragged it around to the east, saying, ‘Nobody will know’. Soon after this the sun rose, and people who had been sleeping rose and came to the burnt *demera* to smear its ashes in a cross on their face, before proceeding to church, and order was restored.

I have asked many people about the significance of burning the cross, and why it happened in the middle of the night, whereas in Addis Ababa the *demera* was lit by priests, at dusk<sup>21</sup>. Only Abba S’om has been able to give me an answer; as I argue in Chapter 2, most participants in most Orthodox ritual act not with an explanation in mind, but in an attitude of deference to the priests. He told me that the point was not to destroy the cross but to ‘illuminate’ it (*mabrat*). He told me that the wooden cross was merely a ‘sign’ (*millikit* – sign, representation,

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<sup>21</sup> For a description of the celebration of the *T'imqet* and *Mesqel* rituals in Addis Ababa see Walelign 2007.

resemblance) of the True Cross. If you destroy a photograph of me, he told me, I will come to no harm, and likewise burning the cross, or perhaps losing the cross that you wear as a necklace, has no effect on the signified. This is an instructive reminder that for all that it embraces materiality Orthodoxy still adheres to distinctions between matter and spirit<sup>22</sup>. However, this cannot explain away the symbolic weight of the ritual: its chaos, its violence, and the apparently disrespectful and anticlimactic manner in which the town *demera* was burned. A sign of the potential discomfort in this ritual is that the main *demera* in Addis, standing in the central square of the town, which is even called *Mesqel* Square, is not burned in this way. The ceremony is televised across Ethiopia and the burning happens at dusk, conducted by a priest, and accompanied by sermons about Ethiopia's Christian history<sup>23</sup>. As far as I can establish, this is a sanitised version of the ritual because of its nature as a public-political focal point and a national display: the participatory aspect has been extracted, and it has become a spectacle

I do not think it is quite correct to say that the burning of the *demera* signifies anti-Christian rebellion, quite, although there were times when I felt this way. As Bloch says, when people enter ritual in a state of deference, it may be incorrect to seek interpretations at all (Bloch 2005c: 136). Rather as I argue in Chapter 2, the displacement between lay people and clergy produces interpretive space where action is not immediately accompanied by exegesis. But without superimposing a 'reading' of the ritual, we can say that *Mesqel* allows certain young men to act out an image of chaos, anti-social behaviour, and disobedience. It also, perhaps, demonstrates what happens when the sacred is brought into the town: if you leave the cross in the marketplace, it gets burned down. The next morning, the faithful carry the ashes of the cross, on their foreheads, back into the church proper, and attend the Liturgy in the proper way. The whole ritual drama, then,

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<sup>22</sup> To what extent these distinctions are sustainable is a pertinent question for the anthropology of Christianity as a whole. One could well argue that Orthodoxy takes a more accepting attitude towards the materiality of symbolic form than certain traditions of Protestantism have: Abba S'om's comment shows that this need not threaten the notion of a sacred realm beyond the material.

<sup>23</sup> Although some form of the *Mesqel* festival almost certainly emerges from non-Christian origins (Walelign 2007: 62-67).

tests the limits of sacred space, and so describes and delimits them all the more strongly: sacred power belongs within church walls.

I am arguing that the emergence of the sacred from the confinement of its usual boundaries brings outbursts of violence, and some further ethnographic material will support the idea of a causal linkage. I have said that on *Mesqel* eve I thought most of the violence was more play than real, but that it sometimes spilled out of control. As in many cases, it is very difficult to distinguish ritual fighting from out-and-out violence. On reflection I do not think it is possible or wise to separate the symbolic or performative aspects of fighting, from the instrumental intent to do physical harm. Both are simultaneous parts of fighting. Ethiopian men play-fight and wrestle all the time, and sometimes fight more seriously, but never with such intensity as at *Mesqel* or *T'imqet*. Alcohol plays a part in this, but the fact that so many young men drink on these nights and not other nights still needs to be explained. The drinking goes along with an entrenched expectation that feasting leads to fighting, as in the proverb *saydeggis, ayt'allam*, "When you do not feast, you do not fight". This plays into a moral discourse about the dangers of repletion and the virtue of fasting (Levine 1965: 85). *Mesqel* and *T'imqet* are celebrations, and most everyone looks forward to and enjoys them, but celebration and violence are closely associated in theory and in practice. This combines also with the resigned attitude shown by non-participants towards violence at these times, showing an acceptance and an expectation that men will behave in this way.

All of this helps to channel any aggressive urges towards the feast nights. One *T'imqet* my friend Gétacchew, a man in his thirties, explained this to me by lamenting recent changes in society: previously, when you had a fight with someone, you would come to them the next morning and say, sorry, I was drunk, and that would be the end of it. Now, he said, the police arrest people and put them in jail for the night, and people no longer police themselves. Indeed that very night several men were taken to jail for fighting. In one case, a teenager asked me for a cigarette. I refused, and he said something insulting, whereupon a friend of mine leaped forward and headbutted the boy, drawing blood from his

own forehead and knocking out one of the boy's teeth. The police did not become involved in this case, as the other people present smoothed the event over. Nobody was really shocked, and there were a number of other fights that night, but I am sure that particular friend would not have responded so violently on another night. Equally I am fairly sure that the younger boy would not have insulted me quite so openly at any other time.

I have shown that the fighting occurs 1) when the *tabots* are spending the night out of the church, and 2) when the *demera* cross stands in the marketplace. I think that the direct cause of the violence is the expectation of violence itself (in contrast with the self-restraint enjoined by periods of fasting), the free availability of drink, and the permissive attitude adopted at these times. But I suggest that these expectations are linked in each case to the sense of a ritual unfinished, and the sacred unbound. Parallel to the van Gennepian model of ritual (1960), *T'imqet* and *Mesqel* contain a phase of opening the boundaries of the sacred (by bringing the *tabot* outside or performing ritual on secular ground), an intermediary liminal phase, and a period of closure as the sacred returns within the church walls. The periods of violence occupy the liminal period, in which the boundaries of the sacred are open.

I am convinced that these festivals play a key part in making sacred power, especially that which resides in the *tabot*, meaningful in Zege. These moments of proximity to power, and these episodes of boundary-crossing, allow people to perceive the boundaries of the sacred and their reasons for existing. The problem of the presence of the God in the sensory world, variously identified by Engelke (2007: 12) and Cannell (2006: 14-15), finds answer in Ethiopian Orthodoxy through hierarchy and mediation by saints and clergy, as I argue throughout this thesis (see especially Chapter 3). But the presence of the sacred in the world has also a temporal dimension which it has been the purpose of this chapter to describe. This involves tying bodily, experiential, seasonal, and lunar/solar temporalities into the overarching narrative of Christianity, as discussed in the first parts of this chapter. It also involves spatio-temporal movement, as sacred power emerges from and then withdraws within its

geographical boundaries. Recurring, temporary modes of existence, as at the eves of *T'imqet* and *Mesqel*, but also in the oscillation between fasting and feasting, the maintenance of purity in church and its relaxation in town, are definitive of human-divine relations in Zege, and it is through context and contrast between different attitudes toward the sacred at different times that people come to experience and understand being Christian.

## Chapter 2

### **Fasting and Consumption: Commensality, Hierarchy, and the Stuff of Relationships**

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The overarching argument of this thesis – that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is built on counterposed dynamics of hierarchy and commensality and on ritual divisions between sacred and profane – places the Christians I work with firmly on one side of a debate about ritualism and faith, formalism and sincerity, outward performance and inner states, that many have identified as crucial to the development of the modern world (Keane 2007: 203-222, Taylor 2007: 146-176, Douglas 2003 [1970]: 1-21). Controversies of anti-ritualism are not limited to Christian history (see Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994 for an account of similar disputes in Jainism), but erupted most famously and consequentially in the European Reformation. In the context of the global success of Protestantism, and of the post-Communist spread of Protestant Churches into erstwhile Orthodox strongholds, it is worth remembering that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church itself considers this debate to be very much alive, and its positions on sacraments in particular are expressly defined in contrast to Protestant thought. It is not that inner feeling or whatever else one counterposes to ritual is unimportant, but that ritual practice takes primacy because, as I have argued, all agency is properly God's, and therefore salvation depends less on the inner state of the individual than on the cultivation of the correct conditions for God's mercy to become manifest. These conditions are premised on sanctity and ritual purity.

At the ethnographic level, people in Zege for the most part show little interest in matters of creed or doctrine. When people wanted to know if I was a Christian, they never asked me what I believed; they asked, "Do you fast?" (*s'ommiñña neh?*) Fasting is necessary and, it sometimes seems, sufficient to Orthodox Christian identity. The importance of this point can hardly be overstated if we are to understand Ethiopian Orthodoxy or life in Zege. I will show that fasting is constitutive of basic social relationships and even of daily experience in Zege,



shaping the religious and economic life of the area and the country, and forming the centrepiece of many people's projects of ethical self-formation. Feasting is a major part of the dynamics of fasting, as I shall show, but it is by fasting that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians tend to define themselves. This means that Ethiopian Orthodoxy in Zege is basically relational in character, defined in the main by with whom one shares food and when.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church recognises seven major fasts (see appendix), although only the clergy are expected to keep all of these. For the laity, what fasts one keeps is largely a matter of "conscience and reputation" (Ephraim 1995: 338), although the 56-day Lenten fast and the three-day Fast of Nineveh are mandatory. In addition, every Wednesday and Friday is a fasting day, in commemoration of the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ, although few people are aware of this reasoning. What 'fasting' entails precisely is context- and conscience-dependent: at a minimum, you do not consume any animal products on a fasting day. Many people take this further by taking no food or water until noon, or until the Liturgy is finished: 3pm on weekdays, 9am on weekends<sup>24</sup>. Priests and those who attend the Liturgy must fast completely until the service is finished.

The fasts are laden with symbolic content, as I shall describe in this chapter. Each relates to a particular event in Biblical history, with the Lenten fast and its culmination in the Easter feast being the archetype and centrepiece of the fasting and feasting year. However, many people are very often not aware of the official reasons or historical connotations of why they are fasting, or have their own separate understandings of what they are doing. This fact renders a straightforward symbolic reading of fasting problematic: fasting practice, I argue, is not principally communicative in any linguistic sense. I will argue that Christians in Zege construe their fasting as efficacious, transformative action, suggesting that we analyse the practice as practice rather than solely as

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<sup>24</sup> It is a historical peculiarity of Ethiopian Orthodox that both Saturday and Sunday are treated as Sabbaths, and have been so since Zer'a Ya'iqob (Kaplan n.d.). This fact is often cited as displaying the continuity between Old and New Testament in Ethiopian Orthodoxy (e.g. Binns 2002: 34).

communication. Yet it is still loaded with meaning, in the sense of contextual significance and performative value, even if the performers are not aware of it. This separation of the meaning of the act from the intention or understanding of the performer is exactly that which has been argued to be distinctive of ritual action (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, Bloch 2005c), and I will be arguing that understanding fasting as ritual practice is necessary to a valid account of its importance in Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

My analysis of fasting and feasting in Zege as ritual or ritualized practice will concentrate on two aspects of fasting practice: the way in which fasting and feasting shape the experience of time, and the ways in which fasting and feasting create relationships or boundaries among people, and between people and the divine. I have argued in my introduction that sacred signs are most meaningful for the connections they make between social actors, and I will now show that the same holds true for the 'meaning' of fasting and feasting. That is, the significance of fasting and feasting is principally as enactments of social connection and disconnection, with the term 'social' understood in its broadest possible sense, encompassing the whole range of human and non-human agents.

### **Fasting as Ritual Practice**

Humphrey and Laidlaw have critiqued the assumption that the concept of 'ritual' applies solely to a category of events like grand ceremonies or rites of passage (1994: 65-67). Ritual, they argue, describes a mode of action that is present at these events but also in other spheres of life. This mode of action is defined by the 'ritual commitment', the voluntary deferral by the performer of the intentional aspect of action. That is, what make an action ritual is the voluntary commitment to an action that is 'non-intentional', 'prescribed', 'archetypal', and 'apprehensible' – that is, action that due to its formal and prescribed character comes to appear as objective and independent of the actor, and as stemming from a higher authority (1994: 88-89). If ritual events for Bloch are "orgies of conscious deference" (Bloch 2005c: 136), then ritualised practices like fasting

are the individual acts of deference that extend the ritual dimension into the everyday.

Rappaport's definition of ritual can also fully comprehend Ethiopian Orthodox fasting: "I take the term 'ritual' to denote *the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*" (1999: 24, emphasis in original). It is valuable to remember that Ethiopian fasting, as well as being prescribed by people other than those who fast, is regular and recurrent, and so, like the calendrical rituals described in Chapter 1, plays a major part in the construction of temporal orders (see Rappaport 1999: 169-215). I shall argue, moreover, that fasting goes further than other rituals in shaping the experience of time; both because of the frequency and long duration of the fasts, and because of the level at which fasting operates, the quotidian level of simple sociality and bodily sustenance. As such, fasting imbues a Christian framework into daily experience – what could be described as an 'immanent Christianity' (c.f. Aspen 2001: 86).

The importance of Humphrey and Laidlaw's account of ritualization for the study of Ethiopian fasting is twofold. First, it provides a model whereby an action (or non-action, in the case of abstinence) may be meaningful without that meaning being apparent or important to the actors. This in turn helps to remind us that, while practical aspects of ritual action and fasting are foremost in Orthodox Christian lives, these actions are not without their doctrinal and exegetical elements. Rather, doctrinal knowledge is the domain of the priesthood in a religious division of labour that I describe further in the next chapter. Second, by releasing ritual from the bounds of the event, it allows us to see the great ritual feasts of Easter and Christmas as connected to and contingent upon the ritual fasts that make up much of the rest of the year.

Fasting may appear, depending on context, as a decisive action – the specific and active refusal of an offer of food – or as a general state of abstinence. Fasting is in effect even while the actor is not doing or asserting anything in particular, for as long as she does not break the fast (c.f. Lambek 1992: 252). This quality of being

both a decisive action and a general state is partly what makes fasting such a potent institution for the shaping of quotidian time and experience, as the next section discusses.

### **Fasting and Time**

Treating fasting as ritual practice and liturgical order points us towards Rappaport's account of how ritual 'makes' time: punctuating apparently homogenous duration, demarcating periods and intervals, establishing orders of succession and regularity, and differentiating ritual from non-ritual time (1999: 169-215). In particular, I want to point out how qualitatively different fasting days are from non-fasting (not to mention full feast days, which I will discuss after the details of fasting have been established, which is how feasts occur in the liturgical order). For simplicity's sake I will concentrate on the Lenten fast, when these distinctions are most pronounced. In many ways Lent with its build-up to Easter (*Fasika*) is the archetypal fast from which other fasting occasions take their shape; note that the Wednesday and Friday fasts are, like Easter, based on the events of Good Friday. The metonymic, iconic, and indexical correlation between fasting: feasting and crucifixion: resurrection is an archetypal pattern, as shall become clear, and marks Easter as the focal point of the Ethiopian liturgical year. The Lenten fast builds and intensifies this focus to a point of maximum tension, which breaks in the celebrations and the feast of Easter Sunday.

The Lenten fast brings about an economic slowdown which is significant even in cosmopolitan Addis Ababa, where the numerous butcher-restaurants will close everywhere but one particular street, and many places will cease serving meat. It dictates the economic life of Afaf town and the Zege Peninsula, since no meat or eggs can be sold and people are generally eating less, while Easter weekend itself entails a frenzy of trade in which prices for chickens and sheep will double or triple. In Afaf a quietus begins to pervade the whole of life. In the middle of my first Lent, I commented to Abebe that I was feeling fairly low (*debbereñ*) and that nothing seemed to be happening. He replied instantly, *s'om new*, it is the fast, and

told me that everybody feels this way. Many people were quite simply tired. One wealthy friend did have a sheep privately killed and turned into stew; this was done in extreme secrecy, and is the only time I have witnessed the Lenten fast broken in Zege. At this time it would become increasingly difficult to interview the normally affable priests, as they would frequently be asleep, as their fasts entailing such long periods of no food or water on a daily basis, while their liturgical duties were increased. Several priests told me at these times that they found the fast extremely difficult and tiring, although emphasising at the same time that it was a good and desirable thing, even a healing and regenerating endeavour. This state of affairs lasts for eight weeks, and intensifies over the final week leading up to Easter

The fast dominates also the soundscape of the town and the forest. No drums are played in Church during the fast, even during funerals, and only the lament-style chants are sung over the megaphones that provide so much of the ambient sound anywhere in hearing distance of a Church, which in Zege means most places. In Afaf and Bahir Dar particular kinds of hymns, played on cassette, suddenly become ubiquitous, with their slow, arrhythmic bass harp. On the radio there is an increase in religious programming, especially detailing the Easter story. These programs are recited in a specific, deliberate and sombre tone of voice, which makes them instantly distinguishable from, say, news programmes. The usually-ubiquitous pop music is heard much less frequently, since many people feel it is inappropriate to the fast. In Zege, by the start of Lent it has generally not rained for some three or four months, and will not do so again until a month or so after Easter. Livestock become thin and the grass throughout Amhara region fades to a monotonous golden brown.

No marriages are permitted in the great fast, or on any other fasting day, though certain exceptions may be possible in emergencies. Weddings are feasts, so perhaps their incompatibility with fasts is obvious, but it serves to illustrate nonetheless the division between times of celebration, reproduction, and

interpersonal connection; and those of restraint and isolation<sup>25</sup>. Weddings involve not just sexual reproduction, but also the related abundance of food, drink, and dancing that accompanies the ceremony. The period before Easter by contrast carries associations of perdition, fallenness, and suffering; the period after with salvation and hence, life.

Any annual saint's day that happens to fall on a fasting day will also be affected. If it is a day not in the Lenten fast, it may simply be that the ensuing feast (*zikkir*) in the saint's name will contain no meat. But if the day falls in the Lenten fast, then it will have quite a different tenor to usual saints' days. This was the case at the annual festival of *Kidane Mihret* (Covenant of Mercy) at Ura monastery in 2008/2001 E.C. Here there was no blessing of the crowds with holy water; no groups of rambunctious young men with sticks barging into people; no great feast and no evening of drinking (see previous chapter). The priests carried the *tabot* out of its sanctuary but, unlike the average saint's day, it did not leave the church compound. Usually it would be carried to the banks of the lake, to bless the water that would then be dispersed over the crowd. But on this fasting day, the *tabot* circled the church building and returned inside. The Liturgy was held as normal and, while there were a large number of people gathered there, no great festival ensued, no drinking, and no violence, nor even its suggestion. This supports my interpretation, laid out in Chapter 1, that a direct link exists between the sacred *tabot* leaving church space, and the outbreak of celebratory violence that ensues. But neither celebration nor violence is a part of the fast.

The great fast reaches its peak on Easter Saturday, the *gehad* (vigil). The clergy and the particularly devout will fast for the entire day: no food, no water. Those who fast, I am told, are not even supposed to swallow their own saliva. On this day, no greetings are permitted, and no shaking of hands, which people told me commemorated the betrayal of Christ by the 'Jews' (*Ayhud*)<sup>26</sup>. This heightened fasting combined with the refusal of greetings brings out a parallel that is latent

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<sup>25</sup> The month of *Tirr* (January) is considered auspicious for weddings.

<sup>26</sup> The term is often used to mean something like 'heathen'. Few if any people I know associate *Ayhud* with any people existing today, and certainly not with the *Beta Israel* people who left Ethiopia for Israel in the 1990s.

at other times: between fasting and being alone, as opposed to feasting and being together. This has important bearings for my investigation of the ways in which sacred hierarchy and relations with the divine stand opposed to commensal relations with other people (although both modes, it should be stressed, are equally part of the life of Orthodox Christians in Zege).

On Easter Saturday evening some people head to Church; I spent my first Easter night in Ura Kidane Mihret with a friend at whose house I was staying, and the church contained perhaps some three hundred people, significant but only a fraction of the parish. The children sing some hymns, while young men, *fendata*, chat in the corner and maintain a less sober, though not overtly disrespectful mien. The Liturgy begins at ten o'clock or so and continues long after midnight, as some people go to bed and others prepare to stay the night.

Some women come to church, but for many, Easter means work. In the house I stayed in the women were up while it was still quite dark on Easter Sunday morning, in order to have the chicken *wot'* (stew) prepared for dawn and the breaking of the fast. As the men awoke, we ate our first meat in two months and then headed outside together to slaughter the sheep we had bought and then to skin and butcher it for the women to cook, taking the occasional raw piece off the carcass and eating it straight away. The household served alcohol, and one of the four brothers who were home for the holiday was drunk by midday. Throughout the day the women remained at home preparing food and receiving guests, although this did not completely prevent them from taking part in the commensality, and they were able to eat and talk with people to a reasonable degree. Some of the men stayed in the house to welcome guests, while others went out visiting, as did I. My friend Menilek took me to a clearing in the forest where a consortium of men had bought and slaughtered a bull and were dividing up the meat, organs and all, and consuming some of the best cuts together, raw, while drinking *t'ella* and *araq*i. The poorer families will obtain at least some kind of sheep's meat, and even the smallest amount can be stretched out into a large enough stew to serve guests. One family I breakfasted with compensated for their thin stew with copious amounts of cheap liquor, which was an effective way

to show the requisite hospitality while perhaps ensuring that their guests would not notice, or not remember, the two gristly morsels of meat they had been served. Visiting neighbours and friends, or hosting them, is crucial at Easter as the fast turns into an outpouring of commensality. There is meat and drink everywhere, in every house, and I had to be careful to visit my closest friends so as not to cause unwitting offence.

The superabundance of meat and drink on Easter Sunday deserves emphasis. The experience of eating together with other people gains its extraordinary power from the long fast that precedes it. My feeling was of sensory overload, and I think many others felt similarly. Suddenly the fast made new sense to me, in the way that it gave meaning to food, and to joy, and togetherness. This is in part due to a deep-seated Amhara idiom, which people in Zege emphasise particularly, that food must be consumed in conditions of togetherness. The following exchange illustrates this:

Antihun (while eating): If you eat alone, you die alone, isn't that right,

Tom?

Boylston: Does that mean if we eat together, we'll die together?

Antihun: No, but at least I'll come to your funeral.

With this extended ethnographic description I have tried to evoke the phenomenal and sensory potency of the long and arduous fast followed by the outburst of plenty: the experience reverberates for much of the rest of the year, and it is of course the length and difficulty of the fast that makes the ensuing feast so powerful. It is difficult not to view other fasts and feasts as or reflections, comments on, or acknowledgements of the big one. And throughout this period, people experience daily life as Christians at a very fundamental level. The fast shapes every meal, it shapes your relations with others, and it shapes to a large extent the ambience of the place you live in (establishing, I would argue, a model for the Wednesday and Friday fasts by which a part of this effect is extended throughout the year).



## **Fasting and Feasting; Hierarchy and Commensality; Eucharistic Sacrifice**

To think of the Easter feast as a superabundance calls to mind Feuchtwang's analysis of ritual, which would associate excessiveness with the incommensurability of God: "Excessive and distinctive diacritics of welcome, feasting and seeing off are what set religious ritual apart from other genres of action" (Feuchtwang 2010: 74). This is a provocative and productive idea that I will investigate further in this section, because it helps to unveil intriguing formal similarities between the Lenten fast/Easter feast and the Eucharistic service (c.f. Stewart 1991: 77: "Christ's resurrection provides a grand parallel to the individual's reception of the Eucharist"). The notion of sacrifice is central here, as I will now explain.

What unites Easter and the Eucharist is a certain formal progression: they begin with a period of fasting; at a critical moment there is an offering, and then an act of consumption that is associated with that offering. On Easter, the offering is the sacrifice of Christ, and the meal consists, at least in part, of lamb symbolic of the Lamb of God. At the Eucharist, the offering is the *Anaphora* (Oblation, Amh. *qurban*, literally meaning 'offering') – the liturgical prayers and the host itself. The bread and wine, that is, are both the offering and the meal, and the meal is Christ himself.

The comparison of the Eucharist with forms present in other cultures that have been called 'sacrifice', while it may be controversial, is not new (see e.g. Bloch 1992: 26-30, Feuchtwang 2010: 74, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 212). In any case the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is quite clear that it considers the Eucharist and the crucifixion equally as sacrifices<sup>27</sup>. What the comparative anthropological accounts of sacrifice cited above have emphasised is the element of boundary-crossing, a point of contact between humans and divine or spiritual power.

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<sup>27</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacaracommunion.html>  
accessed 22-12-2011

Stephan Feuchtwang has suggested to me that the period of fasting preliminary to offering and consumption prevents the act of consumption from being associated with anything (or more importantly, anyone) other than God. Furthermore, the fact of the repetition of the ritual indicates that, however much of God you consume, there will always be more. God's infinitude is therefore demonstrated (Feuchtwang pers. comm.). In Feuchtwang's account of ritual, excess results from an act of exchange of substance with an incommensurate being (which denies or negates the possibility that said being will not respond – 2010: 74). That is, it expresses and mediates, to some extent, the tension between the shared substance of commensality and and the radical difference that hierarchy entails.

If we accept the association between fasting and isolation – and I think the common impurity of eating, blood flow and childbirth suggests that we should – and we further agree that there is understood to be a connection between the Easter feast and the body of Christ, if only symbolic, then we can understand the fast, the feast, and the Eucharist alike as ways of enacting relations of proximity and distance between humans and God. I take the incommensurability of God to be the founding tension of Christianity and the Incarnation-Crucifixion-Resurrection to be its answer, in Ethiopia as elsewhere (cf. Engelke 2007: 13). Accordingly I suggest we should treat the fast as a prolonged restriction of human-human relations and shared substance, preparatory to the sacrificial act that enables proximity, contact, and ultimately shared substance, with Christ.

What sets Easter apart from the Eucharist is that the act of consumption is fully – even excessively – commensal. It marks a return to human relations and, in the obligations to visit and share the hospitality of as many people as possible, an extravagant re-assertion of human connections and human commensality. The ritual contains confirmation that, to the extent that fasting promotes human isolation in deference to higher powers, it cannot be the basic mode of life if society is to exist. Worldliness and connection are inescapable. Easter is the venue for a reaffirmation of worldly life and the commensality-based interpersonal relations that constitute it. Bloch's notion of a post-sacrificial

'reconquest of external vitality' seems particularly appropriate here (1992: 36-37, 88).

### **Fasting, Deference, Bonds and Boundaries**

I have offered an experiential account of the Lenten fast and suggested that the cumulative phenomenal effect is of a transition from hardship and isolation to excess and togetherness. In this sense, I argue, the fast may be an enactment of a sacred archetype of sacrifice. I intend this less as an interpretation of fasting than an analysis of what fasting does, *viz.* performing relations of hierarchical and horizontal contact and distance. There is more yet to say about what fasting does, but I will continue to argue for the pre-eminence of dialectics of connection and boundaries, and proximity and distance. First I want to essay a deeper analysis of how fasting constitutes and affects interpersonal relations. I will consider first horizontal relationships of identity between Christians, and then deferential relations to the clergy and ultimately to God.

Lambek's essay on taboo in Madagascar lays out an analytic framework that applies equally well to fasting: "Like a feast or a gift of food, a taboo can also objectify and embody status, relationship and union" (1992: 250). While I have argued that fasting bears a symbolic association with isolation, it is also true that bonds are forged between those who fast together. So Lambek cites from Fortes: "sharing or abstaining from the same food, means uniting in common commitment. The intangible is thus made tangible" (Fortes in Lambek 1992: 250). As I have mentioned, people in Zege accepted me as a Christian upon seeing that I kept the fasts with them. To this extent fasting makes tangible a common Christianity. It also, like Malagasy taboo, embodies social values (here, of the Christian) in the person of the faster: "whatever their origins, taboos are also embodied, that is to say they become part of the lived experience of specific individuals. And hence, if taboos are the rules of society, one can say that society is embodied in the acts and experience of its members" (Lambek 1992: 248).

So, by keeping the fast, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians embody their religious rules. Importantly, they do so together, and recognise common belonging with others who do the same. The regularity of fasting means that this embodiment is continually reinforced. There are also dietary restrictions that apply permanently and do not have to do with the fast: Ethiopian Orthodox Christians eat no pork or shellfish, in accordance with the rules of Leviticus. Moreover, Orthodox Christians and Muslims do not eat each other's meat. This tradition is no longer so widely observed in Addis Ababa but retains high importance in Zege: once when I inadvertently ate Muslim meat at a wedding I later found out that I had caused great consternation among my Christian friends; it was the only time I was aware of that people ever became concerned about my status or what I was doing. This was a major breach of the identity I had, without fully realising it, been presenting to people for over a year.

This structural boundary of consumption does not preclude friendly relationships or co-operation between Christians and Muslims, however. On the contrary, when people from either group hold a feast for a wedding or Christening, they will be sure to serve vegetarian dishes so as to be able to give hospitality to friends and neighbours of the other religion. Muslims I have spoken to in Afaf – they constitute perhaps ten percent of the population of the town – visit their Christian friends on Christmas and Easter feasting days and accept vegetarian and non-alcoholic food from them. Ethics of visiting and hospitality supersede religious boundaries, then, as do the ethics of funeral attendance, and yet the boundaries concerning the consumption of meat remain sacrosanct, and so Christians and Muslims embody their division and, by extension, their group identity. This is the sort of identity-demarcation that is, as Lambek puts it, “continuously vibrant”, because it is based on sustained abstention rather than periodic action (Lambek 1992: 252).

If Christians embody their common identity by fasting, they also embody a deferential submission to authority. This relates to a point made briefly at the start of this chapter and which I will now expand on: Orthodox Christians in Zege often do not know the official explanations for why they fast, or why they take

part in many other rituals. I never spoke to a lay Christian who could tell me why they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, or who could enumerate all seven major fasts, or tell me what the Fast of Nineveh commemorated (the rescue of Jonah). Likewise with major local rituals: on Asteriyo Maryam, the 'falling asleep' of Mary, which is a major annual festival in Afaf, I asked one of Haregwa's sisters, a middle-aged woman, what the festival was. She replied, "It is the day that we go to church, and then have a party". Similarly, I did not meet a lay person who could explain to me what the three-day Fast of Nineveh was for, though I also never met a person who did not keep this Fast. The most common reply to such questions was, "Ask Abba S'om"; invariably, he was able to answer them. Some people even told me that the fasts were commemorations of certain events, without being able to tell me what events they marked. Nobody ever seemed concerned at not knowing the reasons for their fasts and celebrations, to which they adhered with diligence.

In fact it is quite common for people not to have a firm idea of why they participate in rituals, as Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) and Bloch (2005c: 123-38) discuss. It may only be from a post-Reformation Euro-American viewpoint that we would expect any different. Both of these works identify a deference at the heart of ritual practice, which I would argue applies equally well to fasting. As Bloch says,

"When people tell us that they don't know what such and such a phrase means, or why such an act is performed, but that that it is being said or performed in this way because one is following the customs of the ancestors, they are surely telling us that what they are doing, saying, singing, is above all *deferring*. In such a case there is no exegesis to be expected from the participants and it is indeed offensive to ask for it, as this denies what they are doing" (2005c: 133).

Since ritual performance is prescribed by possibly unknown others prior to performance, the argument goes, participation in ritual involves a voluntary deferral of agency or intention. Ritual actions have been performed before; they

are therefore, Bloch argues, 'quotations' and for Humphrey and Laidlaw, enactments of an archetype (Bloch 2005c: 125-27, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 89).

What this means is not just that people's states of mind when entering ritual is irrelevant to the performance, although this is the true. It means that people defer interpretation, knowledge of why ritual is performed, to the priesthood. There is an epistemological division of labour in which lay people entrust doctrinal knowledge to the clergy. All Ethiopian Orthodox Christians know that the feast of Easter celebrates the resurrection of Christ, and that the Lenten fast leads up to this in some way, and that Christmas marks his birth and *T'imqet* his baptism. This is the extent of many people's knowledge, and this fact does not threaten their status as a devout Christian, provided they keep the fasts. One thing that fasting entails, then, is a commitment to a relationship with the clergy, in which one assents to, without needing to interrogate, their position as the keepers of religious knowledge. That is, it is a commitment to a hierarchical relationship of knowledge and practice.

I will discuss knowledge and the division of labour further in the next chapter, but for now it is worth noting that religious knowledge is not denied to lay people. In recent years the Church has made increasing efforts to educate its parishioners in matters of doctrine, and Abba S'om in Zege is a major actor in this regard. However, religious knowledge is not essential to correct practice, and so, we may deduce, questions of the sincerity of practice are of secondary importance to the fact of performance itself.

### **Deference as Freedom: Fasting and Religious Self-Formation**

Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that there is a certain freedom in the performance of prescribed actions, because the action takes on an objectified quality that the performer can then reinterpret for herself: "This sense of liberty derives from a very actual freedom, which is to make sense of one's own acts to oneself. It includes the possibility of non-reflection, of not having any religious thoughts or

beliefs at all” (1994: 103). People may be separated from the propositional content of the ritual acts they perform, which in this case is managed by the priesthood. But this affords the possibility of reflecting on the ritual act and redefining its place in one’s life. I had come to a similar conclusion from observing the way that people in Zege, particularly young people, performed and thought about their fasting practice in the context of their wider religious identities as Orthodox Christians. In this section, then, I move from large-scale structural analysis of how fasting shapes time and embodies major religious motifs, to small-scale, personal details of how Christians integrate fasting into their lives.

Over the time that I knew him, Zebirhan, a teenage boy in Afaf, went through phases of fasting more intently than his friends did. None of them would eat meat on fasting days, as went without saying, but Zebirhan began waiting until afternoon before taking any food or water; not on every fasting day, but reasonably often. This would make him tired and often morose, and this difficulty was of course part of the point. We discussed his fasting, for which he did not express a direct reason, but described it as something he felt was right and good, and a way of exploring his Christian identity. They did not usually attend the Liturgy, but that Easter, the second year of my fieldwork, he and Abebe, my sometime research assistant, decided to spend the night in church with some of the other youths. They came back with a full explanation of the Easter story that they had learned from discussion with deacons and *debtera* para-clerics, and written down in order to help with my research. Religion was not a regular part of these boys’ thoughts on a daily basis, but they always kept the necessary fast and sometimes, like Zebirhan, decided to push their fasting practices further, when they felt it was appropriate. These moments would show that a Christian orientation was both very important to them and deeply embedded in their senses of themselves, a resource to call on in their trajectories of personal development.

Some slightly older men I knew in both Zege and the town of Bahir Dar kept the fast extremely actively and were regular attendants at the Liturgy. I spoke to one

such man on Easter Saturday as he kept the 24-hour fast of the *gehad*. He commented that not many kept this fast fully, only those with a special desire to show their devotion, but that it was becoming more common among people he knew. He also made it clear that he considered it a pleasure to fast in this way (*yasdessital*). Many people similarly spoke of fasting in terms of pleasure or joy, while emphasising its physical difficulty, and this active conversion of physical hardship into a joyous practice appears to be a very important dynamic.

That young man was extremely devout, and there are plenty like him in the Zege area who put Christian practice foremost in their lives. But among those young men of a similar age who spend more time drinking and talking to girls, fasting has equal importance. I can think of numerous friends among the tour guides of Bahir Dar and Zege – the young men with some education trying to make a living in the tourism industry – who did not conduct lives that the priesthood would approve of. But these young men, while they rarely attended church, were just as firm about their fasting as any other Orthodox Christians. For them, fasting provided a constant grounding in their religious identity, a sense of belonging, and the ever-present possibility of redemption regardless of the other challenges, desires, and projects of their lives.

For women, too, fasting is of the highest importance. This is especially so given the many occasions when, due to work duties or reasons of menstruation, women are unable to enter church. Fasting enables people to take part in religious practice regardless of any other restrictions put upon them, in most cases, and so plays a critical role in women's religiosity. Hannig describes fistula patients in Bahir Dar who, unable to attend church because of their physical condition, were also prevented from fasting for medical reasons. This, she reports, was a significant source of dismay to these women, many of whom were making plans to visit their father confessors and arrange remedial fasts as soon as they were able to return to their homes (Hannig, forthcoming). Fasting beyond that required by the calendar can be ordered by a person's father confessor as penitence during confession (Ancel 2006: 308). It can also be a voluntary act to improve oneself in the eyes of God (Aymro & Motovu 1970, see



Appendix). In each case an element of voluntary ethical choice is involved, an active engagement with programmes of submission and self-discipline that should remind us not to construe Ethiopian fasting as merely rote.

So people of all kinds consider fasting an integral part of what makes them what they are, without necessarily wanting or needing to develop a line of reasoning or rationale to accompany this. We must consider fasting, whatever else it may be, as a kind of ethical, efficacious action. It is without question a good thing to do, something all Orthodox Christians I have met stress a desire for. It is also efficacious because it does something to the person who fasts. It is not clear whether this is best construed as an act of penance, or an act of renunciation, or devotion to a saint, and the theories of Humphrey and Laidlaw and Bloch would suggest that fasting is none of these things, since the intention or meaning behind the action stands at a remove from its performance, even though people are quite at liberty to reinterpret their actions as penance, or whatever (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 89). What fasting can be said to do, I suggest, is to effect a subtle transformation of the person, to place them in a religious orientation. It is an act of religious self-formation. Abba S'om described the fast to me once as "the medicine of our flesh", *yesigacchin medhanit*, also suggesting a transformative impact on the person. It helps people to mould themselves in a religious vein, and it does so in both prescribed and non-prescribed ways: I have given examples of people choosing the degree to which they will fast depending on their circumstances and what they feel is appropriate, possibly under the advice of a priest. This flexibility helps to make fasting a key technique in Ethiopian Orthodox Christians' processes of self-formation.

### **Further Notes on Women's Religious Self-Formation**

I know less than I would like on the religious practice of women. I was on conversational terms with many women during my fieldwork, and came to know perhaps three or four quite well. But I never gained as much insight as I would have liked into their inner lives, their private thoughts, or their aspirations. I will,

however, present what details I can about specifically female modes of religiosity, which in many ways is more active than that of men. Women are more likely than men to attend the Liturgy; on one occasion I counted five women for every man walking to church. They are far more likely than men to take the Eucharist, and now also more likely to attend Sunday school. Women's religious observance is critical to and foundational for the continuing practice of Orthodoxy. The sexes are separate once in the Church, so I cannot talk about behaviour during the liturgical service. But I can say that many people, mostly women, stand outside the church, in the churchyard during the service, whether this is because they have arrived late, or are menstruating or otherwise unclean. They may kiss the Church gates or kneel down and bow towards the church, engaging in their own worship.

Often women are prevented from going to church by household duties. For instance, at Easter the women of the house did not accompany my friend and me to church but remained at home preparing for the next morning. This is particularly true of women who work as servants at the bar-restaurants in Afaf. These women are charged with looking after the establishment and are generally at the command of the bar owners, although in every case I was familiar with, relations between employers and employees were friendly. Servant women tend to come from elsewhere, often the Gonder area, looking for work, although I do not know more about their circumstances, or how they come to be in Zege. I have spent some time talking to these women, who were always friendly to me, but they did not usually share much about their pasts except to tell me where they came from, and it seemed rude to press for information. A number of these serving women live in Afaf, of whom five or six were in my regular circle of acquaintances. There was sometimes regular turnover as women returned to their families or went to work in Bahir Dar. While I have no desire to sugar-coat an account of the lives of serving women, which are hard and restrictive, their relations with their employers are often cordial, with the women having the status of little sisters. They are members of the household, the most important unit of Ethiopian kinship. Their structural position, however, makes it very difficult to rise from their subordinate positions.

Abebe once described *T'imqet*, Epiphany, as *yegered be'al*, the maid's feast. He told me that this was the one religious event where serving women were permitted to leave their duties and join in the festivities. However, in feasts that centre on the home, especially Christmas and Easter, serving women are very much included in the general socialisation, although they still have to serve food and drink. The lower status of women in general is pervasive in Orthodox Ethiopia: women eat separately, and after the men, but divides are perhaps not so strict as they once were.

In Zege many women play cassette tapes or video CDs or Amharic hymns every morning, beginning at daybreak. This is especially true of serving women, who have access to the sound systems of the bars they work in. It is not only women who appreciate these hymns, which I believe are of comparatively recent composition, but it is usually they who play them, as an accompaniment to their morning chores. It would be a serious omission to discuss the spatial dimensions of Orthodoxy in Zege without including these hymns, which dominate the soundscape of Afaf town every morning. Having talked to serving women about the music, it is clear that this is a vital and valued part of their day, which contributes significantly to their general happiness. Particularly given the difficulty they have in going to church, these cassette hymns become core parts of the religious lives of serving women and, I believe, central to their understanding of themselves and the many structural hardships of their lives

Most houses do not include any iconography, although some printed posters from Greece or Russia depicting the Madonna or Christ are now seen. The house has traditionally been a quite worldly space, in keeping with the sacred/worldly division I describe, and I believe that it is an innovation of Orthodox women, enabled by media technology, that religious music now dominates so many domestic spaces in the morning. Fasting retains primacy among women's religious practices, but ways of building their environment in a religious vein form an important complement to this, in making Orthodoxy a consistent and foundational element of daily experience.

## **The Meaning of Fasting**

Each calendrical Orthodox fast is associated with a Biblical event – I hesitate to say ‘commemorates’, because I have shown that no particular state of thought or memory is necessary to correct fasting practice. This is the case with other kinds of ritual practice too, of course, and a large part of the disputes over ritualism with which I began this chapter. I argue that the ‘meaning’, or ‘meaningfulness’ of fasting, as with other kinds of Orthodox ritual, is best understood as a series of enactments of intersubjective contact, closeness, and distance. Fasting is ‘meaningful’ principally in that it helps constitute persons and, especially, relationships.

But fasting does have meanings in the more traditional linguistic sense. This is not a ritual practice whose origins are lost in an ancestral past; it comes from a textual history whose guardians, the clergy, live in society and take part also in the fasts. The Wednesday and Friday fasts do come from the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ, and the fast of *Qwisqwam* does mark the flight to Egypt. Effective fasting does not require the participant to know this, but it is authoritative fact nonetheless. Here deference is important: one who fasts accepts the reasons for the fast indirectly by deferring to the priesthood and to the Church, by whose authority the fasts are established. I have already discussed how this forges hierarchical relations between the observant and the Church; but it also entails an epistemological division of labour that is distinctive to the way religious knowledge works in Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

The contextual meaning of a fast – its Biblical archetype, the theological logic of fasting practice – exists in Zege society, in the texts of the Church and the knowledge of at least some of the clergy. When an Orthodox Christian fasts without being party to this knowledge, I argue, they are accepting both the religious authority and the interpretation of the priest. The textual knowledge associated with fasting and ritual exists at a societal level, not an individual level.

This is one of the reasons I prefer a holistic approach to Ethiopian Orthodoxy: the epistemological division of labour is part of the system, and it may be this fact that lends fasting its practical utility: for lay people, fasting is not automatically attached to an interpretation. The practice retains an indeterminate quality that means that it can apply to a variety of situations. So for non-observant young men the fasts can be a reassurance and affirmation of their Christianity, for the very observant it can be an act of devotion, and for those unable to attend church a way to participate in religious practice. The broad effectiveness of this ritual action, I am suggesting, may be due to its indeterminacy, the fact that it is only indirectly tied to a linguistic interpretation.

In recent years fasting has become a focal point in controversies around religious practice and health. The large amount of international involvement in Ethiopian healthcare has led to questions over whether pregnant women and the sick should keep the fast. The question is even more volatile when it concerns HIV patients: anti-retroviral therapy needs to be taken on a full stomach, and healthcare providers emphasise the importance of proper nutrition for people living with HIV/AIDS.

During my fieldwork the clergy of Zege held meetings to discuss the proper position, but there remain significant differences among the clergy on what the correct attitude to fasting is. The problem is, as Abba S'om describes it, that the fast is considered as the best of all medicines and should prove more efficacious than any other treatment. I have argued that fasting is centrally constitutive of personhood and group belonging in Orthodox Ethiopia, but also that its meaning is usually deferred or indeterminate. This combination of factors makes it easy to understand why people might adopt fasting as a potentially efficacious response to a new disease like HIV-AIDS: the power of fasting is already embedded in daily practice, but its interpretive flexibility easily allows for new definitions and new determinations. One of these has been that fasting is good for HIV patients; in the ultimate deferral, patients enlist the power of God to cure them.

The most widespread and most controversial religious cure, for HIV and for any other affliction, is the use of holy water. This is the subject of a forthcoming PhD by Yodit Hermann, who has studied numerous churches with sources of holy water within their grounds. These attract large numbers of pilgrims and patients, seeking cures for afflictions including HIV-AIDS and addiction. My experience in Zege is that many people use holy water for almost any affliction, physical or otherwise. There are, according to Hermann, gradations of the sanctity and power of holy water. Some is administered within the church with a full liturgical process, and requires preparatory purifications in similar manner to the Eucharist. Other kinds of holy water can be taken away in bottles and given to patients at home, with far fewer purity restrictions. Hermann also reports that HIV patients have formed their own communities around holy water sites, so as to be close to the hoped-for cure while escaping the stigma associated with their illness in their homes (Hermann, forthcoming).

However, Hermann does make clear that there is more to this than the hope for a miracle cure, although this is a large part of holy water practice. She reports that many patients, while hoping for a cure, report that the real purpose of the holy water treatment is to cleanse them and assure them of redemption. Many patients describe this hope of redemption as far more important than their hopes for a cure (ibid.). Now, I would argue that holy water (described as water in which the power of God resides) is best understood in the way I have analysed fasting: as an efficacious mode of the transformation of the religious subject, as a means of drawing the person into proximity with the divine, and as a practice whose potency is widely accepted but whose interpretive meaning is indeterminate. Hermann's work shows that the worldly efficacy of the religious cure is not separate from its spiritual power, but that its spiritual power has its effect by transforming human bodies in this world, whether the results of this transformation are seen in miracle cures or (possibly equally miraculous) human redemption.

Holy water has tremendous importance in Ethiopian Orthodoxy as a non-Eucharistic medium for sacred contact. It offers a means for those lacking the

highest levels of purity to receive blessing and healing, and its use is correspondingly widespread. People moving into a new house will call a priest to bless the building with holy water, and the house will also be blessed after childbirth. As well as its use in obvious cases of sickness, priests disperse holy water widely on major Saints' days and on *T'imqet*, and on the third day of *P'agumen*, just before new year, it is said that the angel Raphael turns the rain and the water of Lake Tana into holy water, and most of Zege goes to the lake to bathe, while the children dance in the rain. In every case but this, though, holy water is regulated and administered by the Church. Either it is made holy by priests through certain prayers, or it comes from a holy spring encompassed by Church grounds (Hermann, forthcoming), but it remains the case that every means of contact with the divine power falls within the aegis of the Church.

It is quite consonant with Orthodox practice as I have been describing it that the efficacy of holy water comes either from contact with the skin or, more effective still, through consumption. This would seem to fit within the Eucharistic logic of contact with, even shared substance with, the divine, although water here is a conductor for God's power rather than God himself. Holy water, like the Eucharist, enacts a relationship with God via the mediation of the clergy.

### **Holy Water and Faith**

Note however that this view of holy water as a medium of connection does not mean that the inner state of the practitioner is completely irrelevant. It is slightly unusual in the Ethiopian case, but Abba S'om and some other Christians have told me that holy water will only cure disease if you have sufficient faith. This requires some investigation, because it is only in the case of holy water cures that I have heard faith (*imnet*) mentioned in relation to efficacy, and this would seem to deviate somewhat from standard Orthodox logics of ritual (sacramental) efficacy coming from the sole agency of God. Such potential for deviation should not come as a surprise: the semiotic properties of holy water, as with any

medium, are liable to slip beyond the control of those who would seek to authorise and regulate their usage (see Keane 1997: 23-25).

First we need to note that faith is not the same as 'belief'. As numerous commentators have pointed out, the notion of belief as assent to a set of propositional assertions about the world is of limited comparative value, and may not even be particularly helpful in the Euro-American societies from which the concept emerged (Pouillon 1982, Ruel 1997, Robbins 2007, Lindquist and Coleman 2008). 'Belief' as trust and as a declaration of fidelity, however, is recognisable across a much broader range of cultures (Robbins 2007: 14-16). Such is the case in Ethiopia where *imnet*, which I gloss as 'faith', has exactly this meaning (the term is cognate with the Hebrew *mn*, about which Ruel makes the exact same argument, Ruel 1997: 38). So when a priest tells me that faith is necessary to cure disease, this does not mean that you must assign certain interpretations to the holy water or hold certain thoughts, but that you must trust entirely in a cure. Even so, this is incongruous given the rest of my experience in Zege. As I have argued, merely taking holy water is transformative. People who are not sick take holy water just for the divine contact it brings. And in many cases where I have talked to people about using holy water for sickness, they have treated it as something efficacious in itself. Faith is important to the Orthodox: people discuss *imnet* fairly often, not in terms of faith having power or effect, but simply as a statement that it is good to have faith in God.

I do not have a definitive answer for why faith suddenly become an issue of efficacy with holy water, but I have a very strong suspicion. This is that HIV-AIDS and the surrounding discourse have introduced new questions of efficacy and evidence. Moreover, it introduces the notion of a disease that cannot be cured. This is a shocking concept, and it may come from sources, such as foreign NGOs, in which there is not a huge amount of pre-existing trust. Yet the efficacy of Western medicines is evident to many. For most people, it becomes extremely difficult to figure out what is going on and whom to trust: this much we can say with confidence. What I observed in practice was a proliferation of gossip and discussion, in which most people knew somebody who knew somebody who had



been cured of HIV by holy water. The only thing certain is that fear and conflicting authorities have created massive uncertainty and doubt and, inevitably, many cases in which people have taken rigorous holy water treatments and still died young from AIDS. It becomes inescapable that holy water does not work in all cases, and the intense scrutiny of HIV therapy may mean that new discourses emerge to try to explain this. I would suggest that, in this atmosphere where evidence is demanded but uncertainty only increases, faith (as trust) takes on a new salience. My reasons for suggesting that the emphasis on faith in this context is a new development are partly that Hermann, who works in Churches with HIV patients, has come across discourses of faith far more frequently than I have in the course of my fieldwork in Zege, and partly because when I have heard faith discussed in this manner it has usually been in relation to HIV. Faith, I suggest, has been linked to the efficacy of holy water only in the conditions of extreme doubt and uncertainty that HIV-AIDS and new discourses of health and medicine have engendered.

Here again it is important to note that the HIV patients Hermann has worked with, who live with this issue on a daily basis, maintain quite a nuanced attitude towards holy water. While they do have faith, she insists, in miraculous cures, the redemptive and transformative aspects of holy water – we can think of this as quotidian grace rather than spectacular or miraculous grace – remains a key part of their practice and their self-understandings.

I have felt it important to at least acknowledge the uncertainties surrounding religious practice and HIV-AIDS, although I cannot offer authoritative conclusions. What a project like this can provide, however, is an understanding of why holy water and fasting are so important to Orthodox Christians in the face of new diseases and new uncertainties. I have tried to show how religious practices of consumption and abstinence are integral to people's self-understandings and practical modes of living as Christians, and that to a large extent dynamics of fasting and feasting are the basis and the substance of relationships (between humans and with spiritual power) in Zege.

## **Conclusion**

To understand Orthodox society in Zege we must understand the role of consumption – food and water – in making persons and, especially, in creating relationships. In the importance of fasting, in Eucharistic practice, and in the all-curing properties of holy water, dynamics of fasting and consuming are key. It is possible to view relationships in Zege as permutations of the basic act of food-sharing (or as permutations of the Eucharistic sharing of substance, depending on which you wish to consider as prior). Orthodox Christians in Zege, then, understand their religion as basically relational, and understand life as, at a fundamental level, as the intersubjective process of sharing substance.

It may seem contradictory that I have argued that fasting enacts commonalities and shared identity between Christians, while also characterising it as an isolation from commensality in favour of sacred wholeness and relationships with the divine. In fact, I think this paradox reveals something important about Christianity in Zege: Christians are a community of individuals. Society and religious ethics are understood in intersubjective terms, but salvation is ultimately an individual reckoning with God. Moreover, as the Eucharist and the general separation of sacred and profane implies, sharing substance or achieving contact with God does not sit well with the sharing of substance with other people. But both are necessary for a proper life, and fasting is the most important practice by which people negotiate this paradox.

## Chapter 3

### Knowledge, Mediation, and the Religious Division of Labour: The Work of the Clergy

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This chapter aims for a detailed account of the work of Zege's clergy, from the perspective both of their career arcs over a lifetime, and of their daily activities. I treat priests as part of a broader division of religious labour and the labour of knowledge; without an appreciation of this division of labour, only a partial understanding of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity would be possible. I have stated in my introduction that Ethiopian Orthodoxy is built around a religious hierarchy and on divisions between the sacred and the profane, and this chapter describes the pivotal role of priests in maintaining those divisions and that hierarchy. The empirical material I present will demonstrate the connections between hierarchy, sanctity and purity as I investigate, in particular, the separation of priests from society at large, and the ways in which they cultivate purity and knowledge in society's service. Chapter 4 will then consider non-clerical experts, with a view to developing a holistic picture of the Orthodox division of religious labour. I will show that the work of priests – transmitting religious knowledge, performing the liturgy, maintaining sacred boundaries – makes little sense if we do not consider the relationships between the priests, the laity, and other traditional experts.

In my view, hierarchy and division of labour are critical to Ethiopian Orthodox practice because of the extreme purity of Christ. I will show that, because of this purity, one cannot maintain contact with the divine if one is fully engaged in social life. One paradox that runs through my analysis is that the members of the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church often appear very marginal, even liminal, in Zege society. If we understand the sacred as defined by being materially set apart, as I argue we should, then we must view sacred centres as peripheral to the societies they serve. This chapter seeks to describe how this paradox plays out in the lives of the clergy themselves.

A first premise of this chapter is that knowing – the acquiring, remembering, enacting, experiencing, or passing on of knowledge – is a kind of work<sup>28</sup>. I have known Abba S'om, a key informant and the priest to whom other priests deferred on questions of exegesis, to refer to *menfesawí sira*, 'spiritual work', to describe church affairs. In the case of priests and other experts in Zege (as elsewhere), knowledge can take a lifetime to acquire, and often becomes the sole source of a person's living income. Knowledge is a limited good not because it is a finite resource but because the time in which to learn it is finite. It is, furthermore, unequally distributed across society. For this reason we can speak of a 'political economy of knowledge' (Lambek 1993:95), as long as we recognise that while knowledge has exchange value, it is by no means reducible to that value. This is one way in which laity-priesthood relations are hierarchical: they involve an imbalance of knowledge.

The second way in which relations between laity and the clergy are hierarchical is the clergy's special status granted by the sacrament of Holy Orders. This marks them as special agents of God's grace (*s'ega*) on earth and as mediators: intermediaries in the ultimate hierarchical relationship, that between people and God. Ordination carries certain preconditions: to qualify one must both show adequate knowledge and display adequate purity. Priests may have one wife in their lifetime and no other sexual partner, while monks are entirely celibate. Both are required to maintain all of the fasts of the Church. I will argue that the purity of the clergy is necessary for its work in building, maintaining and policing the boundaries between sacred and profane. Priests and monks facilitate and mediate contact between humans and God, but more importantly they ensure that such contact is achieved in the proper manner.

In this sense Orthodox hierarchy resembles the caste hierarchy described by Dumont:

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<sup>28</sup> Lambek (1993:61) makes this point, at least implicitly, and also uses the term 'religious division of labour'. I invert this to 'division of religious labour' to highlight that it is the work which is religious.

“The opposition of pure and impure appears to us the very principle of hierarchy, to such a degree that it merges with the opposition of superior and inferior; moreover, it also governs separation. We have seen it lead at many levels to seclusion, isolation. The preoccupation with purity leads to the getting rid of the recurrent personal impurities of organic life” (1970: 59).

This chapter will demonstrate the appropriateness of this statement to Ethiopian Orthodoxy, although it is important to remember that here one is not born into a hierarchical position, one achieves and maintains it through the work one does.

### **Priestly Work as Mediation**

Describing priestly work as mediation speaks to a growing body of work on religion and media in whose advanced form religion itself is understood as mediation: “In the work on religion as mediation, ‘religion’ is often understood as the set of practices, objects, and ideas that manifest the relationship between the known and visible world of humans and the unknown and invisible world of spirits and the divine” (Engelke 2010a: 374, see also De Vries 2001, Meyer 2008a, b). This work has afforded new perspectives on the sensory aspects of religion: how people learn to see, feel, hear, or smell (and also cajole, manipulate, or worship) ineffable or intangible things and beings. Furthermore, it opens a view of the ways in which relations with spirits, saints, or God, and relationships with other people, resemble each other: they are mediated by speech, food, clothes, things, signs (Meyer 2008b: 126). Attention to mediation is a way of incorporating religion as part of an integrated social world, avoiding the dualisms and purifications that sometimes beset social analysis.

The literature on religion and media has focused on, for example, the production of sensory forms (Meyer 2008a, b), the dissemination of religious texts and discourse over distance (Hirschkind 2006, Kirsch 2007), and on the tensions involved in practices and ideologies of materiality and immateriality in themselves (Engelke 2007). Another possible focus, which all of these works

indicate in different ways, is the mediation of hierarchical relations: the ways in which more or less essentialised disconnections of rank are created or imputed between people (or between people and divine beings), and then bridged, negotiated, or mediated. Ethiopian Orthodox mediations between people and God draw attention to these sorts of relations, and the mediatory role not just of things, but also of persons.

What is crucial in the Ethiopian Orthodox case, and probably in others as well, is that the work of priests entails mediation between incommensurates: between God and humans. Because of the great, even infinite asymmetry in this relationship, mediation is only possible through sacraments – *mist'irat*, mysteries (Ancel 2006: 276). These sacraments<sup>29</sup> are to be performed only by the clergy: “A bishop may perform any church sacrament, but there must be at least three bishops for the consecration of a bishop in the sacrament of Holy Orders; a priest can not confer Holy Orders, but he can perform the other six sacraments; a deacon can only help the bishop or the priest in celebrating the seven sacraments”<sup>30</sup>. The Church, that is, claims sole authorizing power for the manifestation of grace in the world and its reception by people. The hierarchy of the sacraments (three bishops can ordain a bishop, a bishop ordains a priest, and a priest can perform the other sacraments) is the proper channel for divine blessing to enter the world: “Some Protestants say that the sacraments are mere symbols and ‘signs of the new covenant,’ and that they are mere outward rituals, through the observance of which ‘the church of Christ confesses her Lord and is visibly distinguished from the world.’ But our Church believes that there is a real efficacy in the sacraments themselves, and that they truly bring invisible graces to the believers”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Communion, Unction of the Sick, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders

<sup>30</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacramentintro.html>  
Accessed 15-12-2011

<sup>31</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacramentintro.html>  
accessed 15-12-1980

The idea of priests as mediators has been suggested before, both in Ethiopia and elsewhere. It is central to Kaplan's work on Ethiopian monasticism:

"repeatedly the holy men intervened between men and demonic, divine, or natural forces. They protected mankind from demons, illness and wild beasts. They intervened with a distant god on behalf of their followers and disciples. They served as arbiters in disputes between husbands and wives, friends, and neighbours. Born into human society, they attained and maintained a position somewhat outside and above it, which enabled them to fulfill a variety of vital mediatory functions" (Kaplan 1984: 70).

A similar idea appears in Pina-Cabral's ethnography of Northern Portugal: "The primary mediator between human society and the divinity is the priest and as such he has a major role to play in local society" (Pina-Cabral 1986:197).

Being a mediator for authority, however, is not the same as holding authority on one's own account. I will show that the life of Zege's priesthood is quite liminal (in Turner's sense of "betwixt and between", in this case between the human world and the divine, with the implication of not being fully present in either realm). This is implied in Kaplan's suggestion that:

"By living an 'angelic life', the holy men became like angels, divine messengers believed to be capable of both conveying and influencing divine will...Such a mediatory role was of tremendous importance in Ethiopia where a pious Christian was primarily concerned with gaining the favor of an immediate figure such as an angel, Mary, or a holy man, rather than appealing to a remote and unreachable God" (1984: 82).

This angel-like status allows priests to become vehicles for some of the power of the divine. I will elaborate the numerous ways in which clergymen can be said to lead a liminal existence, even to be not fully alive. I will suggest that, if not exactly 'outside and above' human society (the most ascetic monks are still part of society), priests and especially monks do occupy society's borderlands. This means occupying a space between life and death, and the maintenance of this

liminality demands extremely hard work. This work, in turn, is foundational for the activities of the priesthood.

### **Priestly Biographies<sup>32</sup>**

The old stereotype of Ethiopian priests as ‘ordained farmers’ (see Aspen 2001: 69) is not one I have found to be true in Zege or nearby. There seems to be great variation in terms of education and knowledge among the priesthood, as priests themselves recognize. So, on questions of interpretation and exegesis, all the priests around Afaf defer to Abba (Father) S’om, from whom a large amount of my data on Church philosophy comes. Abba S’om is a young man, in his early thirties, and unmarried. He and Abba Melake Gennet, a much older priest, serve Fure Maryam church just outside of Afaf, and were the priests I got to know best. Both have *mergeta* status, implying specialist learning. Abba S’om’s speciality is in *mes’haf*, books or writings (i.e. exegesis) and Abba Melake Gennet’s in *aqwaqwam*, a form of liturgical chant. So Abba Melake Gennet is an expert ritualist, but tends to pass exegetical questions on to the younger Abba S’om. But the priests in the area are all capable ritualists and have at least knowledge of the Ge’ez texts required for their ritual duties. Many have their own specialties in liturgical chants (*zéma*), hymns (*mezmur*) or Ge’ez couplet composition (*qiné*), all of which are esoteric and demanding subjects, inaccessible to outsiders, and all of which contribute to the ritual life of the Church.

Abba S’om and Abba Melake Gennet live in bare mud huts near the church of Fure Maryam. They are outside Afaf town, and the grounds of their huts grow into cornfields in the rainy season. Their huts are extremely humble even by the standards of the town, where most people live in rectangular (modern-style) buildings made from eucalyptus frames, mud and straw with corrugated iron

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<sup>32</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from interviews with Abba S’om and Abba Melake Gennet at Fure Maryam Church, with supplemental material from Abba Haylemariam at Azwa Maryam. I have also spent some time talking to deacons, although it is more difficult to speak freely with them.



roofs. The priests' thatched roofs are dishevelled, and those of the deacons' tiny huts, situated near the priests' homes, even more so.

Abba Melake Gennet's wife lives with him and offers me coffee every time I visit, but I do not know if they have their own coffee land. I suspect that the Abba's family may. There are at least three other priests attached to Fure Maryam, all of whom live outside Afaf town. I frequently see all of the priests in town where they interact with lay people on a relaxed and informal basis. People regularly approach priests in town and bow their heads to receive blessing and kiss the cross. Under their white *gabbi* cloaks, Zege priests' clothes are ragged and they usually have only one set, although this is not unusual in Afaf.

Abba S'om is originally from the Lalibela area. He tells me that he left home to train for the priesthood and, when his family died, saw no reason to return. He was then appointed to the Fure Maryam parish. It seems, however, that a majority of the clergy in Zege are native to the area. Priests and monks are assigned to their parishes by the Church; in this region by the Episcopal Diocese in Bahir Dar. Abba S'om tells me that priests can request to be transferred to a new parish, but must obtain a bishop's permission and the assent of his new parishioners. Priestly salaries seem to vary enormously, and in some places priests are entirely reliant on their communities for support. The priests at Fure Maryam tell me they receive 85 birr (roughly USD 8.50) per month, and Abba Melake Gennet has a small patch of land to grow chillies, as a result of his *mergéta* status. They tell me that monks in the big historic churches at Azwa, Ura, and Mehal Zege may receive up to 600 birr (USD 60).

In addition to this, all priests receive payment in food and drink for the private ritual services they provide: officiating at funerals (including seven separate rituals), weddings and christenings. For instance, for the christening of Tomas's first child at Ura the officiating monk was paid: ten litres of *t'ella* (homebrew beer), ten *injera* and a large bowl of *wot'* (stew). Especially for poorer priests this food income is essential to their sustenance, but it is often not adequate. Abba S'om works as a tailor in Afaf on market days when he does not have ritual

duties, to supplement his income. Abba Melake Gennet has a small amount of land on which he grows corn and *berberé* chilis. It is rumoured that some priests have more illicit sideline occupations in magical or occult services, especially love magic, but I have no reason to believe this of any of the clergy of my acquaintance.

My most intensive point of comparison with Fure Maryam church was the monastery of Azwa Maryam, some forty minutes' walk up the peninsula. Here monks live in cells within the church compound, which are simple but of much higher quality than anything at Fure Maryam, including furniture made of a hardwood which I have not seen outside of the old monasteries. My main contact here was Abba Haylemariam, the monk I got to know best during fieldwork. As the person charged with care of Azwa Maryam's collection of artefacts, including many gifts from historic emperors, he spends a lot of time interacting with tourists and other visitors. He wears the monk's *qob* cap and his clothes are much better kempt than those of the priests in Afaf. A final comparison makes the difference in situation between the priests of Fure Maryam and the monks of Azwa Maryam clear: while Azwa contains beautiful 18<sup>th</sup>-century murals which attract international tourism, Fure Maryam's walls are mostly bare mud, with a few sad and fading posters of the Virgin Mary, imported from Russia and bought in Bahir Dar. I am told that Fure Maryam's reduced circumstances are largely due to a fire in 1972 EC that destroyed the church's paintings. The church roof is also in bad repair, and the church's possessions – valuable parchment books – are in danger of getting ruined.

Throughout my stay in Zege, the people of the church at Fure Maryam were collecting for a new roof. One upshot of the monks' better circumstances is that while priests usually have sideline sources of income, monks seem to be able to dedicate themselves entirely to their religious work. When I have asked the difference between a monastery (*gedam*) and a church (*béte kristíyan*), people have made it quite clear that the virginity of the monks is the principal distinguishing factor. Virginity and monkhood are also necessary to becoming a bishop and so gaining further power in the Church. So the high level of purity of

monks, as well as opening paths to greater power and status, brings them greater income, which in turn further supports their religious work, as they do not need to do extra work on the side as the priests of Afaf do. In the political economy of Christianity in Zege, monks are closer to the centre than priests. This is true both in the sense that they have more influence and power, and also that the monastery-churches they work in are Zege's centres of charisma. There is a kind of trade-off perceptible here in which monks' greater renunciation of the flesh leads to greater worldly powers and greater control over the sacred-in-the-world than priests, who fast with diligence but are allowed wives, and therefore lack the great potential influence of the monks, who used to scold emperors on their personal habits (Kaplan 1984: 36).

The path to priesthood begins between the ages of seven and ten years, perhaps twelve at a maximum, when a boy becomes a deacon (*diyakon*)<sup>33</sup>. It is important that they be prepubescent, because their duties relating to the Eucharist (see below) require sexual purity. Reasons I have heard for a family sending a son to become a deacon include poverty (the family will have one less mouth to feed), religious devotion and the spiritual virtue of giving a son to the Church, or a combination of both. The deacons in Zege and Afaf mostly come from much more rural areas; Zege is comparatively developed, as well as being a religious centre of historical renown. Deacons live in extremely modest huts, barely big enough for a person to lie down in, close to the church, and are fed by the Church or by begging for scraps of *injera* in town. Their time is taken up entirely by study and by giving the Liturgy (*qiddasé*), for which their presence is essential.

Deacons begin their study by learning to recite Ge'ez. Their beginning text is the *Dawít*, the Psalms of David, and then they move on through a prescribed series of texts including the *Widdasé Maryam*, the 'Praises of Mary', and the *Tamr'e Maryam*, an account of the miracles of Mary which has a prominent place in the Ethiopian canon. It will be some years before they learn the meaning of the words, because correct recitation is of primary importance for the correct

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<sup>33</sup> Priesthood is not open to women. There is a model of the female renouncer or nun, to be discussed later.

performance of the Liturgy. This is because the liturgical texts of the Church are considered as divinely inspired, and it speaks to a pervasive orientation of the Orthodox Church: identity with the past, at least in ritual, is paramount. So, for example, on Good Friday, when the clergy spends most of the day in church, I have watched a relay of deacons reciting as a priest supervised and corrected their errors. It takes seven years before a deacon is ready to become a priest, if he so chooses. He will spend the majority of this time with his fellow apprentices under the supervision of the priests of the church to which he has been assigned. Deacons at Ura Kidane Mihret tell me that they spend most nights reciting their texts by candlelight, and in general I have found it very hard to interview deacons in any circumstance, because their workload is so consistent, and their deference to the priests so total. Abba Melake Gennet tells me that there is a growing shortage of deacons, as more and more people choose 'modern' education in the towns. In Zege, at least, there seemed to be a healthy number of students, especially in the more famous churches.

Before becoming a priest, the apprentice must spend two years as a *qollo temarí*. This is a period of mendicancy in which they must travel far away from family and other means of support and live only off alms. It should be noted here that almsgiving is a central tenet of the Orthodox Church and that a majority of Christians make small but regular donations to beggars who, whether *qollo temarí* or not, solicit in the name of Mary or the saints. Many *qollo temarí* now spend their mendicancy in Addis Ababa, where they live by selling lottery tickets, apparently by church authorisation. They are always recognizable, in any case, by their purple or green *gabbi* cloaks, and are said by many residents of Addis to possess potent magic<sup>34</sup>.

Abba S'om recalled his period as a *qollo temarí*, some twenty years before, as one of unrelenting hardship. With agreement from Abba Melake Gennet, he described being perpetually hungry, being cursed and abused by people he begged from, and recalled especially the danger posed by dogs. He described the process as

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<sup>34</sup> I will discuss the popular association of deacons and priests with magic in Chapter 4.

one of being humbled before God. The monk Abba Haylemariam described how he had formed close links with Mary during his period as a *qollo temarí*. By chanting songs and prayers to Mary he had gained her protection from dogs and the other dangers of the mendicant life.

This period of mendicancy resonates with a number of anthropological tropes concerning initiation and liminality, and the candidate entering a liminal phase of being humbled before being exalted (in this case, by ordination) seems to fit a classic van Gennepian model of separation, liminal phase, and reintegration. However, while the *qollo temarí* comes into the Church hierarchy, he is never reintegrated into society at large. I will develop throughout this section the contention that priests remain liminal throughout their lives, and that this is a necessity for the work they perform.

The notion of ‘permanent liminality’ in Christianity arises in Turner’s analysis of the Franciscans (1969: 141-47). Here the separation from society at large is achieved through poverty, in ways reminiscent of the *qollo temarí*. Turner writes, “Francis appears quite deliberately to be compelling the friars to inhabit the fringes and interstices of the social structure of his time, and to keep them in a permanently liminal state, where, so the argument of this book would suggest, the optimal conditions inhere for the realization of *communitas*” (ibid: 145). There is more: “Religion for him [St. Francis] was *communitas*, between man and God and man and man” (ibid: 146). This is not the case in Zege, where maintaining marginality puts priests within the church’s hierarchical structure. At society’s margins lies not *communitas*, the dissolution of social gradations, but the sacred hierarchy. Their marginality allows priests to become conduits of divine power for the benefit of the society to which they are marginal. This is because purity (*t’irat*) is necessary for one to approach divine power, and purity is opposed to worldly life.

Abba S’om describes ordination as conferring ‘power’ (*silt’an*) to the initiand. It is understood that this refers to an apportionment or channelling of the power of God. This channelled power is most visible and tangible in daily life in the cross,

nine inches or so in length and usually wooden, which every priest carries. As a priest walks down any thoroughfare, he will be stopped at frequent intervals by men, women, and children who approach him with bowed heads to kiss the cross. The priest will always present his cross to be kissed three times, touching it to the supplicant's forehead in between kisses. This is referred to as *mebrek*, 'blessing', and its constant practice is a ubiquitous indicator of the difference between priests and everybody else; Abba S'om described the empowering of the cross to me as the principle outcome of ordination. An ordained priest can also handle the communion bread (deacons handle the wine, since it is served in goblets and hence they do not need to touch it) and, if he has fasted correctly, can handle the *tabot*, the holy of holies in any church. These powers because of their sanctity require of priests at least a partial separation from society at large.

Candidates for the priesthood need to travel to a major Church centre, in Gonder or Addis Ababa, to take their examinations and receive ordination from a bishop. The examinations test the basic knowledge required of a priest, and show a link between religious knowledge and the power of ordination, although I shall show that these are not isomorphic. Only a bishop can ordain priests, and ordination is carried out through the Sacrament (*mist'ir*) of Holy Orders<sup>35</sup>. Historically, it was only the *Abune*, the Patriarch, who could give Holy Orders, a fact which, since the *Abune* was always Egyptian, instituted the Ethiopian Church in a subordinate position to the Coptic until Haile Selassie pressured the Coptic Church to appoint the first Ethiopian Patriarch in 1959 (Pankhurst 1990: 35). The priest also takes on a new name, indicating the profundity of the change that ordination brings.

The moment of ordination is also one of choice between priestly and monastic paths. A priest is permitted to marry before ordination (and possibly after), but cannot thenceforth divorce or remarry under any circumstances. A monk must be celibate, and will receive upon ordination the *qob*, the flat cap that denotes his position. Monks also tend to wear a yellow *gabbi* cloak while priests wear white, and a white cloth turban. The decision is decisive in the career path of the priest,

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<sup>35</sup> An explanation is available at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website: <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacraorders.html>

for only monks can rise to become bishops and so gain advancement through traditional means in the Church hierarchy. I am also told that monks can attract higher salaries than priests, at least in Zege where the monasteries hold very high status and have a reliable income. This difference in status is evident in numerous ways – the monks tend to be less shabbily dressed than priests, and the deacons who train at their churches appear, to my untrained eye, to recite texts with much more fluency and confidence than those at poorer, non-monastic churches.

The power of monks is widely understood to be a function of their celibacy. There is a terminological difficulty here, because people who become holy renouncers in old age or priests whose wives have died, are referred to by the same term, *menoksé*, as career monks. The word *dingil*, furthermore, appears to refer to celibacy or virginity without a clear distinction. Nonetheless it is clear that a special status adheres to those who have never had sexual relations, and that these are the monks who can rise to become bishops, with all the administrative power this brings. It has not been part of this thesis to study the central organisation of the Orthodox Church, but it is notable that virginity is in most cases a prerequisite for advancement.

More or less everybody I have talked to equates priesthood with the sexual restrictions it entails: that priests may have only one partner, within the bounds of consecrated marriage, and monks may have none. Nobody expects this kind of continence of lay people, and indeed most people do not marry in sacramental weddings, which involve the Eucharist, require both partners to be virgins, and do not allow for divorce<sup>36</sup>. Rather they tend to choose ‘ring ceremonies’, presided over by a priest but without the communion, and hence not considered binding. Furthermore, in every case I know of a person undergoing deaconship but not continuing to the priesthood, sex has been cited as the reason for the curtailment of that career. The power of ordination comes with extensive restrictions, and one’s power increases roughly in proportion with the degree to which one is

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<sup>36</sup> I have heard anecdotal evidence that sacramental marriage may be on the increase.

restricted. This is a very widespread and consistent understanding, and the combination of a priestly education with a lack of sexual continence is often seen to result in the malevolent power of the *debtera*, described in Chapter 4.

I argued in my Introduction that an opposition exists in Ethiopian Orthodox practice between hierarchy and social connection or shared substance. I take the sexual restrictions on the clergy as illustrating this: higher ranks in the church hierarchy are associated with increased sexual restriction. Sexuality is worldly (*alemawi*) as a bodily pleasure but also, I argue, because it entails bodily contact, connection, and the flow of substance. It ties one to other people, where hierarchy and the sacred demand isolation and disconnection. Similarly, priests are subject to much stricter and more numerous fasts than the lay population. It is clear that priesthood entails a denial of bodily pleasures, but as has been noted, disembodiment is never considered a realistic or even desirable aim. Priestly and monastic restriction and purity, I claim, is fundamentally about limiting social connection and social entanglements so as to facilitate contact and mediation with God.

We must emphasise, however, that separation from society is construed as being in the service of society. Priests and cultivate separation in order to mediate for the community. This dynamic is at its clearest in the history of Ethiopian monasticism. Monastic communities were formed around sanctuaries (*deber*), usually on mountaintops, where many remain today. But Kaplan makes it quite clear that the purposes of these communities was not to escape the world but to serve it: “The holy man was, therefore, largely concerned with easing the conditions of the living in this world. He represented a decisively this-worldly religion which claimed to be efficacious in achieving this-worldly goals” (Kaplan 1984: 90). To say that priests are mediators and boundary makers implies that they are intensely involved with both sides of the boundaries they maintain; we cannot understand their work without considering, holistically, their hierarchical relationship to the society they serve.



## **The Organizational Hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

The relationships I describe between priests, communities, and worldly spheres of power are neither timeless nor necessary, as a brief overview of the history of Church organization will indicate. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has at various times stood hand-in-hand with Imperial power as a major force of social control; at others it has been a largely decentralized unit that, according to Crummey, barely existed at all as a national presence (1972: 15, 18, see also Ancel 2006: 49-51).

The classical ideal of Church-State relationships is laid out in the *Kibre Negest*<sup>37</sup>, in which, “Church and State are conceived as one organism, with no rigid separation between the religious and the secular. The relationship is not simply one of Caesaropapism, of subordinating the church to the state, but of a symphony in which neither element exercised absolute control over the other” (Larebo 1988: 378, cf. Agadjanan & Roudometof 2005: 10). The political reality has rarely proved so harmonious, but the ideology of Christianity and Kingship has been a driving force in Ethiopian history, and retains some power even today (see Marcus 2002).

The late 14<sup>th</sup> Century Emperor Zer’a Ya’iqob was the historical figure most responsible for imbricating Orthodox Christianity into a national/imperial fabric (Taddesse 1972: 231, Kaplan n.d.), though a subsequent period of decline meant that, by the start of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church as a centralized body was almost non-existent. As Crummey writes, “While Orthodox Christianity was a vital component of such national identity as existed, no organization corresponded to this community of feeling. The apostolic faith survived in a common liturgy, and yet more strongly as a folk religion. But the national Church, in any structural sense meaningful to a westerner or Greek, had virtually ceased to exist” (1972: 15). Re-invigoration of the Orthodox Church as a national power began under Emperor Tewodros (ruled 1855-68), which Crummey argues was in part a direct response to the first incursions of Protestants in the 1830s

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<sup>37</sup> “The Glory of Kings,” Ethiopia’s national epic.

(1972: 27). This led to a period of centralized, top-down Church organization, although relations between Tewodros and the Church were often fraught (Crummey 2000: 203-04). His successors, Tekle Giyorgis and Yohannes, continued and expanded Tewodros's policies of national religious unity and religious claims to Kingship, and consolidated their power by means of increased land grants to the Church (ibid. 205-214). Theoretically, a third of the land of Ethiopia belonged to the Church, although most scholars, and later the Church itself, would argue that the actual portion was smaller (Larebo 1994: 737-38). Literature on Zege, such as there is, suggests that the Church was a major landholder on the Peninsula (as it would have to have been, for slavery to be of use; Abdussamad 1997). With such control over land, it seems unlikely that the priests would be quite as marginal as those I describe in Zege today.

What we see, rather, from the historical record, is a dialectical movement between inclusion and withdrawal from the world of state power and land control. Monks have traditionally been those who travelled furthest from worldly society, and often stood as critics of the moral standards of imperial power (Tadesse 1972: 108, 116); yet it is also monks who have risen to the highest positions of worldly influence, as in the famous case of Abuna Selama under Emperor Tewodros (see Crummey 2000: 204). This ebb and flow of religious authority and political power is one consequence of an institution that is both liminal and hierarchical (see Dumont 1970: 71-75 for an Indian comparison). In the mid-twentieth century, according to Persoon, while Haile Selassie presided over a centralization of the Ethiopian Church and its liberation from Egyptian authority, he also brought it more firmly under monarchical control: "The Church was gradually being coerced into a subservient position within the monarchical absolutism framework, to the extent of becoming a state subsidiary" (Persoon 2004: 165).

The fall of Haile Selassie instigated a further transformation in the Church hierarchy and in Ethiopian Orthodox practice more broadly which still continues today. While the Derg government confiscated church lands, stripped out the Church leadership and replaced it with officials sympathetic or obedient to the

government (Bonacci 2000: 29-30), it did not attack religious practice at the popular level. Rather it sought to incorporate and 'appropriate' Orthodox culture into its nationalist ideology (Donham 1999: 143). It did, however, strip the church of all its property and land holdings (Bonacci 2000: 24).

What ensued was a widespread revival of parish-level Orthodox Christian participation and organization (Bonacci 2000: 40, Chaillot 2002: 40), including the formation of Parish Councils that still remain responsible for the day-to-day affairs of local churches. At the same time, the formation of the Sunday School department led to new efforts at educating and activating Orthodox youth (Chaillot 2002: 43). After the fall of the Derg, a further significant development was the creation of *Mahibere Kidusan*, the Association of the Saints, by students. The organization is now highly active among university and college students in Ethiopia (Chaillot 2002: 67-68). There has also been a renewal of Church missionary work since 2000 (ibid. 53) and in Church aid and development work since 1972 (ibid. 46).

While the Patriarchate remains powerful, then, significant reforms have affected the engagement between communities and clergy at the local level. Parish Councils involve significant lay participation including new possibilities for involvement by women in the affairs of the Church (ibid. 41). This developing state of affairs calls greater attention to the role of the priest as teacher and even evangelist than has ever existed before, and suggests that further alterations in the hierarchical distribution of knowledge in Ethiopian Orthodoxy are forthcoming.

Protestantism has grown rapidly in Orthodox strongholds since the fall of the Derg, although exact figures are disputed, and the Orthodox Church finds itself competing for attention. This is more visible in Bahir Dar, where there are several Protestant groups, than in Zege. In Bahir Dar's main church, St. George's, Sunday school-style classes are held every day at 5pm. The same church has started holding exhibition days, in which major preachers come from Addis, and give sermons interspersed with singing and dance shows. These are separate

events to the traditional Christian festivals, organised on an ad hoc basis. At the last such event I saw, the churchyard was full to capacity and people were lining the walls outside to catch a glimpse. This indicates the popularity of the new preaching style.

### **Priestly Knowledge in Practice – Exegesis and Preaching**

There are distinctions to be made in the knowledge and level of advancement of priests that not tied to ordination, purity and restriction. These are the specialities of the *mergéta*, a position of high rank and respect. It takes roughly fifteen years to become a *mergéta*, and while all the *mergéta* I know are priests, ordination is not necessary. The title simply denotes an exceptionally knowledgeable person in one of the church specialities – one of the kinds of chanting, or *aqwaqwam*, liturgical song and dance, or *qiné*, improvised devotional Ge'ez poetry, or exegesis and knowledge of doctrine, which is Abba S'om's speciality. A *mergéta* may be entitled to a small allotment of land from the Church, or a higher salary, so the title brings material benefits as well as respect. As I understand it from Abba S'om and Abba Melake Gennet, priests are generally evaluated relative to one another by the amount of knowledge they possess. After the major stratification of ordination, then, knowledge is paramount, although it may not confer great material benefits to a rural priest. So, while the examinations require a significant amount of knowledge in order to gain the power of ordination, this does not seem to have always been the case, given various historical references to the ignorance of priests (eg. R. Pankhurst 1990: 178). Religious knowledge and divine power, then, are linked but not covalent or co-extensive.

Exegetical knowledge is part of a priest's work. But until recently it has been unclear whether it was a part of a priest's work to share this knowledge with the laity. Kaplan reports that up to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century it fell to monastic holy men to evangelise; even then it is not clear how much Biblical information they imparted (Kaplan 1984: 28). At that time ordinary priests may themselves have had little or no textual knowledge. Donham reports that the southward spread of

Orthodox Christianity involved less teaching about Christianity than it did a demand for general submission to Abyssinian authority – even while it simultaneously undercut the more exploitative practices of the empire (Donham 1986: 11; see also Kaplan 1984: 91). The available evidence suggests that Ethiopian Orthodoxy has not historically demanded exegetical involvement or scriptural knowledge from the laity; even the Creed is recited by a deacon rather than by the congregation<sup>38</sup>. In particular, there seems to have been little engagement between lay people and religious texts, either in the form of reading or of hearing them read aloud. The texts were and are in Ge’ez, whose mastery remains the sole privilege of the priesthood, although liturgical services now include readings in Amharic.

Aymro and Motovu state that one reason for the continuing use of Ge’ez was as a source of stability during periods of expansion and missionisation: “the unity of speech helped to preserve the unity of faith... Ge’ez is not a spoken tongue so it does not vary in meaning, hence it offers itself as an apt means for the preservation of unity” (Aymro & Motovu 1970: 51-52). They also point out that Ge’ez has developed a precise theological vocabulary that can be difficult to replicate in other languages. Nonetheless, they report that even at the time of writing in 1970 a significant faction in the Orthodox Church supported the idea of vernacular readings and even a vernacular liturgy (ibid. 52)

The Bible is now available in an approved Amharic version, but still fairly alien; I have not seen any Bibles in private homes in Zege. It is broadly reasonable to state that exegesis and textual engagement have historically been the work of the priesthood, while lay engagement has revolved around fasting and ritual participation. This is still largely the case in Zege, but times are changing, and priests increasingly engage in preaching, explicating Bible passages and ritual logics to their parishioners. This development is far more noticeable in Addis Ababa or Bahir Dar, but there is evidence of it in Zege, too.

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<sup>38</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/church/music.html>  
Accessed 19-2-2012

Here I wish to focus on the changing knowledge relationships between priests and their parish as I have observed them in Zege. For the most part, people in Zege regard the priesthood as a repository of knowledge and arbiter on the reasoning behind questions of religious practice. Deference to the priesthood on questions of religious knowledge remains central to the attitudes of lay Zegeña. However, a culture of religious teaching and preaching is emerging which reflects movements across the entire Ethiopian Orthodox Church toward the greater education of the laity on the content of scripture and the logic behind Christian practice.

The church of Fure Maryam holds Sunday school every week in the afternoon, in which Abba S'om delivers lectures about the Bible, particularly the Gospels, and instructs parishioners on correct Christian practice, especially the avoidance of witchcraft. The sessions are well-attended, with around a hundred people at those where I was present. Most participants are women, reflecting a general pattern of women being more observant than men. Abba S'om also preaches at major festivals, where he delivers an explanation of the festival at hand. At *Mesqel* (Exaltation of the Cross) he delivers a detailed explanation of the story behind the festival, Queen Éléni's discovery of the True Cross, and also more generally of the symbolism and importance of the cross, "our power and our medicine" (*haylacchinna medhanitacchin*). It is significant that it is always Abba S'om who delivers the sermons, not only because he is the agreed authority on exegesis, but also because he is the youngest priest in the area. Preaching is a new skill, which informants tell me has only been practised in the last few years, and it is my impression that older priests in the area are not accustomed to this discursive mode. All of the older priests in Afaf have specialties in Ge'ez ritual texts and chanting of one form or another.

I have heard from Protestant converts that they regard as a major advantage the fact that their religion actually teaches the Bible. This attitude to information presents a challenge to the old form of established Ethiopian Orthodox Practice, which has never held a very central place for lay exegesis or discussion. I want to

suggest that lay Orthodox practice has traditionally been built around discipline, ritual, and bodily engagement, and that the emphasis on textuality and reason which characterises many Protestant approaches presents a novel and challenging form of engagement that, in the perception of many, offers a powerful means of engaging with modern bureaucracy and post-communist economies. Protestantism claims its authority not (ostensibly) from institutions but from scripture itself. My experience suggests that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is beginning to develop similarly textual claims to authority, but it remains the task of future work to investigate to what extent and in what ways this is happening. In Afaf, Abba S'om epitomises the new kind of preaching priest. He has spent years developing his scriptural knowledge and honing his ability to communicate that knowledge. When I interviewed Abba S'om I usually brought a de facto research assistant with me, whether Abebe or one of the other village youths. It is notable that Abba S'om would make a point of instructing whomever was with me while answering my questions. While the Orthodox Church is hierarchical and knowledge is unevenly distributed, this does not necessarily mean that the clergy are secretive about their knowledge, or that they keep it from lay people. Rather, priestly knowledge is a service, whether it is shared with the laity or passed on to deacons and used to keep the ritual calendar going. If we see knowledge as a product of labour then it is easier to understand this permutation: ritual performance has always been an aspect of the work of priests, and now education is increasingly another aspect. But both kinds of work, or service, are equally dependent on the work of knowledge that a clergyman undertakes throughout his career.

### **Ritual Work and the Management of the Sacred**

The conduct of the Liturgy (*qiddasé*) requires a minimum of two priests and three deacons. The Liturgy is held every Sunday, and on major saints' days and sometimes every day of the fasts, depending to some extent on the local history of the Church and on how many priests are available to share the work. The section of the service at which worshippers are present lasts between two and

three hours, but including the preparatory prayers and readings, priests will be occupied for perhaps five or six hours. The liturgical service takes place from noon until 3pm on normal days, dawn until 9am on Saturdays and Sundays. Neither priests nor anyone who participates in the Liturgy may take any food or water on that day until the service is finished. In the various chants and hymns involved in the liturgical ritual, the clergy is assisted by any number of *debtera*, here referring to those who have enough training to know the chants, generally having trained as deacons, but who have not been ordained. Often these men will dress exactly like priests, with white turbans, which may account for a portion of the confusion over what *debtera* do. However, they do not carry crosses for blessing, which is the privilege of the priests.

For the clergymen who are chanting throughout the service, it is an arduous undertaking. During the long fasts, especially Easter, they will fast every day for long periods of time, and at these times I found it quite difficult to talk to even priests I knew well because they were so exhausted. Priests are the only people who keep every fasting day, amounting to some 256 days of the year and generally coinciding with the times when they must be most active. By contrast, as I discuss in the next chapter, lay people generally only fast on Wednesdays, Fridays, and the Easter fast, perhaps adding some others depending on preference. And lay people can always decide not to go to church, meaning that they do not have to endure until the afternoon without taking a drink.

After the Communion the priests and *debtera* begin to sing the *zemmaré*, post-Eucharistic hymns. On non-fasting days the service becomes distinctly joyful at this point. Priests begin the *aqwaqwam* chant-dance, at which point the congregation begins to join in with rhythmic hand-clapping and sung hallelujahs while a deacon plays the *kebero* drum – if the Liturgy takes place on a non-fasting day. If it is a fast, no drums are included and the service remains sombre.

The Liturgy is an extremely complex ritual:

“The general structure of the Liturgy (qeddase) is more or less similar to that of the other Oriental Churches: the preparation and blessing of



the liturgical vessels...a penitential prayer known as “Prayer of the Absolution of the Son” (Fethat Zewold), said while the faithful prostrate; readings (the epistle of Saint Paul, the Catholic Epistle, Acts); different prayers such as praises to the Virgin and saints; the prayer of the Covenant (Kidān) beginning with the Trisagion; a sung Psalm versicle (*mesbak*); the Gospel procession and proclamation by the celebrant priest; a sermon; the dismissal of the catechumens by the sounding of a little bell; the Creed, the kiss of peace (people bow to each other); the beginning of the Anaphora including the memorial of the Eucharistic institution, the consecration of bread and wine by the invocation of the holy spirit (*Epiklesis*); prayers of intercession, the Our Father, the Communion, and the final praises” (Chaillot 2002: 104-05).

For the Communion, the celebrant priest washes his hands twice and announces that he is free of the sin of anyone who takes the Communion in an unworthy state; once his hands are washed, he touches only the bread and the chalice (*ibid.* 105). The bread is unleavened, and stamped with thirteen crosses to represent Christ and the disciples (or the thirteen sufferings of Christ; *ibid.*), and the wine is unfermented. After the Communion deacons dispense holy water for communicants to ensure nothing of the host remains in their mouths, and for anyone else in the congregation to take. If there is someone present capable of composing *qiné* they will provide one at this point to be sung after the Communion.

The sensual and tangible aspects of the service are significant. The celebrant disperses incense twice during the ceremony; once around the altar and once before the Gospel reading (*ibid.* 107). The gospels themselves are treated with veneration: when read aloud they are sheltered under the ornate umbrella (*t’ila*) that conveys honour and respect (the umbrella is later opened over the chalice of blood/wine); and thereafter the book is covered in fine embroidered cloth and then carried around the church for congregants to kiss (*ibid.* 106). Hearing the word of the holy book (often, now, in Amharic) is supplemented by physical devotional contact with it. No effort is made, that is, to separate the medium from

the content, and both are treated as sacred. The service may also include veneration by the priests to the icons of the church murals. I have seen priests performing these – praying and bowing – during the censuring.

I would suggest that books, icons, incense, and chanting, like the umbrella, suggest immaterial materiality. Engelke makes a similar point about the religious use of water: “Water is in some respects like smoke (and even the human voice). Its materiality is – literally – difficult to pin down...its materiality, then, is not always very ‘material’” (Engelke 2007: 241). So it is with chanting or song, often noted as ephemeral sensory forms; this is especially true of the *qiné*, fantastically intricate short poems that are composed ad hoc but sung only once, and never again (Chaillot 2002: 88; see Engelhardt 2010 for a discussion of the materiality of Orthodox singing). The quasi-materiality of smoke, what is more, is what made the burnt offering in Judaic sacrifice an effective mediator between God and the world (Douglas 1999: 69).

Engelke’s Zimbabwean informants treat the Book as troublingly material, but it is possible to argue, in the Ethiopian Orthodox case, that a book’s combination of material form and sacred content – that part of the book which has weight and mass, and the part which emerges when it is read aloud – is an exemplar of the conjunction of divinity and the world. This makes sense given Orthodox conceptions of matter as redeemable creation, and as always containing the potential for immanence and for sacred contact. The material immateriality of icons is discussed at length by Bynum:

“When they insistently display – and even comment on - their own materiality, they show that they are matter. In other words, they show that they are not God. But matter is God’s creation – that through and in which he acts. Matter is powerful. In their insistent materiality, images thus do more than comment on, refer to, provide signs of, or gesture toward the divine. They lift matter toward God and reveal God through matter...they disclose, not merely signify, a power that lies beyond” (Bynum 2011: 35).

These things and substances stand between the phenomenal and the numinous, and it is this standing-between that is crucial to the Liturgy.

A further duty of the priests is taking confession and giving absolution. Every Ethiopian Orthodox Christian has a father confessor responsible for her penance, a relationship that Ancel identifies as one of the main integrators between Church and congregation (Ancel 2006: 300). Absolution is sacramental (brought about by grace - *s'ega* – and so only given by the ordained) and is a pre-requisite for Communion for adults, (although it does not carry the same emphasis as in Roman Catholicism (ibid. 302). So as well as carrying out the Liturgy, priests help to bring their parishioners into a fit state to participate in the Eucharist.

The management and performance of the Liturgy is the main day-to-day activity of the priesthood. I have drawn attention to the spatial boundaries that fence off the church, as well as the bodily purity rules that regulate access. In the next section I will go on to discuss priests' roles in non-calendrical rituals: births, weddings, christenings and funerals. I argue that we can still view priestly work as boundary-making; here priestly ritual marks the proper boundaries between life and death.

### **Life-Cycle Rituals: Priests and the Boundaries of Life Itself**

I am constructing an argument that the work of the clergy is best understood as boundary-maintenance, especially of boundaries between the sacred and the worldly. The boundaries that priests maintain are both spatial and temporal circumscriptions. This is so not just in the maintenance of the calendar and the boundaries between fast and feast, but also in circumscribing human lives, marking (performatively) beginnings and endings. Personal life-cycle rituals – christenings, marriages, funerals – all require the correct ritual handling for which, as I have detailed, priests receive payment in food and drink. These services are necessary because without christening people could not become Christians, and without funerals they could not get to heaven. The situation with

funerals is fairly clear: the seven funeral rites performed for any deceased person are called *fitet*, 'release', in which the prayer of the clergy aid the soul of the deceased away from this world and through the seven stages of heaven into paradise. The service is so important that most people are members of *iddir*, funeral associations that ensure that, in the event of a death, the priests will be paid. Here the position of the clergy as mediums between the living and the dead should be clear; their job is explicitly viewed as enabling passage between the two worlds.

Priests are equally essential for bringing people into the world. Boys are christened 40 days after birth, and girls after 80 days.<sup>39</sup> The christening (*kristenna*) centres on the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, which are administered consecutively. Baptism is construed as rebirth<sup>40</sup> and Confirmation, achieved by anointment with oil, as the pursuant granting of 'the gift of the Holy Ghost which alone can confirm him in the new life given by baptism'<sup>41</sup>. I would construe this ceremony of Baptism and Confirmation as a kind of social birth before which, in several important ways, the baby's life has not properly begun.

Until the christening, forty or eighty days after birth, mother and child exist in a liminal state, as discussed in the Introduction. They are not permitted to leave the house, and I am told that the mother does not wear the cross on her neck that Christians otherwise wear at all times. Most importantly, if the baby dies in this period it will not be buried in the churchyard. Whether such a child would nonetheless go to heaven seems to be an open question among lay Christians in Zege, although Abba S'om told me that it would. Since the child has not been spiritually born, I am not certain that the question, which I asked several times of different people, even makes sense. Abba S'om also mentioned that surrogate

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<sup>39</sup> For reasons stated in Leviticus 12. I have frequently asked people about the reasons for this gender discrepancy, and while it always led to lively debate, there was never consensus among lay people as to why this might be.

<sup>40</sup> "Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." John 3:5

<sup>41</sup> From the official website of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacraconfirmation.html>  
accessed 12-2-2012

baptism was possible: if a child was thought to be in danger of dying while still in an impure state, a third-party woman could be baptised in the stead of mother and baby, allowing the child to be buried in church. In any case, the unbaptized child and its mother are both expressly forbidden from entering Church under any conditions. As Tomas told me of his newborn baby when explaining this prohibition to me, “At the moment, she has no religion.”

The ritual performance of the Christening is necessary to bring mother and child properly into the world, from this in-between state in which it is unclear whether or not they are proper persons. Just as the liturgy marks Christian divisions in continuous time, so Christening places Christian beginnings and endings on biological lives. The work of the clergy here, then, is to set the proper boundaries of life. They do this through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and through the funerary rites. As elsewhere, priests are also required to carry out a legitimate marriage, through the sacrament of holy matrimony.

In summary, then, priests preside over the beginning and ending of every Orthodox life, as well as every legitimate Orthodox sexual union. This is what it means to claim that priests are mediums between life and death; an unbaptized child is not a full person, and to die without a funeral is an unthinkable horror<sup>42</sup>; a child born out of wedlock is not the social shame it once was, but is still problematic. Priests, then, are essential for bringing people into the world and escorting them out of it. This is a crucial element of their mediatory work.

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<sup>42</sup> A note on Islam: while baptism is essential to Christian personhood, this does not imply that Christians see Muslims as non-persons. Rather, Muslims are considered as having their own techniques of making religious persons. Muslims are different kinds of people – consider the mutual refusal of Christians and Muslims to eat each other’s meat – but to be a Muslim, from a Christian perspective, is quite understandable, and Muslim-Christian co-operation and friendships are very common in Afaf. What is harder to imagine, and more of an affront to my Orthodox interlocutors, is the idea of a person being neither Muslim nor Christian. The notion of atheism is to my friends faintly ridiculous and difficult to conceive.

## The Tools of the Priesthood

Priests alone cannot perform acts of mediation, however. In every example I can think of, mediation between God and humans is achieved through some kind of matter or material thing. It is as if divine blessing or grace are like electricity, requiring conductors in order to flow. In the Introduction I suggested that Orthodox conceptions of personhood allowed for a notion of agency distributed between persons and things, explaining why matter and mediation did not carry the intimations of idolatry that they do in certain Protestantisms. I now want to examine the relationship between priests as mediators and the material things which act as 'conductors' in this mediation. These things, I argue, are best seen as tools of the priestly trade, extensions of their professional persons. These tools – handheld or processional crosses, holy water, umbrellas<sup>43</sup>, fly whisks and rattles, among other things – can act both as sacred symbols and as conduits of sacred power, and their symbolic and efficacious actions are not always distinct. While a priest such as Abba S'om does spend time reflecting on the nature of his tools and can provide a detailed exegesis of their symbolism and action<sup>44</sup>, this is a rare ability even among priests, and is secondary to their meaning-in-use.

Under the category of priestly tools I would include the drums and rattles which the clergy uses to conduct the Liturgy; the embroidered umbrellas which they carry whenever performing ritual outside, especially at funerals and when the ark leaves the church; the prayer staffs which they carry in church and occasionally rest on; the small wooden cross which every priest carries on his person and the large silver processional crosses used in ritual; and the holy water which priests create by holding their cross over normal water and praying. I find it instructive to think of even a church building as a tool, a kind of machine for holding rituals in. The church is the venue for mediation, its walls providing the seclusion proper to the *tabot* and the preparation of the Eucharist. As described in the introduction, the church is also a material representation of the Trinity and so, by the principle of indexicality, connected with it.

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<sup>43</sup> I exclude icons from this discussion for the time being simply because in Ethiopia they are less prominently used than other material tools I will discuss.

<sup>44</sup> And symbolizing-as-action

Holy water (*s'ebel*), construed as water imbued with the power of God, is ubiquitous in popular Orthodox practice, and if anything seems to be growing in popularity. Yodit Hermann has made a detailed study of the use of holy water, as yet unpublished, in which she reports that there are two varieties: water which is holy from its source, and water blessed by a priest. That which is holy from source, she reports, is always brought within Church aegis and controlled by priests, a necessity since its sanctity and power are even greater than priest-blessed water. Holy water has ritual uses, being dispersed over crowds at saints' festivals and *Timqet* (Epiphany), as well as private uses, wherein people use the water for healing. In Zege, Ura Kidane Mihret is renowned as having particularly potent holy water, which the priests dole out on a regular basis. What is important for this chapter is that Hermann reports that the faithful must have maintained a degree of purity – fasting, sexual abstinence – before taking holy water, but that less purity is required for priest-blessed water than for naturally-holy water, and neither has restrictions as strict as for the Eucharist (Hermann n.d.).

A priest's hand-cross conveys divine blessing to the parishioners who kiss it, and at the same time it symbolises, indexically and iconically, the crucifixion. Holy water symbolises the blood that flowed from Christ's flank (Hermann n.d.) and brings healing and blessing to those who receive it from a priest; the rattles and drums are tools for making liturgical music, and the rattle's three clackers represent the Trinity. It is this combination of symbolic or representational action with mediatory action, I think, that lies at the heart of Ethiopian Orthodox religious practice, and of Ethiopian Orthodox material semiotics. Sacred objects as tools can either represent the sacred or act as a conduit for it, and the difference depends to a large extent on whether they are being wielded by a priest, the only person with the qualification to use the sacred tools. A cross will always carry its symbolic function, but only in the hands of an ordained person can it convey blessing. Orthodox practice, then, is defined by the priest-layperson relationship and their mutual dependence. Daily life is full of sacred symbols, but

only through the clergy – and the sacrament of ordination – can sacred symbolism be united with sacred power.

### **From Priests and Monks to Saints and Angels – Liminality, Living Death, and Mediumship**

I have characterised the sacred work of priests as associated with substantial social disconnection: fasting, celibacy, and physical seclusion. I will now make a brief investigation of the idea that such restrictions are associated with death and disembodiment, and the related idea that priests and monks belong on the same continuum in the sacred hierarchy as saints and angels. The comparison between holy men and angels has a long history in Ethiopian Orthodoxy as in early Christianity (Brown 1988: 323-338). In some important ways, saints and angels, neither alive nor dead, are similar to priests and especially monks, and that the work of the clergy in an Ethiopian Orthodox community can be seen as aimed at attaining an intermediary state between life and death, in the service of the community as a whole.

Steven Kaplan writes that, “Both as a monk and as an ascetic, the image of the holy man was intimately associated with the angel. Indeed at times the line drawn between the angels and the holy men appears to have been quite a thin one” (Kaplan 1984: 81). The comparison is a productive one, which provides a key to understanding the Ethiopian Orthodox religious system in its full articulation. The unifying concepts here are liminality and mediation or, as I will now argue, mediumship. If a study of Orthodox Christianity requires an account of clergy-laity relations, I would add that it is even more constructive to count saints and angels too as part of this hierarchy of relationships<sup>45</sup>. If monks by virtue of their virginity are a step more sacred than priests, then saints are one step more sacred, a step more powerful, and, not coincidentally, a step more dead, than monks.

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<sup>45</sup> I discuss exchange relationships between people and saints in Chapter 6.



Kaplan has this to say of (historical) clerical asceticism: “While the monastic garb or a sign at birth...may have inaugurated the saint’s ‘angelic life’, it was through self-denial that he purified himself and confirmed his status. Since there was no marriage in heaven... the monk’s chastity placed him in the company of the angels, who were virginal... Like the angels the holy man engaged in ceaseless prayers..., remained vigilant throughout the night... and ignored hunger and thirst... He strove to be, like the angels, a pure being with no flesh” (1984: 81). I have shown that, at least in Zege in the present day, monks do not have sole claim to this purity of the flesh, priests partake in the same liminal practice, albeit to a lesser degree. And, of course, it is never possible to *become* ‘a pure being with no flesh’ without dying. And so, present day priests and especially monks come to occupy a place between humanity and the angels, living in the human world but not fully alive.

Orthodox Christians in Zege understand their relationship with saints, angels and Mary (all comprehended by the Amharic term *qiddusan*) as definitive of their religion as opposed to Protestantism<sup>46</sup>. That is, they manifestly identify the key issue as one of mediation between people and God, *Yigzi’abhér*. Priests and lay people express this in different terms, but every conversation I have had about what makes Orthodoxy Orthodox has centred on mediation in one way or another. Thus when I asked Abba S’om and Abba Melake Gennet how Orthodoxy differed from *Penté*, Protestantism, they replied that Protestants say that *Maryam attamaledim*, “Mary does not give mercy/intercede”. There was also the exchange with which I opened this thesis, the discussion between Tomas, Abebe, and the Protestant. There the key distinction was that the Orthodox said “Mary heals”, *Maryam tadenallech*, whereas for the Protestant healing came direct from Jesus, *Iyesus Kristos yadenal*.

*Maden*, ‘healing’, is a generic word can refer to both physical and spiritual healing. *Mamalled*, ‘intercession/giving mercy’ is more specific, but both ideas

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<sup>46</sup> Distinguishing Orthodoxy from Protestantism causes much more anxiety than distinctions from Islam, which are well-established and tend not to involve either side attempting to missionize the other.

express a continuum between mercy, intercession and curing which is the centre of Orthodox religious practice. This is a system in which divine mercy and divine healing are construed as coming through venerated intermediaries, and not directly from God. As well as Mary, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, and Saint George, play prominent roles as mediators. In Zege, it is common to pray to Mary for aid with conception, to Michael for protection from demons, and to Gabriel for prosperity, for example.

We can see, then, a dual layer of mediation between lay people and God. On the heavenly side, angels, saints and Mary, dead but still active, provide healing and comfort in this life, and potentially salvation in the next. On the worldly side, the clergy, alive but partially disembodied, handle the instruments of healing and salvation: the Eucharist, holy water, and the cross. These are the material conduits of divine power.

I want to push the argument that priests and saints are not just mediators but mediums, because I think the distinction has comparative anthropological value. Thinking of priests as mediums reveals some ways in which the Orthodox clergy has as much in common, structurally speaking, with spirit mediums in other traditions as with priests in other forms of Christianity. 'Medium' is a hard enough term to pin down, semantically (Eisenlohr 2011), but a working definition is enough to advance my point: a mediator acts as a go-between, but the word 'medium' emphasises that the medium becomes a vessel for whatever is being transmitted. More concretely, when a *debtera* writes a prayer on a goatskin scroll for a client (see next chapter), the *debtera* is the mediator and the scroll is the medium. The materiality of the scroll enables it to act as such. When saints convey prayers to God, as Christians say they do, they become both mediator – go-between – and medium for the message. Being medium for communication is one thing, but when a priest prepares the Eucharist, or gives blessing with his cross, or prays over water to make it holy, he becomes a medium for the power of God. Here is the crucial distinction, for it is this mediumship which requires the priest to maintain a state of permanent liminality. He must actually exist between the sacred and the worldly or, what

amounts to the same thing, between the living and the dead. This is why one must fast for eighteen hours before handling or taking communion; it is necessary to become less worldly. For those whose vocation it is to handle the Eucharist, a certain unworldliness is a permanent condition of existence.

### **Conclusion: Mediation and Agency**

Ethiopian Orthodox Church has this to say about the sacraments: "Some Protestants say that the sacraments are mere symbols and 'signs of the new covenant,' and that they are mere outward rituals, through the observance of which 'the church of Christ confesses her Lord and is visibly distinguished from the world.' But our Church believes that there is a real efficacy in the sacraments themselves, and that they truly bring invisible graces to the believers"<sup>47</sup>. This question of "real efficacy" is, as Keane has noted, a question of agency.

Keane sums up the ideas of anti-ritual movements in early modern European Christianity with a reference to Milton's critique of Catholic prayer. Catholics, he says, pray with their eyes open; how then could the words of the prayer book reflect what is in their hearts (Keane 2007: 1)? Milton was pointing to the same characteristic of ritual described by Humphrey and Laidlaw some time later: "We argue that ritualization severs the link, present in everyday activity, between the 'intentional meaning' of the agent and the identity of the act which he or she performs" (1994: 2). For Milton and for Protestants more broadly this severance meant that ritual, since divorced from individual intention, could not index true faith (see also Keane 2003). The account of the sacraments quoted above displays the counterpoint to this view: if sacraments are 'mere symbols', then the agency lies with the person who performs them rather than, as is proper, with God. As such, the Protestant view is sacrilegious; all agency belongs to God, and Protestant notions of 'freedom' (Keane 2007: 7) constitute Promethean attempts to appropriate this agency. While certain Protestant traditions have developed

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<sup>47</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website:  
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacramentintro.html>  
accessed 15-12-2011

the anxiety that matter will be mistaken as powerful (Pels 2008), in the Orthodox view it is Protestants themselves who are the idols<sup>48</sup>. Ethiopian Orthodox practices of mediation, hierarchy, and the ritual use of materials, all bear close association to this understanding of God's agency distributed through the world (cf. Hanganu 2010: 53). This is the crux of how the Orthodox themselves understand the major differences between themselves and the Protestantisms with which they find themselves increasingly often in debate.

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<sup>48</sup> I recognize that this does not constitute a very comprehensive account of what various Protestant groups actually think about mediation and matter. What is clear both in Zege and in the Ethiopian Church as a whole is that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians often define themselves by contrast with an idea of Protestantism much like that characterized above.

## Chapter 4

### Orthodoxy's Edges: Liminal Power, Sorcery, and Other Traditions of Knowledge

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This chapter deals with popular encounters with experts whose work in magic, healing, and the manipulation of spirits<sup>49</sup> falls outside the authorisation of the Orthodox Church. In Amhara even more than in other places, traditional expertise often evades categorisations of 'religion', 'medicine', or 'magic'. The experts considered in this chapter share only the fact that they possess esoteric knowledge, not available through any kind of public institution, for which clients are prepared to pay. Their moral status in the eyes of the clergy may be accepted, tolerated, or anathema, or in some cases they may be clergy themselves. The sheer range of forms of traditional expertise, which Aspen refers to as a 'knowledge buffet' (Aspen 2001: 17) has sown confusion throughout the ethnographic literature on Ethiopia<sup>50</sup>. I hope that this chapter will go some way toward clarifying this situation by approaching the unofficial traditions of expertise in Zege as part of the broader division of epistemological labour, and as reflecting and manipulating parameters of the sacred and the profane in the broader context of Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

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<sup>49</sup> I use the term spirit, which roughly corresponds, in all its ambiguity, to the Amharic *menfes*, to denote any invisible being which is not considered a saint or angel (*qiddus*, pl. *qiddusan*). These include beings which may be referred to as *buda*, *zar*, *zar-buda*, *ganén*, *jinn*, *seyt'an* (collectively, meaning 'demons'), or *irqus menfes* ('evil spirit'). The categories often overlap and should not be considered definitive.

<sup>50</sup> As Aspen puts it, "Because of the complexity of the historical and ethnographic background, and the empirical field data that support the argument, it has been a struggle to find the releasing key to the ambiguities that I, like other anthropologists and ethnographers, have found in the Amhara belief in spirits, saints, evil powers and the biblical God, as well as in their relations to the earthly representatives of all these spiritual powers: the wizards, astrologers, priests, demon-pullers, spirit-masters, and so on" (Aspen 2001: 17). Young's account of *debtera* (1977) is so distorted by attempts to systematize esoteric knowledge as to be almost entirely misleading.

I will be arguing that we should consider esoteric practices as part of the Ethiopian Orthodox workscape, although my informants are very clear that these practices do not constitute 'religion' per se. The Amharic *haymanot*, 'religion', is as much a moral as an analytical category and designates whether a practice or idea is recognised as having an authorising structure or not. Ethiopian Christians recognise Muslims as having *haymanot*, but often deny that the Weyto, a minority group living mainly in Bahir Dar who face much discrimination, possess any such thing. *Haymanot* is distinct from *t'inqola* 'witchcraft' and *asmat* 'magic', which are unauthorised procedures, although Kaplan (2004) has shown that the distinction between religion and magic has always depended largely on what and whom the Emperor wished to reward and punish: "it is impossible to write the religious history of Ethiopia without writing the history of magic as well" (Kaplan 2004: 414). Certainly distinctions on the grounds that magic is individual and instrumental while religion is moral and social do not hold up very well (ibid. 415-6). The word *medhanít*, usually translated as 'medicine', refers just as well to what in English we would tend to call spells, as well as to authorised divine healing. However, I will suggest that we maintain a heuristic distinction between healing practices that call on external agency, and those which are understood to operate through substances that are themselves efficacious such as plants or biomedicine. The latter are (more or less) morally unproblematic; while the former are potentially dangerous unless authorised by the Church.

Priests frown heavily on what they see as consorting with demons (*seyt'an* – always in my experience referring to multiple malign spirits rather than a single unified persona), though their parishioners' understandings of what is *seyt'an* and what is not may differ considerably. The truth is that Orthodox Amhara do not usually devote much effort to classifying these sources of power, whose significance is situational and depends largely on perspective and circumstance. Most or all people in Zege, including those who make money from spirit-related practices, consider all spirits, forces, and substances of potency to be subordinate to God, although the ways in which they are subordinate may allow

for significant of practical leeway. Accepting the absolute authority of God still allows for a good deal of ambiguity among lesser spirit beings.

Although I describe these forms of expertise as unauthorised traditions, in the eyes of many people the Church hierarchy itself is not entirely pure of esoteric or magical power. Additionally, 'magic' may be seen in some circumstances as a transformation or perversion of divine power<sup>51</sup>. There are numerous ways in which people perceive practitioners of magic to be associated with the Church, often based on an assumption that the specialist knowledge of priests, enabled by their ability with the Ge'ez language, includes material more secret and esoteric than the standard Orthodox liturgical and hagiographic texts.

### **Diversity of Knowledge**

Fredrik Barth offers the following working definition of knowledge: "what a person employs to interpret and act on the world. Under this caption I wish to include feelings (attitudes) as well as information, embodied skills as well as verbal taxonomies and concepts: all the ways of understanding that we use to make up our experienced, grasped reality" (Barth 2002: 1). Knowledge, he argues, has three 'facets': it has informational content, it always takes form across social relationships (between, for example, patron and client, priest and layperson, or doctor and patient), and it requires some sort of medium (ibid. 3). The emphasis on the medium of knowledge and the social relationship across which it is transacted has particular value given the complexity of religious practice in Amhara. Apparently contradictory discourses make more sense when we recognise that these emerge in particular encounters between experts and clients, rather than co-existing openly in a public sphere. The deliberate cultivation of ambiguity also has a part to play in the production of marginal or non-hegemonic knowledge practices.

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<sup>51</sup> See Feuchtwang 2010: 59 - "The propitiation and use of amoral and malign spirits for gambling, love, or revenge is the negative side of sacrificial offerings to deities that control them." Also Durkheim 1915: 410.

The purpose of a focus on knowledge, for both Barth and Lambek, is to recognise and illuminate internal cultural diversity, based on a conception of “cultures as particular conjunctions of incommensurate discourses” (Lambek 1993: 12). I have found such a conception necessary to understanding anything of the dynamics of Amhara religious practice in its extreme diversity. Barth’s tripartite framework for analysing knowledge – content, medium, relationship – helps us move away from homogenising models of culture towards an appreciation of the dynamics of expertise and secrecy. In Zege as elsewhere there are numerous traditions of knowledge whose value derives in large part from the fact that their contents and techniques are not widely known. Specialist knowledge takes time, possibly a lifetime, to acquire, and it becomes meaningful when enacted for or on behalf of people who do not share that knowledge. This is a practice-based approach to knowledge in two senses: first because acquiring knowledge takes work, and second because knowledge becomes meaningful when enacted. Amhara religious knowledge is more than an archive of traditional wisdom; it is a means for acting in the world.

Thinking of knowing as a type of work allows us to think of the unequal distribution of knowledge in terms of a Durkheimian division of labour<sup>52</sup>. In these terms religious life in Zege takes form under conditions of organic solidarity. The work and knowledge of priests makes sense only in the context of the work and knowledge of the lay people whom they serve. We can gain better understanding of Ethiopian Orthodox society by further including the work and knowledge of the various healers and other practitioners who work at the boundaries of Orthodoxy. The diversity of knowledge that Aspen notes (2001: 17) then begins to make sense as constituting a political economy of knowledge (see Lambek 1993: 95). Treating knowledge as a kind of work makes knowledge dynamic, conflictual, and creative, without denying the regularity or continuity which is also characteristic of Zege or any other society. Zege’s Orthodox

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<sup>52</sup> I take this idea, that the division of labour is integral to the production and transaction of knowledge, from a reading of Lambek, who speaks of ‘the division of religious labour’ in his analysis of knowledge and practice (1993: 61), and later discusses the division of historical labour (2002: 73-74, 139).



Christianity, I argue, only makes sense when considered as a system, but it is not a closed one. This chapter investigates the modes and traditions of manipulating spirit power and worldly efficacy at and beyond the edges of the authorising structure of the Orthodox Church.

### **Types of Experts, Types of Work**

Throughout this chapter I want to keep sight of the fact that much of Zege's economy of esoteric knowledge is an economy in the regular sense. This is a living for the experts who practise it, and in some cases they may have preferred, in an ideal world, not to have done this type of work, which often has troublesome moral connotations. One man I spoke to lived in abject poverty and told me that he no longer practised his divining and magical work (he specialised in the *jinn* spirits that live in Lake Tana, and the empty perfume bottles in his hut suggested to me that he might have been working quite recently) because he was now old and needed to prepare himself for heaven. He had done the spirit work to scrape a living, but now had to live a life of repentance<sup>53</sup>. Another man who sold potions and spells against evil spirits described his work as *yesiga sira*, the work of the flesh, and not to be confused with his religious life as a member of the Church.

Of the experts I will discuss, there are some whose work is generally seen to be morally problematic. I refer to these as *awaqí*, the knowers, although many in Zege call them *t'enqway*, witches. There is one specialist in Zege whose work nobody seems to consider troubling: he is Beza, the traditional doctor, who works with herbal remedies, western biomedicine, and spirit cures, but whose work does not involve enlisting the aid of spirit forces. Finally there are the most ambiguous and mercurial figures of all, the *debtera*, a class of people whose actions and status have caused by far the most confusion in Ethiopian scholarship. Debtera refers to non-ordained men who are able to sing the hymns

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<sup>53</sup> It is possible that he continued his spirit work in spite of what he told me, but in any case his explanation is instructive of the moral status of his work as he expected it to be perceived.

and liturgical chants of the church. Very often they have trained as deacons but not continued to ordination. In the eyes of people in Zege, this is usually because they do not maintain the sexual purity required of a priest (see also Hoben 1970: 216-17). This combination of religious learning with physical impurity appears to be a potentially dangerous and powerful combination, opening up various possibilities for effective and possibly illicit action in the world. A second meaning of debtera refers simply to a sorcerer whose magic is based on occult knowledge. These people are variously said to fly on clouds, and to be able to summon storms. A friend in Zege told me that a debtera had been hired to conjure snakes onto the site of a proposed football stadium in Bahir Dar, in order to halt construction.

Some people understand these two meanings of debtera to be separate, but there is always the possibility that they may be combined in one person. However, while all choristers are debtera, they do not all engage in esoteric practice, and those who do may do so in quite open and acceptable ways: writing prayer scrolls to be turned into amulets for protection against spirits, for example. In some contexts, debtera may simply refer to any person who is trained in the literature of the Church. I hope that my holistic approach to the division of knowledge in Zege will help provide some clarity as to what debtera actually do. The more important part of my argument will be that the various facets of the figure of the debtera tell us something about the workings of sacred power and its ambiguities, and that a view of esoteric practice as a whole helps us to understand this.

It is important to note that the ambiguity of the terms debtera and *awaqí* to refer to a whole range of powerful and knowledgeable people is probably not accidental. Levine's famous argument in *Wax and Gold* is that a 'cult of ambiguity' defines Amhara culture (1965: 10). While this is sometimes overstated, there is no doubt that it is common for people to employ deliberate vagueness and ambiguity in daily discourse, and this is particularly true in the world of esoteric expertise. This vagueness allows for wide variation in practice as well as great secrecy, so it would be a mistake to try and pin down too firmly the role of each

category of expert, or perhaps to categorise them at all. I focus on expertise and knowledge relations in order to show that the work of these experts takes the form of a series of encounters with clients who enlist them to perform some sort of efficacious action in the world. These meetings tend to be private, but encourage discussion, rumour and gossip, and so a discursive world of what these experts do arises that is parallel and not unconnected to their actual work. Finally I hope that this analysis will help us draw some conclusions about the ambiguities of the sacred in the context of effective action in the world. As Stewart argues in the case of Greek *exotiká*, I would like to emphasise that all of this action takes place within the Orthodox sphere and is part of an Orthodox Christian tradition, broadly construed: “from the village point of view there is only one tradition” (Stewart 1991: 248, see also 98, 246-49). I will therefore start with a discussion of the debtera, whose relationship to the Church is closest.

### **Debtera and the other side of Church Practice**

When I met people who were identified as debtera in Zege it was often in church, as they performed in the ritual chants. They were often involved in Church administrative affairs, too, and Abba S’om told me that debtera referred to ‘servants of the Church’ (*yebéte Kristiyan agilgay*). When I said I had heard of other things that debtera did, Abba S’om told me that the word had two meanings that were not related. Debtera dress as priests do, in a white turban and white *gabbi*, but do not carry the hand cross for giving blessing. But the man I grew to know best in Afaf told me he produced various medicines against spirits and goatskin prayer scrolls, since he knew Ge’ez. This particular man was a regular drinker and treated with both respect and distrust by the young men I knew best in Zege. He worked hard for the local church and used his expertise in various ways, not always clear, to make a living. If he did not actually sell darker magic – love spells or curses – then he at least was happy for it to be whispered that he was capable of such. In all of this he conformed closely to the popular idea of a debtera, a figure of respect and fear, one possibly tainted by his sexual

history, and with the knowledge and power to make things happen. By contrast, when people spoke of debtera flying on the clouds or performing spectacular magic, it was always at a remove, never of a specifically named person, and so never entangled in an actual social relationship.

What I think is crucial to understanding the figure of the debtera is, at least in the minds of many lay people, and possibly in practice, that many among the actual Church hierarchy – priests, deacons, monks – possess occult or esoteric knowledge, and may use that knowledge for personal or business reasons. After visiting a senior priest of Afaf with me, a young man, Yilikal, told me he was convinced that the priest knew love magic that would enable Yilikal to convince women to have sex with him, but that he had not yet won the man's trust enough to get him to admit it. I have heard stories of monks moonlighting in herbalism and selling various herbal cures, although this is less illicit than love spells and may be harmless. But most of all it emerged when I started asking people about it, that most people agree deacons to have magical powers or magical knowledge, and to be liberal in their use of it. Most people told me about vengeful magic, summoning hail storms to rain on particular houses and their fields, or worst of all, giving people medicine to make them fart uncontrollably; some said that deacons would fake hailstorms by throwing pebbles at people's corrugated roofs in order to scare them.

The common belief in the magical practices of the deacons concords with my analysis of the clergy as liminal figures (Chapter 3). It also illustrates, I think, an ambiguity in sacred power that is not always visible in the moral narrative of Christianity. This aligns with the theoretical history of work on the sacred and profane, since the ambiguity of the sacred receives due attention in Durkheim:

“the whole religious life gravitates about two contrary poles between which there is the same opposition as between the pure and the impure, the saint and the sacrilegious, the divine and the diabolic. But while these two aspects of the religious life oppose one another, there is a close kinship between them. In the first place, both have the same relation towards profane beings: these must abstain from contact

with impure things as from the most holy things. The former are no less forbidden than the latter: they are withdrawn from circulation alike. This shows that they too are sacred” (Durkheim 1915: 410).

This formulation may seem unduly dualistic: I am describing a sacred with an ambiguous underside, rather than two opposed poles. But a close reading reveals that Durkheim actually maintains a similar conception, in which the pure and impure sacred are mutable and may transform one into the other: “one object may pass from one to the other without changing its nature. The pure is made out of the impure, and reciprocally. It is in the possibility of these transmutations that the ambiguity of the sacred exists” (ibid. 411). Importantly to the present discussion of esoterica and expertise, what makes the sacred, whether pure or impure, is restriction from general circulation. Further, Durkheim says, “In a general way, the sacrilegious person is merely a profane one who has been infected with a benevolent religious force” (ibid. 410). As a description of the debtera, trained as a deacon but not ordained because of his sexual life, this is almost too perfect: sacred power, without the accompaniment of proper authorisation and containment/restriction, leads to magic.

In the context of the division of knowledge, what makes experts powerful is precisely the fact that their knowledge is esoteric. We can expand and support this point by looking at the media of debtera work, and also some of the moonlighting attributed to deacons. A great deal of the work debtera do for private clients is (a) textual, and (b) based on or written in Ge’ez. These combined facts mean that their products are automatically restricted, since Ge’ez is inaccessible to most, and writing to many lay people. A large part of a debtera’s business is writing out prayer scrolls in Ge’ez, which are then wrapped up and placed in an amulet worn round the neck. Of more illicit magic, love spells and curses, I know few details, for nobody would ever admit to preparing or buying them, but I have discussed these at length with people in Afaf, and there is agreement that the illicit powers of both debtera and deacons come from their learning and their familiarity with secret texts. In the popular imagination, then, there exists a body of esoteric literature of great power whose distinction from the hagiographies and other texts of church literature is not clear. It is worth

noting that in Zege every church possesses various texts, some of a great age, and some with famous illuminations. The monasteries that take tourists display these texts on a regular basis, so it is clear to all that churches do hold huge amounts of textual material of great value.

There is at least one sense, however, in which the clerical access to powerful or occult texts is more than gossip. There is an esoteric literature in Ethiopia, most famous among which is the *Awde Negest*, the “Circle of Kings”. Beza the traditional doctor has shown me this text, which he uses in some procedures, and said that while not widely read, it is quite famous. The parts of the book he showed me were similar to horoscopes, except one’s star-sign (*kokeb*) is derived from numerological analysis of the letters of one’s name, not from the date of birth. It also includes instructions for treatment of zar by persuading the spirit to jump into a chicken; the star-sign determines the colour of the chicken to be used. It contains also various formulae for divination.

I discussed this book with a priest I knew, who told me that he had indeed read it, and briefly considered using it in his youth before turning towards proper texts. He commented that the horoscopes gave predictions which were so specific as to be totally unconvincing, as if one twelfth of all people would have the same lives and die on the same day. But the conversation does show that this priest, at least, had read the *Awde Negest*, and read it quite carefully.

The mystical potency of text, literacy, and the Ge’ez language, I would argue, is an extension of their semiotic potency. That is, their power to produce effects in the world is not separate from their ability to convey information between minds but is a function of it. I am fairly sure that magical or divinatory action, whether construed as good, evil, or ambiguous, is always construed as enlisting spiritual agency, whether this is the agency of God, saints or angels, or more liminal spirits. This is as true of church holy water healings as it is for a debtera’s prayer scroll against demonic action, which is ineffective if the words are washed off (Hannig, personal communication). Some *awaqí*, too, are said to summon spirits into glasses of liquor in order to solicit action from them. The potency of text, I

believe, is because it is understood to be a medium to other powers. This point also helps to understand a distinction between herbal medicines and western medicines on the one hand, which are seen to work by their own agency, and spells on the other, which mediate the power of other beings. The first is morally unproblematic, the second deeply so.

Texts can instruct the expert how to mediate spirit power, or the text itself can act as the mediator. In either case mediation and restriction are the key aspects of the act: texts are a restrictive means of mediating knowledge: because they can be hidden easily, because few people know Ge'ez, and because literacy is limited and was historically more so.

The conceptual role of mystery in Orthodox Christianities is widely acknowledged (Hann & Goltz 2010: 13, see also my Introduction), with Ware identifying the central mystery as the relationship between matter/form and spirit (1980: 264). This is a formulation, incidentally, very close to the spirit of *Wax and Gold* that Levine (1965) identifies with Amhara culture: the notion that profound meanings can lie in simple forms. Part of what makes spirit agencies dangerous and powerful is that we do not fully understand them. They are usually imperceptible, their names change, their categories are unfixed, and their potency is known only through the things that mediate them. The potency of spirits, then, is a function of the division of knowledge and the asymmetries between experts and clients that it produces; and esoteric practice is very much a part of the Orthodox system.

The limited access to holy and occult texts and to esoteric knowledge is a major part of what makes them powerful. Magical practices and Orthodox ritual share the quality of restriction, mystery, and being set-apart, and these qualities are to a great extent what makes them powerful. They differ in that the restrictions of official ritual encompass the rules of physical purity and possess the authorisation of the Church hierarchy. Both may be construed as engaging with marginal power, but purity and hierarchy distinguish the morally authorised sacred from the morally ambiguous.

## **Zar Spirits and the Methodological Problems of Ambiguity**

I had originally intended to make *zar* possession the centre of my study, and had settled in Afaf assured by various people that there were *zar* to be found there. While I did see people possessed by *zar*, it took me almost a year to realise that, if there were organised possession cults as described elsewhere in the literature (Aspen 2001, Tubiana 1991, Young 1975, Morton 1973) in Zege, I was not going to see them, and that in all probability there were not. *Zar* were known to possess people at funerals, and on the eves of St Michael's day (because the *zar* are subordinate to Michael in the heavenly hierarchy) and New Year. I only saw *zar* at funerals, because the other possessions occur at night and in people's homes. Since the moral status of *zar* is ambiguous especially to Christians, there was no polite way to try to witness such an event. But what I learned from asking about *zar* around Afaf was that people denied that any sort of organised cult of possession existed anywhere in Zege, though it might do elsewhere. It did not help that there is no precise word for 'spirit medium'. The common term *bale zar* simply means 'one who has a *zar*' and could mean any possessed person, while the word *awaqí*, 'knower, knowledgeable one' is used interchangeably to refer to all of Zege's esoteric practitioners.

The discussion of *zar* does give helpful evidence of the ambiguity of spirit categories and the factual and moral disagreements which abound in Zege. Priests I spoke to insisted that *zar* were *seyt'an* and must be exorcised, while Beza the traditional doctor and some townspeople told me that you could never exorcise a *zar*, that you must build a relationship with it, and that *zar* moreover are not inherently evil, but are children of God. A middle-aged woman, Haregwa's sister, whom I had seen possessed at her father's funeral, described her condition as being like an illness, as something that happened to her on occasion. Every instance I have seen of *zar* possession was at a funeral, of a woman who was close to the deceased (who, coincidentally or not, was male). Each case involved indecipherable shouting, wailing, grunting, gesticulation and



in one case vomiting. One woman seemed to pass out at intervals before becoming possessed again. In each case the response of the observers was to do their best to ignore what was happening, to ask me if I was scared, and tell me not to be. This was mostly, I think, to reassure themselves – you must not admit to being afraid of a zar. In one case I am convinced that I saw a woman become possessed at a wedding: she rose from the crowd and began shouting and insulting the groom, but in a dissociated way that suggested possession. People told me later that she was a jilted ex-lover of the groom. Again the crowd did its best to pretend that she was not there, and some people even denied to me that she had been possessed.

So there certainly are zar in Zege, but since it is very difficult or even dangerous to talk about or acknowledge them, there is no clear picture of what they are like, and people's accounts of them vary greatly, although most agree that what distinguishes zar from other spirits is that they are person-like. As far as lay people are concerned, the association of zar with St. Michael's day demonstrates that they are very much part of an Orthodox cosmology, but their ambiguity does not easily fit into a largely Manichean model of angels and saints on one side and demons on the other. It will be seen that ambiguity is a major part of many of Zege's esoteric traditions, reflecting uncertainty and complexity at the margins of the hierarchical authorisation of religious practice by the Church hierarchy.

My attempts to speak to *awaqí* of any kind in the early months of fieldwork did not usually go well. This is partly due to the reliance of their professions on secrecy, and partly due to my own naivety and social clumsiness. Over time, I stopped seeking out esoteric practitioners for interviews, as it was a principle of fieldwork not to try to force knowledge from those who did not wish to share it. Much of the information in this chapter was learned from informal conversations with a range of people, and from observing the use of protective amulets, and from interviews with the traditional doctor, who was very knowledgeable but also widely respected. His work involves, as far as I have seen, little or no use of mediums to enlist spirit agency, and so is based more around trust than

mystique. He was thus a valuable and generous informant and shared a good amount of his eclectic knowledge.

My most comprehensive attempt to interview a spirit medium (I was still looking for zar cults at this point) was both disastrous and instructive. A few months into my stay in Afaf, my camera was stolen while moving rooms. I was prepared to accept the loss as a consequence of my own carelessness, as people had warned me before to guard my possessions better. But one of the teenagers in town suggested we go see Bayush, a woman who had been identified to me as an *awaqí* and a *bale zar*, and whom I had visited but failed to interview. I agreed, because I wanted to see what she would do, and potentially develop some kind of further acquaintance, and some of my friends indeed guessed that this, more than my camera, was my motivation for visiting the old lady.

Abebe accompanied me, with three other young men from town, and with hindsight it is obvious to me that this was an adventure for them, that they feared and revered Bayush, and would never be seen to be consulting her on their own account. At the time, though, I was blithely unaware of the social taboos I was helping them to break.

Bayush was elderly, blind, and apparently never left her hut where she sat by a smoky fire. We gave her incense and coffee and negotiated a fee with her female assistant who was slightly younger and quite mistrustful, and told her my camera had been stolen. She burned the incense and began twirling her rosary beads, and then told us that the camera had been taken by a boy with dreadlocks and a gap in his teeth, who had then taken it to Bahir Dar *Kebelle* (District) 11, but had not sold it yet. She gave enough further description that one of the boys thought he knew who was being identified, and we left. The boys wanted to go to Bahir Dar to find the alleged culprit, and I went with them, thoroughly unconvinced but at least aware that it would be undesirable for anybody to enter into a confrontation on my behalf. I still have little idea about what was going on in that hut except that I was out of my depth.

Anyway, we did not find anybody in Bahir Dar, and the matter began to fizzle out, until a few days later I was confronted on the street by an acquaintance, a friend of a close friend's family who had dreadlocks and a gap in his front teeth. He told me that the boys had reported my encounter with Bayush to the police, who had arrested him based on her evidence. He had spent that night in jail and wanted to know, not unreasonably, what on earth I thought I was doing. I was mortified and apologised as prolifically as I was able to, and fortunately for me he realised that, while naive and foolish, I had not set out to harm him (we became good friends in the end, but I still cringe when I think of the incident).

About a year later I was chatting in a coffee house when some friends raised the incident, which they had heard about as it happened, as had everyone else in town. They thought it was hilarious, and asked me what, precisely, I had expected to happen: "You went to a witch (*t'enqway*)!" I explained that I had thought she was a zar medium (which may have been true), a legitimate practitioner, and the people present stated that they were sure, and it was widely known, that the woman was malign and had probably faked the entire incident to settle a grudge against the boy with dreadlocks.

Bayush the medium was not wealthy. She lived in a bare and decrepit hut and was afflicted with elephantiasis of the ankles, common among poor and rural people in the area. But she made a living through consultations more or less like mine, and as the anecdote above shows, she cultivated enough mystique and authority that local police would arrest a man based on her divination. Her work is a telling example of a motif that recurs throughout Amhara culture: that of the power of the margins. I have suggested in Chapter 3 that priests' ability to work with the sacred derives from their social and spatial marginality. Bayush too is a marginal figure, who never shows her face out of doors, and whom people openly revile as a witch. This pattern of a society attributing special powers to those it excludes may be almost universal, but it still deserves comment here because it is so pronounced and because, as I argue, the pattern plays into dynamics of secrecy, hierarchy, and boundary definition that characterise Ethiopian Orthodoxy more broadly.

I believe that the correct response to these methodological problems – and early errors in my fieldwork – is to ask whether the ambiguity that confused me may in itself be a feature of the practices in question and in Zege more broadly. I had first been introduced to Bayush by a neighbour of mine who, I am sure, was trying his best to help me in my research. He was an intelligent middle-aged man, but I had not considered that, even if my questions about zar were clear, it might not be obvious which of the various experts in Afaf might fit my description of a person who organised ceremonies to contact zar spirits for healing purposes. I had not realised to what extent the mystique of people like Bayush would be integral to their trade. Furthermore, I would discover that the fact that most people avoid discussing spirits and spirit experts too deeply has important ethical associations relating to the use of ambiguity.

Levine has famously claimed that the aesthetics of *Wax and Gold*, a poetic cult of ambiguity, are definitive of Amhara life (1965). There are two levels on which this can be understood, of which Levine emphasises the first, the poetic and artistic appreciation of ambiguity. The second level, however, is more ethnographically apparent. This is the way that Ethiopian Christians (or perhaps Amhara in general; certainly people in Zege) use ambiguity in daily discourse to obscure what they are saying. It took some time for me to pick up on this mode of communication, as it can be extremely subtle, but it involves an intentional vagueness in light conversation where the speaker divulges a minimum of information, often less than her interlocutor needs to understand what she is saying. An example would be, instead of saying, “Did your mother send your sister to town to buy bread,” to simply ask, “Was she sent?” The listener can then ask further questions to fill in what details are necessary (who was sent, why etc.), but the speaker will be sure that she has not shared any more information than was necessary to establish understanding. I believe that this calculated vagueness serves two functions: firstly, it allows people to assert some control over the flow of information in a small community where people tend to know other people’s business. But it can also perform or index closeness: for two people to be able to talk while withholding certain information requires a

significant shared background. It shows that we share enough understanding to not need to mention certain things. It can be respectful to be vague, since you do not attempt to force an interpretation of events on the person you are talking to, or to extract all of their secrets. Vagueness and indeterminacy can be an ethical prerogative.

This ethic of ambiguity applies also to an unwillingness to interrogate spirit practices. It is commonly understood that such things take place, but they often relate to peoples personal projects and ambitions – trying to alleviate suffering, gain an advantage in trade, or similar. There is an extent to which both practising as a spirit expert, and visiting a spirit expert, are understandable if improper things to do; we might all like access to a little more power. A variety of social actors may co-operate in maintaining the ambiguity of spirit practices.

### **Knowledge and Medicine**

Beza, the traditional doctor (*bahilawí hakím*), is a unique figure in Zege's knowledge economy. Said to be very wealthy, he lives on a hill in the forest some twenty minutes' walk from Afaf town. His hut is constructed from very solid hardwood and appears to be quite old and of very good quality. It is decorated on the inside with Orthodox images such as Gabriel rescuing the righteous from Nineveh (a common motif), and pictures of his sons in university graduation gear. I have visited him many times and he has always received me hospitably, although he deals with a constant stream of patients some of whom, I am told, travel for days to see him. These patients wait in his compound, some having been carried up the steep hill on stretchers, and he has a separate hut that he uses as a consultation room.

In Zege tales of Beza's skill have taken on global scope: my friend Tomas told me that a man from Dubai, afflicted with some terrible but unknown ailment of the penis, had after years of medical consultations in various countries, made the trip to Zege to see Beza, who had cured him. The man, Tomas said, and had

rewarded Beza with incalculable riches, and the fact that he still lived in his house on the hill just went to show how dedicated he was to his work.

Beza learned his traditional skills from his father. As he describes it, his knowledge is based largely on deep familiarity with the flora of Zege and its potential uses – he tells me about antiseptic poultices and remedies for the liver made from local plants. He also has extensive knowledge about spirits and spirit-induced illness. He was able to give me comprehensive information about the nature of zar and their individual names and behaviours. Much more important for his medical practice is his knowledge of *buda* spirits, one of the most common afflictions. Symptoms can range from yawning, to wild behaviour, to collapsing and seizures, to death. I have seen a number of *buda* attacks in Zege in which people collapsed and they are quite striking, and I heard of one child's death that was attributed to *buda*.

Every woman knows a number of home remedies for *buda*, such as making the patient inhale incense smoke from a gourd, but for all serious cases you go to Beza. On one occasion Tomas's three-month old baby was crying uncontrollably, which was out of character. He and his wife suspected Buda, and so at two in the morning they set off through the forest in pitch darkness to find Beza, who was able to cure the child. He later told me that such emergency visits were commonplace.

Beza also incorporates a strong understanding of 'modern' medicine (*zemenawí*, his term) into his practice, and explained to me that he has spent a number of years studying science in Bahir Dar. He also works with various NGO-run training programs for traditional doctors, and collaborates with a vaccination program which runs from his compound every month on the day of St George (a farmers' holiday). I had a fairly typical consultation with Beza on one occasion when a burrowing insect had taken up residence in my foot. He responded by producing a packaged, sterile needle and a tube of antibiotic ointment, and painlessly removed the parasite from my toe, before neatly dressing the wound. As I was leaving he gave me a small package of powder, which I was to seal into a

necklace and wear around my neck to protect me from *buda* (many people in Zege wear something similar). This act of kindness had nothing to do with my wound, merely a concern for my safety.

We talked a good deal about Beza's referral policy, because he was a crucial intermediary between patients and the Afaf health clinic. Beza would refer a large number of cases, including anybody he suspected might have HIV, to the clinic, but he regards his role as an educator; he told me he spends a good amount of his time explaining the purpose of HIV medicine to patients and reassuring them about the process. He had been involved with a number of NGO outreach programs and took his role in these projects seriously. In my own estimation of his professional success, I would suggest that a clarity about what he was and was not able to cure, the willingness to refer patients if necessary, played a large part in the maintenance of his reputation. He was widely seen not to make exaggerated claims about his abilities.

It was always striking to me how much busier Beza's compound was than the local clinic. The clinic workers did a good job with limited resources, but it was clear that most people's preference in most cases was to go to Beza first. I can suggest a number of reasons for this. A number of rural health clinics in Ethiopia have experienced communication problems between their young, urban, educated staff and the local population. This makes clinics seem slightly alien and unfamiliar: in the eyes of many clinicians, what they had to offer was their superior education, which should be accepted without question and so for many people trips to the clinic were marked with distrust and confusion. Beza, meanwhile, is of the area and has excellent bedside manner. He has a status that his patients recognise, and he is able to understand illness in much the way they do. We had one discussion in which he explained to me the difference between bacteria and spirits (spirits are invisible no matter what tools you use), and offered me his opinion that while science was quite good at dealing with bacteria, it really did not understand spirits. He did his best to combine both sets of expertise, and because of his reputation, patients were more likely to trust him when he advised that they visit the clinic. There is now a fair amount of

recognition that traditional doctors can play key educational and mediatory roles in health provision in Ethiopia, so various organisations are trying to develop more links with experts like Beza.

Finally, on the morality of his work, I do not think Beza acts as a mediator for spirits or invisible powers: both he and his patients understand his medicines as being efficacious in themselves, not as calling on other powers. I believe this is important to understanding the differences between marginal figures like the *awaqí* and a popular and respected practitioner like Beza. While some of his work is based on trade secrets, he does not cultivate mystery, and he is quite open about the nature of his work.

### **Conclusions: The power of the Margins**

In the last chapter I discussed the marginality of priests, and argued that this marginality was necessary to the power they wield on earth. This is because the power comes from elsewhere, and the position of the priests is mediatory, sitting in between realms. This chapter suggests that the power of esoteric experts derives from a similar marginality. The comparison between Beza the doctor and other types of experts suggests that what makes their work ambiguous and questionable is the fact that it harnesses spirit agency, whereas Beza's makes use of the inherent potency of plants and other medicines. The stereotype of the *debtera*, trained in the priesthood but sexually unrestrained, indicates the logic of the power of the margins: sacred hierarchy points to something pure and powerful, and purity means otherworldliness. As I have been arguing, it involves isolation of the embodied elements of the person. The *debtera* compounds the argument about the importance of sacred-profane boundaries, because he embodies the transgression of these boundaries.

The power of marginality may be a feature of hierarchical systems, as Turner seems to suggest (1969: 108-110); as I discuss in Chapter 6, marginalised people in Zege and throughout Amhara (and beyond) are frequently seen as sources of



spiritual threat. The ambiguity of the clergy in the eyes of the people may stem from a widespread doubt about purity, and a feeling that priests are subject to the same failings as the rest of us, but have certain access to spiritual power due to their position. But I have tried to suggest that the dubious power of the margins relates to a wider habitus of ambiguity that pervades life in Zege. It is not just that people tend to guard their personal information to a high degree (in Chapter 5 I describe the skill with which people avoid talking about politics and recent history); but that people usually expect other people to guard information about themselves and often, therefore, to be up to something more than meets the eye. This mistrust in itself can be a valuable tool for experts wishing to develop their cachet or aura of power, but also means that people will always suspect that specialist knowledge is open to misuse.

The culture of ambiguity lays the groundwork, but what really makes the specialist knowledge of certain experts morally troublesome is its communicative aspect: mediation with invisible, non-human powers. More specifically, it is mediation that is not authorised by the Church, with powers that have not, unlike saints, been sanctified by the church. Beza's practice is not a problem because, I argue, the Orthodox Church does not need to authorise every tradition of healing or of specialist knowledge, but only those practices that involve mediation with invisible beings. This would seem to lend support to those who would claim that religion is in itself mediation (see Engelke 2010a: 371, 374-77; de Vries 2001: 19), because mediation is the logic by which Orthodox Christians in Zege judge what is the proper domain of Church authority and what is not.

## Chapter 5

### The Christian Landscape: Deep Time and the Shade of History

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*I myself during a rather gloomy captivity, struggled a good deal to get away from a chronicle of those difficult years (1940-45). Rejecting events and the time in which events take place was a way of placing oneself to one side, sheltered, so as to get some sort of perspective, to be able to evaluate them better, and not wholly to believe in them*

Fernand Braudel, *History and the Social Sciences*

Braudel's description of his experience as a prisoner of war in Germany provides the personal background for his lifelong emphasis on the history of the *longue durée*, his view of discontinuity as a 'great wound' as opposed to the 'shelter' of the grand timescale, the "semi-stillness around which all of history gravitates" (Harris 2004: 168, 162). To focus solely on *l'histoire événementielle*, the history of events, is for Braudel to allow disturbances on the surface of things to obscure the deep underlying wholeness and continuity which is their true nature, if seen from the right perspective. In this chapter I want to argue that Braudel's attitude resembles to a profound degree the historical consciousness and practice of the people of Zege. In both cases a preference for and emphasis on historical continuity commingles with a practical understanding that foregrounding the long view can be an effective way to de-emphasise suffering.

To speak of 'historical consciousness and practice' is to speak of historicity: "a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions" (Hirsch & Stewart 2005: 262). For Hirsch and Stewart, 'historicity' as an analytic relativises the Western concept of history within a broader, cross-culturally applicable, comparative question: how do past and future take form in and articulate with the present.

This is also the approach of Michael Lambek:

“if Western historicity (at least in the twentieth century) can be summed up by the much invoked figure of Benjamin’s allegorical Angel of History, that is hardly the Sakalava vision. Instead of turning back toward the mounting ruins of the past onto which the angel mournfully gazes, Sakalava face the future, bearing the past on their backs, carrying it with them” (Lambek 2002: 12).

This chapter is an investigation into Zege’s historicity, in particular how the material economic and religious environment carries selective aspects of a sanctified deep past into the present.

The context for this explicit preference for history of the long duration is a material continuity evident in the monastery-churches of Zege and, so it is said, the forest they inhabit. This chapter explains how, for Zege’s Orthodox Christians, the history of the region is contained in the environment, and in the relationships between the monasteries, the inhabitants of the peninsula, and the coffee forest that provides their income. Zegeña trace the planting of the first coffee to the arrival of the first monk on the previously unforested and uninhabited peninsula. Human history, church history and the environmental history of the forest in this account are one, and this unity is central to Zegeña Christian understandings of themselves and their relationship to the land.

Braudelian historicities of the *longue durée* present certain dilemmas, however. In addition to effacing painful memories, accounts of deep continuity tend to efface politics and power relations in their entirety, and so too easily become ideological tools of the powerful. Braudel’s rejection of events entails an effort, as he says, “not wholly to believe in them” (in Harris 2004: 169). We must be wary of such historical disappearing acts. As Harris notes: “it is commonplace for assertions of – and celebrations of – deep continuity to be associated with aristocratic and ruling elites, or at the very least with right-wing nationalism. There is a triumphalist dimension to them, a refusal of defeat” (Harris 2004: 168). Much of public discourse about Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has taken this form: celebratory accounts of the unique Ethiopian Orthodox traditions have

the effect of obscuring the non-Orthodox peoples of Ethiopia and the complex history of Imperial conquest and religious and ethnic interaction that have characterised Ethiopia's history (Donham 1986, 2002, Clapham 2002, Holcomb & Ibssa 1990). Of equal importance are the often steep power gradients that have long existed within Orthodox society. I understand my job as an ethnographer not to unpick or challenge my informants' accounts of their own history, but to understand as fully as possible how they inhabit that history, and how those accounts contribute to the making of the present. The challenge facing this chapter is to give due attention to the importance of deep religious histories for life in Zege while remaining attentive to the important and often difficult fractures that these histories gloss over.

I had entered the field hoping to talk to people about the changes Ethiopia had undergone in recent decades. And yet every attempt I made to find out what had happened, for example, under the Derg (1974-91), received the response that very little had happened in Zege, that things had remained basically the same. People of all ages answered in more or less the same way; some very old people would talk about the Italians, but always pointed out that, since the churches had not been harmed, the occupation had not had any lasting effect. There were in fact many contexts in which people cited the continuing integrity of Zege's seven churches as indicating that there had been no significant upheaval. It would not be too strong to say that for Zegeña, the churches are a synecdoche of the well-being of the community as a whole.

The history of the churches stands for the history of the landscape of Zege as a whole, because Zegeña trace the churches' defining influence on local ecology and economy back to the first human habitation of the peninsula. The inextricable intertwining of religious and ecological history is what enables people to trace a continuous lived history to the thirteenth century. This history is tangible, being embedded in the environment, and hence can be construed as more meaningful, and more durable, than political or evenemential histories. However, the material history evident in Zege's forest and churches brings only certain parts of the past into the present. The continuity that people in Zege

identify as integral to their history is thus more than just an ideological preference; it is the material result of deliberate and sustained work.

The Zege Peninsula is unique in Orthodox Christian, Highland Ethiopia for the coffee forest which provides its 10000 inhabitants with a major part of their income. Throughout the rest of Orthodox Ethiopia, there is a strong association between Orthodox Christians and plough agriculture, which is evident in the historical literature (Hoben 1973, Levine 1964: 55-59). This means that most land that is inhabited by humans has been cleared for ploughing. People in Zege, apparently universally, attribute the preservation of the Zege forest to the presence of the seven churches of Zege (actually three monasteries and four churches, but the terms are used interchangeably, for each monastery includes a church), for which the Peninsula is famous. The reason for this association of the forest with the churches is to be found in the history of the foundation of Zege's first church, which is also the history of the first human habitation of the Peninsula.

The story, which countless informants have recounted for me, runs as follows: The Abune Betre Maryam (Literally, Father Staff-of-Mary) came from central Shewa, where his parents had prayed for a son who would become a devoted servant of God. After years of prayer in seclusion, Betre Maryam was commanded to found the land of Zege – miraculously sailing across Lake Tana on his staff, he reached the then-barren, unforested, uninhabited Peninsula, whereupon he set to prayer again. In a vision, he encountered St George, who commanded him to found a monastic community there. On realising that this community would need to be fed, Betre Maryam prayed for guidance, and was instructed to break his staff into three pieces and plant it in the ground. The staff miraculously grew into the first coffee, hops and *ades*<sup>54</sup> plants on the peninsula, which would come to provide an income for the monastic community and all later inhabitants who would come to live there<sup>55</sup>. Betre Maryam struck a

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<sup>54</sup> A herb used to scent butter

<sup>55</sup> It is significant that these are cash crops rather than foodstuffs, as I will discuss later.

covenant with St George, that no ploughing was to take place on the peninsula, so that the coffee could grow, and in return no inhabitant of Zege would ever be harmed by wild animals or lightning. What began as a monastic community soon attracted a lay population, although the timing of this is not clear. Church literature marks the founding of the first monastery in Zege in 1264 Eth. Cal. (c1271 Gregorian) – and this was the founding story to which people still referred me, as the definitive moment in their history, in the Ethiopian year of 2001 (2009 Gregorian). Other events are marked in the religious history of Zege, principally the founding of further monasteries, and visits from kings and emperors, all of whom left valuable donations as the monasteries gained wider fame. But it was to this story of the foundation of the first monasteries and the gift of the first coffee plant that people returned whenever I entered into any discussion of the past; questions which focused inescapably on more recent history were generally met with the response that Zege had avoided the worst of the upheavals that had affected the rest of the country.

One reason for this is undoubtedly that people did not wish to discuss political history with me, an outsider about whose motivations it was hard to be sure. I told people I was there to study Orthodox Christianity in Zege, and most took this to be a valuable project in which they would help to make sure I got my facts right. Political questions and political memories were quite another matter, and as people steered conversations away from the subject of conflict past or present I decided at an early point not to push the matter. In any case, it was not just to me that people in Zege presented an image of the peace and continuity of the peninsula's history: it is a story they tell to all visitors to the peninsula, and to themselves, and that they live out on a daily basis.

At an early point in my fieldwork I was contacted by the Abbot of one of the major monasteries on the peninsula. He wanted to teach me about the history of the churches and the peninsula, and gave me a copy of the pamphlet, in English and Amharic, that the church circulates to visitors. It contains the story of Abune Betre Maryam recounted above, and of the ongoing history of the monasteries, in particular visits from Emperors and the gifts they bestowed, which remain in the

monasteries' museums. In several ensuing discussions with the Abbot, he explained to me the role of the churches in the conservation of Zege's forest: it was the churches that forbade the use of ploughs or the keeping of large livestock on the Peninsula, so ensuring the continuity of the sacred coffee forest that had first been granted to the Abune Betre Maryam. The authority of the church, as he explained it, stood as a protection against short-term interests by people who might wish to gain from ploughing the land, and so protected the environmental well-being of the community. Further discussions with people in Zege confirmed that this history was both well-known and generally agreed upon: the churches were indeed the guardian of the ancient forest and so the protectors of the economic well-being of the people. Many mention the promise given to Betre Maryam that neither wild animal nor lightning strike would harm a person on Zege, as indicative of the blessed status of the place. This is understood in terms of harmony between man, beast, and climate, an implicit contrast with the rest of the post-lapsarian world. This is the history I will be investigating throughout this chapter. As a history of churches and trees and of local environment and economics I will discuss its material dimensions: the landscape and the buildings and things that carry Zege's past into its present. I will show that the physical maintenance of church and forest – through ritual care, plant husbandry, and church prohibitions on clearing the land – is indeed integral to the lived history of Zege. Therefore, the continuity that Zegeña emphasise, far from a mere ideological construct, is a very real aspect of the life of the peninsula.

The fly in the ointment is the history of power relations regarding the ownership and use of Zege's forest land: most troublingly, persuasive accounts of the practice of slavery in the Zege forest until the mid-1930s (Abdussamad 1997). Oral testimonies gathered by Abdussamad in the late 1970s and 1980s tell of Muslim slavers living and trading in Afaf and of apparently widespread use of slaves by the clergy, who controlled most of the land in the Peninsula. He also provides accounts from the Sudan which seem to confirm the existence of the trade in the Zege area. Rouaud, too, refers to Zege's location on established slave-trading routes from Sudan (Rouaud 1991: 45). While I never heard people

discuss slavery as something once practised on their own lands, it is possible to perceive remnants and relicts of this history in the social life of the area. Youths in Afaf town jokingly referred to their darker-skinned friends as *Babbi Bariyew*, “Little Slave”, and discourses of dark skin, slavery, and connections to Western Ethiopia and Southern Sudan were present in various other parts of daily discourse.

Recent studies by scholars of development indicate that land disputes remain common on the peninsula (Tihut 2009, Rahel 2002, 1999). The land reforms of 1975 redistributed land from church control (they report) to individual households, and further reapportionments in 1996 aimed at more equitable distribution (Tihut 2009: 86). However, Tihut reports that female-headed households in particular have had difficulty gaining access to land and that hence their children have become a generation of landless youth, frequently forced to resort to illegal logging for survival (2009: 3). Since the trees they cut (and I too have heard accounts of this happening) provide crucial shade for the development of the coffee, the environmental consequences are significant.

The story of Zege held by most of its inhabitants, of the sanctity of the forest, does not exactly deny the existence of such power relations. Rather it relegates contingent relations of power and land disputes, for better or worse, to a position of secondary importance compared to the overarching religious history of the land, that of the churches and of Christian practice. Even those who challenge the received narrative in the strongest terms (Abdussamad 1997, Tihut 2009) accept that church prohibitions on ploughing have been decisive in ensuring the continuity of the forest whose usufruct is now divided among the inhabitants of Zege<sup>56</sup>, under state ownership.

Beyond a certain point it is difficult to be sure about the environmental history of the peninsula. Tihut claims that the land was predominantly church-controlled

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<sup>56</sup> According to Tihut’s figures the average household farms 0.74 Ha of land, of which 0.6 Ha is occupied by coffee, the remainder being mainly mango, lemon, and hops (Tihut 2009: 81).



during the period of the monarchy (1855-1974); we know from Richard Pankhurst that the coffee forest was already described as flourishing in 1830 (R. Pankhurst 1968: 202). What is crucial for understanding the current situation and environment of Zege is the reform and re-assessment of Orthodox Christianity after the Derg land reforms of 1975.

Numerous sources speak of a new kind of Christian identity emerging after imperial power and the associated influence of the Church crumbled (Clapham 1988, Bonacci 2000, Marcus 2002), and for Amhara Christians a quite different sort of engagement with the church has emerged than existed before. Orthodox Christian identity is now something that people assert in far more active fashion, and this has been the case since very shortly after the first attempts of the Derg to dissolve Church power in the mid-1970s.

### **Church Reform and New Orthodoxies**

While the Derg had initially adopted standard Marxist principles on religion and made early moves to disempower the Orthodox Church, it quickly became clear stage that it would be difficult or impossible to uproot religious loyalties at the local level. Rather, the Derg sought to co-opt and subordinate Orthodox Christianity into its revolutionary project (Donham 1999: 142). Bonacci documents how the Derg was able to purge the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church and replace it with compliant officials from the Patriarch downwards, and to effectively detach the Church from its historical position of influence on State matters: "With the revolution and the arrival of the Derg, the EOC lost the central place it held for centuries in the Ethiopian system of power. Confined to the periphery of Ethiopian society, the image of the institution was radically changed. As the existence of other religious institutions had been highlighted the EOC could not be considered any longer to aggregate nor represent the majority of believers in Ethiopia." (Bonacci 2000: 39). However, this institutional attack did not extend to local parishes (ibid: 27). Rather, the Church responded by becoming far more active at parish level – contrary to stereotypes of the Orthodox Church being slow-moving and resistant to change – and bringing

about something of a revival: "The survival of the Church was dependent on its ability to create new structures and adjust to the new ways of life...The Church actively improved its social structures, with a larger involvement in Parish Councils as well as in family and community development. The establishment of clergy training centres and expanding of Sunday schools also gradually enhanced education levels and spiritual engagement" (ibid. 40). Both Bonacci and Clapham report a significant religious revival after 1977: "Christianity was then flourishing as a refuge. The youth, disappointed by the government's policy turned back in large numbers to the churches...after 1978 we can almost speak of a spiritual renewal. The phenomenon was also reflected by the increase in church building during the Derg period. The nationalisation of urban and rural land boosted access to public funding and initiatives: in and around Addis Ababa, fourteen new churches have been built since 1975" (ibid: 40, see also Clapham 1988: 155, Marcus 2002).

The reassertion of Orthodox belonging continues to this day and, as Marcus describes, is often expressed in contributions to the building of new churches (2002). Evidence of church collections can be seen throughout Orthodox Ethiopia, and donations for the upkeep and restoration of churches were an important practice and topic of discussion during my time in Zege. As I discuss elsewhere, preaching and Sunday School have become key parts of Orthodox practice where they were not before (Chaillot 2002: 64-70) and the para-church organisations such as the Association of the Saints (*Mahibere Kidusan*) have become key actors in the explicit assertion of Orthodox identities and values.

The other important development in Zege has been the advent of tourism and the external recognition of the historical importance of Zege's churches. There is now an extended public, national and international, to which the peninsula and the churches must present themselves, and also key streams of income to be gained by emphasising the antiquity of the churches and the special status of the forest.

However, I would resist any suggestion that the notion of the forest as sacred is merely a construction for external consumption, or a response to external expectations about history and authenticity. In the rest of this chapter I will examine the relationship between religious practice and the other practices of dwelling on the peninsula, to argue that the designation of sanctity stems from embedded practices and lived social structures that are integral to patterns of Orthodox Christian being and belonging in Zege.

### **Sanctity and the Forest**

The idea discussed above, that relations of land and power are subsumed within a wider narrative of sanctity, is consonant with anthropological discussions of the nature of ritual authority. Lambek, building from Rappaport, offers a model for understanding this situation when he suggests that: “precedents are organized within a temporally graduated hierarchy of sanctity such that smooth transmissibility at some levels enables change – and irony and self-consciousness – at others. The sanctity of core truths both offsets and is protected from the irony. This hierarchy enables a partial autonomy for political action and conversely protects the sacred from corruption by the worldly” (Lambek 2002: 267). This is true of Zege on a number of levels. As described, the hierarchy of sanctity helps to produce a narrative of continuity and holiness of the peninsula even while fluctuating and sometimes deeply exploitative power relations pertain, and while land reform changes utterly the relation of church to people and people to land. Furthermore, the construction of sanctity in Zege places it in a specific kind of relationship with the surrounding farmlands and the nation as a whole.

It is very noticeable in my fieldnotes that those who volunteered their reminiscences about political change had almost all been soldiers, and were talking about periods of service away from home – not in Zege itself. Events are construed as things that happen elsewhere, while Zege has a special status, seemingly exempt from history. This idea of Zege as a special, set-apart place is

possible because of its environmental distinction from the surrounding area. I think it is significant that in the founding narrative, Abune Betre Maryam is given cash crops rather than staples to sustain the community, for this meant, and still means today, that Zege's income would depend on interaction with the surrounding farmland. This means that Zege always stands in contrast and mutual interdependence with these ploughed areas. While the farmland supplies Zege with food, by implication Zege does the holy work for the people of the farmland. It helps that the forest is mostly coffee, a product associated with social togetherness and hospitality (see Chapter 6).

I have described in my Introduction how separations are maintained between church space and areas of food production, because food and work are worldly things. Churches are associated with forests throughout Orthodox Ethiopia, with some commentators suggesting symbolic links to the Garden of Eden (Beeland 2011). What distinguishes Zege is that the entire inhabited environment is forest, and so maintains a separation and a holiness of its own. When people from Zege travel to the village of Wanjeta, in open farmland, and visit the church, they enter a forested area adjacent to the ploughed fields. In this small patch of forest there are no houses, only the church. The contrast between open landscape and church forest is clear here, and it helps by contrast to define Zege as the place where everything is forested, and so everything is associated with the churches.

Alongside understandings of the sanctity of forests stands evidence of the charisma of the church-monasteries: their ability to draw admirers, gifts, and resources from afar. This applies both to the tourists who currently visit on a daily basis, and the Emperors whose gifts the Churches of Zege still display. According to monks at Azwa Maryam, these extend from the Emperor Amde Tsion in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to Haile Selassie in the 20<sup>th</sup>, and they have the gold crowns and silver crosses to prove it. I will argue that the continuity – much of it manifest in the physical environment – of churches and forest is integral to their sanctity and so to their continuing ability to attract wealthy people to share in their aura.

Continuity is not the opposite of change; as Braudel points out, the difference is simply one of perspective. Lambek's account of Sakalava historicity, cited above, makes a similar point: in a hierarchy of time-scales, day-to-day change – irony, inconsistency, fracture – may be encompassed by the larger time-scale of smooth transmission. Sanctity, for Rappaport, is associated with the broadest time-scales, those that approach eternity and timelessness; in the Christian cosmos, God and timelessness may be inseparable (in the sense that God is associated with Ultimate Sacred Postulates, which tend towards eternal truth, Rappaport 1999: 277-281).

The question thus emerges: how do shorter, comparatively changeable time-scales relate to the *longue durée*? For Rappaport, the answer is ritual, which I discuss below. First, though, I want to address the relationship between the material environment and cultural transmission. In Zege, that means focusing on how people move, interact, struggle and cooperate in a shared environment of church buildings and coffee trees that links them to broader realities: movement and multiplicity at lower levels produce comparatively stable patterns at higher ones.

One way to approach this is from Ingold's relational, environmentalist approach to dwelling. Ingold writes that “there is no opposition, in terms of the relational model, between continuity and change. Change is simply what we observe if we sample a continuous process at a number of fixed points, separated in time” (Ingold 2000:147). The relational model he refers to is simply one in which persons are construed as being made by their interactions and relationships with humans and non-humans over the course of a lifetime, as well as by their genetic material. The change that Ingold describes is continuous, in that it occurs on an organism's 'life-path', which can be construed as unfolding on a line: “Both plants and people, we could say, 'issue forth' along lines of growth, and both exist as the sum of their trails” (ibid. 144). Every life, then, is a continuous process of change, and the defining attribute of continuity is that it happens on a path or line. Similarly, continuity of tradition does not imply a pre-existing body of

knowledge which is passed down more or less intact from one generation to the next; Ingold argues that the very concept of 'generations' interrupts the continuity between past and present. Rather, tradition consists of following the path of one's predecessors:

“If, however, as the relational model implies, the source of cultural knowledge lies not in the heads of predecessors but in the world that they point out to you – if, that is, one learns by discovery while following the *path* of an ancestor – then words, too, must gather their meanings from the contexts in which they are uttered. Moving together along a trail or encamped at a particular place, companions draw each other's attention, through speech and gesture, to salient features in their shared environment. Every word, spoken in context, condenses a history of past usage into a focus that illuminates some aspect of the world. Words, in this sense, are instruments of perception as much as tools are instruments of action” (ibid: 146).

This is a paean to the indexical qualities of language (and culture), in which the deepest kinds of meaning are those which are tied to a shared external world.

The environment is therefore critical to this conception of continuity and, by extension, tradition. I illustrate this with one final quotation:

“to live in the world is also to inhabit it. Thus a way of speaking is, in itself, a way of living in the land. Far from serving as a common currency for the exchange of otherwise private mental representations, language celebrates an embodied knowledge of the world that is already shared thanks to people's mutual involvement in the tasks of habitation. It is not, then, language *per se* that ensures the continuity of tradition. Rather it is the tradition of living in the land that ensures the continuity of language. Conversely, to remove a community of speakers from the land is to cut language adrift from its generative source of meaning, leaving it as a vestige of a form of life that has long since been overtaken by representation as an *object* of memory” (ibid: 147).

Traditional knowledge is, in this formulation, indexical; it is meaningful only in connection with the object it describes. Cultural continuity is thus dependent on uninterrupted inhabitation of the land. This may help to illustrate why it is only soldiers who have been posted away from home who in my experience discuss recent social change.

When Ingold speaks of 'continuous inhabitation', this must include those parts of human life that are intentionally concerned with the maintenance of certain aspects of the environment. This is equally important whether the things being maintained are 'built' or not (Ingold 1993: 162). The trees of the coffee forest owe their existence to human ministrations just as much as the churches do, and without either the trees or the churches, humans could not exist as they do in Zege. There are simply no grounds for separating human action or 'culture' from the rest of the landscape. Here Ingold's discussion of Bruegel's painting *The Harvesters* is serendipitous enough that I will quote it at length:

"It is instructive to ask: how does the church differ from the tree? They have more in common, perhaps, than meets the eye. Both possess the attributes of what Bakhtin (1981:84) calls a 'chronotope' - that is, a place charged with temporality, one in which temporality takes on palpable form. Like the tree, the church by its very presence constitutes a place, which owes its character to the unique way in which it draws in the surrounding landscape. Again like the tree, the church spans human generations, yet its temporality is not inconsonant with that of human dwelling. As the tree buries its roots in the ground, so also people's ancestors are buried in the graveyard beside the church, and both sets of roots may reach to approximately the same temporal depth. Moreover the church too resonates to the cycles of human life and subsistence. Among the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, it is not only seen, but also heard, as its bells ring out the seasons, the months, births, marriages and deaths. In short, as features of the landscape, both the church and the tree

appear as veritable monuments to the passage of time" (Ingold 1993: 169).

This is to say, churches and trees transcend human lifespans, and so stand as monuments to a community that existed before its current members were born, and which will continue after they die (cf. Rival 1998, Bloch 2005a). This attention to the "temporality of the landscape" is exactly what I am looking for to reflect the way my friends in Zege talk about the forest as being due to their founding father, Abune Betre Maryam. It allows for a perspective in which "the present is not *marked off* from a past that it has replaced or a future that will in turn replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself, like refractions in a crystal ball" (Ingold 1993: 159). For Zegeña the presence of the monasteries is above all what carries the past into the present.

The monasteries were built to last, with foundations of stone imported to the Peninsula, and massive wooden support posts, of a quality that would be difficult to find now in northern Ethiopia. The roofs, however, are thatch, and have been replaced many times since the foundation, just as the paintings within, some dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, have been restored in more or less contemporary styles<sup>57</sup>. What is important is not that things have remained unchanging, but that the buildings, already designed for sturdiness, have been the objects of continuous acts of renewal; otherwise they would very quickly have been consumed by vegetation.

We can interpret Ingold's rubric of 'landscape' in terms of material semiotics, as the sum total of things, utterances, or material forms by which people connect to each other and by which they circulate representations among themselves. The texts of Zege – hagiographies, histories, copies of the Psalms – tie the local tradition in with both a national and international Christian history which has been built on a model of transferability between different places and landscapes.

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<sup>57</sup> The updating of the paintings suggests a very different attitude to time and value than what is usual in European art – see below for further discussion.



But the material semiotic approach points to the external reality of these texts. As media of the religious knowledge of Zege they too are part of the life-world of the Peninsula, common points of reference within the landscape for those with the training and authorisation to read them.

That authorisation is essential, because the image of Zege's religious landscape as a network of people and material signs is only sustainable if we recognise that not all connections are equal or accessible to all. Hierarchical relationships, as discussed in Chapter 3, involve restriction of certain connections to authorised elites, in this case the priesthood, who guard the content of Zege's sacred texts closely. Hierarchy also pertains in relations to the land and questions of ownership and labour, whether it be in the semi-feudal system of Imperial times in which the powerful owned both land and people, or in post-redistribution land politics with their own difficulties and inequalities. To return to the point raised at the start of this section: continuity and smooth transition may relate intimately to hierarchy, as the next section will discuss further.

### **Ritual and Material Continuity**

The role of ritual in forging continuity from the past to the present has been variously noted (Bloch 1977, Connerton 1990, Rappaport 1999). A crucial point of agreement is that rituals are encoded at some point in the past by someone other than the performers and that this isolates the form of the ritual from the diverse intentions and attitudes of its participants (Bloch 1974, 2005b, Rappaport 1999: 24). Both also argue that participation in rituals establishes people's status as part of a greater social whole, such that to later oppose that whole would become self-contradictory (Bloch 1986: 189-195, Rappaport 1999: 119-124). Rituals thus establish a continuity of group identity. But, among numerous differences between Bloch and Rappaport, there is one that is fundamental. This is that Bloch views ritual as hiding the true nature of the world (1974, 1977, cf. Bourdillon 1978) while Rappaport states that it produces truths about the worlds it brings into being (1999: 65). Rappaport's argument

has interesting ramifications for the case of Zege. He argues that “in the case of the ritual acts and utterances with which we are concerned, the sign brings the state of affairs into being, and – here is the sleight-of-ritual – having brought it into being cannot help but indicate it” (1999: 108). I argue that a principal function of Ethiopian Orthodox ritual is to Christianise the experience of time itself by subsuming consumption and work into a Christian time regime (Chapter 1). In the case of Zege, one thing that rituals both create and indicate is continuity. All of the performers may change over time, yet the rituals, like the roofs of the church, retain a form which is recognisably the same.

This observation points to something of deepest significance for Zegeña themselves. This was evidenced when Zege’s first church, the one founded by the Abune Betre Maryam, Mehal Zege Giyorgis, burned down shortly after I completes my long-term fieldwork. This was an unspeakable tragedy for Zege. The fire occurred in February 2010, and when I returned in September, people in Afaf described the loss to me with tears in their eyes. I attempted to interview priests at the church’s site about the loss, but my overwhelming feeling on talking to them was that this was an event, like any other bereavement, on which it would be rude and insensitive to question too deeply. The stone foundations of the church, restored with concrete, stood in their ruined state when I last visited in September 2010, with a metal cross marking where the holy of holies, the *tabot* stood<sup>58</sup>. Most strikingly, though, a makeshift building had been put up in the churchyard, round like a church, and decorated with some imported images of Mary (the original church contained exquisite murals which had been restored by a monk-artist from Addis, and I am tremendously sorry not to have photographs of them). In this makeshift building, priests were conducting the Liturgy as normal. One told me that the hut had been constructed as soon as possible after the fire. I was slightly surprised by this as there is another church, Mehal Zege Betre Maryam, next door to Giyorgis, which had been unharmed. When I asked the priests about this they responded as if my question had no

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<sup>58</sup> The *tabot* (ark) was unharmed in the fire, much to everyone’s relief. Nobody knows the cause of the fire. The most likely explanation is a fault in the church’s generator.

meaning; the mass at one church had nothing to do with the continuation of ritual at another. This episode emphasised to me the importance of keeping the church's rituals going, particularly since this was the church of St George, who had appeared to Betre Maryam ordering him to found a monastery, and whose horse's footprint was still visible embedded in a rock by the churchyard gate. It was, apparently, vital that the rituals continue on the same grounds.

Alongside continuity, rituals, in the analyses of Bloch and Rappaport, produce authority. By enlisting people in a performance encoded at some indeterminate point in the past, they both bring about and signify assent and submission among the performers to a hierarchical social order whose legitimation lies in the past (see especially Bloch 1974). In Ethiopian Orthodox ritual this means several things. Ultimately, participating in Orthodox ritual is, from my perspective and that of the performers, submission to God by priests and laity alike. But at the same time ritual establishes the Orthodox hierarchy as a whole, both on the earthly and heavenly side. The celebration of certain saints' days in a parish indexes acknowledgement of their potency and authority (by virtue of the very performance of the ritual; see Rappaport 1999: 119), and for lay people, ritual participation also includes deference to the clergy (see Chapters 2 & 3). Since the clergy preside over every ritual - and since ritual forms, as both Bloch (1974: 55) and Rappaport (1999: 122-24) describe, do not admit alternative or critique within them except for non-participation - to participate in Orthodox ritual is to acknowledge the authority of the clergy as God's mediators. Such historical material as is available about Zege suggests that this deference has in the past contributed to the Church's control of resources and people in quite stark ways (Abdussamad 1997, Rahel 1999).

The key point as far as Zegeña are concerned is that the authority of the clergy protects the forest. By every account I have heard, the church's ban on ploughing on the Zege peninsula, attributed to the pact struck by Abune Betre Maryam on the founding of the first monastery, is the reason for the forest's survival. When I asked the Abbot of Mehal Zege Giyorgis what would happen if someone broke this rule, he replied quite simply that this would not happen, and even a

newcomer who did not know of the prohibition would soon be set straight. This is a fair reflection of a widely-held view in Zege, although I have spoken to many who acknowledge that illegal logging, in violation of Church edicts, is a significant problem associated with poverty and landlessness.

There exist intimate associations, then, between the ritual cycle and the authority it upholds, and the environment of the peninsula. But this is not the end of the religious formation of the land. In Zege, the religious calendar also defines when coffee can be harvested, for the coffee ripens around the time of the festival of *T'imqet* (Epiphany), which lasts for three days. Only after this do people harvest coffee, and agricultural rhythms are such that it is only economical to harvest for a week after the conclusion of *T'imqet*. People therefore harvest all their beans at this time, regardless of their ripeness, although there are people attempting institute a longer picking season. Harvesting all the coffee in a single week affects the overall quality, since it makes it harder to select for ripeness. Nevertheless, I am assured that the coffee harvest provides a far better income than one can make farming in the surrounding areas.

Apart from some islands on Lake Tana, which are also known for being home to historic monasteries, I know of nowhere else in Northern Ethiopia where coffee is grown. The work of harvesting is not arduous, in part because people's plots are fairly small, but through its regular and repetitive nature it contributes to the continuity of inhabitation of the forest. Every January landowners and their families, plus the youths from Afaf and farmers from further afield whom the landowners hire, gather in the forest and move from tree to tree stripping the branches of beans. The main limiting factor on the time this takes is that there is a certain skill to pulling off the beans while leaving behind the short stem that is necessary for regrowth. Like harvests everywhere, this periodicity and predictability links people to the continuity of the land. For the rest of the year the work required on the coffee trees is relatively light, consisting mostly of weeding. One coffee farmer friend told me that it takes seven years for a new tree to begin producing coffee of high quality, so long-term inhabitation and

continuity is far more important than intensity of labour. Landowners take the harvested coffee back to their compounds where it dries in the sun for some weeks, and it is then sold on local markets and in Bahir Dar. Coffee is never sold roasted, since the roasting is a part of the coffee ceremony, the only proper way to serve coffee (see Chapter 6).

The connection of the coffee forest with ritual authority in Zege extends some of the indexical qualities of ritual to the coffee trees themselves. The trees, that is, come to stand for the ritual tradition that protects them. Through association with ritual – submission to God, authorisation of the priests and the tradition they stand for, which is traced back to Betre Maryam, and the broader ritual associations of forests with sanctity – the forest comes to stand for both deep continuity and deep authority. Monasteries and trees both signify this authority existentially, that is, by their very being.

### **The Materiality and Symbolic Content of Churches**

The rituals of the Orthodox Liturgy are of course significant not only for their temporal qualities; they are embedded in the locations in which they are performed. In this next section I want to examine more closely the materiality of the churches of Zege, which is integral to material and symbolic continuities<sup>59</sup>. I will examine how the churches have been continually maintained and updated, particularly the painted murals which are a major source of the churches' fame. I will also discuss the relics and sacred books that the church has accrued over the centuries. I will argue that each church is best seen as a palimpsest, a site in which new meanings have been consistently layered upon old.

The churches are built on rock foundations with hardwood frames, and the walls filled in with mud and straw in the traditional North Ethiopian style (Fig 8). The roofs of most are thatched, although at least two now have corrugated iron roofs

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<sup>59</sup> To be clear, I am treating the material and the symbolic as interlinked, not positing a dichotomy.

that were, according to local discourse, donated by Haile Selassie. Each church is built in three concentric layers of ascending holiness, and the central chamber, which houses the *tabot* (ark) is forbidden to all but the clergy. The walls of this inner section are coated with cloth, upon which are painted the murals for which the churches are most famous. In Zege most of these date from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and depict scenes from the Bible and the Ethiopian canon including the martyrdom of the apostles, St George slaying the dragon (Fig 10), the miracles of Christ (*Tamra Iyesus*), the story of Belay the cannibal as described in Chapter 7, and the Ethiopian Saint Tekle Haymanot. On the doors to the inner sanctum there are often portraits of the Madonna with the infant Christ, and of the archangels Gabriel and Raphael with their sword and spear. The images are often violent and the persecution of Christians by heathens (discernible because they only are only ever seen in portrait, with one eye visible) is a recurring theme.

I want to argue that a critical aspect of these paintings is that they are never complete, but addition and renewal are always possible. In the church of Mehal Zege Betre Maryam, there are some panels among the two hundred year-old murals that are only partially completed, some of which are mere outlines. The priests told me that they had been left to be filled in in the future. Meanwhile, before it burned down the murals of Mehal Zege Giyorgis had been completely restored in the 1990s Eth.Cal. (early 2000s Gregorian) by a renowned monk-artist from Addis. These restorations were noticeably different in style from the older paintings visible in other churches, with new techniques of shading and perspective. But they also carried different symbolism: suddenly red, green and gold, the national colours, appeared in the saints' halos, and St George was now wearing a red green and gold headband as he slew the dragon. The suggested linking of Christianity with the Ethiopian nation, which is quite overt in the churches of Addis Ababa, is especially significant in the era of a secular, federal Ethiopia. I think it probable that church murals have always contained similar political dimensions.

My argument is that we should not expect these paintings to remain in a fixed 'historic' form. These paintings depict Christian history, Biblical or Ethiopian, for

the purposes of the present; they are very much a lived form of historicity. For instance, the painting in Azwa Maryam of Moses escaping from Pharaoh shows the Egyptian soldiers being washed away by the Red Sea. One can quite clearly see their rifles being washed away with them. It is possible to attribute this anachronism to the ignorance of the painter monks of the outside world and its history. But this painting dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and on closer inspection the soldiers are dressed in a manner very similar to the uniform of Portuguese Jesuits who were present in Ethiopia at the time. If the artists were drawing parallels between the Portuguese and the armies of the Pharaoh, as seems likely, then the rifles too become a part of this message; not an error but an important part of bringing Biblical history into dialogue with the present. Here my analysis closely mirrors that of Reinhard Koselleck when he discusses Altdorfer's painting *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* of 1529:

“Altdorfer made conscious use of anachronism so that he could faithfully represent the course of the completed battle...the event that Altdorfer captured was for him at once historical and contemporary...the space of historical experience enjoys the profundity of general unity. The state of contemporary military technology did not in principle offer any obstacle to the representation of the Battle of Issus as a current event” (Koselleck 1985: 9).

The paintings speak to the present, not the past.

The outer doors of the churches too, while mostly in plain wood, bear a number of charcoal sketches and outlines imitating the paintings within. Priests now tell me that this was a practice of lay people, making their own versions of the murals, which has now been deemed improper. It is difficult to read specific meanings into these sketches, apart from to note that churchgoers appear to have taken part in the inscription of images on their churches in quite a widespread way. At the same time, the churches display paintings on canvas or cloth which have been donated from elsewhere. Fure Maryam, which burned down in 1972, now has some meagre icon posters imported from Russia or Greece. In churches outside of Zege it has always been possible for a wealthy

donor to have his own image added to church murals. Church paintings have never been static; clergy and laity both have always added to them in their own ways.

The churches also possess relics that index their historical depth. Monks are able to tell visitors which king or emperor donated each crown, shield or silver cross. For example, one crown in Azwa Maryam was donated by King Amde Tsion in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and there are numerous other gifts from subsequent rulers. These serve to demonstrate that this place has been considered a locus of sanctity since the distant past. Many of them are priceless, and all serve to underscore the sacred history of Zege. They also help to situate Zege within a wider Christian past, that of the Christian kings and emperors who ruled Ethiopia or parts of it. Once again, antiquity and hierarchical authority are demonstrated in tandem.

It is significant that the past the paintings speak to is in the majority of cases not Zege's own, but a Biblical past from another epoch. This has the effect of situating the local lived history of Zege within a much wider tradition, of Christianity as a whole. My lay friends in particular have only the loosest notion of the geography of the Holy Land. Most consider Israel to be a Christian country still, having never had reason to question this. The term *ayhud*, 'Jew', is used only to refer to those people who are considered responsible for the death of Christ, and never in reference to a people that might exist now. In the paintings, the persecutors of Christ are depicted very similarly to the soldiers of Pharaoh who pursue Moses. This suggests that there is not an idea of Christians and Jews, but rather those who form part of the Christian tradition, and those who oppose it. The Biblical stories effectively take place in a disembodied Elsewhere without geographical links to the present. I would suggest that this relative geographical unboundedness gives Biblical narrative some of the characteristics of Rappaport's Ultimate Sacred Postulates (1999: 287), where a degree of insulation from everyday, grounded realities is necessary in order to sanctify them and make them suitable to act as perduring underpinnings for the religious system. The moral weight of Biblical history, being free from geographical ties,



can be applied to local or national concerns in a variety of different ways. Zege's emplaced, material past of the forest and monasteries sits within this wider Biblical time-scale, which is correspondingly less susceptible to day-to-day events.

Finally, there is Zege's textual tradition, which ties the locality to the broad frame of Christian history. I am not able to comment in depth on the content of the texts, which require years of priestly study to master. However, the antiquity of some of these books speaks for itself. A number of the most ancient are kept in the small museums of each church, and shown to tourists by the monks. At the church I am most familiar with, Azwa Maryam, a monk tells me that one copy of the Psalms dates to the eighth century. The book is hand-calligraphed on goatskin and bound within wooden covers, and contains numerous illustrations. This and many other prized books have gone beyond being only texts to become objects of antiquity, unique and irreplaceable, and signifiers more than anything of their own tremendous historical depth. However, this is partly so because the clergy tends to guard the content of its texts quite closely, playing up instead the quality of the books as objects, signifiers of age and status.

If we take a relational view of signification, then, with a special focus on the recipients or decoders of the sign, we can see two types of semiotic networks surrounding the holy texts of Zege. The two networks pertain to quite different semiotic modes. There is the network of readers of the contents of the text, the clergy. This network is closed and tightly controlled. But beyond this network the books project a different kind of semiosis outwards to the general public of Zege and to its visitors: they index antiquity and authority (and the obscurity of the content of the texts may contribute to this authority). The multiplicity of semiotic modes in a single object is what Keane refers to as 'bundling' (Keane 2003: 414), and it is this phenomenon that enables the two types of networks that I highlight here: content circulates within the clerical hierarchy, while for those outside the medium is the message, and the message is hierarchy and traditional authority, the legitimising power of the deep past.

## **Tourism, Historic Depth, Economic Life**

The monasteries now form a regular part of the 'Historical Circuit', which is one of Ethiopia's more popular tourist routes. Visitors generally hire a boat in Bahir Dar and spend a morning visiting the monasteries and looking at the paintings before heading off to Gonder, Lalibela, and Axum. The valuable relics described above show that the churches have been attracting visitors, and consequently wealth, for centuries. These gifts now form part of the display given to foreign tourists and therefore the prestige of previous visits bolsters the sense of historic depth which is central to the marketing of tourism in Ethiopia.

Tourists generally visit the churches of Mehal Zege Giyorgis and Betre Maryam, Ura Kidane Mihret and Azwa Maryam, as these have the most notable paintings and are situated by the lakeside. Each location has a jetty for the tour boats – 25 or 40 horsepower outboard motors arranged by the hotels in Bahir Dar or by independent tour guides – and a busy day in high season will see as many as eight boats each carrying between four and ten visitors. Each tourist pays 50 Birr (USD3-5) for entry into each church, plus a variable fee to the boatman and tour guide. On arriving in Zege the tourists are taken to the monasteries, and for as much of a walk in the forest as they wish, by a local guide. The guides are young men from Zege with reasonable English proficiency and they operate as a collective, sharing work and profits. The tourists will pass numerous souvenir stands also run by local people and selling silver crosses and jewellery, Orthodox paintings, model canoes and other memorabilia. There are also people selling water and soft drinks, which are brought by boat from Bahir Dar. The sum total of this business is extremely important to the local economy, and as far as I can establish the proceeds are shared quite widely in the community. The trade also brings in highly significant income for the churches themselves, which has helped in restoration efforts, and will go some way towards the rebuilding of Mehal Zege Giyorgis.

Zege's situation close to Bahir Dar helps to bring in tourists, but predominantly it is the prestige and the 'historic' status of the churches and their paintings that draw people. In this light it makes sense to view the continuity I have discussed in this chapter as the careful maintenance and continuous renewal and agglomeration of this prestige. The holiness of the Zege churches, for which kings of old visited, and their historic status, which now draws foreign tourists, are inseparable. The people preserve the historicity of the churches because it is holy. At the same time, the churches and the forest they are responsible for maintaining have important economic value, a value that depends entirely on the preservation of continuity's indexes.

## **Conclusion**

A recurring theme in Braudel's history is the idea of the long view of history as a shelter from the storm of events. I have argued that this is precisely the view of the people I worked with in Zege, and I think there is no better test case for this than the fire that destroyed the Church of St George. My friends describe this as a traumatic event and a tragedy, and efforts are underway to rebuild the church as soon as possible. Some paintings have been lost which are irreplaceable, but the church's rituals continue to be performed. A building of vital importance to the community has been lost, but they will make a new one and continue as before. There will still be a living church on the site where Father Betre Maryam first landed on Zege, and the clergy will still take responsibility for ensuring that no ploughing takes place on Zege. Trees die, and churches sometimes burn down, but the forest, and the human community that inhabits it, extend far beyond the lifespan of any of their components.

This analysis of the relationship between ritual, church, and forest, suggests a key relationship between hierarchy and environment that deserves attention. It demands a view of religion as embedded in a place and an economy, part of a general sphere of existence and habitation. 'Meaning', whatever we take that to mean, is not separable from processes of dwelling and production but part of them. The latter parts of Rappaport's magnum opus, those dealing with religion

and adaptation, suggest a similar view: “I take the term ‘adaptation’ to designate the processes through which living systems of all sorts maintain themselves, or persist, in the face of perturbations, originating in their environments or themselves, through reversible changes in their states, less reversible or irreversible transformations of their structures, or actions eliminating perturbing factors” (Rappaport 1999: 408; see pp. 406-437 for discussion of the role of religion in adaptation, especially p. 426 on relationship between hierarchy and adaptation). In light of the material discussed in this chapter, Rappaport’s argument about the role of ritual in environmental adaptation is convincing. But for ethnographic purposes both the adaptive approach and the Braudelian *longue durée* present certain dilemmas of representation. This is because of the narrow or non-existent distinction between smoothing over the fractures and wounds of history, and effacing them.

To the extent that prevailing Zegeña historicities (attitudes and approaches to history) resemble those of Rappaport or Braudel, and I would argue that in many ways they do quite closely, this problem exists as much at the ethnographic, emic level as at the analytic and etic. My job is neither to deconstruct the historical consciousness of the people of Zege nor to endorse it, but to describe as fully as possible how historicity plays into the inhabitation of a place and the relationships between humans and their surroundings. Religious hierarchy has played as much a part in environmental adaptation as it has in relations of dominance, and to ignore either facet would be to misrepresent the situation. Instead I have tried to show how religious meaning (in the semiotic sense), legitimacy, and authority come to sit in the environment itself, whether that environment is constructed or organic, or both. Continuity is built not merely through ideologies or narratives of traditional authority, but also through relationships with lasting material structures and items – churches, the forest of trees – through which a network of people, things, and practices emerges. This network has a perdurance far beyond that of any human life, although relationships between humans and the land are constantly changing and characterised by conflict. Whether one chooses to highlight the perdurance or the conflict is largely a matter of perspective. The two major perspectives – the

*longue durée* and the short-term evenemential – may stand in conflict to one another, and it is this point of conflict that is most illuminating of the dilemmas of Zege’s historicity. The historicity of continuity would not be so persuasive were it not a profound and rich account of the relations between people, place, and God, as I have set out to describe. Still it is vital not to lose sight of everyday struggles, which I discuss further in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### **The Buda Crisis: Spirits, Saints, and the Stuff of Social Relationships**

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This chapter discusses what for many in Afaf was the most significant and troubling historical circumstance around the time of my fieldwork: an outbreak of *buda* spirit attacks that grew in severity throughout the Ethiopian years of 2000 and 2001 (Gregorian 2008-09). Buda are the most commonly occurring malevolent spirits (*irqus menfes*) in Afaf and probably in all of Amhara region, and their attacks can cause madness, seizures, and even death. The behaviour of buda has important and intricate associations with human agency and social relationships, which I will be unpacking in the first part of this chapter. My interlocutors overwhelmingly and explicitly ascribed the plague of buda to changes in the Afaf market, and especially the growth of competition between traders. I identify an ambiguity between the agency of buda and the agency of people associated with buda attacks that is critical in shaping how social tensions in Afaf play out in public.

In the second part of this chapter I explore how practices and discourse of buda relate to kinship and forms of social relations in Zege. I compare buda caused by trade to other forms of the spirit associated with outcast groups and the dangers of hospitality. This analysis will demonstrate links between buda and moralities of exchange, based around practices of commensality and inclusion, and hierarchy and exclusion. As in previous chapters, a tension between commensality and hierarchy comes to the fore, although it takes different forms here than it does in ritual or sacred settings. This discussion leads into a reconsideration of some of the sociological literature on Amhara 'individualism' and social hierarchy. I will argue that Orthodox Christian kinship and social relations in Zege combine dialectic elements of individualism and communitarianism, egalitarianism and hierarchy in ways that have not yet been adequately described.

Finally I discuss longer-term, moral systems of exchange in Zege, with particular reference to people who enter into exchange relationships with saints. These practices, in which people give thanks for intercession by holding feasts for their neighbours, give further insight into ethics of commensality in Zege as they relate to religious hierarchy. They also stand in contrast to the market relations that were the arena for the outbreak of buda attacks I describe at the outset of the chapter. Having identified commensality as the key concept in each of the spheres discussed, I end with some tentative conclusions about the relationship between commensality and hierarchy in Zege.

### **Buda and Human Agency**

Previous ethnographers in Ethiopia have glossed buda as ‘the evil eye’ (eg. Reminick 1974), due to numerous similarities with practices acknowledged in many parts of Europe and the Mediterranean. A person with buda is sometimes thought to cause sickness by looking at people, especially looking enviously, and Tomas once told me you could protect yourself by wearing sunglasses, so there is some association with the eyes. But in many ways buda as a phenomenon shares a host of motifs with discourses and practices observed across Africa and usually described as ‘witchcraft’. These include in particular themes of jealousy, inequality, selfishness, and social exclusion (Austen 1993). While buda designates a spirit rather than a person or a kind of practice, examples of buda in practice are so often associated with human actions as to cross-cut categories of human and non-human agency. I have seen few if any cases of buda attacks that people did not attribute to something somebody had done, whether intentionally or not. When asked, people in Zege describe buda as non-human spirit beings with their own agency and their own desires, but in practice they are almost always seen to be effects of human action.

We can broadly distinguish two kinds of buda, although I have not heard people in Zege make this distinction explicit. On the one hand, there are buda that result

from immoral action, usually 'witchcraft' (*tinqola*), often motivated by envy or greed. On the other there are buda which are associated with certain people, families, or classes of people, who are usually marginal or excluded in some sense. In these cases buda is seen to be hereditary, and there is some conceptual slippage between *having* buda – being possessed or afflicted with a spirit – and *being* buda. It is quite common for someone to say of a person, 'he is buda', *issu buda new*, eliding the distinction between person and spirit. I would suggest that this recurrent ambiguity of agency, where it is unclear whether the person or a spirit is responsible for causing harm, is integral to the dynamics of buda. As will be seen, people may sometimes be seen to be deliberately and maliciously causing buda attacks, while at others they may be unwitting or helpless mediums or vectors for the action of the spirit. Such people may cause people, especially children, to become ill by looking at them or at their food (especially enviously), but they may be helpless to prevent these attacks or unaware that they are happening.

Some people are born with buda or are made infectious by a witch or other malefactor, but having been labelled as one who may be infectious can have varying effects on one's social status. I have seen several cases of people explaining to me that a friend or neighbour was buda, while treating them no differently (in their presence) than any other friend or neighbour, often enjoying extremely cordial relationships with people they had told me in private to be sources of significant spiritual danger. On the other hand, I have heard many credible stories of people being forced to leave their homes and even leave Ethiopia because of buda accusations, though I never heard of things reaching such a point in Zege.

It never became clear to me how one knows whether a person is buda or not, even though there is often apparent consensus, and though I asked many times. There is a certain amount of gossip in which it will be suggested that numerous people might be buda, and consensus develops around certain people who may have been associated with a particular attack or conform to a number of stereotypes of what a buda is, principally being marginal in some way. There



were two families in Afaf, both extremely poor and without an obvious source of income, of whom I heard it regularly said that they were *buda*. As mentioned elsewhere, Tomas gave this as a reason why a funeral in one of these families was poorly attended, and the neighbouring children wore unusual amounts of protective garb. I often heard that the local tanner was *buda*, and the *Weyto*, the excluded and disadvantaged group of canoe-makers who mainly live in Bahir Dar, are commonly associated with *buda*. Another dynamic is that on almost every occasion when I have accompanied someone on a visit to an area more rural than their own, they have expressed fear of *buda*. Friends from Bahir Dar considered Zege as a whole to be rife with *buda*, while people in Zege warned me never to accept hospitality when travelling in the inland farmlands around Wanjeta.

Wanjeta is the largest village on the Bahir Dar-Zege road. Roughly an hour's walk from Afaf, its economy is much more closely based on the 'traditional' Amhara model of ploughing, although *khat* (*ch'at*) is increasingly being exploited as a cash crop. People in Wanjeta buy and sell goods in the Afaf market. Many Afaf residents, particularly the young, consider Afaf as a local centre, both by virtue of hosting the market, and from having direct links by boat with Bahir Dar. Wanjeta is smaller and more peripheral, although not necessarily poorer. Since it has the only church in the area dedicated to St Michael, Wanjeta is also a destination for many Zegeña on feasts of Michael and Gabriel and on the third day of *T'imqet* (Epiphany), at which times large amounts of food will be served in the churchyard. When I visited on these occasions I was warned by friends not to accept food or even coffee in people's houses, because of the high prevalence of *buda*. They advised that my own health ought to take precedence over politeness. Similarly, when a friend from Bahir Dar visited me in Zege, he talked at length about how the area was filled with spirits, and that he generally felt unsafe there. He also made a point of buying an anti-*buda* amulet while there, as areas with high risk of *buda* also provided the best experts in its prevention. My friend Mastwal, from Zege but studying in Bahir Dar, told me that Bahir Dar natives thought Zegeña to be possessed of various kinds of powerful magic – "if you get a pretty girl, they think it's because you have love medicine". There

seems to be a fairly widespread tendency for those in more central or urban areas to attribute a variety of vaguely threatening magical powers to those in the periphery, which manifests itself as a genuine fear and discomfort on visiting these places. Buda in this sense seems to express attitudes by those in relatively central positions in a social hierarchy, about those who are comparatively marginal. This may bear comparison to the marginality of priests, who are also attributed a certain liminal power (see Chapter 3), as well as that of Zege's esoteric experts (Chapter 4).

The buda epidemic that was taking place during my fieldwork was of a different kind to the buda that my friends feared in Wanjeta. These buda attacks were associated with immoral action. In the later months of my fieldwork, I discovered that there had been town meetings in which people urged the police to take action against certain witches (*tenqway*), identity as yet unknown, who were alleged to be ultimately responsible for a series of buda attacks in which several people had become ill. Buda involvement had been suspected in the death of at least one child. As I interviewed people around Afaf about the events, a common narrative soon emerged. The attacks were only happening in town, not in the Zege peninsula, and they were associated with the market. What was happening was that, with increased competition, certain traders were visiting witches on a clandestine basis and purchasing medicine (*medhanit*) which would magically bring them success in business at the expense of their competitors. These medicines were effective, but they had a particular side effect: they would cause the client to become, without knowing it, a buda or carrier of buda. They would then be liable to cause buda attacks by looking at people. Therefore, by their illicit attempts to attain success in business, they were unwittingly causing sickness and even death. Once it was widely known that this was happening, of course, it could only be assumed that people who continued to patronise witches knew the harm they were doing and continued regardless. During my fieldwork I never heard a specific accusation regarding this behaviour, only common agreement that this was what was taking place.

The existence of buda is not in any serious doubt for Zegeña. They are known by their effects, and their effects are everywhere. I have seen many people collapse in the distinctive empty-eyed catatonia, and every child growing up in the area will see numerous cases of buda attacks, which are often subsequently cured by the correct medicine. For those who grow up in Zege buda are somewhat more real than the lions or tigers that they sometimes talk about with interest, or even the pigs that, I am assured, live in the forest, though I have never seen one. But buda are a different kind of being from animals, being invisible, mysterious, and apparently connected to human action.

Along with the mystery there is a solid common understanding of roughly what buda are and what they might do in a given circumstance. Unlike other spirit-related ailments, buda was a daily subject of discussion for almost everybody I met. People would raise the subject with each other, or to me, in a quite open manner: discussing who was buda, what new loci of infection might have been identified, which treatments or preventatives had been most effective, and often carrying out incense fumigations in my presence. This last was frequently a precaution; if someone had been feeling slightly unwell, a gourd of incense held under the nose would be appropriate just to make sure that the symptoms did not indicate incipient buda sickness. Often people would fumigate me as well, just to be safe. I got the impression that this was more for my own protection than for theirs. Tomas, with whom I lived for the first eight months of fieldwork, encouraged me to buy an amulet of anti-buda snuff from Beza, Zege's most renowned traditional doctor; when I did, this was generally treated as an eminently sensible precaution, particularly given that I, as a foreigner, knew little about *buda* and might not recognise an 'infection' should one attack me. As the time approached for my departure, Tomas became quite worried and insisted I stock up on *buda* medicine in Zege, because if I succumbed to a delayed-action attack in Europe, my doctors would not recognise the cause, and might give me an injection, which would kill me. Other friends, however (Babbi and Menelik, tour guides who considered themselves comparatively familiar with the ways of foreigners), assured me that I need not worry; buda do not attack *farenj* (white people).

Buda, then, are a continuous concern for people in Zege, especially in Afaf. There are few things about which people worry more on a daily basis. They also bear a discernible relationship to social tensions in village life, and particularly a fear or anxiety about one's contemporaries. I would not describe this fear or anxiety as dominant modes of sociality in Afaf; people are generally cordial and kind to each other, and life is fairly peaceful. But at the same time people are not always entirely open with each other, and nor should we expect them to be. Resources are scarce and conflicting loyalties and motivations will always arise. People are always conscious of the possibility that certain others are not what they seem to be, and the discourse of buda reflects this consciousness. My aim for this chapter is not to 'explain' buda, but to develop a description of the place of buda in social relationships in Afaf and, by so doing, to gain a deeper understanding of how those relationships are perceived and constituted. I will start by asking what unites the two kinds of buda: those caused by witchcraft, and those borne by people of low status.

### **Buda, Commensality and Hierarchy**

On the way back from an interview with a priest in April 2009, Abebe mentioned a propos of nothing that life in Afaf had been getting considerably worse in the past couple of years. Asked to elaborate, he told me that people were now afraid to eat together. Zege was known for its hospitality, he said, but at the Easter just passed, a boy named Yitayal had become sick with buda after eating at somebody's house. I have described in Chapter 3 the importance of feasting on Easter Sunday, so the fact that hospitality could be suspect on this of all days was a sure sign that life was out of joint. I had been hearing about the current buda problems for some time, but the threat to Easter feasting was a new level of seriousness. I asked around over the next few months and received confirmation both of Yitayal's sickness and of a general agreement that commensal relations in Afaf town were under threat – but not, it was clear, in the Zege forest, where life

did not revolve so much around market trade. I believe that this threat to commensality is the key to understanding the phenomena of buda in Afaf.

Bloch calls it a 'semi-universal' that societies tend to equate eating together to the sort of sharing of substance associated with kinship and sexual reproduction (2005b: 45-46). In the introduction to this thesis, I described an opposition in Ethiopian Orthodoxy between sharing substance with God in a sacred hierarchy on the one hand, and sharing substance with people, through sex, birth, or food, on the other. There I argued that bodily and material aspects are crucial to hierarchy: material separation from human or worldly contacts, and communion with God. Buda brings to light a slightly different kind of social hierarchy, but one that I argue is equally based on sharing material and commensality.

Commensality is in Amharic Ethiopia the principal way of creating relatedness between people, and this relatedness has a moral dimension. Throughout Amhara, networks of visiting and sharing food are the basis of social life, and the ultimate symbol of closeness is the *gursha*, where you take a handful of food and stuff it into another person's mouth, creating a binding moral relationship. Zegeña repeatedly emphasised to me the importance of eating together, and their opinion that this was valued even slightly more highly in Zege than elsewhere, such was the special moral status of their homeland.

The imperative placed on visiting transcends religious divides. Afaf's Muslim community is fairly small, but Muslim and Christian friends visit each other for coffee quite as often as they do people of their own religion (they also attend each other's funerals). On festivals, both fixed and life-cycle-based, non-meat dishes are always prepared, to serve to guests of the other religion, since Muslims and Christians do not eat each other's meat. Christians will also generally prepare non-alcoholic versions of the local homebrewed beer to serve to Muslims. When I asked Muslim friends what they would do on Christmas or Easter, they said that while they would obviously take no part in the religious ceremonies (which take place on the eve of the event), they would certainly visit Christian friends for food on the day itself. Christians and Muslims, then, manage

both to maintain crucial relationships of commensality and to keep distinctions through separation of substance (meat and alcohol). Moreover, while I never heard anybody being criticised for not attending the Christmas or Easter Liturgy (and many Christians did not attend), to fail to visit friends and relations on the day of the feast was a serious insult, and at times tantamount to a breaking-off of social relations. These same criteria applied to me. Insofar as I was considered a member of the community, it was through making coffee visits and being served food, and attending funerals, which I deal with elsewhere. I cannot overstate the importance of visiting in this society. I would even go as far as to say that one who does not maintain their visiting networks, particularly as expressed by the coffee ceremony, cannot truly be capable of achieving full personhood in any Amhara community<sup>60</sup>.

The coffee ceremony is rather unobtrusive for an institution that has become perhaps Ethiopia's most famous custom. Women perform the ceremony, and Rita Pankhurst notes that it has particular importance for women's social networks, as a time when women can find respite from the day's tasks and see friends and exchange information (1997: 516). The ceremony involves the slow preparation of coffee by a junior woman (and the most senior man present is served first, making the ceremony a hierarchy-marker). Incense is burned and grasses spread on the floor, to which nobody attaches a specific interpretation beyond creating a pleasant atmosphere and showing welcome. Coffee is a good 'social conductor' (Bloch 2005b: 47); its primary purpose is for serving to guests and for the ceremony. No other food or drink performs the same function, part of whose virtue is that it follows no religious or ethnic divisions: coffee is the substance of togetherness (Rita Pankhurst 1997: 536). This is the case even in those parts of Ethiopia that do not possess their own coffee forest.

Throughout Ethiopia, there are certain groups that mainstream society refuses to share substance with (A. Pankhurst 2003). These groups are often

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<sup>60</sup> This dynamic appears to survive the process of urbanisation intact – most of my friends in Addis and Bahir Dar referred to their home neighbourhoods as 'villages', in which they maintained similar visiting networks which extended over two or three blocks of back-alley lodgings.

craftspeople and occupy similar structural positions in societies of various ethno-linguistic, religious, and religious make-up. The *Beta Israel*, now mostly living in Israel, were one such group, and in the Bahir Dar region the *Weyto* canoe makers are another. What all these groups share is that people in mainstream society do not share food or intermarry with them. In Zege this applies to anyone suspected to being *buda*, although it can be difficult to be sure who is *buda* and who is not. Throughout Ethiopia, then, moral relatedness created by shared substance entails also moral exclusion of certain people. Just as in the religious flux between feasting and fasting, commensality and the relatedness it brings are a counterpoint to moments of exclusion and separation.

Implicated in all of this, as Bloch suggests (2005b), is a deep-seated ambivalence about hospitality (described in Amharic by the verb 'to receive', *meqqebbel*). Zegeña are as proud of their hospitality as they are insistent on the importance of commensality. This is a point of pride throughout Ethiopia as in many other places, although here the particular history of social organisation may be important. According to Richard Pankhurst the moral imperative to provide hospitality to travellers (and it is such that I have been told that until recently many Ethiopians considered the notion of a hotel to be strange and immoral, since people should be put up in people's homes) was originally part of the semi-feudal system: in practice, the lord's responsibility was to ensure that any guest was provided for, but his vassals would bear the actual burden of the guest's provision. Such obligations could be ruinous to the peasantry, and may have gone as far as noble guests having liberty to take advantage of peasant women (R. Pankhurst 1990: 11, 182).

More arduous still was the duty of hosting the imperial camp. Until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century Ethiopia had no fixed capital city. Rather the Emperor's camp, with thousands of retainers, would move from place to place, and the local villagers would be required to sustain the camp until their resources ran out and the camp would move on (*ibid.* 26). Times have of course changed, but it is nonetheless worth remembering that the roots of the moral obligation towards

hospitality in Ethiopia developed from a context of steep hierarchy and open exploitation.

For Bloch hospitality is a test - will you dare to share substance with me? – that emerges “when strangers are treated like close kin” (2005b: 55). Stewart offers further insight into this when he points out that assiduous hospitality, rather than producing closeness, actually emphasises the distinction and separation between the guest and his hosts. He is told, once he marries into the village, then he will be allowed to pay for his own drinks (Stewart 1991: 48). Note also that in Greece, just like in Ethiopia, the same word is used to mean ‘guest’ as ‘stranger’ (Amh. *ingida*). Hospitality is the requirement that you share substance with those who are other, strange to you. In Zafimaniry, this requirement leads to the fear of poisoning (Bloch 2005b: 55); in Zege it leads to the fear of buda. The Ethiopian ethnography suggests that, to Bloch’s notion that fear comes from sharing substance with strangers, we should add that that fear is also associated with sharing substance between social unequals in a hierarchy (see Graeber 2007: 26-30). In these cases, those in central positions fear the hospitality of those who are more marginal and often attribute threatening powers to them.

Commensality, then, is the link between buda caused by traders visiting witches, and buda caused by socially marginal people. Both make people afraid to eat together, and so threaten the material basis of social togetherness and the fabric of society. Abebe’s description of how people were afraid to eat together at the Easter feast suggests a fairly straightforward narrative of the buda epidemic in Zege: selfish desire led traders to visit witches. This led to them becoming wealthy at the expense of their neighbours, and also causing them to become ill through buda. Their selfish actions thus made it impossible to safely eat together, and so society in Zege was threatened by selfishness. This accords with the trope identified by Austen in postcolonial African witchcraft: “the misappropriation of scarce reproductive resources from households or communities for the selfish use of accumulating individuals” (Austen 1993: 100).



Without ethnographic data from Zege before the period of fieldwork, it is not possible to state with confidence what changes took place in the Afaf market that led to the buda epidemic. Most informants spoke of increased competition between traders, and during my main fieldwork period a number of new businesses opened in Afaf. My feeling at the time and shortly after fieldwork was that the increased competition and associated explosion of witchcraft might be related to an influx of new commodities into the market. Fabricated elsewhere, I hypothesised, these products might override local networks of production and trade and so disturb established economic patterns. Now I am not so sure; when I visited Afaf again in September 2010, a year after the end of fieldwork, the buda outbreak had largely calmed down.

Beza the traditional doctor told me that the reduction in buda might be due to it now being a year of Luke, 2002 Eth. Cal., while the year 2000 (2007-08 Gregorian) had been a year of Matthew, a particularly active time in the mystical calendar of spirits. To this I would like to add another possible cause of increased competition and insecurity in Afaf: the massive increase in food prices that Zege and much of the rest of Ethiopia saw in the Gregorian years of 2007 and 2008, part of the global food price crisis that was then taking place. In March of 2008 Tomas told me that the price of *t'eff*, Ethiopia's staple grain, had doubled in six months, and that *berberé*, the key spice of almost all food, had gone up sixfold. During that part of my fieldwork, commodity prices in the local market were fluctuating wildly from day to day, and the squeeze was felt particularly badly in Afaf, a town of traders who were mostly not large landowners. Since there was not a comparable rise in coffee prices, the food price crisis was felt quite badly throughout the Zege peninsula. At the New Year and Mesqel festivals at the end of 2000 E.C. (September 2008), most of the talk in Afaf was of how dreadful the millennium year had been. For me this culminated on Mesqel morning when the Afaf cross fell to the West, signifying bad luck, and Abebe quietly dragged it round to the East before too many people saw it, saying that they could not bear another year like the previous one. I would suggest that this pressure on traders, widely acknowledged, could lead to the sense of competition and unfair play that might be thought to drive people to witches in search of a better living. At the

same time, people may well have displaced their frustration and anxiety at the food price rises onto the traders themselves (see Lambek 2002a).

As I have said, I saw no evidence of witch-hunts in the sense of scapegoating particular people or attaching blame for the crisis. This was apparently understood to be a communal problem, and while the community did call on the police to find and arrest the witches responsible, I was not aware of any arrests at the time. Although the buda epidemic was understood to be caused by individual greed, it was seen as a communal problem. This communal understanding of misfortune conforms with other events I have witnessed: in mid 2009 towards the end of my fieldwork the rains were extremely late, and many people commented that the lake was as low as they had seen since the mid-1980s. I discussed this with Abba S'om, who said that, although we cannot know for sure the mind of God, the lack of rain was likely punishment or a warning because people in general were becoming lax in their religious practices. Given this understanding of common suffering for common failings, I now would like to discuss the relationship between individualism and a communal ethic in Zege, informed by the experiences of buda in Afaf town. This will help develop my arguments about hierarchy and commensality as a key tension in Zege society. The ultimate target remains a fuller picture of how social relationships in Zege are made and what form they take.

### **Individualism, Commensality, Kinship**

In the first half of this thesis I devoted a large amount of time to discussing religious hierarchy, which I have described as a hierarchy built around maintaining divisions between the sacred and the worldly. But hierarchy also applies to social relationships outside the religious sphere. Hoben has argued that power in pre-revolutionary Amhara was divided between religious and political or 'secular' spheres, and that priests were not due deference in secular matters, nor politically powerful people afforded special respect in the church (Hoben 1970: 216). While there have always been interactions between

Orthodoxy and political power, I do agree with Hoben's assessment that there are two understandings of power, one comparatively secular and one religious. I have described how priests and monks, bearers of local religious authority, are quite poor and marginal in other ways (Chapter 3). This section discusses kinship and secular relationships in the town, and the question of whether or not Amhara society is individualistic, or hierarchical, or both.

Dumont has argued for a particular Christian history of Western individualism, although he points out that this did not take anything like its recognisable contemporary form until comparatively recently (Dumont 1986: 51). The notion that Christianity introduces an important innovation with its universalism, the insistence on the fundamental sameness of human beings before God: "as Troeltsch said, man is an *individual-in-relation-to-God*" (Dumont 1986: 27). But Dumont shows that this alone does not lead to a modern notion of the individual as an autonomous subject. Rather the individual of early Christianity is "in essence an outworldly individual" (ibid.) as opposed to the "inworldly individual" that begins with Calvin (1986: 52). What I take Dumont to mean is that in Christianities before Calvin, the seed of individualism is present at an ontological level, but not at a practical/societal one. There are holistic relationships at the community level, and individualistic relationships with God. By contrast, in the modern in-worldly version, individualism reigns at all levels (1986: 53). The notion of the outworldly individual is helpful as a starting point for thinking about Orthodox society in Zege where, as I will show, a conception of people as basically individualistic coexists with a strong moral emphasis on relationships and mutual aid.

Social relationships are largely hierarchical but the Orthodox "outworldly individual" means that this hierarchy is not based on an idea of inherent or essential differences between different kinds of people, nor is it usually one in which social positions are fixed at birth<sup>61</sup>. As Hoben describes, those of different backgrounds, from the noble to the poorest peasant, are considered fundamentally the same kind of people: "The Amhara farmer and his lord did not

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<sup>61</sup> Excluded groups described above are an exception to this.

consider themselves to be of different breed or blood. Often they claimed descent from a common ancestor and acknowledged bilaterally traced ties of kinship” (Hoben 1970:192). Kinship, in Hoben’s detailed account, does not create groups that will last over long periods of time, nor is it seen as a major means of differentiating certain ‘kinds’ of people. It is not the dominant ideological mode of building continuity between past and future (that, I argue, is the Church). Rather, because everyone is the same kind of person, status is evaluated by basically contingent relations of power and authority. As Messay puts it, “those who have power in this world appear as those to whom God lends power” (Messay 1999:185).

Hoben goes even further in downplaying the role of descent:

“The Amhara descent group is not a solidary or cohesive group. Its members have no esprit de corps, no emblems, tokens, or honorific names to symbolise their unity. Nor are their relations with one another, even ideally, characterised by affect, co-operation or goodwill... [the descent group] is not, except in a nominal sense, a kinship group...it is not a ritual group. The members do not constitute a congregation. They do not perform any religious ceremonies together. There is no ancestor cult and no ancestral shrine. [The group] is not exclusive but overlapping” (1973:16).

Some of this is exaggerated, at least if applied to Zege. I have found that people do place importance on *zemed*, relations, and do make every effort to treat family members with privilege and kindness. It is quite true, however, that kinship in Zege is relatively unmarked<sup>62</sup> and quite malleable.

The basic unit of kinship in Amhara has been and remains the household (*béteseb*). Hoben describes the traditional (pre-Revolution) life goals of the layman as follows: “to build a large household of dependents who would serve him, show him respect, and give him honour. His well-being, like that of the land,

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<sup>62</sup> For example, there is no single Amharic word for ‘grandchild’ or ‘cousin’. Cousins come under ‘relations’ (*zemed*) while grandchildren are simply children’s children (*yelijj lij*).

depended primarily on his success in the art of managing his relationships with his dependents, rivals and superiors, and not on the number of his children, or his position in solidary local groups based on kinship or vicinage” (1970:192). Furthermore, “The idiom of the household is not the idiom of kinship as it is in so much of sub-Saharan Africa. It is rather the idiom of politics and clientship” (1970:199). Again, this remains partially true in Zege. Certainly the household includes more than just blood relations: live-in servants are treated as very junior members of the households they are attached to, and may well leave if they find a better position. Patronage remains central to many Amhara understandings of personal relationships, but in my experience this patronage often owes more to ‘blood’ relationships than Hoben allows. Since patronage relationships are family-like and family relationships patron-like, it is often difficult or beside the point to draw a clear distinction. One thing that must be noted, though: a household eats together. The men eat first and the women and children after, and sometimes from separate plates, but it is the same food prepared by the same women.

Major sociological studies conducted before the Ethiopian Revolution (Levine 1964, Hoben 1973) describe hierarchical relations at every level of society:

“Traditional Amhara political organisation was primarily structured by a branching, pyramidal network of personal, diffuse and contractual ties between patron and client. Each of these ties was conceived by the Amhara as a personal bond between ‘whole’ men, not as a clearly delimited and circumscribed rights and duties between officeholders...the patron-client relationship was basically contractual and voluntary. In return for his service and support the client expected protection, clothing, and feasts at the lord’s table, and ultimately hoped to be rewarded with rights in land” (Hoben 1970:191).

Status in this system was and is outwardly marked by the display of deference; certain physical and verbal dispositions are demanded of inferiors in the presence of their superiors (Hoben 1970). I encountered many forms of non-hierarchical interaction during my fieldwork, which may or may not be recent

developments, but an understanding of social relationships, especially political relationships, as fundamentally hierarchical remains very prominent in Zege. These understandings remain tacit and subtle, because maintaining successful relations is considered a matter of skill and often deceptiveness from both patron and client. But they can be seen in the ways in which young men move from house to house and associate themselves with different households over the course of time.

These fluid hierarchical relationships have often led to Amhara society being described as 'individualistic' (e.g. Levine 1964: 274). This is because patronage relationships are seen to be self-serving for both patron and client. There is a general understanding that patrons will display their power with ostentation and arrogance while clients will employ what wiles and deceit they can in order to get the most out of their patrons: "One important distinction which is never ambiguous or dissimulated is authority...Authority is displayed or affirmed with great stress and ostentation" (Messay 1999:181). Similarly, according to Donham, "It seems that domination, one might almost say exploitation, was much less mystified in Abyssinian than in [feudal] European discourse. No biological metaphor 'naturalised' inequalities. The very word in Amharic for nobility, *mekwannint*, derives indirectly from the verb *konene*, which means to discipline, to constrain, to inflict pain" (1986:6). In the face of this domination, says the literature, the correct response on the part of the client is wiliness and insincere deference: "According to one saying, *'The wise man bows low to the great lord and silently farts'*" (Donham 1986: 7).

Further, these stereotypes of hierarchical behaviour (which are not without a certain truth) inform Amhara discourses of what Amhara are like. A striking aspect of my fieldwork was the amount of time friends in Zege spent warning me about other Amhara and their tendency towards deceit and theft. A common response when somebody has possessions stolen is that it is the victim's fault, they ought to have been more careful, because it would be foolish to expect people to behave morally of their own accord. An extreme example of this was the armed guard that surrounded the *tabots* when they spent the night outside

on *T'imqet* eve: it was broadly expected that someone might commit the sacrilege of trying to steal them. I recall a conversation with one of the monks of Fure Maryam church in which he refused to accept any of my qualifications to his statement, "People are bad" (*sew metfo new*).

It is widely agreed in Zege that it is a terrible thing to be alone. One day while Tomas and I were poisoning ants in his home, he indicated the poison bottle and remarked "This is what people drink if they have no relations" (*zemed yelélaw yihén new yammít'ett'a*). I found it difficult to gain privacy at times because those around me, out of sheer fellow feeling, could not bear the thought of me being alone. Friends became particularly angry when I hid in my room while sick, explaining that I should have told them so that they could have taken care of me. Caring for the sick, as I have mentioned elsewhere, is a deeply ingrained ethical injunction. Meanwhile people showed great interest in my family, were excited when they met my parents, and asked frequently about my brothers and sisters. Tomas and Abebe made clear to me that the worst thing they could imagine was nobody coming to their funeral. People are generous with their food and place enormous value on commensality, as I describe throughout this chapter. I am confident in stating that people in Zege understand themselves in basically relational ways and consider their families/households and the social solidarity they foster, however fluid, to be the foundations of their existence.

But as is the case in religious social structure, a tension is identifiable between hierarchy and commensality. I would argue that Ethiopianist literature has thus far emphasised the former at the expense of the latter. Recognising this tension allows us to understand *buda*, and also helps us to a better account of the putative Amhara 'individualism'. We can phrase this as follows: Ethiopian Orthodox Christians understand people to be basically individualistic and perhaps fundamentally selfish, but they do not consider this to be a good thing. Rather, individualistic urges must be tempered at all times by social and moral constraints, principal among which are ethics of visiting and commensality. Eating and drinking together counteracts the centrifugal motion of individual people pursuing their own ends; it must be done regularly or society will fall

apart. But this in turn raises the problems of hospitality discussed in this chapter and by Bloch (2005b). It is in this milieu that buda, part agent and part medium and vector for human action, operate. People in Zege associate buda either with people who threaten relations of commensality and hospitality by producing inequality – the traders – or with people of low status with whom, it is projected, it is not safe to share food.

I argue, then, that there exists a relationship between buda and the problem of commensality between unequals. I would now like to suggest a parallel between this situation and the ritual hierarchies described in the first half of this thesis. I draw this connection from Feuchtwang's argument that religious ritual deals with the paradox of commensality between unequals taken to its logical extreme: commensality with incommensurable beings, with gods (2010: 62-67). This incommensurability is mediated by a sacrificial transformation: what ritual enacts is an invitation to another to take the place of the position of the inviting host, displacing her or him" (2010: 61). The pun on 'Host' is extremely tempting when comparing this analysis to Christian ritual, and I believe that there is some value there: it may be arguable whether the Eucharist constitutes 'commensality' with Christ, but we can certainly argue that it is the ultimate in shared substance with an incommensurate being. As discussed in my Introduction, this sharing of substance cannot mix with the sharing of substance with other people, hence the restrictions on food, sex, and childbirth in the Liturgy.

I would like to suggest, then, that the dynamics of buda are indicative of (although not reducible to) a problem to whose extreme form the Eucharist is a solution: the problem of hospitality, commensality, and the inequality of host and guest. This suggests a model of interpersonal and religious relations in which the sharing of substance is the very foundation of society, and the sharing of substance between unequals its principal problem. In the forthcoming, final section of this chapter I would like to add further evidence of the primacy of commensality in relations both among people and between people and divinity, in the form of a discussion of exchange relationships with saints.



### ***Zikkir: Exchange with the Saints***

In contrast to the market relations whose troublesome nature I have described, there are longer-term forms of exchange that, true to Parry and Bloch's analysis (1989), are far more binding and positively valued. I will briefly mention the mutual aid societies *iddir* and *iqub* that are part of most Ethiopian communities, and then will discuss at more length practices of sacred exchange between people and saints.

*Iddir* and *iqub* are mutual finance associations of which most people are members, paying a small amount each month into a general pot which is then redistributed. The *iqub* pays out a lump sum each month on a rotating basis, allowing recipients to finance larger projects like house building or starting a business, or to pay for emergency necessities like hospital fees, costing more than one might have available at any given time. *Iddir*, considered more important, pays for funerals, which can be quite costly. As well as providing food and beer for the priests who perform the seven services required to help the soul to heaven, supplies must be laid on for the three days' morning following the death. Attendance to at least part of this mourning is more or less compulsory for those who have any kind of link with the deceased or his family, and food or beer must be provided. The total cost of a funeral would thus be beyond the means of many families without *iddir*, yet the observance of funerary rites for one's family, and the confidence that they will be in turn observed for oneself, are absolutely essential if one wishes to be a full part of the community. Tomas commented to me, of one person who had died without the insurance of *iddir*, that his funeral had been extremely poorly attended, and his family thus shown to be very ill-connected in town. The importance of attending funerals represents the apogee of visiting practice. In the moment of death it becomes more important than ever to maintain one's social relations. Hence the family must provide food and *t'ella* to all comers. When Tomas tells me that the funerals of known buda are poorly attended, it shows that the fear of buda entails a fear of the enactment of the very relations which are crucial to the maintenance of

community and which by extension constitute people as members of that community.

There is one institution that is particularly instructive when it comes to community relations, commensality, and relations with the sacred. This is the *zikkir*, a feast given in honour of a Saint, often provided by the Church on the day of commemoration of that church's patron saint. All attendees receive food on these occasions, paid for by community contributions. But aside from these church feasts, individuals may also hold *zikkir* as part of a vow made to a saint in return for some protection or service. The most common example I heard when I asked about this was that if a woman wanted a child (or a specifically male child), she would pray to Mary, promising that if her wish were fulfilled, she would hold a feast for her neighbours every year on one of the specific days devoted to Mary. For relief from demonic perturbation, one would make similar vows to St Michael, and for relief from poverty, to St Gabriel. Many people I knew had lifelong obligations to annually hold such *zikkir*, in return for favours granted by saints.

It is relatively common in Orthodox and Catholic societies to enter into exchange relations with saints in which the supplicant gives some kind of money or material goods in exchange for intercession (see e.g. Stewart 1991: 81). What is notable in Zege is that, if a person makes a request of a saint (*silet*, 'vow') and that request is fulfilled, the return does not go to the saint in the form of an offering, but to one's neighbours in the form of a feast. The return of the gift refracts outwards to the community rather than reflecting back at the giver. This recalls a point made in Chapter 5, that a common reward for sainthood is continued remembrance and hence a sort of continued existence: the person giving the *zikkir* ensures that their neighbours will both acknowledge the saint by their participation in the feast, and also perhaps enter into indirect commensal relations with that saint, ensuring the saint's continued membership of society (cf. Duffy 1992: 337 for a similar argument with reference to medieval England). The *zikkir* displays again some of the profoundly communitarian ethic

of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, and further underlines the importance of shared substance in social relationships with saints as well as between humans.

One other type of organisation which is common in Orthodox Ethiopia, though I have seen less of it in Zege, is the *mahber*, social societies dedicated to a saint which meet on that saint's day. On that day the society's members come together to eat, with at least one priest who will bless the occasion beforehand. The *mahber* was perhaps the major form of voluntary association in pre-revolutionary Christian Ethiopia, and retains significance as a venue where ties are maintained, local affairs discussed and decisions made in a religious setting. Markakis describes it as follows:

"Not surprisingly, the most prevalent type of rural voluntary association has the church as its focus. This type of association is known as *mahaber*. In principle this is a purely religious affair, allegedly inspired by the Last Supper. In practice, it is a social function, a periodically recurring feast which relieves the monotony of rural life, and creates a bond of solidarity among the participating members" (Markakis 1974: 97).

In Zege, many of these groups take the form of *senbeté*, which meet on Sundays after church. As Stéphane Ancel says, these groups are important for establishing local socio-religious status (rather than simply 'relieving monotony) and are notable for being organised by parishioners, who invite a priest to preside, rather than the Church. As such they provide an important venue for religious self-organisation and for dialogue between laity and clergy (Ancel 2005).

The Last Supper association is significant, raising themes of commensality with Christ that speak to basic tenets of Orthodox sociality. I want to highlight particularly the presence of the priest to bless the food, and the pattern of sharing a feast in the name of a patron saint on that saint's day. Like the *zikkir*, the *mahber* establishes hierarchical ties with a saint by means of horizontal, commensal ties: the relationship with the saint refracts outwards to become binding among members of the community.

The dynamics of shared substance, then, play into every part of Orthodox life in Zege. The Eucharist is a way of sharing substance with God, and the *zikkir* equates personal relations with a saint and spiritual efficacy with commensal relations with one's neighbours. A largely negative view of human nature as selfish and deceitful sits together with an injunction to build togetherness with people as much as possible, and often to do so within the framework of the calendar of Ethiopian saints. Human selfishness and greed are always threats to this commensality, although the blurring of agency between humans and buda means that this can often be construed as a problem of general self-interest, rather than a mechanism of individual accusation and blame.

At the same time, the refusal of commensality does important things. In religious discipline, it can serve to build proximity to the sacred, physical purity, and to contextualise and counterbalance relations of feasting and commensality. In social hierarchy, refusal of commensality plays into a different and more troublesome kind of purity, the exclusion of certain people from the social fabric.

Commensality, I have argued, is the driving ethical ideal of Orthodox society in Zege. But there are two ways in which commensality does not sit easily with competing, hierarchical models of behaviour. The first kind is the sacred hierarchy that exists in the temporal and spatial boundaries built and maintained by the Orthodox Church (See Introduction, Chapter 1). In this realm, 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. The second kind of structure is what Messay calls the 'fluctuating hierarchy' (1999: 125). This is the set of shifting relations between social unequals, which is both epitomised and threatened by the host-guest relationship. As Graeber argues, hierarchy often involves a denial by the powerful of shared substance with the less powerful (Graeber 2007: 26-28). However, Ethiopian Orthodox notions of personhood do not acknowledge hierarchical differences of status as anything more than contingent. Social unequals should nonetheless be equal in the eyes of God, from whom they

borrow their worldly power. Here the tension between commensality and hierarchy is an animating dynamic of buda: people's fears about buda reflect uncertainties about with whom one shares substance. It is this perceived threat to commensality and substance-sharing that unnamed greedy traders, outcast canoe-makers, and those poorer or less central than oneself all share.

## Chapter 7

### **“Unto Dust Shalt Thou Return”: Death and the Semiotics of Remembrance**

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This chapter discusses funerary practice, Orthodox ideas of body and spirit, and the ways in which people make memorials for each other on the Zege Peninsula. I will pay special attention to gravestones and photographs because, here as in many other places, physical memorials to the dead become locations where latent uncertainties and conflicts about the relationship between spirit and matter, body and soul, this world and the next, tend to crystallise. The distinction between flesh and spirit has been the major site of conflict within Christianity since the religion’s beginnings, and it was a dispute over the apportionment of flesh and spirit in the person of Christ that led to the schism between the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches, including Ethiopia, and the Churches of Byzantium and Rome (Binns 2002: 9, 28).

Throughout this thesis, in describing material relations of hierarchy and commensality, and in identifying the sacred and the profane as dimensions of the material world, I have emphasised the tangible elements of religious practice and of social relationships. Whether pertaining to interpersonal relationships or to those between people, saints, and God, I have argued that Ethiopian Orthodoxy is principally about contact, connection, and shared substance. Death is the test of this regime of connection, the event that puts most stress on practices and idioms of togetherness. I have portrayed the sacred as a realm that we cannot consider as totally opposed to human physicality: although people do cultivate the isolation and enclosure of the body, it is precisely that bodily cultivation which can allow one to overcome the human condition. Once dead, however, as I will show, the body does become a truly despised thing, and Ethiopian Orthodoxy appears at its most dualistic (although even here, priests mediate between worlds) as emphasis moves to the departure of the soul. This chapter explores the extent to which the antipathy to dead bodies extends towards

material tokens or memorials of the body, like gravestones, and so aims to understand what happens when material, substantial interpersonal relations meet the great separation of death.

The ethnographic prompt for composing this chapter was what I perceived as a persistent and multifaceted anxiety in Zege with forgetting and being forgotten. This anxiety is tangible at funerals and in conversations about death, but also in daily discourse, in the language of greeting and parting, and in innumerable small conversations in the course of daily affairs. As an example, one of the more common ways to greet friends in Amharic is *'t'effah'* - "You disappeared" - even if you saw each other the day before. The idea of disappearing is recurrent in daily speech - people also often say *'attit'fa'*, "Don't disappear," upon parting. This is more than a verbal convention, because it will be accompanied with genuine upset and anger if a person fails to maintain contact without a valid reason. People take the idea of disappearance quite seriously. This sort of language is pervasive and is often accompanied with the language of forgetting. Many people asked me during my fieldwork if I would forget Amharic after I returned home, and showed delight when I returned a year later still more or less able to speak. I have always taken this concern with my language skills as a token of a more general question about whether I would forget Ethiopia, or forget Zege, once I had left. Many people assumed that my future non-presence would entail a general forgetting of them and their world.

As I have come to understand them, concerns about forgetting have everything to do with religious discourses of materiality and immateriality, and especially with the question of what we leave behind us when we die. To better understand the dynamics of forgetting, I want to trace the means and the media by which people make memorials, and the factors that limit this memorialisation. These limiting factors include conditions and conventions of burial practice, Orthodox notions of the passage of the soul; and pragmatic difficulties of access to technologies of memory.

By asking how people remember each other, we can switch the focus from the anxiety which I immediately perceived during fieldwork, to a positive emphasis on the ways in which people make themselves present to each other, and integrate the lives of others into their own. It is this personal, physical presence, I think, that is the overriding concern of the people I lived with in Ethiopia. Beginning from funerals, then, as ultimate moments of separation, I will move towards an account of how people make themselves present to one another in life and in death.

As I see it, issues of forgetting and being forgotten concern the physical status both of people being present to each other while they live, and of their physical remnants after they die. I want to consider the semiotic aspects of this problem, the ways in which people indicate the presence of themselves and other people, living or dead, to each other. I treat memorials as material signs, in that they carry some kind of reference to the person being remembered, and the physical form they take is integral to their semiotic function. Memorial signs are like the sacred signs discussed in my introduction: the relationship they mediate between the sign's recipient (the person who visits a gravestone or carries a photo in their wallet) and the person represented is at least as important as the relationship between sign and signified. My focus is on the material sign as mediator of a social relationship, a vector of interpersonal connection.

I am following the work of Webb Keane (2007: 1-42), Alfred Gell (1998: 12, 15, 102) and others who have developed the classificatory schema of CS Peirce (especially 1940: Chapter 7) to elucidate the relationship between material form and signification. Like Gell and Keane, I will lay particular emphasis on the index: a sign which represents its object by virtue of some kind of physical or causal connection. I will identify the indexicality of memorials as being indispensable to their effectiveness; that is, signs need to have some kind of contiguity with the deceased in order to act as satisfactory memorials. Indexicality, however, places significant limits on what kinds of semiotic forms people are able to enlist to help them remember people.



Keane provides a template for this view of indexicality in his work on semiotic form:

“the very materiality of objects is inseparable from their capacity to signify...the realism and intuitive power of objects often derives from their indexicality, their apparent connection to the things they signify by virtue of a real relationship of causality or conjunction. That is, they point to the *presence* of something (if not here, at least at some time and place). Under manipulation, they transform the spatial and or temporal dimensions of identity and experience – for instance, bringing the distant closer or the past into the present” (Keane 2006: 311).

I argue that the link between indexicality and presence – in space and in time – is crucial, particularly when what is being made present is dead people about whom one cares. Indexicality brings into the here-and-now actual, material traces of times past and people who have passed.

This is problematic in Zege for a whole range of reasons: religious, because the dead should not really leave any remnant after parting this world; practical, because good memorials are expensive; and political, because there is competition over who will be remembered. The politics of who gets remembered and who does not also take on religious and economic dimensions, as the two best ways of ensuring that people will continue to remember you are to attain great wealth or display great piety. This is not a new problem; as Peter Brown has shown, social hierarchy has all too easily transferred into the world of the dead in Christian history: “The tension between the community of the dead and the demands of private status has always presented paradoxes to toy with:

Here I lie at the chapel door

Here I lie because I'm poor

The further in the more you pay

Here I lie as warm as they” (Brown 1981: 34).

In this context, I hope to show that both being remembered and remembering others are central concerns in Amhara life, and that the best way to understand this is by unpacking the signs and practices they use to memorialise each other. Treating signs as inescapably material allows us to see them as limited resources; more importantly, the materiality of signs of remembrance forces the question of matter and spirit to the forefront. Material memorials pose the question of just how far the material remnants of the person are supposed to remain in the world or whether, in fact, death entails a complete and irreconcilable separation. My analysis begins with a consideration of graves and graveyards.

### **Technologies of Remembrance and Graveyard Politics**

Every funeral I attended in Zege ended with the deceased being buried in a grave marked only by a ring of stones. All baptised people are buried in the churchyard, although there is no single area designated for graves, and priests tell me that unbaptised children are buried just outside the church walls. The markers used are volcanic rocks from a volcanic lake, and so graves built in this manner soon become indistinguishable from surrounding areas. The stones are no more than 20 cm in diameter, and the churchyards see rapid vegetation growth every year in the rainy season. One grave, that of my friend's father-in-law, had been meticulously maintained and cleared of plant life so that it was still clearly visible when I visited some two years after his death. This degree of preservation is unusual, however, and in any case the grave included no indication as to the identity or individuality of its occupant.

While I was surveying graves in the Ura Kidane Mihret churchyard, Abebe, who was accompanying me, pointed out to me the rough area where his young mother had been buried some five years before. But he had no idea of the actual place. It was a poignant moment, as we had discussed his mother several times in the previous years. He told me he would have liked to see the grave, although I

must have partially influenced this by asking in depth about burial practices, and taking him with me to catalogue the graves.

My main reason for examining the churchyards in depth was the presence, in each of the church-monasteries of Zege, of a significant number of concrete graves. These took the form of raised oblong blocks, with the deceased's name, birth and death dates scratched in by hand while the concrete was still wet. They often also had some kind of metal cross embedded at the head. I found thirty of these graves in the yard of Fure Maryam, Afaf's local church, a similar number in Ura Kidane Mihret in Zege proper, and ascertained that there were also several concrete graves as far as the Mehal Zege monasteries on the tip of the peninsula. With very few exceptions these graves were constructed between 1991 and 2006 by the Gregorian calendar, from the downfall of the Derg until a local law was passed forbidding any further construction.

There are obvious practical grounds for outlawing concrete graves. Churchyard space is limited and the graves would quickly choke the church lands if allowed to proliferate. According to some interlocutors in Afaf, the problem came to a head when people began trying to stake out plots for graves in advance, causing widespread conflict, and the situation became unmanageable. But there is a separate discourse against the graves; as Abebe explained to me, the priests of Ura Kidane Mihret had turned against concrete graves 'so that it does not become modern' (*zemenawí indayhon*). The traditionality of the churches, their similarity to their past selves, is a key part of their status. As a priest explained to me in Mehal Zege, the most remote part of the peninsula, concrete graves are 'what they do in town. It is not done here.' This was an appeal to propriety, and to a pervasive local understanding that in Zege the traditional and the holy are isomorphic. After all, Zege has retained its holy status, and the income that derives from tourism and pilgrimage, by preserving its church traditions (see Chapter 5).

Finally, his companion, an older priest who had been listening to us, made reference to the Bible: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen

3.19), for a theological explanation of the impropriety of concrete graves. Bodily dissolution, not physical permanence, was the proper end of a Christian life. In this case the theological argument coincides with the need for regulation of individual desires so that the common interest, in the form of the church grounds, can be preserved. But there clearly is a widespread desire for physical memorials for the dead, otherwise people would not have started building concrete graves in the first place, which as far as I can ascertain have no analogue in earlier Ethiopian history, or locally before 1972 (Gregorian calendar)<sup>63</sup>.

When I asked priests in Mehal Zege what one could do if one wanted to be commemorated, they responded that one could arrange (including payment) for monks to recite prayers in one's name, and by building a temporary shelter in the churchyard, ensure that they would use it for your commemorative prayer. They then took me to the main external gate of the monastery, a large and sturdy structure built from local stone. They told me that a senior monk had had this gate built as his memorial gift to the monastery, and was now buried beneath the entrance. A further way for lay people to be commemorated is to give a large enough donation to a church that they paint your likeness among the murals of Gospel stories and Ethiopian hagiographies. In many churches, you can see images of these people in modern dress, close to the archangels and Mary, although this is not permitted in the Zege churches on account of their historic status. The common theme here is that, to be commemorated in the traditional idiom requires either wealth, or a very high religious status, of a kind rarely achieved by anyone other than by monks.

This prerogative is illustrated by the one concrete grave I found which had been built after the ban. This was the finest grave I have seen, made of stone, with birth and death dates neatly inscribed and displaying, uniquely, a small painted portrait of the deceased. As it was explained to me by Abebe and confirmed by other accounts, this woman had become a nun a year or so before her death, and

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<sup>63</sup> R. Pankhurst (1990: 195-99) gives fairly detailed accounts of funerals in historic Abyssinia, but makes no mention of graves or gravestones.

one of her sons had moved to Texas and become quite rich, and so had paid for her grave to be built. Still, it was quite discreetly placed in an unobtrusive corner of the churchyard, since it was technically illegal. Abebe explained that the son must have paid quite a significant amount to the church in order to persuade them to flout the law, which might nonetheless have been unacceptable had the woman not been a respected nun<sup>64</sup>.

As far as I have been able to establish, concrete graves proliferated in all seven churches in Zege after the fall of the Derg in 1991 Gregorian.<sup>65</sup> From this time until the outlawing of concrete graves in 2006 I estimate that one fifth to one seventh of the people who died in Zege were buried in such graves<sup>66</sup>. Reasons for not being buried in concrete would include tradition, since the graves have apparently never been considered proper by clergy in Zege, and cost. Nonetheless this proliferation of concrete and the subsequent necessity of the ban indicate a very widespread desire for these kinds of graves as opposed to the standard unmarked ring of rocks. I have been told by Abebe and by priests that some people now mark graves by planting a tree, but it was difficult to find many examples of such trees. That they thought of this detail, however, does indicate an assumption that people desire some kind of indicator of the place in which the remains of the deceased lie.

One could argue that grave building is less about remembrance than status. This is quite reasonable, and one thing that concrete tombs index is that the family has some money. I do not deny that graves act as status markers in all sorts of important ways, but it is remembrance that people emphasise. As my friend Addisu put it, “you know how we carry photographs of each other? Well it’s just

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<sup>64</sup> Remember that nuns, unlike monks, do not spend their lives in orders – rather they tend to become nuns in old age, often after being widowed. They then have no clerical role but rather are recognised as having renounced the world.

<sup>65</sup> I am still searching for information on burial practice under the Derg. It has been indicated to me that concrete graves would not have been allowed because they marked class inequalities, but I cannot confirm this.

<sup>66</sup> Assuming thirty gravestones per church, or roughly 210 on the Peninsula. Ethiopia's death rate is currently 11.29 per thousand, and Zege's population c10000, leading to a very rough estimate of 1400 deaths over a 14-year period.

like that, so you have something to remember with, if you have the money.” Having high status in life – through wealth or through religious achievements – makes it likely that you will be remembered more widely. What is at issue here, and I think it applies equally to questions of status or of remembrance, is what traces of us remain behind when we die.

Like a tree planted at a graveside, a gravestone allows a mourner to return to the spot of burial even a long time into the future; it is an indexical memorial because it points to the actual remains of the deceased. It implies that these remains in themselves and in their materiality are widely considered important. Yet the priest’s citation, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”, describes a theological position which denies any value to human remains. The standard practice of unmarked graves enacts and reinforces this position, as graves, and hence the remains they contain, quickly devolve into indistinction. This is the central contradiction of death in Zege, and it is particularly brought to light in the way people enlist new technologies (such as concrete) in their memorial practices.

The qualities of concrete – its hardness and its durability – meant that the practice of building concrete graves was unsustainable, since churchyards would quickly be strangled by the non-degrading matter. But the qualities of concrete also have semiotic valency, what Peirce calls qualisigns, and it was this that was unacceptable to the clergy. Concrete as a material suggested newness, and possibly a man-made quality, which made it inappropriate for the ‘traditional’ churches of Zege. Furthermore, its very durability stood against Orthodox principles concerning the body after death.

The discomfort surrounding human remains and the memorials that mark them out should be understood as consonant with the rules of bodily purity that surround the church, as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. There I described how those who had partaken in food, water, sex, or birth were not permitted entry to the church. I described this as a symbolic and practical isolation of the embodied aspects of human life from the sphere of the sacred, a

sort of rehearsal of the separation of body and soul at death. When a person dies, a family member will block all orifices of the corpse with material, tie the big toes together, and wrap the body in fine white cloth. I think we must view this final closure of the body as analogous to the bodily closure and isolation required during the Liturgy. It is logical to suggest that the body fluids that are kept as far as possible from the Liturgy and the Eucharist, are associated with putrefaction (cf. Bynum 1995: 108-113). In ritual and in death, work is required to keep body and soul separate. It is at these times that something like a loathing of the body emerges in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Unlike in many European and Eastern Christian traditions, there are no relics in Ethiopia. No hairs, bones, toenails, nor any other body parts are used in the search for proximity to the divine. I am fairly sure that the very notion would be considered horrific: Amhara funeral practice is about getting rid of the body as fast as possible. Friends who asked me about English funeral practice were shocked to hear that we might preserve the body for a week or more before burial, and even leave it open for viewings by the mourners.

Controversies over human remains are indicative of more general questions of material and spirit, and the proper relationship between the living and the dead. In the next section I will give an account of an Orthodox funeral in order to give a fuller impression of how people practice and conceptualise their relationships with the dead. This will offer further evidence of the denigration of human remains, and will describe how the soul is conceptualised as leaving this world, and how priests perform the service of assisting the soul on its journey to heaven. This ritual service is the officially sanctioned means by which to enact relations between the living and the dead.

### **Throwing out the Bones: Human Remains as Dust, and the Soul's Journey to Heaven**

Two months or so into fieldwork, my friend Tomas had learned enough about the sort of work I was trying to do that, when an elderly neighbour of ours died, he knew that I would want to attend the funeral. To do so would also be an

unequivocally good act on my part; attending funerals is the key marker of social participation and belonging in Amhara Orthodox society. Participation, in turn, and attempting to act like the people around you, not only by conforming to custom but also by engaging in local social networks, was the surest way for me to gain people's approval. This becomes paramount in moments of loss, as people emphasise their remaining social ties ever more strongly, so attending funerals becomes the most significant indicator, for locals, that a person is a member of their group.

People were gathering in the Afaf town centre to carry the corpse, shrouded in patterned cloth, out to Fure Maryam church. There was a noticeable divide in mood: while close family members, especially women, were wailing and dancing around the body, making ostentatious displays of grief, the rest of the crowd was casual, chatting and joking as if this were any ordinary social event - which in a sense, it was, for I would attend six more funerals in the next three months.

The funeral party arrived at the church, and the priests and monks assembled around the body to begin the mortuary rites. It was difficult for me, and still is, to distinguish one stage of the funeral from the next. The ritual was conducted in Ge'ez, spoken by nobody outside the priesthood, and the funeral progressed apparently under nobody's direction, but from a shared, internalised knowledge of how the rite should proceed, with congregants assembling away from the body in a different part of the churchyard, surrounding the family members as they paraded their grief, before joining the clergy to proceed around the body.

As the priests continued their chanting I was called away from the ritual with the non-related men to another part of the churchyard to dig the grave. The mood around the new grave was light. There was one shovel, and men were sharing the work according to no particular prescription. My presence was a novelty, and the occasion for a good deal of comparative questioning about funerary practices in England. The idea that we leave the body unburied, so that the relatives can arrive, provoked slightly bewildered amusement. As was often the case I also



became a useful foil for people to tease each other in the guise of introducing me to the area (“Tomas! Don’t listen to this guy. He’s a philanderer!”).

When we were about two feet down into the earth, one of the younger men pulled out a bone and asked, “Does this happen in your country?” We had hit upon a previous grave, about twenty years old by my amateur reckoning. His tone was casual, and he nonchalantly tosses the bone away, but the question and his manner of asking indicated that this was not an entirely unremarkable or unproblematic situation. Further bones were simply thrown away like the first as we came to them, including some fragments of skull, until the grave was eventually deep enough to receive its new tenant. I would frequently think back to this moment throughout the rest of my fieldwork as people's attitudes to death and loss became more apparent to me. Their blasé treatment of the human bones now seems to me an instantiation of a much wider discourse of death and absence.

The lack of solemnity among the gravediggers is significant, if not hugely surprising in itself. Attendance at funerals is so important that many people there will not actually have known the deceased particularly closely. Furthermore, people end up attending a lot of funerals, and they do become somewhat routinised. In any case people’s behaviour is far less important than the fact of their presence. Richard Pankhurst (1990: 195) confirms that it has historically been the case that what counts at funerals is presence. The presence of the living is particularly important in light of the absence of the deceased, and the gravediggers’ treatment of the bones they unearthed is a stark demonstration of that absence.

In tossing away the bones, the gravediggers were behaving in a manner perfectly in line with Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine as expressed to me by the priests who disapproved of concrete graves. They treated the bones, and the site of the earlier grave, as if they were nothing special; or at least, they nearly did. For one man did at least consider it notable, and worth asking me what we did in such circumstances in my own country. I have since found out that at least some of my

friends feel that, given the choice, they would rather not have someone else buried where their bones lie, and felt that concrete tombs would be a good way of ensuring this did not happen.

As the funeral drew to a close, the body was brought to the grave and placed inside as the priests continue to chant. The men who dug the grave refilled it, and then placed a ring of rocks, fist- to head-sized, around the grave. Looking around, it was hard to tell which of the nearby rocks marked previous graves, now disarranged, and which were strewn randomly. Aside from the ring of rocks, no marker was placed on the grave.

Finally, on a signal from one of the priests, the entire congregation sat or squatted for a moment in silence. This, I was told, is called *yigzi'o*, and is the moment that the soul leaves the body, the first step of a journey to heaven that would require six further ritual services to complete – after three, seven, twelve, thirty, forty and eighty days. This was a striking and profound moment, the only point of silence in the whole ceremony, and the only time at which all in attendance acted in unison. My questions at the time indicated that everyone present understood this as the moment of the soul leaving, and found the *yigzi'o* to be a potent marking of this event.

Note that the soul does not immediately enter heaven upon leaving the body, however. This implies that there is an intermediary period after death where some interaction with the deceased is still possible. This is a question which has recurred repeatedly in Christian history, and which came to a head in Western European Christianity in the Reformation. The Catholic Church's adherence to the concept of purgatory meant that there was a coherent reason to pray for the dead (or, notoriously, to pay for them); this allowed a kind of contact with the dead, or at least a kind of remembrance, which a great number of Christians have found comforting. But for the new wave of Protestants prayer for the dead represented an unacceptable intermixing of spirit and material, and so had to be stamped out along with the whole concept of purgatory (Duffy 1992: 475).

If purgatory was the Catholic solution to the question of intermediary positions between this world and heaven and hell, Ware reports that the Orthodox Churches have approached this problem by emphasising the element of mystery. We may not know where souls have gone, but prayer is nonetheless helpful to them, and comforting to those who pray, which is construed as a justification in itself (Ware 1963: 259).

The situation in Ethiopia is quite different. I have detailed in Chapters 2 and 3 the extent to which theological knowledge is not shared between priests and lay people, and accordingly I have found that lay people and priests may have quite different ideas about death. The priestly account of Orthodox cosmology, as collected from my interviews, is of a seven-layered heaven, each with its own esoteric characteristics, but only the last of which is *gennet*, paradise, the final resting place of the soul. It is for this reason that seven funerary rituals are required to assist the soul's journey. Since each ritual requires a modest payment of food and beer, the sevenfold rituals are also an important part of the clerical livelihood. At each ritual, the priests will chant the prescribed Ge'ez prayers in order to help the soul on its journey.

For lay Christians, however, little is clear about the journey of the soul; very few people know about the seven levels of heaven, for example. The major concern is getting to *gennet*, paradise. People are quite happy to defer to priests on the correct means of assisting the process, although they may question the number of rituals required, and the correct payment. This arrangement has implications for the relations between the living and the dead, because it means that for lay people, their contact with the deceased is always doubly mediated: contact with the dead is carried out by the proxy of a priest, and in a language which only the priest understands.

While I have argued throughout this thesis that sacredness is best thought of as a domain within the world, and that Orthodoxy cannot be classified as dualistic in any simple sense, funerary rituals emphasise the point of absolute division between the living and the dead. The role of the clergy is to help the soul on its

way from this world to the next. The *yigzi'o*, the moment at the end of each funeral where the entire congregation crouches or sits, is the only moment where every person at the funeral acts in unison. It is also the only moment of silence after the priests' chanting, the wailing of the mourners and the chatter of the gravediggers. This collectivity inescapably highlights the moment at which the soul begins to leave this world. It is at this point that the problem of divine absence becomes a problem of human absence, because the ultimate transcendence of the spiritual world of death entails a concomitant disregard for the earthly remains of the deceased. This disregard was manifest most sharply when the gravediggers uncovered and discarded the old bones as described above; once the spirit has departed it leaves absolutely nothing of importance in its mortal remains. This is the point that was affirmed to me by the priests at Mehal Zege when they quoted to me, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3.19). I have argued that human embodiment while alive is problematic but also potentially, through discipline and overcoming, the route to salvation. The body is, further, the means of Communion with God. In death, however, a more comprehensive antipathy towards the human body emerges and so, I would argue, proximity to the divine starts to look more difficult.

### **Sainthood and the Theology of Remembrance**

I do not wish to cast these problems of materiality and remembrance as exclusively Orthodox, or exclusively Ethiopian, or exclusively caused by theology. I take the moment of death as a nexus point of practical and theoretical concerns and insecurities about matter, spirit, and community. When remembering the dead, the range of memorials one can construct is limited by factors both ideological (such as religious injunctions on the proper form of tombs) and practical (such as the cost of a gravestone). I take as a central virtue of Keane's elaboration of concepts of semiotic ideology and semiotic form that it allows one to consider both these ideological and practical limitations as integral to the process of signification (and hence of social connection) itself, producing a semiotics which ties people into the world rather than abstracting them from it.

This is especially important in light of the many ways in which Christianity has been involved in attempts to detach ideas from things as a part of divisions between the ideal and the material (Keane 2006: 310-12; 2007:23). What I want to focus on is what memorial practice tells us about the gap between the living and the dead in Orthodoxy. This is not the same thing as the gap between humans and God, but the two are related.

This work stands in dialogue with a body of literature that discusses the paradoxes inherent in any endeavour which posits an ideal realm of existence outside of the world of lived experience. Much of this has developed in the anthropology of Christianity (especially Engelke 2007, Cannell 2006, Keane 2006) but there are precedents elsewhere: Bloch posits the incommensurability between a transcendent realm of deathlessness and the lived world as a possibly universal upshot of the ritual process (1992)<sup>67</sup>. The idea of a Great Divide has been most central to scholarship on Christianity at least since Hegel (Cannell 2006:14, Engelke 2007: 13), and also seems to remain a significant underpinning of 'modern' thought, particularly in the work of purification (Keane 2007: 41, Latour 1993). The work of purification is the purportedly modern tendency to draw separations: between humans and non-humans, ideas and things, nature and culture (Latour 1993: 10, 35). Keane suggests, I think rightly, that it is worth pursuing the relationships between what Latour identifies as the work of purification, and the Christian history of divisions of spirit and matter, and the problem of the fetish (Keane 2007: 23-25). We can see this as the latest development in a tradition that goes back to Weber, of interrogating the inter-relationships between the history of Christianity and ways of thinking about the world in the capitalist era. Yet these separations are never completely achieved, because of the ineluctable material conditions necessary for human sustenance and human communication (Engelke 2012: 212). Precisely because unworldliness is such a prominent idea in certain kinds of Christianity, anthropologists of Christianity have especially emphasised the insistently

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<sup>67</sup> Although I duly note Cannell's criticism that this may indicate the Christian framework of Bloch's own thinking (Cannell 2005).

material moorings of symbolic practice (eg. Engelke 2007: 9-11, 28-32; Keane 2006: 322, 2007: 24).

So what is particularly Orthodox about the case at hand? After all, Church of England funerals frequently include “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” at the committal, without experiencing the problems of memorialisation that I saw in Zege. This, I think is where theology, and especially arguments about the nature and body of Christ come in. The Chalcedonian Churches argued that Jesus was of two natures, divine and human, in one body. The Oriental or non-Chalcedonian Churches, by contrast, maintained that the nature of Christ was singular but of two essences: human and divine so completely mixed as to be inseparable, and thus of one ‘nature’ or ‘person’ (Greek *physis*, Amh. *bahriy*, *akal* see Ayala 1981: 18). As Crummey explains it, “the minority group denied the *continuing* distinction between the Divine and the human natures in Christ. They held, rather, that Christ was *from* two natures which effected a perfect *union* (=Ge’ez *Tawahedo*). They held that only one nature continued, a unique Divine-Human one. They did not necessarily, as is so often alleged, absorb the human into the Divine” (Crummey 1972: 15).

What was at stake was idolatry, the danger of mistaking the profane for the sacred and worshipping it. The Ethiopian Orthodox answer, that the human and divine in Christ are unified<sup>68</sup>, has significant ramifications. What it means in practice is that Christ is considered much closer to God, and much further from humans, than in other traditions: Christ does not act in human affairs (Morton 1973: 65). Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, at least in Zege do not pray to Jesus; traffic with the divine must instead be mediated through non-divine agents: either Mary and the Saints, or priests. An example would be *Kidane Mihret*, the Covenant of Mercy for which the Ura church in Zege is named. In this story, Christ appears to Mary to promise her that all who pray in her name will be

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<sup>68</sup> Note, though, that this is not a gnostic or monophysite system. Christ is at once fully divine and fully human. See Ayala 1981: 19, 55, 67. The preferred term is ‘miaphysitism’ (Mebratu 2010).

saved. Mary here is the necessary go-between because Christ's divinity only allows contact in the thoroughly purified context of the Eucharist.

Saints are excellent intercessors because they are already dead and free of their bodies. In Chapter 3 I argued that clergymen should also be considered as partially dead, due to their marginal existence and their regimes of bodily purity. As such they are the proper agents to interact with deceased human souls as well as with the divine. The theology of the purity of Christ, that is, has a knock-on effect on the treatment of the dead, because it necessitates the mediatory class or sacred hierarchy of the priesthood to deal with all matters un-worldly. Christ's relative distance from mankind suggests that the whole heavenly realm, the soul's destination, is similarly distant and requires comparable mediatory practices to be reached.

The Ethiopian Orthodox funeral very clearly aims to effect a proper separation of body and soul. The corpse, a dangerous and worrying object<sup>69</sup>, is transformed into inert dust that my grave-digging friends were able to toss away like so many pebbles, while the soul is sped away to heaven, that is, away from the material world. The liminal priests will hold the several ensuing services that will aid the journey. But everything that was important about the person is departed. By contrast, concrete graves index the material remains of the person. They offer an indissoluble, insistent point of physical reference. They mediate the relationship between mourners and the deceased without the authority, and the purity, of the priesthood. After a lifetime of religious work in which embodied practice was inevitable, the soul finally achieves disembodiment, and yet the concrete grave insists that something of significance remains in the body.

If gravestones constitute improper remembrance, then what does proper, authorised remembrance look like? A list of the names of deceased persons is kept in church and must be present when the Eucharist is performed for the

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<sup>69</sup> I have heard several stories of problems occurring when a person dies away from home, because few drivers are willing to transport the body in their vehicles.

purposes of remembrance (Aymro & Motovu 1970: 53). Like the Bede-roll in pre-reformation England, this undoubtedly produces an important sense of permanence in the parish community (Duffy 1992: 334). As I have described, however, participation in the Eucharist is restricted, so while the Eucharistic remembrance is important, it does not necessarily provide an effective means for mourners to maintain relationships with the deceased (c.f. Danforth 1982: 133).

I believe there is an ideal model of how people should be remembered in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and that is by sainthood. I have hinted at this already by saying that the way to be remembered, other than accruing great wealth, is through great acts of piety. Here I want to emphasise just how much the reward for such piety is remembrance in and of itself. The founding saint of Zege, Abune Betre Maryam, for example, did both the things which tend to lead to sainthood: he performed miracles, by crossing the lake on his stick, and he spent years in ascetic prayer. He then founded the first church in Zege in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and his image remains on the walls of its neighbour monastery, Mehal Zege Betre Maryam, which was named after him. In the telling of the tale it is quite clear that the reward for his great devotion was, not only that he went to heaven, but that anyone who prayed in his name would also be saved. The reward, then, is that people will use your name, in a devotional context, in perpetuity. There is a real kind of eternal life contained in that formula, and it is a recurring trope that people who perform superhuman acts of devotion will be remembered in the same way.

Another way of putting this is that the reward for sainthood is to become a medium; you yourself become the means of contact between humans and the divine. You can then gain the dual rewards of eternal life in heaven and eternal presence on earth – you transcend the gulf between material and spirit. This means continued connectivity: continued relations of contact and exchange with other persons (see Chapter 6 on the *zikkir*), and hence, continuing life. The prototype of this pattern is Mary, who is most memorialised of anyone in the Ethiopian cosmos, in mural paintings and in dedicated festivals.



The foundational template for this dynamic is the Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mihret, for which the church of Ura is named). This is a story from the Ethiopian canon, contained in the Te'amra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), in which, as recounted by Ayala, Christ appeared with a legion of angels to Mary on Mount Calvary, where she would regularly pray after the ascension, and promised her that he would “liberate from toil..all those who would invoke her holy name, and celebrate her memory” (Ayala 1982:119). He continues, “To the Ethiopian minds, such a 'Copact' [sic] is equivalent to a third, or a *new New Testament* in the divine economy of the salvation of mankind” (ibid). For this reason, Ethiopian Christians, he says, “will never refuse a favour or alms to one who requests it in her name” (ibid.120), which I have found to be true in principle if not necessarily in practice. It remains the case that the majority of beggars call for alms in the name of Mary or another Saint, often depending on which day of the month it is, and Christians of my acquaintance take seriously the principle that one should give alms in these cases. In the context of this chapter, this set of practices highlights both a strong moral onus upon remembering the good, and the very high desirability of being remembered.

The power of begging in the name of a saint is illustrated by the story of Belay the Cannibal, which is known across Orthodox Ethiopia, and which is painted in episodic form on the door to the inner sanctum of Ura Kidane Mihret church. The story has it that Belay ate every person he met including his parents, amounting to seventy-five, or seventy-five thousand depending on which version you hear. The exception was one leprous beggar who was begging by the roadside for water, in the name of Mary. Belay, hearing the name, takes pity and gives the beggar a single handful of water. The final, largest panel of the mural depicts St Gabriel<sup>70</sup> weighing the seventy-five murdered people against the single handful of water. In the panel Mary can be seen casting her shadow over the side of the scale containing the water, causing it to outweigh the murdered people, and so by having answered one request in the name of Mary, Belay is saved.

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<sup>70</sup> In Ethiopian theology it is Gabriel, not Peter, who mediates judgement.

The problem with sainthood as the ideal way to be remembered is that it is an ideal, and largely unreachable. The acts of the saints tend to be superhuman; Tekle Haymanot, Ethiopia's most famous Saint stood on one leg for nine years until his other leg dropped off; he was given three pairs of wings as a replacement, and is now memorialised in most churches in Ethiopia, and has a day of the month named after him. Disembodied embodiment, as has been made clear throughout this thesis, is not a realistic aim for most.

Monks come close to this ideal, and so are often specially honoured in remembrance, as with the monk I mentioned earlier for whom the monastery gate was built. But for most people sainthood is simply inaccessible, and it also tends to be incompatible with the basic requirements of maintaining human society – standing on one leg in prayer does not leave much time for growing food. So we have a situation, quite common in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, where the ideal condition is seen to be impossible, and what emerges is a gradual, tacit negotiation of exactly which concessions to materiality are acceptable.

The memorials which money can buy will never be as good as those which are attained through sainthood, but they can still be effective. They will, however, always be informal. So, as I have mentioned, in many churches, a rich man can give a donation to have his likeness painted among the saints. In Zege, this is not an acceptable compromise, because the murals are of historic importance. What I think happened in Zege between 1991 and 2006 was a testing of whether concrete graves could be acceptable in lieu of sainthood. That question has been answered in the negative but, in the case of the woman who was a nun and whose son gave a substantial donation to the church, exceptions may be made in the right circumstances.

So: there is a problem with material memorials, which appears to be related to Orthodox notions of transcendence, and the strict regulation of relations between the living and the dead, or the human and the divine. It is also related to

the problematic nature of human bodies, compared to the body of Christ in its indissoluble divinity. Just as someone has finally got free of the physical ties of life, a concrete tomb declares, here is the body, here are the bones; she is still tied to this world.

I have been developing an argument that a focus on materials and mediation helps us to understand problems of remembrance in Zege. This picks up on a major trend in the anthropology of religion in the past few years, which has considered the links between religion and media and suggested that large amounts of what we think of as religion, and perhaps religion itself, can be understood simply as mediation. In this final section I want to consider this idea in reference to the last memorial medium I want to speak about: that of the photograph. The questions I am aiming to answer are, what does a medium mean in the context of relations between the living and the dead, and why is it important?

### **Photographs, Media, and the Distributed Person**

Photographs have extremely high value in Zege, and people are explicit in describing this as being due to their desire to remember each other. Photographs are especially good for remembrance, of course, because they actually look like the deceased. They are iconic, in that they resemble their subject, but also indexical, in that they capture light reflected from the actual physical form of the person they represent. This technology is clearly superior to the effigies of cloth and straw that people made in the past.

I have said that correct funeral practice tends to produce distance between the deceased and the mourners, in the process of separating body and soul. The camera helps to counteract this process, and allows mourners to feel some kind of ongoing connection with the deceased. I would argue that indexicality makes this connection into a kind of presence, albeit not one comparable to a person's actually being alive in this world. As Alfred Gell puts it, "the agency of the person

is actually impressed on the representation” (1998: 102). The memorial is effective because it is a direct effect of the person being memorialised. To quote Gell again: “the inferential schemes (abductions) we bring to ‘indexical signs’ are frequently very like, if not actually identical to, the ones we bring to bear on social others” (1998: 15). This Maussian notion resonates with arguments made in the Introduction to this thesis, that Ethiopian Orthodoxy recognises a distribution of (ultimately divine) agency through persons and things in equal measure, and that relationships constituted through matter and material things are the basic concern of this religious system.

Cameras offer vast potential as technologies of remembrance, and as technologies of presence (which may be the same thing). People in Zege value photographs of themselves and loved ones extremely highly, to the point that even if I kept my camera hidden I was unable to walk across the street in Afaf without requests to take people’s photographs. The word people most often used was ‘*mastawesha*’, ‘that-which-makes-us-remember’. At funerals especially it was best to have a large framed photo of the deceased, but in daily life too young people carry numerous photos of friends and family in their pockets. As I had the only digital camera in town, people would often ask me to take photos at weddings, christenings, or any ritual, which I would do whenever possible. The individual portrait photo is most clearly important for funerals, although obviously valuable in many other respects. But even in the relatively prosperous market town of Afaf, few people have enough access to a camera even to procure a photo of themselves. If they do, it is often a significant event.

Personal names offer striking possibilities for remembrance, in particular names like *Kassahun*, *Kassayé*, and *Masresha*. Each of these names is given to a child born after a previous sibling has died in infancy, and I know more than one person with each of these names in Zege. *Kassahun* means ‘Be a compensation’; *Kassayé* means ‘My compensation’; and *Masresha* means, with notable irony, ‘That which makes [us] forget’. To tie ones child in so intimate and lasting a manner to the memory of a previous bereavement surely speaks to a powerful desire to remember even, or perhaps especially, painful memories. A friend of

mine, *Ashenafi*, 'Winner' or perhaps 'Victor', tells me that he was given his name after his twin sister, who had seemed the healthier of the two, had died in infancy<sup>71</sup>. This is a quietly remarkable semiotic form since the name becomes part of a real person, who then becomes, among other things, a living sign of remembrance.

Neighbourly visiting and local networks of commensality are crucial to Amhara life (see Chapter 6). Social ties are maintained by being seen to make an effort to maintain regular personal presence. People began to accept me as a community member when I attended funerals; I became even better integrated when I started turning up at people's houses unannounced. Making yourself present to others is an unequivocal ethical good. Now, when it is not possible to be physically present, mobile telephones have been widely adopted as a means of keeping up some kind of presence and connectivity. This is the case whether or not you have some kind of business to transact or information to exchange; it is very clear, in Zege as elsewhere, that the relationship itself is paramount. Mobile phones allow people to achieve presence over much greater distances than before.

I am suggesting that gravestones and photographs of the dead have similar mediatory functions to phones and visiting networks, in that they allow the living to maintain partial relationships with the dead; as Danforth says, "A person's grave serves to maintain the reality of his existence in tangible form, in the world of physical space, for those who want to continue to engage in a social relationship with him" (Danforth 1982: 133). Ethiopian Orthodox understandings of death, I argue, posit the absence of the soul after death in particularly strong fashion. This is the culmination of a religious discourse in which an utter ontological divide between God and humans always suggests itself until – through the Eucharist, through Holy water, and the sacraments – methods of establishing contact emerge. It is not human-divine contact that

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<sup>71</sup> In general, people may choose Old or sometimes New Testament names for children, name them for their hopes such as *Yibelt'al*, 'He will overcome', or select from a range of common Amharic names with generally positive meanings. See Messing 1974 for more details.

causes the problem here, but contact between living and dead people, for which there is no established practical mechanism.

## **Conclusion**

In anthropology and elsewhere there is now growing support for claims like Gell's that "the immediate 'other' in a social relationship does not have to be another 'human being'" (1998: 17, see my Introduction). Gravestones and photographs do for relationships as the sign of the cross or the taking of holy water does for relationships with God: they facilitate closeness. The use of media by Orthodox Christians in Zege suggests that they understand this point quite profoundly. What emerges especially in the case of graveyards is the question of what kind of mediation, and what kind of relationship with the dead, is proper. The materiality of gravestones makes them potent memorials, but in the eyes of many this materiality is wholly inappropriate.

The presence of the memorial (the material sign) suggests or partially produces the presence of the person because it is indexical. The signs by which we remember and communicate with each other are not arbitrary but are intimately connected with the things they communicate or commemorate. A photograph is indexical because the image you view comes from me just as much as the image you have when you look at me right now. Gravestones are indexical because they point to where my bones lie. They do not just remind you of me; they direct you to me.

I will finish by returning to the question of whether Ethiopian Orthodoxy is dualistic, to which the answer must be, 'sometimes'. Christ is distant from humans, and heaven is separate from this earth, and spirit is opposed to matter and the body. But as this thesis has tried to show, never are these distinctions absolute or simple. What is distinctive about Ethiopian Orthodoxy is the way in which divisions or oppositions between God and the world of the living are managed and policed by the clergy. The funerals I have described are enactments

of the division between body and soul, but it is only in death that such a division pertains. In life body and soul may be at odds but their coexistence is essential.

The memorial practices of lay Orthodox Christians in Zege highlight the extent to which personal relationships are constituted through things. This thesis thus ends how it began, asking how material signs make relationships between social actors, and how mediatory hierarchies describe the proper forms that these relationships can take. In the conclusion of the thesis, that follows this chapter, I will attempt to draw together the semiotic aspects of this discussion, particularly the role of indexicality in making relationships. I end this chapter by remembering what happens directly after the funeral: family, friends, neighbours, and anyone with any connection to them proceed to the mourning tent where the family serves food and *t'ella* beer to all comers. The way you confirm your continued connection after the great separation is through more commensality.

## Conclusion: Indexical Religion

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“Indexical signs are linked to what they signify by existential connections” (Keane 1997: 79): These existential connections have been the common theme of this thesis: how indexical, material signs connect social actors (human, spiritual, or divine) through mutual reference to a shared reality. The sign of the cross identifies those who make the sign and those who witness it with the shared historicity of the crucifixion; the tripartite, concentric arrangement of the church building ties worshippers into a tangible materialisation of three-ness and so makes links with the intangible trinity (both of these examples are iconic as well as indexical); partaking in the same food does not just symbolise togetherness but draws the sharers into a single point of substantial contact; the gravestone connects mourners to the bones of the deceased. In every part of the Orthodox society of Zege I have found these points of mutual contact with the phenomenal world and the world beyond – via the worldly sign - to be paramount.

In this account, the sacred and the profane are described by permutations of connection and contact. To recapitulate, the sacred is not covalent with the divine, the invisible, or the ‘beyond’. Rather it is a state in the perceptible world which is oriented towards contact with the beyond. The sacred is set apart from the profane because the purity (which may simply amount to disembodiedness) of God is incompatible with worldly relations of connection between embodied humans. The total fasting and bodily enclosure which is required before taking the Eucharist epitomises this setting-apart. The ethnographic and theoretical reasons why I have made the Eucharist central to my analysis of Orthodoxy in Zege should be clear: it is “the meeting of God and humanity, and at it the nature of the Church is most clearly seen and experienced” (Binns 2002: 40).

The index as I have described it relates closely to Meyer’s use of ‘medium’, particularly in the case of sacred indexes. For Meyer, religious media are “a broad array of authorized forms that are to bring about and sustain links



between humans and what, for lack of a better term, I call the 'transcendental' – as an indispensable condition without which the latter would not be accessible and present in the world" (2011: 61). I have tried to show how the relational thinking of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians makes media of contact with the ineffable divine look very similar to media of contact and connection with other social actors. What is then important about the medium as 'embedded sensational form' (Meyer 2011: 62) – medium as indexical material sign – is that multiple participants can perceive, touch, share or partake in it. The sign of the cross is a medium as defined by Meyer, but what I wish to emphasise is that as such it is a shared point of reference in the world. The Peircean semiotic framework helps to elaborate dimensions of the semiotic relationship beyond sign and signified: the relationship between the encoder, transmitter, and receiver of the message, as well as that between the medium (sign) and the signified, are all integral to the material sign as relational node (see Rappaport 1999: 32, 52).

Chapter 5 of this thesis extends the analysis of indexicality from semiotic acts in predominantly ritual contexts to describing relationships with the lived environment as a whole - the 'social environs' (James 2003: 298). The aim has been to produce an account of Ethiopian Orthodox religion that resists abstraction, but depicts symbolic practice as a product of living, organic people making their way in the world. Building on Ingold's suggestion that "the source of cultural knowledge lies not in the heads of predecessors but in the world that they point out to you" (2000: 146), I explore how Zege's environment, forest and buildings included, both represents and results from centuries of Christian inhabitation and Christian practice. The whole environment is an index, a common reference and an existential link to the past. By attending the same churches and cultivating the same trees people participate in a shared reality that is also, per Meyer, a tangible medium to the transcendent.

The contrast between knowledge 'in the head' and 'in the world' is a key to questions of the efficacy of ritual. If the semiotic content of ritual, as I am arguing, is mainly about making relationships, it is also transformative (The fast

and the Eucharist especially transform people through taking or refusing substances that associate, indexically, with God and other actors). Compare this to anti-ritualist semiotics, in which signs carry information from one head to another, and it is sincerity – the faithful representation of internal states by external signs - that makes the religious subject (Keane 2007: 200). Ritual symbolism transforms our relationships to others and to the world; therefore it transforms us.

I have noted a connection between indexicality (the material sign carrying something of or some connection to the referent) and ideas of distributed agency that have emerged in the work of the likes of Gell (1998), Latour (1993), or Strathern (1988). Hanganu (2010) makes an argument that this distributed view is appropriate to Orthodox approaches to matter because of a view of humans and matter as equally redeemable co-creations of God, from whom their agency ultimately stems (see Introduction, Chapter 7). However, Ethiopian Orthodoxy, like other Orthodox Christian societies, holds a notion of the person that is basically universal and individuated. Distributed agency does not equate to distributed personhood. Rather, Hanganu describes “a paradoxical Eastern Christian intermediary position” between a putative Western individualism and non-Western holism. Dumont identifies a similar intermediary position when discussing pre-reformation Christianities, characterised by the ‘outworldly individual’, the person as an individual-in-relation-to-God but part of a worldly hierarchy (1986: 30, 51).

We should be wary of discussion of ‘intermediate’ positions, which risk playing into a simplistic dualism of the West and the Rest. There is no need to describe personhood, hierarchy, and attitudes to mediation and materiality in Ethiopian Orthodoxy as ‘intermediary’ between any two states. Rather we are describing a society in which people are construed as basically unitary individuals, but in which the connection between those individuals – and the media or the material signs that connect them – are of the highest practical and ethical importance.

I have described a society in which material mediation is treated not with suspicion but with acceptance, even active emphasis: processional crosses, holy water, and church murals are the proper tools of the work of the sacred. But it would be an error to try and claim that materiality and embodiment are therefore unproblematic in Zege's Orthodox Christianity. My chapter on death should demonstrate that, but I have also described the various ways in which the sacred-on-earth is opposed to worldly (indexical) connectedness of bodies. A tension does exist between embodiment and holiness, and it seems to pertain to the divide between humans and God that Hegel thought characteristic of Christianity (see Cannell 2006: 14-22). But the resolution to this tension is not to be found in human heads but in indexical acts of connection and consumption.

The tension between sacred and profane, therefore, is not so much between embodiment and spirit but between two types of material connection, substance sharing, or physical meeting: hierarchical connection with God, mediated by priests, monks, saints, and angels; and (more or less) coequal commensality and physical intimacy with humans. Now, as I discuss in Chapter 6, profane society is not in fact egalitarian but quite hierarchical. This, I would suggest, has something to do with historical Imperial hierarchies being justified along quasi-sacred lines. In any case, as I show, this kind of hierarchy, too, conflicts with ethics of commensality and interpersonal physical presence. Previous literature on Amhara has been, in my opinion, far too quick to highlight aspects of hierarchy and domination without noting their constant dialectic interaction with ethics of care, togetherness and commensality. These ethics are of central importance to the people I lived with in Zege. Hierarchical links between people are generally acknowledged to be contingent and fluctuating (see Messay 1999: 127); commensal links, on the other hand, are of prime moral importance, and require constant upkeep: by regular visiting, Easter and Christmas feasting, and especially by funeral attendance.

So, while there is a clear tension, even incompatibility, between relations with God and relations with other people, my argument has been that these relations are of basically the same kind. They are relationships of contact and shared

substance enabled by indexical, material signs. Sometimes, these signs are gifts, and carry in a Maussian way a part of the giver, which I would argue is an indexical process: the Eucharistic prayer is construed as an offering, and the transformation of the Host is its return; so also the *zikkir*, the gift to a saint that is returned by a feast for one's neighbours, is an indexical material mode of contact in the form of an exchange relationship. When people in Afaf ask each other for photos, as they commonly do, I am sure that they construe this similarly as a gift that carries part of the person. Indexicality does not have to take the form of exchange, however, but can simply take the form of a common semiotic reference point, like the church, or the cross worn round one's neck that indicates shared identity with other Christians as well as with Christ.

Peter Pels has commented that it may be time to recognise "that in current social science, the abstractions of culture and the social produce a magic, or a fetish, of their own and that we need a non-Protestant sense of materiality to counter such enchantments" (2008: 279). It is my view that the Orthodox Christians of Zege and of Ethiopia offer such a counter-example; a way of being Christian through worldly connections.

## Appendices: Fasts, Months, and Saints' Days

From Aymero & Motovu 1970: 63-64, cited in Ethiopian Orthodox Church Website<sup>72</sup>:

“The fasts are ordained in the Fetha Negest are:

1. Fast for Hudadi or Abiye Tsome (Lent), 56 days.
2. Fast of the Apostles, 10-40 days, which the Apostles kept after they had received the Holy Spirit. It begins after Pentecost.
3. The fast of Assumption, 16 days.
4. The gahad of Christmas (on the eve of Christmas).
5. The fast preceding Christmas, 40 days. It begins with Sibket on 15th Hedar and ends on Christmas eve with the feast of Gena and the 28th of Tahsas.
6. The fast of Nineveh, commemorating the preaching of Jonah. It comes on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the third week before Lent.
7. The gahad of Epiphany, fast on the eve of Epiphany.

In addition to these, there is the fast of repentance which a man keeps after committing sin, it being imposed as a penance by the priest for seven days, forty days or one year. There is a fast which a bishop keeps at the time he is consecrated.

There is a fast of desire which a man keeps if he thinks he will increase his value in the sight of God or that he will subdue his body by extra good works. Monks and nuns observe additional fast days not required of the laity. All persons above the age of 13 observe the church fasts. The priest rarely grants dispensations. The man who ignores or neglects any injunction of the church is not considered good Christian.”

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/calendar.html> Accessed 19-2-2012

**The Ethiopian Months** (with Gregorian calendar equivalents in non-leap years)

*Meskerem* Sept 11 – Oct 10

*T'iqimt* Oct 11 - Nov 9

*Hidar* Nov 10 – Dec 9

*Tahsas* Dec 10 – Jan 8

*T'irr* Jan 9 – Feb 7

*Yekatít* Feb 8 – March 9

*Meggabít* March 10 – April 8

*Míyaziya* April 9 – May 8

*Ginbot* May 9 – June 7

*Sané* June 8 – July 7

*Hamlé* July 7 – Aug 6

*Nehasé* Aug 7 – Sept 5

*P'agumén* Sept 6-10

### **The Monthly Feast Days**

(Information from Fritsch 2001: 70-72. Days commonly marked in Zege shown in bold. *Meskerem* 1, the first day of the year, is the feast of St. John.)

- 1 – *Lideta*, the nativity of Mary (**annual feast *Ginbot* 1**)
- 2 – *Tadéwos*
- 3 – ***Be’ata***, Entry of Mary into the Temple
- 4 – John ‘Son of Thunder’ (*Yohannes Wolde Negwedgwad*)
- 5 – *Abune Gebre Menfes Qiddus*
- 6 – Name of Jesus; *Debre Qwisqwam*
- 7 – ***Selassé***, the Trinity
- 8 – *Abba Kíros*
- 9 – Thomas
- 10 – ***Mesqel*** (**annual feast of *Mesqel*, *Meskerem* 10**)
- 11 – Hanna, mother of Mary
- 12 – **Michael (*Mikaél*, annual feasts *Sané* and *Hidar* 12)**
- 13 – *Zer’a Buruk*
- 14 – *Abune Aregawí*, one of the Nine Saints
- 15 – *Qirqos*
- 16 – **Kidane Mihret (annual feast *Yekatít* 16)**
- 17 – *Ist’ifanos*
- 18 – *Éwost’atéwos*
- 19 – **Gabriel (*Gebr’él*, annual feast *Tahsas* 19)**
- 20 – Construciton of the Church of Mary at Philippi
- 21 – Our Lady Mary (**falling-asleep, *Ast’eriyo T’irr* 21**)
- 22 – *Deqsiyos* (Ildefonse of Toledo)
- 23 – **St. George (*Gíyorgís*, annual feast *Míyaziya* 23)**
- 24 – ***Abune Tekle Haymanot* (annual feast *Nehasé* 24)**
- 25 – *Merqoréwos*
- 26 – *Abba Selama* (St. Frumentius)
- 27 – ***Medhané Alem*, The Saviour**
- 28 – Emmanuel
- 29 – *Be’ale Yigzíabhér*
- 30 – *Marqos*

## Glossary of Amharic Terms and Proper Names

<i>alemawí</i>	worldly
<i>Azwa Maryam</i>	Monastery-church near Ura Kidane Mihret. Also on tourist trail.
<i>Bahir Dar</i>	Capital of Amhara region, located 15km across the lake from Zege
<i>berberé</i>	chili used in most Ethiopian cooking
<i>buda</i>	evil spirit, sometimes compared to evil eye; see Chapter 6
<i>debtera</i>	chorister; non-ordained church assistant; sorcerer (see Chapter 4)
<i>Derg</i>	Name of the Communist government of Ethiopia 1974-1991, lit. 'Committee'
<i>Fure Maryam</i>	Afaf's local church
<i>Genna</i>	Christmas
<i>Ge'ez</i>	The liturgical language of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, related to Amharic as Latin is to Italian
<i>Ginbot Lideta</i>	Celebration of Mary's birthday, <i>Ginbot 1</i>
<i>Haile Selassie</i>	Ethiopian Emperor, ruled 1930-74
<i>iddir</i>	Funerary Association based on mutual aid
<i>iqub</i>	Local mutual finance association
<i>mahber</i>	Informal religious association
<i>Mehal Zege Giyorgís</i>	Monastery-church at tip of Zege peninsula, first church founded in the area
<i>menfesawí</i>	spiritual
<i>Mesqel</i>	lit. 'cross'. Refers to the festival of the Exaltation of the Cross, held Meskerem 15-16 (September 26-27)
<i>Penté</i>	Disparaging term for Protestant
<i>qiddasé</i>	Liturgy (lit. 'sanctification' – Binns 2002: 39)



<i>qiné</i>	religious poetic couplets
<i>qollo temarí</i>	Apprentice priest serving period of mendicancy
<i>qurban</i>	Eucharist (lit. offering)
<i>T'imqet</i>	lit. 'baptism'; The feast of Epiphany; celebrates the baptism of the Saviour
<i>tabot</i>	ark; altar – replica of the Tablets of Law held in the inner sanctum of every church
<i>Tana</i>	Ethiopia's largest lake, on whose shores Zege is situated
<i>Tewodros</i>	Ethiopian Emperor, ruled 1855-68
<i>Ura Kidane Mihret</i>	Monastery-church in central Zege Peninsula. Popular with tourists
<i>wot'</i>	stew
<i>Zer'a Ya'iqob</i>	Ethiopian Emperor, ruled 1434-68

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## Photographs



Figure 1. *T'imqet* procession. Monk carries shrouded *tabot* on his head



Figure 2. Same procession, image of the Baptism of Christ



Figure 3. Candles on *T'imqet* eve, after the procession of the *tabot*. As Abebe said, "The light has come".



Figure 4. Tent where the *tabot* rests overnight on *T'inqet*



Figure 5. Cross with fence and light, next to *tabot* tent.



Figure 6. *T'imqet* day 3. The *tabot* proceeds to Wanjeta





Figure 7. A christening begins before dawn. Those present wear their white church robes.



Figure 8. The church of Azwa Maryam



Figure 9. Author and father in Afaf marketplace



Figure 10. Mural of St. George slaying the dragon, Azwa Maryam. With apologies for poor photo quality.

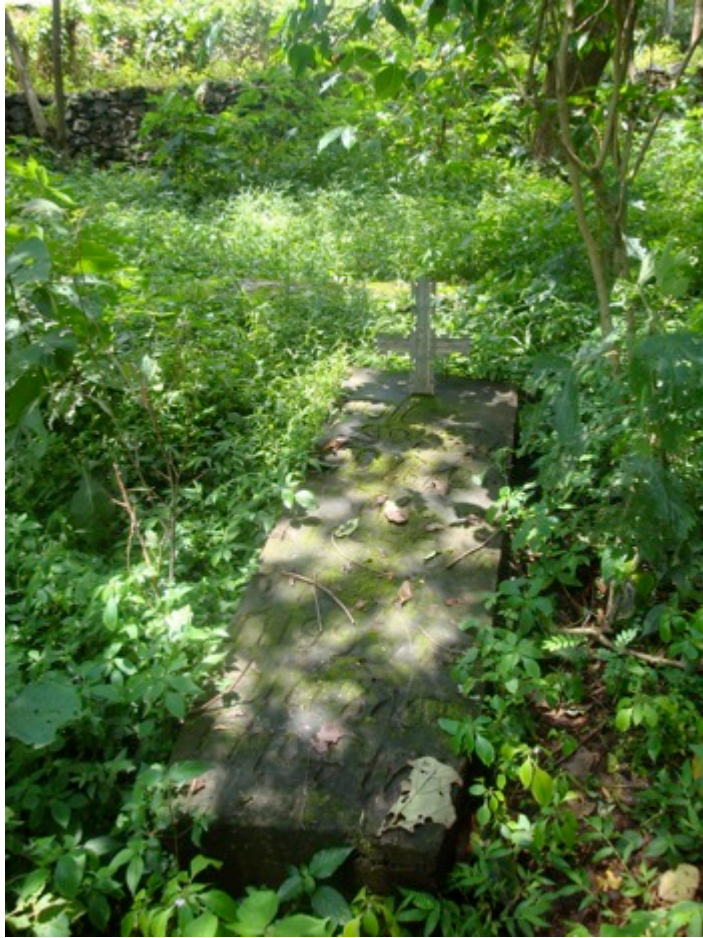


Figure 11. Concrete grave, Ura Kidane Mihret



Figure 12. Drying coffee, Ura

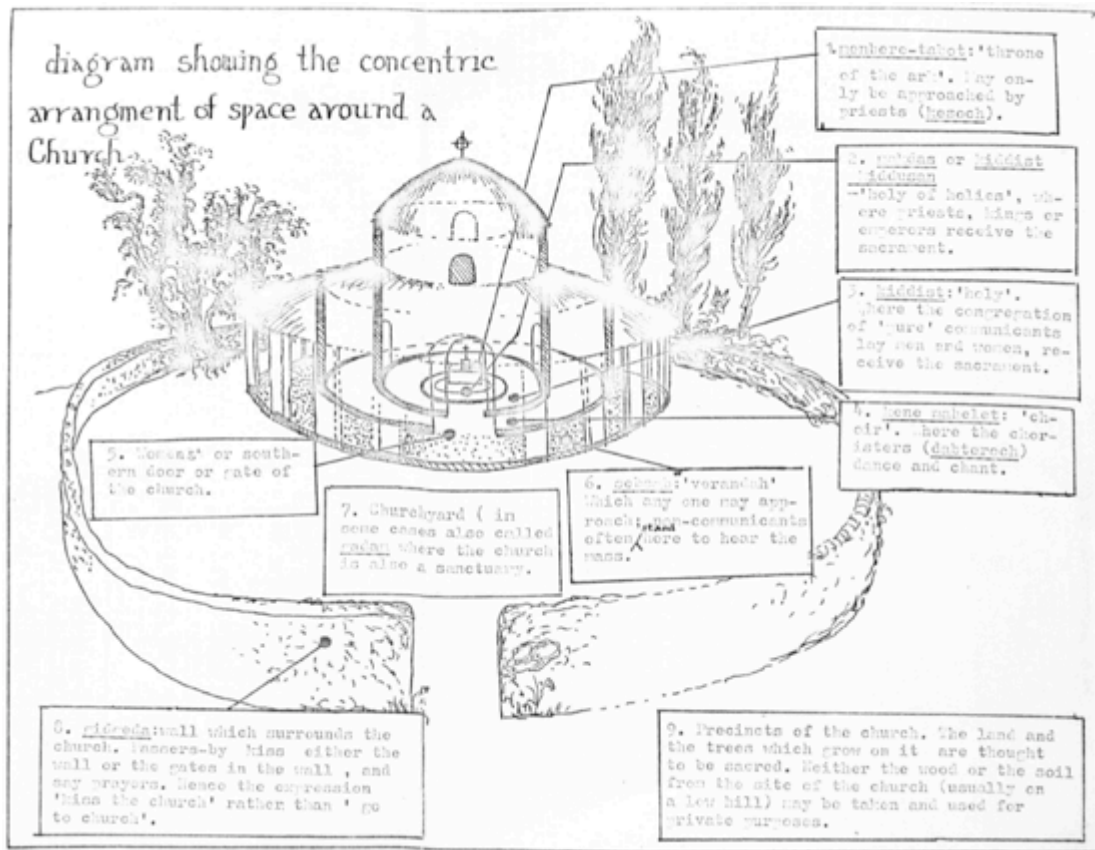


Figure 13. Alfred Gell's Diagram of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church. From Morton 1973.

- Indicated: 1. *menbere tabot*, the seat of the ark  
 2. *qidduse qiddusan*, holy of holies (innermost level)  
 3. *meqdes*, (mid level)  
 4. *qiné mehalit* (outer level)  
 5. southern door  
 6. verandah  
 7. churchyard  
 8. outer church wall  
 9. precinct of the church