

Introduction

A RITUAL REGIME I: PROHIBITION AND THE CONNECTION OF THINGS

On the Zege peninsula it is forbidden to plough the land or to keep cattle or horses. The prohibition dates from a covenant (*kidan*) made between God and a wandering monk named *Abune* Betre Maryam sometime in the fourteenth century.¹ The covenant states that so long as nobody cuts trees, ploughs the land, or keeps large animals, God will provide the people of Zege with a living and protect them from natural disasters and wild animal attacks. As a result, Zege is covered by a dense coffee forest, in marked contrast to the arable and ploughlands that dominate most of northern Ethiopia. Nine church-monasteries maintain the prohibition on ploughing to this day, and residents of Zege (known as *Zegeña*) state clearly that the forest is tangible evidence of their continued observance of the covenant.²

The prohibition makes Zege ecologically unique as well as sacred. Forests have a long association with churches in Ethiopia (Tsehai 2008). They connote the Garden of Eden, and the fact that they are unploughed marks them apart from the curse of Adam, to eat bread “by the sweat of your brow” (Genesis 3:19). Forests also provide shade and shelter for the church, lending seclusion and modesty in the same way that clothes shelter the naked human body (Orlowska 2015). Images of shelter and seclusion predominate. And yet this same forest has made Zege an important node in long-distance trade routes and, for a significant period, an importer of slaves (Abdussamad 1997, Tihut 2009).

The prohibition of ploughing and the existence of the coffee forest, therefore, do not isolate Zege from the surrounding farmlands. Quite the opposite, they create interdependence, where inhabitants of the peninsula need a market to sell their

coffee and fruit and obtain food staples. Moreover, as the church-monasteries have gained fame as sites of blessing, they have attracted pilgrims, kings, and lately foreign tourists to visit in search of blessing, political legitimacy, and historical experience. What initially appears as an isolating move, the prohibition of ploughing and the growth of the forest, turns out to create a dense web of spiritual and earthly connections. This close, seemingly paradoxical relationship between prohibition and interconnection lies at the heart of this book and, I argue, of contemporary socioreligious practice in Zege.

This book takes prohibition as a starting point for understanding the religious life of Orthodox Christians in Zege. I want to highlight how prohibitions create lasting, material states of affairs (such as the existence of the forest in Zege), but also how they build meaningful distinctions into the fabric of social life: here, between the forest, where ploughing is prohibited, and the surrounding farmlands, where it is not. The prohibition of ploughing is only one example of a religious regime in which eating, work, and sexuality are continuously subject to various fasts, avoidance rules, and periodic proscriptions. And yet prohibition is always accompanied by mediation: if refusing to plough creates a distinction between forestland and farmland, it also enables a relationship with God, via the intervention of the saint who made the original divine compact.

This is a place that has seen massive political upheaval since 1974: the fall of the emperor and rise of the socialist Derg; the land reforms that stripped the church of most of its holdings and deeply impacted local class relations; and the rise in 1991 of the secular-federal Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, which has rendered the Orthodox Church constitutionally equal to Islam and Protestantism, while reimagining Ethiopia along ethnic lines under the aegis of the developmental state (Clapham 2017, Donham 2002). And yet these developments have not seen a breakdown of the prohibitions and practices that organized religious-economic life in Zege. Rather, such practices have been reorganized and in some cases reemphasized in line with constantly developing local understandings of the proper arrangement of power and blessing. This proper arrangement revolves around the observance of prohibitions and the importance of mediators.

Alongside the emphasis placed on the religious protection of the forest, Orthodox Christians in Zege highlight the importance of fasting, of priestly and saintly intermediaries between humans and God, and of the protection and seclusion of ritual objects and spaces, in what amounts to a general theory of mediation. This theory explicitly opposes secular, modern, Protestant practices of leveling and breaking down distinctions with the properly Orthodox regulation and mediation of boundaries, whether these be the boundaries between humans and God, the distinction between the Orthodox community and other peoples, or the interface between a human body and the world.

This boundary work, based on prohibitions and their mediation, produces something approaching a total framework for social life: what I term a *ritual regime*. We have already seen how the prohibition of ploughing ties work, labor, and the environment to the work of the church-monasteries. In this and the following chapters it will become clear that the Orthodox calendar and its timetable of fasting and feasting incorporate human bodies into a structured religious life-world at a very basic experiential level, so that the daily life of the body and its rhythms becomes hard to separate from the calendrical rhythm of Orthodox ritual.

At times it appears that Orthodox life in Zege is totally bound up in this regime, and almost entirely defined by the remarkable continuity of practice engendered by the fasts and other forms of prohibition. But we will also see that this encompassing ritual regime is never total, and that it coexists with unorthodox practices and ideas of impressive diversity. To pick one example, it is common knowledge in Zege that poor and landless men often cut down trees to sell as firewood, violating the church's edict of protection and threatening the health of the forest as a whole (Tihut 2009: 63). They do so out of a sheer and immediate need that is impossible to square with the dominant narrative of the sacred forest, and the depth of such contradictions will become clear in chapters 4 and 5. We will also see that the structure of political authority in Zege has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, but that core principles of prohibition and mediation remain intact or even enhanced.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ORTHODOXY

To speak of a kind of religious system built from pervasive, structured practices of prohibition and mediation puts this ethnography on quite a different footing from existing work in the anthropology of Christianity. Much of that work has taken as its theme the search for directness and immediacy in the religious practices of global Protestant and Pentecostal churches, while making efforts to trace the development of distinctly Protestant-modern ideologies of interiority and sincerity (e.g., Engelke 2007, Keane 2007, Bielo 2011). Even works that focus on mediation and the use of media show how intermediaries between humans and God become effaced in the search for direct, nonmediated, instant communication (Mazzarella 2004, Meyer 2011, Eisenlohr 2012). From such a perspective, intermediaries such as saints and priests may appear as obstructions to clear and sincere religious communication, while the observance of fasts and prohibitions looks like unthinking (and therefore insincere) deference to tradition.

Indeed, this is a criticism I have heard Protestants in Ethiopia make of Orthodox Christians: that Orthodox Christians do not read the Bible for themselves, but only follow rules and priests. My Orthodox friends in Zege respond that Protestants

show arrogance in denying the need for intercession, and say that not following the fasts is tantamount to having no religion at all. Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia do not efface the medium, but valorize and sanctify it.

It has often been noted that the anthropology of Christianity has been weighted heavily toward the study of Protestantism and Pentecostalism, due in part to the predominance of these churches in the places that anthropologists traditionally study (Hann 2007, Hann & Goltz 2010). Orthodox churches have seemed to lack that global scope, and it has not been obvious how to locate them within conversations about the anthropology of Christianity. The Orthodox affirmation of mediation is to some extent articulated as a response to Protestantism. But I want to avoid the assumption that Protestantism represents a modernizing, globalizing, rationalizing force, while Orthodoxy is simply reactionary, taking refuge in tradition, ritual, and institutional authority. It seems more useful to ask what are the starting premises from which Orthodox Christians in Zege approach the contemporary world.

One way to begin is to consider some of the distinctive ways that Orthodox Christians understand materiality and the relationship between God and the tangible world. Anthropologists of Christianity have tended to define Christianity's driving problem, following Hegel, as the difficulty of making the divine present in a fallen world, or of accessing that which is present but intangible (Cannell 2006: 14–15). What Engelke (2007) calls the “problem of presence” is taken to begin from absence: we cannot see or feel God, so we must somehow make him present.

I would suggest that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity begins from the opposite problem: the boundary between God and humans is insufficiently stable (as are the boundaries of human bodies in general). There is a prevailing sense that divinity unbound is a profound physical danger to humans—those who enter the sanctum of a church while in an impure state are likely to be struck down or become sick; a thief who attempts to steal a sacred object may become frozen to the spot.

A large number of Orthodox practices in Zege concern themselves either with the boundaries of the holy, as in the seclusion of ritual objects, or with the boundaries of bodies, as with restrictions around menstruation and bleeding. Prohibitive practices also mark out certain times as inappropriate for particular activities such as eating meat or working the fields. The boundary between God and humans, in all their physicality, is never totally closed, but is subject to careful and ongoing management.

God can seem less like an absence than an overwhelming presence. This goes along with a distinctive theory of materiality and mediation common to many Orthodox churches: the potential sanctity of all matter, including flesh (Hanganu 2010). Painted icons can be true points of contact with saints, and holy water, imbued with divine power, is a regular part of daily practice. As Engelhardt (forthcoming) puts it, “The mediatic nature of Orthodox Christianity is sensible everywhere—in the materials and prototypes of icons; the sacred language, script,

and chant notation of service books; the intercessory power of saints; the bodies and voices of clergy; the architectural acoustics of churches; the Eucharist; and, ultimately, in Christ as the hypostatic union of God and humanity.” Things, substances, and sensations can be not just ethically charged, in Keane’s (2014) terms, but divinely charged.

But the potential sanctity of matter is subject to close regulation, and is understood to be granted from the top down. This is especially the case in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Emanations of divine power on earth are due solely to God’s grace (*s’ega*). The principal and perhaps only way for humans to access grace is through the seven sacraments (*mistírat*, “mysteries” or “secrets”): baptism, confirmation, matrimony, communion, unction of the sick, confession, and holy orders. Only clergy, empowered by the sacrament of holy orders, may perform these, and only bishops may ordain priests (Boylston 2017).

The use of holy water is not included among the sacraments, but in practice water is almost always made holy through the prayers of the clergy—that is, it is enabled by holy orders. In those cases where divine power irrupts in the world without the intervention of the clergy, it is usually through angelic action, as in Zege when the whole of Lake Tana becomes holy on the annual day of the Archangel Raphael. God’s power, therefore, can be anywhere, but by the same token is subject to hierarchical mediation. Prohibition, mediation, and hierarchy, then, indicate a practical theory of matter, spirit, and authority. Mediation between humans and God is not simply an act of reaching out, but has a regulatory and restrictive function, which is most clearly evident in the practice of the Eucharist.

A RITUAL REGIME II: PURITY AND TIME

According to Orthodox doctrine, the Eucharist is fully transubstantial: through the performance of the liturgy and by divine grace, bread and wine become the actual body and blood of God. This is the one point in Orthodox life when Christians and God come into direct contact. It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that most Orthodox Christians do not take the Eucharist throughout most of their adult lives. This is because of concerns about purity, and especially the assumption that sexually mature adults are generally not in a fit state for communion.³ The actual transformation of the Eucharist demands stringent regulations to preserve the purity of the host: communicants must fast completely for eighteen hours beforehand and abstain from sexual activity; they must have no open wounds or flowing mucus; menstruating and postpartum women may not enter the church building at all; and, I have been told, you must not take Communion if a fly has entered your mouth by accident. After taking Communion, you must not speak or spit or work or wash or blow on a fire or otherwise open the border between your body and the world.

These prohibitions have spatial correlates: Orthodox churches are divided into three concentric areas separated by walls: the inner holy of holies (*meqdes* or *qid-diste qiddusan*), accessible only to priests and deacons and home to the *tabot*, on which the Eucharist is consecrated; around this the *qiddist*, in which the liturgy is performed and communion is given; and outside of this, the *qiné mahlét*, where votive hymns are sung. Men and women must enter by separate doors and remain in separate areas at all times while within the church. Outside of this is the churchyard, an open space surrounded by a wall of its own.

The practical result is that, during any liturgical service, people will arrange themselves in a concentric pattern according to the degree of prohibitions they are in accord with: celebrants in the middle; then those in a state to take communion; then, outside the walls, large numbers of people attending the liturgy and performing prostrations but not actually entering the church building. Outside the churchyard wall, passers-by may stop to kiss the church gate and cross themselves. As was the case with the Zege forest, the existence of a prohibition creates a specific geographical arrangement among people and the environment. Note, however, one distinction whose importance will become clear: while the prohibition of ploughing is permanent, the Eucharistic prohibitions are temporary and rhythmical—fasting and purity are required at certain times and places and for certain actions, but are understood to be part of wider social and biological temporalities. If there is a time and place for abstinence, there are other times and places for feasting and the reproduction of life.

Eucharistic restrictions coexist with a raft of prohibitions derived from Leviticus, which have tremendous importance across Orthodox Ethiopia. Orthodox Christians may not eat pork or shellfish; men must be circumcised; boys must be baptized after forty days and girls after eighty, and until that time the mother may not enter church space because, as was repeatedly explained to me, of her bleeding.⁴ The strong gendering of these prohibitions is evident; female reproductive bodies emerge as a special concern in a manner not unusual among patriarchal societies (Hannig 2014). Nonetheless and as we will see, this should not lead us to assume that women are entirely excluded from discourses and practices of holiness.

An important point about prohibitions is that you do not need to know the reasoning behind them in order to maintain them. In a casual situation I asked a group of friends, including some sons of priests, why boys were baptized after forty days and girls after eighty. A lively debate ensued: one man said that Jesus had been baptized after forty days; another said that girls gestate for five days longer than boys, though he could not say how this had become a forty-day differential; another suggested that girls were baptized after eighty because Mary had spent eighty days in exile in Egypt. I then asked a woman, who told me that her son and daughter had spent the same amount of time in the womb, and so she was unconvinced by those arguments. She was also unimpressed by the idea that

women bleed longer after giving birth to girls. Finally, we all went to ask *Abba Sòm*,⁵ the local expert in exegesis, who explained that Jesus had been baptized at thirty years old, because Adam was thirty years old when he came to the world. The split between forty and eighty days for baptism was because Adam entered the Garden of Eden forty days after his creation, and Eve after eighty.⁶

All of my interlocutors agreed that the forty-eighty rule was important, though most were open about the fact that they were unsure exactly why it existed. But there is something to be learned from the form of their guesses: each assumed that there must be some parallel or archetype in the biblical story, and that the baptism rule would be explained by virtue of its formal resemblance to that archetype—rather than using a causal deduction. This is an example of what Mary Douglas (1999: 27) in her work on Leviticus calls “the analogical mode of reasoning,” in which “what is true is so by virtue of its compliance with a microcosm of the world and of society; to be convincing, what is true must chime with justice; it looks to match microcosm with macrocosm in ever-expanding series.”⁷

The prominence of analogical reasoning in esoteric traditions within Ethiopian Orthodoxy has been remarked on by both Young (1977) and Mercier (1997). The latter points to the numerological and symbolic work of authors of magico-religious scrolls as evidence of a “Hellenistic” theory of associations in which formal patterns are understood to reflect the nature of authority in the universe (cf. Lloyd 1996). I would suggest that logical systems based on analogy stretch much wider and deeper into Ethiopian Orthodox practical culture than either author has suggested, and that analogy is the mechanism by which everyday practice comes to be associated with the authority of church tradition. Here my approach is informed by Descola (2013), who proposes that “analogism” is the organizing ontological schema for a large portion of the world’s societies. The implications of Descola’s argument are too broad for this book to pursue in full, but I have drawn freely on his ideas, especially concerning the ways in which analogistic thought tends to produce totalizing models of the social cosmos.

Formal resemblances, rules based on analogy, and prohibitions share this quality: they can be understood by their logic of dividing and organizing the world, and can be maintained, without further exegetical investigation.⁸ This is not to say that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians do not reflect on their practices, or that they do not care about the intention behind religious action. They certainly do. But prohibitions and analogical rules can continue to do their work without such examination (see Fortes 1966: 11, Bloch 2005).

In addition to the prohibitions derived from Leviticus, and perhaps most importantly, Orthodox Christians follow a calendar of fasts. Officially, there are seven major fasts (Fritsch 2001); minimally, you must avoid meat, animal products, and sexual activity on Wednesdays and Fridays, and throughout Lent. Most people avoid any food or water for a certain period of time on fasting days (usually

until the liturgy has finished), and those who attend church must abstain from food and water completely. But there are in total more than 250 fasting days in the year, and it is expected that clergy will keep to these, while for lay Christians observance of the noncompulsory fasts will be largely a matter of “conscience and reputation” (Ephraim 2013: 81). The fasts are the core of Ethiopian Orthodox practice, and regarded by most Christians in Zege as the main point of distinction between Orthodox Christians and others.

The fasts are extensive and regular enough that prohibitions become a part of the everyday experience of having a body: even nonfasting days become meaningful by opposition to fasting days. In this way temporary, rhythmic prohibitions become a way of maintaining and managing one’s bodily state of being. But prohibitions also come to define boundaries of the collective.

The clearest example is the prohibition on Christians eating Muslim meat and vice versa (Ficquet 2006). I learned this after attending a wedding in the local Muslim community, which is based in Afaf town and the area to the south around Fure Maryam church (see map). Many Christians attended and were fed vegetarian dishes. I temporarily forgot that I had, through my practices and associations, marked myself as a Christian, and had some of the main meat dish. A friend of mine approached me that evening and told me that I had done a bad thing and people were talking: the meat had been blessed in the name of Allah, and now if I were to enter church I would certainly become extremely unwell. In the general mood of conviviality I had let my guard down. Later when asking Muslim friends what they would do in Christian festivals, they said that they would always visit people and eat nonmeat food and drink nonalcoholic drink, and that Christians would always be sure to have these on hand. The importance of neighborly hospitality, however, coexisted with an equally important prohibition. The rules, then, may draw a sharp distinction between collectives at one level (that of meat, because meat must be divinely blessed when it is prepared), while allowing relations at another level (that of visiting and hospitality) (see Dulin 2016).

The Amharic term for *prohibition* or *taboo*, *newir*, has a range of important applications not obviously associated with Orthodox doctrine. Incest is *newir*, traditionally tracing relations back seven generations (Hoben 1973), although three generations are often considered sufficient. Also prohibited according to *Abba Som* is marriage between God-kin, who are “just like blood relations.”⁹ But equally *newir* is marriage between a “clean” (*nes’uh*) or “proper” (*chewa*) person and a descendant of potters, weavers, Muslims, slaves, or Weyto (a marginalized ethnic group associated with hunting and canoe-making). Slave descent, in particular, is a point of deep division, as will become clear in the following chapters. Often respondents have described marriage prohibitions in terms of food prohibitions: weavers were thought to have been Muslims and so to follow the wrong fasts and eat the wrong meat; Weyto are widely denigrated as pagan eaters

of hippopotamus flesh. As one friend told me, many *chêwa* people would also refuse to share a table with descendants of slaves, even though these divisions are not usually publicly acknowledged; this could make seating at weddings a tricky procedure, though he stated that this was more true of his father's generation, and that he felt his own peers were more relaxed. This was a young man who had several close friends rumored to be of slave descent, but who nonetheless described the idea of marrying a slave as deeply *newir*. As is often the case with Muslim neighbors, friendship and cooperation are one thing; eating together and marriage quite another. But prohibitions or stigmas around sharing substance vary in their severity: while Christians may share vegetables but not meat with Muslims, they are supposed to throw away any cup or plate that has been used by a Weyto.¹⁰

Finally, cannibalism is profoundly *newir*, but turns out also to relate to marriage prohibitions. The idiom of the cannibal in Zege is the *buda*, an evil spirit that inhabits certain people and magically feeds on the flesh of others. As we will see in great detail, the idiom of *buda* is in fact closely associated with those marginal groups with whom marriage is also *newir*.

It would be possible to write a whole book dissecting the logic principles by which marriage and food prohibitions relate to classes of people, things, and spirits. But it is important to recognize that prohibitions do not just map out, describe, and impose order on socioreligious classifications: they also enforce and bring them into being as ongoing states of affairs. Marriage prohibitions, for example, create two de facto and unequal endogamous classes in Zege; to be *chêwa* is to define the terms of prohibition. While this is rarely acknowledged, it has an extremely durable effect on social relations. These marriage prohibitions coexist, in an incommensurable way, with fasting and dietary prohibitions, which include all Orthodox Christians (including all slave descendants) within the same code of practice. It is one thing to deduce the logics behind prohibitions (whether they relate to blood or to ideas of proximity and distance, for example) and quite another to understand how prohibitions create durable relations of inclusion and exclusion within a society.

Prohibitions can organize relations between human groups, between the genders, between humans and God, and between bodies and the environment. They can become operative at certain times and in certain places and situations, and they lend a certain sense that life itself has a structure, and has certain kinds of difference imbued into it. These differences always possess a moral quality: to threaten them becomes an act of pollution. For Orthodox Christians in Zege, prohibitions are explicitly mechanisms by which humans demonstrate control over desire and pride. At the same time they draw distinctions between "proper," "clean," *chêwa* people who refuse improper desires and connections and other people who do not. And yet, as the example of interreligious hospitality shows, the distinctions that prohibitions create are always capable of being mediated. Indeed, that mediation may be part of the process of prohibition itself.

The anthropological tradition offers a wealth of resources for thinking about prohibition; ambivalence around sex, death, and eating animals seems to be a human universal. Anthropologists have tended to focus on the symbolic and logical orders that underlie prohibition, in a manner that is, explicitly or implicitly, structuralist: treating prohibitions as basically synchronic and concerned with symbolic order and classification. Even Valeri (2000), who is critical of “intellectualist” approaches, still devotes most of his wide-ranging analysis to the logical patterns that underlie taboo practices.

This tradition, most famously represented by Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1964, 1966) and Douglas (1966), considers prohibition at its heart as part of the human quest to classify and order the world and to render anomalies and contradictions manageable. This work is foundational: there is no doubt that prohibitions produce clear binary distinctions (fasting/nonfasting, sacred/profane, Christian/non-Christian, human/animal, or human/God) from which logical orders can be built. But there is cause for dissatisfaction with models that would interpret prohibition in purely structural-conceptual terms. As Lambek (1992), Gell (1996), Valeri (2000: 95), Descola (2013), and others have pointed out, matters of identity and difference are not just taxonomic exercises; they are produced in everyday acts of practical and ethical identification and distinction.¹¹

We have seen that prohibitions on ploughing actively shape the living environment in Zege, as well as set the temporal and spatial conditions in which labor and consumption may take place. Prohibitions create ways of being in time and ways of being with others: they make ongoing states as well as conceptual oppositions. This state-maintaining capacity is largely a result of the negative nature of prohibitions. Not doing something (eating meat, ploughing the land) is not so much a clearly definable action as an open-ended state of being. Abstaining from something has a different temporal quality than doing something: there are an infinite number of things I am not doing right now (household chores, reading fiction, retraining as a chemical engineer), but my not doing them only becomes salient when I *might* do them, or I want to do them, or other people around me are doing them.¹² In Ethiopia, it may not be clear whether I am fasting or simply between meals, until we sit down to eat together.¹³

Michael Lambek (1992: 246) discusses this definition-by-negation with regard to Malagasy taboo: “Self-identity or self knowledge is predicated not on substance, but on that which the other is not.” Lambek (1992: 253–55) goes on to show how this not doing becomes an embodied status, a “continuously vibrant” moral condition. He draws on Fortes’s (1966: 16) account of taboos as a kind of living rule set, where “eating lends itself uniquely to the imposition of rules.” Because food is a regular, intimate, and recurring need, food prohibitions must be continuously reaffirmed through practice.

The idea of taboo as making states of being is perhaps most pronounced in Gell (1996: 137): “Taboos on eating, on killing, on sexual intercourse, on looking at,

touching, etc., together circumscribe a ‘hole’ in the texture of shareable intersubjective reality which, privileged with respect to a specific individual, constitutes his soul or ego or personality. Taboo does more than express the self: it constitutes the self” (cited in Valeri 2000: 98). Likewise in Zege, to keep the fasts is to be an Orthodox Christian; to refuse marriage to slaves is to be *chëwa*. But in the case of marriage, a profound asymmetry is present: only the “proper” get to constitute themselves in this way, as observers of prohibition. The definition of social reality itself is deeply one-sided.

This presents significant ethnographic problems. I have worked over a number of years to try to elicit accounts from slave descendants and other marginal figures of how life works in Zege, and these are presented in this book. But they are extremely partial, not just because it is difficult to interview marginal people in the presence of others who define the terms of the encounter, but because the isolating dimensions of stigma impede the formulation of any kind of stable counterdiscourse. At the same time, Orthodox Christianity and Islam do offer potent ways for marginal people to claim to belong, and to mark themselves as correct followers of prohibitions in their own right. It is a point enshrined in the Fetha Negest, the Law of Kings, that a Christian’s slaves must be baptized, suggesting that the rejection of identity with slaves has never been total (Pankhurst 2011).

The embodied nature of prohibitions around eating, reproduction, and sexuality, furthermore, lends them a profound and important affective dimension (Valeri 2000: 48, 101). This is true in two respects: First, as with my consumption of Muslim meat, the violation of prohibitions around the body tends to produce reactions of disgust or fear. Second, through acts of abstention, we work on and shape our own feelings of hunger or sexual desire. As Valeri has it, “what are the relations between object and subject that taboo regulates? Principally eating, touching, and penetrating. . . . All these involve the body as desiring, that is, feeding on its objects, consuming them” (2000: 101). (To these Valeri might have added being eaten, being touched, being penetrated, and the like.) This aspect is particularly important for Ethiopian Orthodox understandings of fasting as an act that, in weakening the flesh, suppresses sinful desires and pridefulness and encourages more spiritual yearnings (Malara 2017, Ephraim 2013, Levine 1965).

Fortes likewise notes that avoidance frequently appears as evidence of self-possession, and a degree of control over the appetites that distinguishes humans from beasts. From this perspective, to abstain from killing, or from eating certain foods, or from certain sexual acts is to demonstrate that you can be moral at all. To abstain is to enact a distinction between beings capable of regulating desire and those that are not. I believe that this is a premise of Ethiopian Orthodox prohibitions, and that we can thus add something to Lambek’s account of how taboo enacts and marks the self by negating the other. Following a prohibition does not just mark me as different than the other who does not; it marks me *as a negator*—as one who

is in general capable of abstinence and avoidance, as opposed to those who, not observing such limits, are beholden to their appetites. But as we have seen, and as Lambek and Fortes indicate, this is not just about producing conceptual oppositions, but about living ways of being and indeed whole geographies of prohibition.

A RITUAL REGIME III: MEDIATION AND HIERARCHY

Since 1991 various forms of Protestantism have rapidly gained ground at the expense of Orthodoxy in traditionally Orthodox areas (Haustein 2011), compelling Orthodox Christians to formulate active responses and to articulate their own position. Zege remains almost entirely Orthodox, but there is nonetheless a strong sense of Protestantism as an existential threat. I asked *Abba*¹⁴ S'om to explain the major differences between Orthodoxy and Protestantism, and received a reply: "*Maryam attamalednim yilallu*" (They say Mary does not mediate/intercede) whereas in fact "*Tamallednallech; kefit'rat belay, kefet'ari betacch*" (She mediates/intercedes for us, above creation, below the creator). He went on to discuss how Protestants deny transubstantiation, thus denying both the role of priests and the rules of Eucharistic purity, and how Protestant ritual was therefore "worldly" (*alemawi*). The role of specialist, ordained priests is understood here as a function of prohibition rules: the sacrament of holy orders, bestowed from on high by God's grace, is necessary for the performance of the liturgy and the handling of the Eucharist. Prohibitions are accompanied by a pervasive religious division of labor. Where there are rules and acts of avoidance, we see not just mediators, but proliferations of mediators: Mary, saints, priests, monks, and various other expert actors are required to manage the boundaries (Kaplan 1984).

Asking lay people about Protestants, I received similar responses, but with an even stronger focus on Mary. One friend, Temesgen, used the same phrase for the Protestant idea that Mary does not intercede (*attamaledim*) and also pointed out that, because they drank milk on Fridays, they were *koshasha* (*dirty*), while wrinkling his nose and rubbing his shoulders in disgust. Violating fasting days and prohibitions and the denial of Mary's intercession go together, I suggest, because it is assumed that there is no need for mediators when you do not respect boundaries.¹⁵

Relationships between lay people and Mary take a number of practical forms in Zege. Thirty-three major annual feasts of Mary are included in the calendar, while the churches of Fure Maryam and Azwa Maryam, being consecrated in her name each observe a major festival on one of these days.

Some people have *zikir* pacts with her in which a request for assistance (for example, with fertility) is made and, if granted, the petitioner will hold a feast for her neighbors on one of Mary's annual days. On the celebration of Mary's birthday, *Ginbot Lideta*, family and neighbors gather together to eat in Mary's name and to promise to meet again one year in the future (see chapter 7). That so many of these

commemorations involve eating and feasting is a defining feature of Ethiopian Orthodox relations with saints: we related to them by eating or fasting together in their names. There are also fasts specifically for Mary, most notably those commemorating *Qwisqwam*, the exile in Egypt, and *Filseta*, the Assumption. During the fast of *Filseta* there are certain hymns that women in Zege sing during the night, sometimes removing their clothes and wrapping themselves in sharp leaves to mark her suffering. An example, related to me by Tefera:

Out of all, out of all (the grains), teff is the smallest,
 (Yet) she rises, wearing a shield
 Our mother Mary, what happened to her?
 Bowing her head, she cries
 Even if she cries, even if she lets her tears flow
 While her son hangs on the cross,
 “Hang me, let them beat me.”¹⁶

Key themes here are the empathy of Mary with the suffering of mothers, and the protection that God offers to the meek, through her intercession (Marcus 2001). In Ethiopian Mariology Mary is fully human but possesses certain special characteristics: she was mortal but her body was not subject to putrescence. In the words of the former patriarch (Paulos 1988: 205): “Her death confirms that she is not a heavenly being but truly our human sister.” However, her body did not decompose but was taken intact into heaven, as commemorated by the feast of *Filseta*, the Assumption: “the Lord did not permit the body in which He Himself had dwelt to fall prey to corruption and dissolution: though Mary as a human being underwent death, she was taken up into heaven” (Paulos 1988: 206). All humans will be returned to their bodies on judgment day, but until then “in her perfect state she intercedes for humanity until the final judgement” (Paulos 1988: 205).¹⁷ Mary’s physical incorruption contrasts with the leaky and endlessly mutable bodies of regular people, but as a human herself she can still speak to us, grieve with us, and feel pity for us (Bynum 1995: 113).

As Ethiopian Orthodox Christians make abundantly clear, Mary is due veneration not in isolation but because of her relationship to God. This brings out a rather important point: part of God’s becoming human (although still divine) through the Incarnation was to gain kin, because having kin is part of the human condition. To engage with God through Christ is thus to engage with a wider web of relations that make such communion possible. A key part of such relations is the *kidan*, or covenant (Antohin 2014, Girma 2012). This is a pact made between God and a saint on behalf of humans—a mediated agreement with lasting effects.

A paradigm of the covenant is the Kidane Mihret, the Covenant of Mercy, which is also the name by which the monastery of Ura in Zege is consecrated. This refers to Mary pleading with Christ on behalf of all humanity. According to Paulos

(1988: 73),¹⁸ Mary appeals to him, “by my womb which bore Thee nine months and five days, . . . by my breasts which gave Thee suck, and by my mouth which kissed Thee, and by my feet which walked about with Thee.” On hearing this, Christ compares his mother’s sufferings and grief with his own, and agrees that all who seek intercession in her name will be saved. Mary’s suffering and grief as a mother make possible a connection between God and the rest of humanity.

Similar patterns of covenant and salvation are widespread. In Zege’s own foundation story, *Abune Betre* Maryam does not just gain salvation in return for his devotion; he is promised that all who pray in his name will be saved, as well as receive earthly protection. The saint as mediator becomes a patron for those who follow, and one whose holy work is explicitly understood to be done on others’ behalf.

Thus far this introduction has sought to lay out the foundational logics and practices of prohibition and mediation. Some important principles follow from these. First, the existence of prohibitions and purity rules means that specialists are usually required to mediate between humans and God, and so a religious division of labor is operative. Second, since it is possible to obey or enforce a prohibition without exactly knowing why, many forms of religious knowledge can be deferred upward (Bloch 2005, Bandak & Boylston 2014).

This does not mean that the clergy conspires to keep the population in ignorance; strong traditions of textual commentary exist instructing specialists how to communicate religious knowledge to lay folk (*andimta*; Cowley 1989) and today a widespread Sunday school movement exists for the religious education of the laity. Rather, it is the job of religious specialists to do certain kinds of work (performing the liturgy, keeping the calendar, passing on the textual tradition, monastic prayer for the souls of the community) for everyone else, because this work is not compatible with the mundane work of growing coffee or raising children. That incompatibility, the same logic by which adults tend not to take the Eucharist, is a basic practical tenet of Orthodox religious life in Zege. Like any boundary, it requires a huge amount of effort to maintain; and the more people work to maintain it, the more they produce intermediary figures who stand between worldly and spiritual life.

The Amharic verb *mamalled* is sometimes translated as “mediation” and is glossed by Kane as “to intercede, intervene” or “to conciliate.” It may also be read as “to plead on behalf of”; grammatically it suggests doing something for someone else. This is the word used by my respondents to describe what Mary does for us. It implies that Mary’s pleas on our behalf are much more likely to be heard than any effort we make on our own, because of Mary’s special relationship with God.

In recent work on religion, “mediation” has come to be used in a wider sense, to denote the material underpinnings of any communicative action, but especially communication between humans and God. Here “material mediation” refers to

practices of making “transcendent” or “invisible” things present to the senses through material communications (e.g., Meyer 2014, Vries 2001). Here media are understood “in the broad sense of transmitters across gaps and limits” (Meyer 2014: 24), and the problem of religious communication is understood as a material one: the “transcendent” must be made accessible to the senses.

For my friends and informants in Zege, “mediation” (*mamalled*) addresses a slightly different problem, which is that of authority. God is omnipresent but, notwithstanding Christ’s sacrifice, humanity remains in a state too sinful and impure to relate to God directly. To do so would be to commit the sin of arrogance (*t’igab*; Levine 1965, Messay 1999). In the words of Roger Cowley (1972: 246): “The work of intercession belongs to created beings. The creator is prayed to, and does not himself pray to another.”

For this reason we have saints, the Virgin Mary, the holy sacraments, and the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church: as people in Zege put it, to carry our prayers to God on our behalf. These intermediaries enable human-divine communication, but in going between they also keep things in their place. Saints can mediate for us because they have the quality of being listened to by others (*tesaminnnet*); they represent us as diplomats, not just as messengers.

It is not always obvious whether the separation between humans and God is a metaphysical one premised on his physical difference from us, or a hierarchical one based on his exalted rank. In using the English term *mediation*, rather than the narrower “intercession,” I hope to maintain the tension between these two possibilities: mediation as the material actualization of a relationship, and mediation as the maintenance of hierarchical distance. What makes mediation a particularly compelling question for religious studies is that in practice these questions of managing material difference (between flesh and spirit, for example) and status difference (between servant and master) often emerge together.

THE FIELDWORK AND THE RELIGIOUS DIVISION OF KNOWLEDGE

The research for this book took place between February 2008 and June 2009, with return visits of up to a month every year until 2014. I arrived in Ethiopia at the beginning of 2008, looking for a place to study the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and local practices of magic and spirit possession. As my research developed and I realized the importance of daily practices such as fasting, my focus shifted toward the pervasive embeddedness of Orthodoxy: in the local material environment, in the economy, and in the complex memory work around the forest and the churches. I was interested in Zege as an important historical center of Orthodox Christianity, but one that because of its environment seemed slightly out of step with the rest of the highlands. In February 2008 I chartered a

tourist boat and asked the captain, Amare, if there was somewhere I might try to live in Zege, where his father was a priest, and if he could introduce me to people.

Amare took me to Afaf (pop. c. 3000), the market town at the edge of the forest, where the Zege peninsula meets the mainland. He introduced me to Thomas and Haregwa, the owners of a local bar with a room to rent where I would stay for the next several months before moving to quieter accommodation in a compound where some schoolteachers and other incomers rented rooms.

On finding out that I was there to study Orthodoxy, most people I spoke to were encouraging; they were proud of their religious traditions, and felt they ought to be more widely known. In the afternoons I sometimes chewed *khât* with whoever was around, and I read Leslau's *Introductory Grammar of Amharic* cover to cover, before moving on to an Amharic translation of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. In the evenings, if there were no customers in the bar, I would watch Jean-Claude Van Damme movies with Thomas on the bar's TV and try to translate the events for him. Since those movies are not heavily dependent on dialogue, this was a suitable beginner's task.

The biggest methodological challenge I faced was how to negotiate the local knowledge economy: the range of different kinds of experts on religious and esoteric matters—what Harald Aspen (2001: 17) calls the “knowledge buffet”—and the range of opinions and attitudes that other people might have toward those experts. On top of this, there were differences between the market town, where I lived, and the inner peninsula. Afaf town still counts as part of Zege, but it is also the interface between Zege and the lands beyond, and is considered much less “traditional” (*bahilawî*) than the forest itself.

Over time I developed a set of routes that I would walk every few days, or whenever I felt at a loss for what to do. One would take me to Afaf's local church of Fure Maryam—off the tourist track—to speak with *Abba S'om*, a priest and expert in scripture and exegesis, to whom most people in the area deferred on questions of doctrine and of *why* certain practices were performed. *Abba S'om* was not from Zege, having arrived from near Lalibela some time ago, and had ambitions to move on in the church. He supported himself by working as a tailor on market days, and when last we spoke in 2014 he had reenrolled in secondary school, in his mid-thirties, in the hope of meeting the requirements for further theological training. He is extremely well read and always showed tremendous generosity and patience in explaining Orthodox doctrine to me while we drank coffee in his little hut outside of town. He also took responsibility for preaching at festivals and teaching Sunday school to the people of Afaf.

We would usually be joined by *Abba Melake Gennet*, an elderly priest and *mergéta*.¹⁹ He was a specialist in *Aqwaqwam*, the votive dance and chants that accompany church services, and provided teaching to the young deacons and church students who lived in tiny, threadbare huts around the church. Many had come

far from home, at ages as young as seven, to begin their church training, but when I arrived *Abba* Melake Gennet told me that student numbers were dwindling as more young people sought modern education instead. As we will see in chapter 8, recent events have reversed this trend somewhat. These students were still at the stage of learning the rote learning, going sound by sound through the Psalms in classical Gêez, not yet fully able to discern their meaning. I tried to interview deacons and church students where possible, but their work is famously tiring and they tended to extreme shyness and deference, so I often decided to let them be. Many adult clergy, on the other hand, were happy to reminisce about their apprenticeship.

My second route would take me into the Zege forest to the port of Ura, and then perhaps on to Mehal Zege at the tip of the peninsula. This is the main path that connects the forest to Afaf, and especially on market days (Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday) one tends to meet a lot of people en route to and from town. Mehal Zege had the oldest two monasteries on the peninsula (Betre Maryam and Giyorgis), but Ura was closer and had the important monasteries of Ura Kidane Mihret and Azwa Maryam. I would interview monks and church-monastery assistants whenever I could, and am particularly grateful to *Abba* Haylemariam, a senior monk at Azwa Maryam, who would frequently sit with me for long periods and explain what was going on. In these early months the then-abbot of Mehal Zege Giyorgis, one *Abba* Agumas, made sure to visit me to make sure I knew the official history of the monasteries.

In Ura I would also get to know a number of men who worked as tour guides and their families. The tour guides were knowledgeable, were used to explaining their history to outsiders, and were without exception extremely welcoming and helpful with my work. I owe a particular debt to Menilek and “Babbi” Alemu and all the members of their family, who took me in, fed me generously, and treated me always with warmth and friendship. When not actively interviewing, it was my pleasure to sit with them and others by the shores of Lake Tana, to speculate about questions that had come out of my research, to talk about life in Europe, and most importantly to argue about whether Man United or Arsenal would win the Premiership.

Many of the tour guides were also the children of church officials, and it was through them that I slowly began to learn of the class of people—the *mislené* and *liqered*, the *yewist’ gebez* and the *yewicch’ gebez*—not fully of the church or fully separate from it, who had been so important in the political life of Zege before the Derg. My efforts to reconstruct this system—and to explore the consequences for the local religious political economy—can be found in chapter 1.

My third route would take me by a different path up the hill into central Zege and the monastery of Yiganda Tekle Haymanot. In this area lived Beza, the traditional doctor to whom most people deferred on matters of general health and

medicine, and especially on the treatment of *buda* spirit attacks (see chapter 5). On each of my walks I would try to conduct a semiformal interview, and then perhaps visit somebody in their home for food. In this way I tried to build an understanding of Zege that went beyond my placement in Afaf town. The main path through the Zege forest splits off into innumerable smaller paths that seem haphazard but effectively divide different landholdings. Residents of the forest themselves sometimes comment on the complexity of the paths, and sometimes get lost in unfamiliar areas. I would always go accompanied to interviews—so as not to get lost, but also because nobody would let me walk alone: they would consider it gross negligence to do so, because I am a guest, and because being alone one tends to depression, loneliness, or boredom (*dibirt*), which is a terrible state in which to leave another person. I also found it helpful to have people who were familiar with my project and interview style to come along and help explain me to people, to clarify my Amharic questions, and to discuss people's responses. As it turned out, I almost never conducted an interview without such accompaniment. Two young men, Abebe and Zebirhan, took the most interest in my work and ended up becoming *de facto* research assistants and accompanying me on a large number of interview trips. Their help made much of this research possible.

In my downtime in Afaf I would visit people's homes or sit somewhere public in one of the town's three main food and drink establishments, and either join in discussions or ask people questions that had arisen from my interviews. I also made efforts to visit different kinds of specialists: magicians and medicine purveyors, former church students, and, with less success, spirit mediums.

The natural tendency was for younger men with some school education to show more interest in talking to me, especially since I could talk competently about football. I did my best to reach out to other kinds of people, visiting older people in their homes and soliciting women's opinions as well as men's. This usually meant public places where there were other men present, and as such it is often hard to know what women really think about certain issues. But I was able to talk to older women when they hosted me, to my host Haregwa and her relatives, and to women who shared my compound in later months. I do my best to represent their perspectives in the pages that follow, though I must admit to limitations on this front, and I have been fortunate to be able to draw on work by Tihut Yirgu Asfaw (2009) and Rahel Mesfin (1999, 2002) in this area.

At the end of my initial long stint of research, in 2009, there were certain things I was not completely satisfied with. One was my understanding of the church-political organization of the peninsula; another was the history of slavery in the area and the continuing presence of slave descendants. This was the subject of many uncomfortable jokes but was difficult to discuss openly. Because of this, I made multiple return visits, attempting as best as I could to fill in some of the gaps. In this I received remarkable assistance from Tefera Ewnetu, a student and

tour guide from Ura with a deep interest in local history. Tefera read my entire PhD thesis after I made it available online, and we discussed at length those things he disagreed with or thought I ought to have included. Following on from this, we conducted several interviews together across the peninsula, especially with church scholars and senior figures in Zege society. This follow-up work has vastly increased my understanding of Zege life, and I am indebted to Tefera for his help.

OUTLINE OF BOOK

The progression of this book reflects a tension between structure and history, and my attempts to represent both the powerful regulatory forces that make up the ritual regime of Zege and the deep historical transformations that have nonetheless taken place. The first three chapters are concerned with the political and especially religious organization of everyday life in Zege. Chapter 1 attempts a reconstruction of the social history of Zege, especially the complex and unique relationship between monastic and political power in the area. Chapter 2 describes the Orthodox calendar, perhaps the most significant mechanism of the religious regulation of life in Zege. The focus here is on how, through fasting and feasting, the daily experience of having a body unfolds in a framework and a material environment that are always already coordinated along religious lines. At the same time, we see how dissidence and nonconformism frequently get expressed through apparently trivial violations of the calendar. Chapter 3 considers the religious division of labor and the work of priests and other specialists. It shows how church work frequently becomes connected with more shadowy traditions, and lays out the theory of knowledge as the sole property of God that underlies the system.

Having outlined Zege's structures of authority and their transformation, I then proceed in chapters 4 and 5 to unravel the problematic parallel histories that people in Zege are well aware of: histories of slavery, exclusion, and sorcery fears. I explore how the church forest has been simultaneously the site of histories of sanctity and slavery, and how these histories have produced rifts that are still deeply felt. Chapter 5 discusses an outbreak of *buda* spirits and shows how this experience of crisis is tied to extensive histories of labor relations and notions of moral exchange. Throughout these chapters we will see the narrative of the decline of hospitality that has become a key trope by which recent social change has been understood.

Chapters 6 and 7 take us deeper into the religious-material interface in Zege, especially the transformation of hierarchical feeding practices. Chapter 6 continues the discussion of the decline of hospitality by examining changes in the use of concrete graves and the devaluing of funeral feasting. Chapter 7 compares hosting, hospitality, and eating together in the name of saints with Eucharistic practice, and argues that small-scale "echoes" of the Eucharist are foundational to relations between saints and community.

The final two chapters consider Zege's outward-looking relationship to the wider world. Chapter 8 discusses media, church-building, and interreligious relations, as national and international interreligious politics has become far more tangible in the local environment of Zege. Chapter 9 investigates how church knowledge, modern education, and the know-how required for young men to find opportunity in the world fit together. The chapter shows how young men with church backgrounds are also frequently those who gain access to modern education and to the social opportunities that foreigners sometimes provide. Monastic traditions of knowledge itself as an ascetic practice have not necessarily kept people from secular, modern forms of knowledge; instead the two traditions are constantly drawn back into dialogue.

NOTES

1. *Abune*, "Our Father," is an honorific term for bishops and sometimes other holy men.
2. I refer to church-monasteries for simplicity. Every monastery (*gedam*) contains a church (*bête kristiyan*) and locals sometimes use the terms interchangeably. All churches in Zege were entirely monastic until roughly three generations ago, when a request was made for priests to serve in Ura and Yiganda. This may have been due to concerns about monks starting families.
3. As many priests in Addis Ababa have explained to me, the official church position is that any Christian may take Communion provided they have first given confession and observed the other purity restrictions. Nonetheless, the reticence of nonelderly adults to take communion is widespread.
4. The derivation of these rules is clearly not Leviticus alone, as the rules concerning baptism suggest. Many are codified in the *Fetha Negest*, the Law of Kings, which was codified around 1240 and translated into Ge'ez in the fifteenth century, where it became a key legal text for the Ethiopian monarchy (Pankhurst 2011). The influence of Leviticus in, for example, the forty-day and eighty-day rule and the repurification of the mother is clear (see Ullendorff 1968).
5. *Abba*, "Father," is a general term of address for priests and monks. The priest's name is actually *Abba T'iw Melesan*, but he is universally and affectionately known as *Abba Som*, "Father Fasting." He is also a *Memhir*, "teacher."
6. Versions of this account appear in the Book of Jubilees as well as various versions of the Life of Adam and Eve (Stone 2013: 36).
7. Douglas's (1999: 18) extended explanation of the analogical mode of Leviticus helps to understand my friends' thinking about prohibition: "Leviticus' literary style is correlative, it works through analogies. Instead of explaining why an instruction has been given, or even what it means, it adds another similar instruction, and another and another, thus producing its highly schematized effect. The series of analogies locate a particular instance in a context. They expand the meaning. . . . They serve in place of causal explanations. If one asks, Why this rule? the answer is that it conforms to that other rule. If, Why both those rules? The answer is to a larger category of rules in which they are embedded as subsets or from some of which they are distinguished as exceptions. Many law books proceed in this concentric, hierarchical way. In Leviticus the patterning of oppositions and inclusions is generally all the explaining that we are going to get. Instead of argument there is analogy." This passage encapsulates the logic of the ritual regime I am describing.
8. Further discussion can be found in Lloyd (1996, 2011) and Descola (2013), who explore how the analogical mode of thought based on micro and macro resemblances and repetitions becomes, under certain conditions, the dominant logic of a broad but not exhaustive range of societies, including

premodern China and India, ancient Greece, much of Africa, and the indigenous societies of the Andes. Descola describes how sacrifice is a key practice of such “analogistic” societies (and only these societies) because of the concern they evince with global connection and disconnection. In this context, the focus on sacrifice in Christian society in Zege, along with the astonishingly, redundantly dense web of analogic symbolism surrounding Orthodox ritual and bodily practice, suggests that a sustained consideration of analogism is appropriate here. This informs my thought throughout this book, but to give a list of those practices that support a reading of Orthodox society as a whole would take a large amount of space and detract from my attempts to show not only how ritual life in Zege is logically ordered, but how many practices break from or run against this semitotalizing system of order that I term the *ritual regime*.

9. When they are born, children are assigned a Godparent of the same gender; marriage prohibitions extend to the close kin of the Godparent.

10. The prohibition of relations with Weyto does not extend to economic relations. Traditionally Weyto have made papyrus *tankwa* canoes for all residents of the area (Gamst 1979). For an account of similar economic relations and marital dietary prohibitions between Christians and Beta Israel, see Salamon (1999).

11. In fairness to Lévi-Strauss, his structuralism was never simply about drawing distinctions and making concepts. As Lambek (1992) points out, his entire theory of society as exchange is premised on the basis of the prohibition of incest, which compels men to seek wives beyond their immediate kin (rather as the prohibition on ploughing in Zege compels coffee farmers to trade with outsiders for their food). In Lévi-Strauss’s theory of sacrifice, too, the aim of all the conceptual world is to build contiguity between humans and God—to make a relationship possible, before severing it through the act of death and so compelling divinity to make some kind of return (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 228).

12. Valeri (2000: 408), in contrast, argues that nonaction is actually more clearly marked than action.

13. Not all activity related to fasting is negation or nonaction: admonishing others to keep the fast, for example, is a positive form of action, as is refusing the offer of prohibited food. The point is that a state of fasting is maintained between such moments of affirmation, and that the temporal qualities of prohibitions similarly extend beyond the actions that affirm them.

14. *Abba*, “Father,” term of address for priests and monks.

15. Most of my data concerning Protestantism concern Orthodox Christians’ impressions and imaginings of what Protestants do, and may or may not reflect actual ideas and practice.

16. Translation by Mellatra Tamrat, who glosses the *teff* (local staple grain) metaphor as follows: “even the smallest rise, shielded by the protection of God.” Original Amharic as transcribed by Tefera:

Kehulu kehulu teff tensalech
Geleba lebsa tenesalech,
Emye mariam men hunanalech
Angetan defeat teleksalech
Betalekse betaneba
Lja besekel singelata,
Enian Sekelugn yegerfugn.

17. Mary’s special physical status was apparent during her life; she is said to have never menstruated and to have lived on mana; according to the Anaphora of St. Mary: O virgin, thou didst not eat earthly bread but heavenly bread prepared in the heaven of heavens” (Paulos 1988: 201).

18. Here Paulos draws from Arras (1974: 73–74).

19. The title of *mergéta* denotes religious knowledge, for which one does not necessarily have to be ordained; the next step, upon passing examinations in Gondar, is to become a *memhir*, “teacher.”