

## Proliferations of Mediators

Prohibitions in Zege produce clear distinctions in social space and time. These distinctions, as I have argued, are most apparent around the performance of the Eucharist (*qurban*). The Eucharist is prepared in the inner sanctum of a church, surrounded by multiple concentric walls, each marking an increase in the purity and observance required to enter. The sanctum itself and the *tabot* it holds are accessible only to deacons and ordained priests, and only the ordained may actually prepare the sacrament. Those who give communion, *qorabí*, will upon death be buried with a candle to mark their special status.

As we have seen, a practical assumption exists that most Orthodox adults lack the purity to take communion. The real, bodily presence of God does not mix well with the domains of sexuality, feeding, or reproduction, and particularly with bodily fluids (Hannig 2013). Nonetheless, through the sacraments (*mist'írat*) and by God's grace (*s'ega*), God does become available to human consumption.

It seems that prohibitions around the sacred can never be total. A holy *tabot* that nobody could touch or see would be a dead object. Instead, priests, endowed by the sacrament of holy orders, manage relations between *tabot* and community, while at the same time making sure general access is restricted. As the former patriarch *Abune Paulos* (1988: 174) makes quite clear, it is the purity of the Eucharist that necessitates the religious division of labor. This is the basic structure of Ethiopian Orthodox mediation: specialist figures both enable and restrict traffic between humans and divinity. The rules of prohibition and separation go along with the rules of mediation and connection. This produces a social universe of structured, hierarchical relations.

What I find most noticeable about Ethiopian Orthodox religious mediators in Zege is their sheer variety and proliferation: priests, deacons, monks, and nonordained church singers all play parts in the management of human-divine relations, but so do saints, angels, and the Virgin Mary. Saints and angels are also important for the control of demonic agents, but there also exists a substantial demimonde of figures associated with the church (but not approved by it) who mobilize religious knowledge for the suppression, and sometimes the propitiation, of demons. This chapter argues that all of these figures share core symbolic elements of hybridity. They are all construed as embodying split states between human and nonhuman form, and between life and death. These hybrid mediators, I argue, are products of the regime of prohibition that structures Orthodox life.

### THE BODIES OF ANGELS

In the course of conversation in the front room of Haregwa's bar, Haregwa and Zebirhan asked me, "*Igzíabhér man yímeslal?*" (Who does God resemble?). Haregwa, a woman of my age who had hosted me for many months with her husband, said that God was definitely a white man (which was largely a way of teasing me). I asked if God was definitely male, and after a moment's thought she replied, "*besim wend new*" (By name he's male). What about the Trinity, I asked—grammatically it sounded like it might be female, as in the term *qiddist selassé*, the Holy (f.) Trinity. Haregwa and Zebirhan thought the Trinity was definitely male if it was anything, but said at this point we ought to ask someone more knowledgeable. She sent Zebirhan to find an ex-deacon friend who was passing through town. The friend told us that this was a matter of divine mystery (*mist'íre melekot*), starting from how the three persons (*akal*) of the Trinity could all be in one.

He then told us that it was similar with angels: we refer to Archangel Gabriel and Archangel Michael in male terms but actually they have no gendered parts. The language available to us does not necessarily reflect the nature of the beings we are discussing. Haregwa asked him if angels urinate (I think I had prompted this by asking her about it earlier), and he replied, "of course not." Nor do they eat like us; while we eat food, they eat only praise (*mesgena*).

I would suggest that the angels' lack of sex, nutrition, or excretion is understood to be integral to their role as messengers (Amh. *mel'ak*, "angel," *melak*, "to send"). In Zege Archangel Michael, Archangel Gabriel, and Archangel Raphael are second only to Mary as recipients and conduits of prayers and vows, while the area of Ura appears to be named for Urael. Each has their own domain: Michael protects from demonic attack and possession (and is generally identified as having dominion over demons); Raphael and Gabriel assist with problems of fertility, disease, and poverty. Their role is explicitly understood, as one elderly told me, as "carrying our prayers to God."

The other place where angels are prominent is painted on the shutters of the holy of holies in the center of the church-monasteries. Michael is often portrayed with a sword; Gabriel saves three children from the fire (see Cowley 1983: 128); Raphael impales a sea monster that threatens an island church. The archangels are warriors and guardians as well as protectors; it is not for nothing that they protect the inner sanctum. They also have wings, highlighting their celestial and nonhuman qualities. In the book of Enoch, which seems to be a key source for much of Ethiopian angelology, and which was only fully preserved in Gêez, two of the main roles of the archangels are to plead with God on behalf of humanity and to imprison Azazel, leader of the “Watchers,” fallen angels who came to earth and had sexual relations with human women. Azazel has taught humanity how to make tools and weapons and how to beautify their faces and wear jewelry. The angels are gravely punished: Gabriel is commanded to destroy the children of the fallen Watchers and set them to war against one another; Raphael is sent to imprison Azazel; Urael is dispatched to announce the coming flood to Noah; and Michael is ordered to imprison the fallen angels who have “united themselves with women so as to have defiled themselves with them in all their uncleanness” (1 Enoch 11).

Angels must not have sexual relations with humans (implying, of course, that they might desire to do so). The archangels, on the other hand, serve the dual purpose of pleading with God on humanity’s behalf and of carrying out his punishments and smiting wrongdoers. In both senses they stand between humans and God. It is the presence of such go-betweens, partly like humans, but also radically different, that is so important in the practical logic of Orthodoxy in Zege. The vital importance of having mediators is greatly enhanced by the expansion of Protestantism into traditionally Orthodox areas.

#### HOW MEDIATORS MAKE RELIGION

The afternoon trade was dying down in the veterinary pharmacy in Afaf village, on the edge of the Zege peninsula, where my friend Thomas and his teenage factotum Abebe kept shop. A local man popped his head round the door to say hello. His face was familiar; I had seen him in Thomas’s bar and knew the two were friends. The man was chatting to Thomas when Abebe, talking to me but intending to be overheard, remarked, “Tom, this guy is *P’entey*”—Pentecostal, though the term now refers colloquially and rather dismissively to any kind of Protestantism (Haustein 2011: 229). 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.

Our friend smiled and did not deny it. The exchange was light-hearted, and his religion did not seem a great impediment to his friendship with Thomas 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 belw*). Playing my part as the naïve but mostly harmless outsider, I asked.

The man paused, still smiling, but did not respond. As he turned to leave, Thomas said quietly, *Maryam tadenallech* (Mary heals). Their Protestant friend appeared not to hear, but when he reached the door he turned defiantly, raised both arms high, and exclaimed, *Iyesus Kristos yadenal!* (Jesus Christ heals!). Then he walked away, leaving Thomas and Abebe scoffing and shaking their heads.

Abebe’s choice of question is instructive: “who heals?” (or “who saves”—the words *medhanit*, “medicine,” and *medhani*, “savior,” are cognate). It illustrates not just the importance of Mary as an intercessor 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 most Orthodox Christians, rather like a peon addressing an emperor by name. Even the casual use of the name of Jesus clashes to the Orthodox ear; they prefer *Gétacchin* (Our Lord) or *Medhané Alem* (the Savior of the World).

Educated Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa have made it clear to me that they regard secularism and Protestantism as contiguous. According to one church student, Daniel, for example, secularism (he used the English word) is not a rejection of the eternal like atheism, but an attempt to break down the divisions between the eternal and the realm of worldly things. A religious world was one that observed partitions, a secular one did not, nor did the world of the Protestants as he saw it. This was why Protestantism was opposed to monasticism—it wanted to have Christianity in all things, but in doing so made it excessively worldly. There are echoes between Daniel’s argument and Charles Taylor’s (2007: 145) in which “the need to make God more fully present in everyday life and all its contexts . . . prepares the ground for an escape from faith, into a purely immanent worlds.” Protestantism does not do away with God, but with the elevation and separation that make human-divine relationships legitimate and meaningful. This is more insidious and hence more threatening than outright atheism, which few Ethiopians outside of a small urban elite consider a serious position.

This is not a wholly inaccurate view of the various schools of Protestant practice in Ethiopia. For example, Haustein notes some of the key characteristics that were understood to define the Pentecostal “revivals” of the 1960s: “Bible study, prayer meetings and eventually salvation and Spirit baptism” (2011: 108). These remain key points of contention between Orthodoxy and Pentecostalism. Note that the revival movements do not reject mediation entirely (if that were even possible). Rather, mediation occurs through reading scripture and nonhierarchical prayer groups, alongside more directly embodied techniques of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues. The hierarchical mediator has been removed, be they priest, monk, saint, angel, or Mary. This was the key point. Pentecostals and other Protestants do

not do away with all mediation, but with a specific kind of agent who serves as the go-between of legitimate religious activity.

The rise of Protestantism is not the only challenge Ethiopian Orthodoxy faces. Policies of religious equality enshrined in the 1995 constitution have allowed Muslims to launch new claims to public belonging, and Muslim groups have been happy to cite the principle of state secularism in order to advance their claims (Abbink 2014, Samson 2015). But Protestantism and Islam present different kinds of challenges: while Orthodox Christianity is losing a significant portion of its congregation to Protestant conversion (“stealing sheep”), relations with Islam are based less on competition for followers than on perceptions of political sovereignty and territorial rights (Boylston 2014). We will see this dynamic in chapter 8, in which political claims to Christian centrality are made in opposition to Islam, while thought about what actually constitutes proper Orthodoxy takes Protestantism as its foil.

Orthodox responses to these transformations have been complex but always active. Reformist movements have multiplied, with reform being generally understood as a challenge to hierarchical mediation, but so have powerful antireform sentiment and neotraditionalist movements. Grassroots participation in parish councils started increasing almost immediately upon the dispossessing of the church by the Derg (Larebo 1986, 1988, Clapham 1988, Bonacci 2000, Chaillot 2002), while youth movements, Sunday school organizations, and lay religious societies have become driving forces in the promotion of Orthodoxy, acting semi-independently from the central church. Some of the local developments of these movements are detailed in the next chapter. But this vast increase in lay activism and engagement with religious texts has entailed not a devaluation of the role of specialist priests and monks or of liturgical ritual, but a forceful and conscious reaffirmation of them.

#### MEDIA, MEDIATION, AND PRESENCE

A series of landmark works in the anthropology of Christianity have identified the search for direct, unmediated contact with God as central to global Protestant projects (Engelke 2007, Keane 2007, Meyer 2011). These works go on to argue that the desired immediacy is a practical impossibility; rather, the impression of directness is produced through material mediations: sincere words, holy honey, the use or abandonment of text, electric sounds and images (Meyer 2011, Stolorow 2012). More to the point, they attempt to trace the connections between Protestant notions of semiotic transparency (ironically enabled by print technology) and the development of global colonial and postcolonial *epistemes* in which increasingly sophisticated media technology gives the impression of increasingly unmediated connection. This tendency of media to become invisible—that is, for hypermediated

communications to be cast as unmediated or “im-mediate”—has long been identified as a characteristic of modern ideology (McLuhan 1964, Mazzarella 2004).

When Tomas and Abebe insisted that it is Mary who heals, they were perceiving the same apparent trend in Protestantism, and objecting to it as irreligious. Mediators are required; Jesus is God, and God cannot mediate with God. In the words of Roger Cowley: “The work of intercession belongs to created beings. The creator is prayed to, and does not himself pray to another” (1972: 246). What they are saying is that the central problem of human-divine relations is not really how to make God present to humanity; in fact, a certain separation must be maintained.

The animating problem for Ethiopian Orthodoxy is not that of a gulf between humans and God that must be bridged, but rather that the boundary between humans and God (or the environment or one another) is not sufficiently stable. What we see in Zege, as will become clear, is not just an emphasis on mediation, but a proliferation of mediators, far beyond what would seem necessary if the ultimate goal were simply to mend a rift between humans and God. This proliferation suggests that a dialectical process is occurring: any attempt to keep domains separate results in profusions of in-between figures.

#### THE WORK OF PRIESTS

There is good reason to talk about priests, deacons, and monks along with saints and angels as part of a single analysis. Steven Kaplan (1984: 70) has written extensively on the angelic capacities of holy men in Ethiopian tradition, as figures between humanity and God, but also as mediators with animals and the environment and in resolving disputes. Saints such as *Abune Betre Maryam* were holy people who later became fully fledged intercessors. And I would suggest that the restrictions surrounding religious work—the clerical observance of all 250-plus fasting days, the need to fast before performing the Eucharist, the celibacy of monks—are parallel to the angels’ lack of need for sex or food. But priesthood also involves a great deal of mundane work.

Clerical authority stems from the ability to perform the sacraments—the legitimate manifestations of divine grace (*s’ega*) on earth. This is understood in explicit opposition to Protestantism:

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>1</sup>

The fact that only those empowered by the sacrament of ordination can perform the other sacraments implies the organizational monopoly of the Orthodox

Church on legitimate mediation. However, institutional control over access to the sacred is only part of the story.

The central part of priests' work is the performance of the Divine Liturgy (*qid-dasé*), culminating in the Eucharist. Excellent descriptions of the service in all its complexity are given by Ephraim (2013: 85) and Fritsch (2001); as well as the service of the mass itself, there are morning prayers (*mahlet*) and, on the eve of feasts, the vigil (*wazéma*). The morning prayers often begin with the *Widassé Maryam*, the Praises of Mary, and will begin long before the congregation arrives.

The main body of the liturgy consists in the performance of one of fourteen *anaphora* (a variety of prayer texts, literally "offering") that include Gospel readings and orders of service. The performance of the Eucharist itself, after the carefully regulated prayers of offering, requires a range of paraphernalia: "three candles (made of beeswax, a cross, and other consecrated vessels), the chalice, . . . paten, . . . cross spoon, napkins for wrapping the Eucharistic bread, ciborium, the bread and the wine. . . . Other requisites are the censor, a processional cross, holy water, . . . two crescent circles to be placed over the Host, . . . sanctuary lamp, and a small hand bell," as well as the New Testament, the Missal, and a list of persons to be remembered (Ephraim 2013: 88). The complexity and precision, and the seeming redundancy of equipment, serve a metacommunicative function, showing that the utmost order must be preserved in this space. It also creates a lot of work for the people tasked with providing all of this equipment, who have traditionally held important political roles in Zege (see chapter 1).

Performance of the liturgy requires at least three deacons and two priests, all of whom must have fasted properly. It will be performed every Sunday and on important saints' days and feasts, at a minimum, and the orders of service follow a closely regulated annual progression (Fritsch 2001). The liturgy is performed at dawn on regular days and at noon on fasting days, and is usually followed by *aqwaqwam*, plain chant with dancing performed by priests and *debtera* (discussed below in chapter; Fritsch 2001: 88). There are different *aqwaqwam* for different seasons, and the *aqwaqwam* of fasting days never use drums. The liturgy itself takes around three hours; the total performance required of the priests, including morning prayers, is much longer and is all done without food or water. It is a complex and exacting task.

Monks in Zege tend to live within monastery grounds. Noncelibate priests have only arrived within the last three generations, apparently on request of the people of Mehal Zege from the bishop *Abune* Qerilos.<sup>2</sup> This was due to concern that monks were making families—in this way, some people could become priests, who are allowed to marry once. Priests' and monks' incomes vary quite widely across the peninsula. Clergymen receive fees for performing funerals, weddings, and baptisms, often in the form of food and drink, and in some churches they also receive a monthly stipend. In 2008, I was told, this could

range from eighty-five birr per month to a few hundred (roughly eight to fifty US dollars). Fure Maryam, for example, outside Afaf, is quite poor and does not receive tourists. *Abba S'om*, the priest of Fure whom I came to know best, would work as a tailor on market days. He lived in a very humble hut just outside of Afaf town, where he grew a small amount of corn and chillies along with some of the other priests and monks. Near his home were a few even smaller huts where young students would stay.

*Abba S'om* described ordination to me as conferring “power” (*silt'an*), understood not as power in the priest's own right, but as the ability to channel the power of God. This power is most visible and tangible in daily life through the priest's hand cross, usually made of wood and nine inches to a foot in length. When a priest walks through any thoroughfare, he will generally be stopped at frequent intervals by men, women, and children who approach him with bowed heads to kiss the cross and receive blessing (*mebrek*). Because of the cross, the everyday public life of priests (and all clergy) is punctuated by small, regular acts of blessing.

Clerical training effects a permanent but incomplete separation between trainees and fully social worldly life. The path to priesthood begins between the ages of seven and ten years, perhaps twelve at a maximum, when a boy becomes a deacon. As Girma Mohammed points out, church education is ascetic training:

Students . . . are carefully coached to lead ascetic life in monasteries as opposed to engaging the material world and pursuing innovation. They are encouraged to beg, rather than work, not necessarily because they are needy, but as a part of spiritual discipline and a means of “disowning” their souls from “this world.” (Girma 2012a: 118, see also Alemayehu 1973, Chaillot 2002: 97)

Church students are known as *yeqollo temarí*, “grain students,” in reference to the raw grains on which they are supposed to survive (Cowley 1983: 54). According to Levine (1965: 169) and to some priests in Zege, *yeqollo temarí* may refer particularly to a one- or two-year period of absolute mendicancy in which students' social ties are to be cut off. More generally, *yeqollo temarí* refers to the whole religious studentship (which may lead to becoming a church assistant or lay scholar instead of to the priesthood), and *yeqollo timhirt bet*, “grain school,” to the institution of traditional church education (Young 1975).

*Abba S'om*, my main contact on exegesis in Fure Maryam church, recalled his period as a *yeqollo temarí*, some twenty years before, as one of unrelenting hardship. He told of 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 one of being humbled before God. The monk *Abba Haylemariam* described how he had formed close links with Mary during his period as a *yeqollo temarí*. By chanting songs and prayers to Mary he had gained her protection from



dogs (every former *yeqollo temarí* I have spoken to mentions dogs) and the other dangers of the mendicant life.

In *Abba Haylemariam's* account, it was the experience of privation and danger, above all, that formed his relationship with Mary. The relationship between ascetic life and saintly or angelic mediation has often been noted, and is central to Kaplan's work on Ethiopian monasticism:

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" (Kaplan 1984: 82; for examples in other Christianities, see Pina-Cabral 1986: 197, Brown 1988: 324).

If priests are simultaneously authoritative and marginal, monks can be even more clearly set apart from daily affairs, and yet have more authority to pronounce on them. The decision to enter monastic service can be chosen by church students at the point of ordination; monks take up the *qob* cap and the requiem for the dead is then sung for them (Paulos 1988: 26). They will remain celibate for life and observe the rigorous hours of the monastery. Because of this, as many Christians in Zege have told me, monks are the only people the populace will really listen to on matters such as whether to allow eucalyptus planting on parts of the peninsula or the proper response to HIV/AIDS. Monks have also long been the only people who could talk back to emperors or other state authorities.

But, as we have seen, mediators are always also buffers or regulators. Priests in Zege are in charge of spatial and temporal boundary maintenance. They must escort every human life in and out of this world, via baptism and funerary prayers. It is the priests who admonish people not to partake in the liturgy after eating food, not to enter the church or take the Eucharist in an impure state, and not to cut trees or plough the land in the vicinity of the church. *Abba Sòm* once told me that he regards it as his job to make sure that people do not work the land on holy days and to encourage them to come to church instead. He compared his work to that of the police, and discussed how the worst sanction, at least in theory, would be excommunication (*wigzet*).

Understandings of church poverty and asceticism have transformed in recent decades. I have been told by theologians in Addis Ababa that the poverty of *yeqollo temarí* now has much to do with the church's lack of resources after having its lands confiscated by the Derg government in the 1970s. Ideally, they say, students would not spend their whole time begging, and priests would not work secondary jobs, and many fundraising efforts among Christians in the city go toward providing better funding for church students who might otherwise be drawn to

the opportunities that secular government education provides. The embattlement narrative of dwindling church resources, especially surrounding education (and therefore the future of the priesthood), has proved a potent way of galvanizing middle-class Orthodox Christians in the cities to greater fundraising and support efforts directed at the rural church schools and monasteries. One prominent fundraiser in Addis Ababa told me at length how rural Orthodox Christians were in constant danger of succumbing to Islamic or Protestant propaganda if traditional education was not supported. The amount of resources being poured by Christian organizations into the support of church schools is significant, and shows the degree of importance that people place on the continuation of the priesthood and the traditional education system. But the new context of competition for resources may fundamentally change the grounds on which ascetic training is founded.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIATION

Kaplan emphasizes the importance of the role of Ethiopian holy men as mediators between humanity and the environment. Here too we see important recent changes in Zege. A number of semiofficial practices had arisen based on prayer for rain and protection of the peninsula from hailstorms. But even since the beginning of my fieldwork in 2008 there have been moves to replace some of these activities with others more easily reconcilable with church doctrine.

In Zege, the priests and monks are said to mediate between humans and non-human nature via the pact with God, established at the founding of the first church by the Saint Betre Maryam, that no wild animal will harm a human on the peninsula and that no person will be struck by lightning as long as the forest and the churches remain (Cerulli 1946, Bosc-Tiessé 2008). This is consistent with Kaplan's (1984: 87) account of holy men as mediators not just with God but also between humankind and nature.

Hailstorms are an infrequent but serious concern in Zege, having destroyed the peninsula's coffee crop once in the 1960s (Rahel 2002, Binayew 2014). Because of this, every year at the beginning and end of the rainy season, the priests circumambulate the peninsula carrying the book of the Acts (*gedl*) of Saint Betre Maryam, in which his foundational deeds are recorded (Cerulli 1946). In this way they reiterate Zege's devotion to its patron and renew the environmental protection that he affords, where both book and the forested environment itself are markers of the saint's historical presence.

However, there have also existed important nonpriestly mediators between people and environment. Until the last five or six years there was a figure called *yebereḍ tebaqí*, or the "ice guardian." This man was in charge of making prayers, and perhaps magical charms too, for preventing hail, which strikes only rarely in

Zege but can devastate the coffee crop when it does. One charm involved wrapping a certain medicinal plant in grass, carrying it round the peninsula, and then suspending it upside down in the church rafters—a parallel to the more proper practice of carrying the book of the Acts of Saint Betre Maryam around the peninsula, making a sort of divine enclosure.

The guardian would receive money from the community in return for these services. As the *mergéta* explained it, the guardian had to know certain prayers (*sélete bered*), and would stand on a big stone, never moving, so as to be connected to the land. The *mergéta* himself had performed the role in the past, due to his religious knowledge. However, at least one Muslim man has held the role of *yebered tebaqí* in recent memory, at least in the districts of Ura and Yiganda, which according to some priestly informants is one of the reasons the position was discontinued.

Because of recent concerns that traditional, quasi-Christian practices that had developed in Zege did not reflect the authority of the church, there is currently no *yebered tebaqí*. The community must instead offer coffee to the church, and the church's prayers alone must keep the hail at bay. Tihut (2009: 43) describes this move as an extra act of taxation by the church, saying that each household was required to give two kilograms of coffee to the church for rain and hail prayers. Rahel (1999) describes how households may have been pressured to contribute out of fear of being blamed should a disaster occur.

Likewise the practice of *fel*, described in chapter 1, in which Zege's dignitaries would slaughter an ox on a hilltop at the start of the rainy season in prayer for rain, has been discontinued, and the hilltop renamed *mesqel adebabay*, the square of the Cross. Some priests have told me that this was in response to the building of a new mosque in Afaf village, whereupon it was felt that the Christianity of the peninsula should be marked in more explicit fashion. They also said that the sacrifice of Christ had obviated the need for animal slaughter, and "only the blood of our Lord" could provide protection.

These examples show how an explicit concern with the increasing public visibility of Muslims in Ethiopia has led to a crackdown on mediatory practices that used to be understood as unproblematic parts of local Christian life, and to a new emphasis on the church and the priesthood as the only proper mediators. If the growth of Protestantism has led Orthodox Christians in Zege to reemphasize the importance of mediators, the enhanced status of Islam (a direct result of secularist state policy) has led to a retrenching of legitimate mediation within the organizational boundaries of the church. But this is emphatically not a rejection of the principle of hierarchical mediation, and it is therefore not at all the same kind of thing as Protestant reform.

Popular practices for seeking environmental protection do frequently reemerge regardless of church approval. In April 2014 there was a hailstorm in Zege that

threatened the coffee crop. Tefera contacted me to say that some of the coffee farmers in Zege had responded by placing all of their metal objects, such as sickles and axes, outside of the house. His father had told him that putting out the tools was to emphasize the promise that the farmers would not work on the monthly saints' days—a key sign of devotion that would ensure the saints' protection against further hail.

In December of that year when I visited Zege again, Tefera and I went to ask *Mergéta* Worqué about the incident. He told us that this was not an official religious practice but an old tradition (*bahil*). He said it might well display that farmers were obeying rules about not ploughing, and added that if it did hail, the tools that had been placed outside would ring with sound, which would act as a prayer to Betre Maryam for protection. But the real, important practice was for the clergy to carry the book of Betre Maryam around the land.

In sum, while all agree that God's protection for the environment must be sought via saintly intermediaries, especially Betre Maryam, there has been wide variation in which earthly specialists should take on responsibility for the work of prayer—often quite arduous—that this involves. There is an important political-economic dimension, as major questions also surround the appropriate kinds of contribution from the community for the work of seeking protection. Mediation is a kind of work, and like any form of going-between, it can be a source of power and can be subject to disputes of legitimacy and appropriation.

#### MEDIATION WITHOUT DISEMBODIMENT IS MAGIC

One final kind of mediator exists in Ethiopian Orthodox societies, who can do much to enlighten the ethics and logics of human-nonhuman contact and the flesh in a place such as Zege. The *debtera* is a term that has caused some confusion in the literature because of its constitutive ambiguity: it may refer either to a church chorister—an adult man who has received training in Ge'ez texts and chants but has not been ordained—or to a sorcerer, a purveyor of healing magic and curses, and a master of demons, capable of flying on clouds and controlling the weather (Young 1975). Many men perform both roles simultaneously, combining licit and illicit techniques of mediation; it is precisely this ambiguity that has come to define the *debtera* in popular discourse.

Ask someone in the village and they will likely be able to point you toward a *debtera*, but two villagers may not agree on who is or is not a *debtera*, and the person indicated may not answer to the term. *Debtera* is not a clearly defined position like a priest, but designates a person with some kind of special knowledge. The *debtera* I knew best was a man in his fifties who lived in Afaf town and performed *aqwaqwa* dance and chants during festivals and church services. He wore the white turban of priests and church servants (*agilgay*) and could read Ge'ez. All

of this indicates years of church education. Perhaps because of his education and connection with the church, he was also secretary of a large *iddir* group in the name of Saint Michael, in Afaf. These are funerary associations, where each member pays two birr per month, and the association pays for the mourning tent and for food and drink for mourners and priests when you die. The *debtera*, along with another adult former church student, kept the register of members and payments in a neat ledger book.

He also sold a variety of medicines and charms against demonic possession, and showed me a number of plastic bottles full of potent-looking brown liquid that would be drunk or poured in the nose to get rid of *ganén* spirits that could drive their victims mad and cause them to jump in the lake. This he described to me as *sigawí sira*, “fleshly work” done for a living, and totally distinct from church service. He could also make Ge'ez prayer scrolls and amulets to be worn around the neck for demonic protection, which is a widespread tradition in Orthodox Ethiopia (Mercier 1997). Finally, he was rumored to be a sorcerer (*t'enqway*) of possible slave descent, and to be capable of much more potent and harmful magic than he let on. A pillar of the community, a servant of the church, a skilled practitioner of esoteric arts, and also the object of fear and stigma, this man epitomizes the ambiguity of the *debtera* more generally.

By most people's accounts, *debtera* turn away from the priestly path because they have violated (or wish to violate) the sexual purity rules, having had pre- or extramarital sex. They are widely viewed as epitomizing a state of religious knowledge without religious purity, and so are archetypal boundary-violators; one man told me that you become a *debtera* by urinating on the sacred *tabot* of the church. They have mediatory powers, being able, it is said, to command spirits, but they work, as my friend said, in the service of the flesh. It is, I believe, from this basic paradigm that the local legends of *debtera* as fearsome sorcerers who fly on clouds and summon snakes and hailstorms emerge (with the encouragement of a number of *debtera*-like experts who know the value of cultivating mystique for their line of business). *Debtera* are marginal figures, both feared and respected, and usually operating at a remove from general sociality.

In the minds of many Orthodox Christians in Zege, even deacons, monks, and priests may engage in illicit magic and medicine. One young man, Yilekal, told me that he was sure an elderly local priest in Afaf knew how to make love medicines, but would not give one to him because he had not yet won the priest's trust. He did find information about a priest in Zege who could supply such medicines, but had heard that he was worried about being arrested for practicing traditional medicine without a licence. Disappointed, Yilekal nonetheless gave his baptismal name to the elderly priest so that he could pray for him. I do not think that the priest was actually practicing magic, and this would certainly not be sanctioned by the

church, but there remains a widespread popular perception that those educated in the church tradition possess esoteric magical power.

Countless people of Zege have told me about the magical activities of deacons who, I am told, can summon hailstorms (or give the impression of having done so) and curse people with unstoppable flatulence. One man, Addisu, told me that he thought deacons probably cultivated this image, and would throw pebbles on peoples' roofs to pretend that they had summoned hail. The common conflation of *debtera* with priests or deacons suggests that a general category of "mediators" is operative, encompassing any people who have access to powers outside of the visible world.

The esoteric nature of church knowledge plays a part in conflations between the religious and the demonic. It is not just that church knowledge is written in Ge'ez and thus opaque even to most literate people, though this is part of it. It seems that the church's literary tradition has long produced offshoot texts of dubious propriety. In Getatchew Haile's (n.d.) colorful description:

Some naughty people who have the rudimentary knowledge of Geez compose or translate from other languages prayers against illnesses and for warding off evil spirits, which are said to be the cause of illnesses much like germs and viruses. . . . Interestingly, one finds among these prayers a few for healing what Viagra is supposed to heal. The prayers contain strange names that are supposed to have the power to do the thing for which they are invoked. The church is against turning to them under the threat of excommunication.

Such spells and prayers are widespread, and *debtera* are rumored to trade them with one another in secret. But certain texts have become well established, most notably the *Awde Negest*, the *Circle of Kings*. This book contains various horoscopes, information on numerology, and guides for the treatment of spirit possession (Young 1977).<sup>3</sup> A traditional doctor, Beza, showed a published copy to me and Abebe during one of our visits. He read our horoscopes after working out our star signs from the letters of our names—I was told I would die at age sixty-nine or seventy. Abebe was nonplussed to be told he would go blind at age thirty, and that he would one day kill a man and then become a monk. On the way home we discussed our fortunes, and Abebe suggested we go speak to a priest for clarification.

The priest confided that he had read the *Awde Negest* in detail while a church student. A lively and curious man of around thirty, he had been interested in the book in his youth, before deciding that it was improper and likely fraudulent. He raised an issue that had troubled us—how could the book describe a person's fate in such detail when there was only a limited number of star signs? We couldn't all go blind at thirty and commit a murder. Abebe was much relieved. But the priest's case shows us that students in the church, through their literacy, do gain exposure

to esoteric texts as well as more canonical works. Combine this with the widespread idea that church students make use of stimulants and other plant-based mind drugs in order to assist their intensive study, and it is easy to see how religious knowledge sometimes appears quite close to more ambivalent, pragmatic, or illicit sources and techniques of authority.

#### CONCLUSION: MEDIATION AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge, especially knowledge of God, has been traditionally treated as problematic and potentially dangerous in Ethiopian Orthodox society (Levine 1965). To seek to know God carried implications of *t'igab*: pride and the illusion of repletion (Messay 1999). But in fact humans are not producers of knowledge. Rather all knowledge is God's. The first time I interviewed *Mergéta* Worqé about local history, he thought it was important to preface any answers he had to my questions: "I am a *mergéta* specialized in *aqwaqwam* (votive dance chants), and also a church painter. God has ordered us to tell the truth. All creativity is from god. If you pray to God angels will support your learning. The world is led by the books of the saints, not the constitution." Human learning is not the production of knowledge, but the submission to angelic and saintly guidance. It follows that religious knowledge has often been the domain of specialists, while for the laity, as we have seen, religious engagement primarily revolves around fasting and calendrical events.

So Orthodox life in Zege is characterized by a large and diverse array of religious and quasi-religious specialists on the Earthly side, and an equally diverse set of saints and angels (and, conversely, demons) on the celestial end. These figures relate to the laity through the calendar of fasts, feasts, and holidays in the names of saints and angels (and calendrical occasions when demons are known to proliferate), and also through personal appeals via prayer, through relationships with one's soul father, and through thanksgiving meals (see chapter 7). Common basic principles of hierarchy and mediation underlie these systemic relationships.

But why so many mediators? In part, this seems to stem from shifts in local authority and relations between landlords, the state, and the church. But I would suggest that symbolic logics of prohibition and the flesh are equally important. We began this chapter by asking why it matter that angels are genderless and do not eat or excrete; we have seen the various restrictions and separations that priests and monks must observe, and the consequences when esoteric knowledge is not subject to such strict purity regulations.

Purity and prohibition, as shown in previous chapters, build boundaries into social time and space. Especially, they place restrictions on the bodily conditions of those who would approach God. But such structured grids are not sufficient for human collectives to live. Each separation produces intermediaries who both enable and restrict traffic across the symbolic divide. In doing so, they must often

be marked as partially dead or disembodied, or must embody partway states between humanity and something else.

Some mediators are considered legitimate and authoritative, some immoral and improper; still others occupy zones of ambiguity at the edges of the Orthodox Church hierarchy. The designation of which mediators and methods of mediation are legitimate is demonstrably subject to historical change. But Orthodox Christians in Zege have consistently maintained, against Protestantism as they understand it, that there must be mediators. And to a great extent the history of Zege can be understood in terms of the transformation of what counts as legitimate mediation.

## NOTES

1. Taken from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's English website, [www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacramentintro.html](http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/dogma/sacramentintro.html), accessed June 23, 2017.

2. According to *Mergéta* Worqué.

3. From my field notes: "He insists that holy water can NOT cure *zar*. Rather you revolve a chicken round the patient's head, possibly 3 times, and the *zar* will enter into the chicken. I ask if the colour of the chicken is important, on a tip from a friend, and he says yes this depends on your '*kokeb*' (star), which is derived numerologically from your name and your mother's name. Mine (slightly dubious as Mum's name is impronouncable in Amharic) is *shert'an wiha*."