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The *Buda* Crisis

In early 2009, while walking to an interview, Abebe told me: "Life in Zege has got worse. People are afraid to eat together." The reason, he said, was widely thought to be competition in the Afaf market, which was driving traders to seek the services of sorcerers *(tenqway)* to boost their business by occult means. The problem was that while the sorcerers' medicine was effective, it carried a side effect: it turned the client into a *buda.* This meant that they would make others sick, usually inadvertently, usually by looking at them or their food. Everyone I spoke to agreed that trade was at the center of the problem because of the merchants competing to get ahead. A couple of deaths had been attributed to *buda,* and eventually the crisis became so severe that a town meeting was called and the police were urged to arrest the sorcerers responsible—even though, as we will see, this was not legally permissible. While this was a flashpoint, caused in part by the world food-price crisis that had doubled the price of basic staples, *buda* are an everyday hazard of the environment in Zege. Probably they are the most consistent source of anxiety in daily life, because they are ever present, unpredictable, and potentially fatal. They are also known to be extremely numerous in this particular area (and, by national repute, in the whole of old Gojjam province).

In the light of this story of spirits and the market it is tempting to regard the *buda* crisis as a response to the growth of market capitalism and its attendant inequalities. There is some truth in this, but a moment's attention reveals a more interesting and complex picture. For the notion of merchants becoming *buda* is unusual, and coexists with a much more widely attested association of *buda* with certain marginalized groups: potters, weavers, the Beta Israel, lepers, and in this area, the descendants of slaves (H. Pankhurst 1992, Reminick 1974, Salamon 1999,

Finneran 2003, A. Pankhurst 2003). We have to understand the crisis in the market in the context of these wider associations of *buda;* once we do this, *buda* looks less like a situational response to markets, and more like a key idiom of local historicity (Lambek 2002), a major figure by which people understand and participate in the unfolding of events, especially processes of social differentiation over time.

But *buda* is not just an interpretive idiom or a conceptual tool that people apply in order to make sense of unclear or emergent situations. These are spirits, understood to reside or inhere in people and in the environment. They are unpredictable, dangerous, and exert action beyond anyone's control. *Buda* possess a potency of their own that even a skeptical methodology must acknowledge if it is to have any hope of understanding why people are so concerned about them.

BETWEEN ACTION AND ESSENCE, AT THE BOUNDARIES OF THE HUMAN

One of Abebe's good friends, Zebirhan, gave me an explanation of *buda* that could have been a boilerplate from Africanist literature: "*Buda* is when a person gets rich for no obvious reason, without any special ability." Numerous studies have shown how similar practices have been important as capitalist markets came to Africa, with their power to apparently arbitrarily enrich some at the expense of others (Masquelier 1993, Geschiere 1997: 10, Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). This is undoubtedly part of what we see in Zege, particularly in the market village of Afaf with its substantial trading of foreign-produced commodities. But there are also reasons to be suspicious of attempts to frame spirit illness too narrowly as a response to capitalism and colonialism, or to treat it as if it were only a cipher for politics (Geschiere 1997: 218).

Buda is a constitutively ambiguous phenomenon. It is often unclear whether *buda* act intentionally or not; and it is very unclear whether *buda* is something you are, or something you have. While Ethiopian spirits do not fit into any kind of ordered typology (Aspen 2001), a *buda* is usually a nonhuman spirit, not a type of person. However, in conversation people frequently say, "So-and-so is *buda.*" This may mean that so-and-so has visited a sorcerer and become a vector of sickness, or it may mean that they have inherited the condition of *buda,* as some people are known to do. In these cases calling someone *buda* refers less to the morality of their actions than to something essential about them that makes them impure. If a person is *yebuda zer,* the race or seed of the *buda,* then no person of standing will marry them or even share food with them, for fear both of losing social standing and of being physically harmed by the *buda* spirit. At least in this area, this puts *yebuda zer* in the same category as *yebariya zer,* slave descendants, as well as lepers, weavers, tanners, and other outcast craft groups that exist all over Ethiopia.

At the same time, however, it is difficult to discern outwardly who is *yebuda zer* and who is not. In Zege these people are all Orthodox Christians, and very often they are friends and socialize together in all sorts of ways. If non-*buda* refuse to receive food from *buda,* they find subtle and polite ways to do it. The same goes for slave descendants, except that they are frequently teased about their skin color in a semijoking, semiserious way that reveals quite deep underlying rifts. *Buda* articulates, with overlapping spheres of inclusion and exclusion, where we can be together as Christians and as friends, but our substance must remain apart, and it is here that the phenomenon can tell us most that is specific to Zege, and to some extent other parts of Ethiopia. *Buda* operates between action and essentialism, and between the human and the nonhuman, and it is this that makes it most revealing about Ethiopian life. Is *buda* a kind of person or a spirit that inhabits people? Do my neighbors harm me because they are doing bad things, or, and here is the key question in Zege, are they basically different kinds of people from me (Lyons & Freeman 2009, Lyons 2014)?

A CATEGORY THAT VIOLATES CATEGORIES

Because some of the material is controversial, it has taken time to unfold some of the details of local spirit politics, and there undoubtedly remains more that is hidden to me. I have made it a point not to press people on matters that, in my judgment, were likely to be experienced as rude or intrusive. However, as I have got to know people better over the years, I have found that many were willing to discuss this subject matter—nonetheless I have endeavored not to do anything to exacerbate the local tensions described below.

People in Zege are all classified as Amhara. Most are Orthodox Christian, with a Muslim minority living in the market village of Afaf. The broad designations— adopted in both government and local discourse—belie substantial diversity of background and status among Zege's residents, much of which is revealed through the practice and discourse of *buda.*

Almost all of the research that exists on *buda* describes it as a hereditary phenomenon associated with more or less endogamous groups of blacksmiths, potters, or other kinds of craftspeople (Finneran 2003). Special attention has been devoted to the Beta Israel, still known in Ethiopia as *Falasha,* who have suffered particularly visibly from *buda* accusations (see especially Quirin 1992, Kaplan 1995, Salamon 1999, Seeman 2009). Many draw attention to the similarity between *buda* and caste-like artisan groups in other parts of Africa, especially metalworkers (A. Pankhurst 2003, Finneran 2003, Lyons and Freeman 2009). *Buda* is described as a spirit, or a person possessed by a spirit, that harms people by "eating" them, and that may transform into an animal, particularly a hyena, at night (Reminick 1974, Tubiana 1991, H. Pankhurst 1992). Those accused of

being *buda* may be forced into humiliating confessions and purifications and are sometimes in real danger of being killed (Rodinson 1967, Salamon 1999). In all cases, non-*buda* will refuse to eat, marry, or have sexual relations with *buda.* Of particular interest for this book, some sources note that *buda* are not just crafts-people, but specifically those who sell their products in the market (Rodinson 1967: 58, Lyons 2014). Related to this, those accused of being *buda* are almost always described as landless people, or at least those who cannot adequately support themselves from the land (see especially Reminick 1974, Pankhurst 2003, Lyons 2014). There is broad recognition of a pervasive class dimension to *buda* ideology, in which the powerful use *buda* accusations to restrain and stigmatize other groups (Reminick 1974, Salamon 1999, Finneran 2003; cf. Galt 1982 for a similar argument about "evil eye" in Italy).

Explanations of the phenomenon fall roughly into two camps, not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the one hand, there are those who emphasize the material-symbolic properties of crafts, especially metalworking, which appear to a settled farming population as occult, even outright evil, since opposed to the principles of the growth and fertility of crops (Finneran 2003, Lyons and Freeman 2009, 2014). The other group focuses on the historical experience of dispossession as generative of stigma, with craft-working being the only profession available for those without access to land (Quirin 1992, Kaplan 1995, Freeman 2003). Quirin and Kaplan both demonstrate that the *Falasha* did not become a stigmatized group, much less a quasi-caste, until they had been stripped of their rights to *rist* land in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—and that, even then, it took hundreds of years for a fully stigmatized identity to coalesce. These efforts to show the historical emergence of dispossession and *buda* accusation are persuasive, but they do not explain why the accusations take such strikingly similar form in quite culturally distinct parts of Ethiopia—even in a work such as Pankhurst and Freeman's *Peripheral People,* which considers a wide range of cases. Some part of the symbolic argument must therefore be necessary in order to get at the shared underlying logic of *buda* and related phenomena. In this regard, one element that I will argue has not been given due notice is the association of *buda* with differing ideologies of exchange, particularly the conflict between the values of hospitality and those of the market.

Part of the defining nature of *buda* as a phenomenon is that it is capable of incorporating a great diversity of ideas and practices under a monolithic rubric that is recognized throughout the country. After all, *buda* designates an invisible, inscrutable being. It is powerful precisely because its referent is not well fixed. Even more than this, and critical to understanding the flexibility of the phenomenon, *buda* is always something that violates fundamental, normative social distinctions: male and female (Lyons 2014), human and animal (Salamon 1999), or master and slave (Reminick 1974). This boundary violation may be *buda*'s definitive aspect—a

sort of antidefinition that would go some way to explain the variance in the literature (cf. Hannig 2014).

As I have indicated, these interpretive associations do not amount to an exhaustive description of the social phenomenon of *buda;* there is also a very important phenomenological dimension. People feel *buda* as an environmental presence, one that causes pronounced fear and anxiety. This conditions daily experience, particularly the experience of being unwell. It also ties this conditioning of experience to interpersonal relations, thus shaping the contours of society to a remarkable degree.

Buda spirits cannot be seen, as Beza, the local traditional doctor, informs me, even with a microscope—this is the key way in which they differ from bacteria. A good starting point therefore seems to be to ask how people learn that *buda* exist. There is no doubt that they do exist, although some of my friends have questioned whether *buda* eat white people, since they never seem concerned about them. If you grow up in Zege, by a young age you will have heard your parents and other people discussing *buda* and speculating about whether a particular illness was *buda*-related. More strikingly, if your own mother was ever worried about *buda* attacking you, she would have held a gourd of incense and charcoal to your face, so the smoke would drive the spirit away. You might well have seen people collapse on the street, catatonic or in convulsions, as sometimes happens with *buda* attacks. More memorable still, if you did get sick you might have been rushed through the forest by concerned relatives to see the local doctor. When their usually placid child would not stop crying one night, my friends Tomas and Haregwa, worried sick, carried her for over an hour uphill through pitch black forest to find the local doctor. They were convinced this was a *buda* attack and, indeed, a successful remedy was found.

All of this is visceral experience. Yes, you learn about *buda* from talk, but you also experience them in direct fashion, associated with strong smells, cries, emotions of fear, and feelings of sickness. And you see evidence of *buda* all around you, particularly in the case of more vibrant attacks, where the victim may shout and scream or otherwise violently act out. Children have much more experience of *buda* than they do of, say, leopards, of which some may or may not remain in the area. Unlike leopards, *buda* cannot be seen, but also unlike leopards, there are very many *buda* in the village and the forest. The experiential qualities of *buda* also convey a play of uncertainty between humanity and animality. *Buda* victims often growl and grunt and are said to eat ashes or feces. These are striking contradictions of the things that are understood to make humans human—the power of speech and avoiding impure foods—but our initial responses to them is shock and surprise, not (yet) conceptual reflection.

It is only later that a child learns that her neighbors may be causing *buda* attacks in some way. She may have always worn a protective amulet containing a Geʽez

prayer scroll around her neck, which her mother placed on her because the family next door was known to be *yebuda zer,* the race of *buda*. She will start to hear speculation and gossip, and to learn what is generally known about how *buda* behave and which people are responsible for them. Analytically, it is essential to realize that the experience comes before the interpretation—most people have become sick with a *buda* attack long before they really understand what that might mean.

FROM SICKNESS TO HISTORY

As people become socialized they learn quite quickly that *buda* is associated with a range of interpersonal phenomena—status and power being key issues—without necessarily being reducible to them. This section traces some of these associations, both historically and across contemporary Zege, to try to understand how *buda* emerges as an intelligible phenomenon among other relationships, especially those between people, property, and spirits. Foremost among these is the relationship between *buda* and slavery. In the minds of many in Zege, as I will show, the two categories remain closely tied.

I had been in the field for a long time before I worked up the courage to ask direct questions about slavery. When I finally did ask Abebe if there had been slaves in Zege, and what had happened to their descendants, he began reeling off a list of names—many of whom friends of both of ours—who were *yebariya zer,* seeds of the slaves. Seamlessly, he also began listing people who were *yebuda zer,* seeds of the *buda*. While *buda* and *bariya* were not the same thing to him, he made it clear that they belonged in the same category: they were people that nobody would marry, many would not eat with them either, especially in Abebe's father's generation. I was surprised because I had attended weddings with many of these people, and had never noticed any divisions. Abebe said that, indeed, there were ways to be subtle about which table you ended up at, so that the rejection would not be explicit. I asked him if there had been slaves in his family and he responded, mock indignant, *nes'uh nen,* "we are clean." I conducted a number of further interviews on the topic that elicited the same picture.

He had learned all of this—which families are "pure" and which not—from his father, talking in his home. Establishing purity is not simple, because of the Amhara cognatic descent system, which means that there are no clear lineages or descent groups of any kind. Instead there are clusters of competing land claims and patriarchal households in which slaves, servants, women, and children have historically been subordinate in just about the same way (Hoben 1970, Reminick 1974). People do keep careful patrilineal genealogies, though. Many men, especially local scholars and those from important families, can trace the names of their fathers back eight generations or more. These genealogies have traditionally served to prevent incest according to the seventh-generation rule (Hoben 1973)

but also to exclude impurities of slave or *buda* from the line. But the genealogies are not explicit; they are not displayed in corporate social groups, but are kept in the home and in people's memories. They play a key role in structuring relations of inclusion and exclusion, but as with the food at the wedding, they do so largely below the surface of social interaction. This helps to explain why descendants of the "pure" are frequently on openly friendly terms with slave or *buda* descendants, even when profound rifts exist between them.

An outcome of this system of reckoning descent is that, rather than a set of lineages or segmentary kin-based groups, you have just two categories: "clean" and "unclean." It is part of their semi-implicit nature that there is not an institutionalized term for either category. These categories are not relevant to every social context. In relations of trade, of daily conversation, or of friendship, they can be negligible; in sharing food and in marriage they can be absolute. These different levels of inclusion and exclusion are defining mechanisms of Amhara life.

The idea that slave descent renders you impure and hence unfit for marriage is a common one, for example, in Madagascar, as described in the work of Denis Regnier (2012). It is easy enough to speculate on why this might be—in order to morally justify owning a person, you probably need to tell yourself a story in which they are different from you in some basic way. Regnier's argument revolves around the way that people essentialize historically contingent differences. Mine, on the other hand, is that *buda* discourse in Zege blurs the lines between what is due to your essence and what is due to your actions.

Recall the explanation of *buda* given to me by Zebirhan: *buda* is suspected when people become wealthy through no obvious legitimate means. This definition is especially prevalent in the market village rather than the surrounding forest. Most of the gossip I have heard about people in the village who were *buda* having visiting sorcerers has revolved around some of the wealthier merchants—not coffee merchants, but shopkeepers, bar owners, and other businessmen. That is, these are people who have become wealthy, but not from the land. This landlessness is the obvious thing that merchants share with slaves, but also with the numerous other caste-like groups that experience forms of social exclusion in Ethiopia.

Ethnographic literature from other parts of Amhara describes *buda* as almost exclusively a descent model, with some even describing *buda* as an ethnicity distinct from Amhara (Reminick 1974, H. Pankhurst 1992). In Addis Ababa, according to Diego Malara's (pers. comm.) research, certain neighborhoods are known to be *buda,* in that people from these excluded quasi-ethnic groups have settled there. The taint of *buda* is remarkably broad in scope—it is difficult to shed by moving to new places, and has very much survived the process of urban migration.

The phenomenon of outcaste, landless craftspeople is known across Ethiopia, far beyond Amhara Christian areas (A. Pankhurst 2003). In most cases such people are regarded as possessing harmful spirits akin, if not identical, to *buda* itself.

In the Lake Tana region and around Zege, the most prominent such group is the Weyto, possibly the original inhabitants of the area, who are mostly canoe makers, and who endure comprehensive discrimination (Gamst 1979). For the past century the Weyto have almost all been Muslim and have claimed to have always been so (Cheesman 1936: 92), but find comparable difficulties integrating into Muslim communities as into Christian ones, because of the prevalence of the stigma against them.

There are, finally, numerous instances of *buda* being associated with slavery. In the southern kingdom of Kaffa, for example, during a period of particularly high demand for slaves in the nineteenth century, the government hired sorcerers to identify people as *buda,* and on these grounds they and their families were seized and sold into slavery (Fernyhough 2010: 87). This era was also a high-water mark of slavery in Zege, as British and Italian interest in coffee as a commodity stimulated rapid increases in production.

There is a curious, revealing reversal of the story of *buda* being slaves, which Reminick (1974: 283) reports from the 1960s and which I have heard in the same form in Zege, in which a *buda* could enslave the soul of the recently deceased and turn it into a domestic slave. When any visitor came, the enslaved person would be bewitched to look like a household ornament. Reminick's interpretation of the story is persuasive: a landed man's status was designated by the number of dependents in his household, including, at that time, the descendants of his or his family's slaves. It stands to reason that a *buda* should desire the same status, but having no land to support such dependents, he of course achieved this by occult means. *Buda,* then, are a projection of an agrarian landed people's nightmare of the agency of the landless. Slave owners anywhere tend to become dependent on their slaves and to resent this fact; *buda* articulates the near-universal fear on the part of dominant people about the desires and the potency of those they dominate; it seems to speak to anxieties inherent in the property system itself—or at least, the property system of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopia, with its extractive aristocracy and long-distance trade markets.

Landlessness does seem to be the common factor in Zege as well, or at least the common factor is anxieties about production that does not come from the land. Certainly desire is central: slaves are dangerous because it is assumed that they desire the possessions of their masters; the marketplace is dangerous as a whole because it is a field of competitive desire. At the same time, it was exactly strong, long-distance markets for coffee that created the demand for slaves in Zege in the first place. Slavery brought in foreigners in large numbers and made them subordinate, in conditions of maximal desire and competition in Zege society at large.

The duality of *buda* imagination, in which oppressors imagine themselves as the spiritually oppressed, is reminiscent of Lambek's (2002) account of witchcraft as projection in Mayotte. *Buda* has been used as grounds for enslavement and

dehumanization, and imagined as one who enslaves the souls of the dead and turns people into objects. A horrific reciprocity is imagined, which plays into a wider mistrust of exchange relationships as opposed to the hospitality that the dominant society holds as its paramount value.

OTHER STORIES

Most anyone who gets called *buda* would contest the term, of course—though not that *buda* spirits exist, which is undeniable. The label is shameful and humiliating, and crucially, unlike a group designation, it is isolating. There is no possibility of *buda* getting together and joining an ethnic or class movement or solidarity group, because no person could possibly want to be associated with the concept. This is why it is always incorrect to describe *buda* as an ethnicity. *Buda* is an antiethnicity, it dissolves solidarity. It is an appellation of mistrust and exclusion; it casts people as antisocial agents. Precisely because it blurs the line between individual actions of sorcery and polluting essence, *buda* can never become a unifying identity. By contrast, people who were called *Falasha* have in many parts of Ethiopia been able to organize themselves as a corporate group and to redefine themselves as Beta Israel, their own preferred designation, although many have converted to Orthodoxy in an attempt to escape stigmatization, and have found themselves caught between the two groups (Seeman 2009).

If it is difficult to interview slave descendants about being slave descendants, it is outright impossible to ask people about being accused of being *buda.* Because of the moral connotations of the term, it would be deeply insulting, akin to calling them a murderer. But I have made efforts to find acceptable ways to talk to people on several trips subsequent to my initial fieldwork. Sometimes we can talk about the subject, and sometimes we can talk around it in illuminating ways.

The stories that emerge have a fragmented quality to them. One young man I used to play football with, whose friends had jokingly called him Baby Slave, never letting him forget it, had got into an argument with a local merchant. Ironically, and significantly, he had accused the man of being *buda* and, facing likely legal and social trouble, had left Zege for another part of the country. The last rumor I heard was that he was serving in the army. Another young man was said to have been extremely talented, but to have gone slightly crazy *(ibd)* after being forced to break up with his girlfriend because of his weaver descent.

Those Weyto I have spoken to, mostly in Bahir Dar, have likewise emphasized their Muslim identity; when I tried to talk to one of the few Weyto men in Zege, we were joined by a group of young men who started asking him, if he was a Muslim, why he didn't go to mosque. In the main, this shows the limits of appealing to religious belonging to overcome stigma. Muslims, the vast majority of the time, still do not marry Weyto, who go to their own mosque in Bahir Dar, and noble

Christian families do not marry weavers, though some people have told me that this may be changing slowly, and that the younger generation was not quite so concerned with this.

One part of the story that emerges is of fragmentation—lives narrated in terms of disruption and broken relationships. These people are excluded from the mechanisms by which coherent-seeming narratives and interpersonal belonging get produced. But at the same time people move beyond the disjuncture and build relationships with the land and the church, make a living, have families, and build respect. Shared Christianity does not obviate the fragmenting discourse of *buda*. But the church is a powerful agency of continuity, and the universalism that lies at its heart always exists, at least in potential.

HOSPITALITY AND EXCHANGE

The fact of shared Orthodox Christianity is incommensurable with the discourse of exclusion that surrounds *buda*. Lambek (1993: 12) points out that incommensurability is often a central feature of social life, but here the disjuncture is particularly intense. In the era of slavery, a Christian had to baptize his slaves. For one thing, it is commanded in one of the key Christian law books, the Fetha Negest, which also forbids Christians from selling slaves to others (Paulos 2009: 175). Christians would buy from Muslim traders and then the slaves would eventually be set free, or pass to their owners' descendants and become dependent retainers (Reminick 1974, Abdussamad 1997). For another, slaves prepared food for the household, and so they had to be Christian. This immediately causes problems, because you need to bring the slave close enough into circles of commensality that they cook for you, but keep them distant enough that you can claim complete superiority. This dilemma highlights the perennial tension between parochialism and universalism that runs throughout Ethiopian Orthodox history. According to my research assistant Tefera, one solution was to tell slaves that they were accursed, and that any fine meat would give them leprosy, so as to stop them from stealing food while they cooked it. The way Tefera tells it, slaves would have to eat rats, thus marking them as substantially inferior and morally compromised.

Likewise, those who remain of the *Falasha* people in Zege have not kept their distinct religion, but converted to Christianity a generation ago. Nonetheless they, too, retain the taint of *buda,* which means that their hospitality is always potentially poisonous, and their children are unmarriageable. The merchants who are suspected of being *buda,* too, are almost always Christians. This is why they are so troublesome—you are supposed to eat with them, but the spirit within them, because of its greed, threatens this commensality.

Abebe's comment that "people are afraid to eat together" summarized what for many people is the major trend in Zege in recent years. While conducting

interviews in the forest with Tefera, one of our most frequent topics was the decline in hospitality because of economic hardship. The elders we spoke to framed Zege's history as one of collective feasting, as described in the next chapter, in which all proper relationships were defined by acts of eating together, either in the great funerary *tezkar* feasts or in the clerical dining rooms *(mefraq)* that organized church-lay hierarchies. The church dining room epitomizes proper hospitality, with its dignitaries sitting in prescribed order under the blessed authority of the church. Now, as Tefera told me, people would rarely offer food to nonrelated visitors or ask it of their hosts. There are two overlapping reasons for this: one is consideration, not wanting to compel people to part with their very limited supplies. The other is fear of *buda:* because of an atmosphere of competition, hardship, and envy, there is always a danger that people who serve you food may inadvertently harm you by means of the *buda*. These fears are particularly pronounced when people go to areas slightly poorer or less central than their own, which is not unusual—people in a hierarchy frequently attribute occult powers to those less central to them. Fortunately there are ways to offer hospitality without serving food: homebrewed beer and coffee are relatively safe and can always be served to guests.

Eating together is how Amhara act out who belongs and who is excluded, but *buda* are not only threatening because they disrupt hospitality; they actually eat you. This is the point where we are reminded that *buda* is both a kind of person and a kind of spirit. I remember a friend asking me in the course of discussion what the English word *cannibal* meant. I said it was a person who ate people and he replied, "Oh, you mean *buda*."

In many parts of Africa eating is a trope of dominance (Mbembe 1992). In Ethiopia the word *meblat,* "to eat," is used for when one wins a game: the winner eats and the loser is eaten. To some extent we can read this, again, as a projection of the dominant onto those they dominate: we are more successful than them materially, so they must take their revenge spiritually. This only goes so far, however, since the market traders who are called *buda* are hardly disadvantaged. More significant is the concern of a hierarchical relationship turning into an exchange. You may eat the *buda*'s food, but rather than this acting to arrange a relationship between you, as hospitality normally does, the *buda* exacts direct repayment in the form of your own vitality. Again, *buda* looks like a projection of the powerful relating to desires and ways of making value outside of the landed agrarian hierarchy.

At the same time, the trope of eating calls into question the dividing lines between humans and animals. Countless people have told me in interviews that *buda* are animal spirits, as distinct from *zar,* which are human-like. And yet, as this chapter demonstrates, people continually talk about *buda* as if it were an essential quality of certain kinds of people. In many parts of Ethiopia, the archetype

of *buda* is that it transforms from a person into a hyena at night. Since the hyena eats carrion, the *buda* therefore steps out of the realm of proper personhood. Its predatory and gustatory habits are then unpredictable and it lacks the repression or suppression of the appetites that makes people moral. *Buda* are both animal spirits that roam the village and the forest and people who live among others. The conflation of one with the other is central to the logic of *buda,* and plays a key role in deciding what counts as a proper human.

RESPONSIBILITY

One of the major practical consequences of these uncertainties about what is human is the difficulty in establishing personal and legal responsibility. Although harm caused by *buda* is understood to be due to some aspect of interpersonal relationships and to the emotions of other people—principally desire, envy, and greed—those people are usually not thought to deliberately cause harm or eat their victims. The *buda,* as agentive spirit, is malevolent, but the person might not be, and I have witnessed numerous cases of people maintaining close, friendly relations with others whom they later told me were *buda.* There are ways of ascertaining the party responsible for a *buda* attack, mainly by inducing the spirit, through the mouth of the victim, to say the attacker's name.

This accusatory practice has led to violence and ostracism in the past and in other parts of Ethiopia. I was once asked to consult on an asylum case involving people who had had to leave Ethiopia because of persistent persecution on the grounds of being *buda.* However, in Zege, during the time I worked there, there were no overt *buda* accusations. The reason has to do with legal definitions of reality, as Haregwa explained to me. She told me that after baby Christina's attack, Tomas had also been attacked by *buda.* Haregwa had administered incense and the *buda* had spoken the name of a local merchant whom we knew quite well. Tomas had been cured with holy water, but I wanted to know if they had tried to openly accuse the merchant. Haregwa replied that they could not because "He would have us arrested" *(yasassern neber).* It was no longer permissible to make *buda* accusations because *Mengist sew sew aybellam yilal* (The government says people do not eat people). There is gossip and resentment about *buda,* but it is almost impossible for this to turn into overt conflict.

I suspect that this is a large part of the reason why so many people described 2008–09 as a time of *buda* crisis. Following up on my interview with Haregwa, I asked a friend (from the Zege forest, of quite high birth) about the legality of accusation. He confirmed that *buda* accusation was forbidden because it was "not scientific." He told me that *buda* had multiplied in recent years, partly because of coffee traders traveling to more dangerous parts of the countryside, but that it was increasingly difficult to "remove them from the society." Somewhat alarmed,

having heard enough tales of the violent ostracism of *buda* accusees, I asked what he meant, and he said that it was difficult to get suspected *buda* out of *mahber* associations, church groups, and other positions of local influence. It remained, of course, ambiguous whether he meant that the bad spirits had to be removed, or the people possessed by them.

The question that had disturbed me was still present, and underlined that there was a genuine ontological disagreement between us. For my friend and others like him, *buda* were a present and general threat to the well-being of the society and individuals alike. For the government, which still works from a broadly Marxist materialist definition of reality, this was pure superstition and a prime example of harmful traditional practice (cf. Marsland 2015). In this case I find it hard to disagree with the government's position, which has undoubtedly prevented some grave injustices. But the experience of *buda* crisis during my years of fieldwork shows how deep the effects of such contestations over the definition of reality can run.

As an anthropologist, the point that strikes me is this: it is easy enough to gloss over significant differences in ontology, culture, or cosmology (however you prefer to cast it) until actual situations of justice and punishment arise. It is when action is called for, action that has real effects on people's lives, that we all discover how much we "mean" our ideas. Which is to say that questions of ontology or belief cannot be understood without attention to the consequential moments, and sometimes matters of life or death, in which they are put to the test.

During that same conversation Haregwa explained to me how the stigma or suspicion of *buda* can follow people from place to place. When she had married Tomas, people had been suspicious because he came from elsewhere, and therefore his *zer* (seed, race) could not be known. But, she told me, if she had married a local weaver's son, it would have been even worse, and her family would have asked her why she was spoiling her seed. She also said she felt this *zer*-thinking was on the way out *(iyyeqerre new),* whereas her father's generation had been very strict.

What makes *buda* sometimes seem like an ethnic or caste designation is that, if you divide the world up into pure and impure people, you create two de facto endogamous moieties. Those who are likely to get called *buda,* whether because of slave descent, or because of being *Falasha,* or because of their profession, are likely to marry others in a similar position. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is the case in Zege, with marriages between slave descendants and tanner's descendants, for example, being acceptable. By these means a general opposition between pure people and impure people, opposed to each other as honor is to shame *(kibur/ hifret),* is preserved and transmitted. The two groups, however, are not symmetrical. One part has all the cultural attributes and institutions that anyone can aspire to; the other is acknowledged only in gossip and innuendo, and has no grounds for solidarity.

LAND, TRADE, CRAFT, AND CREATIVITY: MODES OF VALUE PRODUCTION

We can now return to the original problem that sparked this discussion: the *buda* crisis in the Afaf market in 2008–09. As we have seen, there was broad public consensus that the cause of the crisis was traders visiting sorcerers and accidentally becoming *buda* in the process. This interpretation resonates with a wider distrust of trade in the predominantly agrarian heartlands of Ethiopian Orthodoxy (Levine 1965, McCann 1995).

A large part of this distrust exists because the accumulation of power and money through trade is unpredictable and difficult to regulate through the normative social conventions that distinguish good power from bad. We have already seen a paradigmatic example of this in the story of the merchant and the slave (in the previous chapter). Like that merchant, today's traders are thought to be dealing with demons in order to get rich at others' expense—except that the lines of intention and responsibility are more blurred, because these events are unfolding in time rather than being retold in hindsight. The last few years have seen significant volatility in the Afaf market, with new businesses (veterinary pharmacies, bar/hotels, general stores) opening up while others have gone under or moved location several times, and a general increase in food prices has intensified a sense of competition.

I have heard gossip about at least three of Afaf's most successful businessmen being *buda*. Much of this gossip, so far as I can gather without being rude, derives from their nonnoble backgrounds. People are becoming (comparatively) rich who should not have under the old system, at least as people remember it. The key turning point here is the land reforms after 1974 carried out by the Derg government, which redistributed the lands of the church and nobles (Rahel 2002). The old system was upheld by feasting—to be a legitimate wealthy person you had to feed your neighbors—whereas now to be a legitimate landholder you just have to be registered. At the same time, nobles lost control of taxation rights on plots in the Afaf market, which now went to the state.

Another factor that makes the accumulation of wealth unpredictable, and trade seem mysterious and threatening, is the dependence on commodities that come from outside, and on relations with the traders and companies that supply them. Barkeepers need fridges and a good supplier of bottled St. George's and Dashen beer, while veterinary pharmacists need to source their medicine and general storekeepers need industrially produced goods such as jerry cans, plastic shoes, and flashlights. These things come proximally from Bahir Dar, an hour away by bus, but originally from all over the world—much of the stuff on sale in Afaf is Chinese-made. This means that trade depends both on good relations with outsiders and on mysterious physical processes. Neither I nor many people in Zege know

how plastic is made, for example. How crops grow may be mysterious enough in itself, but that is a mystery of God, and furthermore the whole process from sowing to harvest is locally visible, meaning that crops are not alienated in quite the same way.

There is now a substantial literature on witchcraft and sorcery discourse as a way of engaging and critiquing "modernity" or capitalism in Africa (e.g., Masquelier 1993, Geschiere 1997, Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). A common theme is that witchcraft discourse, since it has long had to do with selfishness, secrecy, antisocial action, and power exerted at a distance, becomes a potent framework for understanding and acting out the effects of colonialism and increasing incorporation into global markets. Sorcery often stands also for any kind of creative force that appears to exist beyond normal channels of social control. Because these discourses, like *buda,* tend to involve engagements with the foreign or external, they become key idioms of history-as-culture (Sahlins 2004): products of the conjuncture of unexpected events, established local symbolic traditions, and the human imaginative capacity.

The challenge in analyses of witchcraft-and-capitalism or witchcraft-and-colonialism is to avoid falling into a Manichean picture of a harmonious precapitalist or precolonial world in which mutuality was a shared value and witchcraft the opposite of that value. Precolonial cultures were not unified, insular entities suddenly cast out of Eden by the disruption of the world capitalist system. That disruption is real enough, as the experience of the Afaf market shows, but its historical context is a situation already (a) deeply embedded in state affairs and long-distance trade routes, and (b) divided by various sociopolitical tensions and competing value systems. A comparative and historical account of *buda* shows that the relationship of *buda* with greedy merchants is part of a much wider politics of value. The landed nobility, which regards hospitality as the hallmark of moral sociality, is deeply mistrustful of other forms of value creation such as craft and trade, especially insofar as they involve exchange transactions. Commodities are here understood as opposed not to gifts, but to hospitality and hierarchy.

The idea that commodities are often morally suspect because they create little or no long-term obligation between people, and because the circumstances of their production are concealed, is nothing new (see, e.g., Gudeman 2008, Graeber 2011 for recent accounts). We can add to this by relating the *buda* crisis of market traders to the wider use of *buda* as a term of shame and exclusion. Market traders share with slaves, potters, and tanners the fact that they do not make a living from the land. Because of this, they are thought of as avaricious—merchants because of the nature of their occupation, slaves because of their envy of their masters. This perceived lack of control over the appetites in turn opens up the whole symbolic repertoire of *buda* as indicating animality, the failure to fast, the lack of autonomy and honor, and the propensity to make spirit attacks due to either malice or a deeply shameful lack of control. What makes *buda* such an effective and persistent

phenomenon is the allusive flexibility with which it evokes some or all of these clustered referents to describe individuals or whole categories of people.

ANATOMY AND ENVIRONMENT

The challenge for an adequate ethnography of *buda* is to describe the incredibly condensed semantic range of the concept and the history it carries, while somehow accounting for the fact that *buda* is not just an interpretive notion, a sort of local genre of political history. People experience *buda* as an ever-present threat, constituted in a loaded sensory and emotional field of fear, anxiety, sickness, the inhuman noises of the victims, and the smokes and smells of the various remedies. *Buda* has an independent existence that is not fully described by its conceptual use; however, I do not understand this existence in the same way that my informants do. From my standpoint of methodological atheism, I maintain that *buda* is a partially imaginary phenomenon, constituted through uniquely human faculties for projecting and inferring the desires and intentions of others. Much of the horror and even violence that surrounds *buda* discourse is due to fear, especially the fear that you or your children will be killed, deliberately or not, by the actions of your neighbors. This entails a significant imaginative dimension—both conceiving of possible future suffering and inferring the desires and intentions of others. Indeed, the conviction that those who are like slaves will enslave their masters is entirely dependent upon the ability to imagine and project fear and desire.

But to say something is partly imaginary (that it could not exist without its imaginative component) is not to say that it is not real (Bialecki 2014). An anatomy of *buda* shows that they are constituted not solely in people's heads—if anything can be—but in the conjunction of imagination with the human production of symbols and discourses, *and* in the return of those discourses as something alien to us, *and* in the unfolding of events in history.

As we have seen, people in Zege would in any case agree with me that *buda* is an inherently interpersonal phenomenon, driven by human desires both conscious and unconscious. We just disagree on whether they can actually eat and kill a person. This disagreement has significant consequences for our ideas of how to trace responsibility for events and actions, but it cannot be phrased as "they believe *buda* exist and I do not." Nor are people the uncritical pawns of their own concepts. Many of my friends in Zege are well aware that *buda* discourse gets used to unfairly stigmatize people, but that does not imply that they think *buda* do not exist or are not dangerous.

Buda cannot be just an idea, because that idea is always externalized. It cannot just be a symbol, because that symbol always has means of transmission or figuration, which is furthermore beyond the control of any individual or group. Even if we think *buda* is "just" a concept, it is one that gains tangible persistence

through its instantiation and repetition—in acts of discussion, interpretation, and treatment—and through its emergence from real human relationships (Hacking 1999: 34). The concept *buda* has an object, but one that remains constitutively indeterminate. For this reason, the most intransigent social constructivist or the most ardent rationalist skeptic alike would have to agree that *buda* has a tenacity and a resistance, which is to say, an existence of its own. My friends and I tend to disagree on the nature of that existence, though it is always something that we can discuss and perhaps learn more about. And if we shift attention to how *buda* are knowable and how their actions are intelligible, there is much more in common, and a far richer picture of the interaction between human intentions and relations and the lived environment emerges. Pinpointing exactly where we agree or disagree seems to be an extremely valuable exercise for understanding the level at which cultural differences operate and how deep they run.

Some friends have told me that I need not worry because *buda* do not eat white people. Others warned that I must take medicine home with me, because doctors there would not recognize *buda,* and might give me an injection, which would kill me. These speculations bring home the fact that the nature of *buda* is always open to question. But they also point to its local and environmental quality. *Buda* is something that is around, on paths and in houses, though invisible. *Buda* are part of the lived environment in the same way that other people and their productions are: an environment that is always already social, and in which the boundaries of the human are a defining, troubled concern. Capturing this environmental quality offers hope of understanding *buda*'s social, historical, and conceptual density without losing sight of the critical dimension of what it feels like to live in a place where such things are active.