

Echoes of the Host

The narrative of the decline of hospitality recurs throughout this book, as it did in my conversations with Orthodox Christians in Zege. The fact that changes in hospitality practice have become an idiom for general social decline reflects two key points. One is the ethical importance attached to feeding and eating together as the primary act that allows us to share our existence with others. The second is the religious significance, by analogy with the Eucharist, of any act of hosting. These two points are not unrelated; each speaks to a basic conception of feeding as the sharing of life. Both hospitality and the Eucharist entail hierarchical relations between feeder and fed, but the element of commensality means that there is always a sharing of existence and not simply a relation of command.

I would like to sketch how we might understand everyday acts of feeding and hospitality in relation to the Eucharistic feast. While the Eucharist itself is closely restricted, I will show that a series of practices serve as “echoes”—smaller versions of the same pattern, which allow for everyday relationship-making among people and in the names of saints. My first example is the feast most closely associated with the Eucharist.

Easter Sunday 2009, we rose at dawn to eat meat. We had had none for fifty-four days and were about to make up for it. We began in the home of my hosts, Thomas and Haregwa, with chicken that Haregwa and her servant, Kassaye, had been cooking through the night. Then Thomas and I killed a sheep and passed some of the meat to Haregwa to fry up quickly for us, eating small chunks of liver and rump meat cut straight from the corpse while we waited. We washed it down with a little beer and then Thomas and I went our separate ways. We each had a lot of houses to visit and to receive food, and if we missed any we risked offending

our hosts. I was still in the position, common to ethnographers, of slightly odd, lingering, honored guest, and plenty of people were waiting to see if I would fulfill my obligations to honor my hosts by receiving their food and drink. The women would stay in the house and serve meat and beer to the steady stream of people who would visit in their turn.

My first engagement was with Abebe's aunt. This was important because Abebe had been helping me conduct interviews for some time and both he and his aunt wanted to establish a properly respectful relationship—that is, one that was not purely commercial, and that involved a degree of autonomy and dignity on both sides. Hosting me at Easter would be a great way to do this, except that they had almost no money and I had quite a lot. Abebe's father wasn't around much at the time, and his mother had died some years before. His aunt had just moved into a rather bare and run-down place, and they were worried that it didn't look very impressive. So they borrowed a TV from neighbors and played some music videos to liven things up as they served me food. There were only a couple of strips of gristly meat, but with enough thin sauce you could make it look like more. I ate, and as we chatted Abebe's aunt brought me a glass of *araqí*, very strong and very cheap liquor, which she pressed on me, followed by several refills. My field notes say this was 8:30 AM. I left a while later for a sleep, to recover before I made any more visits, and in no way could I say that my host had skimped or held back on me.

Excess is a theme of Easter and of hospitality in general, as we will see. It is part of the strange yet semiuniversal power play of hospitality, in which we dominate one another with a generosity that unites and differentiates us at the same time. Relationships are established not as equal but as alternating, spatiotemporally circumscribed periods of dominance and dependence, all in an atmosphere of utmost conviviality (Pitt-Rivers 1977, Stewart 1991: 48). Within Abebe's aunt's house she was a sovereign and would feast me as a queen feasts her subjects, and while that same relationship would not persist outside the bounds of her house, something had been altered, and a certain honor, dignity, and perhaps sense of obligation on my part had been established. I was a much wealthier person who was employing her nephew, but her act of hospitality had helped to offset that asymmetry, at least a little.

Endalew, a young student, and his friends once asked me what I thought was most distinctive about Zege. I had mentioned the forest, and they replied yes, but most of all it was hospitality and visiting. In Zege you should feed guests, and visit neighbors. This goes together with the number of complaints I have heard that hospitality and visiting were under threat due to fear of poisoning and poverty. This is particularly concerning because of the religious and moral implications of eating together: hospitality is a technique for drawing saints and other mediators into interpersonal relations.

A simple example would be Ginbot Lideta, the celebration of Mary's birthday. It is local tradition that groups of family and neighbors get together to eat, and to promise what contribution they will make to the food in a year's time. Everyone contributes, and everyone indicates the desire to be reunited in a year. The event is inclusive; in the morning I saw priests together with their deacons and church students eating a rare meal of *injera* with butter. After that I joined Haregwa and Thomas with our neighbors to eat corn and drink *tella* and coffee. Promises for contributions for next year ranged from a chicken or a box of wine to fifty birr, ten *injera*, or a bag of onions. The housemaid, Kassaye, also promised a bottle of wine, marking her as a cocontributor with her employers. This is an important suspension of hierarchy, and seems to mark the equality of all when it comes to the love of Mary. And here is the point: feeding one another, along with promising to keep doing so in the future, is done for and in the name of the Virgin. Which is to say, you do not just pray to Mary; you feed others in her name and under her protection. If we make one another, in a physical and substantial sense, through relational acts of eating and feeding (Strathern 2012), then in Zege eating and feeding also constitute Mary as a part of these relations.

STRANGERS AND GUESTS

My experience with Abebe's aunt is a reminder that ethnographers usually work with people who have already developed techniques for dealing with strangers. Most often, the feeder-fed relationship is the initial template into which outsiders can be incorporated. Amharic renders both the English *stranger* and *guest* by a single word, *ingida*; a stranger was one who had to be hosted. In Ethiopia before the twentieth century, taverns were unheard of. An old story has it that when the first hotel in the country, the Taitu, was built in 1898, guests came to eat the food and use the facilities and were then stunned to be presented with a bill (Binns n.d.). The very notion of a guest paying for a meal seemed faintly obscene, a violation of the basic principles of honor.

These days the commercial hospitality industry is familiar enough, and the first call of a newcomer in a village like Afaf, who does not have other business, is likely to be one of the taverns along the two main streets. Every traveler needs food and drink, and these spaces also serve as grounds for figuring out who newcomers are, as the houses of hosts did in the past. However, unlike private houses, here food is served to which not every person present is really entitled. If a stranger buys a meal, it would be poor form for everyone in the bar to descend on them and eat it. After all, they have paid a set price for a set amount of food.

In any other situation there would be hierarchy—men eating before women and children—but everyone present could expect to eat. And yet cherished norms hold that one should never eat alone, and as a result complex and implicit codes

of behavior arise around tavern food. If one has food, it is ethically proper to say to anyone present, *innibla* (let's eat). It is also prudent, because one never knows if a *buda* will see your food and make you sick. When I lived in Thomas's tavern he would often bring me food in my bedroom rather than the guest area, so as to protect me from dangerous glances. My personal experience was that when someone said *innibla* to me, they would often follow by saying, "This is our culture."

Sometimes if someone says *innibla* to you in a tavern, you should refuse. I noticed that only close friends and boys much younger than me would accept my invitations, for example. Anyone else would refuse, I am fairly sure because I belonged permanently in the category of guest, and should therefore have been an acceptor of food except from people much junior to me. Additionally, if someone from elsewhere sits down to what is obviously his lunch, you should politely reject his offer. But if an older man were to offer you food, you might politely take a bite or, if he were obviously making a display of providing a communal meal, join him and eat. But in every case, the offer must be made. As Pitt-Rivers (1977) notes, it is often the very pretense of generosity, commensality, or equality that makes hospitality function, even though it is decidedly not egalitarian. There is a sort of mutual contract that host and guest will play along with their roles.

The case of the tavern offers an interesting test of how hospitality logics adapt to new situations. But it also describes my own entry into the field and my positioning throughout my work, in which I usually ate in a tavern once or twice a day. The first day I arrived in Afaf, I was taken to Thomas's tavern, where, over food, I slowly asked about the possibility of finding a place to live and doing field research in Zege. Eating food—even food I had bought—offered the first chance of finding commonality from which we could try to figure out relationships, which for people in Zege often involved working out whether my presence was likely to advantage or inconvenience them, or at least prove diverting. (The second medium that would ease my integration was playing and watching football.)

An outsider who enters a community such as Zege will be judged largely by whether they eat with people, visit their neighbors' houses, and attend their funerals. These acts of copresence are the basis of social life at the local level. While eating at Thomas's daughter's christening feast, my friend Antihun said to me, "If you eat alone, you die alone, isn't that right?" I asked if that meant that if we ate together we would die together, and he replied, "No, but I'll come to your funeral." To be alone is always bad, and much of village life revolves around making sure to show others that you are present to them, in life and in death. Eating together is, as Antihun describes it, the strongest form of copresence.

There are also those strangers with whom nearness is denied, and to whom the rules of hospitality therefore do not apply—not every outsider is a guest, whatever the language might tell you. The classic example is that of slaves; recall Tefera's story of how masters would deny meat to their slaves even while eating the meals

that they served. This appears to be an inherently problematic situation, and one that people would prefer to gloss over. A comparable situation exists today in the case of servants, who are almost always from outside the community. Every tavern has at least one woman employed, and sometimes a few boys, who arrive in arrangements of quasi-fostering. The solution for such people—outsiders who are not guests—is almost always to incorporate them structurally as very junior members of the family. These are the people who frequently get omitted from accounts of hospitality: the ones who actually cook and serve the food (whom we might call disappearing mediators). While you should not accept food from a person junior to you, this does not apply to the woman or child who actually serves you the meal, who is understood to represent the master of the house. This is consistent with the logic of the patriarchal household described in the classic literature on Imperial-era Amhara society (Hoben 1973, Reminick 1974).

THE EUCHARISTIC HOST

There is, as numerous commentators have noticed, a distinctively sacral or cosmic element to hospitality (Hocart 2004: 78, Candea & da Col 2012). As we will see, both hospitality and ritual involve complex relationships of reciprocal honoring (guest honors host, host honors guest) whose end result is not equality but hierarchy. Likewise, a common thread of eating together in the name of a sacred other links overt acts of ritual to more mundane commensality.

The relationship between hospitality and sacrifice is especially explicit in the Eucharist as practiced by those Christianities that, like Ethiopian Orthodoxy, still insist that the rite effects the complete transubstantiation of bread and wine into God. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church states that the Eucharist is not just a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice, but a full repetition of it (Paulos 1988: 171). As *Abba S'om*, the priest widely recognized as the local expert on exegesis, explained to me, at the Last Supper Christ said, "This *is* my flesh"; he did not say that it was a *sign* (*millikit*) of his flesh. He drew the comparison between the burning of the Mesqel cross (see chapter 2), which was a *sign*, and the actual transformation of the bread and wine.

The English term *host*, referring to the Eucharistic bread, comes from the Latin *hostia*, "sacrificial victim." The Amharic *qurban*, "Eucharist," derives from an Arabic term also meaning sacrificial offering and implying closeness (Amh. *qirb*, Kaplan 2003b: 15, see Heo 2015: 58), and the Greek *anaphora*, describing the Eucharistic prayers, also means offering. The Eucharist begins as an offering to God, and turns into the reception of God. It is offered with ritual prayers, transformed and sanctified, returned, and then consumed. And this is the key point of any sacrificial ritual: we consume the very same thing that we offer, although transformed. It is worth dwelling on this point.

Consuming the gifts that one has given is not so unusual at any kind of feast. As Marsland (2015) notes, for example, in Nyakyusa, one of the problems with feasting is that people bring contributions, but actually eat and drink far more than they bring. Contemporary Western middle-class practices of bringing a bottle of wine to a dinner party are not so different. As with the sacrifice, we consume what we gave, and much more besides. For Stephan Feuchtwang (2010), the very excessiveness of the return indicates that we are communing with a God. It is a special quality of the Eucharist that, however much is consumed, there is always more (Simmel 1997). The Eucharist can be performed at any place and time where a church and priests are present, and so enacts the universal omnipresence of God. This surpassing, overabundant quality of the Eucharist is mirrored, I would suggest, in the Easter feasting that I have described, which also draws directly on the Resurrection of Christ.

Feuchtwang's analysis of ritual as "excessive hospitality" or communicative excess hinges on a special reversal that takes place in the process of offering and return: the invitation of the guest to be host. In performing the offering (oblation, *qurban*) we invite a being that is immeasurably strange and external to us. The "sleight-of-ritual" (Rappaport 1999: 108) reverses the roles and turns the worshipers into guests receiving the newly sanctified (and therefore immeasurably greater) meal. The performers enact both invitation and response. But ritual is not the same as hospitality: "the performance mimics but also makes itself different from the ritual of hospitality by markers such as the camphor flame" (Feuchtwang 2010: 60). Ritual is not just a communication but "a performance of invitation, communication, and seeing off. It is the marking out of an inside, which an outside of greater power, authority, and scale is invited to enter into, respond within, and depart from. The entrance is not just a crossing of the threshold, but an entering into the host position" (2010: 70). This reversal and displacement are a key difference between ritual and everyday hospitality.

Innumerable markers serve to differentiate the Eucharist from everyday hospitality. The practice of communion—of enabling direct physical contact between humans and God—is therefore not just a matter of taking something distant and bringing it close. It requires first the alienation or setting apart of what is familiar. The rite can only be performed by priests and deacons after years of special training, and every piece of equipment (for which there is an extensive formal list) must be specially consecrated. The communion bread and wine, once consecrated, can be handled only by priests. Eucharistic bread is made from wheat or sorghum rather than the staple *t'eff*, and the wine is made from unfermented dried grapes never used outside church (Fritsch 2011: 276). Prior to the liturgy the priests prepare the Communion bread and mark each piece with the imprint of thirteen crosses in commemoration of the last supper, and then the ceremony and prayer of the Anaphora effect the miraculous transformation of the Host. The celebrant

priest washes his hands twice and announces that he is free of the sin of anyone who takes the Communion in an unworthy state; once his hands are washed, he touches only the bread and the chalice. The priest gives pieces of bread to the communicants, one at a time, and a deacon serves them wine from a ladle. After the Communion, deacons dispense holy water for communicants to ensure nothing of the host remains in their mouths, and for anyone else in the congregation to take. The service finishes with celebratory prayers and, on nonfasting days, singing and dancing.

As for the people receiving Communion, they must have abstained from all food and water for at least eighteen hours beforehand,² and from sexual activity for longer. Communicants must have no open wounds, no illnesses or runny noses; a fly entering your mouth renders you ineligible. Menstruating and postpartum women cannot even enter the church, and it is expected that people who have begun puberty but not married will also not take the rite.

The irony of the Eucharist as practiced in most parts of Ethiopia is that, while it is the sacramental core of the religion, most people for most of their lives do not partake in it. This appears more to be a matter of custom than church edict. Numerous priests in Addis Ababa have explained to me that any adult Christian has only to undergo confession before taking the sacrament. To most in Zege this idea is horrifying, however, and it is standard for men and women to stop taking communion on reaching puberty, and only consider recommencing in old age, often after a spouse dies. But the extreme proscription of the Eucharist also coexists with a number of equally embodied practices by which the general Christian population can maintain their religious engagement.

First among these is fasting. We have seen how fasting is an especially important lynchpin for those whose work duties or fears of physical impurity keep them from going to church. Fasting is a portable discipline that affords people, especially women, a degree of control over their religious engagement that can circumvent other authorities and restrictions (Bynum 1987). The same goes for young men whose sexual lifestyles and drinking habits are most at odds with Christian ideals, many of whom are extremely diligent keepers of the fasts. As one young man described to me, this gives him a way of always feeling in touch with his faith, and feeling that there is hope for him no matter what.

I would suggest that there is a model or diagram (Bialecki 2017) of Orthodox practice that allows for participation at different scales or levels of engagement. Not everyone takes the Eucharist, but more or less everyone takes part in the Lenten fast and Easter feast, and the one can be understood as an echo of the other: it repeats key formal aspects in indexical or iconic fashion, but is understood to have diminished (and hence more accessible) potency.

The Christian Eucharist is an explicit echo of the Last Supper, and intimately tied with the Easter passion from Crucifixion and Resurrection. The passage from

fast to feast, described in this and the last chapter, takes very similar form to the practice of the Eucharist, which also requires a progression from fasting to celebratory consumption. The plenitude of the Eucharistic feast—ever-present and all-encompassing—resonates with the excess of Easter hosting, whether with meat or alcohol. In both cases, powerful sensory effects are produced by a period of abstinence followed by a sudden overabundance. This iterative movement from fast to feast and from suffering to joy is one of the core rhythms of Ethiopian Orthodox life, as we saw in the last chapter. It is a means by which people participate in life at a scale beyond their immediate bodily surroundings.

Other important echoes of the Eucharist exist in the form of holy water (*sèbel*) and the dark Sabbath bread consumed after church services. These have to a large extent become the popular equivalent of the Eucharistic bread and wine (Lee, pers. comm.), and form perhaps the most commonly used media of popular engagement with divine power. Ethiopian Orthodox holy water has been covered extensively in other studies (Hermann 2010, 2012, Malara 2017) and has become famous for the healing sites that exist around the country and attract large numbers of patients suffering from HIV/AIDS, demonic affliction, and any number of other maladies. At these sites, taking holy water carries purity rules similar to those of the Eucharist, although less extreme. It has been described as having “God’s power on it” (Malara 2017) or as indexing the water that issued from Christ’s wounds while on the cross (this is especially so of the holy water given out at the Eucharist). So while not exactly the blood of Christ, holy water is a material vehicle of God’s blessing that is intimately—iconically and indexically—connected with the Crucifixion and Christ’s body.

Malara notes that holy water has another key property, however: it is transportable. On saints’ days in Zege, worshipers do not just receive splashes of holy water on their bodies; they bring bottles and jerry cans, and carry the water back to friends and relatives who cannot make it, especially those who are sick in bed. I have been gently teased by friends for not thinking to do so when I have visited holy water sites. This transportability and capacity for being shared are crucial to the ethico-spiritual potency of holy water (cf. Keane 2014). It does not just entail an encounter between the individual, priests, and God, but a much more dispersed interpersonal sharing of blessing, one absolutely vital for showing kindness and care to others.

I think I am justified in describing holy water as an echo of the Eucharist (though this may not be the only way to conceive it). At least, it reiterates the pattern of progression from solemnity to exuberance that, I am arguing, continually reenacts and repeats the narrative of the salvation of the world in multiple, nested microcosms. But as Malara’s work shows, this does not mean that each “echo” is an identical copy. The different material and symbolic properties of holy water, the Host, the fast, and the Easter feast offer different affordances, and are available to different people at different times.

Put in other words, the “diagram” of a progression from solemnity to exuberance, mediated by consumption, is not a “scale-free abstraction” (Candea 2012), but one whose repetition and transformation weave certain themes into the experiential fabric of shared life. The Eucharistic host is manifestly not the same as the hosting of a guest in one’s home, but they draw on the same patterns and techniques—especially those of feeding—in order to produce organized, meaningful, morally charged power relations.

ZIKIR: MEALS OF MEMORY, PRESENCE, AND PATRONAGE

Local saints’ days provide another example of religious echoing, following Epiphany (*T'imqet*) in the passage of the *tabot* to water and its exuberant blessing, but on a smaller scale; the *tabot* does not spend the night outside, which shortens the vigil and the festival considerably. The blessings by holy water, both on Epiphany and the smaller saints’ days, are often colloquially referred to as “baptism” (*t'imqet*), which led some early European observers to label the Orthodox degenerate practitioners of multiple baptisms. In fact there is no evidence that people mix up the sacrament of baptism taken shortly after birth with the blessing of crowds with holy water—calling this “baptism” points rather to the indexical and metaphoric quality that invokes a portion of the blessing produced by the actual sacrament. This is a recurring pattern in Ethiopian Orthodoxy’s religious division of labor: sacramental practices that are the province of the clergy alone have their echoes, rhymes, and resonances through different domains of more accessible and, crucially, shareable practices. This diffusion of sacred form does much to give the feeling of living in a ritual community.

The other defining aspect of a saint’s day festival, aside from the transit of the *tabot* and the exuberant blessing of water, is the holding of a *zikir* feast. *Zikir* is a key concept for understanding the relationship between commensality, religious relations, and memory, so it is worth dwelling on it a moment. Meaning “food given in remembrance of the dead” (Cowley 1972: 246), it is cognate with the Arabic *dhikr*, described in Sufi traditions as a communal worship event in which “the devotees are imagined more fully present before God than in regular activities” (Newby in Setargew 2011). Where *dhikr* in Islamic traditions refers to acts of speaking the name of God though, in Amharic Christian culture it tends to indicate a commemorative meal, and to be aimed at saints or Mary. Key resonances remain with the Arabic term: *zikir* is a collective act of commemoration, and it denotes not just remembrance as in bringing to mind, but a re-remembering, or a constituting of the object of memory as actually present. Like “remembrance,” *zikir* also denotes thanks. My friend Menilek described a *zikir* to me as a meal that you held for your neighbors in order to thank a saint for a vow/request (*silet*) that had been granted;

Haregwa, for example, had a *zikir* for Selassie (the Trinity), which meant that she would host a meal each year on Trinity day, in thanks for an unnamed vow that had been granted.³ *Abba S'om*, in turn, told me that all associational meals (*mah-ber*) were essentially *zikir* in the name of a saint.

In each case, the *zikir* involves people getting together and eating in the name of a saint. This mode of remembrance recalls Christ's words at the Last Supper, "This is my body given for you: do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), which recall in turn the Jewish Passover commemoration (Feeley-Harnik 1995: 567). Aside from the semiotic echoes of food as commemoration, the crucial factor is that eating is, as we have seen, a shared act, and food a shared medium.

Note the pattern of sacred exchange implied in the *zikir* as vow. When you ask something of a saint and it is granted, you do not repay the gift directly, by returning something to them. Instead, the repayment refracts outward, onto the community; you give the saint shared commemoration, and make them a benefactor of all (see Malara 2017). Like the Eucharist, the host of the meal invites a greater being to be the real host, displacing her or him. Relationships with saints are not dyadic: it is a trope of saintly histories that a person who displays great devotion is rewarded not just by entry into heaven but by a promise that others who pray in her or his name will also be saved (Taddesse 1972b: 2).

The archetype of this promise in Ethiopic tradition is the Kidane Mihret, the Covenant of Mercy (also the name of a monastery in Zege), in which Christ promises to Mary that all who pray in her name will be saved. One might almost say that the essence of sainthood is becoming a benefactor who can save others, and its reward is to be remembered in the shared meal.

The *zikir* feast held on a saint's day operates at a larger scale, and commemorates the saint in a more general way, usually because the local church was consecrated to that saint. This can result from a vow just as much as individual *zikir*, for example, if a church's founder established the church as repayment of a promise—again, the saint becomes a medium for the salvation of others. I visited the church of Wanjeta Mikael (which is consecrated to both Michael and Gabriel) on St. Gabriel's day in 2008 with Beschew, a local vagabond and odd-job man in his forties. A number of people from Afaf were headed to the church, some forty minutes' walk into the countryside, but my usual interview companions could not go, so Abebe enlisted Beschew to show me around, since he was at a loose end. We had got to know each other while sneaking out of wedding parties to smoke, and he would often come around the village in the evening asking for bits of leftover food. He would tell me about how he slept on the verandah of Abbi's hotel, where I often ate, and children would throw rocks at him. He was, suffice to say, extremely poor, but also totally indomitable, and prepared to do undignified things to get by. At one wedding feast, while the *mizé* (groomsmen) cooked a sheep, Beschew took the guts and testicles and ran off into the woods to eat them. Another time I saw

him walk barefoot into a swamp. He returned with his feet and ankles covered in leeches, which he carefully picked off and placed in a plastic bag to sell to fishermen as bait.

Beschew, as a likeable outsider, was a great person to visit a festival with. We arrived at the church mid-morning to find the inner sanctum already empty and the feast in progress (food provided by local parishioners, and vegetarian only, since we were in the advent fast, *Tahsas* 19 [December 28]). One rarely sees the inner chamber of the church, guarded by vast doors depicting towering, heavily armed angels, so Beschew grabbed the opportunity to have a look inside (still making sure to take his shoes off before entering the church). We attracted some disapproving looks, but since the *tabot* wasn't there it wasn't actually a sacrilege. We then headed just outside the churchyard to have our food and *t'ella* beer. Beschew ate enthusiastically, because he didn't often get meals so good, but he was also careful to remind me not to smoke this close to the church. Between us we made a slightly strange part of the congregation, but we were part of it, eating in Gabriel's name. Once full, we went down to the water to see the *tabot* and get splashed with holy water.

Beschew showed me that while we were taking part in the church feast, we should pay due respect. We were entering into codes of conduct that he usually had little time for and that had even less time for him. It is easy to forget how potent large, inclusive feasts are when plenty of people are genuinely hungry. We had our point of unity, where a rather larger and more diverse group ate together than is usual, before going our separate ways, and we did so in the name of Gabriel, our host for the period that the *tabot* remained outside the church. Beschew taking part in the *zikir* did not change his status afterward, but it was a point of engagement, at which everyone had to acknowledge that he was not entirely outside the community either, and that he too was a guest of Gabriel for the duration of the feast, rather than eating the things that others discarded. In the same way, on the celebration of Mary's birthday, servants had to be acknowledged as being as much a part of the saintly community as anyone else.

CONCLUSION: BREAD AND SPIRIT

*This is my body given for you . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood,
which is poured out for you.*

—LUKE 22: 19–20, CITED IN PAULOS 1988: 175

There is a case for saying that the concept of covenant (*kidan*) is the foundation of Ethiopian Orthodox social thought (Girma 2012, Antohn 2014). Two points stand out: a covenant is a pact between a saint and a community, not an individual; and in Ethiopia the covenant is created and commemorated through commensality.

Feeding is the basic relational act by which a collective of people and divine agents is brought into being. It is not just a joining of constituent parts to form a larger whole, but it actively makes those who participate. I have described the Eucharist as the core (or perhaps climactic) activity of Orthodox life, but the Eucharist can only coexist with the other acts of eating and feeding for saints that I have described. Moments of saintly commensality, such as the *zikir* or *Ginbot Lideta*, can prove inclusive in ways that everyday life is not.

It is not too strong to say that feeding and commensality have been the most important means of relationship-making throughout Zege's history. The focal point of church-landlord hierarchies was the *mefraq* dining room, in which the leaders of church and community ate together but in clearly marked hierarchical order. Meanwhile, lasting status, virtue, and memorialization were established through the feasts of *tezkar*. Today these meals do not define the social makeup of Zege, to the regret of some. But *zikir* meals and Easter and Christmas feasting remain at the heart of human-divine community formation, and the consumption of the body and blood of God remains at the heart of everything.

NOTES

1. See Aymro and Motovu 1970.
2. According to Tefera, the norm in Zege is actually half a day.
3. Of course, the Trinity is not technically a saint, but in practical terms it is often treated in the same way, as a recipient of vows with a monthly commemorative day.