
The Knowledge of the World

An Amharic novel called *Dertogada* became a runaway hit while I was in the field. It was popular enough that some of my friends in Zege were able to recount the plot without having read it: The hero, Dr. Miraje, raised in the monastery of Kibran Gebrel, just off the Zege shore, must travel to America to find the great Ethiopian rocket scientist Engineer Shagiz, whose work has been the basis of the American space program, and bring him back to Ethiopia. It emerges that there is a secret Ethiopian spy base under Lake Tana armed with state-of-the-art spy planes and submarines, and Shagiz is needed to help run the place and make the Ethiopian secret service the equal of the CIA and Mossad, which also have large parts to play in the story. These basic elements of the plot have entered widely enough into the general consciousness that I and other friends have had people report them to us quite earnestly as fact.

The novel is a remarkable document for several reasons. It reads like a postcolonial inversion of a Dan Brown thriller, with an extra helping of picaresque farce. It confronts the aporia between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians' sense of the depth and richness of their own culture and the seeming inadequacy and underdevelopment of the Ethiopian nation-state on the international scene, and tries to build a synthesis that will pull the Tana monasteries and spy planes into the same picture. It also contains multiple instances of cross-dressing, face transplants, and mistaken identity that Elizabethan theatregoers in England would have had no trouble recognizing. Its author, Yismake Worku, is reputed to have trained in the Tana monasteries while also pursuing modern education, as so many young Christians do. The book shifts abruptly from the poetry of the twentieth-century Ethiopian laureate Tsegaye Gebremedhin and church literature to quoting "Redemption

Song,” all woven into a thriller built around Kabbalistic coded messages that bear the clear influence of *The Da Vinci Code* (available in English and Amharic in Bahir Dar) and its predecessors in the American Cold War technothriller genre.

The juxtaposition of space exploration and international spy agencies with the Tana monasteries captures something integral to the dual extension of technology and religion as it is locally understood. The military and economic power of “Western” science and technology is undeniable. But this power seems to sit on a different axis from the charismatic potency of the churches and the tradition they mediate. Yismake’s novel brings the two together in a way that is clearly fantasy but that captures something of the general Ethiopian Orthodox engagement with modernity: we know that our people are smart and in possession of a sophisticated cultural heritage; so why are these gifts so out of sync with the contemporary world’s criteria for glory and success? How, knowing so much, can we be so humiliated? It is something that has preoccupied Ethiopian intellectuals for a century or more.

This chapter will show how, in the vein of *Dertogada*, young Zege Orthodox Christian men’s search for knowledge of the world, and hence for advancement of their prospects, continually folds back into their engagement with the churches. Perhaps this is unsurprising, since the churches have always been key points of interface between the local environment and the wider world. At the same time, I will consider the relationship between global media and the human body. It will become clear that young Zegeña experiences with global knowledge and media involve more than viewing or hearing things from afar: there is always a more active physical engagement.

SEX, LOVE, AND FOOTBALL

Once in 2009 I sat on a rock by the lakeside in Zege, chewing *khat* with Babbi and Abebe. On their request I was trying to translate the lyrics of the Shakira song “Hips Don’t Lie” (“So be wise and keep on / Reading the signs of my body / And I’m on tonight / You know my hips don’t lie / And I’m starting to feel it’s right / All the attraction, the tension / Don’t you see baby, this is perfection”). We had decided that the title should be “*Dalé Aywashm*” and hadn’t got much further, but the general gist was clear enough. Babbi remarked, “Ah, the international languages: sex, love, and football.” As we will see throughout this chapter, what the international languages share is a vast, globally mediated component, along with an underlying and irreducible grounding in bodily engagement. Babbi’s brother would meet a Polish woman a few years later and emigrate, with positive financial results for the whole family; the international languages have huge material importance. But the meeting would not have been possible without the young man’s high level of education, skill in English, and substantial experience in tour-guiding work, as well as

personal charm. All of this was in turn made possible by the education of Babbi's family, their close connections to the churches, and their involvement with local associations of tour guides and coffee growers.

Another of Babbi's brothers, Menilek, has been working for several years on improving Zege's coffee output in collaboration with foreign traders. The projects have been hampered by practical and bureaucratic problems, most notably the centralizing of coffee export by the Ethiopian Coffee Exchange (ECX), which has made life more difficult for small-scale and specialty growers. Still, the work has been possible because of Menilek's English skills and close relationship with local farmers, often through church associations. In 2008–09 a major project was underway to try to harvest only the highest-quality beans, which meant expanding the picking period from the usual practice of harvesting everything in the week after Epiphany, ripe or not. Menilek's work involved assuaging some farmers' complaints about the "*sayensawi*" (scientific) methods, which did not account, for example, for the need not to pick on Saint George's day. To coordinate this work, involving husking machines and great drying racks stretched along the shore of Lake Tana, required the ability to go between the expectations of European traders and the local coffee growers, whose practices and understandings were built around the church calendar.

Modern education and church knowledge were once thought incompatible. Attempts in the 1940s to build a government school in Zege met entrenched opposition on the grounds that it was antithetical to Zege's tradition and the institutional autonomy of the church, and so the first school was not actually constructed until the 1960s (Binayew 2014: 44). By 2009 every young person I spoke to considered modern education the only serious route to advancement, but the Afaf school only went up to eighth grade. Any further schooling had to take place in the city, which requires either money for transport and lodging or family members willing and able to put your children up. Tefera, who read my early work and ended up helping me with a number of interviews, recalled to me his journeys to school some fifteen years before: for five years he would travel the 25 kilometers from Zege to Bahir Dar on foot, or by *meruchà* (runner) canoe, setting out at midnight on Sunday if there were Monday morning classes. He and his friends would bring dry *injera* to eat with a little spice, and would stay the week before coming back. Tefera is the son of a churchman of noble descent, which helps to explain the value his family puts on education, and their material ability to support a son in school. He is now studying for a business diploma in Bahir Dar, though he often returns to Zege for tour guide work, and has acted as an assistant and translator for other researchers who have passed through Zege. This work and his own background have given him a keen interest in Zege's history, and he has done more than anyone to help me understand the area.

Tour guiding in Zege is run through a cooperative that shares the work and its proceeds and benefits the community greatly. This goes along with the business of selling refreshments and souvenirs to tourists, in which many local women run

stalls, also organized by a collective association. This work alone cannot sustain young people with big ambitions, but it provides a significant base from which many people begin and to which most regularly return in the course of studying and working in Bahir Dar.

The point of telling these stories is to establish a sense of how the hopes and dreams of young people in Zege are formed and how they work toward the future in ways that fold back into church and coffee. Starting to think about this helps us understand in turn how Zege connects to the wider world through media, travel, and exchange, and through love and personal relationships. As people build relationships they also build their imaginings of what the world is like, and I want to highlight the role that the church, the media, and the education system play in imagining a reality wider than one's own experience, and in trying to establish one's place in it. This means sex, love, and football, but also prayer and healing, which have been drawing people to Zege for six or seven centuries, as well as trade and government bureaucracy and everything else that connects the world. The place I entered as an ethnographer was one where people already had quite developed ideas of what Europeans were like and what they might expect from me, built on concrete connections of many kinds, and it seems important to account for these understandings while developing my own analysis of what Zege is like. Ethnography goes both ways.

OF SAINTS AND SWEDES: ON KNOWING HOW TO ASK

Yibeltal was a tour guide who worked in Bahir Dar. He came with me on my first couple of visits to Zege while I was looking for somewhere to settle. He was working, and did not see helping me as much different from any other tour guiding. But helping me with research gave him a chance to talk to priests in Zege, who, he was sure, possessed good love magic. Not that he necessarily needed it, being an excellent talker with the charm and education necessary to make a living out of independent guiding. But it was an interesting opportunity and a nice side perk. (However, as he told me, all the priests in Zege had claimed ignorance of such medicines. He did not believe them.)

A few months after I had settled we were having a coffee back in Bahir Dar and he was telling me about an attractive Swedish woman he had been guiding. He told me that he had gone to Giyorgis church and made a vow to Saint George that, if he got to have sex with that Swedish girl, he would light a candle for the saint every year on his annual feast day.

Obviously it is not orthodox to ask for patently sinful things in vows, but I actually believed he had done it (and he would later lead me to believe that the vow had been granted). There is a logic to the idea that would still make for a good story even if Yibeltal were just exaggerating and had not actually gone in person

to the church to ask for help getting sex. Part of it is the idea of turning saintly benefaction to unsaintly ends, but there is more. Saints and tourists share a quality of being powerful external agents who can change the course of a person's life if approached in the right way. For this you need knowledge, and knowing how to ask was Yibetal's profession.

The context for this story is that for most tour guides in Bahir Dar, including many who are from Zege and take tourists back to visit the peninsula, foreign women offer one of the more realistic prospects of material advancement in life. Many young men talk to me about meeting an older woman and developing a relationship that would lead either to long-term financial support or, better, to taking them back to Europe. There are enough examples of this actually happening that, for many, such an escape seems a more likely prospect than finding gainful local work commensurate with their levels of education.

Yibetal had once told me that he liked having affairs with foreign women because he learned so much: "She can tell me the things she knows." Sometimes this knowledge took the form of romantic and sexual tricks, but it also meant learning languages and generally picking up information from well-educated, middle-class visitors. Yibetal would continuously develop his appreciation of the perspectives of others, of reality as those from other countries saw it, and of what motivated them to travel, make friends and lovers, and spend money. Each engagement would further equip him to meet more people in possession of knowledge, wealth, and opportunity. Sometimes he and other tour guides would ask visitors what guides did in other places they had visited. Most suspected that Kenyan guides, with more experience of tourism, had many more sophisticated tricks for meeting people than they did—and Yibetal would eventually end up in Kenya after gathering one too many bad debts in Bahir Dar, or, as he would have it, once opportunities in the local area had been exhausted.

In this and every example we will see in this chapter, world imaginations and knowledge are made and transmitted as much through relatively direct human connections and transactions as through mass media; or rather, the two are mutually enabling. People decide to travel to Ethiopia after reading websites or tour brochures; people decide to talk to tourists after learning English from films and textbooks. Romantic and sexual relations can easily lead to the movement of persons and the transfer of significant wealth. There are no media without the movement of people and things, and therefore the translations and exchanges by which they come to know and understand one another.

THE WORLD'S KNOWLEDGE

Being a good tour guide, like being a priest, requires a lot of knowledge. On the one hand, they need to know a lot about the churches and about Zege's history.

On the other, they need to speak English and have a developed awareness of what visitors want. Yibetal's story displays the degree to which extra knowledge about visitors can be beneficial. One important skill, much to the amiable puzzlement of the guides, is knowing the English name of every bird you are likely to see, because even the tourists who are not explicitly there for bird-watching tend to ask. Guides should know what each painting on the church mural depicts, and all the specialist English vocabulary to describe them. Many learn smatterings of German, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch as well.

The guides act as interfaces between two vast corpora of knowledge. On the one hand is the church tradition, which is restricted by its complexity, its use of classical language, and the ascetic requirements of training. On the other is the stuff of modern education: English grammar and vocabulary, scientific training, mathematics, and so forth. This knowledge is restricted by difficulties of access; a high school recently opened in Zege, but until it did pupils had to travel to Bahir Dar at significant expense. Even then, the schools have difficulty finding textbooks and qualified staff. And the prospects for educated young people, in Bahir Dar, across Ethiopia, and beyond, are often poor (Mains 2012).

In this context it is notable that many of the most successful guides have family histories connected to the church. I have several friends whose fathers were priests, church scholars, or dignitaries such as *misené* and *liqered*. For example, Tefera's father was *yewist' gebez*, the official in charge of the church key, and he has played a large part in Tefera developing both an expansive modern education and deep knowledge of the peninsula and its churches. There are many others among the guides, as Tefera listed for me: Getaneh's father is a *misené* and church singer, Masresha's father was a *liqered*, Yihenew's father was a *meggabí*, and so forth.

The relationship between Church and modern education is an important one. Ethiopia's first European-style modern school was built under Emperor Menilek in 1908, and modern education was one of Haile Selassie's major governmental priorities, as education came to be seen as a key step to gaining material and developmental parity with the West (Bahru 2002, Girma 2012). Before this, education in Orthodox areas meant church education (Chaillot 2002, Ephraim 2013: 92), which involved, as we have seen, rigorous training in the Ge'ez language, in the memorizing of holy texts, in ritual technique, and often in mastery of *qiné* devotional poetry. Orthodox Christians still hold church education in extremely high regard, and have put large amounts of time and resources into its preservation (see previous chapter). A remarkable number of students I have spoken to in Addis Ababa combine modern, secular education by day with church study by night, which requires a heroic commitment. Those I have spoken to tend to hold their church education in higher regard, being both more thorough and possessing a far stronger ethical and spiritual dimension.

In the Orthodox educational tradition knowledge and creativity are inseparable from the ascetic training of the body (Lee 2013). We have seen some indication of this in the mendicant period that students undergo. But from the moment students begin to memorize the Psalms in Ge'ez, bodily discipline, especially fasting, is an integral part of their training. For any kind of creative production of poetry or images, as we will see, the student must have both absorbed a huge amount of tradition and fasted with diligence to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them. This is an expression of the fact that both knowledge and creativity are of God, and can therefore only be accessed through prayerful discipline of the flesh.

Historically, then, education in Orthodox Ethiopia has been religious: ascetic, esoteric, and highly specialist, yet providing the literary and disciplinary skills for functionaries well beyond the church (Crummey 1972, Ephraim 2013). This tradition now meets the modernist developmental goals of education as a general good, universal primary education, and so forth—worthy goals often curtailed by practical difficulties. And yet for every young person I spoke to in Zege, modern education remains the indispensable ingredient for having any hope of progress in life. I asked one university student what one thing he would wish improved for Zege, and he replied, “Education; then we can help ourselves.”

When I asked Abebe, after eighteen months of informal research assistance, what he wanted out of life that I might help with, he said, “I want to study.” I did end up helping to support his studies, and Abebe’s interaction with me is important and indicative. He approached a foreign visitor in the hope of accruing not just short-term profit, but opportunities for learning, cultivating relationships with outsiders, and perhaps gaining future support or being introduced to others who might support him. In part, this calls on a model of patronage that would not be alien to historical Ethiopia, in which advancement came through cultivating relations with the powerful (Levine 1965, Messay 1999, Malara & Boylston 2016). In part, it is simply a matter of curtailed opportunity elsewhere. For many talented, curious young people like Abebe, such random interventions from outside often look like the only realistic way to change one’s life trajectory. This is not to say that my intervention was entirely praiseworthy—it was somewhat arbitrary, was likely to lead to questions of dependence that would be difficult to manage in the future, and frankly came as much from a sense of obligation as from openhearted generosity of spirit. But it is precisely the ability to manipulate and manage such senses of obligation—the moral responsiveness of others—that is such a crucial social skill, especially in conditions of massive inequality, but classically in the gifting practices of any kind of hierarchically tending society (Haynes 2013).

There is an important sense in which anthropologists and tourists are like saints. Not because of our moral qualities, which are dubious, but because we are powerful, unpredictable, and external agents whose stochastic actions can potentially be harnessed for the good. It is not accidental that Yibeltal prayed to St. George for sex

with the Swedish visitor; in many ways, the prayer and its hoped-for result belong in the same category of action: aimed at unpredictable foreign patrons, with the hope of gaining knowledge. When young people like Abebe want to request something from a patron—to send money by Western Union, for example—they go to church and ask Mary or Saint George to protect and bless the person in question, *and* to guide them toward providing generous assistance. Then they send an email directly asking for help. But at a distance the action of the saint and the action of the communication technology have a relation to each other that is crucial in conditions of radical power imbalance.

Abebe once told me that local boys in Afaf were scared of me because I walked like the Belgian martial arts movie star Jean-Claude Van Damme. Action movies were popular in the bars and teahouses, in part because you could mostly work out what was going on without the help of language. I found the comparison odd, because I know nothing about fighting, but the young men in Zege would never accept that I did not know kung fu. Most were convinced that I was refusing to teach them because I wanted to keep the knowledge to myself, in a culture in which keeping knowledge to oneself is a key concern and a basis of the functioning of hierarchy (Levine 1965).

For these young men, who experienced a lot of wealthy tourists passing through Zege and saw Van Damme beating up villains on a regular basis, it seemed obvious that white people possessed a repository of secret knowledge that allowed them to exert dominion over the world. It is hard to disagree with the general diagnosis, which seems to have its counterparts elsewhere (Rollason 2010). I had apparently limitless amounts of money; it went without saying that I would also be a secret master of violence. Local *debtera* practiced mastery over demons by means of closely guarded knowledge, and the mastery of white people was even more obviously effective; despite Ethiopia's victory over its would-be colonizers, we still found ourselves in this situation.

In a parallel set of assumptions, young men from Bahir Dar often thought that Zegeña were in possession of especially powerful love magic. Yibeltal certainly thought so. Babbi's brother, who would end up going to Poland, told me his frustration that whenever someone from Zege had any success in love, their Bahir Dar friends would assume that it was due to magic and pester them to share their secrets. That magic might be thought to be in the possession of sorcerers, but equally, it would often be assumed to be priests and monks who possessed the secrets. The church was, after all, the repository of all the great secrets of the traditional repertoire. It was known, with perhaps more justification, that certain church scholars had knowledge of "brain medicine" that was given to the students to keep them awake and increase their powers of concentration and recall. It was also known that too much of this stuff would drive you crazy, and everyone in Ethiopia knows stories of church students and *debtera* who have gone over the edge.

The cultivating of potential patrons and the search for knowledge are conditioned partly by circumstance and the limits of the possible and partly by the distinctive Amhara theory-practice of knowledge described by Levine (1965). One of the key skills of life is knowing how to learn more things, and how to turn this knowledge into productive relationships. This is the setting in which we should understand the way that engagements with modern, secular education fold back into relationships with the churches, as in the novel *Dertogada*. In working between radically different bodies of knowledge and applying them to one another, young people are mobilizing the best resources they have available to them for developing understanding, relationships, prospects, and hope. It is in the apparent incongruities between the bodies of knowledge that some of the most interesting and productive opportunities for development emerge.

PAINTING TIME AND SPACE

It is perhaps indicative of Amhara knowledge practice that my friend Mebratu never mentioned to me that he was a church painter. When I asked him about this, having found out from someone else, he just said that he assumed I knew. Perhaps it was just his natural humility, perhaps a widely shared habit of not spontaneously sharing information unless directly asked.

Mebratu is an exemplar of the young people I have been discussing: a skilled church painter who learned the trade from his father, an occasional tour guide, and a passionate Manchester United fan. He wears long dreadlocks that most traditionalists would firmly disapprove of, and many of his friends would spend their days chewing *khat* by the lakeside, which became a key medium for my own fieldwork.

Mebratu paints icons and church murals, but spends much more of his time producing works for sale to tourists. Most are in the iconic style of the church, including images of saints and Mary. Some are from older, pre-Gondarine traditions: apotropaic carvings to scare demons and protect the home. Mebratu explained each style he had learned from his father in terms of its provenance from a period, with the earliest being the charms, which he traced to the eighth and ninth centuries (see Mercier 1997 for a broader history).

For Mebratu the different painting and carving styles were ways of instantiating and continuing knowledge of the past, whether the painting would ultimately be used in a church or displayed in some tourist's home. The methods involved were different: for church paintings you had to pray and fast, and not talk to anyone "so that the Holy Spirit passes through." This is a common theme in Orthodox epistemology: true creativity can only come from God, and people become able to channel it through fasting and discipline of the flesh, as well as through mastery of an authorized tradition (Johnson 2011, Menonville 2017). Much the same goes for the composing of *qiné* poetry by church scholars. For the souvenir paintings, on

the other hand, there was no such need to fast, since “God doesn’t say anything” about them.

What set Zege’s painting tradition apart from others, according to Mebratu, was the paint, all of which is produced from local plants. A number of plants are used, and the dyes are mixed with egg and sometimes buried for up to six months to get the right colors. Many of the painters in Zege display palates of the relevant flowers alongside their stalls where they paint and sell their works to index their provenance. The paints and the works produced from them are thus drawn from the bequest and covenant of Saint Betre Maryam that produced the coffee forest as a whole, while for tourists they speak of a local authenticity that elevates the works above mass reproduction.

Some local artists have begun producing “Picassos.” These are iconic paintings on carved wood, much in the local style, but turned Cubist in imitation of Picasso’s works; we see both sides of the Virgin’s face at once, or a woman with her child both internal and external to her. I am told that it was originally a tourist who requested a Picasso-style icon, and local painters, finding something that appealed to visitors, were happy to produce more—not copies, but experiments with a new style. Two artists I spoke to described the Cubist style of combining multiple perspectives in a single image, and kept producing new pieces with subtle variations on the ones gone before (see the art on the cover of this book).¹

The pieces are sold as souvenirs, but they capture something of the lives of Zege’s painters: of a cosmopolitan awareness and a searching focus on the outside world, with a deep relationship with church tradition, which is performatively demonstrated for history-seeking tourists but also profoundly felt. The ability to learn from visitors is crucial—not just to know what other visitors will want to buy, but to broaden one’s own perspectives.

Church paintings already perform interesting tricks with time and space. One mural in Azwa Maryam depicts Pharaoh’s soldiers being drowned in the Red Sea as Moses and his followers look back on them; the soldiers’ rifles can be seen floating away on the waves. Is this anachronism due to unawareness on the part of the eighteenth-century painters? Or does it equate the armies of the Pharaoh with contemporary foreign groups in Ethiopia (Koselleck 1985)? The paintings carry bits of other places and epochs into the here and now, but they do so in a dialogic, interactive fashion. Many of the murals of saints are not passive; churchgoers bow to them and address prayers to them, and priests perform veneration before them as they perform the liturgy. The paintings are active; their relationship to their object is one of complex indexicality (Mercier 1997, Gell 1998, Bosc-Tiessé 2008, Belting 2014).

In Orthodox terminology, the veneration bestowed on the icon is received by the prototype (Roudometof 2014). Some people describe icon paintings as “windows” rather than representations; they show us another world. In the words of

Abune Paulos (1988: 155), “an icon is not simply a religious painting designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the holder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to humanity. . . . Behind the painting of the saint is the person of the saint, and behind the saint God Himself.” Iconic paintings, that is, are mediation points of human-divine contact.

On the doors and window blinds of churches there are many charcoal outlines of half-drawn saint and angels, the product of deacons and church students practicing their iconography (Griaule 2001). These practice etchings give us an indication of iconic religious practice in the course of being formed; they are part of a living tradition. However, I have the general impression that the veneration of icons is less prominent in Zege than, for example, in the Orthodoxies of Russia or Eastern Europe (e.g., Hanganu 2010, Luehrmann 2010). Priests give veneration to the icons on church walls during the performance of the liturgy, and carry large iconic paintings along with the *tabot* on saints’ days and Epiphany. But at these times it is the *tabot*, not the icons, that is the main focus of lay and priestly attention. Lay people, meanwhile, often carry images of saints on small pieces of card or stored in their mobile phones, but these are not sanctified and are more like reminders than icons; I have never seen anyone pray to an image on their phone. I have been told that portable, painted, sanctified icons were used by traveling missionaries, but have never known anybody to carry one.

Likewise, the souvenir paintings destined for sale may look like icons, but they do not require any special treatment. But still they condense elements from great swathes of space and time in their construction. This is achieved through traditions of skill and the recognizable styles that tie them to twelfth-century Gonder or twentieth-century Spain, all produced with dyes from Zege plants. Enskilled knowledge allows the painters to fashion materials in ways that tie them to scales far beyond immediate experience. They turn the materials into indexes—tangible evidence—of the spatiotemporal transmission of knowledge, as well as of the relationship between Zege, its saints, and its history. The finished items are then taken away to other countries, where they will become evidence of the new owners’ travels and encounters.

CONCLUSION: THE LIFE OF KNOWLEDGE

One thing that I have attempted to do in this chapter is to undermine the notion that the monasteries of Zege are necessarily conservative or backward-looking. While they are certainly regarded as guardians of history, the status of the monasteries as centers of skill and knowledge means that they tend to find themselves quite close to the unfolding of new events. At the same time, there is a clear progression of class privilege in the transmission of education and skills related to the church. As tourism has grown in economic importance, it is the sons of

churchmen who have been in positions to make the most of new opportunities. It is important to state that most of these people are not wealthy by any standards, and many have undergone extreme privations in pursuit of education. But they have nonetheless become the people who introduce outsiders to the monasteries of Zege, from which other connections may ensue.

During my last visit in 2014 electricity cables were beginning to be brought into parts of the Zege peninsula as far as Ura. Until then, the main source of electricity had been the solar panel in the churchyard of Ura Kidane Mihret. The monastery had been able to purchase the panel with income from tourism, and as a result people from the surrounding area would go there when they needed to charge their mobile phones. There is nothing incongruous about this, much as it may seem to run against the grain of monastic seclusion and withdrawal. In fact the monasteries have often been points of engagement with the present, as testified to by the crowns, shields, water jugs, and other gifts from emperors that are now displayed in the new museum that has been built on the grounds of Ura Kidane Mihret.

What is perhaps more novel is the meeting of ascetic traditions of education and painting with contemporary forms of secular education at schools and universities. While students must travel to Bahir Dar for later high school and university, the people who are able to do so often come from church traditions and maintain relationships with the church-monasteries as tour guides, as we have seen. Traditional knowledge streams do not run counter to modern education, but people who are successful or privileged in one tradition are likely to find relative success in the other.

Again, this point is less surprising once we recognize how detailed and rigorous monastic traditions of education are. This is one of the central points of the novel *Dertogada*; the scholastic heritage of the monasteries should be comparable to those of NASA and modern spy agencies. The question is then what the contemporary world would look like if reimagined from a position where Ethiopian Orthodox scholarly traditions gained their rightful place alongside contemporary science.

NOTES

1. According to Johnson (2011: 44), the famous Ethiopian painter Afework Tekle also cites Picasso as an influence (and Picasso, in turn, was heavily influenced by African art). It is quite possible that the painters in Zege are aware of this work.