

## Conclusion

*On this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.*

*On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever*

—ISAIAH 25:6–8

What is perhaps most remarkable about Orthodox practice in Zege is the degree to which fasting, prohibitions, and commensality produce an integrated ritual ecology. Orthodox practice offers structured, synchronized techniques for working on the material world and the body, and develops them into the appropriate states for the conduct of life. If the human condition is that we all live in the world of the flesh, then it behooves us to work on that world, and to mark out times and spaces where we are not completely immersed in its desires. We must dispense with the idea that the inward condition of practitioners does not matter in ritualistic systems, because it matters very much what fasting feels like: the tiredness and the happiness that practitioners describe, and the resultant effect on one's thoughts and one's soul. You work on the soul by working on the body.

The synchronized nature of fasting and feasting means that the foundations of religious practice happen on the scale of the collective, not the individual. For

better or for worse, this amounts to a powerful normative force. But within this overarching synchronicity there remains a core of autonomy that stems from the nature of fasting. As Bynum (1987) notes, few religious practices give individuals so much say over what happens to their bodies. While there is little scope for violating the fasts without attracting social opprobrium, people are quite able to increase the intensity or frequency of their fasting, or indeed to formulate their own understandings of what a particular act of fasting will achieve. As we have seen, these practices prove quite variable over the trajectory of an individual life. While it is clear that deep rifts remain in Zege from the history of slavery, diligent fasting remains a way, ultimately irrefutable, in which slave descendants can demonstrate their moral constitution and their equal status as Orthodox Christians.

In feasting, too, there are different registers of inclusion and exclusion, from the purity of the Eucharist, to the avoidance of Muslim meat but the sharing of other kinds of hospitality, to the *zikir* feasts that build relations with saints without stringent purity regulations that apply to more official rituals.

Successive Ethiopian governments and other modernizers since 1974 have opposed certain practices that they consider unproductive or harmful; the most obvious examples being large-scale funerary feasting and, with less success, the refusal to work on saints' days. But it is quite difficult to stop people from fasting, if they don't want to be stopped.

Not all prohibitions concern food, and it is important to understand fasting and food restrictions within the broader regime of Orthodox observance. But in one way or another, feeding and fasting have been the dominant idioms by which people in Zege have described how life has changed and how the really important things get sorted out. Dietary restrictions distinguish Orthodox Christians from others, while eating together and eating in memory of people and saints establish and affirm the basic obligations that are vital to existence. Refusing to eat together, on the other hand, is the ultimate form of stigma, exclusion, and fear.

We have seen that knowledge in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is closely dependent on the physical and spiritual condition of the knower. Religious poets and artists must fast in order to become channels for creation. Scholars must observe ascetic practices so that angels will guide their learning. This connection between knowledge and the condition of the body provides a clue to understanding the wider paradigm of Orthodox materiality in Zege. Prohibitions are part of the moral formation and conditioning of matter so as to make it amenable to the mediation of divine knowledge. Belief, then, is not opposed to practice but is dependent upon it.

There is one final point to make about Ethiopian traditions of knowledge: they are never complete. Ethiopian Biblical commentary does not attempt to reconcile

contradictory interpretations, but adds them one upon the other, and expects further commentaries to be added in the future (Cowley 1989). I hope that this work will be accepted in the same spirit, as a contribution to an open discussion on a topic that can never be fully known. The people of Zege have shared their food and knowledge with me, and they will always have my gratitude. I look forward to our future meals and conversations.