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Fasting, Bodies, and the Calendar

CALENDARS, BODIES, AND RELATIONS OF SCALE

Notwithstanding the decline of monastic authority in the past century, it remains the case that everyday Orthodox life in Zege unfolds, to a remarkable extent, within a religious framework. The geography of the land and the movement of people across it, regimes of labor and production, exchange and trade, and the everyday consumption of and abstinence from food are highly coordinated within the Orthodox calendar. In the introduction to this book, I showed that prohibitions around food and labor have a formative influence both on the environment and on the experience of time. In this chapter I broaden my perspective to the Orthodox calendar as a whole, and in particular to how the rhythms of feasts and fasts tie together human bodies, the productive environment, and the seemingly abstract religious calendar. The result is that meaningful, highly structured religious distinctions get sewn into the everyday fabric of experience.

Orthodox Christians in Zege maintain the importance of the calendrical feasts and fasts, in the face of secular governance and fears of Protestant expansion. This is not passive adherence to tradition but the active affirmation of a set of principles about how life should be organized: by the religious structuring of time and space, the discipline of fasting, and the observance of feasts in the names of the saints. The calendar, with its feasts and fasts, is the engine of what I call the ritual regime: that is, a system in which bodies, space, and time are mapped, divided, demarcated, and otherwise experienced in terms of the temporal geography of ritual. This is the system that connects bodies and patterns of work, exchange, and consumption to a much larger schematic vision of the world in which time and experience are comprehensible through their connection to foundational religious events.

While church attendance may be variable, fasting is the means by which the whole community participates in the ritual order. For those not attending church, the minimum requirements on a fasting day are that no animal products be consumed. Sexual activity is also forbidden. Those going to church must not eat or drink anything until the liturgy is finished, and many who do not go to church voluntarily follow the same restrictions. Priests and monks must observe every fast, meaning that for more than 250 days of the year they take no meat at all, and go without food or water for at least part of the day. So while religious labor is unevenly distributed, fasting establishes the minimal participation of every Christian in the Orthodox regime.

Interpersonal moral pressure and the mutual surveillance of neighbors do much to ensure the observance of the fasts. But it must also be said that my acquaintances in Zege describe fasting as a joyous and fulfilling activity that they perform gladly, and I know of many people young and old who sometimes perform extra fasts for specific personal reasons, on the advice of the priests who act as their confessional fathers.

The Orthodox calendar was inherited from Alexandria but developed over time to include a range of monthly saints' feasts and a close association with the seasonal patterns of northern Ethiopia (Fritsch 2001, Ancel 2005). A good deal of its current form, however, is due to the explicit Christianizing project of Emperor Zara Yaqob (r. 1434–68). As Steven Kaplan (2014) puts it, "He demonstrated an intuitive understanding of the routine and habitual in bodily practice. . . . He sought to transform the Christian experience of time so that each week, month and year became imbued with Christian content." The calendar and especially the annual and monthly feasts were developed as a deliberate plan to regulate the lives of imperial subjects as part of a broad project of power. Zara Yaqob's vision of disciplined, devout bodies synchronized in worship (and obedience) provides a template for understanding the importance of the calendar today.

This focus of temporal power at the level of bodily experience recalls Nancy Munn's account of calendrical power: "the construction of cultural governance through reaching into the body time of persons and coordinating it with values embedded in the 'world time' of a wider constructed universe of power" (1992: 109). Calendars, that is, coordinate different scales of existence: between the phenomenological, immediate life of the body and the relations within and among states and world systems.

The Orthodox calendar is the most powerful normative tool in Zege society (and therefore also, as we will see, the object whose violation most effectively demonstrates dissidence). There are twelve thirty-day months, beginning in September by the Gregorian calendar (the end of the rains in Ethiopia, associated with harvest and renewal), followed by the intercalary month of five or six days known as *P'agumén*. *P'agumén* is a period of both renewal and preparation for the new year, an *entre-temps* in which liminal things such as spirit possessions happen.

Each day of the thirty-day month is dedicated to a saint or saintly event, and which of these is observed depends largely on local tradition. In Zege, Saint Michael (twelfth of each month), Saint Gabriel (nineteenth), and Saint George (twenty-third) have special importance, among others, and on these days no work is permitted—usually this is interpreted as agricultural labor and work on the land, while shopkeepers and people in town carry on work as normal. The number of saints' days can add up, and has become one of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity's great controversies. That farmers refuse or are forbidden to work for religious reasons has come to be seen as unmodern, antidevelopmental, and harmful to national productivity. Many urban Orthodox Christians hold this opinion, as well as critics from outside: I have been told more than once by taxi drivers that the holy days were a Coptic plot to keep Ethiopia lazy and underdeveloped, and hence prevent them from fully utilizing the water of the Nile, upstream from Egypt (dams have become the quintessential, highly divisive symbol of the Ethiopian developmental state as promoted by the current EPRDF government).

Saints days may stipulate different kinds of action depending on the place, the church, and the individual. If a person has made a vow *(silet)* to a saint, she may give commemorative meals *(zikir)* on that saint's annual or monthly day (see chapter 7); likewise voluntary associations named after a saint will have their meetings (which also involve a meal consecrated to the saint, in the attendance of a priest) on these days. Each church has an annual saint's day of special importance, depending on the consecration of its *tabot.* This will be marked by a *zikir* feast for the community and is the only time, aside from Epiphany, when the *tabot* leaves the church.

We can start to see already how the Christian calendar specifies when work happens, and differentiates between work and nonwork days. This differentiation is the mechanism that produces a qualitative distinction between sacred and profane life across many axes of experience. The distinction comes into closer focus when we attend to major festivals and fasts.

There are seven major fasts in all.[1] Some fasts are more widely observed than others. Clergy are expected to keep all fasts; the usual minimum for laypeople is to keep the Lenten and the Wednesday and Friday fasts along with the three-day fast of Nineveh that precedes and prepares for Lent. Others, like the fast of *Qwiswam* commemorating the flight to Egypt, may be observed by the more knowledgeable and devout—such as those attending Sunday school—while others are less aware or involved. The clergy tends to consider these fasts optional for the laity (Ephraim 2013). But in a very real sense they also perform the fasts for the laity and on their behalf. Fasting is a collective practice that allows for different degrees of participation precisely because it is cooperative.

Christmas is celebrated on *Tahsas* 29 (usually January 7), and Easter is calculated according to various formulae, happening usually not far from Gregorian Easter. Each of these is preceded by a fast: fifty-six days for Lent, and forty-two or forty-three days for Advent (*Hidar* 15–*Tahsas* 28). The eves of Christmas and Easter are *gehad,* "vigils," in which more extensive fasting takes place (and there seems to be some disagreement between parishes in Zege as to exactly how these should be observed).

Christmas and Easter are the major feasts of the year, and they are feasts in the strict sense of the term. While some festivals involve public ceremony, Christmas and Easter mostly involve serving and consuming food in the home. They are turning points in the annual cycle of fasting and feasting, and in each case the transition from fast to feast is marked by the performance of the liturgy (itself a ritual model of the progression from fasting to feasting). Parallel to this is a rhythm at a smaller scale, as people move through the seven-day week, in which each Wednesday and Friday is a fasting day. Outside of the major fasts and feasts, then, people are still constantly moving between fasting and nonfasting times.

The calendar conditions and synchronizes bodily experience by stipulating fasts and feasts. At the same time the calendar has, over the centuries, come to mirror the seasonal changes of the solar year. As well as the comparatively obvious fact that the new year occurs straight after the rainy season (early September by the European calendar), the liturgical cycle also marks the passing of local environmental time, creating, as one church scholar described it to me, "a science of the seasons." Fritsch's account of the liturgical year makes this especially clear:

> "Alleluia (twice). The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: the hungry are satisfied. The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: the poor rejoice. The sound of the footsteps of the rain when it rains: he made the *Senbet* (Sabbath) for man's rest" (*Mezmur* chant *dems'e igerí lezinam,* sung in the first week of the rainy season). (Fritsch 2001: 307)

These rain and fertility chants and readings continue throughout the rainy season until the new year and the *Mesqel* festival, which are closely associated (Fritsch 2001: 304). *Mesqel,* the Exaltation of the Cross, has close parallels in non-Christian parts of Ethiopia and appears to be a Christian development of a preexisting festival (Kaplan 2008). Fertility imagery abounds, particularly in the yellow *Mesqel* flower that symbolizes the feast and its designation as the opening of the "Season of Flowers" (Fritsch 2001: 304). The *Mesqel* ritual as currently practiced places huge emphasis on the concept and form of the cross and the new life brought about by the Resurrection. It also draws analogies between the renewal brought by the rains and the spiritual renewal brought by the Crucifixion (Kaplan 2008).

The coordination between the religious calendar and seasonal change has local importance. Because of its coffee Zege is one of the few places in Christian Ethiopia where the harvest does not take place at the end of the rains, but some four months later, in late January. Here the mutual interdependence of the Christian calendar and the seasonal climate is clearest: coffee harvesting happens only after *T'imqet* (Epiphany) on *Tirr* 12 (January 19), regardless of when the coffee ripens. For the most part coffee picking only lasts for a week after that. No picking happens before *T'imqet* partly because tradition dictates, and partly because people are occupied with preparations for the festival and the celebration itself. After this, large numbers of farmers from the surrounding countryside head to the peninsula to pick coffee for a daily wage of twenty-five to thirty birr (USD 2.50 to 3.00) plus lunch. The landowning families pay the wage on an informal and ad hoc basis, usually to people they know. Young men from Afaf town also join in the wage labor, as do all male members of the landowning families and many females. Women also prepare food for the pickers. Many men who live outside Zege return for the picking season.

The weeklong picking season is not the optimum for coffee harvesting. The beans do not all ripen at once, but over a six-week period from mid-January to the end of February. General practice in Zege, however, is to harvest all beans in the week after *T'imqet,* regardless of their level of ripeness. This leads to a reduced quality of coffee, but is the only economical way to do it. This is largely because, one week after *T'imqet,* the day laborers from outside the peninsula need to return to work in their fields. There simply is not more time to spare. Furthermore, it is extremely time-inefficient to comb over the same land multiple times, picking only the ripe beans, and in local markets this would not lead to enough increase in price to justify the extra labor input. So the picking season is determined partially by the timing of religious festivals, partially by seasonal conditions in the peninsula and surrounding area.

The Orthodox calendar also coexists with a simple routine of market days: there are markets in Afaf on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. If one of those falls on a Christian festival, there will be no market, and the preceding market day will serve for people to buy their supplies for the feast. In fact, a great deal of market activity is dictated by the religious calendar, since livestock are one of the main trade goods: the fast, especially in Lent, means long periods of no livestock sales, while each feast, especially Easter, entails a rush of purchase and consumption. Prices rise and fall accordingly, with chicken prices roughly doubling before a feast.

This all makes it difficult to separate the religious calendar from the seasonal time of the environment, or from the local economy. The rhythms of production and those of exchange, as well as those of feasting and those of feasting, are set by a single calendrical regime. The calendar coordinates the temporality of human bodies and of the local environment together, creating a sense of unity among different scales of social existence. In this way the ritual calendar tends toward creating an encompassing, integrated regime of socioenvironmental experience. The primary mechanism of this integration is fasting.

FASTING AND EXPERIENCE

While most people during my time in Zege wanted to know if I was Christian or not, I cannot recall ever being asked about my beliefs or even if I was a regular churchgoer. But everybody wanted to know if I kept the fast—primarily taking no meat on Wednesdays or Fridays or during Lent, but also potentially on a number of other occasions throughout the Christian calendar, amounting, if you were really strict, to more than 250 days of the year spent in either partial or total abstinence from food and drink. In the eyes of most Orthodox Christians I know, certainly in the villages, if you follow the fasts you are a Christian and if you don't you are not, and that's really all there is to it. Communal abstention can shape communities as surely as common consumption (Fortes 1966). While eating produces moral registers of sharing and generosity, fasting affords an even more potent moral distinction, between those who restrain their appetites in the name of higher virtues and those who do not or do not do so correctly (as in the common denigration of the Weyto and other groups as, supposedly, nonfasters; see chapter 5).

Fasting maintains a continuous ritual vibrancy throughout the rhythm of the calendar (cf. Lambek 1992). It changes the physical condition of a collective while also marking the boundaries of that collective as a distinct group—*and* setting terms by which outsiders can be incorporated or related to. In this sense, one thing that Ethiopian Orthodox fasting does is produce Christians; or, better, fasting is a discipline by which Ethiopian Orthodox Christians intersubjectively produce one another. The material form that fasting takes—the refusal of certain or all foods at certain times—is integral to fasting's particular effectiveness because it shapes the very experience of sustenance and nutrition and of the passage of time.

Fasting and the calendar establish Orthodoxy at a prediscursive level. This point is important, since it captures much of the tenor of what daily Orthodox life is actually like in Zege. Fasting is not directly translatable into a single meaning, reason, or doctrinal exegesis. It is very difficult to produce a statement like "Orthodox Christians fast because X." There are, of course, extensive doctrinal and dogmatic explanations for why and when people should fast, although most people are only roughly aware of them. In any given situation a number of reasons could be given for a fast: to remember; for penitence; because it brings joy *(desta);* because of Mary; because of Our Lord. There is a widespread idea that fasting is necessary to tire the flesh out and so weaken its aggressive and lustful urges (Levine 1965); for others, it constitutes more of an identification with a saint or saintly event. Or one may simply do it because not to do so would attract opprobrium.

The point is that people fast regardless of which of these meanings they may choose to highlight or fix upon. It is not reducible to any of them; fasting is not a form of language. And this helps to account for the comparative lack of focus on creed in popular Orthodoxy: Christians are already doing the work of being Christian, together.

When somebody says that we fast on Fridays because of the Crucifixion, it is therefore not obvious exactly what that "because" is doing. The Amharic *sile* means "because, for, or for the sake of"—the relation it denotes is not directly causal, but describes a commemoration of, identification with, or following of the suffering of Christ, in a subordinate way. One of the things that fasts do is establish an identification between today and the archetypal event, as well as with all previous and subsequent Fridays in which the same identification will be performed. They do so not by commanding you to think of Christ's suffering (though for many this is part of it), but by telling you to reenact a small part of it, to adopt a condition of privation and denial. Fasting performs an act of allegiance and iconic-indexical connection between all those who fast and the person or act for which they fast. It is divine patronage in practice, and it shows popular Orthodox Christianity to be built on conditioned relations of loyalty and repetition.

What precisely fasting entails depends on circumstance and personal conscience. At a minimum, no animal products are to be consumed on fasting days—a rule I have seen broken only once, when a friend beckoned me into a back room and served mutton stew in the middle of the Lenten fast. Never a particularly observant person, he had grown tired of fasting and suspected that I had too, but he had to be secretive or face general disapprobation and perhaps a visit from the priest if word got out. In towns, some restaurants will now serve meat on fasting days, particularly if they have any foreign clientele, but most Orthodox Christians still avoid meat and eggs on these days.

If attending the liturgy, then you may take no food or water between the beginning of the day and the end of the service, which is 3 PM on regular fasting days and 9 AM on weekends. For those taking Communion, a minimum of fifteen or eighteen hours' total fasting is required. On Easter Saturday, the devout will take no food or water for the entire day, not even swallowing their saliva. Note that this does not efface the flesh so much as make one hyperconscious of one's body, both because you have to take care not to swallow, and because of the fatigue and thirst that you feel when performing a big fast. When I asked one young man why he was following the Saturday vigil to its full, exacting extent, he simply replied, *"yasdessital"* (It makes one happy).

Thinking about how people describe the feeling of fasting—usually in terms of a combination of tiredness and happiness—reminds us that there is an inward, more individual aspect to the practice. It is important to recognize that fasting is not simply an activity of rote obedience. Not only are there many optional fasts, or fasts of optional intensity; there is also the possibility of performing extra fasts for penance or for other personal reasons.

I have noticed that many of my friends move between periods of more and less intense fasting over the years. There is a stereotype that older people fast more and better as their fleshly urges subside, but it is noticeable that younger people often emphasize their fasting at times when other aspects of their lives are more tumultuous—when leaving school, moving to the city, flirting, or, as Malara's (2017) research shows, doing legally or morally questionable work. Over the time that I knew him, Zebirhan, a young man in his late teens, went through periods of fasting with more intensity than his friends did. None of them would eat meat on fasting days, but Zebirhan would often wait until afternoon before taking any food or water at all. This made him tired and sometimes morose, and this difficulty was part of the point. He never gave me an exact reason for his extra fasting except that he felt that it was the right and proper thing to do.

Fasting, like any religious engagement, unfolds over the trajectory of a life (Schielke & Debevec 2012). Individual Christians may choose to perform extra fasts, or may be recommended to do so by their soul fathers *(yenefs abbat),* the priest responsible for their pastoral care. This may result from the confession of sins *(nessiha)* or simply from personal desire. Hannig (2013, 2017) has shown how important this kind of fasting is for women prevented from entering church by physical ailments that make them feel insufficiently pure; similarly in Zege many women who are kept from church by work duties use fasting as a way of maintaining their devotion (see also chapter 8). The play between fasting as intersubjective, world-making discipline and a kind of devotional self-orientation that goes beyond external constraints is a key dynamic. Individual fasts can be simultaneously acts of submission to God and acts of self-mastery, asserting control over one's desires and one's life situation; this potential partially counteracts the normative weight of calendrical fasting.

FAST TO FEAST

Fasting is not really a world-denying or world-hating practice, but rather a way for people to do religious work on and through their bodies. Moreover, most fasts have as their culminating act a feast, and should not be considered without this context. There are a very large number of possible feast days *(be'al)* in the calendar—nine major feasts of the Lord and nine minor; the thirty-three feasts of Mary instituted by Zara Yaqob, as well as the monthly and annual saints' days, the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and others. But the longest and most significant fast-to-feast progression is that from Lent to Easter. Because of the length and intensity of the fast, and its more or less universal observance among Christians, it becomes the event to which shorter fasts get compared. It becomes a model in which each year Orthodox Christians reenact the salvation of the world.

By the time Holy Week arrives, the fast has been going for forty-eight days, with profound effects on the ambience and economic life of Afaf town. The lack of livestock and egg sales combined with people saving for Easter means the market has been slow, and this is compounded by the fact that we are now six or seven months into the dry season. People are tired from not eating, and not much work gets done. No drums are played in church, and priests' chants stick to the mournful register of the *zi'il,* the songs of penitence. The pop songs that usually play on radios and sound systems are replaced by the mournful drone of the *begena,* the ten-string harp said to have been played by David, whose sole purpose is the contemplation of our remorse for our sins. No marriages take place during the fast, and by the end of Lent the livestock will be extremely thin and the grass a uniform shade of yellow brown.

In the final week before Easter the general air of subdued penitence kicks up a notch. Radios begin broadcasting the story of the Crucifixion, focusing on the acts of betrayal and cruelty in the lead-up to Christ's death. Holy week (*himamat,* "suffering") is a time for *sigdet* (prostration, surrender): the performance of repeated prostrations in the churchyard, in penitence, and in commemoration of the Lord's suffering. As one man told me, you should perform 133 prostrations, for the number of times Christ was beaten. Priests are busy all week chanting in the church, but no absolution is given. During this week, especially from Thursday on, people must not shake hands or otherwise greet one another—something people have to constantly remind one another of, since greetings are so habituated.

Holy Week enacts a world without trust or redemption. It does so at the level of the most basic embodied habits, hence its power; it is very strange not to be able to greet people. This must not be underestimated: the feast of humanity's salvation begins with the production of its opposite, a world in which salvation is not possible.

Some people, further, go shoeless, and the most devout will go without food or water for the duration of Easter Saturday, isolating themselves entirely from any kind of conviviality. When asked why they do not greet one another, most people say it is because of the betrayal of Christ by Judas (or by *Ayhud*, "the Jews," although I do not think many people make the connection between the supposed enemies of Christ and any currently existing people). Equally, many perform ritual acts without knowing why, and still others are critical of this degree of ritualism. As one teenage boy told me, pointing to a friend who was barefoot, "What matters is in your heart, and being good to people. It isn't stuff like that."

None of this action would make sense without the transition into the feast, marked by the midnight service. As the young spend the night in church, learning about the Resurrection from deacons and other slightly older Christians, men get ready to slaughter and women to cook the first chicken and sheep for a very long time.

The liturgical service itself reenacts the event of the world's salvation, revolving around the performance of the Eucharist. Starting from slow chants of penitence, over three hours the service builds to the offering and consumption of the sacrament, followed by joyful song, drumming, and hallelujahs.

Easter Sunday itself is a day of lavish feasting. Families that can afford to will slaughter a sheep and a chicken, and groups of men may share the meat of a cow among themselves. Poorer families may make a stew with at least a few pieces of meat in it, and serve cheap liquor in order both to show hospitality and to disguise the quality of the food. Men move from house to house visiting their neighbors, in direct contrast to the practices of holy week, while women cook and serve guests. All who greet one another say, "*inkwan aderresen*" (Rejoice, for he has brought us across). Having fasted for fifty-five days, and intensively in the last week, makes Easter Sunday an overwhelming sensory experience. There is too much to eat and drink, along with music and incense. This excessive quality marks an association between salvation and limitless plenitude—the post-Resurrection world is as abundant as it had been barren before.

The phenomenal intensity of the Easter feast comes from the experience of having fasted. This cannot be understood without an idea of how the whole environment of Zege has been affected by the fast, and so of degree to which the fast is effective beyond the limits of human bodies. It amounts to a form of world-building: collective fasting is an ambient phenomenon and becomes a thing of the environment. Orthodoxy becomes the frame of life.

COUNTERCALENDARS

The intimate relationship between calendars and the exercise of power has been widely noted (Bourdieu 1977: 97–108, Gell 1992, Peters 2013). For Nancy Munn, who views time and sociality as coconstitutive, this power takes on an extremely intimate nature:

> Control over time is not just a strategy of interaction; it is also a medium of hierarchic power and governance. . . . Authority over the annual calendar (the chronological definition, timing, and sequence of daily and seasonal activities), or of other chronological instruments like clock time, not only controls aspects of the everyday lives of persons but also connects this level of control to a more comprehensive universe that entails critical values and potencies in which governance is grounded. Controlling these temporal media variously implies control over this more comprehensive order and its definition, as well as over the capacity to mediate this wider order into the fundamental social being and bodies of persons. (Munn 1992: 109)

Munn's critics respond that there is always a second kind of temporality that is not so dependent on cultural construction (Bloch 2012: 79–116, Hodges 2008: 406). They are probably right, but this should not detract from Munn's demonstration of how deeply social regimes of time become part of the prediscursive, embodied, intersubjective experience of living in an environment—as calendrical practice in Zege shows.

However, calendrical power is not so totalizing or so formative of experience that people cannot see other ways of doing time. The Orthodox calendar currently coexists in a partly integrated way with the government's calendar. The Orthodox dating system is widely used, although the government also works in the international Gregorian calendar. The government's calendar includes recognition both of Muslim festivals and of days of more recent national-historical importance, most notably Adwa day, which celebrates the defeat of the invading Italian armies in 1896. While many people in Zege have a great deal of national pride, they tend to ignore the non-Christian elements of the calendar as not having much importance or gravity in the unfolding of their own lives, and ultimately as being somewhat artificial. This mild incommensurability of calendars was clearest at the Ethiopian Millennium, an event that appeared to mark an inherently Christian temporality, since it referred to the birth of Christ, but was not interpreted that way.

The year 2007–08 CE was Millennium according to the Ethiopian calendar and was marked by various government-sponsored celebrations of unified Ethiopian nationhood (Orlowska 2013). The event was a centerpiece of the EPRDF's efforts to promote their secular, multiethnic (and effectively one-party) vision of modern Ethiopia (Marcus 2008), culminating with a much-publicized performance by Beyoncé at the Sheraton hotel in Addis. But my friends Menilek and Mulugeta were dismissive of the whole concept. Although it did represent two thousand years since Christ's birth, they said, it was not a proper Christian festival (that is, it did not come from Ethiopian canonical tradition) but was just a government creation. Like the celebration of victory at Adwa and the recognition of Muslim festivals, it was part of government attempts to make a unified secular national calendar, but as such it carried no legitimacy for them. Both men were from an old church family; they were not exactly traditionalists, but they had respect for the old ways, which meant especially the church's calendar. Here the EPRDF may simply be following the lead of the Derg in choosing to appropriate, rather than undermine, the Orthodox calendar in the name of modernist developmental projects (Donham 1999: 143).

Perhaps because it is so foundational, the calendar is one way that people in Zege can show dissent against the prevailing cultural order, for example, by proclaiming an alternative calendar that differs from the official one in some way. Until about a generation ago, according to *Mergéta* Worqé, there were a small number of Unctionists *(qibatocch)* in Zege. These were followers of a rival Christology to the mainstream *Tewahido,* who maintained that Christ's divinity was not originary but came from his baptism in the Holy Spirit (Crummey 1972: 14–27, Ayala 1981, Cohen 2009: 132). These people or their descendants have all since joined the mainstream. But as Tefera tells me, what people primarily remember now about the Unctionists, and what marked them as aberrant, was not just their Christology, but also the fact that they did not change the date of Christmas during a leap year, whereas the church calendar moves it back by a day. That simple discrepancy of a day every four years was enough to clearly demonstrate the Unctionists' nonconformism.

A more unusual and extreme case is that of "the Prophet Tesfa" *(nebiyy Tesfa),* as he is known in slightly mocking fashion. Tesfa is in his fifties, lives in the Zege forest, and follows a calendar entirely of his own invention. It includes forty days of Lent rather than fifty-five, and numerous other discrepancies: he counts the months differently, has an extra thirteen days' fasting for Christmas, and ignores several of the other fasts. He told us that we were currently in the year 31 AD, all time before that having been lost in sin and heresy. In addition, he told me, he eats no animals raised by others, and while he prays to God he rejects entirely the authority of the church, which he describes as built by "whores, thieves, and murderers." He harks back to what he considers an Abrahamic faith, before Christian practice became corrupted. He tried to live in a tent, like Abraham, but his family would usually make him sleep in the house. While he cheerfully explained all this to me and Tefera outside his home in the woods, a small crowd gathered to listen, incredulous and mocking. His description of his calendar was what provoked most affront, though he said plenty of other things that might have. To change the dates of the fasts was plainly ridiculous and was met with laughing disbelief.

People in Zege consider Tesfa mad, and some have told me that Tesfa's father was a *mergéta* (religious expert) who gave him too much brain medicine. It is commonly believed (and probably true) that religious teachers have various herbal medicines for the intellect to aid their deacons in their study of the texts. Tesfa's brothers were all highly intelligent, but something had happened to him. It must be said that much of his discourse was fantastic, disconnected, and occasionally messianic and paranoid. He told us about his mission from God to return Hosni Mubarak to rule over Egypt, and about his collection of secret holy texts from the Sinai, and he recounted a long and obscene story about a woman copulating with a dog, to illustrate the faithlessness of other nations.

But while Tesfa was not always fully coherent (or, at least, was not regarded to be so), he certainly knew which buttons he was pushing by denouncing almost every part of the church's timeframe. Some of his practices, like drinking only water instead of coffee or beer, were minor eccentricities, but it was his calendar that set him apart. He told me that prophets are never recognized in their own country, but that he would ascend to heaven in due course.

The calendar is not arbitrary; precision matters. I began working with Tefera after he read my doctoral thesis and we began to discuss the possibility of future research in Zege. In his reading he showed most interest in making sure I got the precise details of the calendar right. I had, for example, counted the Lenten fast as fifty-six days rather than fifty-five, following another source. (It is easy to make errors, since it is not always obvious whether a fast begins at dawn or midnight.)[2]

Correctness matters very much, because the calendar is one of the bases of the Ethiopian church's authority. Even then, there are certain disputes: in Zege, Tefera tells me, the churches of Mehal Zege and Ura are in disagreement about the start date of the Christmas fast by a matter of a day. Ura, which advocates an extra day of fasting, can thus claim to be more devout, while Mehal Zege claims to be more accurate by official church doctrine.

The calendar frames moral social life in what is supposed to be an immutable and unchallengeable way. This is not an invisible or unquestionable ideological structure, although it is a very powerful one that commands great loyalty. Control over the terms of temporal distinctions does, as Munn says, set the terms of relationship between bodies and the cosmos. But people are quite able to question and think past this framework if they so desire. In fact, because of its very formality, the slightest deviation can become a statement of rebellion. At a larger level, the coexistence of church and government calendars gives an impression of ongoing church-state relations. While governments have over the last several decades succeeded in subordinating the Orthodox Church to the state on a legal level, Christians in places like Zege have simply continued to maintain their calendar as they think right, and have even reasserted the importance of the cycle of the fasts.

TRANSIT OF THE *TABOTS*: MATERIALITY AND THE POWER OF LIFE

As with most ritual calendars, the Orthodox calendar contains within it the symbolic seeds of its own negation: certain times that show us what life is like when sanctity is not bound and contained. This is clearest on the festivals of the Exaltation of the Cross *(Mesqel),* Epiphany *(T'imqet),* and the annual local saints' days. These all share one key characteristic: they involve sacred performance in worldly space, temporarily breaking down the domains established by regular calendrical fasting and feasting.

When sacred rituals are performed outside of church bounds—especially in the marketplace—it is an occasion for extreme male exuberance, sometimes turning into violence. My first experience of this connection was *Mesqel* of September 2008 (just after the New Year's celebrations of 2001 by the Ethiopian calendar). On the eve of the festival a wooden bonfire *(demera)* was erected on the main street of the Afaf marketplace with a cross rising some four meters from the kindling. In the late afternoon the clergy gathered in a circle around the cross and began to perform the slow votive chants usually associated with the liturgy. A large crowd gathered around them, and as the prayer chants built up into faster *aqwaqwam,* groups of people began to sing and dance around drummers. The celebration built to a crescendo around sunset, and then stopped. *Abba* S'om, the local expert on exegesis, gave a sermon about the meaning of the cross ("the medicine and salvation of our flesh") and the story of the festival: the finding of the remains of the true cross on Calgary by Empress Helena, the wife of Constantine.

After that, the clergy just left. The anticlimax was palpable; a bonfire had been built but not burnt. The people of Afaf retired to their homes or to the bars to drink, and young men gathered in groups with their drums and went from house to house, dancing raucously and singing until they were paid to go away. I talked to two policemen who were, unusually, on the streets after dark because "the young ones are disturbing everyone." They made no arrests, though, and soon disappeared. As the evening drew on, the boisterousness increased. Teenagers whom I had never seen touch alcohol were drinking at the bar on the main drag, making lewd suggestions to the servant women (which were not taken very seriously). Young adult men chewed *khat* (technically forbidden to Christians but widely used by the youth of the village) while an ex-soldier sang *azmari* songs. The noise was loud enough that one family across the street had to carry an elderly relative, bed and all, to another part of the town. Despite their annoyance, there was no possibility of asking the boys to stop. Their behavior was expected, if not sanctioned. One normally mild-mannered friend of mine headbutted another man in a fight over a cigarette, drawing copious blood on both sides.

The actual lighting of the cross-bonfire felt like a deliberate anticeremony. At around three in the morning, around ten people gathered around the *demera.* All had been drinking. One lit the bonfire with a match; another bummed a cigarette from me and lit it from the flames. We sat around the fire, talking and taking naps. Many families had their own, smaller cross-bonfires that they sat around, most having sensibly gone to sleep and then woken again. There was no special ceremony around the big *demera,* but all present watched carefully to see which way it would fall—it was said that if it fell eastward it would mean good fortune for the coming year, and if westward then bad. It fell southwest, to general groans, but then one boy resourcefully jumped up and pulled the burning cross round to the east, saying that nobody need ever know.

As dawn broke, older and more devout people headed to church for the liturgy. All stopped by the grand *demera* to take some of the warm ash and make crosses on their foreheads. It made quite a contrast to the manner of the burning—I was told that the material of the cross is "our power" *(haylacchin).* There followed a relatively calm day of feasting, as the real exuberance was finished.

The structure of the *Mesqel* festival as practiced in Zege follows a pattern of the suspension and reassertion of order that is quite similar to that described by Turner (1969). A liminal phase sees the suspension of normal rules and hierarchies, followed by the reconstitution of social hierarchy. Perhaps there is subversive potential; perhaps it is just the letting off of steam and youthful aggression that actually serves the maintenance of structure. Either way, the event sets a contrast to forms of constraint and control that exist the rest of the year. However, while the wildness of young men is tacitly sanctioned during the night, it is not so clear that the burning of the cross is meant to be a reversal of the Christian order.

Shortly after my first *Mesqel* I asked why you would burn a cross, and he told me not to think of the fire as destroying, but as "illuminating" *(mabrat)* the cross. He told me that the cross was our sign *(millikitacchin)* and that, if you destroyed a photograph of me, no harm would come to my person. The idea of illuminating the cross is compelling, and consistent with the use of flame in other ritual forms to mark salvation (the flame in a censer, for example, represents Christ's Incarnation). But as with any ritual exegesis, this explanation cannot exhaust what the ritual is about. We might note that the bonfire form exists in non-Christian rituals around Ethiopia and has been adapted, in quite classic Christian fashion, into the Orthodox calendar—rituals have a history, and no exegesis will quite exhaust their meaningful potential.

This point was made clearer to me by the fact that, along with the performance of *Mesqel* eve in Afaf, Ethiopian state television was broadcasting the same ritual from Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, the central plaza that is named for the festival. Those people who stayed in the bars in Afaf were able to watch the Addis version of the ritual, and the differences are instructive. For one thing, the televised version was far more consciously theatrical. Actors played out the Empress Helena finding the cross, standing on a carnival float festooned with lights. Cameras showed foreign tourists with cameras at the front of the audience, which was separated from the performance by barricades. Dignitaries gave speeches, in English and Amharic, highlighting the depth of Ethiopia's unique culture and tradition. National flags were tied to the staffs of the choristers as they danced the votive chants; a general emphasis was placed on Mesqel as an item of national cultural heritage, which was absent in Afaf. Participatory ritual was on the way to becoming a spectacle, with a strong distinction drawn between performers and audience, rather than a focus on the transformation of the participants themselves, as in Afaf.

The strongest indication of this transformation, for me at least, was the moment when, at sunset and following the speeches of the dignitaries, a senior bishop lit the giant *demera* and the camera lingered on it as it burned. The gap between the ceremony and the lighting, which had precipitated the night of exuberance in Afaf, was gone. *Abba* S'om told me he thought this difference was just a matter of local practice and not doctrine. I would suggest also that the ritual would have made a rather unsatisfying viewing experience stripped of its climactic burning—which, as I have argued, was exactly the point of the performance in Afaf. Where I was, the gap between performance and climax was an important period of suspension. In the ritual on television, this no longer made sense. But the televised version was visible in Afaf, and presumably contributed to a sense of nationhood among those who viewed it. Certainly those I spoke to were happy that Orthodox ritual was being given due priority on state television. But the logic of the televised event was, I suggest, significantly different from that of the ritual in Afaf.

The performance of church ritual in town is not an inversion for inversion's sake. As the local ex-deacon Destaw (now an adult, with a strong church education, but no longer part of the clergy) explained to me, this was an important site for ensuring the generational continuity of Orthodoxy. The children were a major focus. Large numbers of children were present at the singing and dancing, many wearing paper crowns with references to Bible verses (Galatians 3:1: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!"; and Matthew 16:24: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"). This was one of the few times I have seen public references to chapter and verse, and was part of an explicit drive to educate children in Orthodoxy, as was *Abba* S'om's sermon, which drove home the importance of the cross as both symbol and source of power.

Sacred things cannot remain totally hidden away, or they risk losing all relevance to the collective. Access is restricted, but connection and communion must be possible; we have seen that the Holy Communion is, in practice, highly restricted. *Mesqel* is an important point of contact and transmission for the young, but it also carries with it the elements of excess that I have described. The importance of sacred contact is made even clearer in those festivals, especially Epiphany, in which the sacred *tabot* leaves its sanctuary in the middle of the church and is taken to bless the waters.

The walls of churchyards mark out a clearly differentiated geography of sacred and profane. Churches are out of town, surrounded by trees, and walled in. In the central sanctum, accessible only to priests, lies the *tabot,* the consecrated replica of the Ark of the Covenant on which communion is prepared. For a woman or a layperson to see the *tabot* is to incur certain and instantaneous divine punishment, and my friend Thomas told many stories of thieves found frozen to the spot in the act of trying to steal one.

At least twice a year, however, the *tabot* leaves the church to be carried, shrouded and with great fanfare, to the water (Lake Tana, in Zege's case). On Epiphany and on the annual day of the saint to which the *tabot* is consecrated, it is taken to the water so that the water will become holy and its blessings will be dispersed to the people. In the case of a *tabot* of Mary, there are thirty-three feasts to choose from; Afaf's Fure Maryam celebrates the Dormition (*Asteriyo Maryam,* Tirr 21). One friend told me that these saints' days are like a "little *T'imqet,*" sharing many formal characteristics, but with much more of a local flavor, commemorating religious history appropriate to the area. The monasteries in Mehal Zege, at the tip of the peninsula, have annual feasts for the founder, Betre Maryam; Afaf is consecrated to Mary and so observes one of her many days.

In the morning the priests bring the *tabot* outside—the one who carries it must have fasted, and must be dressed in fine brocaded robes (sacred things carry the symbolism of royalty). The people of Afaf, especially the young, follow the *tabot* on its procession round the church and down to the lake, and sing and shout while the priests sing the votive prayers that will bring the *tabot*'s blessing to the water. They then cast the water at the crowd, using whatever vessels available, and people with plastic containers take as much as they can carry for friends or relatives. The water is especially beneficial for the sick but is of value to all. The *tabot*'s presence, given the proper ritual treatment, empowers the water with divine blessing.

On the eve of Epiphany multiple *tabot*s proceed from their separate churches to rest together, overnight, by the lakeside. Priests and deacons escort them, shading each *tabot* with brocaded umbrellas as well as its shroud, and the people follow, singing joyfully. As in the case of *Mesqel,* a certain amount of male aggression is noticeable whenever this happens—groups of "fire age" boys (*fendata,* mid-teens to early twenties) rush around in groups, waving their *dula* staffs in the air and barging into people. As the sun sets two tents are set up, one for the *tabot*s under police guard, another for the older people who wish to keep vigil, and people walk round the village carrying candles, an extremely effective marker of the coming of the light, in the relative absence of artificial light sources.

While older people keep vigil by the *tabot*s, young men drink, sing, and chew *khat,* much as they did on Mesqel. The *T'imqet* celebrations then proceed to a fête day, with penny amusements on the streets and, formerly, marriage arrangements being negotiated. In an important example of status suspension, Abebe told me that *T'imqet* was *yegered be'al,* "the housemaid's feast," being the one festival that servant women were permitted to participate in rather than having to tend the home or place of business. Maids always come from poorer parts of the countryside and are among the lowest-status people in the village; *T'imqet* is seen as a chance for them to find husbands and, perhaps, a chance of improving their situation. All of this happens, note, while the *tabot*s are resting by the lakeside and the inner chambers of the churches lie empty. Over the next two days the *tabot*s proceed back to their resting places, accompanied by crowds of jubilant followers, and order is restored. The Afaf festival ends with the accompaniment of the *tabot* of Saint Michael back to Wanjeta village, out in the farmlands, so people trace the geographical movement of the *tabot* from its place in church, to the meeting place at the waters, and back again. They follow the seat of divine power across the land, marking out its religious contours and making clear the relationship among the different churches.

These festivals have associations with both fertility and aggression, which we should probably understand together as aspects of the worldly condition of the flesh, which is most fully expressed feasting. The relationship between repletion and arrogance or aggression is paradigmatic and, in some accounts, one of the main reasons for the importance of fasting (Levine 1965, Malara 2017).

Liminal times are especially important in the relationship between sanctity and the environment. *P'agumén,* the short intercalary month, falls at the end of the rainy season in early September, straight before the renewal of the new year and the harvest festivities that have for centuries been tied into the framework of the Christian calendar. Those five days are neither really in the old year nor yet in the new. On the Zege Peninsula on Lake Tana in northern Ethiopia, it is said that this is one of the few times that *zar* spirits tend to descend, as if the boundaries between human and spirit worlds have been suspended like the boundaries between years and seasons (the other times are at funerals and during the annual feasts of Saint Michael, the subduer of demons).

P'agumén 3 is Archangel Raphael's day. Of the multitude of saints' and angels' days, it is the only one to fall in the intercalary month. On this day and this day only Raphael makes holy the rain and the water of the lake. Children dance naked in the streets of the village of Afaf, absorbing blessing, and adults head to the shallows of Tana to bathe and wash their clothes for the new year.

Holy water is usually associated with churches. Either it is made holy by the prayer of priests, or if a sacred source is found by chance, then a church will be built on that spot (Hermann 2012). But on Raphael's day, the water of the environment itself turns into blessing. This is not normally possible precisely because blessing, that elusive and potentially dangerous quasi-substance, must be contained and regulated within the structures of the church. It takes the authority of angels at the special in-between time to extend this blessing to the wider landscape. In the night, in the privacy of people's homes, *zar* spirits emerge in those they possess. Usually they come only at funerals and on the annuals feasts of Archangel Michael, the angel of mastery over the demonic.

Raphael is not mentioned in the sixty-six-book Bible as used by Protestant Churches, but he appears in Enoch and Tobit, Deuterocanonical texts that are included between New and Old Testaments in the eighty-one-book Bible of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. An intermediate figure from intermediate books, the archangel links people to blessing, and hence to the power of an encompassing reality, through the local environment and the contact of water on and in bodies. Intermediate times such as *T'imqet* eve and Raphael's day have profound spatial consequences. They temporarily reorder relationships between bodies, environment, and spirits, and so, by way of contrast, make visible the distinctions and divisions that exist the rest of the time.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has aimed to show how pervasively the Orthodox calendar shapes everyday life in Zege, and in particular how it brings bodies, the environment, and Christianity into a single spatiotemporal framework. The calendar stipulates when and where people should fast, feast, and work, and denotes specific fasts and feasts as commemorations of particular events and personages from religious history. This system is remarkable in its pervasiveness, especially because it appears at odds with secular government ways of organizing time and space. This continuing adherence is possible in large part because Orthodox Christians consider fasting so important: as a discipline, as a practice of integration, as a mode of group formation, and as the moral grounding of any kind of religious life. The fast is as meaningful and as available to the wildly unobservant as to the devout, and to marginal people as much as to grandees. It can be practiced with deep and educated reflection, or with the certainty of habit. It can tie one to the church, but also offer a space of independent practice in which to assert control over one's person.

Fasting is also strongly normative. It creates a simple binary of fasting and nonfasting by which whole worlds can be ordered. But this normative force is never quite total, and in Zege we see multiple cases of people resisting or debating the precise terms and time frames of fasting. While the fast is ordinarily associated with the division of space and time into spiritual and worldly, there are moments when blessing spills out into the world, and a less-structured existence briefly becomes palpable. But it is the nature of fasting as abstinence, as a practice that marks and acts out different kinds of body-time, that makes the calendar such an enveloping and immediate presence.

NOTES

1. The seven fasts in chronological order are:

    1. *Qwisqwam,* forty days commemorating the holy family's exile in Egypt.
    2. The fast of the prophets, forty-three days.
    3. The fast of Nineveh, three days preceding Lent.
    4. The great fast, *Abiy S'om,* fifty-five days of Lent.
    5. The fast of the Apostles.
    6. The fast of salvation: kept by all on every Wednesday and Friday of the year, except from Easter to Pentecost and on Christmas and Epiphany, should they occur on such a day.
    7. The fast of the Assumption *(Filseta).*

Of these the great fast, the fast of Nineveh, the fast of salvation, and the fast of the Assumption are generally compulsory for all, while others are only compulsory for monks and priests (Fritsch 2001: 83–84).

2. The Lenten fast comprises three parts: the fast of Heraclius (seven days), the fast of Christ (forty days), and the Pasch (eight days; Fritsch 2001: 177).