
Concrete, Bones, and Feasts

A predominant narrative in Zege identifies the decline of nobility and their hospitality mores as the most tangible local outcome of the past several decades of political change. For many, funeral feasts known as *tezkar* were the emblematic practice of this old social regime and the primary means of establishing morally recognizable status over generations. Feasting for the dead was the chief means of reconstituting moral hierarchy (by establishing the deceased and their relatives as hosts and benevolent feeders of others, with the implicit or explicit imprimatur of the church) as well as of managing relations between the living and the dead.

Memories of *tezkar* feasting contrast with a recent trend in Zege of building concrete tombs for the deceased. The rise of concrete graves happened more or less in parallel with the decline of *tezkar*, starting from the late Haile Selassie era, until the practice was forbidden in 2006. The reason given for the ban, issued by the local churches, was that the concrete graves were filling up the churchyards, and leading to disputes over graveyard plots. This chapter will show how these disputes over material memorials represent wider questions about the material remains of the dead and the use of these remains to advance the status of the living. Concrete graves brought deep-seated dilemmas to a head: about the relationship between body and soul, but also between universal Christian salvation and the earthly political presence of the church.

The old practices of *tezkar* feasting had come under concerted attack by successive modernizing governments as irrational and backward, and indeed their competitive nature could be ruinous, as a local church scholar *Mergéta Abbi* explained to me (see also Messing 1957, Mersha 2010). The concrete graves represent a shift in the material register of memory and status, but they were an innovation that

raised their own significant political-spiritual problems: they were too durable and emphasized the material remains of the deceased instead of the soul's progression to heaven. Their rise and fall offer invaluable insight into transforming relations among churches, people, and land as they have played out in material history.

A society's relations with its dead go a long way toward defining its relations with its past and its land; in particular, remembrance and death ritual tend to be integral to the reproduction (or transformation) of hierarchy (Bloch & Parry 1982). In this light, the comparative weakness of ancestors and lineages in Orthodox Ethiopia is striking, and creates rather different contours of memory and political reproduction than are found elsewhere in Africa. There is a case for saying that the Orthodox Church takes over much of the organization of death and spatiotemporal continuity that elsewhere in Africa is the province of kin groups (Hoben 1970, 1973). This is not to say that kinship lacks importance in Amhara social relations; it is a primary concern for everybody in Zege. Rather, kinship relations and relations to the church exist in a state of often uneasy compromise between universalistic doctrine and the reproduction of class divisions. Many of these tensions come to prominence in the graveyard and in disputes about what constitutes legitimate mediation between life and death.

THE *TEZKAR* DYNAMIC (SACRIFICE,
HOSPITALITY, STATUS)

*A poor man's tezkar, a drunken leper.
(Both are equally unappealing.)*

—ETHIOPIAN SAYING,
RECORDED BY ROGER COWLEY

With the caveat in mind that this is a study of how *tezkar* is remembered now, not of the historical specifics of its practice, it is at least possible to say that *tezkar* feasts have become, for many of the men whom others recognize as authoritative commentators, a condensed symbol of the way things were before the Derg, before Federalism, and before the police and the *qebellé* office came to Zege. The place of feasting in local memory is doubly significant because the word *tezkar* itself describes a way of remembering, from the same root as *zikir* (memorial feasts for a saint; see chapter 7). The *tezkar* was a memorial practice, closely associated with the funeral services performed by the church, as we will see. To associate *tezkar* with a disappeared past is to say that we remember differently than we used to; our very means of knowing life and death and time are not what they were.

One of the threads of continuity between Ethiopia's Imperial, Derg, and Federal regimes since the start of the twentieth century has been the drive toward modernization, understood to be embodied in the more effective aspects of Euro-American techniques of science and governance (Clapham 1969, Donham

1999, Andreas 2012). For Orthodox Christians in Zege one of the most noticeable aspects of this modernist ideology has been the consistent pressure against funeral feasts on the grounds that these were backward, extravagant, economically irrational, and potentially ruinous. The *tezkar* has special importance across Orthodox Ethiopia and has traditionally entailed the bereaved giving a large feast for their neighbors on the fortieth day after death (Mersha 2010: 881–82). Messing (1957: 485–86) reports that the fortieth day was considered the first on which the soul could be released from purgatory, and describes the feast as “the greatest single economic consumption in the life cycle.”

As a result of this concerted government opposition, *tezkar* feasts today are small affairs for family and neighbors, nothing like the immense tournaments of value described by Messing in which a feast-giver could easily bankrupt himself. The decline of *tezkar* provides for many people in Zege a narrative of the transition from Haile Selassie’s time to the present. This narrative expresses a decline in traditional authority, hierarchy, and values, and their replacement by something as yet uncertain. Many people in Zege, particularly but not only elites, associate the resulting decline in funeral feasting with a broader decay of hospitality as the basis for morally legitimate sociality.

This narrative of loss provides the context for the *buda* crises described in the previous chapter: the decline of the feasts that were the received media for the perpetuation of status meant that new status uncertainties were experienced in terms of hospitality and the serving of food itself became dangerous. These days, people say, you do not want to accept food from your neighbors in case they are *buda* (at worst, this could kill you). Serving *t’ella* beer, so Tefera tells me, is considered relatively safe, since it arouses less jealousy. We can understand this narrative as indicative of a broader decoupling of ritual legitimacy from political power. But what has declined is not Orthodox liturgical ritual itself, which remains integral to life in Zege, but the degree of integration between Christian ritual and local political-moral hierarchies.

According to Tefera and to the recollections of *Mergéta* Worqé and *Memhir* Abbi, in Haile Selassie’s time any man of any standing at all had to throw a *tezkar* feast at least once in his life, usually upon the death of his father. If he lacked the resources at the time of death, he might wait years until he had gathered enough to hold a sufficiently splendid feast. Such events could involve the slaughter of fifty cattle or more, and one elder told me of feasts that would serve every one of the several thousand people in Zege. A feast of that size would be referred to as *neguse tezkar*, “the *tezkar* of kings,” after the idea that the death of an emperor should be followed by a feast to feed the whole country. This imperial comparison, which *Mergéta* Worqé makes explicitly, helps to clarify the logic of *tezkar*: the political ruler feeds his dependents, and so shows the benevolence and generosity proper to a powerful man. Or actually, his successor feeds them, and so claims the

legitimacy of the one in whose name he hosts the feast. Today it remains vitally important to feed guests at a funeral, but these events are now much more modest, and the expenses are in many cases covered by *iddir* mutual aid groups (see below), which exist for that purpose.

Tezkar entailed the slaughter of cattle: at least one, but as many as possible. What people remember about the *tezkar* of old is their lavishness. Even the most destitute people on the peninsula, Tefera tells me, would be fed from the final morsels of the feast. On a larger scale, when an emperor died, his *tezkar* was supposed to feed the entire country. Tefera, who is the son of a church dignitary, describes *tezkar* as a sort of noblesse oblige, emphasizing how even the scraps of the feast would not go to waste but would be fed to the beggars and other poorest and meekest people of Zege. *Tezkar* meant that one could not legitimately become rich without performing at least one great act of generosity and feeding—basically, it declared that the powerful were subject to the code of hospitality and generosity.

It matters very much that the medium of this generosity is food, because this establishes the accepted medium for morally appropriate hierarchical social relations. Much of this logic remains in place—a moderately successful merchant friend of mine complained to me about the burdens of laying on his daughter's christening feast because of the weight of social expectation—particularly since this man was an outsider and had to work doubly hard to establish himself as a good Zegeña and a father of children.

These funeral feasts, especially in their lavishness, closely resemble similar practices from any number of other societies in which a degree of hierarchy is present (Hayden 2009). The dispersal of vast amounts of surplus wealth in the name of status or glory is a phenomenon often remarked on (Bataille 1991), and funerals seem to be a particularly significant occasion for these events. Maurice Bloch's explanation is that these feasts serve to transform the mortality of powerful individuals into transcendent forms of power—dynasties, lineages, and eventually states (Bloch & Parry 1982, Bloch 2008). To eat in the name of a dead man (it is usually a man) is quite different than accepting hospitality from a living person, because the object of the feast, stripped of his biological qualities, is an identity, potentially stable over time: something like a god (in Orthodox society every memorial feast resonates strongly with the Eucharist). Hence the excessiveness of the feast: it celebrates something that tends toward eternity (see chapter 7, Feuchtwang 2010).

This theoretical generalization gives a useful starting point for thinking about why funeral feasts are important for turning temporal power into something more established and transcendental. However, in the cases described by Bloch (Madagascar) and Feuchtwang (China), funeral feasts contribute to a system in which ancestors have paramount authority and are thought to actively participate in the lives of the living. Here Amhara is quite different. The descent system is

cognatic (inheritance can be traced through the mother or father), meaning that it is almost impossible to delineate clear descent groups (Täklä Iyäsus 2014: 30).

Rather than ancestors, the only people who can approach sacred postmortem status are holy people and saints, beatified by their good works, by their extreme acts of devotion and asceticism, and especially by their defense of the faith. Other humans cannot involve themselves in the affairs of the living after they die, but pass on to the next world. This would seem to indicate that, in contrast with Madagascar and many other parts of Eurasia, it is the church and not kinship that decides how the status of the dead can shape and authorize the affairs of the living. However, the importance of *tezkar* feasting shows that powerful families have consistently attempted to legitimize their own status through mortuary and remembrance practices. As this chapter will show, the tension between church remembrance practices and the wishes of families remains a key issue today, although the terms and media of remembrance practice have shifted away from funerary feasting and toward the politics of gravestones.

Zege adds an extra element to the *tezkar* feasting, which I have not seen attested elsewhere: the family may slaughter a sheep upon the grave of the deceased, allowing its blood to fall on the burial earth. Consistent with other interpretations of death, this was explained to me as a way to help the soul away from this world, as a form of atonement. The ensuing communal consumption of the sheep then re-forms community bonds in a manner consistent with the practice for remembering saints (Kaplan 1986: 8). The practice also contains clear analogical links to the salvific power of the blood of Christ. This is understood as further effecting the separation of the soul from this world, and trying to make sure that it is free from sin as it leaves. But any memorial sacrifice in this area is still understood to demonstrate the status of the man who makes it. It demarcates him as having wealth but also as putting that wealth to moral use. Zege's *tezkar* sheep-sacrifice indicates the depth of association between local sacrificial practices as tools for the reproduction of status and mainline Christian ritual. At least as it is understood in Zege, *tezkar* has everything to do with the expiation of sin as well as the competition for status.

Tezkar and related sacrificial practices are marked as morally positive—and, I would suggest, capable of mitigating the sins of the deceased—because they are socially productive. They have their clear counterparts in examples of “bad sacrifice” that invert the principle of generosity. One example would be the sacrifice of the slave described in chapter 4. Another, as told to me by Tefera, is that rich households sometimes, as part of the *tezkar*, slaughtered an ox in their own house, so that the blood ran across the threshold. This was said to enhance their own longevity rather than sustaining the community in helping the soul of the deceased. These “inverted” sacrifices are selfish, and by opposition they declare what a sacrifice ought to be: generous, community-minded, and outwardly connective.

Another key memorial mode, which continues today, is the use of *fukera* (bragging, praise songs) to praise the deceased and sing their accomplishments. *Fukera* is understood to have no religious significance, but to be something that wealthy people can do to enhance their status. *Fukera* is performed by hired specialists, and if done well makes for an entertaining theatrical performance. But it is also, in my experience, often treated with a degree of ironic cynicism from the audience. *Fukera* can be performed during a funeral, before the corpse is buried (or sometimes at weddings and christenings to sing the praises of the families involved). After the most recent funeral performance I witnessed in Zege, a friend commented to me as we were leaving, “That guy was a huge *buda*. The family just hired the *fukera* because he was rich.”

This criticism does not seem to be confined to recent events. *Mergéta* Worqé volunteered to Tefera and me that he could remember many examples of men who were slave traders in life hiring people to sing songs of their greatness and generosity. He told us that some people even stole parts from saints’ hagiographies and had them presented as their own stories or those of their family.

Fukera is a display for the community but does not leave any lasting mark on the landscape. Likewise, *tezkar* did not require monuments or other lasting physical memorials to the dead. The feasts produced continuity of hierarchy through feeding, which would have lasting effects in the memories of the attendants, but would leave no lasting mark on the landscape. As such, they did not bring powerful men into open conflict with the church’s monopoly on the treatment of the dead and the intergenerational continuity of the landscape. After the fall of the Derg, a new fashion for concrete graves would bring quite new and problematic questions of memorialization and legitimacy.

THROWING OUT THE BONES: HUMAN REMAINS AS
DUST, AND THE SOUL’S JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

You bury a new corpse by digging up an old one.

—ETHIOPIAN POPULAR SAYING,
RECORDED BY ROGER COWLEY.

Two months or so into fieldwork, my friend Tomas had learned enough about the sort of work I was trying to do that, when an elderly neighbor of ours died, he knew that I would want to attend the funeral. To do so would also be an unequivocally good act on my part; attending funerals is the key marker of social participation and belonging in Amhara Orthodox society. Participation, in turn, and attempting to act like the people around you, not only by conforming to custom but also by engaging in local social networks, were the surest way for me to gain people’s approval. This becomes paramount in moments of loss, as people emphasize their remaining social ties ever more strongly, so attending funerals becomes

the most significant indicator, for locals, that a person is a member of their group (A. Pankhurst 1992: 188, Kaplan 2003a: 645). Attendance is ensured by *iddir* funerary associations, which I describe in more detail below.

People were gathering in the town center to carry the corpse, shrouded in patterned cloth, to church. There was a noticeable divide in mood: while close family members, especially women, were wailing and dancing around the body, making ostentatious displays of grief, the rest of the crowd was casual, chatting and joking as if this were any ordinary social event—which, in a sense, it was, for I would attend six more funerals in the next three months.

The funeral party arrived at the church, and the priests and monks assembled around the body to begin the mortuary rites (*fiṭhat*). I was called away from the ritual with the nonrelated men to another part of the churchyard to dig the grave. The mood around the new grave was light. There was one shovel, and men were sharing the work according to no particular prescription. When we were about two feet down into the earth, one of the younger men pulled out a bone and asked, “Does this happen in your country?” We had hit upon a previous grave, about twenty years old by my amateur reckoning. His tone was casual, and he nonchalantly tossed the bone away, but the question and his manner of asking indicated that this was not an entirely unremarkable or unproblematic situation. Further bones were simply thrown away like the first as we came to them, including some fragments of skull, until the grave was eventually deep enough to receive its new tenant. I would frequently think back to this moment throughout the rest of my fieldwork as people’s attitudes to death and loss became more apparent to me. Their blasé treatment of the human bones now seems to me an instance of a much wider discourse of death and absence. Above all, it indicates that the remains had been deindividuated: whatever there was of a person in them before, it resided there no longer.

The lack of solemnity among the gravediggers is significant. Attendees’ behavior is far less important than the fact of their presence. Richard Pankhurst (1990: 195) confirms that it has historically been the case that what counts at funerals is presence. The presence of the living is particularly important in light of the absence of the deceased, and the gravediggers’ treatment of the bones they unearthed is a stark demonstration of that absence. In tossing away the bones, the men were behaving in a manner perfectly in line with Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine as expressed to me by the priests who disapproved of concrete graves. They treated the bones, and the site of the earlier grave, as if they were nothing special; or at least, they nearly did. For one man did at least consider it notable and worth asking me what we did in such circumstances in my own country. I have since found out that at least some of my friends feel that, given the choice, they would rather not have someone else buried where their bones lie, and that concrete tombs would be a good way of ensuring this did not happen.

As the funeral drew to a close, the body was brought to the grave and placed inside as the priests continued to chant. The men who dug the grave refilled it, and then placed a ring of rocks, fist- to head-sized, around the grave. Looking around, I thought it was hard to tell which of the nearby rocks marked previous graves and were now disarranged, and which were strewn randomly. Aside from the ring of rocks, no marker was placed on the grave.

Finally, on a signal from one of the priests, the entire congregation sat or squatted for a moment in silence. This, I was told, is called *igzi'o*, and is the moment that the soul leaves the body, the first step of a journey to heaven that requires seven further ritual services to complete—after three, seven, twelve, twenty, thirty, forty, and eighty days. This was a striking and profound moment, the only point of silence in the whole ceremony, and the only time at which all in attendance acted in unison. My questions at the time revealed that everyone present understood this as the moment of the soul leaving, and found the *igzi'o* to be a potent marking of this event.

After the funeral the entire party retired to a tent set up in the compound of the bereaved family. This would stand for three days and allow mourners, friends, and well-wishers to gather and pay their respects and express their grief, but most importantly to demonstrate their presence: nonattendance at the funeral tent, unless one is absolutely unable to, will often be taken as a severance of friendship. As with the burial, while close family members, especially women, displayed their grief, much of the atmosphere was jocular. Men chatted and played cards, respectful but not overly somber. What mattered was that they were there.

The term for mortuary rites, *fit'hat*, is cognate with the Amharic *fetta*, to release (A. Pankhurst 1992: 191), and is understood as such by people in Zege: in the sense both of releasing the deceased from her sins and of releasing the soul from this world and from its bodily confines (Merawi 2005). The rite separates bodily things, which are tangible but will decompose, from spirit, which is permanent but elsewhere. For each *fithat* service the family of the deceased must make a payment to the clergy—in Zege, usually an amount of *injera* bread or *t'ella* beer, specified according to the occasion, which accounts for a vital part of the livelihood of the clergy. (According to *Mislené Fantahun*, the *Mes'hafe Ginzet* [Book of Remembrance] stipulates three jugs of *t'ella* and thirty *injera* to the church *mahber* association on day thirty, with one jug of *t'ella* and ten *injera* to those who perform the memorial liturgy; on day forty, it is four jugs of *t'ella* and forty *injera* to the *mahber*, and again one and ten to the liturgists.) Here is also where the much-reduced *tezkar* feast comes in, associated with the fortieth-day *fithat*. The exchange of food and drink for funeral services makes remembrance a public, shared affair. It connects the family's grief and remembrance with the process of stripping the soul of its burdens and assisting it to heaven, and makes salvation a shared enterprise.

TECHNOLOGIES OF REMEMBRANCE AND
GRAVEYARD POLITICS

Every funeral I attended in Zege ended with the deceased being buried in a grave marked only by a ring of stones. All baptized people are buried in the churchyard, although there is no single area designated for graves, and priests tell me that unbaptized children are buried just outside the church walls. The markers used are volcanic rocks from a volcanic lake, and so graves built in this manner soon become indistinguishable from surrounding areas. The stones are no more than twenty centimeters in diameter, and the churchyards see rapid vegetation growth every year in the rainy season. The result is that graves, which already lack identifying markers of the occupant's identity, merge quite quickly into their surroundings.

While I was surveying graves in the Ura Kidane Mihret churchyard, Abebe pointed out to me the rough area where his young mother had been buried some five years before. He had no idea of the exact location. It was a poignant moment, as we had discussed his mother several times in the previous years. He told me he would have liked to see the grave, although I must have partially influenced this by asking in depth about burial practices, and taking him with me to catalogue the graves.

My main reason for examining the churchyards was the presence, in each of the church-monasteries of Zege, of a significant number of concrete graves. These took the form of raised oblong blocks, with the deceased's name, birth date, and death date scratched in by hand while the concrete was still wet. They often also had some kind of metal cross embedded at the head. I found thirty of these graves in the yard of Fure Maryam, the nearest church to the local market town, a similar number in Ura Kidane Mihret in Zege proper, and ascertained that there were also several concrete graves as far as the Mehal Zege monasteries on the tip of the peninsula. Most of these graves were constructed between 1991 and 2006 by the European calendar, from the downfall of Communism until a local church edict was passed forbidding any further construction.

There are obvious practical grounds for outlawing concrete graves. Churchyard space is limited and the graves would quickly choke the church lands if allowed to proliferate. According to some interlocutors in Afaf, the problem came to a head when people began trying to stake out plots for graves in advance, causing widespread conflict, and the situation became unmanageable. But there is a separate discourse against the graves. As Abebe explained to me, the priests of Ura Kidane Mihret had turned against concrete graves "so that it does not become modern" (*zemenawí indayhon*). The traditional quality of the churches—their similarity to their past selves—is a key part of their status. As a priest explained to me in Mehal Zege, the most remote part of the peninsula, concrete graves are "what they do in town. It is not done here." This was an appeal to propriety, and to a pervasive local

understanding that in Zege the traditional and the holy are isomorphic. Zege has retained its holy status, and the income that derives from tourism and pilgrimage, by preserving its church traditions.

Finally, his companion, an older priest who had been listening to us, made reference to the Bible, “Dust you are, and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19), for a theological explanation of the impropriety of concrete graves. Bodily dissolution, not physical permanence, was the proper end of a Christian life. Pankhurst and Aspen (2005: 873) attest that this is generally true of Christian Ethiopia: “According to an old Christian custom, the graves are deprived of inscriptions or other signs identifying the defunctes. In the case of important persons, including emperors and high ecclesiastics, the identity of remains is usually preserved by the local tradition only. . . . Devout Christians, both nobles and commoners, were completely ‘depersonalized’ in their corporal death (this being ‘balanced’ by the hope for eternal life of the soul).”

Mergéta Worqé provides key insight on the value of the body and burial site after death. As well as saying that concrete graves contradict the *Mes’hafe Ginzet*, the Book of Remembrance, he told me that bodies were to be buried wrapped in a rough palm mat with its sharp edges toward the corpse; a symbol of penitence and of the fact that the body does not travel with the soul after death. In addition, it was not Orthodox for families to mark out burial spaces for their members, as this would emphasize the remains. However, there was strong demand for family members to be buried together, and this stricture was usually relaxed.

There are examples in Ethiopia of graves and human remains given high public importance. One is the history of saints’ relics (Kaplan 1986), which I discuss below, and another is the practice of building mausoleums or elaborate tombs for emperors and for wealthy and famous people, which is most noticeable in Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie has a magnificent tomb within his eponymous cathedral in Addis, and the graveyard contains monuments for the resting places of a number of major figures from twentieth-century Ethiopia, including the singer Tilahun Gessesse and the former prime minister Meles Zenawi. Emperor Menilek has his own grand mausoleum under Bata Maryam monastery in Addis. The practice of building mausolea for emperors dates to the 1600s but substantial grave building seems to have been restricted to emperors and some holy people (Pankhurst & Aspen 2005: 873). In the largest church of Bahir Dar, near Zege, there are marble statues and tombs for some of revered monks who were associated with the church. As a friend in Bahir Dar told me, “only rich people and heroes” receive such monuments in the key churches, highlighting the inequality among the dead that material monuments can produce. What is more, many people I have spoken to in both Addis and Bahir Dar have been highly critical of these inequalities in burial practice. The priests in Zege certainly considered tomb-building a distinctly urban, and hence suspect, practice.

As far as I have been able to establish by counting graves and recording the dates inscribed on them, concrete graves proliferated in all seven churches in Zege after the fall of the Derg in 1991, although there are occasional examples extant from the late Haile Selassie era. From this time until the outlawing of concrete graves in 2006, I estimate that one-fifth to one-seventh of the people who died in Zege were buried in such graves. This demonstrates a widespread desire for these kinds of graves as opposed to the standard unmarked ring of rocks. I have been told by Abebe and by priests that some people now mark graves by planting a tree, but it was difficult to find many examples of such trees. That they thought of this detail, however, does indicate an assumption that people desire some kind of indicator of the place in which the remains of the deceased lie. As my friend Addisu put it, “you know how we carry photographs of each other? Well it’s just like that, so you have something to remember with, if you have the money.”

A gravestone points to the actual remains of the deceased. It declares that they have some significant physical remnant in the environment. Because it bears the occupant’s name, it states that something of the unique identity of that person persists in their bodily remains. Yet the priest’s citation, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” describes a disavowal of human remains as a legitimate medium of proximity. The standard practice of unmarked graves enacts and reinforces this position, as graves, and hence the remains they contain, quickly devolve into indistinction. Where *tezkar* used to provide a form of intergenerational transmission of status—a kind of living memorialization mediated by food to the bodies of the living—the concrete grave operates in a whole different register of physical-symbolic continuity, external to the circles of food and feeding that constitute legitimate hospitality and power, and so external to the cycles of transmission of life. Gravestones introduce massive nonorganic elements into the life of remembrance, and so completely change the temporality of life and death—if nothing else, by hanging around and blocking up the graveyard.

The durability and individuation of gravestones contrast with *tezkar* as a mode of transmitting status. At the same time, it sits uneasily with the more properly religious side of funeral ritual, which focuses on effecting the separation of body and soul and the denaturing of the body so as to assist the soul on its journey to heaven. When a person dies, a family member will block all orifices of the corpse with material, tie the big toes together, and wrap the body in fine white cloth (Kaplan 2003a: 645). Stopping up the body effects a closure analogous to the bodily restrictions surrounding the Eucharist (Hannig 2013); it is only in death that the separation of spirit from the world of organic continuity can be achieved. The burial is held as soon as possible after death, and friends who asked me about English funeral practice were shocked to hear that we might preserve the body for

a week or more before burial, and even leave it open for viewings by the mourners. As the next section shows, funeral practice aims at a complete denaturing of the remains of the body, in the name of establishing proper separations between the worlds of the living and the dead.

As important as the treatment of the deceased is the way that the living anticipate their own deaths and funerals as part of their imagination of a fulfilled life. Both aspects are served in important ways by funerary associations. In Zege as elsewhere in Amhara the institution of *iddir* funerary associations is critical to the arrangement of proper funerals (Pankhurst and Damen 2000, Solomon 2010). Members make a monthly contribution to the pot, which is used to pay for funerary expenses incurred by any member. Just as important, *iddir* members attend the funerals of their fellows. *Iddir* ensures that priests are paid, food is served to mourners, and mourners will attend, the crucial aspects of any funeral. Tomas explained to me that to be too poor to be a member of an *iddir* would be one of the worst things imaginable, since it would mean that nobody would attend your funeral. It would also mean that priests would perform only minimal rites, but he made it clear that it was people's attendance that mattered.

To have an unattended funeral is to live a life unrecognized and unsocialized. It means you have established no meaningful connections and none of the status or respect that would compel people to attend and commemorate you. What people seek in their own funerals, and what the *iddir* ensures, is not just that their soul will be assisted to heaven, but that they will be recognized as having lived as part of the community. Often, indeed, people emphasize this recognition more than their salvation.

The *iddir* pays for food to serve to guests at the tent, which ensures that they will come, and establishes the deceased as host and therefore a person of honor and a feeder of others. Since *iddir* membership is inexpensive, this ensures that most people can be mourned with enough hospitality to establish basic respectability. Alula Pankhurst and Solomon Dejene present *iddir* as having originally been a response among Gurage migrants to urbanization—a form of solidarity to replace kinship ties in situations of alienation. Informants in Zege now regard *iddir* as an institution of perennial importance and of social continuity, in the face not of urban diffusion but of the dissolution of hierarchies based on *tezkar*. *Iddir* organizations participate to some extent in the logic of *tezkar*, which says that funeral recognition is the basis of good social life, and that feeding mourners is the proper way to ensure this recognition. *Iddir* societies make at least a portion of this recognition—and, thus, a foundational level of dignity—available to all but the poorest and most marginal. In this it reflects a key dynamic of the functioning of hospitality ideology: there may be bigger hosts and smaller hosts, but so long as most people can be a host in their own domain, they are able to experience their place in society as nonhumiliating (see chapter 7).

SAINTHOOD, ANCESTRY, AND THE REMAINS OF
THE PAST

We have identified two foci of memorial mediation: that of hosting and feeding, and that of the treatment of remains. Each plays a part in the work of long-term habitation and legitimacy, especially in competing attempts to establish inter-generational status. To a large degree, these are questions of ancestry, which for a number of reasons play out in quite distinct fashion in Orthodox Ethiopia. A major reason for this is the role of saints and other powerful figures as exemplary forebears (Bandak 2015). I have said that most exceptions to the disregard for human remains are in cases of heroism, especially emperors and holy men. Such figures can become key connectors to the past, and Kaplan (1986: 2–5) recounts several stories from hagiographies of a saint's bones being fought over by communities seeking the status and legitimacy those remains would confer.

In many parts of Africa, the burial places of ancestors' bones are central to how social collectives establish claims to autochthony and to a sense of continuous inhabitation of the land over successive generations (Bloch 1971, Cole 2001, Fontein 2011). Bones here stand metonymically for all that is most permanent in the person and, by extension, the lineage. They are physical remnants of the past that people can relate to and venerate, and that indicate how the living can expect to one day be absorbed into a wider whole after their death.

In Orthodox Amhara, by contrast, not only is there no ancestor veneration; there are no lineages. There is no sense that the ghosts of the dead return to haunt the living—the work of *fithat*, if successful, makes sure of that. Descent is cognatic, reckoned through the father and the mother, which prevents the emergence of distinct lineage groups, meaning that no particular group of people has exclusive claim to any one forebear (Hoben 1973). And while descent is crucial for the transmission of land and property rights, the Orthodox Church performs many of the functions that elsewhere would be performed by descent groups: establishing social continuity beyond the lifespan of the individual, and denoting legitimate occupation of the land. For the people of Zege, it is the antiquity and continuity of their churches—as physical structures, and not just as institutions—that make their land special and grant them their sacred right to reside there. According to Kaplan, saints' bones have at various times in Ethiopia served similar purposes as ancestors' bones have elsewhere, of establishing autochthony and legitimacy. Saints, then, sometimes overcome the general tradition of depersonalizing the remains of the dead. However, Kaplan (1986: 6–7) makes clear that the locus of devotional practice was not parts of the saint's body—unlike in Europe, these were never circulated—but at the burial place of his or her remains and, by extension, in the monastery that housed them.

In Zege, at least, it is more often in church buildings themselves that memory is materialized. The ultimate indexes of belonging for inhabitants are the monasteries, especially the first two to be founded, those of Mehal Zege Giyorgis and Betre Maryam. When I asked priests in Mehal Zege what one could do if one wanted to be commemorated, they responded that one could arrange (including payment) for monks to recite prayers in one's name and, by building a temporary shelter in the churchyard, ensure that they would use it for your commemorative prayer. They then took me to the main external gate of the monastery, a large and sturdy structure built from local stone. Built into the gate above the entrance is a small cell where prayers for the dead can take place in seclusion. They told me that an abbot had had this gate built as his memorial gift to the monastery, and was now buried by the entrance. His bones were not treated as unimportant, but they were subsumed into the church, and they were not marked by his written name or his image.

A list of the names of deceased persons is also kept in the church and must be present when the Eucharist is performed for the purposes of remembrance (Aymro & Motovu 1970: 53). Like the Bede-roll in pre-Reformation England, this produces an important sense of permanence in the parish community (Duffy 1992: 334)—and also establishes the church building itself as the legitimate locus of memory. There are also many cases of wealthy patrons having their likeness painted into church murals. They are often seen giving offerings to Mary and followed, in the earlier paintings, by their slaves. In some churches outside Zege men in modern suits have been included in the paintings, although this is no longer allowed on the peninsula itself due to the churches' historic status. With the exception of the list of the parish dead, the common theme is that to be commemorated individually in the traditional idiom requires either wealth or a very high religious status.

This prerogative is illustrated by the one concrete grave I found that had been built after they were forbidden. This was the finest grave I have seen, made of stone, with birth and death dates neatly inscribed and displaying, uniquely, a small painted portrait of the deceased. This woman had become a nun a year or so before her death, and one of her sons had moved to Texas and become quite rich, and so had paid for her grave to be built. Still, it was quite discreetly placed in an unobtrusive corner of the churchyard, since it was technically illegal. Abebe explained that the son must have paid quite a significant amount to the church in order to persuade them to flout the law, which might nonetheless have been unacceptable had the woman not been a respected nun.

The Orthodox Church is the institutional locus of continuity between past and present, much more than any kinship-based form of ancestry. But only certain kinds of memorial are possible within this institutional framework, and the strong overall trend is to impersonal graves. The use of concrete graves in Zege in the 1990s and early 2000s was an attempt to broaden the possibilities of material

memorialization of distinct individuals, but one that raised serious practical and religious questions about making permanent additions to the church landscape.

CONCLUSION: MEMORY, MEDIATION, HISTORY

Descendants of the nobility remember *tezkar* as an epitome of moral relationships and of a good society, but many others agree. Funeral feasts present a potent ideological account of power, not as domination but as protection and generosity. From the perspective of early-twenty-first-century Zege, they stand for a past in which power and wealth were understood to serve a moral hierarchy rather than being an end in themselves—or at least could be convincingly presented as if they did. *Tezkar* stands, retrospectively, for what Graeber (2012) calls a human economy: one in which the purpose of wealth is understood to be the rearrangement of relationships between people. The accrual of wealth could not be an end in itself, or at least it could not appear to be so, and therefore the only way to keep one's property was to destroy or redistribute it. Like any other historically oriented memory, this narrative of *tezkar* and the old morality of Zege coexists with counterstories about the rich trying to appropriate sacrificial power and church practice for their own ends.

This provides a useful point for thinking about the relationship between Christianity and culture (Chua 2011). Was the *tezkar* feast a Christian event? It was performed by Christians, with the assistance of churchmen, but it was separate to the burial in the churchyard, and its recession does not seem to have altered people's sense of being Christians as the loss of the liturgy would. Because Orthodoxy is built around the calendar, and because so much that is basic to life happens either in church or in relation to it, many practices and ethical positionings exist within the aegis of Christianity that are nonetheless not integral to Christianity. Serving coffee to one's neighbors, for example, is central to people's ideas of good behavior, but while this can be understood in a Christian framework, it is not necessarily so. Muslims observe much the same practices of neighborliness.

But *tezkar* participated in a number of idioms that tied it to a Christian framework. The slaughter of cattle ties *tezkar* to the feasts of Christmas and Easter and to a dynamic, which I discuss in the next chapter, of feasting for God. To do so at a funeral redoubles the religious associations, not just because it necessarily involves the clergy, but because it means that the feast is being carried out for nonliving beings. There are also practices local to Zege of spilling an animal's blood for the penance of the departed soul, often as part of the *tezkar* feast. Those practices that concern the salvation of the soul of the departed and those that arrange relationships among the living are closely related.

Political circumstances have changed, and while the church-associated dignitaries—the contemporary *mislené* and *liqered*—still command respect, they

have much less control over resources or labor. Since the land reforms of the 1970s, land is apportioned by the governmental bureaucracy, and as of the last decade disputes and disturbances in Zege are the province of the police and the government courts, and many people lament the decline of hospitality as the primary mode of arranging human relationships. In the past decade the market town of Afaf gained a government school and then electricity, while the monasteries of the peninsula have become significant attractions for tourists and pilgrims, creating employment opportunities for young men with a command of English. Education holds the key to advancement, and the churches' museums draw as much attention as their altars. And yet ritual remains central to the life of Zege, to people's ethics and their experiences of their bodies and their environment. Zege's environment is still a ritual environment, and is in some ways more strongly effected by the presence of churches than it was in the past.

We can learn much about this transition from looking at the media of remembrance. Gravestones do not establish continuity in the way that funeral feasts do, and each practice has its own symbolic associations that decide its legitimacy or otherwise. Feasts are, at least retrospectively, associated with a range of morally potent sacrificial practices and the asymmetric ethics of care and hospitality. Concrete graves are associated with construction, with an external kind of production and signification that does not sit well with the narrative of Zege as a holy, set-apart place.

The media of remembrance, once established as legitimate, are always in some sense up for grabs, and subject to attempts at appropriation. *Tezkar* and funeral practices are effective means to arrange authoritative relations among people, with reference to external power. They achieve this arrangement through the slaughtering of animals, the giving of food and drink, the correct treatment of bodies, the construction of buildings or monuments, and the use of words. Each of these techniques is a tool of mediation that can be reappropriated or repurposed. This makes it quite difficult to divide mediatory practices into those that are authentically Christian and those that are not; it is also what gives Christianity in Zege, or anywhere, its sense of belonging to a place. But the negation of human remains achieved through Orthodox ritual sets limits on this localization and attempts to maintain the transcendental or universal aspects of Christianity. It is only by looking at the material means of commemoration that we can understand how these two processes can coexist.