

A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses through Form and Ritual

Kaleidoscopes of Meaning

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In memory of my father
(Grigoris Evangelatos, Zakynthos 1938–Athens 2015),
who made beautiful crosses

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PREFACE

The first encounter I ever had with the visual intricacy of Ethiopian crosses was through the work of my father, a Greek autodidact jewelry maker deeply fascinated with the study of history. Although he was an atheist, and always remained suspicious of powerful institutions like Christian Churches of any denomination, he could sincerely appreciate personal forms of Christian devotion and their visual expressions. Crosses were not very common among the types of jewelry he produced; but he created a number of designs based on the open-work pendant crosses that Coptic (Egyptian) and Ethiopian Christians have been wearing for centuries. I remember being mesmerized by their visual richness, their organic symmetry, their playful complexity, the creative and inventive way in which thread- and knot-like motifs were employed to vitalize the cross, a sign that in its most basic, linear form seemed rigid and uninviting to my childhood eyes. I remember being proud of my father's creations, even after he explained that his crosses were not based on his own designs but on Coptic and Ethiopian examples. At age twelve or thirteen, I secretly wished that the American performer Madonna, at that time going through her 1980s large-cross accessorizing period, would somehow find out about my father's creations, and would wear them for all the world to see, giving him the recognition that he deserved.

A few decades later, as I look back with more critical eyes, I am glad Madonna didn't wear my father's crosses. Yet, I still wish the source of my father's creations, the Christian traditions of Coptic Egypt and Ethiopia, would earn more visibility in the eyes of an international audience. Ethiopia in particular is rarely associated in the minds of outsiders with cultural values and achievements—instead, it is mostly known for humanitarian and political crises. Despite the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the country and several new academic publications being produced in the last few

decades, Ethiopian crosses and the Christian culture of Ethiopia as a whole are rarely recognized and remain largely unknown to international audiences, who might otherwise have familiarity with other ancient, medieval and more recent Christian traditions. I hope that this book will contribute, even to a small degree, in giving greater visibility to Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Therefore, I have ventured to produce a study that will hopefully be of interest not only to scholars, but also to a larger, non-specialized readership.

As I cast a glance at my distant memories, I realize that my childhood fascination with the formal qualities of Ethiopian crosses has turned into a deep appreciation. Now I see the visual richness and vitality of these crosses as inextricably linked with their multivalent socio-cultural significance. Ethiopian crosses as they continue to be produced and used in our time, following a centuries-old tradition, are powerful visual and material expressions of significant dimensions in the lives of Ethiopian Christians. They encapsulate and support personal and communal values, beliefs, and aspirations on a wide range of topics: the past, the present, and the future; this world and the next; protection and salvation; self and community; relations with God, the saints, and other Christians. Therefore Ethiopian crosses speak about the potential of humans to develop a positive sense of identity, belonging, and becoming. Ultimately, Ethiopian crosses are powerful instruments of social and cultural interaction as well as conduits of personal introspection and self-perception. My aim is to shed some light on these functions by exploring what the visual aspects of the crosses might mean and how they are used in the context of Christian Ethiopian culture, especially during rituals. In drawing such links between formal elements and socio-cultural functions or personal experiences, I will also attempt to offer some theoretical insights into the operation of visual creations in human societies and lives.

Looking at the rich exploration that lies ahead in the pages of this book, I am grateful to my father for introducing me to Ethiopian crosses, visual analysis, and historical inquiry. I am thankful to the interested readers and scholars who might pick up this book and engage in a thoughtful dialogue with my suggestions. I am also grateful to all the researchers who came before me and on whose work I base my own. But above all, I am deeply indebted and humbly thankful to Ethiopian Christians, past, present, and future,

for the devotion, thoughtfulness, imagination, and inventiveness they have shared with the world through their creations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many thanks for the completion of this project, in addition to those I already gave in the Preface. It seems to me that if it takes a village to raise a child, it certainly takes at least as much to write a book, especially for a dyslexic person like me who takes so long to process and conclude labor. First of all, I am indebted to my Greek family for their emotional and financial support, but also for the ways they challenged me during my early life, studies, and professional career. I wouldn't be where I am today without them. Back in my homeland, my best friend Litsa—a true sister—, her husband Vasilis and their whole family have embraced me with joy and strength whenever I needed them most, and remain my 'own family of choice'. Stacy, Bob and their wonderful family have received me with Hawaiian love and generosity in my new Californian home in Santa Cruz. I am thankful for having such great friends. In the last four years, Josh has offered his sustained and healing embrace and has put up with my relentless work schedule and messy house. I hope that reading this book will pique his interest and renew his understanding towards the challenges of my academic life.

I owe thanks to my Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Robin Cormack, for teaching me to ask questions and for encouraging me to pursue my scholarly ideas on the basis of primary textual and visual evidence. I am especially grateful to my colleagues in the Department of History of Art and Visual Culture (HAVC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). Since 2007, they have supported and challenged me to push forward, and to broaden the intellectual questions I pose on my material, towards more socio-culturally involved directions. My interests and faculties in visual analysis and interpretation are largely sustained thanks to my inquisitive students at UCSC, who keep inspiring and challenging me with their insightful questions and observations, so I also owe a big thanks to them.

I am indebted to a number of institutions that supported my graduate studies in Europe, and especially my postdoctoral research in North America. The latter include the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, the Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University, the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies at Toronto, and especially the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection at Washington, DC. Although the year-long fellowships I held at these institutions were not devoted to the subject of this book, my research interests and skills were significantly enhanced during those residencies, through use of resources and interactions with other scholars, ultimately leading to where I am today. My time at Dumbarton Oaks was particularly fruitful in terms of my interest in Ethiopian crosses, as it led to stimulating conversations with the Museum Director, Gudrun Buehl, and subsequently to a collaboration with her in the context of the exhibition *Cross-References*, held at Dumbarton Oaks between March–July 2011. Largely inspired by the subject of that exhibition, I started collecting Ethiopian crosses, in order to study and lend them to the Dumbarton Oaks exhibition, for which I was also invited to give two public talks. I thank Gudrun Buehl for fueling and supporting my interest in Ethiopian crosses and for being a thoughtful interlocutor, and Joseph Mills, photographer of the Dumbarton Oaks Museum, for producing excellent photos of the material in my collection, many of which are now part of this book.

I am thankful to the Arts Research Institute and the Committee on Research at UCSC for repeatedly funding my various research projects. The largest part of the expenses involved in the illustration of this book were covered by a grant from the Arts Research Institute. Through a recent grant from the Committee on Research, I was able to employ Lorraine Affourtit, graduate student at the Visual Studies Ph.D. program in the HAVC department, to copy-edit parts of this book manuscript and to research and recommend recent publications on Ethiopian culture. I thank Lorraine for working meticulously in her role, and for prompting me to clarify my writing wherever necessary. Obviously, any shortcomings in the following text are entirely my responsibility. In terms of research funding, I also owe my deep gratitude to David Yager, former Dean of the Arts at UCSC, for his valuable support through the Arts Dean's Fund for Excellence and for granting me the 2015 Arts Dean's Research Professor Award. The latter supported the

publication of images included in this volume. Finally, I would like to thank Gorgias Press, and especially the editor Melonie Schmierer-Lee for her patience and understanding as I was going through a difficult period in my personal life.

To all the other people in the 'village that helped me raise' this book, thank you for your contributions. I hope that both you and people from other villages, nearby or faraway, will enjoy reading its pages and strolling through its images.

Santa Cruz, December 30th 2016



1. Contemporary Ethiopian hand and staff crosses sold at a store of religious items and antiques, off the beaten path, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Erika Howard.

INTRODUCTION

As the most important symbol of the Christian religion, the cross has been the subject of countless renderings through the centuries, in all of the different cultures that adopted Christianity. Such representations are found in diverse contexts and media and are often characterized by great complexity and sophistication, incorporating visual elements that elaborate on the theological and devotional significance of this sign in connection to local cultural traditions.¹ Ethiopia stands out among other lands for the inexhaustible variety and intricacy of the patterns used to decorate crosses of all kinds and for the incomparable prominence that this religious symbol has in the life of the country's Christian Orthodox population (Figs. 1–

¹ Some general publications on the cross in Christianity: *Crosses and Crucifixes. Treasures from the 8th to the 19th century*, exhibition catalogue (Milan 2009), with extensive bibliography on the cross in pp. 36–41). *Ave Crux Gloriosa. Croci e crocifissi nell'arte dall'VIII al XX secolo*, exhibition catalogue (Montecassino 2002). *The Art of the Cross. Medieval and Renaissance Piety in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum*, exhibition catalogue (Boston 2001). *La Croce. Dalle origini agli inizi del secolo XVI*, exhibition catalogue (Naples 2000). *Il crocifisso di Ariberto: un mistero millenario intorno al simbolo della cristianità*, exhibition catalogue (Milan 1997), with various sections on the significance of the cross in Christianity. For the cross as a universal symbol, with special reference to the Christian religion, see R. Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross* (London 1995). On the theology and symbolism of the cross see also A. Andreopoulos, *The Sign of the Cross. The gesture, the mystery, the history* (Brewster 2006). In the present book, the Cross (upper case) refers to the True Cross, the actual wood on which Christ was crucified, while the cross (lower case) refers to the symbol of the cross in any other form.

18, 35–39, 44–81, 116–121, 140–145).² In both the textual and visual culture of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, the cross has been venerated for centuries as a fundamental source of physical and spiritual protection and as a prominent marker of communal and individual identity. Crosses of various forms and sizes are extensively used in rituals, daily social interactions, and personal devotional practices in a variety of contexts. In some regions of Ethiopia, crosses crown not only churches but also private houses (Figs. 6–7), and they might appear embroidered not just on traditional clothing but even on the skin of people (tattooed, branded, or incised on their forehead, temples, hands, or other parts of the body—Figs. 8–18).³ The devotion of Ethiopian Christians to the cross is also expressed through the popularity of the personal name

² Some basic publications on Ethiopian crosses that include references to the information I present in this paragraph: M. Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis. La più antica iconografia della croce', in *Nigra sum sed formosa. Sacro e bellezza dell'Etiopia cristiana* (Vicenza 2009), 152–173. M. Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia. The Sign of Faith. Evolution and Form* (Milan 2006). S. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses. A Cultural History and Chronology* (Milan 2006). C. Griffith Mann, 'The Role of the Cross in Ethiopian Culture', in *Ethiopian Art. The Walters Art Museum*, exhibition catalogue (Lingfield 2001), 75–93. J. Mercier, *Art that Heals: the Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*, exhibition catalogue (New York 1997), especially 64–72 ('The Rampart of the Cross'). É. Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne: de la guérison de l'âme à celle du corps', in *Le roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard. Art et médecine en Éthiopie*, exhibition catalogue (Paris 1992), 62–66. D. Hecht, B. Benzing, and G. Kidane, *The Hand Crosses of the IES Collection* (Addis Ababa 1990). E. Moore, 'Ethiopian crosses from the 12th to the 16th century' and E.D. Hecht, 'The hand-cross collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Museum: a project report', in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art* (London 1989), 110–14 and 115–20. H. Skrobucha, *Äthiopische Kreuze. Funktionen – Brauchtum – Formen* (Greven 1983). W. Korabiewicz, *The Ethiopian Cross* (Addis Ababa 1973).

³ This tradition is most common in the Northern parts of the country. M. Simović, *Daughter of Zion. Orthodox Christian Art from Ethiopia*, exhibition catalogue (Jerusalem 2000), 19. Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 7. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 58–59.

Gabra Masqal (Servant of the Cross), which was also adopted in the past by a number of emperors after they ascended to the throne.⁴ The paramount importance of the cross is also reflected in Christian Ethiopian traditions about critical moments of world history, from the first battle of the angels against Satan, when the sign of the cross is believed to have appeared as the luminous weapon of the angelic army,⁵ to the time of the Last Judgment, when the cross will be both the sign of the end of times and the protective shield of the just.⁶ In the popular Ethiopian protective prayers col-

⁴ The most famous imperial examples are Lalibela of the Zagwe dynasty (13th–14th c.) and Amda Seyon of the Solomonic dynasty (1314–44). See Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 37.

⁵ *Le roi Salomon*, 164. According to Jacques Mercier, in Christian Ethiopia this primordial sign of the cross is considered the origin of all protective talismans and is identified with the very Name of God, a later manifestation of which is the Cross on which Christ was crucified. According to the fifteenth-century Ethiopian *Book of Mysteries*, when Satan rose against God, the archangel Michael and his angels fought against him, but were defeated twice, until God gave them as their weapon ‘a cross of light whereon was inscribed a name... which read “In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit”’, and when Satan saw that inscription, he and all his demons were defeated. See E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Mysteries of the Heavens and the Earth* (Oxford 1935), 16–17 (p. xviii for the dating of this text in the 15th c.).

⁶ In Christian tradition, it is believed that *Matthew* 24:30 foretells that the cross will appear in the sky to herald the Second Coming of Christ: ‘Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory’. See P. Piovanelli, ‘Pre- and Post-Canonical Passion Stories. Insight into the Development of Christian Discourse on the Death of Jesus’, *Apocrypha* 14 (2003), 106. In the Ethiopian *Banquet of Righteousness*, which preserves ancient prayers and spells for the safe passage of the dead in the afterlife and their salvation at the day of Last Judgment and is popular in burial rites, the cross has a prominent place. It is inscribed as an apotropaic symbol on the scrolls that contain the text, to give life in this world and the next, and is mentioned in the text itself at critical moments of the unfolding of salvation. It is written that the cross and the names of God offer protection to the

lectively known as *Rampart of the Cross*, the entire universe is imbued by the power of the cross: identified with Christ and the Trinitarian God, the cross is everywhere, creates everything, can accomplish anything, is venerated by all the animate and inanimate inhabitants of the world, and offers all kinds of blessings and protection against any material or spiritual threat.⁷ In Christian Ethiopian tradition, the cross is the sacred matrix that encompasses the life of the world in both its macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions. It is the social and cultural nexus through which and with which people interact in order to shape and express personal and communal identities and hopes.⁸

users of the scroll. The five nails of Christ's Cross are regularly invoked for protection. According to the same text, when the book with the secret names of God is unsealed and the angels blow their trumpets (a moment that resembles the vision of the Last Judgment in *Revelation*), it is the day of the celebration of the Finding of the True Cross. See E. W. Budge, *The Bandlet of Righteousness. An Ethiopian Book of the Dead* (London 1929), 16–17, 23, 37–39, 47, 66, 68, 69–70, 72, 75, 78. According to Coptic and Old Nubian texts known as the *Gospel of the Savior* and the *Stauros-Text*, a huge cross-tree will be the wondrous landmark around which the saved will gather during the Last Judgment. It is possible that this idea survives in oral traditions among the Christians of the Coptic, Nubian and Ethiopian Churches, but I have no evidence to this effect. See S. Emmel, 'Preliminary re-edition and translation of the *Gospel of the Savior*: New Light on the Strasbourg *Coptic Gospel* and the *Stauros-Text* from Nubia', *Apocrypha* 14 (2003), 9–53, esp. pp. 17–18, 23–30, 42–46.

⁷ D. Lifchitz, *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux* (Paris 1940), 93–211. See also the brief discussion in Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 39–42.

⁸ See the relevant comments of Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis', 153.



2. Contemporary Ethiopian hand and staff crosses sold at a store of religious items and antiques, off the beaten path, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Erika Howard.



3. Ethiopian Orthodox cleric presents a staff cross, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Yoko Aziz/ age fotostock.



4. A procession with Ethiopian Orthodox clerics holding staff crosses, celebration of Palm Sunday, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by Jean-Pierre De Mann/ age fotostock.



5. T-shirts decorated with traditional cross designs are sold at a street market during Christmas, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Grant Rooney/ age fotostock.



6. Statue of Jesus Christ overlooking the Church of Medhane Alem (Savior of the World) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Photo by Dereje/ Shutterstock.com.



7. A Christian home marked with crosses, Addi Arkay, Amhara region, Ethiopia. Photo by J Marshall - Tribaleye Images / Alamy Stock Photo.



8. Ethiopian woman wearing traditional clothing embroidered with crosses prepares a coffee ceremony, next to a man playing a masenqo (traditional single-stringed instrument). Photo by Bluerain/ Shutterstock.com.



9. Ethiopian woman and her daughters wear traditional clothing embroidered with crosses during the T'inkat festival, held in January and celebrating Christ's Baptism, Gondar, Ethiopia. Photo by Grant Rooney/ age fotostock.



10. Ethiopian woman wearing cross pendant and traditional clothing embroidered with crosses, Amhara region, Ethiopia. Photo by Franck Metois / Alamy Stock Photo.



11. Ethiopian girl with a cross incised on her forehead, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo.



12. Ethiopian Amhara woman with cross tattoos, Tis Abay (Blue Nile Falls), Ethiopia. Photo by Onyx9/ Shutterstock.com.



13. Ethiopian Tigrayan woman with cross tattoo on her forehead and two cross pendants. Photo by Mitchell Kanashkevich.



14. Ethiopian girl with a cross tattoo on her forehead, Adua, Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Neil Cooper / Alamy Stock Photo.



15. Ethiopian girl with a cross tattoo on her forehead and a cross pendant, Gorgora (south of Gondar, on the north shores of Lake Tana), Amar people, Ethiopia. Photo by Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo.



16. Ethiopian Amhara woman with cross tattoos and cross pendant, Addis Mercato (the largest open-air market in Africa), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Photo by Jeremy Woodhouse/ Getty Images.



17. Ethiopian woman with cross tattoo on her forehead, Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Aleksandra H. Kossowska/ Shutterstock.com.

In this book, I discuss the visual complexity of portable Ethiopian crosses as a sophisticated system of symbolic references: a visual network that generates potential meanings, developed over the centuries to express and manifest the multifaceted significance of the cross in the socio-cultural context of Christian Ethiopia. It is important to clarify that I use ‘system’ and ‘symbol’ as concepts with expansive, relational, and generative significance, rooted in the etymology of the Greek words from which the English terms derive. According to the literal sense of the Greek words, different components *stand together* in a system and are *brought together* and literally *con-tribute* in a symbol.⁹ Synergistic confluence is essential in both cases. In other words, systems and symbols join and assemble various elements in a collaborative and contributive manner, generating relations that can potentially develop and expand in diverse ways, leading to a wide variety of possible outcomes.¹⁰ Victor Turner has captured well this generative potential when he spoke of “the multivocal or polysemic nature of symbols, where one meaning is related to others in an increasingly deep pool of potential meanings available for exploitation by future interpreters.”¹¹ In modern Western tradition, systems and symbols often tend to be considered rigid and monodimensional, operating as one closed process or having one unique meaning. Such rigidity is not applicable when discussing the millennial cultural production of religious traditions like that of Christian Ethiopia.¹² When I refer to the

⁹ *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon founded upon the seventh edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Mansfield Centre 2013), 759 (συμβάλλω, σύμβολον), 783 (σύστημα).

¹⁰ In this sense, systems and symbols are ‘generative assemblies’. The term has been coined by Kyle Parry, Assistant Professor of Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and will be discussed in some detail in the conclusion of this book.

¹¹ V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Cornell, 1967), 27.

¹² Compare the discussion of the polysemy of symbols in the medieval Western Christian tradition by C. Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York 1992), 116: ‘Medieval symbols were far more complex – polysemic as anthropologists say – than modern people are aware... we might find

symbolism of Ethiopian crosses, I speak of the confluence of a number of formal elements and their potential meanings on the body of those crosses, and therefore I recognize multivalence and polysemy, enriched by the input of diverse viewers in different contexts. That multivalence of meaning is not only based on the contribution (συμβολή) of various elements making up the cross and its socio-cultural significance, but in turn it also actively contributes (συμβάλλει) to the socio-cultural experience of cross users. In other words, Ethiopian crosses are powerful symbols (literally contributive) both in terms of their constitution and their function. In addition, Ethiopian crosses not only bring together diverse meanings but they are also so closely related to them that it is not feasible or sensible to separate the two, the symbol and its meanings, by defining them as signifier and signified.¹³ For example, in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition, as in many other Christian cultures, the cross is not just a signifier of protection, healing, or universal unity, but rather a source and agent of such desiderata. Therefore, in this belief system the ‘symbol of the cross’ is identified essentially (in its essence) with its various meanings, which it encompasses and joins to itself integrally. The cross *is* the means by which protection, healing, or universal unity are generated rather than simply signified. In bringing such desiderata together through and with its form, the cross is a symbol in the ancient Greek sense of ‘joining together’ and ‘contributing’.

Keeping these considerations in mind, I argue that we can better understanding the visual language and possible meanings of Ethiopian crosses as both reflecting *and* reinforcing specific socio-cultural values that are central in the experiences and beliefs of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. For this purpose, I do not use vis-

in medieval art and literature some suggestions of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack.’

¹³ As is done especially in Saussurean semiotics, the terminology of which I try to avoid in this book. For relevant criticism of this kind of semiotic analysis see, for example, P. Gose, ‘Labor and the materiality of the sign: beyond dualist theories of culture’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 13 (1989), 103–121.

ual analysis as a goal in itself, or as a tool in dating objects or creating genealogies. Rather, I use it as a method through which to identify recurring and prominent visual patterns which can then be linked to significant aspects of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox value system. Therefore I explore symbiotic interactions between visual and other cultural creations (such as texts) in the Christian tradition of Ethiopia. Ultimately, I attempt to answer the question: in what ways do Ethiopian crosses embed, reflect, and shape ideas that are important to the individuals and communities that create and use them? In the course of this study it will become apparent that the range of ideas referenced through Ethiopian crosses can be impressively wide, from religious beliefs to interrelated socio-political values, and from power relations to cultural traditions about local histories or universal structures. This fullness of meaning that Ethiopian crosses embody does not only explain but also sustains their incomparable visual richness and prominence in Ethiopian culture.

In the following analysis, I do not aim to be exhaustive, as that would be a rather futile goal. Thankfully, no single scholar or even a group of scholars can ever exhaust any subject under consideration, given the variety of different perspectives we all bring to the table, and the complexity of the phenomena we study. Indeed, the multiplicity of meaning that I intend to study regarding the cultural life of Ethiopian crosses is a continuously unfolding phenomenon with endless variations. After all, the ways Ethiopian Orthodox Christians might perceive meaning in their crosses is the result of numerous interacting and varying factors that generate diverse possibilities of interpretation: from the particularities of each cross and the unique interests and identities of individual viewers, to the specific socio-cultural contexts and historical moments in which Christians encounter such crosses. My intention is to simply trace some possible avenues of approach for a contextual interpretation of Ethiopian crosses.¹⁴ In doing so, I also choose a point of view

¹⁴ To quote Godet ('La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 62) on the complex interpretative possibilities in the case of Ethiopian crosses: 'Les Éthiopiens chrétiens rapportent à la croix des sens symboliques et légendaires multiples qui donnent lieu à des interprétations complexes encore

that is trans-temporal: all the examples of specific Ethiopian crosses I discuss in detail are contemporary variations of a centuries-long tradition. Therefore, I examine how cultural traditions and beliefs of the past might resonate in the present. This is not because I assume that the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox tradition is static. On the contrary, I argue that any living tradition is defined by both continuity and change, the two driving forces of any ongoing cultural phenomenon.¹⁵ The richness of meaning embedded in and activated by Ethiopian crosses results from this process of continuity and change. I explore how layers of meaning might have been integrated over time into the conception and reception (the creation and use) of Ethiopian crosses, enriching the relationship of Ethiopian Christians not only to the most powerful symbol of their religion but also to each other. In other words, I argue for the accumulation of potential socio-cultural meanings and functions of the cross that might have developed over the centuries, yet are still current today. Therefore my analysis focuses on contemporary Ethiopian crosses in the context of the history of Ethiopian Christian culture. I refer specifically to Orthodox Christians and not to other denominations, as Orthodox Ethiopians are the most direct heirs of the millennial cultural tradition of Christianity in Ethiopia.

peu étudiées'. (In free translation: 'The Ethiopian Christians apply to the cross multiple symbolic and legendary meanings that lead to complex interpretations, still understudied.') Another very important observation is made by Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 15, and encompasses both the potential and the limitations of an interpretative approach to Ethiopian crosses like the one I attempt in this book: the crosses 'are not only of decorative structure, but bear a wide range of religious symbols, the meaning of which is not always unambiguous, even among priests and monks... The topic needs more investigations, especially the collecting of interpretations given by the priests and monks themselves'. However, I would argue that interpretations by laypeople are also important and might not always be based on what priests and monks teach them.

¹⁵ For important relevant comments regarding Ethiopian culture see R. A. Silverman, 'Introduction: Traditions of Creativity', *Ethiopia. Traditions of Creativity*, ed. R. A. Silverman (Seattle 1999), 3–25, esp. 20–24.

I do not suggest that all the readings I propose regarding crosses are intelligible or relevant to all Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, at all times, either today or in the past. Rather, I argue that these readings are plausible within the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, and could shed more light on the interrelation between the form, meaning and function of crosses. To be clear, I don't believe in a rigid, monodimensional and 'transparent' one-to-one correspondences between form, meaning, and function in visual creations. Rather, I see an expansive network of possible correspondences between them. Therefore, in the course of my analysis I will point out correlation between visual and other cultural elements of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition that indeed seem to indicate a relationship between what Ethiopian crosses do in terms of meaning and function and how they look in terms of form. I focus my analysis exclusively on *portable* crosses not just because they share similar material, technical, and visual aspects, but above all because they are constantly handled and experienced closely or even intimately by people in diverse contexts and occasions. Therefore, portable crosses are dynamically involved in the development of socio-cultural interactions, experiences, and identities. This dynamic presence of portable crosses in the lives of Ethiopian Christians is central in the development of their form, meaning, and function.

The intricate Ethiopian crosses that are used in religious contexts have been discussed in scholarly literature from various perspectives, such as their formal or conceptual relationship to pre-Christian or early Christian culture,¹⁶ their connection to Byzantine models,¹⁷ or their similarities to the structure of liturgical music,¹⁸

¹⁶ For example, C. F. Perczel, 'Ethiopian crosses: Christianized symbols of a pagan cosmology' in *Ethiopian Studies: proceedings of the sixth international conference, Tel-Aviv, 14–17 April 1980* (Rotterdam and Boston 1986), 427–446.

¹⁷ M. Heldman, public lecture on Ethiopian crosses presented at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, in the context of the exhibition *Cross-references*, July 2011.

¹⁸ C. F. Perczel, 'Art and liturgy: Abyssinian processional crosses', *Northern African Studies* 5.1 (1983), 19–28. The author claims that the har-

to mention just a few characteristic examples. I elaborate on existing interpretations and suggest new ones in order to shed more light on how and what Ethiopian crosses mean and do in the lives of communities and individuals. I explore theological beliefs, devotional needs, and broader socio-cultural concerns as important points of reference in the analysis of the crosses. I take into consideration Ethiopian textual and visual evidence as well as aspects of Ethiopian history and cultural tradition. I conclude that Ethiopian crosses visualize a complex set of ideas that encompass not only fervent hopes for protection and salvation in the present or the future, but also basic beliefs about universal or specifically Ethiopian history, as well as important concepts of socio-cultural and individual identity. Thus these intricate crosses create a vibrant symbolic fabric that interweaves communal and personal values and concerns with fundamental beliefs about the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. All of these concepts are intensely activated in the context of religious rituals: on such occasions, the participants are guided to internalize and embody through experience and interaction the same abstract ideas that are visualized through the symbolic language of the crosses they use. During rituals, crosses mediate the sensorialization of ideas that become lived experiences for the participants.

Through discussion of the multilayered meaning of Ethiopian crosses, I also aim to offer a useful case study on the potential of visual creations: that is, their capacity to operate as interactive depositories of ideas, agile generators of meaning and dynamic facilitators of exchange, with an influential role in identity formation,

mony, rhythm, complexity, and variations seen on Ethiopian openwork crosses are inspired by similar elements in the music of the liturgy. I would propose instead that both the music and the visual elements of the cross express values that are central to the Christian culture of Ethiopia, as discussed below. The concluding comments of the author (p. 23) include the inaccurate statements that the cross 'does not represent the crucified Christ', and the liturgy and the crosses are of iconoclastic nature. On the other hand, the article presents very useful information on the structure, purpose, and theological references of the Ethiopian liturgy, and includes useful quotations from important texts recited during the ritual.

socio-cultural communication, and the construction of power relations. Therefore, it is my hope that this book will reach a wide range of readers, including not only those interested in Ethiopian or Christian visual production, but also those who study visual culture more broadly and might appreciate theoretical discourses on the socio-cultural embeddedness of visual production, especially when such discourses are anchored to concrete material examples.

The book is divided in four chapter, the first two of which can be considered introductory, in that they set the stage for the subsequent discussion of the visual material. The first chapter is dedicated to a short history of Ethiopian Christianity, to provide useful context. The second chapter begins with a brief historical overview of the place of crosses in Christian Ethiopian culture, followed by a discussion of terminology and the introduction of the material examined in this specific study. Next comes a basic presentation of the types and functions of Ethiopian crosses (staff crosses, hand crosses, pendants, and their respective uses). The chapter concludes with a section on symbolism in Ethiopian Christian culture that helps contextualize the symbolic analysis of the crosses in a wider cultural setting.

In the third chapter, I explore possible interpretations of the various formal elements that are prominent on Ethiopian crosses, with emphasis on theological, cultural, and social references. The themes examined include: the multidimensional symbolism of textile-like motifs, with special attention to theological concepts as well as social values and organization; the image of the honeycomb as a useful lens through which to explore possible meanings of Ethiopian crosses; the interplay of materiality and immateriality that makes reference to the different dimensions of the world as perceived in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity; the importance of tree and water motifs as symbols with deep theological and cultural implications; and the significance of saints, Mary, and the Ark in the context of ritual and Ethiopian identity formation.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss Ethiopian crosses from a more theoretical perspective, using the Ethiopian material as an opportunity to explore issues with broader implications in visual studies. I focus on two main topics: the role of visibility during rituals, and the construction of meaning in terms of multiplicity and fluidity. In the latter case, I examine how Ethiopian crosses can advance our understanding of the operation of visual creations as

dynamic generators of meaning. I propose that it is more appropriate to define this meaning-full dynamism as a kaleidoscopic phenomenon, rather than as one of sedimentation or palimpsesting (which are terms more often used in scholarly literature). Therefore, I approach a theoretical discourse in visual studies through the concrete example of how Ethiopian crosses generate meaning in their cultural contexts.

In the epilogue of the book I offer some culminating remarks on Ethiopian crosses and their visual power through brief examination of three issues: the expansive, non-linear operation of time in the symbolic universe of Ethiopian crosses; the inextricable relationship between meaning and function in the socio-cultural life of these crosses; and the creative potential that they embody through their open-ended structure.

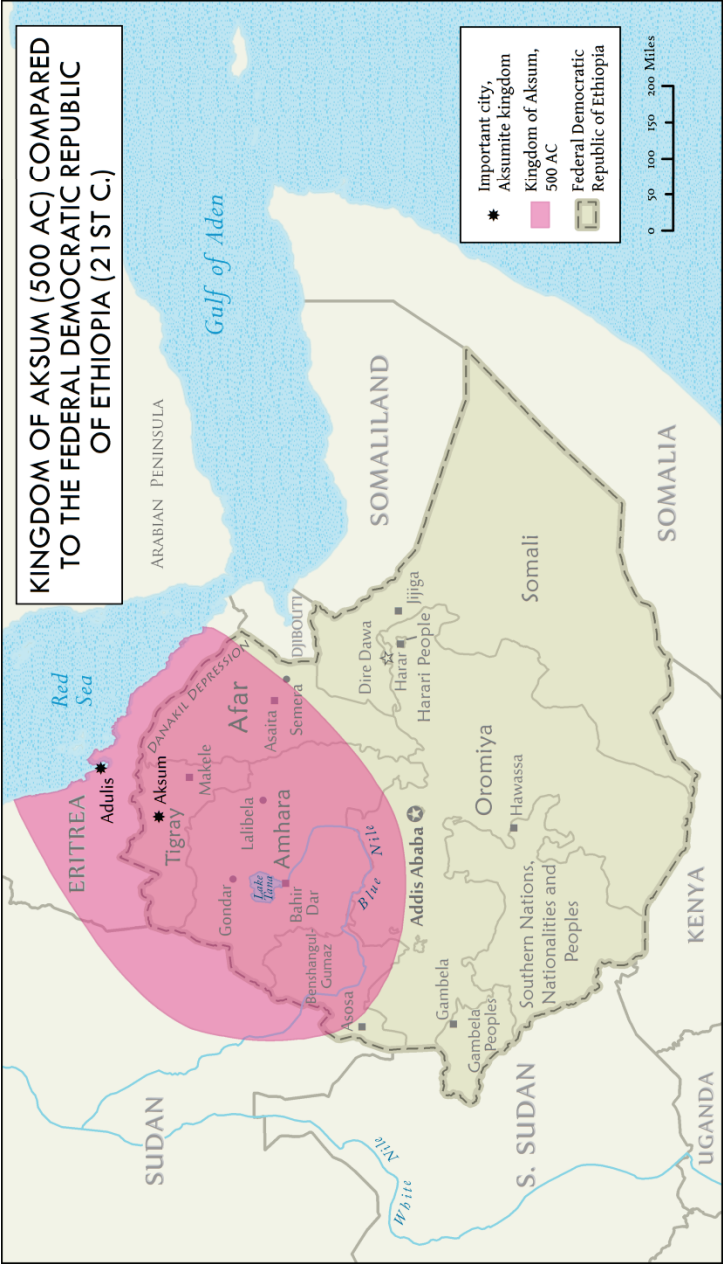
In concluding this introduction, I would like to acknowledge my positionality as researcher of the material at hand, in a way that sheds more light both to the limitations and the possible merits of this book. First of all, I am agnostic, and this is a main reason I approach the religious beliefs of other people with respect and appreciation. All the religious beliefs I explore in this study are of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, even when I do not frame them with the clarification 'according to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians...'. As a scholar I am not concerned with *whether or not* such beliefs are true or accurate (evaluations which, after all, depend entirely on one's point of view). Rather, I am concerned with *why* certain beliefs are true for specific people and to *what effect*. In other words, I explore how such beliefs relate to the believers' socio-cultural values as well as their visual creations and experiences. Second of all, and perhaps more importantly for this study: I am not an Ethiopianist, and sadly I have never traveled to Ethiopia up to now—although one day I hope to visit this country and put to the test what I have gathered from the study of primary and secondary sources available to me. Yet, as a Byzantinist with a deep interest in the visual language of Christian traditions, I can operate as a 'relevant outsider': as somebody with adequate affinity to Ethiopian Christianity, as well as a fresh pair of eyes that can offer new insights. I have endeavored to base my suggestions on a responsible and creative use of primary and secondary sources, both textual and visual. I am indebted to the scholars whose work I depend on; and I hope that my contributions can be responsibly and creatively

critiqued and put to use by those specialists who have a much deeper knowledge of Ethiopian culture than I have. My ultimate aim is to generate fruitful dialogue, which I believe is the best I can ever do as a scholar, even when I write on subjects of my own Byzantine specialty.

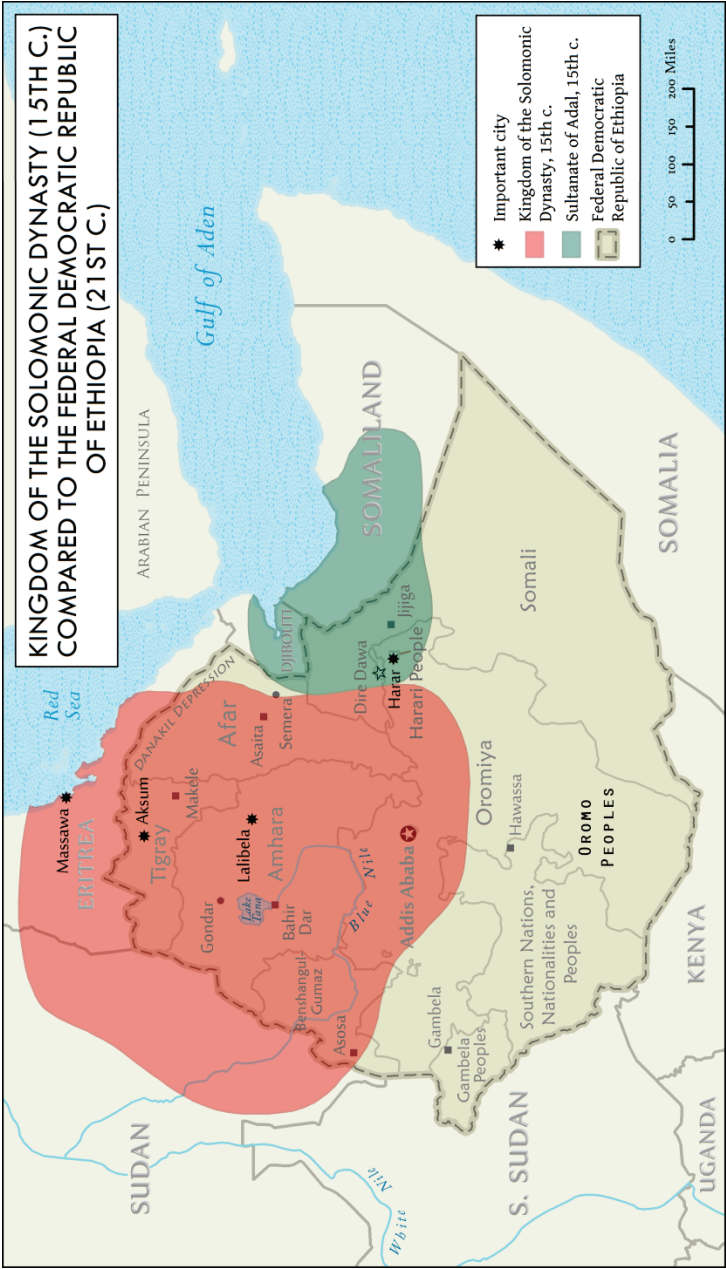
As I embark on an exploration of the meaning-full potential of Ethiopian crosses, I invite readers to consider two ways of approaching my work: namely, as a scholarly attempt and as my personal process of understanding. As a *scholarly discourse* on other people's cultural productions and interactions, my suggestions can be more or less plausible. As a *personal reaction* to those same cultural phenomena, my suggestions are simply that: another case of cultural reception and production, and a personal way of experiencing Ethiopian crosses. I hope that even as a personal account of cultural experience, this book will inspire readers to appreciate the dynamic potential of Ethiopian crosses to generate meaning. I will consider my effort to have been worthwhile, if my work support readers to develop *their* personal and scholarly approached to Ethiopian crosses, and to enjoy and understand this rich and engaging material in their own terms.



Map 1: created by Celia Braves, 2017. Data source: Made with Natural Earth



Map 2: created by Celia Braves, 2017. Data sources: Made with Natural Earth and TimeMaps “North East Africa 500 CE”



Map 3: created by Celia Braves, 2017. Data sources: Made with Natural Earth and TimeMaps “North East Africa 1453 CE”



18. Ethiopian monk with pilgrim's staff cross, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by E&E Image Library/ age fotostock.

CHAPTER ONE.

ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

All the crosses and other visual material discussed in this book are produced in the religious and cultural context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition, fostered by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), with roots going back to the 4th c. AC.¹⁹ Following a trans-temporal approach in my analysis, I take

¹⁹ I use BC (Before Christ) and AC (After Christ), in my dating references, especially since I study a Christian culture. I consider BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) to bear false claims of political correctness, since they still reflect the idea that the year of the presumed birth of Christ defines what is ‘Common’. This assumption is problematic, as many cultures base their dating system on entirely different watersheds (for example, the Year of the Hijra, equivalent to 622 AC, is the starting point in the Islamic calendar). I replace AD (Anno Domini, ‘Year of the Lord’ in Latin) with AC (After Christ), because the latter is descriptive, while the former makes a claim that Christ is the Lord—a statement that clearly doesn’t reflect everybody’s beliefs. It should be noted that the principal calendar used in Ethiopia—and corresponding to the liturgical calendar of the EOTC—is based on the Coptic calendar and is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar used in the West (so the Ethiopian millennium was celebrated in year 2007 according to the Gregorian calendar). The Ethiopian new year begins in September 11th or 12th of the Gregorian calendar. The Ethiopian calendar is solar, but has thirteen months (the thirteenth month has five days and six every four years). See C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies* (Cambridge 1961), Appendix IV, ‘The Ethiopian Calendar’. A table with day by day, month by month, and year by year correspondences between the Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars can be found here:

into consideration religious and socio-cultural developments of the past and the present, in order to interpret the crosses used by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians today. Therefore, my first step will be to offer a historical overview of Christianity in Ethiopia, in order to provide context for the material discussed. It should be noted that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has played an instrumental role in the development of the Ethiopian empire, which preceded the formation of the modern state of Ethiopia. Orthodox Christianity was also a fundamental factor in the development of a modern Ethiopian national identity, which is a contested notion, not shared equally by all Ethiopian citizens. I would like to clarify from the beginning that although I occasionally propose interpretations of Ethiopian crosses that refer to socio-political notions of unity and order, I do not intend in any way to suggest that such crosses are emblems of national Ethiopian identity. After all, today at least one third of Ethiopia's citizens are Muslim, and parts of the population still practice indigenous religious traditions.²⁰ My interpretations of Ethiopian crosses are intended to explore what these sacred objects might mean and how they might function for their Orthodox Christian makers and users. As these people belong to different ethnic groups, and their concerns are influenced by their relation to each other and to other ethnic groups, I will also provide some basic information on that front. For the purposes of this study, the following outline of the history of Christianity in Ethiopia is extremely brief, but hopefully not reductive in ways that might render it distorting.

A history of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity must begin with some discussion of the geographic and other implications of the term 'Ethiopia', for which it is necessary to report some complicated data of the present day. The modern state of Ethiopia, or more fully the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (established in 1994), is a land-locked country in the Horn of Africa (at the east part of the continent), bordered by Kenya and Somalia to the south, Somaliland and Djibouti to the east, Eritrea to the northeast

http://calendar.zoznam.sk/ethiopian_calendar-en.php?ly=2017. In this study I use the Gregorian calendar throughout.

²⁰ For more details see below.

and north, Sudan and South Sudan to the west (Map 1). Encompassing the Blue Nile and its tributaries as well as a number of large lakes, Ethiopia is home to high mountains and highland plateaus in the central and northern part, reaching heights from 1500 to 4550 meters or 4,921 to 14,928 feet, which have earned the region the name ‘Roof of Africa’ (Figs. 19–20). The country also comprises tropical forests in the west, and dry lowlands in the south and east. In the northeast, the Danakil Desert includes volcanos, sulfur- and salt-lakes, and one of the hottest and lowest parts of the planet in the Danakil Depression, 125 meters or 410 feet below sea level (Figs. 21–22). These great geological and climatological differences lead to highly diversified fauna, flora, and ultimately human communities and their ways of life.²¹ Within its 102 million people,²² Ethiopia is said to encompass more than 80 different ethnic groups with distinct cultural traditions, speaking languages that belong to four major linguistic families: Cushitic (including the Afar, Oromo and Somali languages), Semitic (including Amharic, Tigrinya and Harari), Omotic (languages spoken mostly in the south), and Nilo-Saharan (languages spoken mostly in the southwest).²³ Amharic is the official language of the federal state of Ethiopia, while the nine regional states are free to choose their own working language. Amharic, Tigrinya, Afar and Harari are written in the script of Ge’ez, an ancient Semitic language that is still employed in the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, but is no longer used in everyday parlance. Since 1991, Oromo is written in a Latin alphabet called Qubee.²⁴ The Latin alphabet, Arabic script or other writing systems are also used for various languages, some of which

²¹ For the above see R. Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians. A History* (Oxford 2001), 6–7, and P. Henze, *Layers of Time. A History of Ethiopia* (New York 2000), 1–4.

²² Estimated in July 2007, CIA World Factbook, accessed December 30th 2016.

²³ G. R. Varner, *Ethiopia. A Cultural History of an Ancient Land. A Study of a Land and People* (Raleigh 2012), 14, 57–61.

²⁴ <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ET/languages>, accessed November 19th 2017. http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/Afaan_Oromo_19777.html, accessed December 30th 2016.

(for example, Afar or Somali) may be written in more than one script. According to a 2007 estimate, the four largest ethnic groups in the country are Oromo (34.4%), Amhara (27%), Somali (6.2%) and Tigray (6.1%).²⁵



19. Panorama of Semien highland mountains and valley around Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Homo Cosmicos/ Shutterstock.com.



20. Blue Nile Falls, Tis Abay, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.

²⁵ CIA World Factbook, accessed December 30th 2016.



21. Dallol, the sulfur lake area in the Danakil Depression, Ethiopia. Photo by Kenneth Dedeu/ Shutterstock.com.



22. Caravan carrying salt blocks from the Danakil Depression lakes to Mekele, capital of Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Onyx9/ Shutterstock.com.

The members of these four groups might be dispersed throughout Ethiopia (for example, Amhara populations are prominent in urban centers), but each group dominates their respective regional states within the Ethiopic federation: Oromiya to the south and west, Amhara and Tigray to the north, and Somali to the east. In total, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia comprises nine ethnically-based regional states (Map 1).²⁶ According to a 2007 estimate, 43.5% of the Ethiopian population were Orthodox Christian, 33.9% Muslim, 18.5% Protestant Christian, and 2.7% followed indigenous African religions.²⁷

The complex ways in which ethnic and cultural identities might intersect and interact in modern Ethiopia is indicated by religious affiliations, which transcend but do not erase ethnic alignments: religious traditions might carry their own cultural associations, but it turns they might be influenced by local ethnic cultures, and at times they are overridden by ethnic tensions.²⁸ For example, the Amhara and Tigrayans are predominantly Ethiopian Orthodox Christians,²⁹ and are traditionally seen as representatives of the

²⁶ For more detailed information see É. Ficquet and D. Feyissa, 'Ethiopians in the twenty-first century. The structure and transformation of the population', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia. Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, eds G. Prunier and É. Ficquet (London 2015), 76–88.

²⁷ Ibid. In the same source, the following data was also included under religion: Catholic 0.7%, other 0.6%.

²⁸ See U. Braukämper, 'Aspects of Religious Syncretism in Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22.3 (1992), 194–207. Among other things, the author observes that dietary practices related to cultural traditions might influence the decision of specific ethnic groups to embrace Christianity or Islam: with its strict prohibition of meat consumption for a large part of the year due to fasting rules, Christianity is more compatible with the life-style of farming populations in the highlands while it is incompatible with the lifestyle of pastoral populations in the lowlands, where Islam is more widespread.

²⁹ In the Amhara and Tigray regions, 82.5% and 95.6% respectively identified as Orthodox Christian in a 2007 census. See *Understanding Con-*

Habesha ('Abyssinian') identity, born in the historic nucleus of present-day Ethiopia, that is, the highland fertile regions of central and northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Their cultural and political role was instrumental in the creation of the Ethiopian Christian empire, through conquests of surrounding regions in the fourteenth-fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. They both trace their roots back to the ancient pre-Christian cultures of the region and its first Christianized civilization in the kingdom of Aksum (still a major religious center close to the north border of Ethiopia). On the contrary, the Oromo people were newcomers in the region at the southern part of present-day Ethiopia, when from the sixteenth century onwards they started infiltrating the land and settling in through warfare and immigration. To a large extent they adjusted to the cultural traditions and political systems of the pre-existing ethnic groups and often collaborated with them, but they were also seen as outsiders by the dominant Christian Amhara and Tigrayans, and therefore they were stereotyped in negative terms.³⁰ In 2007, almost half of the Oromiya population (47.5%) identified as Muslims, 30.5% as Orthodox Christian, 17.7% as Protestant Christians, and 3% still practiced indigenous African religions.³¹ Conversion to Islam or Protestantism has often been perceived as a way for the Oromo to resist the pressures of the politically and culturally dom-

temporary Ethiopia, chart on Ethiopia-Religion, at the beginning of the book.

³⁰ For all the above see Ficquet and Feyissa, 'Ethiopians in the twenty-first century', 17–20, 23–27. Also, D. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia. The evolution of a multiethnic society* (Chicago 1974), 72–86 (Levine uses the term Galla for the Oromo, which is not used by Oromo themselves and is avoided in most recent literature, as a term with potentially derogatory connotations). For the Oromo see also S. Etefa, *Integration and Peace in East Africa: A History of the Oromo Nation* (New York 2012).

³¹ *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, chart on Ethiopia-Religion, at the beginning of the book. The book contains two chapters on Ethiopian Muslims and Protestants respectively: É. Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Muslims: Historical Processes and Ongoing Controversies', 93–122; and E. Fantini, 'Go Pente! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia', 123–146.

inant Orthodox Christian groups.³² The 2016 protests that erupted in Ethiopia and were violently suppressed by the federal government—leading to the deaths of hundreds of people and the detention of thousands³³—have cast a strong light on the ethnic tensions that might override religious affiliations in the country. At the beginning of 2016, the protests started among Oromo people, but by July–August Amhara regions were also in unrest. These two ethnic groups (Oromo and Amhara) might have distinct request and complains relevant to their specific place in the Ethiopian federation,³⁴ but they are both frustrated with government corruption and undemocratic practices, and they both seem to begrudge the fact that the ruling federal party is predominantly controlled by Tigrayans who monopolize economic and security positions and opportunities.³⁵ In this case, political dissatisfaction and ethnic tensions were not discouraged by the shared Christian Orthodox faith and Habesha identity of the Amhara and Tigrayans.

I have deemed the above a necessary preface to the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, in order to indicate that there is no monolithic Ethiopian identity to which the visual material I examine can be related. It is clear that Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is just one among multiple factors, social, cultural and ethnic, which have interacted for centuries in the land encompassed today within the modern state of Ethiopia. This said, it is also true that the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition has exerted a paramount influence on the histories, cultures, and experiences of the people who have identi-

³² Ficquet and Feyissa, ‘Ethiopians in the twenty-first century’, 26.

³³ <http://www.africanews.com/2016/12/24/ethiopia-s-mass-release-of-detainees-excites-top-us-officials-call-for-more/> and <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/ethiopia-at-a-crossroads-as-it-feels-the-strain-of-civil-unrest-1.2898411>, accessed December 30th 2016.

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/dec/18/ethiopia-oromia-farmland-development-fatal-clashes>, accessed January 1st 2017.

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/dec/22/gondar-ethiopia-ethnic-tensions-toxic-politics>, and <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/ethiopia-at-a-crossroads-as-it-feels-the-strain-of-civil-unrest-1.2898411>, accessed December 30th 2016.

fied with it through the centuries. So it is now time to outline the trajectory of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity from its beginning to the present day. I base the following summary mostly on material from Paul Henze's work on Ethiopian history.³⁶

According to Ethiopian tradition, the first mention of Christian believers in a land that should be identified with a territory within the modern state of Ethiopia is found in the Greek text of *Acts* 8:26–40. This passage of the New Testament states that an Ethiopian eunuch in the service of a queen encountered Philip and, after listening to his exegesis of scripture, believed in Christ and asked to be baptized. In ancient Greek, the term Αἰθίοψ (Ethiopian) could mean any dark-skinned person (usually but not exclusively from Africa).³⁷ Moreover, the court in which the eunuch served has been located by scholars in the Nubian kingdom of Meroë (Kush), in modern Sudan to the northwest of Ethiopia.³⁸ Nevertheless, in later centuries Christians from the land of Ethiopia identified the eunuch of *Acts* 8:27 as a compatriot, and were proud of the early advent of Christianity in their land.³⁹ It is possible that Christianity reached the land in the first centuries AC, through travelers to and from the Mediterranean and Egypt. The new religion was more systematically introduced to the Horn of Africa, and more specifically to the kingdom of Aksum, in the fourth century.

³⁶ P. Henze, *Layers of Time. A History of Ethiopia* (New York 2000). S. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the unknown land. A cultural and historical guide* (2002), provides a more concise historical summary.

³⁷ See the examples mentioned by Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 3–10, starting with Homer, who uses the term Αἰθίοψ to identify the most pious of people, beloved by the gods.

³⁸ This identification is based on the word *kandake* that is used in the Greek text of the *Acts* to describe the queen whom the eunuch served. This term was a royal title in the kingdom of Meroë. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 353.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Munro-Hay suggests that such a belief might have become popular soon after the official introduction of Christianity in the Kingdom of Aksum in the fourth century, for which see below. See also note 298 below.



23. The obelisk-like stone stelae of Aksum, Ethiopia. The fallen Great Stele is about 33m (108 ft) long. Photo by Dmitry Chulov/ Shutterstock.com.



24. King Ezana's Stele (21m / 69 ft high), Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by trevor kittely/ Shutterstock.com.



25. Gold coin of Aksumite King Eon (first half of the 5th c.). Crosses accompany the inscription, declaring the faith of the empire. Photo by the Trustees of the British Museum/ Art Resource, NY.



26. Coin of Aksumite King Joel, 6th c. AC. Prominent cross on the king's crown and in front of his eye on the obverse, and large cross on the reverse. Photo by the Trustees of the British Museum/ Art Resource, NY.

The Aksumite kingdom (Map 2) might have been established as early as the fourth century BC.⁴⁰ It flourished between the first and sixth centuries AC and survived until at least the tenth century. In its heyday, it was recognized as an important political power by people of the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia. South Arabian and indigenous cultural elements merged to create a vibrant civilization in the kingdom. The capital city of Aksum, famous for its impressive obelisk-like monolithic stelae and stone architecture (Figs. 23–24), was probably established in the first century AC, close to the northern border of modern Ethiopia with Eritrea. The territories of the kingdom extended until the Red Sea, to encompass the rich trading port of Adulis, and gradually expanded southwards in the fertile highlands of modern central Ethiopia. Flourishing trade, especially around the Red Sea, but also with Egypt and the Mediterranean, prompted the introduction of coinage in Aksum around 270 AC. By the fourth century AC, surviving inscriptions and literary sources from within and without the kingdom suggest that its people could use three terms to identify themselves or at least part of the kingdom's population, and the same terms could be used by outsiders referring to them: Aksumites (from the kingdom of Aksum), Habashat (later Habasha in Arabic, transformed into 'Abyssinian' in European languages), and Ethiopian (in the Greek language often used in official inscriptions of Aksumite rulers).⁴¹ From the time Christianity was adopted by king Ezana around 340, the new state religion was also proclaimed on coins (Figs. 25–26), with the introduction of crosses to replace the earlier religious symbols of the sun and the crescent moon. According to the fourth-century Roman church historian Rufinus, the Aksumite dynasty was converted to Christianity by Frumentius, a Syrian young man who survived a shipwreck off the shores of the Red Sea and was taken to the Aksumite court where he eventually

⁴⁰ For the following information on the Aksumite kingdom see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 22–49; Munro-Hey, *Ethiopia*, 19–21, 231–43; Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 7.

⁴¹ Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, refers to a fourth-century trilingual inscription of King Ezana which employs the terms Habashat and Ethiopian—the latter in Greek.

served as treasurer and secretary to the king. When Frumentius was sent to Alexandria to request a Christian bishop for the Aksumite kingdom, Patriarch Athanasius appointed Frumentius himself, ever since known to his flock as Abuna Salema (Father of Peace). After Frumentius and until 1959, every new Abuna held the rank of metropolitan bishop or archbishop as head of the Ethiopian Church, and he had to be appointed by the patriarch of Alexandria. He was usually a native Egyptian monk, often without previous knowledge of the languages of his Ethiopian flock and in need of an interpreter (called *qala pappas*).⁴² The Abuna had three main prerogatives: to ordain priests; to crown the King of Kings (the title used by the Aksumite and later monarchs); and eventually to consecrate *tabots* (identified as copies of the Ark/Tablets of the Old Testament, on which the Eucharist is celebrated, attested by the second millennium as the most holy object of each Ethiopian Orthodox church).⁴³ From the fourth century onwards, Ge'ez, the Semitic language of the Aksumite kingdom, was used to translate the Bible and other Christian texts and to compose the liturgy of the Ethiopian Church. It has been suggested that this process of translation might have encouraged or consolidated two major changes in the Ge'ez script, which took hold in the fourth century and differentiate it from other Semitic scripts: the inclusion of signs for vowels and the direction of writing and reading from left to right (rather than right to left).⁴⁴ Today the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is still celebrated in Ge'ez, but only learned clerics can understand it, as it is no longer spoken by the people (compare the use of Latin in the liturgy of the Catholic Church).

A turning point in the development of Christianity in Ethiopia came with the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. According to the dogmatic promulgation of that council, Christ has two per-

⁴² Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43–44 (and pp. 40–55 for more information on the Church). Also S. Ancel and E. Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the challenges of modernity', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 64–66. The *tabot* will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

⁴⁴ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 25.

fect natures, human and divine, that remain undivided and unconfused in his person. The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches (and by extension Protestant denominations which branched off of Catholicism) subscribe to this dogma and are therefore called Chalcedonian or post-Chalcedonian. In opposition to this dogma, the Churches collectively known as Oriental Orthodox, today including the Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syrian, Armenian, and Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Churches, follow a different Christological definition: according to them, perfect divinity and perfect humanity, while still remain undivided and unconfused in the person of Christ, are united in one nature (*mia physis*, in Greek). Therefore these Churches self-identify as Miaphysite and are often called pre-Chalcedonian, as they do not recognize the ecumenical authority of any Church councils from Chalcedon onwards. Unfortunately, a very common mistake in scholarly literature is to describe the Oriental Orthodox Churches as Monophysite (from the Greek *mone physis*, single nature). Yet Monophysitism was a heresy of the fifth century which claimed that Christ is only divine, his human nature being entirely subsumed by his Godhead. This claim was condemned by both pre- and post-Chalcedonian Christians.⁴⁵ In theological terms, it is not only inaccurate, but can also be considered derogatory to call the Oriental Orthodox Churches Monophysite. The adherence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the Miaphysite dogma is proclaimed in its official full name, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: the Ge'ez word Tewahedo refers to unity, union, unification, oneness, and empha-

⁴⁵ For a brief overview of the Christological dogma of the Ethiopian Church, see O. Raineri, *La Spiritualità Etiopica* (Rome 1996), 30–32. For a more extensive study of this issue, see M. Kiros Gebru, *Miaphysite Christology: an Ethiopian perspective* (Piscataway 2009). Also Endale Abebe, *The Impact of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) on the Unity of the Church: Special Focus on the Life of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* (Saarbrücken 2011). See also <http://www.eotc.faithweb.com/orth.html#DOCTRINES> (online publication by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church), and http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/theology/nature_of_christ.pdf (online publication by Pope Shenouda III, late head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria), both accessed December 30th 2016.

sizes that the perfect divinity and perfect humanity of Christ are united (yet unconfused) in his one nature.⁴⁶

According to Ethiopian tradition, the so called Nine Syrian Saints arrived in the Aksumite state shortly after 451. They were probably priests and monks expelled from the Eastern Roman Empire (more widely known today as the Byzantine empire), because of their Miaphysite beliefs. They were warmly received by the monarch of Aksum and devoted themselves to establishing churches and monasteries, translating Christian texts, and organizing Christian communities. A century later, St. Yared is credited with creating the tradition of Ethiopian hymnography and religious music, as well as establishing the basis of the Ethiopian religious education system and the rules for the composition of *qene* (Ge'ez poetry). Monasticism flourished in the country and was organized primarily on the Rule of Pachomius from Egypt. Monasteries and their abbots enjoyed great regional power and prestige. Rulers would offer them rich land endowments and in return they would enlist their support.⁴⁷

In the sixth century, the Byzantine emperor Justin I asked the Aksumite King of Kings Kaleb to help Christians who were persecuted by a Jewish ruler in the area of Yemen in south Arabia.⁴⁸ Kaleb invaded and established a Christian rule in the area, but he was unable to control it for long. This ambitious expedition strained the resources of his kingdom and is believed to have contributed to the decline of Aksum. In the seventh century, the rise of Islam also affected the fate of the Aksumites. Around 615–16, Prophet Mohammed sent a few of his followers, who were persecuted at Mecca, to find refuge in the land of Aksum. They were amicably received by the Christian king. In the Islamic tradition, this is known as the First Hegira or the Abyssinian Migration. When the Prophet called his followers back in 628, some decided to stay behind and establish a Muslim community. It is believed

⁴⁶ Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 30.

⁴⁷ For the above see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 38–39, 47; Ancel and Fiquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 66–67.

⁴⁸ On the information of this paragraph see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 39–49.

that, in recognition of the Aksumite assistance, the Prophet instructed his people to 'leave the Abyssinians (Habesha) in peace, as long as they do not take the offensive.' Indeed, early Muslims did not declare war against the Aksumite empire. Yet, as the new rising power in Arabia and the Mediterranean, they gradually took control over the trade in the Red Sea and conquered Syria, Palestine and North Africa. In addition, Islam spread in the coastal regions of the Horn of Africa where it has remained dominant ever since. These developments struck a debilitating economic blow to the kingdom of Aksum, even though it continued to be involved in trade with the Mediterranean and Egypt. The rise of Islam to the north and east encouraged the Aksumites to turn their interests and activities inlands, towards the central and south regions of modern Ethiopia. Ethiopian Christians remained connected with the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt from where they received their Abuna, and maintained a presence in the holy city of Jerusalem, but their attention was no longer turned towards the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Signs of decline in the city of Aksum by the mid seventh century—dilapidated buildings and shrinking population—indicate reduced political and economic power, yet Aksum remained a major religious center, up until the present day. The expansion and consolidation of Christianity continued at a steady pace. Aksumite rulers endeavored to extend their territory south and Christianize the indigenous people. This eventually provoked a counterattack and by the late tenth century Aksum was sacked and its churches were destroyed. Yet the Aksumite paradigm of a Christian monarchy with different people under its rule survived and thrived in later centuries in the lands of present-day Ethiopia. In cultural terms, scholars consider that the kingdom of Aksum was a seedbed society for the development of the Ethiopian Christian empire in the second millennium AC.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 110. He uses the following definition of seedbed societies: 'those which are agents of cultural innovations that become very significant to societies of a different time and place.' For a series of generic but useful time maps of the Horn of Africa that show the development of an 'Ethiopian' realm from the time of Aksum to the present day (starting at 200 AC and ending in 2005) see <http://www.time-maps.com/history/nubia-ad1648>.

Due to the scarcity of reliable and detailed sources, historians have trouble discerning exactly who was the enemy and what happened in the aftermath of the attack on Aksum in the late tenth century. It seems the Aksumite dynasty survived, but by the twelfth century it was replaced by the Zagwe, probably of the Agew/ Agaw people.⁵⁰ Although they spoke languages of the Cushitic family, they maintained Ge'ez as the language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with which they collaborated closely as presumed God-appointed monarchs. At the same time, Amharic was evolving into a widely used language. By the thirteenth century, the Zagwe ruled from a city in the north part of present-day Ethiopia, which was soon to be known as Lalibela, after the most famous Zagwe king. He is credited with the construction of the renowned monolithic rock-cut churches of Lalibela (Figs. 27–30). According to scholars, these impressive spaces of worship were intended to turn the city into a second Jerusalem, or at least a second Aksum, and a major pilgrimage center. Lalibela is still considered the holiest city in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition after Aksum itself.⁵¹

The year 1270 is traditionally accepted as the beginning of the so-called Solomonic dynasty, which replaced the Zagwe.⁵² Being Amhara people, the new rulers established Amharic as the official language of the state, while Ge'ez continued to be the language of the Church. It seems they didn't have a permanent capital, one reason being their extensive campaigns that kept them on the move.⁵³ They claimed that their lineage connected them not only to the Aksumite monarchy, but also to the Biblical king Solomon, through the Queen of Sheba (Queen Makeda) and her son Menelik.

⁵⁰ On this and the following information see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 48–53.

⁵¹ See J. Mercier and C. Lepage, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia. The Monolithic Churches and their Treasures* (London 2012), especially pp. 267–75.

⁵² On the Solomonic dynasty and the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 56–82.

⁵³ Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 23.



27. Cruciform rock-cut Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Yury Birukov/ Shutterstock.com.



28. Cruciform rock-cut Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by WitR/ Shutterstock.com.



29. Rock-cut Church of Medhane Alem (Savior of the World), Lalibela, Ethiopia. Cruciform windows create cross-shaped streams of light in the interior. Photo by Rafal Cichawa/ Shutterstock.com.



30. Rock-cut Church of Abba Libanos, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Cruciform windows create cross-shaped streams of light in the interior. Photo by Homo Cosmicos/ Shutterstock.com.

In the fourteenth century, the *Kebra Nagast*/ *Kebre Negast* (*Glory of the Kings*) was written down in Ge'ez to narrate the story of Mak-eda and Menelik and how the latter brought to Ethiopia the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant.⁵⁴ This text conferred legitimacy and prestige to the new Christian dynasty of the land, by proclaiming a venerable royal lineage and possession of the Ark. This holy relic is said to have come to Ethiopia with the support of the one true God who favored Melelik, and is still believed to reside in the Church of our Lady Mary of Zion, in Aksum. In the eyes of many Ethiopian Christians to this day, the *Kebra Nagast* is a highly revered and authoritative source. It is often viewed (at least by Orthodox Christians) as the Ethiopian national epos, and in the twentieth century it was cited in the two constitutions of Haile Selassie's reign 'as the foundation of the Ethiopian state and authority for the origin of the Solomonic dynasty', from which Haile Sellasie himself claimed descent.⁵⁵

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Solomonic rulers expanded their territory to the south and at times also to the north until the Red Sea and the port of Massawa, close to ancient Adulis

⁵⁴ When making references to this text, I use the following English translation: E. W. Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek, being the history of the departure of God and his Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the establishment of the religion of the Hebrews and the Solomonic line of kings in that country* (London 1922). A more recent translation, with commentary by the editor M. F. Brooks, was published by Red Sea Press (Lawrenceville 1996), but was not available to me. For a concise reference to the tradition of Solomonic descent, see *African Zion*, 11–12, *Ethiopian Art*, 27–28. Also, W. Witakowski and E. Baliocka-Witakowska, 'Solomon in Ethiopian Tradition', in *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition. King, Sage and Architect*, ed. J. Verheyden (Leiden 2013), 219–40; D. M. Coulter-Harris, *The Queen of Sheba. Legend, Literature and Lore* (London 2013), 135–148 (chapter 9: 'Ethiopian Legends: Ancestral Claims and Political Dominance'). Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 92–112, offers a useful analysis of the *Kebra Negast*, especially in terms of literary structure and ideological agenda. His attribution of the epos to a Tigrayan cultural context is not widely embraced in the secondary literature I examined.

⁵⁵ Henze, *Layers of Time*, 56.

(Map 3). Through military campaigns as well as Christian missionary activities spearheaded by energetic monks, they created an empire which encompassed a large part of the present-day state of Ethiopia. The rulers were fervent supporters of the Ethiopian Church and systematically used Christianity to enhance their own authority and exert power over their subjects. It is indicative that in the fourteenth century three successive rulers adopted the throne names 'Slave of the Cross', 'Vessel of Christ', and 'Vessel of Mary'.⁵⁶ In the fifteenth century, Zara Yacob took the throne name Kwestantinos (Constantine), while the most famous of his four wives was Eleni (Helen).⁵⁷ These onomastic choices recall Constantine I (first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire) and his mother Helen who was credited with having found the True Cross on which Christ was crucified.⁵⁸ Zara Yacob was invested in restoring and maintaining unity in the Church as a means of securing the unity of the empire (as the Roman emperor Constantine had done in the fourth century). For example, he contributed in settling a dispute among opposing parties about whether or not Ethiopian Christians should celebrate both the Sabbath and Sunday. With his intervention, both were accepted as holy days of the week and are still observed today with the celebration of the Eucharist among Orthodox Christian Ethiopians.⁵⁹ The emperor was particularly committed to the dissemination of Christianity among non-believers, but also to the indoctrination of Christians in what he considered their proper duties (which included marking all their

⁵⁶ Henze, *Layers of Time*, 64, 67 (Amde Tseyon, Sayfa Ar'ad, and Wudem Asfare respectively took these evocative throne names).

⁵⁷ Henze, *Layers of Time*, 69, 72.

⁵⁸ It is worthy of notice that according to tradition Zara Yacob was responsible for instituting the celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross (Masqal or Meskel commemorated on September 27), which is one of the most important feasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Although different from the feast of the Finding of the Cross by St. Helen (also called Masqal/ Meskel, commemorated on March 17), the Exaltation of the Cross also makes references to Helen. See Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 45–46.

⁵⁹ Henze, *Layers of Time*, 69, 71.

personal belongings and their forehead with the sign of the cross). He often went to extremes, using violence to impose his will, and was criticized for it even by Christian religious leaders. His patronage led to the establishment of several churches and monasteries and the prolific creation of religious paintings, manuscripts, and liturgical objects, including crosses.

In the sixteenth century, the expansion of the empire was reversed and even its survival seemed tenuous at times. From about 1529 to 1543, Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim ('son of Ibrahim') invaded with his troops and laid waste to much of the land, destroying churches, monasteries, and their religious treasures, to the dismay of the faithful—and of later generations of scholars. Imam Ahmad was the Muslim ruler of Harar (a major Islamic center to the east, capital of the Sultanate of Adal). His military success earned him the title al-Ghazi, 'the Warrior' in Arabic. The Christian emperor Galawdewos finally managed to defeat this formidable opponent, with the instrumental help of about 400 Portuguese men who carried the latest firearms of the time.⁶⁰ A new threat emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century, with the large-scale invasion of the Oromo people, Cushitic pastoralists from the south. Through warfare and immigration, the Oromo occupied territories in south and western areas of present-day Ethiopia, where they created a new home for themselves. Although many were converted to Islam and some remained faithful to their indigenous religions, others became Orthodox Christians and eventually assumed positions of power within pre-existing local communities. In later centuries, Oromo military leaders and lords would also create family ties with members of the Solomonic dynasty, through marriage.⁶¹

While the Oromo exhibited masterful adaptability within the new socio-cultural context they encountered, European newcomers

⁶⁰ Ahmad is often referred to as Gagn ('left-handed') in the sources and scholarly literature (and originally this nickname probably carried derogatory connotations). For his destructive campaign as well as his notoriety among Ethiopian Christians to this day, see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 86–92.

⁶¹ For the Oromo see note 30 above. Also Henze, *Layers of Time*, 90–92.

were not as successful. The Portuguese had established contact with the Solomonic dynasty in the late fifteenth century, and sent an important diplomatic mission in 1520.⁶² Later the Catholic Church undertook missionary activities, and the pope appointed a Catholic patriarch in the region, to antagonize the Orthodox Abuna appointed by the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. Some of the Jesuits active in this African Christian empire treated Orthodox Christians with arrogance and soon became rather unpopular, especially when they converted to their faith two Solomonic emperors in the early seventeenth century. The first ruler, Za Dengel, was killed in a rebellion caused by his conversion. His successor Susenyos was also a convert, and fell under the influence of the extremely uncompromising Portuguese Catholic Patriarch of the kingdom, Alfonso Mendes, who aimed to prohibit Christian Orthodox practices entirely. As a result, another rebellion ended in Susenyos' abdication. His son Fasiladas was a fervent supporter of the Orthodox Church. Soon after he ascended to the throne in 1632, he expelled all Jesuits and banned them from his kingdom on pain of death.⁶³ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church remained linked with all subsequent monarchs.

The seventeenth century saw the rise of Gondar as a center of power for the Solomonic dynasty, with ruler after ruler embellishing the city with royal residences and churches (Fig. 31).⁶⁴ From the second half of the eighteenth century, the power of these rulers was mostly nominal, as they became puppet kings with the required Solomonic lineage, under the control of powerful regional lords who vied for prominence.⁶⁵

⁶² Henze, *Layers of Time*, 85–86.

⁶³ For all the above see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 92–100; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 25–31.

⁶⁴ For Gondar see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 100–107; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 32, 69–164.

⁶⁵ For the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century (also known as 'The era of the Princes', see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 119–24; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 32–33.



31. Buildings of the royal enclosure, Gondar, Ethiopia. Photo by Fernando Tatay/ Shutterstock.com.



32. Ethiopian silver coin (half birr) of Emperor Menelik II, 1889. Prominent cross on the lion's crown and staff and on the emperor's crown. Photo by Yaroslaff/ Shutterstock.com.



33. Ethiopian nickel coin (25 matonas) of Emperor Haile Selassie, 1923. Prominent cross on the lion's crown and staff and on the emperor's crown. Photo by Yaroslaff/ Shutterstock.com.



34. Ethiopian bronze coin (5 cents) of Emperor Haile Selassie, 1944. Prominent cross on the lion's crown and staff. Instead of the ceremonial and more traditional outfit of Fig. 33, the emperor now wears modernized attire. Photo by Yaroslaff/ Shutterstock.com.

By the second half of the nineteenth century three such lords successively claimed a Solomonic pedigree and power for themselves and succeeded in revitalizing the Ethiopian empire: Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II.⁶⁶ The latter was by far the most successful, and even his highly symbolic name (after the son of King Solomon and Queen Makeda) emphasized his prestige as usher of a new era (Fig. 32). After his coronation in 1889, his bloody conquests enlarged the realm to almost the present-day extent of the state of Ethiopia. One of his most salient achievements was his victory over the Italian army in the battle of Adwa (1896). On this occasion, the Ethiopian army successfully defended the independence of the empire from colonial invaders who at the time were involved in operations all over the continent—in the so-called ‘scramble for Africa’. Menelik II also begun the process of modernization of the country’s infrastructure. The new capital of Addis Ababa (‘New Flower’) was founded, and communication and public services were established (railways, roads, post, telegraph, banks, schools, and hospitals).

By 1916, three years after Menelik II’s death, a distant relative and member of the nobility with Amhara, Oromo, and Gurage lineage was appointed regent as Ras Tafari, and by 1930 he was crowned King of Kings with the name Haile Selassie, or ‘Power of the Trinity’ (Fig. 33).⁶⁷ Even before his coronation, he had developed intense international diplomatic activities and was highly respected around the world as head of state. In late 1934, Fascist Italy under Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, using modern war technology—including airplanes and chemical weapons. After the Ethiopian

⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of this period see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 127–87. For a summary see Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 33–35.

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion of the reign of Haile Selassie until his deposition in 1974 see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 188–286. For a summary see Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 35–36. See also Ch. Clapham, ‘The era of Haile Selassie’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 183–208. For the Rastafari cult based on the person of Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari), and its importance in the construction of a proud African identity see G. Bonacci, ‘From Pan-Africanism to Rastafari: African American and Caribbean ‘Returns’ to Ethiopia’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 147–158.

army was defeated, Haile Selassie went into exile from 1936–41, working to raise awareness about his country's suffering and solicit help on the basis of the principles of collective security. The response was deplorably limited, until Italy entered the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany. In 1941 Haile Sellasie re-entered Ethiopia and an alliance of Ethiopian partisans and soldiers of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth of Nations, Free France and Free Belgium defeated the Italians. In a remarkable speech he gave after entering Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie urged his compatriots to rejoice for their victory 'in the spirit of Christ. Do not return evil for evil. Do not indulge in the atrocities which the enemy has been practicing in his usual way, even to the last.'⁶⁸ During the Italian offensive and subsequent occupation, the Italian forces committed extensive atrocities and crimes of war, including the bombing of Red Cross facilities. The Ethiopian estimation of lost lives during this period amounts to three quarters of a million, although this number is disputed by the Italian side. The destruction of numerous churches was also reported.⁶⁹ In the context of their colonial politics, in 1937 the Italians removed one of the three largest obelisk-like stelae from Aksum, and erected it in Rome. In 2005 the monument was finally returned to Ethiopia and in 2008 it was re-erected and unveiled at Aksum, amidst much local celebration.⁷⁰

During his reign, Haile Selassie continued the modernization efforts of Menelik II with caution, so that foreign investments would not act on the expense of Ethiopian traditions and needs (Fig. 34). He often met opposition among ecclesiastical and noble

⁶⁸ Haile Selassie, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress: The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I*, translated from Amharic by E. Ullendorff (New York 1999), vol. 2, p. 165.

⁶⁹ Publications that deal with these subjects include: R. Baudendistel, *Between bombs and good intentions: the Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936* (New York 2006); A. Mockler, *Haile Sellasie's War* (New York 2003); A. Barker, *Rape of Ethiopia, 1936* (New York 1971). For concise references to Italian atrocities and Ethiopian resistance see also Henze, *Layers of Time*, 225–28.

⁷⁰ http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/abstract_scovazzi.pdf, accessed January 1st 2017.

circles who disapproved of certain innovations, while his concessions to their demands also caused the dissatisfaction of the new educated elite, students, and citizens who desired democratic developments. His insistence on maintaining autocratic power further fueled political tensions. In 1974 he was deposed by the military coupe of the Derg, and the following year he died under uncertain circumstances. He was the last ruler of the Solomonic dynasty.

Haile Sellasie worked tirelessly to achieve the independence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church from the patriarchate of Alexandria.⁷¹ He advocated that the head of the ETOC should be an Ethiopian, not a Copt (Egyptian Christian). He and his supporters also believed that the monarchy should use the Church to promote its political agenda of unity and national identity. For decades the Alexandrian patriarchate ignored Haile Sellasie's request, but in the 1950's the situation changed. In 1951, Abuna Baselyos became the first native archbishop of Ethiopia invested by the Coptic patriarch, and his prerogatives included the ordination of Ethiopian bishops. In 1959, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church became autocephalous (literally 'with its own head'). As its leader, the Ethiopian Abuna has the rank of patriarch, is elected by a college of local ecclesiastical authorities, and can ordain bishops and archbishops, both in Ethiopia and abroad. Following this development, the EOTC established missions within the country and internationally. During the reign of Haile Sellasie, the autocephalous Church was closely controlled by the monarch who taxed Church property and envisioned to establish a centralized ecclesiastical system with fiscal authority over local parishes.

When the Derg overthrew Haile Sellasie in 1974, they initiated a purge in the ranks of the Church. According to the rhetoric of the new regime, this move was supposed to eradicate corruption, but in reality aimed to control the Church.⁷² Patriarch Tewoflos

⁷¹ For more detailed information on the subject of this paragraph see Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 70–76.

⁷² For the EOTC under the Derg see Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 76–79. For a detailed treatment of the era of the Derg see Henze, *Layers of Time*, 284–333. Also, G. Prunier,

was deposed in 1976 and executed in 1979 together with imperial officials. In 1976, an ascetic monk was elected in his place as Abuna Tekle Haymanot. He was in agreement with the Derg land reforms—as part of which, the holdings of ecclesiastical institutions and nobles were confiscated and distributed to the peasants. In 1978, the Derg ordered most archbishops and bishops into retirement, as presumed sympathizers of the monarchy, and in 1979 new ones were ordained in their place by Patriarch Tekle Haymanot. After his death in 1988, the new patriarch, Abuna Merkorios, was also approved by the regime. Although the Derg were atheists, they did not proceed to the dissolution of the Church, but rather used it whenever possible to advance their political agenda, control local communities, and promote unity in the country. The collaboration of the Church hierarchy allowed for the survival of the institution. In 1977, under the leadership of colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Derg initiated extensive persecutions of all their political opponents, inaugurating a period known as ‘Ethiopian Red Terror’, in which it is estimated that more than half a million people were killed. During that traumatic period, many Ethiopians turned to the Orthodox Church to find solace and escape turmoil.

In 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union which supported the Derg, the regime was overthrown by the rebel forces of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Within its ranks, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front played a major role and continues to dominate the political landscape of Ethiopia to this day, within the EPRDF government.⁷³ After the fall of the Derg, Patriarch Merkorios was forced to abdicate, and went into exile, settling in the USA in 1997 and establishing a dissident church (Synod in exile). Patriarch Paulos was elected in Ethiopia in 1992. After his death in 2012, he was succeeded the

‘The Ethiopian Revolution and the Derg Regime’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 209–232.

⁷³ See Henze, *Layers of Time*, 334–43. Also, M. Tadesse, ‘The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)’, in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 257–82.

following year by the current patriarch, Abuna Mathias.⁷⁴ Since 1991, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church had to deal with a number of challenges. These include the still active dissident Church which has created some rupture among diasporic communities; the separation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which became autocephalous in 1993;⁷⁵ and the rising missionary success of Protestant Churches, which were allowed into Ethiopia in 1944 together with the Catholic Church.⁷⁶ The latter has not succeeded in attracting numerous followers.⁷⁷ Characteristic of the rising presence of Protestantism in the country is the fact that the prime min-

⁷⁴ Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 79–83, 86–88.

⁷⁵ The history of the relationship between the modern states of Ethiopia and Eritrea is too complicated to report in this short introduction. I limit myself in saying that the colonial occupation of Eritrea by Italy between 1889–41 has played a role in later developments and the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia—for which Eritreans have fought a long war of independence between the 1960's–90's. In 1993 Eritrea became an independent state. According to the online CIA World Factbook (accessed January 2nd 2017) in a 2010 estimate, 55% of Eritrea's population were Tigrinya (same ethnic group with the Tigrayans of Ethiopia, speaking the same language, which is one of the official languages of Eritrea). Most of them are Christians of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which until 1993 made part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Islam is the other major religion of the country and Arabic is also an official language. For a detailed discussion see G. Prunier, 'The Eritrean Question', in *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, 233–56.

⁷⁶ For these challenges see Ancel and Ficquet, 'The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church', 81–86.

⁷⁷ There are probably various reason for the lack of success in Catholic missionary activities in Ethiopia, but historical memories might be among them: perhaps a mistrust among Orthodox Ethiopians towards Catholics due to the seventeenth-century precedent with the Jesuits; and possibly a mistrust of many Ethiopians due to the close association of the Roman Catholic Church with Italy, the country which invaded Ethiopia in 1896 and 1934–41. According to the CIA Factbook (accessed December 30h 2016), in 2007 there were 18.5% Protestants and only 0.7% Catholics in Ethiopia.

ister of the federal government since 2012 until the present (2017), Hailemariam Desalegn, is a Protestant. At the face of such challenges, the most successful responses of the Orthodox Church and its followers are those aiming to revitalize their communities. One characteristic example is the erection of large new cathedrals paid by the donations of parishioners—including Medhane Alem (‘Savior of the World’) in Addis Ababa, the second largest cathedral in Africa (Fig. 6). It has been observed that ‘local communities are proud of these buildings, which are a powerful sign of the revival of Ethiopian Christianity.’⁷⁸ A clear indication that the Orthodox Church is dynamically engaging with its people is the rising popularity of miraculous healings and exorcisms, performed by charismatic priests and monks. It is recognized that ‘these healers address the spiritual and psychological needs of believers who are strained by the daily hardships of existence and the struggle to adapt to modernity.’⁷⁹ Holy water is often used in healing miracles and blessing rituals, and hand crosses are prominently employed by exorcists (Figs. 35–36). In addition, crosses continue to be absolutely central in the celebration of the liturgy and the feasts of the Church, and play an important role in the everyday lives of Orthodox Christians and their interactions with each other (Figs. 44–81, 116–121, 140–145).

⁷⁸ Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, 86.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 84–85.



35. Blessing ceremony through water and the cross: an Ethiopian Orthodox priest pours water over the body of a staff cross and lets it fall over a young boy, Church of Debre Sina (Mount Sinai), Gorgora, northern shores of Lake Tana, Ethiopia. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.



36 Priest Memihir Girma Wondimu, believed by thousands of Ethiopian Christians to be a great healer, touches the forehead of a possessed man with a hand cross, during an exorcism ritual at a church in the outskirts of Addis Ababa. Photo by David Tesinsky/ age fotostock.

Ecclesiastical objects like crosses and icons are now produced in large numbers in Ethiopia, not only for the Orthodox Christians, but also for foreign tourists, who visit the country in increasing numbers.⁸⁰ Such products are even available online, and address both Ethiopians of the diaspora and other interested audiences. Back in 2010, when I started collecting Ethiopian crosses, I was buying them directly from Ethiopian sellers through Ebay. Nowadays, there seem to be several online sellers who trade from Europe or the USA, but still import their products from Ethiopia. I remember that when I began buying these crosses, I had the naïve belief that one day I could own a comprehensive selection of basic designs. I soon abandoned that futile goal, once I realized that the variety of imaginative and unique designs is inexhaustible. As I was finishing this chapter in early 2017, I was once more tempted to search online, and to my excitement I again discovered some crea-

⁸⁰ N. Sobania and R. Silverman, 'Icons of Devotion/Icons of trade. Creativity and Entrepreneurship in Contemporary "Traditional" Ethiopian Painting', *African Arts* 42 (2009), 26–37.

tive renditions that I had not encountered before, especially from sellers trading directly from Ethiopia. In these examples, thoughtful re-interpretations of traditional forms manifest the unabated relevance and multivalent significance of the cross in contemporary Christian Ethiopia. To this day, the inventive and meaning-full designs of Ethiopian crosses produced by the Orthodox Christians of the country are a testament not only to the millennial richness, but also the continuous vitality of a living cultural tradition, which is time to examine in more detail.



37. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric displays an ancient staff cross in one of the rock-cut churches of Lalibela, Ehtiopia. Photo by 2630ben/ Shutterstock.com.

CHAPTER TWO.

THE CROSS IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Ethiopian crosses of various media survive from an early period. In fact, Ethiopian coins bear the sign of the cross as early as the fourth century, when Christianity was adopted by the Ethiopian kings (Figs. 25–26).⁸¹ Soon after, the cross became prominent in monastic culture.⁸² As Christianity spread in the land, so did the use of its most sacred symbol. Due to the upheaval of the tenth century that led to the sack of Aksum, few objects and visual representations predating that time still survive.⁸³ In addition, old Ethiopian crosses without datable inscriptions are notoriously hard to date because of the continuous repetition of decorative patterns across the centuries.⁸⁴ This is true of metal crosses, but even more so of wooden examples that are more widely produced and do not re-

⁸¹ Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 2–3. ‘Ezana [the first Christian Ethiopian king] may have been the first Emperor in the world who engraved the sign of the cross on coins as a Christian symbol’. Ibid, the pre-Christian use of the sign of the cross in Ethiopia is also mentioned. See also Di Salvo, ‘Signum Crucis’, 152–57. For a more detailed discussion see W. Hahn, ‘Symbols of Pagan and Christian Worship on Aksumite Coins. Remarks to the history of religions in Ethiopia as documented by its coinage’, *Nubica et Aethiopica* 4 (1999), 431–454.

⁸² Possibly through influence from Coptic Egypt, according to Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 2–3.

⁸³ Simović, *Daughter of Zion*, 12.

⁸⁴ Di Salvo, ‘Signum Crucis’, 158.

quire complex technical expertise.⁸⁵ Usually, the earliest known portable crosses (in metal) are dated to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. They already display striking formal complexity and the characteristic open-work structure that gives them a lace-like appearance, very typical of most Ethiopian crosses from that time onwards (Fig. 37).⁸⁶



38. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric displays a staff cross in one of the rock-cut churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia. This design, with slight variations, is one of the most popular for large Ethiopian staff crosses (compare Figs. 39, 44, 49, 89, 121, 130, 151). Photo by Danita Delimont / Alamy Stock Photo.

⁸⁵ Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 18. For the recent re-dating of Ethiopian objects, including crosses, to an earlier period than previously assumed see also *Ethiopian Art*, 48.

⁸⁶ *Ethiopian Art*, 76–79. The chronology and formal development of Ethiopian crosses is systematically discussed by Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 91–175. He uses visual representations of crosses (and not just surviving portable crosses) in his dating, and ascribes an 8th–12th c. or 11th–13th c. date to the earliest surviving portable crosses (ibid., figs. 173–77). See also Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 123–44.



39. An Ethiopian Orthodox young cleric and an altar boy dressed in festive robes carry staff crosses in a procession during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.

The designs become even more elaborate from the fifteenth century onwards, with the introduction of intricately interwoven motifs that remain central in the production of Ethiopian crosses to the present day: whether they are made of wood, metal, stone or leather, these crosses are based on patterns of interlocking threads and knots that create an intricate matrix on which other motifs and figures may be added (Fig. 38–39).⁸⁷

As in earlier examples, the visual effect is based on the repetition of self-similar patterns in different sizes and on the balanced manipulation of matter and void that creates the impression of textile-like motifs. The creativity of Ethiopian cross-makers thrives in transforming the archetypal idea of a lace-like or weave-like matrix into infinite imaginative variations.⁸⁸ As these objects are hand-made, the creation of each one is an opportunity for the makers to explore new possibilities within the tradition to which their creations belong. The fundamental symbolism of the basic design is amplified by the integration of different variables, enriching the

⁸⁷ The open-work and lace-like structure of earlier Ethiopian crosses, from the twelfth century onwards, also creates the impression of interwoven components. However, from the fifteenth century onwards this idea is much more clearly articulated in the visual details of the crosses, through a network of careful incisions that create the impression of threads passing over and under each other in complex inter-woven patterns. Compare cat. nos 3 and 4 in *Ethiopian Art*, 80–84. Ibid., 55.

⁸⁸ In this book, I make the following distinction between what I call ‘lace-like’ and ‘weave/woven-like’ patterns: although both are based on the open-work treatment of the cross-body and include incisions to add detail to the intersecting forms that make up the overall design, the woven-like patterns are the most complex and textile-like. As stated above, they use dense knot and thread forms to create the impression of an actual weaving, with components crossing over and under each other in regular alternation. On the contrary, what I call ‘lace-like’ patterns intersect but do not interlock in the same weave-like manner, nor do they have the density that creates a textile-like effect. (I chose this term because lace can be created in various materials through perforation alone, without the use of threads, while weaving is based on the interlocking of threads or thread-like components).

overall message with meaningful components (Figs. 40–43, 82–85, 89–90, 102–104, 109–11, 122–25, 128–30, 132, 135, 138–39). Although the details of each cross vary and new motifs are introduced over time, the basic characteristics of the weave-like or lace-like matrix (self-similar patterns, symmetry, openwork) are observed in most cases, suggesting the operation of a stable yet gradually enriched system of symbolic forms and underlying meanings.⁸⁹ In the present study I am not interested in the historic development and classification of Ethiopian cross patterns, but in the contextual interpretation of some over-arching characteristics common in most portable crosses of the open-work type.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ For new developments in the production of Ethiopian crosses and the introduction of new designs that co-exist with old ones, see the overview in *Ethiopian Art*, 48, 51, 55, 56, 58, 61, 68. Although the clearly interwoven motifs are particularly prominent in the production of the 15th century and again from the nineteenth century to the present, the open-work lace-like appearance is a common feature of the majority of Ethiopian crosses, even those without inter-woven motifs (especially in metal but to a large extent also in wood; more on this issue below.) Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis', 158–173 presents numerous crosses, the majority of which are of open-work, lace-like or woven-like appearance, even if they vary greatly in terms of provenance and date. Ibid., 158, although Di Salvo attempts a classification of Ethiopian crosses in six groups, he also admits that the possibilities created by the combination of various motifs and the resulting visual outcomes are unlimited. See also the even richer material presented in his book *Crosses of Ethiopia*.

⁹⁰ It should be noted that a large number of portable crosses are not open-work strictly speaking (they do not have perforation, but on the contrary are solid, especially in wood or leather). Yet many of these crosses still reference their open-work counterparts by employing weave-like motifs created through the interlocking of knot- and thread-like elements. The absence of literally 'open' work is due to the technique and material of production, but the visual effect is very similar to open-work crosses, minus the more dramatic interplay of matter and void, shadow and light, that is found on actual open-work crosses.



40a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (14.5 x 8.5 inches, 37 x 21 cm), with the so-called 'Knot of Solomon' in the center. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



40b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 40a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body and a holy figure in the center, probably Christ. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



41a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (16.75 x 10 inches, 42 x 25 cm) with bird-like heads at the extremities of the loops at its lower part. The birds could allude to the idea of the cross as the Tree of Life. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



41b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 41a), with dots added on the thread-like motif around the central body, surrounding the figures of Christ (top) and angelic beings (sides and bottom). Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



42a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (12.5 x 7 inches, 32 x 17 cm) with the so-called 'Knot of Solomon' in the center, three angelic figures in the upper and lateral arms, and human busts at the extremities of the loops at its lower part. The human figures appear to be venerating the cross. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



42b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 42a), with more detailed incisions on its body and the image of Mary holding Christ at the top arm, flanked by angelic figures at the lateral arms. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

The variety of possible interpretations that can be applied to the widespread features of these crosses offers the opportunity to examine issues of agency—from the points of view of makers and users—and to think in broader terms about the role of visual signs in the life of the communities that produce and employ them.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Most of the motifs I will examine are knots, interwoven geometric shapes, and so on. From a Eurocentric perspective, such themes are often described as ‘abstract’, ‘an-iconic’, ‘non-figurative’, ‘non-representational’, or ‘decorative’. All these terms reflect specific cultural hierarchies that give special importance to the human figure in narrative compositions or devotional depictions and overlook other subjects as secondary, gratuitous, or even frivolous embellishment. This is a serious misconception when attempting to interpret the meaning of images, either within European visual traditions or other cultures, like the Ethiopian, as will become apparent in the course of this study. For the moment, I would like to clarify that what might be termed formally ‘abstract’ can actually have very concrete and important meaning in the Ethiopian context. Occasionally, I might use the convenient term ‘abstract’ to refer to non-anthropomorphic and non-zoomorphic motifs, such as knots and threads, but I would like to invite readers to understand this as a convention that doesn’t imply any qualitative or quantitative evaluation of meaning or lack thereof. Furthermore, ‘icon’, ‘figure’, and ‘representation’ are all words that, in reference to the visual, define something as a created image or a material visual depiction, whether it is of a human or an animal, a plant or a mountain, a building or a crown, a circle or a cross, a knot or a line. In view of this, terms such as ‘an-iconic’, ‘non-figurative’, and ‘non-representational’ are oxymoronic in the description of material visual creations. In any given culture, a geometric design or a landscape might be as important and meaningful an image (icon, figure, representation) as, let’s say, the face of Christ in European visual traditions. Obviously I don’t intend to make any generalized statements about the importance of all kinds of images in all cultures, but to suggest that when we attempt to decipher their messages in any given context, we should consider the possibility that they are all potential carriers of meaning. Imposing any preconceived notions of ‘higher’ versus ‘lower’ importance is rather misleading and

counterproductive. Many Ethiopian crosses combine thread and knot motifs with depictions of holy figures (Figs. 40–42). That doesn't mean that the former are less significant than the latter in creating the meaning of the object or that they are 'just superfluous decoration' framing the 'main subject'.

In the following pages, I might refer to the 'decoration of the cross' with one pattern or another (including human figures), but I never assume that there is such a thing as 'just decoration', defined as an aesthetic embellishment devoid of meaning. From a modern Eurocentric point of view, 'decoration' or 'ornament' is often understood as non-anthropomorphic, non-narrative imagery that might cover the entire surface of an object, its center, or its periphery (in the latter case as a framing device) in order to make it aesthetically appealing, without any other intended message. Yet this is a problematic notion in itself, and was not espoused even in European traditions of the past.⁹¹ Firstly, the labor and cost of creating 'decoration' adds value to an object and renders it a status symbol, which is obviously a very meaning-full statement. Secondly, the culturally specific category of beauty is a significant factor in the construction of a society's hierarchical system of values: whatever is considered to be aesthetically pleasing in any given culture carries positive associations that often intersect or overlap with other significant categories of culturally-specific meaning, such as power, influence, desirability, purity, or moral superiority. Especially in a religious context, aesthetic quality has divine associations, as divinity is believed to be the ultimate source and the original creator(s) of beauty. Therefore, human-made 'embellishment' in a religious setting pays tribute to this concept: humans dedicate their best creations to the divine maker(s) who provided humanity with all the beauties of the world. In a Christian context, God's example inspires humans to honor him by fulfilling their potential as creators

⁹¹ For example, see C. Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Boston 2016). For a masterfully sophisticated discussion of the multivalent meaning and cultural prominence of *kosmos* (which included the notion of decoration) in the Mediterranean world of Late Byzantium see I. Drpic, *Epigram, Art, and Devotion in Later Byzantium* (Cambridge 2016), 118–85.

in his 'image and likeness' (*Genesis* 1:26).⁹² Moreover, 'decorative' motifs may have additional rich meaning in many cultural traditions, depending not only on the specific significance of each pattern, but also on the way they are combined in an overall design and on the manner they are employed in certain objects or in particular settings. I hope to propose some viable interpretations of such cases in the present study. My aim is not to discuss the aesthetic quality of Ethiopian crosses, but to explore the possible significance of formal elements that are considered worthy of representation on the sacred symbol of the cross, exactly because they embed various categories of interrelated meanings, of which beauty is just one multifaceted and polyvalent component.⁹³

⁹² It should be noted that this generic observation might apply in different degrees to different cultures. Scholars have noted that the social status of creators of objects among various Ethiopian ethnic and cultural groups is a complex issue. For example, among the Amhara 'virtually all manual labor not associated with tilling the soil (farming) is looked down upon', but that is not true among other Ethiopian groups. In addition, makers might be both feared and admired for their special knowledge, and the products of their labor are appreciated. (Silverman, 'Traditions of Creativity', 13–16.) Also, the making of religious objects like crosses or paintings is more highly regarded than the making of non-religious utilitarian objects. Painters and cross makers were often members of the ecclesiastical establishment (respected priests or monks) and even today many of them attend church school even if they are not priests or monks themselves (see notes 97 and 98 below).

⁹³ For a critical discussion of the above issues from various perspective see E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca 1979); O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton 1992); J. Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (London 2001) and *Ornament: a modern perspective* (Seattle and London 2003); D. Brett, *Rethinking decoration: pleasure and ideology in the visual arts* (Cambridge 2005). Trilling (*Ornament*, 23) states that 'ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content'. Personally I take issue with this definition: I see visual pleasure as being part of the communicative value of content, the latter being a multifaceted message of which the aesthetic function is just one aspect. For discussions

INTRODUCING THE MATERIAL

In the following pages, I focus my analysis on the basic formal aspects that are shared in the matrix of most Ethiopian open-work crosses, and I make limited reference to variables that appear with some frequency. I give special attention to the symbolic sophistication of the interlocking, woven-like motifs that are particularly widespread on Ethiopian crosses today and have also known periods of great popularity in the past. In the images of this book, all crosses photographed as isolated individual objects, laying down against a neutral background, are contemporary creations that reproduce or elaborate traditional designs used in older surviving examples, some of which date from centuries ago (for example, Figs. 40–42).⁹⁴ On the contrary, crosses presented in the hands of people photographed in portrait-like fashion or during rituals might be antique heirlooms or more contemporary productions (for example, Figs. 38–40). In Ethiopian Christian experience, crosses of different dates and designs co-exist in the same setting, united through ritual use and through the basic conceptual and formal elements that are common to most crosses. This diachronic survival and contemporary synchronic use of Ethiopian crosses demonstrates the vitality of a living tradition that continuously accrues values and meanings and makes them available in a kaleidoscopic manner, allowing social agents different possibilities in their interactions with each other and with the tradition itself. I will return to this issue in chapter four, when I will discuss in more theoretical terms the *modus operandi* of these objects and will explore the significance of the kaleidoscopic metaphor (broadly intended to signify multiplicity of meaning).⁹⁵ In the meantime, I will present possi-

of decoration along these lines of layered meaning see the literature mentioned in note 91 above.

⁹⁴ All these crosses derive from the contemporary commercial online market that distributes internationally objects produced in Ethiopia according to traditional designs and techniques.

⁹⁵ I consciously use ‘*modus operandi*’ in this context, as a term that is often employed today in English to refer to the mode of operation of human beings or institutions. I intend to underline that visual creations (like the Ethiopian crosses) can be considered creators in their own right,

ble interpretations that could have developed and operated any time during the long-lived production of these crosses, as they are rooted in diachronic, deep-seated concerns and beliefs of the Ethiopian Christians, and correspond to basic social and cultural values.⁹⁶

through their powerful influence on the experience, relations, and world-views of people. They are not just instruments used by social agents but ultimately function as agents themselves. This is a well-established idea in the humanities and social sciences, particularly advanced by A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford 1998). To mention just a few other relevant works: *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge 1986). R. W. Preucel and I. Hodder 'The production of value' in *Contemporary Archaeology in Theory*, ed. R. W. Preucel and I. Hodder (Oxford 1996), 99–113. *People and Things: Social Mediations in Oceania*, ed. M. Jeudy-Ballini and B. Juillerat (Durham 2002). *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities (The Social Life of Things Revisited)*, ed. W. van Binsbergen and P. Geschiere (Münster 2005). An overview of ideas presented in the above and other relevant publications appears in M. Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (London 2007), esp. chapter 3, 'From Visual Communication to Object Agency', pp. 38–66.

⁹⁶ In making this claim, I do not subscribe to any ahistorical perceptions of a stagnant and unchanged culture, but to a historical observation: the pragmatic stability that defines basic human needs (like protection) and the vital stability that characterizes the basic dogmas of the Christian Ethiopian Church (like the centrality of the Incarnation of God in Christ for the reinstitution of unity in the relationship between divinity and humanity). I have already noted that the production and use of Ethiopian crosses is characterized by both continuity and change, the two interrelated forces of life and by extension of any ongoing cultural phenomenon. More will be said on this below. For some relevant observations concerning the study of past and present cultures, the coexistence of continuity and change, and the perils of presentism as 'a form of ethnocentric thinking that projects contemporary views and practiced into the past' (an approach that I diligently try to avoid) see, for example, E. M. Brumfiel, 'Cloth, Gender, Continuity, and Change: Fabricating Unity in Anthropology', *American Anthropologist* 108.4 (2006), 862–77. Although Brumfiel focuses her attention on Mesoamerican weaving, her comments are perti-



43a–c. Contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (10.5 x 4.5 inches, 27 x 11.5 cm) created for the tourist market (notice the self-adhesive tag ‘Made in Ethiopia’). The handle is in the shape of a human figure with a large cross pendant on its chest and arms raised to hold the body of the cross. This figure is sometimes referred to as ‘Adam’ by scholars. a: one side of the cross has a typical textile-like motif of interwoven threads. b and c: other side of the cross, with cross-shaped window closed (b) and open (c) to reveal two painted scenes from the life of Christ (the one on the left is probably his Baptism). Bought on the online market, author’s collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

In recent years, Ethiopians started producing crosses for the tourist market. Although innovations have been introduced in order to attract customers, these are mostly concerned with the multiplication of surfaces to be decorated; for example, through the addition of windows that open up to painted surfaces on the main body of the cross (Fig. 43). At the same time, the patterns of decoration follow age-old traditions and the most highly regarded cross makers are still priests or deacons or at least are educated at church school, where they become familiar with the main dogmas of their

nent to the study of all cultural phenomena, and are supported by extensive references to relevant scholarly literature.

faith. Although tourists buy such crosses as souvenirs, their makers consider them sacred religious objects, and the locals continue to buy and use them as such—from the same creators who cater for the tourist market.⁹⁷ In the past, the majority of the crosses were used in an ecclesiastical or faith-centered context and were created by monks, clerics, or lay people trained within the educational framework of the Ethiopian Church.⁹⁸ The most wealthy and pro-

⁹⁷ For all the above see Sobania and Silverman, 'Icons of Devotion/Icons of trade'. I believe the term 'artist' can be applied to all Ethiopian cross-makers (even the ones who would not identify themselves as artists but as makers of religious objects, or priests, or other professionals), because I see in their work the expression of creativity, imagination, aesthetic preferences and technical skills that I identify with artistic production. Ethiopians might make crosses to earn their living or as a devotional practice (or both), but the artistry of their work as I define it here is always a feature of their cross-making activity. However, I recognize that in Western tradition the term 'artist' is linked to a number of culturally-specific notions and value assumptions that might not be applicable to other cultures, so I will avoid this word and instead use the more generic and simply descriptive term 'cross-maker' or 'creator'. I deliberately avoid the term 'craftsman', which is often used in art-historical scholarship to create an arbitrary hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' artworks and artists, based mostly on modern Western preconceptions about the value and function of visual creations (often applied to very different cultures). For an insightful discussion of these matters as they pertain in particular to Ethiopian culture see Silverman, 'Traditions of Creativity'. Ibid., 15–16 it is noted that although blacksmiths are looked down upon in the Ethiopian highlands, precious-metal specialists (who also make crosses) are more highly regarded, one reason being the intrinsic value of their materials and another the high status of their clients.

⁹⁸ M. Heldman, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Fre Seyon. A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage, and Spirituality* (Wiesbaden 1994), 80–81 (reference discussed in more detail in note 129 below); *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven and London 1993), 39, 142, 195; Simović, *Daughter of Zion*, 17–18; *Ethiopian Art*, 56, 62, 66, 75. For issues of patronage, including dedications by Christians who don't belong to any social elite groups, see N. Sobania and R. Silverman, 'Patrons and Artists in Highland Ethiopia: Contemporary Practice in the

lific patrons were members of the Ecclesiastical and State hierarchy, and the works they commissioned were often closely supervised by high-ranking clergymen. Those figures of authority were invested in creating eloquent visualizations of interrelated socio-cultural and religious concepts that would be intelligible both to the well-educated elite and the broader population. Indeed, the diffusion of the basic patterns of Ethiopian crosses across social, spatial, and temporal boundaries within the multicultural territory of this large Christian realm suggests that their visual language was widely successful and meaningful—and continues to be so today.

Within Ethiopian visual production, different cross designs might have been developed in specific locations or periods, but may be geographically and chronologically diffused through later production. Even more importantly, despite specific design differences, Ethiopian portable crosses share significant formal, functional, and conceptual similarities that can be perceived as signs and instruments of shared socio-cultural values and concerns among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Consequently, in the following analysis, Ethiopian crosses will emerge as a powerful emblem of unity, with socio-cultural implications that extend beyond a strictly religious sphere, in the eyes of the Ethiopian Christians who identify with this religious tradition. This is entirely reasonable, considering that to the present day the social and cultural life of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is profoundly defined by their religious beliefs.⁹⁹ In such a context, the cross is not just the most prominent symbol of their religion, but it also becomes a particularly powerful and eloquent marker of their identity.¹⁰⁰ This inextricable integra-

Commissioning of Religious Paintings and Metalwork', in *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg July 20–25, 2003*, ed. S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden 2006), 469–77.

⁹⁹ Simović, *Daughter of Zion*, 16–17. *Ethiopian Art*, 19–42.

¹⁰⁰ See K. K. Merahi, *The Contribution of the Orthodox Tewahedo Church to the Ethiopian Civilization* (Addis Ababa 1999), 11, for the interweaving of religious and national identity in the case of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Merahi holds a prominent position in the Ethiopian ecclesiastical hierarchy (he has served in various capacities, including head of Pastoral Care Service). I employ his publications extensively in this book, exactly

tion of religion with other components of socio-cultural identity, a phenomenon widely diffused throughout human history, is a concept that those of us living in largely secularized states should not overlook. The *applicability* of basic cultural values on the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses, as suggested below, further reinforces the idea that such objects are significant products and producers of an entire system of socio-cultural relations and ideas that include religion as a basic defining component. The rich and subtle visual language of these crosses has developed into such an impressively long-lived and vital tradition exactly because it serves a network of fundamental socio-cultural interactions—with success that ensures the continuous life and evolution of both the network itself and the cross as its server.

TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF ETHIOPIAN CROSSES

In this study I examine portable crosses of three basic types that are used in various religious rituals, daily interpersonal exchanges, and individual life activities in the Orthodox Christian culture of Ethiopia. Several terms are used in the literature to describe these crosses, and due to this lack of consistency confusion is sometimes unavoidable. I will be using three generic descriptive terms that refer to the way these objects are handled and presented: staff crosses, hand crosses, and pendant crosses.¹⁰¹

because they reflect beliefs widely held by Ethiopian Christians. I thank Andrea Greig for purchasing copies of Merahi's books for me when she traveled in Ethiopia. M. Di Salvio, 'Signum Crucis', 153, 158, states that in Ethiopia, the cross appears everywhere as an element that unifies and distinguishes the Ethiopian people. For the practice of other religions in the country, see the discussion in chapter 1.

¹⁰¹ For issues of terminology and use relevant in the following discussion, see Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis', 159. The terms I use are closely based on the ones he employs in his *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 22: staff-mounted, hand and neck crosses. Instead of the latter, I use the term pendant crosses to avoid any misunderstanding: all such crosses are appended from a chain/cord that is hanged around the neck, but some are worn close to the neck and some lower, on the chest, or even hanging as low as the waist. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 17–35, discusses the 'nomenclature and

Staff crosses are very diffused in Ethiopia and are often characterized by great dimensions and very intricate decoration.¹⁰² They have a lower hollow shaft for insertion on a pole and they are usually cast, often in more parts that are then attached together. Although they are frequently called ‘processional’, in reality they serve a variety of religious uses. A large staff cross is displayed to the congregation during the liturgy (Figs. 44–46). Since the texts are read in Ge’ez, an ancient language that today is incomprehensible to the general population,¹⁰³ the cross becomes a focal point on which the faithful can concentrate their gaze and prayers during the ritual. When this cross is raised at the end of the liturgy, the congregation knows that the ritual is over. Staff crosses are also displayed to church visitors and pilgrims (usually in churches that are popular pilgrimage sites and tourist attractions and own old and venerable crosses). In such cases, the crosses are often presented without the staff attached to them, so that the clergymen can handle them easily and even offer them to the lips of pilgrims who wish to kiss these holy objects (Figs. 3, 37–38, 47–48, 82, 121, 139). Staff crosses are also used without their pole when they are immersed in or sprinkled with water during rituals of blessing or purification (Fig. 35).

classification’ of Ethiopian crosses according to various scholars as well as Ethiopian sources. He provides a vivid picture of the variety of the material and the challenges of producing a consistent terminology that depends on function and significance. This is why I opt instead for a simple classification based on the way crosses are handled and presented (staff crosses, hand crosses, pendant crosses).

¹⁰² On this subject, with reference to the information I present in this paragraph, see Skrobucha, *Äthiopische Kreuze*, 23–35. Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 151–70. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 30–31. Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 6. Perczel, ‘Abyssinian processional crosses’, 19–23. Korabiewicz, *The Ethiopian Cross*, 96–102, 109–30.

¹⁰³ Roughly speaking, Ge’ez is to Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia) and to Tigrinya what Latin is to various European Romance languages, although the exact relationship between them is still disputed (Henze, *Layers of Time*, 77). Although all people attending Church school are taught to read Ge’ez, they are not taught to understand its meaning, unless they pursue a higher ecclesiastical education in order to become priests.



44. Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds a staff cross during the celebration of the liturgy at the Ethiopian Chapel, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, Israel. The cross is displayed during the liturgy and eventually is raised before the congregation, to signal the end of the service. Photo by Kobby Dagan/ Shutterstock.com



45. Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds a staff cross during the celebration of the liturgy at the Ethiopian Chapel, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, Israel. Photo by dominika zarzycka/ Shutterstock.com.



46. Ethiopian Orthodox priests and deacons celebrate the liturgy in the rock-cut church of the Abuna Yemata Monastery, Tigray region, Ethiopia. An altar boy holds a staff cross that will be raised to signal the end of the service. Photo by Mitchell Kanashkevich.



47. Ethiopia Orthodox cleric displays two staff crosses at the Asheten Marym (Smell of Mary) Monastery, in the mountains above Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Eric Lafforgue/ age fotostock.



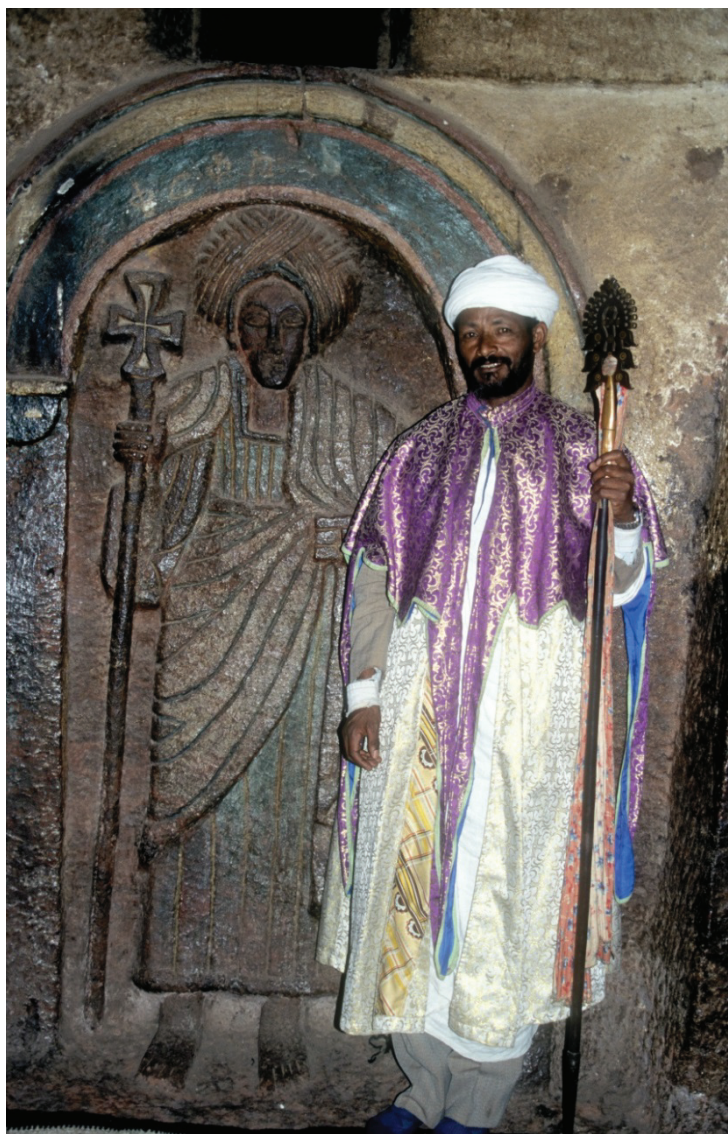
48. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric displays a staff cross in one of the rock-cut churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia (compare Fig. 38). Photo by Fredy Thuerig/ Shutterstock.com.



49. Ethiopian Orthodox clerics and altar boys display metallic and wooden staff crosses, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.



50. A procession with staff crosses, Timkat festival, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.



51. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric with a staff cross in his hand proudly stands next to the painted relief of a holy figure also holding a staff cross (which lacks the appended cloth and could be intended to represent a pastoral rod). Inside the Rock-cut Church of Golgotha, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Norma Joseph/ Alamy Stock Photo.

Mounted on their staff, these crosses are taken in procession on various special occasions, like Church feasts, official celebrations, local anniversaries, or times of crisis, when divine help is invoked. During processions, the crosses are often accompanied by colorful parasols as signs of the honor and reverence due to them (Fig. 49–50). A characteristic aspect of all of these crosses that is peculiar to the Ethiopian tradition is the pair of hooks or loops at the base of the vertical arm, from where a long cloth is appended and hangs along both sides of the pole (Figs. 37–39, 44–50). According to a traditional interpretation, this cloth symbolizes the colobium or loincloth of Christ at the Crucifixion, or the sudarium of his burial.¹⁰⁴ This idea complements the frequent identification of the cross itself with the very body of Christ, as attested in various Ethiopian texts.¹⁰⁵

Smaller staff crosses can be used as pastoral rods, in which case the lower loops might be missing or be filled with decorative motifs, since they are not used to hold a textile (compare Fig. 51). Through such rods religious leaders identify themselves as followers and imitators of Christ, guarding their flock as Good Shepherds

¹⁰⁴ Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 152, 167. For other possible meanings see the discussion in chapter three.

¹⁰⁵ For the identification of the cross with Christ see Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 63–64. Also Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 34. This identification is very prominent in the popular protective prayers collectively known as *Rampart of the Cross* in which the cross is addressed and acts as Christ himself, often with Eucharistic connotations. For example, the cross is called the Alpha and the Omega or Emmanuel, is born out of the house of David, is the Lamb of God, the fruit of the vine and the grain, the bread of life. The cross is God himself, manifests his mercy, and saves the world like Christ. It is called 'our salvation, our life, Jesus Christ'. See Lifchitz, *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux*, 93 forward (for example, pp. 93, 99, 101, 105, 109, 111, 113, 115, 117, 121, 123, 125, 133, 145, 147, etc.). The identification of Christ with the cross is common in various Christian traditions. To quote Baert, 'the medieval border between the idea of Christ's Cross and Christ himself is wafer-thin' (B. Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood. The Legend of the True cross in Text and Image* [Leiden and Boston 2004], 308).

who carry the cross.¹⁰⁶ Pilgrims are also supposed to hold staff crosses as signs of their identity and mission: they are pious Christians devoted to an arduous trip that is a test and a proof of faith and at times requires intense perseverance and self-sacrifice, ultimately in imitation of Christ. Such pilgrims' crosses are much simpler than the more ceremonial ones used in church rituals, but they are equally important to their users, not simply as identity markers but also as protective objects that can guard the pilgrims from the various perils of their journey (Figs. 18, 52–53, 142). In addition, such staff crosses also have the practical function of a walking stick. Pilgrims' staff crosses are usually made in one piece, or with the rod and cross permanently attached to each other (rather than the cross placed on a removable pole).¹⁰⁷ Monks and nuns also own a staff cross similar to that of pilgrims, and are usually buried with them, unless the owner is considered to be a person of special sanctity, in which case the cross might be preserved in a church treasury.¹⁰⁸ The similarity between the staff crosses of pilgrims and anchorites (monks and nuns) could be of some significance. In past times of slow transportation, anchorites might have formed a much larger part of the total number of pilgrims, since lay Christians were bound by mundane responsibilities to their families and local communities. Beyond such practical considerations, there might also be a significant spiritual analogy between the experience of pilgrims and anchorites, which is also reflected in the similarity of their staff cross as an identity marker: both groups are committed to an arduous journey of self-discovery that is meant to bring them closer to God, either through the visit of sacred locations with special connection to the divine, or through the daily

¹⁰⁶ In paintings and miniatures, such staff crosses are often used as symbols of authority by holy figures (like angels or saints) or by royal figures who are invested with the sacrality of their office to which they are appointed by God. For example, see Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 112–13, 299, figs 5.37–9, 10.17.

¹⁰⁷ Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 25–26.

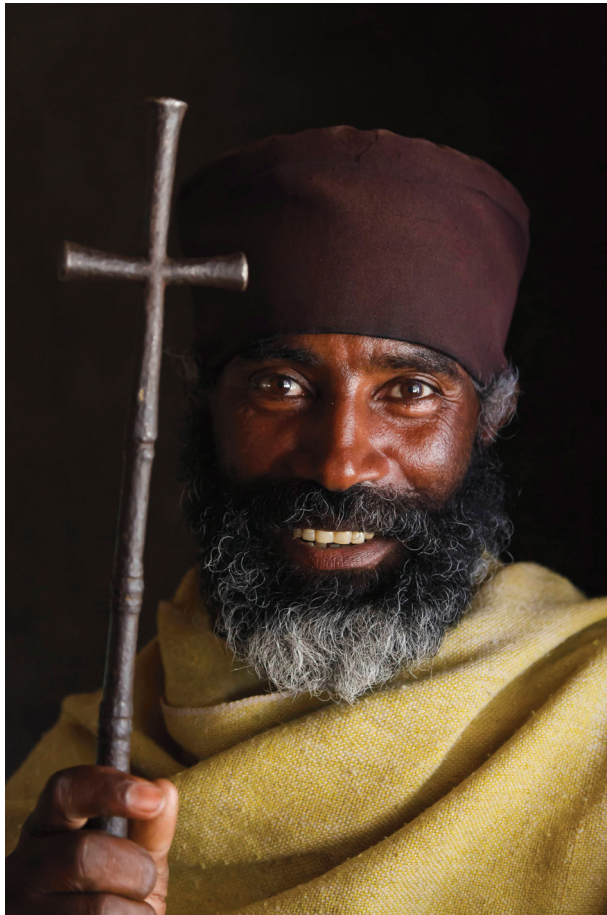
¹⁰⁸ Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 124. Ibid., the authors call the large staff crosses (with removable pole) 'crosses with a socket', and distinguish them from the staff crosses of monks and nuns that are one piece.

practice of an ascetic life devoted to God.¹⁰⁹ In both cases, the ultimate goal is an intimate encounter with God.



52. A pilgrim immersed in devotional reading, with his pilgrim's staff cross next to him, Lalibela, Ehtiopia. Photo by Godong / Alamy Stock Photo.

¹⁰⁹ Compare the insightful comments on this analogy, concerning the monks and pilgrims to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mound Sinai, by J. Elsner, "The viewer and the vision: The case of the Sinai Apse" *Art History* 17.1 (1994), 81–102.



53. A monk with his staff cross (similar to a pilgrim's staff cross), Monastery of Debre Maryam (Mountain of Mary), close to Bahir Dar, southern shores of Lake Tana, Ethiopia. Photo by Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo.

Especially in the past, this encounter with God was achieved through personal renunciation and sacrifice in imitation of Christ even by pilgrims, who had to endure the difficulties and dangers of a long journey, like monks and nuns had to endure the challenges and hardships of an ascetic life. Therefore both pilgrims and anchorites were also in need of the protection and solace that the most sacred symbol of their faith could offer them as their daily companion, in the form of the staff cross on which they could lean, in a physical as well as spiritual sense.

Ethiopian hand crosses and pendants are equally characteristic examples of the double function of this Christian sign as a source of protective blessing as well as a marker of identity. Pendants, usually made in metal, wood, or leather, are worn by people of both sexes and all ages, under or over clothing, close to the neck, or on the chest (Figs. 10, 13, 15–16, 54–59). Members of the clergy usually wear a pendant cross on a longer chain, hanging low on the torso, closer to the waist (Fig. 60). Pendant crosses are considered prominent signs of faith and sources of protection, often given to the wearers at the time of their baptism, when a baptismal cord is tied around their neck (a tradition documented since the fifteenth century).¹¹⁰

Hand crosses in metal or wood belong to members of the clergy and to monks or are liturgical objects and are therefore traditionally handled by men alone.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ For basic information on Ethiopian pendant crosses see Skrobucha, *Äthiopische Kreuze*, 54–65; Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 27–28. For the baptismal cross and cord see also *Ethiopian Art*, 92.

¹¹¹ For basic information on Ethiopian hand crosses see Skrobucha, *Äthiopische Kreuze*, 36–53; Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 28–30; Hecht, Benzinger, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 6–18. See also the entry in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya, (New York 1991), vol. 5, 1472: ‘In the course of performing any ecclesiastical function, whether inside or outside the church, the patriarch, bishop, or priest must hold in his right hand a cross.... With it he makes the sign of the cross over the oblations on the altar, the baptismal water, the heads of the betrothed during the wedding ceremony, or those to be given absolution. He holds it during the reading of the Gospel, while delivering a sermon, and when blessing members of the congregation or their homes. When a patriarch or bishop is consecrated or a priest is ordained, he is given a manual cross as a token of the authority he receives in the name of Jesus Christ. Its use during the liturgy signifies that he is the minister of Jesus Christ who is the Shepherd and Guardian of souls (1 Peter 2:25). It also stands for the power Christians can derive through prayer, for just as Christ conquered death and opened the gates of His Kingdom for believes, they can resort to the cross as a weapon with which to fight evil.’ The use of hand-crosses is similar in the Coptic, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, but a major differ-



54. Contemporary Ethiopian pendant crosses (ranging from 2 to 3.5 inches tall, or 5 to 8.5 cm). Seven crosses are made of metal and one of leather. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.

ence is that only Ethiopian and Eritrean hand crosses have a developed base, the symbolic significance of which I will discuss later on. Saints, angels and other figures of authority are often depicted holding a hand-cross in Ethiopian paintings or miniatures. For example, see Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 271, 286, 299, figs 9.16, 10.2, 10.17.



55. An Ethiopian boy with a simple pendant cross, Wollo, Ethiopia. Photo by Godong/ age fotostock.



56. An Ethiopian boy with a large wooden pendant cross has taken his shoes off before entering the Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Grant Rooney/ age fotostock.



57. An Ethiopian girl wears a large pendant cross with Christ on it (crucifix), in a rural house in Ethiopia. Photo by adrian arbib / Alamy Stock Photo.



58. An Ethiopian woman with a large wooden pendant cross, Hana Mursi Hotel, Omo Valley, Ethiopia. Photo by Eric Lafforgue / Alamy Stock Photo.



59. Ethiopian girls celebrate the Ashenda Festival that is held in August and marks the end of a two-week-long fast in honor of the Assumption of Mary, city of Mekele, Tigray region, Ethiopia. The girls wear pendant crosses. One of them dons a traditional dress embroidered with crosses. Photo by Minas Wondimu Hailu/ anadolu Agency/ Getty Images.



60. Three members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (from left to right, a *dabtara*, a monk and a priest) attend Easter celebrations at the Ethiopian section of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, Israel. The priest wears a large pendant cross and holds a wooden hand cross. Photo by Kobby Dagan/ Shutterstock.com.



61. An Ethiopian Orthodox priest blesses the crowd with a liturgical wooden hand cross (while on his other hand he holds his own smaller hand cross and his parasol), during the February feast of Kidane Mihret (Covenant of Mercy). This Ethiopian Orthodox feast celebrates the promise Christ gave to his mother to forgive the sins of those who seek her intercession. Photo by Eric Lafforgue/ age fotostock.



62. An Ethiopian Orthodox deacon holds a liturgical wooden hand cross and a swing censer during a procession, Timkat festival, Gondar, Ethiopia. Photo by Grant Rooney/ age fotostock.



63. An Ethiopian Orthodox priest holds his wooden hand cross as he poses for a photo, West Gojam, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.



64. Close-up of the same priest of Fig. 63. Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.



65. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds his wooden hand cross as he poses for a photo, Church of Yemrehana Krestos (built inside a cave about 12 miles northeast of Lalibela), Ethiopia. Photo by 2630ben/ Shutterstock.com.



66. The same cleric as in Fig. 65 displays his hand cross for a close-up.
Photo by Eric Lafforgue/ age fotostock.



67. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds his wooden hand cross as he poses for a photo, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Fredy Thuerig/ Shutterstock.com.



68. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds his wooden hand cross as he poses for a photo, rock-cut twin church of Gabriel-Rufael (Gabriel and Raphael), Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.



69. Interrupted from his devotional reading, an Ethiopian Orthodox monk displays his hand cross as he poses for a photo, Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.



70. An Ethiopian Orthodox monk has his hand cross appended from a beaded cord that hangs around his neck, wears the yellow mantle often donned by monks and nuns, and holds a prayer staff of the traditional T shape. Gondar, Ethiopia. Photo by Jorge Fernandez / Alamy Stock Photo.



71. The Ethiopian Orthodox cleric Taklu Melkamu holds his wooden hand cross as he poses for a photo, Church of Yemrehana Krestos , (built inside a cave about 12 miles northeast of Lalibela), Ethiopia. Photo by Eric Lafforgue/ age fotostock.



72. Two monks pose for a photo as they hold their hand crosses, Abba Garima Monastery, northern Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Sergi Reboredo/ age fotostock.



73. An Ethiopian Orthodox monk poses for a photo as he holds his wooden hand cross, monastic complex of Kidane Mihret (Covenant of Mercy), Zege peninsula, Lake Tana, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.



74. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric blesses a pilgrim by presenting his hand cross for veneration, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Mitchell Kanashkevich.



75. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric blesses a woman by presenting his hand cross for veneration, Nakuto Lab Monastery outside Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Sergi Reboredo/ age fotostock.



76. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric blesses a devotee by presenting his wooden hand cross for veneration, Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Mitchell Kanashkevich.



77. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric blesses a pilgrim by presenting his large wooden hand cross for veneration during, Christmas time, Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Grant Rooney/ age fotostock.



78. An Ethiopian cleric blesses a young girl by presenting his hand cross for veneration, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. After the girl has bowed before the cross, the priest touches her forehead with it. The next steps of this short but significant ritual are presented in Figs. 79-80. Photo by Eric Lafforgue / Alamy Stock Photo.



79. The next step of the blessing ritual presented in Fig. 78. Here the girl kisses the body of the cross. Photo by Eric Lafforgue / age fotostock.



80. The last step of the blessing ritual presented in Figs. 78-79, here between a different cleric and girl: the devotee kisses the base of the hand cross during the feast day of St. Michael, at the homonymous rock-cut church in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by infocusphotos.com / Alamy Stock Photo.



81. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric blesses a young woman by presenting his wooden hand cross for veneration, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Design Pics Inc / Alamy Stock Photo.

Large hand crosses, usually between twelve to twenty-four inches long (thirty to sixty centimeters), are employed during the liturgy. One is held by the officiating priest, who uses it to bless the congregation (Fig. 61); another, normally longer, rests on the left shoulder of the incensing deacon (Fig. 62). Smaller hand crosses, normally between four and ten inches in length (ten to twenty-five centimeters), are prized possessions of monks and clergymen, including the *dabtarat*, the unordained clerics of the Ethiopian Church who chant and dance in religious feasts and work as healers at the margins between religion and magic. Often these personally owned hand crosses are family heirlooms inherited from father to son or directly crafted by the owner (a possibility especially in the case of wooden examples that do not require advanced technical skills and processes). Hand crosses are used as personal identification markers and as important instruments in social interaction: they are always carried by their owners, who hold their hand cross in front of their chest as a sign of their professional identity when they present themselves in ceremonial occasions or when they are photographed (Figs. 63–73). In addition, hand crosses are used to bless the faithful, who honor their clergy and venerate the cross according to a brief but significant ritual, performed every time Ethiopian adults and children meet a cleric (Figs. 74–81). First, they bow in reverence, in response to which the clergyman takes out his hand cross, and as the faithful bow again, he touches them with the tip of his hand cross on their forehead (Fig. 78). Then the faithful kiss the main part (top) and the base (bottom) of the cross (Figs. 79–80).¹¹² Since in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition monks are considered holy men who have attained the highest standards of spirituality and virtue, they might also confer their blessing to the faithful through their hand cross, following the same ritual.

In this interaction centered on the cross, the cleric (or holy man) asserts his authority and responsibility as spiritual leader, while the faithful recognize his position—and by consequence theirs, as obedient members of the flock who also have the advantage to be guided and protected by their spiritual leaders. This is basically a ritual that establishes relationships of power, in which

¹¹² Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 46.

both sides have to accept restrictions, assert privileges, and recognize each other's roles. On the one hand, the cleric enacts his authority and offers his blessing, which implies not only a hierarchical position of superiority and privilege, but also requires moral conduct and leadership abilities according to certain standards and constraints of duty and responsibility. On the other hand, the faithful choose to validate the cleric's authority and to benefit from his blessing. Therefore, they exert their own kind of power and enjoy their own kind of privilege, even as they observe the constraints of obedience that define their duties and responsibilities as members of the flock under the direction of their shepherd.¹¹³ A similar enactment of power relationships, although on a communal rather than personal level, occurs during liturgical processions, when priests and deacons carry the crosses that the faithful venerate. The personal exchange between a priest and the faithful through his hand cross carries the intensity of intimacy and individuality. The communal exchange between them, through the crosses of processional and liturgical settings, carries the intensity of group participation, reinforcing social and cultural values by the large and more spectacular scale of the ritual and the interaction and alignment of numerous social agents.

The importance of hand crosses in the establishment of power relations and social hierarchies is also visible when two clerics or monks meet each other. In such a case, the above ritual is repeated, with the junior cleric or monk following the behavior of members of the congregation: he bows and kisses the hand cross of his sen-

¹¹³ According to Merahi, *Contribution*, 48–50, the balance of duty and privilege in the relationship between clergy and faithful in the Ethiopian Church is a kind of 'social administration' passed down from 'our Lord Jesus Christ to our fathers the Apostles' until the present day. In his description, both sides of the social equation have clearly defined responsibilities and advantages, along the lines discussed above. See also K. Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries in Ethiopia II* (Addis Ababa 2003), 89–91. My analysis of the social implications of Ethiopian rituals centered on crosses is based on C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford 1992), especially part III on 'Ritual and Power'. I thank Professor Raoul Birnbaum for recommending this publication to me.

ior colleague. In this interaction, the senior man asserts not only his authority, but also his responsibility to provide guidance and support to his junior. In his turn, the junior man confirms that superior authority through his reverence, but also asserts his own power and privilege, as he is in a position to confirm the seniority of a colleague, but also to benefit from his blessing and guidance. Once more, members of the Orthodox Ethiopian Church strengthen their spiritual and socio-cultural bonds and mutually agree upon their respective roles and responsibilities, through a meaningful ritual centered on the cross. Finally, whether owned by priests, *dabtarat*, or monks, hand crosses are not only markers of identity and instruments in social exchange that articulate the relationship of their owners with other members of the Church. In addition, they are considered powerful protective objects that support their owners in their daily struggle against temptations and light their path to spiritual life, moral conduct, and Christian leadership.

In the following chapter I will venture to explore some specific formal elements of Ethiopian portable crosses that can enrich their meaning and function in the context of socio-cultural interactions or personal experiences. Yet before I embark on such a discussion, I would like to draw attention to certain aspects of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition that demonstrate the centrality of symbolic interpretation in Christian Ethiopian culture.

SYMBOLISM IN CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIAN CULTURE

In a culture with deep roots in ancient traditions, like Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, symbolism is polysemic and multivocal. Symbolic references do not point to rigid and linear one-to-one correspondences of meaning, but to open-ended networks of possible meanings. Members of the culture are free to explore and enrich such meanings with personal nuances, as long as they are consonant with the wider socio-cultural value system in which they operate. This expansive and generative cultural mindset should be taken into consideration when investigating the possible meanings that the visual aspects of Ethiopian crosses might have.

The significance of symbolism in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is a complex subject that could be the topic of a separate study. Relevant references will be made throughout this book, but here I would like to mention just a couple of representative examples that shed light on the cultural framework within which the

crosses are produced and used. My first example comes from a category of texts that are known as *Rules or customs of the Church* and survive in a number of Ethiopian manuscripts of various dates, at least from the eighteenth century onwards (possibly preserving even older traditions).¹¹⁴ Their content is known by the *dabtarat* (singular *dabtara*), unordained clerics with a prominent role in the daily life of Ethiopian Christians.¹¹⁵ These texts present symbolic interpretations of the various parts of a church building as well as the rituals and objects used in them. The details of each interpretation might vary from manuscript to manuscript, or more than one interpretation might be present on the same topic in the same manuscript. What is particularly significant for the following discourse on Ethiopian crosses is the overall mentality these texts reveal and further promote: firstly, the intention to interpret symbolically every single component of a church building or ritual reveals a basic operating mechanism in the culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church, that is, to search for a deeper meaning in all things. Secondly, the fluidity and flexibility of individual interpretations is combined with a stability in basic patterns of symbolic meaning-making: everything that comes in threes is a symbol of the Trinity, every single unit is related to the oneness of God, every container is interpreted as a symbol of Mary and its content as a reference to Christ.¹¹⁶ This balance between plurality in details and unison in underlying concepts that refer to basic dogmas of the Church reveals the organic evolution of an interpretative tradition that is defined by both continuity and change. Similar modalities of reading can be applied to the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses: every single pattern used to decorate them might have one or more meanings that are open to diverse, personal interpretations by various viewers. At the same time, the same patterns might serve fundamental beliefs of Ethiopian Christians about salvation and pro-

¹¹⁴ See R. Schneider, 'Nouveaux témoins du texte Éthiopien des règles de l'Église', *Journal asiatique* 276 (1988), 71–96.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 71. On the *dabtarat* see also Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 44: Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia*, 52–53.

¹¹⁶ Schneider, 'Texte Éthiopien des règles de l'Église', 71.

tection according to the basic dogmas of their Church or underlying values of their society.

It has been noted that the traditions codified in the *Rules or customs of the Church* do not include specific interpretations for the various forms of portable Ethiopian crosses. However, we shouldn't misunderstand this lack of symbolic references in the *Rules* as an indication of lack of interest among Ethiopian Christians about the possible meanings of their crosses' formal elements.¹¹⁷ After all, if such interest was indeed lacking, then it would be difficult to explain the attention with which Ethiopian crosses are decorated with intricate features that through the centuries demonstrate both a stability in their general formal patterns (such as knot- and thread-like motifs, self-similar patterns, and open work), and a creative introduction and re-interpretation of variants (like tree- or bird-like motifs, human or angelic figures, and so on)—all of which are meaning-full in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, as I will argue in the following chapter. Rather, it is possible that such formal elements are not specifically mentioned and explained in the *Rules or customs of the Church* exactly because within Ethiopian Christianity they are open to a wide range of contextual and personal interpretations according to the greater framework of the culture. Regulating such interpretations could be a futile endeavor, both because of the inexhaustible variety of the crosses' formal elements, and because such diversity of forms and meanings is central to the vitality and relevance of the cross to Ethiopian Christians. After all, they use crosses in various occasions throughout their lives, inside and outside church buildings, during rituals, social interactions, or personal moments. On the contrary, the *Rules or customs of the Church* regulate elements that are exclusively or primarily part of the church building and its liturgical implements, and do not present the same inexhaustible variety as the formal elements of portable crosses. For example, the *Rules or customs of the Church* discuss the symbolism of the various compo-

¹¹⁷ This lack of interest seems implied by Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 83, 88, when he comments on the absence of symbolic references concerning the forms or parts of crosses in the *Rules or customs of the Church*.

nents of incense burners.¹¹⁸ They also associate the cross at the top of the church building with the presence of ‘the Divinity’ above everything else in the world (a simple reference for a cross that has a stable, unchanged physical position, and is not handled and experienced in various occasions, contrary to portable crosses).¹¹⁹ In addition, the *Rules* assign symbolic meaning to the material out of which crosses are made (such as gold, silver, copper, iron, or wood), in other words, an aspect of their visual and material identity that is very easy to codify in a limited, manageable number of cases.¹²⁰ The same *dabtarat* who have intimate knowledge of the *Rules or customs of the Church* are often involved in creating healing scrolls, on the formal elements of which they provide a number of diverse interpretations, not codified in written rules, but orally transmitted and varying in content, depending on the context in which the discussion takes place.¹²¹ In comparison to healing scrolls, portable crosses can be considered a more official—that is, Church sanctioned—healing agent, the formal elements of which can also solicit widely varied contextual interpretations in the eyes of Ethiopian Christians. Such interpretations will depend on the personal views and interests of the interpreters as well as the visual and socio-cultural contexts in which each cross is experienced—for example, the cross’s overall design, or its vicinity to other material objects such as textiles or paintings, and the ways specific people are seen interacting around and through the cross.

My second example concerning Ethiopians’ appreciation of multilayered meanings comes from the poetic tradition of *qene*, also known as ‘wax and gold’. This literary genre operates on two semantic levels: the ‘wax’ is the apparent meaning, while the ‘gold’ is

¹¹⁸ Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 83.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–85: gold is related to the gold that one of the three Magi presented to the infant Christ, silver to the thirty pieces of silver Judas received to betray Christ, copper to the blood of Christ on the Cross (because the material used has a red tone), iron to the nails and crown of thorns of Christ’s Passion, and wood to the Tree of Life from which, according to tradition, the wood of the Cross derived.

¹²¹ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, esp. p. 57.

the underlying message, which is considered to be the true essence of the poem and to possess a more profound significance.¹²² Outsiders to the culture might misunderstand this layering as a source of ambiguity and confusion, but Ethiopians themselves and any observers familiar with the values of this tradition consider *gene* a very refined mode of expression. It confers richness and subtlety to literary creations, which are appreciated not only for their deeper meaning but also for the wit, eloquence, and artistry required to produce such sophisticated layering.¹²³ The rules of this poetic tradition are thought to have matured around the fourteenth century, but its roots are considered to be much older, laid down by St. Yared who is credited with the creation of Christian Ethiopian Ge'ez hymnography in the sixth century.¹²⁴ *Gene* is often mentioned as a characteristic cultural achievement of the Amhara, one of the main ethnic and cultural groups of Ethiopia that play a central role in cultural and political developments and primarily adhere to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.¹²⁵ Scholars often claim that only members of the nobility and the ecclesiastical hierarchy are trained in composing and appreciating *gene*, while the peasants who make up the majority of the Amhara people are unable to grasp its subtleties. For that reason, peasants are often derided by the elite, even in the form of *gene* verses that make fun of rustic simplicity.¹²⁶ If this were true, it would limit the implications of my

¹²² Discussed in detail by N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago 1965), 5–11. See also the comments made by S. D. Messing in his review of Levine's book in *Middle East Journal* 21.2 (1967), 267–69, esp. 268, with reference to Ethiopian scholarship on the subject.

¹²³ Messing criticizes the lack of this kind of appreciation from Levine's discussion of *gene* (as above, p. 268).

¹²⁴ Messing, 'Review of *Wax and Gold*', 268. Henze, *Layers of Time*, 47.

¹²⁵ Messing, 'Review of *Wax and Gold*', 268. *Gene* is also composed in Tigrinya.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 268. Also T. Tamrat, 'Review of *Wax and Gold*', *The Journal of African History* 8 (1967), 353. Levine himself mentions the use of *gene* by elite members making fun of peasants, but he also seems to refer to the opposite, discussed below (see *Wax and Gold*, 7–9).

discourse on Ethiopian fascination with multiplicity of meaning to only having significance among the well-educated noblemen and churchmen. However, there is evidence that the subtleties of *gene* poetry are appreciated by audiences across social strata.

In the following analysis, I often refer to the fact that members of elite groups are usually the patrons of elaborate and expensive Ethiopians crosses. Clergymen in particular are the ones who produce, commission, own, or handle most of such crosses, and given their ecclesiastical education, they are probably more prepared and inclined to explore the various possible interpretations of the crosses' intricate decoration. However, I wouldn't exclude the laity (including the majority of the Christian population comprised by peasants and other working-class people) from an appreciation of and a potential to explore diverse meanings in visual creations that are central to their lives, as is the case of Ethiopian crosses. The popularity and continuous production of these objects over the centuries suggests that, up to a certain point, the majority of viewers are able to attribute one meaning or another to at least the most prominent and widely diffused patterns of Ethiopians crosses. This would be either because they have heard a cleric or monk talk about them or because they are personally inclined to combine information from their cultural background and their individual concerns in order to make sense of prominent aspects of their visual experience. Otherwise, if the intricate patterns of Ethiopian crosses were meaningless for the majority of viewers, it would be hard to explain the vitality and richness of their production. Later on, I will say more about the possible avenues of interpretation followed by different groups of viewers.

Returning to the evidence of *gene*, it would be interesting to examine to what extent popular songs incorporate a similar word-play that echoes a layering of meaning along the 'wax and gold' tradition and implies a more widespread familiarity and fascination with hidden messages and the quest to uncover them—a fascination not restricted to elite groups. A recent cultural guide to Ethiopia mentions that a typical *azmari*, a musician who is also a singer and songwriter, 'will make up songs as he goes, often to suit his audience. In a restaurant or nightclub he will sing songs that are

complimentary or insulting to the guests, or skillfully constructed to be both of these at once. This traditional wordplay, known as “wax and gold”, is impossible to translate in English’.¹²⁷ Scholarly publications on the tradition of *azmarinwoch* (plural of *azmari*) point out the ancient roots of this art form that has been practiced for centuries by itinerant musicians performing in Amharic both for the nobility and for a more general audience (for example in weddings or other celebrations). Although they would often receive some years of training in church school, *azmarinwoch* would not become clerics, but instead they would ‘drop out’ and turn into entertainers. As such, they could direct their caustic verses even against the ecclesiastical establishment or the nobility.¹²⁸ In more recent times, *azmarinwoch* have begun to live permanently in urban centers, and they perform in the ‘restaurants or nightclubs’ mentioned by the above cultural guide (especially the more traditional type of establishment known as *azmari bet*, or ‘music house’). There they interact dynamically with their audiences, even re-configuring and singing back improvised verses provided by the clients. Social critique and studied, witty ambiguity or double meaning remain features of their improvisational art, along the tradition of ‘wax and gold’.¹²⁹ The enthusiastic response of their audiences to their witty

¹²⁷ S. Howard, *Culture Smart! Ethiopia* (London 2010), 112–13.

¹²⁸ A. Kebede, ‘The “Azmar”’, Poet-Musician of Ethiopia’, *The Musical Quarterly* 61.1 (1975), 47–57. E. Lulseged, ‘Social, economic and political discontent in Ethiopia as reflected in contemporary Amharic songs (mid 1950s–mid 1970s)’, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 27.2 (1994), 21–43.

¹²⁹ See A. Bolay, ‘Les poètes-musiciens éthiopiens (*azmari*) et leurs constructions identitaires. Des marginaux qui aspirent à la normalité’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 44 (2004), 815–839. Also, D. Newman, ‘Prophecies, Police Reports, Cartoons and Other Ethnographic Rumors in Addis Ababa’, *Etnofoor* 11.2 (1998), 108, note 28. Newman provides a characteristic example of a political *azmari* song with a ‘wax and gold’ reference: “‘The eighty year old lion, you have killed; The seventeen year old leopard, you have chased away; How can you not get rid of a six year old goat?’” The lion refers to Emperor Haile Selassie and his monarchy. The leopard refers to Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and the military regime, the Dergue, which lasted seventeen years. The goat refers to Meles Zenawi

verses is nowadays shared through YouTube.¹³⁰ The tradition of *azmari* performances indicates that not only lofty *gene* poetry but also more popular forms of verse composition can be based on the ‘wax and gold’ approach that is grounded in the ability to create and identify a deeper meaning, hidden behind the surface. In terms of socially charged cultural production, the *azmari* tradition allows for the following suggestion: the fact that noblemen might have used *gene* in the past to make fun of what they would have perceived to be simple-minded peasants doesn’t mean that the peasants themselves didn’t have their own codes of communication to subvert the very same social hierarchy in more or less covered-up ways that allowed them to be critical of the establishment without exposing themselves openly as dangerous and punishable instigators of social unrest.¹³¹ In this sense, the ‘wax and gold’ approach to the creation of layered meaning would have made part not only of elite but also of popular culture in the past, as is also the case today. This would contribute in the cultivation of a mindset that is open to the layered interpretation of other forms of cultural production, such as crosses, among both the aristocracy and the peasants or working class.

and the current government which had been in power for six years at the time the verse was sung.’

¹³⁰ For example, a performance at Fendika Azmari bet, Kazenchis, Addis Ababa, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPQPicUBB5Q> (posted January 6th 2011, accessed January 5th 2017).

¹³¹ Levine, *Wax and Gold*, 7–9 mentions the following among the possible uses of *gene*: ‘...disguised insults... providing an outlet for criticism of authority figures... enabling... witty individuals to satirize the monarch himself and still live to repeat the witticism; ... a code for lovers; ... satiric challenges between feudal lords; ... putting the common people at the mercy of (social) superiors...’. Also quoted by Messing, ‘Review of *Wax and Gold*’, 268. In this passage Levine doesn’t specify if the ‘witty individuals’ satirizing the monarch are members of the elite themselves. Certainly such individuals often have reasons to antagonize a ruler. In any case, the *azmari* tradition indicates that non-elite members of society could also participate in such forms of social criticism.

A final comment about the tradition of *qene* that should be made in the context of the interpretation of crosses is that the very term ‘wax and gold’ used to define this literary tradition derives, as scholars have often noted, from the process of metallurgic production employed for the creation of Ethiopian crosses. In the lost-wax technique, the original wax prototype embedded in a body of clay is melted away and the cavity is filled with the most precious material of metal, forming the final product.¹³² I would like to point out that when the term ‘wax and gold’ is applied to poetic production, it doesn’t simply imply the duality of meaning and the difference between the superficial and the hidden message, while suggesting that the latter is more precious; it also implies that *qene* (as well as *azmari* song composition) is a creative process not only for the author but also for the audience, since its members are equally expected to excavate gold out of wax. The same can be said about the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses or of any other visual creation with a symbolic significance: the meaning is embedded by the creator and it is re-created by the viewer. The main difference is that visual language might allow for a greater variety of interpretations to be attributed by the viewer, even in addition to what the creator originally had in mind, as opposed to the less open-ended nature of a literary text and its possible readings. I will say more about multiplicity of meaning in visual production in chapter four.

As a final note on *qene*, I would like to suggest that the employment of a term borrowed from the material production of

¹³² Levine, *Wax and God*, 5. See the interesting comments on this term by Heldman, *Marian Icons*, 81: ‘The term “wax and gold” betrays familiarity with the metallurgical process. Moreover, its application to a literary form that was unique to clerical *literati* reveals that these authors bore no disdain of the metalworking process per se.’ Heldman uses this argument to reinforce the evidence provided by other sources that churchmen were the producers of Ethiopian crosses, and the pejorative associations of metalworking applied to working-class Ethiopians who earned their living through this occupation ‘did not apply to Christian monks, who were responsible for producing brass and bronze lamps as well as bronze, brass, silver and gold crosses and other metal objects for liturgical use’.

metal objects to identify layers of meaning in literary production might also suggest a more overarching awareness about the multiplicity of meaning in cultural production and experience as a whole. This mentality could encompass and promote diverse readings of the symbolic aspects of Ethiopian crosses, embedded in their material dimension. In fact, the incisions applied on the surface of crosses after they have been cast out of metal (or curved out of wood for that matter) can be seen as another stage in the ‘wax and gold’ process of creation. Creators shed light on the spiritual significance of the cross by adding more layers on its material and symbolic dimensions through incision. They engrave designs that reveal aspects of the power and significance that the cross already possesses in Ethiopian culture; they excavate meaning already embedded in its body. In a way, this process parallels the manner in which *azmarinwoch* re-configure improvised verses provided by their audience—verses that are based on the contemporary socio-political culture and might employ widely known literary formulae. In this sense, cultural production is a re-interpretation and enrichment of elements already present in the ideological environment of a society. The Ethiopians who create, use, and read these crosses (or compose and enjoy *azmari* songs) excavate the gold: the potential hidden messages that are encompassed in the wax and in the framework in which cultural values and ideas are developed. The materials already exist, but their cultural potentials are amplified as they are accessed and manipulated by social agents. In the following pages, I will make occasional reference to more aspects of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture that reflect and promote multilayered interpretation as a major characteristic of this tradition.¹³³ It is now time to turn to the crosses themselves.

¹³³ For example, the importance of biblical typology that emphasizes links between the Old and the New Testament, or the diverse readings of healing scrolls and their magical signs, whose meaning might change from one occasion to another. I am skeptical towards the opinion of Tamrat, ‘Review of *Wax and Gold*’, 353–54, that biblical typology is *equivalent* to the wax and gold poetic tradition. It is true that they both reveal an interest in hidden meaning and indeed Old Testament prefigurations are seen as ‘shadows’ of New Testament ‘truths’ (which can be considered analogous

to the relation between wax and gold in *gene*). But in the case of biblical typological exegesis, both the Old Testament antecedents and their New Testament fulfillments are highly revered as stages in the divine plan of salvation, the former preparing the path for the latter. In *gene*, the semantic layer of ‘wax’ is the shell in which the more profound message of the ‘gold’ might be found, but this constitutes only a superficial analogy with biblical exegesis. In *gene*, both semantic layers might be important for the communicative purposes of the poem, but the ‘wax’ doesn’t elicit any form or reverence equivalent to the one due to Old Testament, nor does it have a spiritual connection to the ‘gold’, as is the case in biblical typology.



82. One of the ancient staff crosses of the rock-cut Church of St. George, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo.

CHAPTER THREE.

INTERPRETING ETHIOPIAN CROSSES: THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF FORM

In this chapter, I turn to the formal elements of Ethiopian crosses in order to investigate some of their possible meanings. In the context of this discussion, it is important to remember that even in its most basic form—an intersection of a vertical and horizontal line—the cross has many archetypal meanings, as one of the most universal and ancient symbols shared by many human cultures.¹³⁴ The sophistication and complexity of Ethiopian crosses seems designed to amplify this depth and multiplicity of meaning in ways that make this sign particularly powerful in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Before reading on, I invite readers to consider the following: in investigating the meaning-full dimensions of Ethiopian crosses, I take meaning to be not a set number of definitions, but rather an *experiential process* in continuous unfolding. As Ethiopian Orthodox Christians create and use crosses, they engage in an ongoing process of imaging and imagining, understanding, making sense of, and interacting not only with the crosses themselves, but also with the world around them—experienced through their engagement with the most sacred symbol of their religion. Cross makers introduce their own meaning-full understanding of the cross and the world, through the formal elements they employ in their creations. Cross users—including viewers who might not oth-

¹³⁴ For example, it can signify the intersection of different dimensions or realms, such as earth and heaven, or materiality and spirituality; or it can refer to the four cardinal points, as an all-encompassing symbol. See Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*.

erwise handle the cross except with their eyes and minds—depend on the formal aspects of crosses to develop their own meaningful understanding of this powerful symbol and the world in which they interact. The meanings cross makers and users develop might intersect, overlap, or complement each other in various ways, but they all depend to some extent on the formal elements of the crosses and on the socio-cultural context in which they are experienced. In this chapter, I examine these two factors—formal elements and socio-cultural context—in connection to each other, in order to explore a range of meaning-full experiences that Ethiopian crosses can facilitate.

THE TEXTILE-LIKE REFERENCES OF OPEN WORK: A MULTILAYERED SYMBOL

As already mentioned, a prominent visual feature of Ethiopian crosses is their open-work appearance, created by motifs that interlock and intersect to produce lace-like or even woven-like effects, especially in the case of patterns that resemble knotted and interwoven threads (Figs. 83–84). The practical advantage of this form in the case of metal crosses is that the voids included in the formation of the open-work patterns (either through casting or cutting out of metal leaves) allows for less material to be used, which results in more economic and lighter objects.¹³⁵ However, similar lace-like or woven-like motifs are prominent in many sculpted wooden crosses, which are very light and cheaper than metal to begin with (Figs. 64, 66, 73, 85, 86). In this case, it is obvious from the amount of work invested in the perforation of the wood, and especially the meticulous engraving of the knotted and interwoven thread-like patterns, that such motifs have important symbolic value. Likewise, in the metal examples, the laborious and detailed incisions that, in addition to the open-work, create the effect of interlace or woven fabric, clearly raise the cost and visual impact of the object without significantly reducing its material and weight. It is therefore obvious that such motifs have significant meaning, and this is why they

¹³⁵ *Ethiopian Art*, 78.

are a constant feature of Ethiopian crosses, even in painted versions or stone-sculpted ones.

The motifs of knotted and interwoven threads that form the matrix of most Ethiopian crosses today might have ancient roots in the culture of the Late Antique Mediterranean, where such motifs were used widely as decoration in many different contexts, from mosaics and sculptures to jewelry and manuscript illumination (Fig. 87). Interlocking patterns were prominent in the Coptic visual production of Egypt, examples of which could have reached Ethiopia through the close connection of the two Christian Churches ever since the introduction of Christianity in the kingdom of Aksum in the fourth century.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Even though they appear on surviving portable Ethiopian crosses from the fifteenth century onwards, such interlocking thread motifs were part of the decoration of Ethiopian manuscripts at least from the fourteenth century. Since Late Antiquity, similar patterns were commonplace in Coptic visual production, which had great influence on Ethiopian Christian culture, especially since the Church of Ethiopia was subordinate to that of Egypt (as mentioned above, from the fourth century until 1959 the head of the Ethiopian Church was a Copt appointed by the patriarch of Alexandria, Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 22, 27–28). For typical examples of interlocking decorative motifs on Coptic portable objects, such as manuscripts and textiles, see *Ägypten. Schätze aus dem Wüstensand. Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil*, exhibition catalogue (Wiesbaden 1996), 232–33, 302, 336, 346, 372. For the influence of Late Antique Coptic culture on Ethiopia and Ethiopian manuscripts, see *African Zion*, 63, 118–19, 130–31. It should be noted that textile-like decorative motifs (not produced by *interlocking* thread patterns but still creating the impression of the texture and patterns of textiles and reminiscent of the complexity and textile-like effect of Ethiopian crosses) can be seen in the decoration of Ethiopian churches at least from the 10th century onward. For examples see Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 77, 79, 96, figs. 4.12, 4.14–15, 5.18.



83a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (12 x 6 inches, 30.5 x 15 cm) with the figure of an archangel holding a sword in the center. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



83b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 83a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body and the image of Mary holding Christ in the center. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



84. Contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (8 x 3 inches, 20 x 7.5 cm) with a typical weave-like design. The other side is almost identical. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



85. Contemporary Ethiopian wooden hand cross (15.25 x 6.75 inches, 38 x 17 cm) with a weave-like design that also resembles a tree (notice the four leaf-like patterns radiating from the center). The other side is almost identical. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



86. Contemporary Ethiopian wooden hand cross (12.25 x 5.75 inches, 31 x 14.5 cm) with a weave-like design, smaller cross-like knotted motifs around the main body, and the so-called “Knot of Solomon” in the center of the cross and on the base. The other side is almost identical. Bought on the online market, author’s collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



87. Detail from a Late Antique (roughly 4th-6th c. AC) floor mosaic from Sardes, present-day Turkey, with typical knotted motifs that were popular at that time throughout the Mediterranean. Photo by Piotr D/ Shutterstock.com.

Even Islamic visual production could have contributed to the popularity and proliferation of such interlocking motifs, which are prominent in what has been aptly called the ‘Draped Universe of Islam’.¹³⁷ It is also possible that woven-like patterns in Ethiopian painting, architectural decoration and cross making had a connection with local traditions of textile and basket weaving. No matter their origin, the development of such motifs in Ethiopian Christian culture has acquired a force of its own through the centuries. Still, their possible connections or at least their visual similarities with the Late Antique culture of the Mediterranean can contribute to their interpretation. In the Mediterranean context, inscriptions that accompany interlocking knot- and thread-like designs on floor mosaics, or incantations that appear next to similar motifs in magic spell manuscripts have prompted scholars to conclude that in Late Antiquity such patterns were thought to have protective qualities, and this belief was shared among followers of different religions, including Christians.¹³⁸ However, knots that fasten—in order to safeguard or to control—are perceived as protective agents in many cultures around the world, and in Ethiopia this concept need not have originated through influence from the Late Antique Medi-

¹³⁷ Islamic Fatimid and Ayyubid decorative motifs (10th–13th centuries) were influential on the Coptic tradition. In fact, there was a fusion of creative practices in the Eastern Mediterranean that gave rise to what has been called ‘Arabo-Christian’ visual production. Its influence has been noted in the decoration of the monolithic churches of Lalibela. See Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 199–201, 254–5. For a brief overview of the paramount importance of textiles and their patterns in Islamic culture (in relation to pre-existing traditions of the Mediterranean and the Persian world), see L. Golombek, ‘The Draped Universe of Islam’, in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. P. P. Soucek (University Park 1988), 25–49.

¹³⁸ For example, see H. Maguire, ‘Magic and geometry in Early Christian floor mosaics and textiles’, *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 44 (1994), 265–74, reprinted in H. Maguire, *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot 1998), VIII. Also U. Sansoni, *Il nodo di Salomone: simbolo e archetipo d’alleanza*, exhibition catalogue (Milan 1998).

terrestrial.¹³⁹ In any case, similar knot- and thread-like motifs are still abundantly used today in the context of Ethiopian magic spells, especially on healing scrolls, in which crosses are also prominently employed as protective signs (Fig. 88).¹⁴⁰ In addition, the metaphor of the net as a protective mechanism is extraordinarily popular in Ethiopian culture, especially in the tradition of the 'Net of Solomon', which is identified with the Name of God and is believed to capture demons like a net captures fish in the sea.¹⁴¹ The open-work body of Ethiopian crosses can be seen as another kind of powerful net, reflecting the belief that the cross defeats evil and protects from it. In Ethiopian visual production, the employment of knotted and weave-like motifs on the cross, the protective Christian sign par excellence, mutually reinforces the effectiveness of both the cross and these network patterns as apotropaic and healing agents.

¹³⁹ Despite its very problematic use of Eurocentric terms such as 'primitive' and 'savage', the following work offers a useful overview of the magical use of knots, threads, and nets in various cultures: C. L. Day, 'Knots and Knot Lore', *Western Folklore* 9.3 (1950), 229–256. See also Sansoni, *Il nodo di Salomone*.

¹⁴⁰ On the healing scrolls, see Mercier, *Art that Heals and Ethiopian Magic Scrolls* (New York 1979). To quote just two relevant mentions, on p. 87 Mercier notes: 'Even in the absence of any spell-binding inscription, certain figurative images in the scrolls, and geometricizing religious images of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rich in interlacing, are taken as talismanic by clerics'. On p. 79 he states: 'The cross, instrument of the triumph of Jesus over Satan and over death, figures explicitly on the majority of scrolls'.

¹⁴¹ *Le roi Salomon*, 138. Also, Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 50, 87.



88a-b. Top and bottom part of a contemporary Ethiopian healing scroll (68 x 7.5 inches, 170 x 19 cm), painted on parchment and created by an Ethiopian Orthodox *dabtara* (unordained cleric). Healing scrolls are usually produced for specific individuals and contain a wide array of protective textual and visual material (prayers, incantations, magic symbols, holy figures, the sign of the cross and various thread-like and knot-like motifs). From top to bottom, this scroll includes four main images: an enthroned figure (probably Solomon) flanked by two angels, a variation of the so-called “Net of Solomon” magic symbol that is meant to capture demons, an archangel, and the Lamb of God (Christ) carrying a staff cross, inside a protective circle formed by two snakes biting each other’s tails. Bought on the online market, author’s collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

The interweaving of threads that make up the basic matrix of Ethiopian crosses may have many more symbolic meanings, all interrelated to the concepts of the protection and healing of humankind through the divine plan of salvation centered on Christ's Incarnation and Sacrifice. Interweaving is an ancient powerful symbol of unity, as are the textiles produced by it.¹⁴² Therefore, an important step towards exploring the symbolic polysemy of Ethiopian crosses is to recognize their textile-like quality (Fig. 89). In fact, the cross in its most basic linear shape can be seen as the ultimate abstraction of weaving, with its vertical and horizontal arms representing the warp and weft of textile making.¹⁴³ In addition, textiles are potent symbols of protection, honor, and revelation,¹⁴⁴ for which reason they hold a prominent place in the symbolic universe of the Christian tradition.

¹⁴² Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 65–70; J. C. Cooper, *Symbolism. The Universal Language* (Wellingborough 1982), 22–24. About weaving as a symbol of unity, universality, and multiplicity of meaning (all of which are pertinent to Ethiopian crosses and their weave-like patterns), Guéno writes (p. 67): weaving ‘is also used to represent the world, or more precisely the aggregate of all the worlds, that is, the indefinite multitude of the states or degrees that constitute universal Existence’.

¹⁴³ Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 66; Cooper, *Symbolism*, 23.

¹⁴⁴ The literature on the significant cultural and social role of textiles in human societies is very extensive. In this study, I am referring only to a few aspects of their multilayered function. For some informative works with reference to further literature see, for example: J. Schneider, ‘The Anthropology of Cloth’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 (1987), 409–48 (I thank Professor Ruth Makrides for drawing my attention to this article); *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. A. Weiner and J. Schneider (Washington DC 1989); J. Scheid and J. Svenbro, *The craft of Zeus. Myths of weaving and fabric* (Harvard 1996), focusing on ancient Greece and Rome; *Weaving, veiling, and dressing: textiles and their metaphors in the late Middle Age*, ed. K. M. Rudy and B. Baert (Turnhout 2007). For a brief overview of the paramount importance of textiles in Islamic culture see Golombek, ‘The Draped Universe of Islam’.



89a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (19.25 x 14 inches, 49 x 35 cm) inspired by a very popular older motif (compare Fig. 38). Notice the four angelic figures at the intersections of the cross arms and the motif of 'running water' on the arms themselves. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



89b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 89a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbar-ton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Christ's own body is described as the veil that clothes his divinity and makes it visible to the world.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, the most important events of human history, from the Creation and the Fall, to the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ, and finally the Baptism and Salvation of Christians, are described in terms of putting on or taking off symbolic clothing.¹⁴⁶ Adam was dressed in robes of glory before the Fall and in a mantle of shame after his disobedience. Christ, the New Adam, put on the veil of human flesh in order to reinstitute the Old Adam in his original glory. Christians baptized in his name are 'dressed in Christ'. They shed the old skin of sin and are reborn and invested in grace, so that at the end of time they can stand in front of God's throne in the robes of honor that are worthy of their virtue. The textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses seems to encompass all of these pivotal moments of history on the sacred matrix of the instrument of Christ's Passion and triumph over death, which is also a cosmic symbol of the victory of light over darkness, from the beginning to the end of time. It should be

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, N. P. Conostas, 'Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 164–194. More extensive treatment of the same subject in N. P. Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the cult of the Virgin in late antiquity: homilies 1–5, texts and translations*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 66 (Leiden and Boston 2003), chapter 6, 315–58.

¹⁴⁶ Mentioned by Conostas ('Weaving', 180–181; *Proclus*, 318, with extensive references to previous relevant literature). Also, S. Brock, 'Clothing metaphors as a means of theological expression in Syriac tradition', in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, ed. M. Schmidt (Regensburg 1982), 11–40. M. Aubineau, 'La tunique sans couture du Christ. Exégèse patristique de Jean 19, 23–24', in *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten, I–II*, ed. P. Granfield and J. A. Jungmann (Münster 1970), I, 111–16. For a discussion of clothing as a symbol of the Incarnation especially in the Byzantine tradition, with emphasis on two 12th century manuscripts, see M. Evangelatou, 'Threads of Power: Clothing Symbolism, Human Salvation, and Female Identity in the Illustrated Homilies by Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos', *DOP* 68 (2014), 241–323, esp. 266–87.

noted that clothing as a symbol of the Incarnation, and therefore of the unity of humanity and divinity in Christ, is a prominent theme in Ethiopian literature.¹⁴⁷ The same idea of unity between earth and heaven might be visualized through the textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses, further reinforcing the symbolism of the archetypal sign of the cross, as well as the role of the Cross in Christ's Passion, as references to universal unity.

The hand cross of Fig. 90 seems to provide a particularly eloquent visualization of the above ideas. Once the cross-shaped window of its textile-like body is opened, we see two images of Mary: on the cross-shaped window leaf to the left, she is shown spinning as she often does in Ethiopian images of her Annunciation. But here she doesn't face the archangel Gabriel but rather looks on to the right, where she appears again on the center of the cross, holding her divine Child while flanked by two angels. The thread she

¹⁴⁷ For example, this is one of the most prominent metaphors used in the popular Ethiopian hymn to Mary known as *Enzira Sebbat* (*Harp of Glory*), a supreme creation of Ethiopian literature, mentioned in more detail below. See J. A. McGuckin, *The Harp of Glory: Enzira Sebbat. An alphabetical hymn of praise for the ever-blessed Virgin Mary, from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Introduced and translated from the Latin version of M. Van Oudenrijn O.P. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vol. 40. Louvain 1961* (New York 2010). Without being exhaustive, I list here some of the most representative examples: Christ was clothed in Mary's flesh (pp. 38, 60, 74, 113, 119, 122, 123). She is the vestment of the king of Israel (p. 39), and the sacerdotal vestment of the high priest (pp. 41, 61, 65, 70, 75, 89, 93, 100, 107, 119, 121, 125–6, 128, 132, 134). Obviously, the king and the high priest are Christ, whose body is compared to a precious vestment, provided by Mary (she is 'the mother of the high priest, whose vestments were sprinkled with the blood of divinity', p. 93). In the same hymn, honor and virtues (such as sanctity, purity, clemency, mercy, faith, justice, graciousness) are often compared to a precious vestment, worn either by Mary or the faithful who ask for her protection in the shape of a robe with which to cover their nudity (pp. 29, 34, 39, 41, 47, 57, 67, 73, 88, 97, 107, 110, 112, 144, 154).

spins during her Annunciation is a powerful symbol of the Incarnation as the weaving of Christ's body: it refers to the corporeal 'fabric' of the divine Child who after the Annunciation materialized in Mary's womb and later was embraced in her arms.¹⁴⁸

On this hand cross, the textile-like nature of the Incarnation is visualized through the pairing of the two images of Mary, the one holding the symbolic thread and the other holding the Child whose body that thread symbolizes. Therefore the images in the center of this weave-like cross reveal the purpose of the Incarnation: the investiture of divinity in the veil of flesh, so that Christ could be sacrificed on the Cross for the salvation of humankind and its reunion with God. The thread Mary holds seems linked to the thread-like motifs that weave the body of this cross, further reinforcing the idea that Christ was veiled with the fabric of human flesh in order to be sacrificed on the fabric of the Cross. Although this hand cross was produced for the tourist market (since the lack of a latch to hold the window closed renders the cross impractical for ritual use), it remains a superb example of the theological sophistication of Ethiopian crosses.

¹⁴⁸ For a detailed exploration of this symbolism see M. Evangelatou, 'The purple thread of the flesh: the theological connotations of a narrative iconographic element in Byzantine images of the Annunciation', in *Icon and Word: the power of images in Byzantium. Studies presented to Robin Cormack*, eds A. Eastmond and L. James (Aldershot 2003), 261–79.



90a

90b

90a-d. Contemporary Ethiopian metallic hand cross (16 x 5.5 inches, 40.5 x 14 cm). a: one side of the cross, with an angelic figure in the center. b: other side of the cross, with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body, and a cross-shaped window that opens to reveal painted scenes. c: when the window is opened, Mary appears spinning on the window leaf, facing the image of herself enthroned, holding Christ and flanked by two angels, on the body of the cross. d: detail of the same cross with a close-up of the painted scenes. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.





90d

In fact, the cloth appended from Ethiopian staff crosses used in the liturgy and in processions (Fig. 91) might relate specifically to the Crucifixion as a major turning points of human history that is described through a powerful textile metaphor in the Bible: according to the synoptic Gospels (*Matthew* 27:50–51, *Mark* 15:37–38, *Luke* 23:45–46), the veil of the Jewish Temple concealing the Holy of Holies in which only the High Priest could enter once a year was torn in two at the moment of Christ's death on the Cross. Christian exegetes interpreted this as a reference to the idea that, through the sacrifice of Christ's body, salvation was offered to the whole world.



91. Ethiopian Orthodox clerics display large mettalic staff crosses around a cross-shaped pool the water of which will be blessed by the immersion of crosses, Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia (compare Fig. 127). Photo by Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.

Through the parting of his bodily veil, all could gain access to his salvific divinity: the true Holy of Holies, heaven itself, was now open to all Christians through the miracle of the Incarnation.¹⁴⁹ The textile appended on Ethiopian staff crosses hangs down in two parts, to the left and right of the pole, like a veil that has been divided in two. It is spread apart to reveal the divine mysteries of Incarnation, Passion, and Salvation that are visualized through the sign of the cross—the instrument of Christ's martyrdom that tore his bodily veil in order to reopen the gates of paradise. So this actual textile could be an explicit reference to the soteriological meaning of the Crucifixion described in the Gospels through the symbol of the veil. In addition, the textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses could refer not only to this episode, but also to the entire Christian tradition of textile metaphors.

It is worthy of notice that the architecture and liturgical furnishings of Ethiopian churches are modeled after the Old Testament tradition of the Tabernacle and Temple of Jerusalem. Churches are divided into three parts of increasing sanctity, and a sacred veil is used to partition the Holy, where the congregation receives the Eucharist, from the Holy of Holies, where only clergy are allowed in order to perform the Eucharistic sacrifice on a copy of the Ark of the Covenant.¹⁵⁰ This tradition highlights the familiarity of the clergy, and possibly also part of the congregation, with the symbolic significance of the sacred Temple veil and its connection to Christ's sacrifice during the Crucifixion and the Eucharist. In its Ethiopian Christian version, this veil marks the threshold through which the officiating priest presents the sacrificed body of Christ that grants his followers access to the heavenly Holy of Holies. Such a visual and ritual tradition could inform the interpreta-

¹⁴⁹ This exegetical tradition has biblical roots, especially in Pauline theology (*Hebrews* 6:19–20, *Hebrews* 9–10). For further analysis and previous literature (including works mentioned in note 146 above), see Evangelatou, 'The purple thread of the flesh', esp. 263–64.

¹⁵⁰ *Sacro e bellezza*, 101–105. See also M. Heldman, 'Architectural Symbolism, Sacred Geography and the Ethiopian Church', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22.3 (1992), 222–41. The altar tablet on which the Eucharist is performed will be discussed in more detail below.

tion applied on the veil that hangs from Ethiopian staff crosses. The connection between the sanctuary veil and the cross is emphatically made on a few known examples of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sanctuary veils, where the Crucifixion is prominently represented and the sign of the cross is repeatedly depicted.¹⁵¹ In fact, these woven crosses have very similar design to metallic and wooden staff and hand crosses, which have a prominent textile-like appearance. Such formal similarities between the woven and the sculpted examples reinforce the hypothesis that the weave-like aspect of Ethiopian portable crosses is consciously created in order to resonate with the deep symbolic significance of textiles in Christian tradition. After all, if salvation is perceived as the re-union between humankind and God through his Incarnation in Christ, then the most comprehensive symbol of this salvation is indeed the textile: created through the cross-like union of different elements, warp and weft, vertical and horizontal, heaven and earth, such a textile can envelop and protect everything within its embrace.

It should be noted that, in the context of rituals, Ethiopian Christians encounter several visual stimuli that might encourage them to think of crosses in the above textile-related terms of unity and connectivity. Veils used as furnishings inside the church and robes worn by clerics are often richly decorated with intricate patterns that echo the woven-like motifs on the crosses (Fig. 92–94). In addition, similar decorative forms might appear on church furnishings made of other materials (like wood or stone) and might also be sculpted or painted on various parts of the building, like walls, arches, and ceilings (Fig. 96). At times, such woven-like decorative motifs in the space of the church might include crosses, which in turn are often formed by textile-like patterns (Fig. 95).¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ See E. Balicka-Witakowska and M. Gervers, 'Monumental Ethiopian Tablet-Woven Silk Curtains: A Case for Royal Patronage', *The Burlington Magazine* 138.1119 (1996), 375–385; and M. Gervers, 'The Tablet-Woven Hangings of Tigre, Ethiopia: From History to Symmetry', *The Burlington Magazine* 146.1218 (2004), 588–601.

¹⁵² See for example the churches discussed by Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, figs. 4.12, 4.14, 4.15, 5.5, 5.18–23. Relevant images from the church of Yemrahane Krestos are also included in M.-J. Friedlander and

In this draped universe, the fabric-like matrix of portable or immovable crosses might appear not only as one among many elements that echo each other, but as the one single element that unites and encompasses all others in its embrace and brings them under the protection of God. After all, it was by spreading his arms on the Cross that Christ renewed the unity of earth and heave and created the universal community of the Church. In a sense, the textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses, which are also identified with the body of Christ in Ethiopian Christianity,¹⁵³ visualizes the Pauline idea that the Church is the community of the faithful, united together as members of Christ's body:¹⁵⁴ Ethiopian Orthodox Christians come together in the draped universe of their local churches, where they see the cross as the instrument of salvation that embraces all the world, not only in spiritual but also in visual terms. Various portable crosses, that are focal points during church rituals and feasts, resonate with the patterns that decorate the church building and its furnishings, the robes of the clergy, and even elements of attire and bodily adornment used by the laity.

B. Friedlander, *Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia. A Guide to the Remote Churches of an Ancient Land* (London 2015), 266–67, figs. 153–157.

¹⁵³ See note 105 above.

¹⁵⁴ See *1 Corinthians* 12:27 and many other passages in Paul's epistles, such as *Romans* 12:5; *1 Corinthians* 6:15 and 12:12; *Ephesians* 5:30. For a fuller list see http://biblehub.com/1_corinthians/12-27.htm. The idea that all the faithful are part of Christ's body is very strongly proclaimed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in an online text (<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/hierarchy.html>, accessed 25 August 2017) which proclaims the strong link between hierarchy (i.e. priesthood) and laity.



92. The interior of the Church of Debre Birhan Selassie (Mountain of Light and the Trinity), built in the 17th century in Gondar, Ethiopia. Every inch is covered by rich textiles and wall-paintings. The two veiled passageways lead into the Holy of Holies (the sanctuary wherein only clergy is allowed). On the wall, above the scene of the Crucifixion appears a typical Ethiopian representation of the Holy Trinity as three identical old men (detail in Fig. 101). Photo by Milosk50/ Shutterstock.com.



93. A young Ethiopian Orthodox cleric, richly dressed with embroidered robes and jeweled crown, carries an equally richly decorated wooden staff cross, during the Masqal/ Meskel feast celebrating the Exaltation of the True Cross, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Martin Zwick/ age fotostock.



94. Ethiopian Orthodox clerics richly dressed in embroidered robes and jeweled crowns carry equally richly decorated staff crosses during a feast celebration, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Christopher Roche/ age fotostock.



95. Cruciform decoration of the ceiling of the rock-cut Church of Chirkos (Cyricus or Kyriakos), Wukro, Tigray region, Ethiopia. Cross-shaped designs are combined to create a textile-like effect, not unlike that found on Ethiopian portable crosses. Photo by Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.



96. Detail of the wall-paintings on the ceiling of the rock-cut church of the Abuna Yemata Monastery, Tigray region, Ethiopia. The central medallion depicts apostles, three of whom hold hand crosses. The knot- and thread-like decorative motifs are reminiscent of similar patterns on Ethiopian portable crosses. Photo by Nicolas Marino/ age fotostock.

Such cross-references also speak of the hierarchy that characterizes the relationships of the members of the Church.¹⁵⁵ For example, the intricately decorated and luxurious robes of the clergy create a vivid and privileged visual link between them and the intricately decorated staff crosses they carry, setting them apart from the other members of the congregation, who are usually dressed in plain clothes. Yet even members of the laity might wear a prominent pendant cross, or have a cross tattooed on their forehead, or even have crosses embroidered on their clothes (Figs. 4, 8–17, 37–39, 44–46, 49–50, 55–59, 93–94). Therefore the cross visually relates and unites all of the faithful in one community, as members of Christ's body.

I would like to return for a moment to the tradition of appending a cloth from large Ethiopian staff crosses used in church rituals and processions, as this can offer some useful insights in relation to the textile-like matrix of such crosses. According to a traditional interpretation mentioned previously, this cloth symbolizes the colobium or loincloth of Christ at the Crucifixion, or the sudarium of his burial, thus emphasizing the idea that the cross itself is the body of Christ, dressed in this manner.¹⁵⁶ According to another traditional interpretation, the cross should not be touched directly (as a sacred object referring to the True Cross and Christ's body), and therefore the cloth hanging along the pole of staff crosses is a reminder of that due reverence.¹⁵⁷ Members of the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy carrying such staff crosses often hold the pole not with their bare hands, but by grabbing the hanging cloth and holding it around the pole, while others hold the pole directly with their hands, letting the cloth to hang freely around the pole (both holds can be seen in Figs. 39, 49, 91). Yet other clerics can be seen touching or even resting on the body of the cross itself (Figs. 97–98).

¹⁵⁵ In 1 *Corinthians* 12 Paul doesn't only speak of the interdependence of all members of the body (that is, all members of the Church as the body of Christ), but he also clearly refers to a God-given hierarchy (especially in line 28). See also <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/ethiopian/hierarchy.html>, mentioned in the note above.

¹⁵⁶ Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 152, 167.

¹⁵⁷ Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 31.



97. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds the body of a staff cross during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Eric Lafforgue/ Alamy Stock Photo.



98. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds the body of a staff cross while another cleric holds a ceremonial parasol and blows a ceremonial horn, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia.

Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.

At the same time, hand crosses (which as crosses also refer to the body of Christ) are meant to be handled, touched and kissed. So the explanation of the cloth hanging from staff crosses as a reminder of the untouchable status of the cross is either not widely followed in practice today, or was not widely held in the past either, or at least was not the only or primary reason for the use of such a cloth.

I have already suggested that a reference to the torn Temple veil and all its theological implications about salvation through Christ's sacrifice might be a possible meaning for the appended cloth. Another possibility is the visual connection between the staff cross draped with a textile and the *tabot* (the copy of the Tablets of the Law on which the Eucharist is celebrated in each Ethiopian Orthodox church) which is entirely covered by a textile when it is carried in processions together with staff crosses (compare Figs. 99–100). Both the *tabot* and the cross are invested with colorful textiles, and are therefore 'dressed for the occasion'. Thus they signal the special character of the ritual in which they participate, which is also manifested by the festive attire of the clergy accompanying them. But while the veiled *tabot* refers to the Old Testa-

ment tradition of the Tablets hidden in the Ark and the Ark itself covered by a veil when in public procession—and thus not freely available to the people,¹⁵⁸ on the contrary the cross is fully visible and *more* prominent through the cloth that hangs from it. This juxtaposition of clothed holy objects could closely relate the *tabot* and the cross, ultimately referencing the connection between the Old and the New Testament as two stages in the divine plan for human salvation.¹⁵⁹ At the same time, the difference in visibility between the entirely covered *tabot* and the fully displayed cross, the one hidden by a textile and the other showcased by it, might also emphasize the idea that while God was hidden and perceived only indirectly in the Old Testament, in the New Testament he became fully visible through the veil of Christ's human body that clothed his divinity. In the context of such an interpretation, the notion of unity between the Old and the New Testament, but also the progression from the one to the other so as to actualize a more intimate and universal union between God and humanity, are emphasized through the textiles of the *tabot* and the staff cross, also echoed in the woven-like motifs on the matrix of the cross itself. Such theological interpretations could occur to at least some Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, and in particular members of the clergy who carry the holy objects in questions and are more intimately familiar with the theological traditions of their Church.

Another possible approach to the meaning of the cloth appended from ritual staff crosses would be to focus on the tactile and visual aspects of the cloth in the experience of the people who touch or see it together with the cross it clothes. Those Ethiopian Orthodox Christian clergymen and altar boys who believe the cloth is there to remind them not to touch the cross with bare hands can appreciate the fact that the cloth actually allows them such tactile contact through its mediation—since they handle the cross through the cloth.

¹⁵⁸ *Numbers* 4:5–6.

¹⁵⁹ The same connection is expressed on Ethiopian hand crosses through the prominence of their base that also refers to the *tabot*, connected through the handle with the body of the cross—a theme that will be discussed in more detail below.



99. Ethiopian priests carry the *tabot*, a copy of the Tablets of the Arc of the Covenant, owned by every Ethiopian Orthodox church, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (close-up in Fig. 134). Photo by Dereje/ Shutterstock.com.



100. Ethiopian Orthodox clerics and altar boys display metallic and wooden staff crosses, during the Timkat festival, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.

Those who freely touch the cross with bare hands might still appreciate the fact that the tactility of the cross is extended and amplified through the cloth that hangs from it (Fig. 100). In other words, in both cases the appended cloth actually increases the palpability of the cross. Contrary to hand and pendant crosses, which are continuously handled, touched and kissed, the large ritual staff crosses used in churches and processions are not usually experienced in the same intimate way.¹⁶⁰ Rather, there is often a solemn distance between the body of the cross and the person carrying it on the pole, and an even greater distance between the cross and members of the congregation viewing it. In this sense, the appended cloth which is constantly touched by the clergy and is flowing downwards from the height of the cross can bridge the distance between this holy object and its handlers or viewers. Clergymen experience the palpability of the cross and the blessings that it confers by directly *touching* the appended cloth. Members of the congregation experience the same availability by *seeing* the cloth flowing from the base of the body of the cross, in a sense visualizing the blessings that cascade from a cross they are not invited to touch or kiss, but are still encouraged to perceive as a source of protection and solace.¹⁶¹ Ultimately, the appended cloth makes this solemn cross more relatable and brings it closer to the people, in the same way that Christ's bodily veil made God more relatable and brought

¹⁶⁰ Their size and long pole doesn't make them conducive of intimate interactions. In all the photographic material of Ethiopian feasts and processions I have reviews and in the relevant literature, I have not seen occasions in which the faithful kiss large staff crosses while they are attached on their pole. However, smaller staff crosses (also with an appended cloth) or staff crosses without the pole can at times be used to bless members of the congregation who kiss the body of the cross. For example, see R. Marsh, *Black angels. The art and spirituality of Ethiopia* (Oxford 1998), photo on pp. 62–63; Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 139, fig. 5.72.

¹⁶¹ As far as I know, members of the congregation do not kiss or touch the cloth appended from such crosses. If that was the case, it would be an interesting parallel with the custom found in many traditions to touch and kiss the robes of a venerable person, rather than engage directly with the body of such a person.

him among his people. The textile-like matrix of the cross itself also reminds Ethiopian Orthodox Christians of the availability of salvation through the Incarnation of God in Christ, made possible through the veil of his human body. In this interpretative framework, the textile is once more the element that refers to the idea of unity and connectivity between God and his people, through the materiality of the fabric (the cross, its cloth, and the body of Christ to which they refer).



101. Wall-painting of the typical Ethiopian iconography of the Holy Trinity as three identical old men, here surrounded by the four symbols of the Evangelists, Church of Debre Birhan Selassie (Mountain of Light and the Trinity), Gondar, Ethiopia (compare Fig. 92). Photo courtesy of Luc de Zeeuw, <https://flic.kr/ps/RGZSh>.

To return my focus on the interwoven motifs on the matrix of Ethiopian crosses, I would like to stress that unity is not the only concept that is emphatically visualized through them. Order is another significant reference, highlighted through the marked symmetry of the complex designs that decorate Ethiopian crosses (literally all the crosses illustrated in this book have this feature). These two elements, unity and order, could refer to the relationship between God and humanity as it was re-established through Christ's sacrifice, reversing the effects of the Fall. In addition, unity and order might have other important applications and implications as well. For example, they might refer to the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, all equal and inextricably connected. Indeed, the unity of the Trinity has a very prominent place in

Ethiopian religiosity, as is evident, for example, by the popular depiction of the Trinity as three identical co-enthroned figures—an iconography that is rather rare in Christian cultures outside Ethiopia (Fig. 101).¹⁶² In addition, the dogma of the Incarnation of the Logos through the unction of the Holy Spirit is particularly important to the Ethiopian Church.¹⁶³ References to the Trinity are very prominent in various quotidian aspects of Ethiopian culture.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² The only example I know from the Byzantine tradition is the miniature of the Trinity ordering Gabriel to deliver the news of the Incarnation to Mary in the twelfth-century Kokkinobaphos homilies (cod. Vat. gr. 1162, fol. 113v, cod. Paris. gr. 2008, fol. 153v). In this case, the three co-enthroned figures are represented as young men. Discussed by I. Hutter, *Die Homilien des Monches Jakobus und ihre Illustrationen, Vat. Gr. 1162 und Paris. Gr. 1208* (Universität zu Wien 1970), 159–161, 327–341, and I. Hutter – P. Canart, *Das Marienbomiliar des Mönchs Jakobos von Kokkinobaphos. Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1162. Einführungsband und Faksimile*, *Codices e vaticanis selecti* 79 (Vatican City-Stuttgart 1991), 60–62. In Ethiopian tradition, the three figures are depicted as old men with white hair and beard, reflecting the vision of God as the Ancient of Days in the book of *Daniel* 7:9. See *African Zion*, 188, with reference to the earlier surviving depiction of this iconographic theme, preserved among the eleventh-century wall paintings of the Faras cathedral in Nubia (modern Sudan, north of Ethiopia). In Ethiopian tradition, the co-enthronement of the three figures on the same throne is an important iconographic element meant to emphasize the unity of the Trinity. Their representation on separate thrones is considered inappropriate. See Merahi, *Contribution*, 101.

¹⁶³ Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 26–27.

¹⁶⁴ For example, personal names often include a reference to the Trinity, perhaps the most famous case being the last Ethiopian emperor, Hayla Sellase (Strength of the Trinity). See Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 28. Orthodox Christians who attend church school begin their day with an extensive reference to the Trinity. First the teacher says ‘good morning’ three times, to which the student replies ‘God be praised’ three times. Then the teacher asks ‘who created you?’, to which the student replies ‘the Holy Trinity’. Next they recite the mystery of the Trinity in the format of questions and answers, followed by the teacher’s recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. See Merahi, *Contribution*, 56. According to tradition, a fundamental element of the religious and cultural identity of Orthodox Ethiopian

And the popular protective prayers collectively known as *Rampart of the Cross* regularly address the cross as a sign or manifestation of the Trinitarian God.¹⁶⁵ Most Ethiopian crosses seem to reflect the centrality of the Trinity in Ethiopian spirituality through their prominent tri-partite design and the triple repetition of their basic motifs. On many staff and some hand crosses, the four arms of the cross are not equally developed (Figs. 3, 37–44, 83, 84, 89, 90, 102–104, 129–30). Instead, the lower arm is abbreviated and connected with the pole-shaft or handle of the cross, while the other three arms (top and lateral) are usually decorated with the same motif, so that the formation of the cross is prominently tri- rather than quadri-partite. This design is echoed in each of the three arms: they are often designed as smaller tri-partite crosses each (very clearly seen in Fig. 102), and may be flanked by smaller cross-like extremities, also in tripartite formation (as in Fig. 103).

So the overall design of the cross has a pronounced tripartite emphasis both in the general structure and the details of the decoration, which could be considered an eloquent visual gesture of veneration towards the Trinity.¹⁶⁶

Christians, hymnography (Zema), was invented in the sixth century by St. Yared, through the intervention of the Holy Trinity in the shape of three birds that visited him directly from paradise. See Merahi, *Contribution*, 106, 112, 117.

¹⁶⁵ Lifchitz, *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux*, 93. Each paragraph starts with an invocation of the Trinity, followed by a reference to the cross, which is often explicitly identified with Christ. Since he is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the cross also becomes a manifestation of the Trinitarian God and not just Jesus Christ. This identification of the cross with the Trinity is widespread in Christian tradition, as is attested, for example, by the belief that the wood of the Cross was produced from three different trees: cypress for the Father, cedar for the Son, and pine for the Holy Spirit. See E. Casier Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (Chicago 1962), 58.

¹⁶⁶ It should be clarified that this tripartite design is a matter of choice and not of structural necessity. The cross can be designed to have four arms of equal development and then be attached to a pole-shaft or handle, and each arm can also be designed in a quadri-partite formation.

A relevant powerful gesture of Trinitarian significance occurs during exorcism rituals of the Ethiopian Church, when the priest plunges the three arms of a hand cross into the water he sanctifies for the blessing of the possessed person, while he invokes the power of the Trinity.¹⁶⁷

Finally, it is worthy of notice that the interlocking threads that weave the body of Ethiopian crosses have no visible beginning and end, as they all merge into an incessant flow (for example, in Figs. 104–105). This element does not simply reinforce the idea of unity (for example between the three persons of the Trinity or between God and his people). In addition the unending thread motif may visualize eternity as a characteristic of both God and his relationship with humanity. Indeed, eternity refers to the everlasting nature and presence of God and his incessant actions for human salvation, which have in their center the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, who identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end (*Revelation* 1:8, 22:13).

However, it is obvious from the surviving material that a tri-partite formation is preferred in Ethiopian crosses. I assume that Di Salvo refers to these tripartite extremities of Ethiopian crosses when he mentions ‘Trinitarian emblems’ and ‘Trinitarian knots’ in his *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 36, 63 (fig. 65), 147, 163. However, on p. 123 he hypothesizes that groups of three joined crosses at the extremities of the cross arms (what I call tri-partite cross formations) might be representations of the Cross of Cavalry, by which I assume he means the three crosses raised there during the Crucifixion (Christ’s and the two thieves). I think such a specific narrative reference is a possible reading, but the more powerful symbolic reference to the Trinity is perhaps the primary intended message on the symbolically charged body of Ethiopian crosses. The narrative reference might be more appropriate in cases like the one Di Salvo presents on p. 133 (fig. 7), when we see a large central cross with Christ crucified on it, flanked by two much smaller crosses.

¹⁶⁷ Godet, ‘La croix dans l’Église éthiopienne’, 64.



102a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (17.25 x 10.25 inches, 43 x 16 cm) with an angel in the center and two birds perched on the loops (for the suspension of textiles). The three arms of the cross are shaped as smaller tri-partite crosses with even smaller cross-like tri-partite extremities. This emphasis on the number three, often found in the overall design of Ethiopian portable crosses, might be a reference to the Holy Trinity. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



102b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 102a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbar-ton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



103a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (13 x 7 inches, 32.5 x 17.5 cm) dominated by smaller, tri-partite cross motifs. Two angels appear inside the loops used for suspending a textile. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



103b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 103a), with more detailed incisions on its body. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



104a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (14.25 x 7.25 inches, 36 x 18.5 cm) with the figure of Mary and Christ in the center, birds in the four arms around them and several anthropomorphic heads in the periphery (possibly meant to represent angelic figures). Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



104b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 104a), with more detailed incisions on its body and a holy figure (possibly Christ) in the center. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

At this point, I would like to introduce some more references that further reinforce the symbolic function of the thread in Ethiopian visual culture, and by extension of Ethiopian crosses. Since the fifteenth century by royal decree, and until the present day according to custom, a cord (*matab*) is tied around the neck of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at the time of their baptism, with or without an appended cross.¹⁶⁸ The importance of the cord, even on its own (without the cross), as a marker of belonging to the Christian community after the initiation rite of baptism, might be explained once more as a symbol of unity. A thread that surrounds the neck of the wearers in a protective, unbroken circle could signify the revived union between them and God—a union broken after the Fall and amended when humans re-establish communion with their creator as new members of the Christian Church. The ancient design of the knot of Solomon, two interlocking perpendicular rings in a cross-like formation, is another powerful symbol of unity that often appears on Ethiopian crosses and seems made up by two cyclical, self-attached threads (as in the center of Fig. 105. See also Fig. 86, main body and base of the hand cross.)¹⁶⁹



105. Detail of the staff cross of Fig. 40a, showing the so-called 'Knot of Solomon' in the center. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

¹⁶⁸ *Ethiopian Art*, 92; *Sacro e bellezza*, 179.

¹⁶⁹ See Sansoni, *Il nodo di Salomone*.

Threads literally establish union by binding and knotting things or themselves together, and therefore their use as symbols of union can be easily understood. In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity there is a tradition that further emphasizes this symbolic potential: it refers to the thread that the Virgin Mary was spinning during her sojourn at the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, where she was being prepared to become the Mother of God. Mary is depicted spinning during her Annunciation in Early Christian, Byzantine, and other Eastern Orthodox traditions, including the Ethiopian. As mentioned above, the thread that she produces is a symbol of the Incarnation, the union of divinity and humanity in the body of Christ, produced on the loom of Mary's womb.¹⁷⁰ According to the apocryphal Protevangelion of James, that thread the Virgin was spinning during her Annunciation was purple, which through its royal and blood-like color can indeed signify both divinity and humanity.¹⁷¹ However, according to one Ethiopian tradition that is cited by priests today, the thread that Mary was spinning at the Temple, before the Annunciation, was not just purple but purple and gold, and clearly signified the union of humanity and divinity in Christ.¹⁷² This union is in fact a very important dogma for the

¹⁷⁰ Evangelatou, 'Purple thread', 261–79; 'Threads of Power', 266–87 (p. 266, n. 5 for further literature).

¹⁷¹ Discussed in Evangelatou, 'Purple thread', especially 262–66. For the text of the Protevangelion of James, see C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Lipsiae, 1876), 22 (chapter 11).

¹⁷² K. Merahi, *The Covenant of Holy Mary Zion With Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1997), 22. The priest doesn't state clearly which material stands for Christ's divinity and which for his humanity, but he explicitly mentions that their combination in the thread symbolizes the union of divinity and humanity in Christ's person. Reading his analysis closely, I assume that he sees gold as symbolizing divinity (because it is the one which 'gives strength to the silk') and purple silk thread as symbolizing humanity (because it 'expresses the gold's quality' and doesn't inhibit it 'from shining'—which I assume to be analogous to the way humanity manifests Christ's divinity). The combination of gold and purple as symbolic of the Incarnation is also employed in the Marian hymn *Harp of Glory* (McGuckin, pp. 72, 100). Mary is hailed as the priestly robe of gold and

Ethiopian and the other pre-Chalcedonian miaphysite Oriental Churches (Eritrean, Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Indian). As already mentioned, these Churches actually accept that Christ is equally human and divine, like Eastern Orthodox Christians believe, but they recognize only one rather than two natures in him.¹⁷³ So in a sense their miaphysite theological formulation gives greater emphasis to the *unity* of humanity and divinity in Christ (that the other Churches also accept). The Ethiopian Church in particular is prominently invested in this dogma of unity, reflected in its full official name, ‘Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, since the word *tewahedo* refers to unity, union, unification, oneness.¹⁷⁴ This fundamental dogma of union between humanity and divinity in the person of Christ seems reflected in the Ethiopian tradition of Mary spinning purple and gold in one thread.

It is worthy of notice that in some contemporary Ethiopian depictions of Mary holding Christ, which are the most obvious representation of the dogma of the Incarnation, a bi-colored twisted cord, made of two different strands or threads spun together, is used to frame the composition (Fig. 106). On the contrary, in depictions of the Trinity as three co-enthroned figures, a tri-colored braid is used instead (Fig. 107), formed by threads in red, yellow and green which are said to represent the three equal persons of the Trinity united in one God (and they also coincide with the colors of the Ethiopian flag).¹⁷⁵ In fact, the cord that Ethiopians are expected to wear after their baptism is also supposed to be made by three intertwined threads of different colors as symbols of the unity of the Trinity which manifested itself during Christ’s Baptism

purple, made to dress Christ, or as the book with gold cover and purple pages (containing the Word of God).

¹⁷³ See the relevant discussion in chapter one.

¹⁷⁴ Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 30.

¹⁷⁵ Merahi, *Contribution*, 118 reports that according to Church scholars, green stands for the Father, yellow for the Son, and red for the Holy Spirit. He mentions this tradition in connection to the three birds that were colored accordingly and represented the Trinity and inspired St. Yared in the invention of hymnography.

and presides over the baptism of his followers.¹⁷⁶ So the Trinitarian symbolism of three interwoven threads is widespread in Ethiopian culture. And since the will of the Trinitarian God is manifested throughout history, in all biblical events, in the Incarnation and in the acts of saints, it is appropriate to use a tri-colored braid to frame any religious image (Fig. 108), including that of Mary holding Christ. Likewise, the idea of union between God and humankind is an overarching concept relevant to any religious depiction in Christianity. Therefore, a bi-colored twisted thread could be considered an equally appropriate frame for any Christian composition. However, this union occurred first and foremost through the Incarnation of God in the person of Christ born by Mary. Therefore, it is possible that at least some Ethiopian creators and users of religious images see the employment of a bi-colored twisted thread as a particularly fitting frame for depictions of the Mother and Child. Such a use would echo the symbolic significance of the purple and gold thread Mary is said to have spun in the Temple.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Kaplan, 'Seeing Is Believing: The Power of Visual Culture in the Religious World of Aṣe Zār'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia (1434–1468)', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32.4 (2002), 410. Also S. Kaplan, 'Zara Yaqob o l'apogeo dell'impero', in *Sacro e bellezza*, 179.

¹⁷⁷ It would be interesting to examine the colors used in such a bipartite thread, to see if they index the chromatic range of purple and gold mentioned in connection to the Virgin's spinning, but I haven't examined enough examples of the motif to reach any general conclusions. At the outset, I would suggest that some viewers might be inclined to make a specific chromatic connection to the tradition about Mary's spinning, and others might be just thinking of the formal reference of two twisted threads to the unity between humanity and divinity. This said, I have observed that red is the usual color for one of the two threads (possibly referencing the usually darker 'purple', i.e. the extremely precious porphyry dye produced by murex shells, in Latin *purpura*, and in Greek *πορφύρα*). The other color of the twisted threads is usually brighter and could be seen as a possible reference to gold. Yellow is not the only color that could be used to index this material. Green, which is often used in combination with red in these twisted threads, might also be a reference to gold. For examples, notice the colors used for the representation of the



Detail of Fig. 105, 'Knot of Solomon'.

sun and moon in Crucifixion scenes of Ethiopian sanctuary veils: red for the bloody moon and green for the darkened sun, mourning the Creator's death (Gervers, 'Tablet-Woven Hangings', 589). A very interesting reference to 'green gold' as symbol of Christ's human flesh, connected to the Burning Bush as symbol of Mary providing it, is included in the fifteenth-century *Book of Mysteries* (Budge, *The Book of Mysteries* p. 132). In this case, it seems that the chromatic symbolism is reversed in comparison to what Merahi suggests (note 175 above), so that gold is a sign of humanity rather than divinity. This is consonant with the powerful expressive potential of symbols to be flexible and accommodate different readings. If gold is a sign of divinity (reference to light), then purple can be a sign of humanity (reference to blood); but if gold is a sign of humanity (reference to materiality), then purple can be a sign of divinity (reference to royalty, alluding to the King of Heaven). In fact, this symbolic flexibility perfectly reflects the concept of the union of humanity and divinity in Christ, if both colors can be read as references to either. It seems that the Ge'ez word for green (*hamalmil*) also covers hues of yellow, which is typical in Semitic languages, but since *hamalmil* is used to translate the Greek terms for green alone (and not yellow), the opinion of scholars on this issue is divided. See M. Bulakh, 'Basic colour Terms in Ge'ez: Synchronic and Diachronic Aspects', in *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg July 20–25, 2003*, ed. S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden 2006), 741.



106. Interior of a contemporary Ethiopian wooden bowl (diam. 9 inches, 22.5 cm), painted with an enthroned figure of Mary and Christ, flanked by two archangels (holding swords). The figures are inside a medallion formed by a bi-colored (red and green) twisted thread which is linked to an outer similar thread through two knot designs that include the symbol of the so-called 'Knot of Solomon' in green and blue. Two angelic creatures with outspread wings and no body (possibly meant to represent cherubim) flank the central medallion on the left and right, perhaps alluding to the idea of Mary as the New Ark containing Christ the Living Law. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.



107. Contemporary Ethiopian painting on parchment (10.30x 8 inches, 26 x 20 cm), with the traditional Ethiopian iconography of the Holy Trinity as three identical old men, here surrounded by the four symbols of the Evangelists (compare Fig. 102). The scene is framed by a braid-like motif made up of a red, a green and a yellow thread (similar to the colors of the Ethiopian flag). Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



108. Contemporary Ethiopian painting on parchment (11.5 x 7 inches, 29 x 18 cm), with St. George killing the dragon with cross-surmounted darts. The scene is surrounded by a braid-like motif made up of a red, a green and a yellow thread (similar to the colors of the Ethiopian flag, compare Fig. 107, probably created by the same painter). Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

No matter how specific the use of tri- or bi-stranded threads can be, it is safe to assume that in the context of Christian Ethiopian culture, at least some creators and viewers consciously identify the thread motif as an eloquent symbol of unity, whether it is the unity of humanity and divinity in Christ, or the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Likewise, we can assume that at least a number of Christians recognize the prominent interlocking threads of Ethiopian crosses as referring to the idea of unity that is so important in the Christian cosmology of salvation and in the power of the cross. The threaded motifs painted on the contemporary wooden bowl of Fig. 106 seem an eloquent visualization of this idea: the frame around the rim and around the central medallion with Mary and Christ is of the bi-colored twisted thread type that could refer to the Incarnation. In the two cross-shaped threaded motifs between the two circles (above and below the central medallion), a third color is added, perhaps as reference to the Trinity that willed the Incarnation. In addition, the knot of Solomon is included in the cross-like design, further reinforcing the theme of unity that is central in the perception of both the Incarnation and the Trinity (compare the knot in Figs. 105–106).

VISUALIZING THE SOCIAL FABRIC ON ETHIOPIAN CROSSES

The concepts of everlasting unity and order that seem interwoven on the matrix of Ethiopian crosses are important not only in a religious, but also in a social sense: they validate and uphold the status quo that any monarchy wants to preserve, suggesting that the kingdom is peaceful and prosperous under the wise leadership of the divinely-appointed ruler. From the thirteenth century until 1974, Ethiopia was ruled by a royal dynasty that claimed descent from the God-chosen kings of ancient Israel, David and Solomon, forefathers of Christ. The links between the monarch and the Church were very strong and the ruler was revered not only as a secular but also as a spiritual leader.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ *African Zion*, 39–40. Heldman, *Marian Icons*, 71–72. She reports the remark of the last Ethiopian monarch, Haila Sellase (1930–74) that

In this context, it is possible to consider the cross as the Christian sign of the whole kingdom: its symbolism of unity and order references not only the relationship between God and humanity, but also the harmony of the earthly realm as a reflection of the heavenly one, prospering under the leadership of the Ethiopian ruler who is divinely selected to represent the heavenly king on earth. Needless to say that such an ideology would be never espoused by all the subjects of the monarch, since many belonged to different religions and depending on the time period, might have been violently conquered against their will. Even some Christians could be political opponents of the ruler—yet even they could aspire to the ideal of unity and order that the matrix of Ethiopian crosses might visualize. The textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses is tightly-knit, dense, complex, but also prominently symmetrical and ordered, formed by interlocking threads and knots of different shapes and sizes (for example, Figs. 40–42, 89, 102–104). This system of ordered diversity seems a very appropriate visual metaphor for a strong social fabric, which is reinforced during the interaction of its members through the nexus of the cross (as in the rituals described above): everything/everybody co-operates harmoniously and contributes diligently to the balance of the larger scheme of things, the life of a prosperous community that ensures the well-being of its members through divine guidance.¹⁷⁹ In this way, socio-political control is successfully visualized but also effectively naturalized, justified, and promoted as part of a divinely ordained status quo, since it appears embedded in the sacred sign of the cross.¹⁸⁰

‘the Church is like a sword and the government like an arm’, which vividly illustrates the interrelation of these two institutions in Ethiopian tradition.

¹⁷⁹ The use of textiles as symbols of the social fabric is a very ancient theme, encountered in many cultures. See, for example, Scheid and Svenbro, *The craft of Zeus*, 7–34. The authors refer to ancient Greek veils woven by women of different families or different cities and dedicated to goddesses, as symbols of civic harmony, i.e. the interweaving of different social threads into one orderly fabric.

¹⁸⁰ A comparable naturalization of socio-political control through the prominence of symmetrical forms on important visual statements such as palaces, religious buildings and luxury objects is very pronounced



Detail of Fig. 89a. Staff cross with typical weave-like motifs.

in various Islamic traditions. One characteristic example is the exquisite stucco and tile decoration of the Alhambra palace in fourteenth-century Granada, Spain, which creates the combined impression of naturalness and absolute control to justify and eulogize the God-sent power of the ruler and the prosperity of his kingdom (a case of hyperbolic visual rhetoric at a time of acute socio-economic crisis). See D. Fairchild Ruggles, 'The Eye of Sovereignty: Poetry and Vision in the Alhambra's Lindaraja Mirador', *Gesta* 36.2 (1997), 180–189 (with emphasis on the poetry that expresses the political ideas visualized in the decoration of the palace). Another characteristic example is the employment of exuberant, deceptively natural, yet strictly symmetrical flower decorations on the buildings patronized by the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan—the most famous of all being the decoration of the Taj Mahal. See J. M. Dye, 'Artists for the Emperor' in *Romance of the Taj Mahal* (Los Angeles 1989), 88–127, esp. 104, 122.

It is important to note that even in the post-monarchic period starting in 1974 all Ethiopian political regimes continued to collaborate closely with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in order to promote their political agenda of order and unity in the state.¹⁸¹ Therefore the socio-political symbolism of Ethiopian crosses proposed here would still be relevant even after the abolition of the monarchy, as a reference to the hopes of the Church and its people (if not political leaders as well) for social unity and order. To this day, the continued cooperation between the State and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as systems of authority that mutually recognize and support each other, is still evident in the way that government officials participate in major religious feasts, such as the celebration of the Exaltation of the True Cross during the late-September feast of Masqal or Meskel (meaning Cross), which is one of the most important feasts in Ethiopia.¹⁸² It is even possible that at times of political turmoil, like the years of the Derg regime of 1974–91 which exerted a tight and often hostile control over the Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians consciously or subconsciously turned to the traditional interwoven design of their crosses to seek reflections of social order and harmony that were lacking from the actual socio-political framework around them. Indeed, it has been said that during the Derg regime ‘there was even an upsurge in church attendance as people found in ritual activities a shelter from political turmoil.’¹⁸³ The latest protests and political upheaval in Ethiopia (during 2016) might have also prompted several Orthodox Christians to turn to the matrix of Ethiopian crosses in hopes of finding reassurance in

¹⁸¹ See the discussion of the post-1974 period by Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, 76–88.

¹⁸² See *Ethiopian Art*, 33. On the role of Ethiopian Christian rituals in the solidification of social order, see also W. Emiru, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Festivals of the Finding of the True Cross and Epiphany. Temporal, Spatial and Symbolic Aspects. Anthropological Perspective* (Addis Ababa 2007).

¹⁸³ Ancel and Ficquet, ‘The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’, 78. The authors also note that ‘despite its atheism, the Derg did not attempt to eradicate the Orthodox Church or Islam, but leaned on religious institutions in order to spread its ideology and control rural localities.’

the vision of harmony and order evoked by the crosses' coherent and symmetrical textile-like motifs.

In relation to this socio-political analysis, perhaps it is not a coincidence that woven-like patterns became particularly prominent on Ethiopian crosses in the fifteenth and nineteenth-twentieth centuries, when kings were fervently invested in the reorganization, expansion, and protection of their realm, while emphasizing their authority as both spiritual and religious leaders.¹⁸⁴ However, it can also be said that these were always important goals for the Ethiopian monarchy, and were effectively visualized in the prominently symmetrical form of Ethiopian crosses even without the presence of interwoven, thread-like motifs. Self-same, intersecting, or paratactically arranged patterns were used to create striking images of unity and balance on a lace-like matrix that brought together components of different sizes—like agents of different roles, collaborating towards a common goal and thus creating an eloquent visual metaphor for a stable social structure (Figs. 37, 47, 82). Seen from a distance, these dense lace-like crosses produce the same textile-like visual impression with crosses that are formed by actual thread-like motifs (compare Figs. 37–38, 47–48). In both cases, the image created is that of a densely woven fabric of sacred, protective power in the shape of the cross. This cross-fabric functions not only as a symbol but also as a socio-cultural agent within the community of believers, being an effective vehicle for the expression *and* realization of their hopes and beliefs. As a focus of prayer, the fabric of the cross receives and embodies the wishes of individuals and their communities. As the most powerful Christian symbol and a venerable instrument of salvation in itself, the cross spreads its fabric before the eyes of its users to reassure them of belonging to the fabric of a blessed community: the Christian Church and State of Ethiopia that through union with God lead to both spiritual and physical well-being, visualized but also realized through the cross itself.

Perhaps the most eloquent example of the powerful political implications of Christian visual traditions in Ethiopia is provided

¹⁸⁴ I am referring in particular to Zara Yacob, Menelik II, and Haila Selasse.

by the policies of the fifteenth-century emperor Zara Yacob. In order to promote the unity of his multicultural empire and to reinforce his authority as a divinely appointed leader, he fervently advocated for the veneration of Mary and the cross, whose images were to be honored by all the Christians of the kingdom. Failure to do so was tantamount not only to religious but also to political insubordination, and was severely punished. In addition, Christians were expected to have the cross tattooed on their foreheads or palms and to wear the tri-partite twisted cord around their necks after baptism. They were also required to inscribe the sign of the cross on all of their belongings, including their cloths, weapons, and agricultural tools.¹⁸⁵

Dwelling a bit longer on the concept of a community with both religious and political dimensions, it is appropriate to note the cosmic symbolism that the cross has in Christian (and even pre-Christian or non-Christian) traditions.¹⁸⁶ Scholars believe that since antiquity the intersection of vertical and horizontal arms was meant to signify the communion of different dimensions or realms of experience, like earth and heaven, humanity and divinity. In addition, the four arms of the cross can be related to the four cardinal points of the horizon. In a Christian setting, they symbolize universal union and sanctification through the power of Christ, who spread his arms on the wood of the True Cross to embrace and save the world.¹⁸⁷ To quote an eloquent passage from the Byzantine theolo-

¹⁸⁵ See the insightful presentation of Kaplan, 'Seeing Is Believing', 403–421; Kaplan, 'Zara Yacob' in *Sacro e bellezza*, 175–180.

¹⁸⁶ See especially Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 10–22, 27–40, with references to the basic concepts I mention below. Also Cooper, *Symbolism*, 26–42.

¹⁸⁷ Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis', 153. G. Ladner, 'St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine on the symbolism of the cross', in his *Images and ideas in the Middle Age. Selected studies in the History of Art* (Rome 1983), 197–208, especially 198–201. See also an overview of relevant ideas in Baert, *Holy Wood*, 323–24, with reference to further readings, including E. S. Greenhill, 'The Child in the Tree. A Study of the Cosmological Tree in Christian Tradition', *Traditio* 10 (1954), 323–71. See also J.-M. Prieur, *La croix dans la littérature chrétienne des premiers siècles* (Bern 2006).

gian Andrew of Crete (seventh–eighth century): ‘O Cross, reconciliation of the cosmos, outline of the terrestrial expanse, height of the sky, profundity of the earth, bond of creation, extent of all that is visible: the breadth, depth of the universe’.¹⁸⁸

Relevant to this idea of universality is the concept of concentric communities, encompassed one inside the other and all structured around the central idea of God’s love for humankind. The universe itself is the broadest community, followed by the transcendental Universal Church formed by all of God’s servants—angelic, saintly and human, past, present, and future. This encompasses the earthly institution of the Christian Church, which in turn embeds local Christian communities of various sizes (identifiable with nations or cultural and ethnic groups, cities, parishes, and individual congregations). All the earthly communities strive for unity and salvation, and each is assumed to reflect in its hierarchical structure the divine order that is bequeathed from above through the succession of interlocking communities.¹⁸⁹ In this reflection of the macrocosmic in the microcosmic, even the smallest unit of any community, the individual person, becomes a manifestation of universality and divine order, underlying the significance of each creature in the creation and for the Creator. The above concept is effective for ordering an otherwise unpredictable world and for recognizing the value of every life that otherwise might appear insignificant in the vastness of the cosmos. But it is also a concept with powerful political implications, as it can be used to justify hierarchical control in a society that self-identifies as Christian and tries to contain centrifugal tensions through the construct of a centripe-

¹⁸⁸ Quoted by Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 11.

¹⁸⁹ Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries II*, 82–84, references the same concept of interrelated communities, supported by scriptural quotations: a local Church like the Ethiopian (1 *Thessalonians* 1:1); the Ecumenical Church of all Christians on earth (1 *Corinthians* 12:28, 1 *Timothy* 3:15); and the Universal Church of all believers, living and deceased, making up the body of Christ (*Ephesians* 1:23–3:10). See also Perczel ‘Abyssinian processional crosses’. For the importance of interrelated communities and the concept of a God-sent hierarchical organization in the culture of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity see also Levin, *Greater Ethiopia*, 113–27.

tal ideology. As a symbol that can be used to identify all these interlocked Christian communities, the cross is a very effective emblem of order for any political institution that uses the Christian religion to support its power. After all, the cross is believed to be an instrument of salvation enacting the will of God who, at least in official rhetoric, is assumed to appoint political authorities ruling in his name. This political dimension of the symbol of the cross is attested in Ethiopia since the Christianization of the fourth century and the early cross-inscribed coins of that time (Figs. 25–26), until the most recent religious feasts in which State and Church officials appear together as the most honored participants, following ancient practice.¹⁹⁰ Keeping these thoughts in mind, I would like to turn again to the formal elements of Ethiopian crosses and discuss a feature that might be interpreted as a reference to order in religious but possibly also political terms, as already suggested for the fabric-like character of the cross matrix.

A typical self-same motif that often appears on Ethiopian crosses of a prominent textile-like character is once more the symbol of the cross itself: small crosses of the same or different shapes and sizes that are clustered together to create the main body of the actual cross; or crosses that appear at regular intervals within and around the main matrix, creating the impression that the cross is sprouting forth more crosses (Figs. 47 right, 82, 86, 109–111, 139). This repetition of the cross motif has been interpreted by scholars as a reference to the regenerative properties of the cross, but it can also be read as an emphasis on its importance, sacredness, and power, further amplified by its recurring representation.¹⁹¹ In a cyclical manner, the cross is represented over and over again, within the framework of the overall cross-body, in order to echo, and by extension, reinforce the significance and effectiveness of the sign.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Emiru, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Festivals of the Finding of the True Cross and Epiphany*, 39–44.

¹⁹¹ *Ethiopian Art*, 80–81, states about a cross almost identical to that of Fig. 82 above: ‘The many small crosses radiating out from the hub of this wheel-like form allude to the symbolic, regenerative properties of the cross.’ On the significance of repeated motifs (especially crosses) see the relevant comments by Maguire, ‘Magic and geometry’, 268–74.



109a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (9.25 x 4.5 inches, 23 x 11 cm) with a textile-like body formed by the repetition of small crosses. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



109b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 109a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body, including small circles that make the cross appear like a blooming or fruitful tree. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



110a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (15.75 x 8 inches, 39.5 x 20 cm) with a textile-like circular body formed by the repetition of small crosses radiating out from the center, creating the impression of a tree sprouting forth more crosses. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



110b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 110a), with more detailed incisions on its textile-like body. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbar-ton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



111a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (11.75 x 6 inches, 39.5 x 15 cm) with a circular body formed by the repetition of small crosses inside intersecting circles or standing independently around the periphery of the cross, creating the impression of a tree sprouting forth more crosses. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



111b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 111a), with more detailed incisions on its tree-like body, including small circles that make the cross appear like a blooming or fruitful tree. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Alternatively, if the cross is a cosmic symbol, the smaller embedded crosses might highlight the sanctification of the entire world by the sign of Christ and his religion. The whole universe is not only encompassed in the overall shape of the cross, but is also punctuated internally by it, so that literally wherever one looks within this universal matrix, the cross reigns supreme. Moreover, if we think of the fabric of the overall cross design as symbolic of an ordered community, then the repetition of the sign of the cross in different sizes and embedded formations could have an additional meaning: it might be intended to visualize the concept of macro-cosmic and microcosmic dimensions reflecting each other within the universal matrix, literally cross-referencing each other through the visual resonance between the cross body and the various cross-like motifs contained in it. In this hierarchical system of symbolically represented interlocking communities, the building blocks of small crosses that make up the body of the entire cross could be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, the small crosses might be referencing local communities embedded in the matrix of the Ethiopian Church. They might also refer to the smallest units of the Christian Ethiopian or the universal community: individual Christians who strive to live their lives as true followers of Christ, lifting up their own cross in their pursuit of virtue and salvation.¹⁹²

It is this virtuous conduct that makes them worthy members of their communities—and their communities worthy members of the Church. These cross-shaped individuals or communities are embraced in the overall matrix of the cosmic cross because of their moral *and* socio-political conformity to the established hierarchical structures. They are embedded in the all-powerful matrix of the

¹⁹² *Matthew* 16:24–27: “Then Jesus spoke to his disciples. He said, ‘If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it. What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses his soul? Or what can anyone trade for his soul? The Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory. His angels will come with him. And he will reward everyone in keeping with what they have done’. There is a similar mention in *Mark* 8:34–38 and *Luke* 9:23–27.

sacred cross so that conformity to the established structures is naturalized, celebrated and sanctified.

In some cases, the specific design of a cross might further reinforce such references. For example, some Ethiopian crosses are made up of concentric circles that successively sprout forth little crosses (Figs. 47 right, 82, 110). Perhaps the most obvious interpretation for this form is a reference to the solar disc radiating light: a cosmic symbol that relates to the universality of the cross and its luminescence as source of salvation and sign of Christ, who is hailed as the 'Sun of Justice'.¹⁹³ At the same time, this configuration seems a very eloquent visualization of the idea of interlocked macrocosmic and microcosmic communities, radiating from the same center and reflecting each other's order in their overall structure but also in the behavior of their cross-inscribed members, all oriented towards the same source of light. Similar ideas could be applied to the interpretation of designs like the one on Fig. 111, where numerous crosses are circumscribed by individual intersecting and touching circles, all inscribed into a larger circle sprouting forth more crosses in its periphery. This design could be seen as a reference to individuals and communities belonging to a larger entity, in various levels of social or cosmic organization: believers within a congregation, or local communities within the Church or State, or all of the above within the cosmos, sanctified and held together through the power of the cross as a manifestation of divine will. This design will be discussed again below in search of other possi-

¹⁹³ The reference to Christ as the Sun, or the Sun of Justice, has biblical roots (e.g. *Malachi* 4:2) and is well-known in Ethiopian Christianity, as is also the case with other Christian traditions. For example, Christ appears as the sun in one of Solomon's dreams in the *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of Kings*), the national epos of Christian Ethiopia. In the same source, the Ark, which is considered a prefiguration of Mary containing Christ, is often said to shine like the sun. Christ himself is also called the Sun of righteousness. See Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 35–36, 65, 78, 83, 84, 85, 91, 204, 206, 216. Christ is also mentioned as the Sun of Justice, shining his rays upon the whole creation, in the popular Marian hymn *Enzira Sebbat*, (McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 67, 75, 85, 101, 110).

ble interpretations, showcasing the multiplicity of meaning that Ethiopian crosses can accommodate.

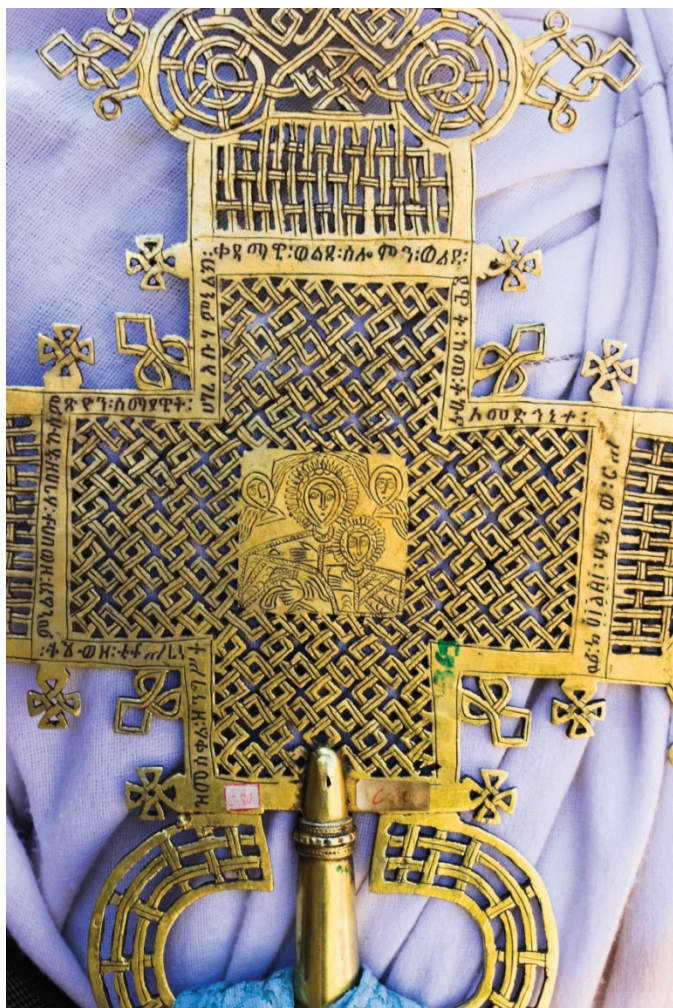
According to the above analysis, the design of some Ethiopian crosses might evoke more vividly than others the idea of a socio-political order supported by the value system of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Depending on their personal interests and lived experiences, individual cross makers or viewers might be more or less inclined to read such a meaning in the patterns of specific crosses. For example, people involved or familiar with the production of honey—which holds a prominent place in Ethiopia—might use the image of the honeycomb as a lens through which to identify references of socio-political order and harmony in the matrix of Ethiopian crosses. This is such a rich subject that it deserves a more detailed consideration on its own.

THE IMAGE OF THE HONEYCOMB IN THE BODY OF ETHIOPIAN CROSSES

The honeycomb can be relevant to the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses for a number of reasons. In formal terms, the construction of honeycombs through the repetition of identical cells, ordered in a dense matrix, is reminiscent of the visual effect of open-work Ethiopian crosses, formed by interlocking self-similar motifs (compare Figs. 112–113). In socio-political terms, the orderly and hierarchical organization of a beehive is reminiscent of the idealized perception of a Christian society organize according to the principles of order and unity under the superior authority of God, the Church, or the monarch—an ideal that could be reflected on the design of some Ethiopian crosses. Finally, in cultural terms bees and their products are particularly important in Ethiopia; and this prominence might inspire a number of Ethiopian Christians to use the paradigm of the honeycomb in their interpretation of the formal elements of at least those Ethiopian crosses that visually resemble such natural forms. This hypothesis deserves further research. For the purpose of the present discourse, I can only offer corroborative evidence from a few sources.



112. Honey inside a honeycomb. The textile- or net-like appearance of honeycombs, produced by the repetition of identical cells that look as if made up of interwoven threads, is reminiscent of the body of many Ethiopian crosses (compare Figs. 113-14). Photo by Kotomiti Okuma/ Shutterstock.com.



113. Detail of the central part of an ancient staff cross kept in the collection of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, Aksum, Ethiopia. The main body of the cross is created by a weave-like pattern that both in its structure and its gold-tone color is reminiscent of honeycombs. At the very center, Mary holding Christ is overshadowed by two angels who spread their wings above her like a canopy, possibly alluding to the cherubim overshadowing the Ark of the Old Covenant (purported to be held at Our Lady Mary of Zion), and presenting Mary as the New Ark, containing Christ the Living Law. Photo by Jane Sweeney/ age fotostock.



114. This gold-tone staff cross displayed during the Timkat festival at Lalibela, Ethiopia, is also reminiscent of a honeycomb due to its color and central cell-like weave pattern. Even the yellow sparkling textile appended from the cross could bring to mind the flow of glittering honey from the honeycomb (an evocative metaphor for blessings flowing from the cross to nourish the faithful). Photo by Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.

Taken together, the following evidence might indicate that the 'honeycomb-cross' model of analysis is at least plausible in the context of Ethiopian culture.

Reverence towards bees and their products is considered a pan-Ethiopian characteristic that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries, with the bee being a symbol of good luck among all Ethiopians.¹⁹⁴ In Ethiopian Christian tradition bees and honey can have special significance. For example, King Lalibela is said to have received his name because of the swarm of bees that gathered around him when he was born—which his mother considered a very auspicious omen.¹⁹⁵ Therefore the sacred city of Lalibela, named after him, also owes its appellation to bees. In addition, the belief of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that they are descendants of Solomon and the new chosen people of God in possession of the Ark might also lead them to see their realm as another promised land, flowing with milk and honey.¹⁹⁶ In the sixteenth century, the Orthodox monk Abba Bahrey, who wrote a contemporary history describing the invasion of the Oromo in Ethiopia and perceived his time as one of turmoil, prayed to God to protect the land of his people by exclaiming: 'Make honey flow from the mountains and milk from the hills'. The invocation clearly identified abundance of honey with prosperity.¹⁹⁷ Even more interesting is *The Story of Narga*, which narrates the mid-eighteenth-century royal foundation of the Narga Sellasie Monastery on one of the islands in Lake Tana. According to this text, 'Narga means "honey"; the honey does not remain alone while it is in its original place, the beehive, but the bees swarm around it, while tasting the sweetness of the blessing which the Lord granted them. Also this monastery does not remain alone, but those who behold God, each one with his own time, swarm around it, while they taste the sweetness

¹⁹⁴ Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 58.

¹⁹⁵ Henze, *Layers of Time*, 51. *Ibib.*, Lalibela means 'the bee recognizes his sovereignty'.

¹⁹⁶ Compare *Exodus* 3:8, 3:17, 33:3; *Ezekiel* 20:6.

¹⁹⁷ M. Mennasemay, 'Abba Bahrey's Zenahu LeGalla: Towards an Ethiopian Critical Theory', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6.1 (2012), 4–5.

of the goodness he did for them...'.¹⁹⁸ This interpretation can be also applied to the 'honeycomb' body of Ethiopian crosses, which might be perceived to flow with the honey of God's blessing and to attract the faithful as if they were bees, swarming around the cross so that each one in their own time and way can understand its meaning and rejoice in its gifts. In Fig. 114, the yellow sparkling cloth appended from a gold-tone cross could be read in the eyes of some viewers as the flowing of honey-like blessings from a honeycomb body. Like bees, the faithful might find their place of belonging, protection and salvation in the harmonious religious, socio-political and ultimately cosmic order that the cross embodies in its honeycomb design. In addition, as the honeycomb is a source of material sustenance and the cross a source of both physical and spiritual protection, Ethiopian Christians might see honeycomb references on their crosses especially at times of acute personal or communal poverty, when famine might induce them to swarm around their crosses and pray to God for honey-like blessings and material sustenance.

Today Ethiopia is the largest producer of honey and beeswax among all African nations, and various organizations support bee-keeping as a way to encourage economic development, empower local communities, and assist women to form co-operatives that can help them gain a stronger economic and social standing.¹⁹⁹ Even in areas where individually owned beehives are still of the traditional type (hollowed trunks or other tube-like cavities hanging high up from tall trees), the collection of honey is based on and further reinforces strong social bonds among community members

¹⁹⁸ M. Di Salvo, *Churches of Ethiopia. The Monastery of Nagra Sellase* (Milan 1999), 216.

¹⁹⁹ <http://africanbusinessmagazine.com/uncategorised/honey-ethiopias-liquid-gold/>, <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/estafrica/?p=6178>, <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/estafrica/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/cs-women-collective-action-ethiopia-270313-en.pdf>, accessed online on January 29th 2017.

who collectively participate in the harvest of liquid gold.²⁰⁰ In addition, honey is used extensively in cooking and winemaking throughout Ethiopia.²⁰¹ The importance of bee culture in contemporary Ethiopia might inspire several Ethiopian Christians to employ the image of the honeycomb in their interpretation of crosses. Even the theme of ‘wax and gold’ that has been mentioned before as a model of layered interpretation applicable on Ethiopian crosses can acquire heightened relevance through the example of the honeycomb. In a beehive, the wax of the honeycomb is used to support the production of the most precious, golden honey. In the process of metal cross-making, the wax is melted away and replaced by the most precious metal. In the process of interpreting such a cross (even made in wood, but still retaining the honeycomb aspect of an intricate matrix), the material and its forms are the basis for developing a deeper understanding of the significance of the cross and the place of God in the lives of Christians. This is a ‘golden’ and ‘honey-sweet’ meaning, based on the ‘wax’ of materiality. It is analogous to the refined meaning that emerges as gold out of wax in the structure of *qene* poetry. It is similar to the most precious honey that flows from the wax of honeycombs. In this universe of interpretative potential, the formal, social, and cultural aspects of honeycombs might be used by Ethiopian Christians as a lens through which to achieve a richer understanding of the formal, social, and cultural significance of their crosses.

²⁰⁰ Y. Ito, ‘Local honey production activities and their significance for local people: a case of mountain forest area of Southwestern Ethiopia’, *African Study Monographs*, Suppl. 48 (2014), 77–97.

²⁰¹ Honey wine is a very popular beverage in Ethiopia, produced both for domestic and commercial consumption. See B. Bahiru, T. Mehari, and M. Ashenafi, ‘Chemical and nutritional properties of ‘*tej*’, an indigenous Ethiopian honey wine: variations within and between production units’, *The Journal of Food Technology in Africa* 6.3 (2001), 104–108, at <http://www.bioline.org.br/request?ft01028>, accessed online on January 15th 2017.



115. Detail of Fig. 2: Contemporary Ethiopian hand and staff crosses.
Photo courtesy of Erika Howard.

MATERIALITY AND IMMATERIALITY: SANCTIFYING THE WORLD IN ALL ITS DIMENSIONS

While exploring the references of Ethiopian crosses to fundamental cultural beliefs, it is important to consider a prominent feature that appears on all open-work crosses of lace-like or woven-like appearance. This is the pronounced juxtaposition between material presence and absence: the solid components and the void spaces between them create a striking interplay of shadow and light, mate-

riality and immateriality (Figs. 47, 115, 139). This significant characteristic could refer to the union of materiality and spirituality as a central element in the belief system of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition. On the one hand, humanity and divinity (analogous to materiality and immateriality) are united in the person of Christ—God made flesh for the salvation of the world. On the other hand, body and soul (materiality and spirituality) are united in all human beings, and this convergence is expressed in Ethiopian Orthodox Christians' hopes and prayers for both physical and spiritual salvation.²⁰²

As already mentioned, the miaphysite dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church places great emphasis on the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in one nature. Since Ethiopian crosses are venerated as Christ himself,²⁰³ it seems apt that open-work crosses are defined by an evocative interplay of materiality and immateriality in the same body. Through the Incarnation, God deigned to inhabit a human body that became the temple of his divinity. This sanctification of human physicality increased the honor God had previously bestowed to humankind as the most favorite of his creations, made in his 'image and likeness' (*Genesis* 1:26). During his life on earth, Christ continuously cared for both the body and soul of his flock, satisfying their physical and spiritual hunger and thirst, healing their physical and spiritual ailments and wounds.²⁰⁴ Indeed, Christ often pointed at the interrelation of body and soul in his healing miracles, with references to sickness as an effect of sin, and healing as a reward for faith.²⁰⁵ This understand-

²⁰² For the role that the cross plays in Ethiopian culture concerning the combined health of body and soul, see Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 62–66.

²⁰³ See note 105 above.

²⁰⁴ For example, consider the two miracles of the feeding of the multitude (five thousand in *Matthew* 14:13–21, *Mark* 6:31–44, *Luke* 9:12–17 and *John* 6:1–14; four thousand in *Matthew* 15:32–39 and *Mark* 8:1–9), or Christ's dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well (*John* 4). For healing miracles, see the following note.

²⁰⁵ For a discussion of relevant gospel passages and secondary literature on the psychosomatic perception of health in the Bible and in Or-

ing of humans as psychosomatic entities is prominent in the Christian Bible and is also fundamental in Ethiopian prayers that entreat God and his saints for the well-being of the faithful.²⁰⁶ Such hopes for holistic salvation, which encompasses both the body and the soul, also accompany dedicatory inscriptions for paintings or liturgical objects (including crosses) donated to Ethiopian churches.²⁰⁷

In Ethiopian Christianity, the belief that materiality and immateriality/spirituality are closely intertwined in the entire world, encompassing humankind and even God incarnate, seems vividly evoked in the way open-work motifs are created through the interweaving of matter and its absence on the cosmic symbol of the cross. This interplay between materiality and immateriality is particularly striking in the case of processions, when large crosses are prominently displayed as the congregation comes together to pray for divine protection. The matrix of large staff-mounted open-work metallic crosses both reflects and filters the sun light.

thodox Christianity, with special attention to the Byzantine tradition, see M. Evangelatou, "Virtuous soul, healthy body: the holistic concept of health in Byzantine representations of Christ's healing miracles," in *Holistic Healing in Byzantium*, ed. J. Chirban (Brookline, MA, 2010), 173–242.

²⁰⁶ To mention just one characteristic petition addressed to Mary: 'Be the medicine of my body, and the remedy of my soul', McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 98.

²⁰⁷ For example, Sobania and Silverman, 'Patrons and Artists', 470, mention the dedication of liturgical drums on which not only the name of the patron but also the following invocation has been inscribed: 'Let this be their medicine for the body and soul'.



116. Metallic staff crosses reflect the sunlight forward and cast intricate shadows behind them, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Wojtek Buss/ age fotostock.



117. Metallic staff crosses reflect candle- and lamp-lights during Easter celebrations at the Ethiopian section of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, Israel. Photo by Kobby Dagan/ Shutterstock.com.



118. Close-up of the crosses of Fig. 117, during the same Easter celebration. Photo by Kobby Dagan/ Shutterstock.com.



119. Silhouettes of Ethiopian Orthodox clerics carrying staff crosses and ceremonial parasols during a festive procession that confers blessings to the town and its land, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Universal Images Group North America LLC / DeAgostini / Alamy Stock Photo.



120. Detail of Fig. 39, with metallic staff crosses reflecting the sunlight forward and casting intricate shadows behind them, during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.



121. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric displays an ancient staff cross at a monastery of Lake Tana, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. The intricate shadows on the body and face of the cleric visualize in a 'tactile' way the blessings conferred by the cross. Photo by Tim E White / Alamy Stock Photo.

This interaction between cross and light creates both luminous effects that dazzle the eyes (Figs. 116–18) and lace-like shadows that are temporarily etched on the landscape and on people's bodies and faces (Figs. 119–121).²⁰⁸ The reflections disseminate the sun rays back into the universe, intensely engaging the vision of the participants and therefore tracing a path of luminescence that through the nexus of the cross connects the human viewers with the original source of all light, God himself. Especially during the day, when the sun rays are reflected on the crosses (Fig. 116), as the members of the congregation focus their gaze on the luminous crosses, they can imagine their prayers traveling in reverse direction along the same luminous path that ultimately leads them back in heaven, to the Creator himself. The shadows that fall behind the crosses are also perforated by light. Like immaterial tattoos, they imprint and bless spaces and people, becoming incisive and 'tactile' visualizations of the presence of God (Figs. 120–121). His grace penetrates, touches and animates the material world, like the light that flows through the body of the cross.

Indeed, during Ethiopian processions in which large staff crosses play a major role, the prayers recited invoke divine blessings for the entire creation and are believed to have a direct effect on the spaces and people of the local community. One such prayer exclaims: '... Bless us O lord that we may bear fruit for one thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold- Remember Lord the seed and the fruit of the fields, make them abundant- Remember Lord the sweetness of the air and the fruits of the earth, bless them- Remember Lord the rivers and fill them with the waters of life unto due measure and limit- Remember Lord the safety of men and

²⁰⁸ Compare the comments in *African Zion*, 181: 'Crosses with pierced designs are displayed effectively in processions, either silhouetted against the open sky or shimmering by the reflected light of lamps and candles within a church interior'. In *Ethiopian Art*, 90–91, fig. 29, 'the cross in the center of this object appears in silhouette. As a result, during benedictions this opening could be used to project a cruciform shadow onto the object or person receiving the blessing'.

beasts.²⁰⁹ As these words are uttered in front of a staff cross, the cross itself acts as the agent that distributes divine blessings through its emanating reflections and cast shadows. When the cross is of an open-work type (rather than a solid design), its dynamic activation through interaction with light is all the more striking, exactly because the open-work interplay of materiality and immateriality projects the auspicious and conspicuous patterns of the cross on the landscape and the faithful, who yearn for material and spiritual protection to encompass all aspects of their lives.

In certain occasions the priest might bless the congregation with a hand cross while reciting a similar prayer (Fig. 61): ‘... bless the east and the west, the north and the south- bless the heaven, the earth, the sea and the rivers- bless the winds of the sky and the rains- bless the sun, the moon and the stars- bless the mountains and the hills- bless the trees, the herbs and the fruit of the earth- bless those that are under heaven and those that are under earth- Oh Christ our Lord, fill their hearts with the fear of thy name and make their lives prosper forever...’. Perczel notes about this occasion that the priest waves the cross ‘in every direction, so as to bless the people, the land, the waters, to promote fertility and abundance, prosperity and peace’.²¹⁰

In all these rituals, it is the materiality of the cross and its interplay with immaterial light that manifests the presence and blessings of God. Indeed, it is through materiality that the spiritual dimension can be perceived and can sanctify the human experience. In the same way, the divinity of Christ was manifested through his historical body and continues to be active among the faithful through his Eucharistic body. His divine grace and presence are also experienced through the crosses and icons employed in religious settings.²¹¹ In the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian worldview,

²⁰⁹ This prayer is recited by the deacons in front of the processional cross. See Perczel, ‘Abyssinian processional crosses’, 21–22.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ For the use of material images to experience the physical presence of the holy in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture, see, for example, Kaplan, ‘Seeing Is Believing’, 413–15. To provide another relevant example: since the synergy of matter and spirit for human salvation is the

the interweaving of materiality and immateriality is what makes salvation possible, through the Incarnation of divinity in Christ and through his Passion on the Cross, thus renewing the relationship between humankind and God in the experience and hopes of Christian believers. In this cultural context, the intertwined materiality and immateriality that defines open-work Ethiopian crosses seems to acquire special significance. As a symbol that relates to the cosmos, Christ and the salvation of his followers, the cross resonates with the significance of a triple conjunction: matter and spirit in the world, humanity and divinity in Christ, physicality and spirituality in human existence.

THE CROSS AND THE TREE OF LIFE: FROM THEOLOGY TO DAILY EXPERIENCE

Various motifs added on the basic matrix of Ethiopian crosses further enrich the meaning of this quintessential Christian symbol through references to the history of the world and to human salvation. For examples, fruits and birds transform the cross into a tree (Figs. 78–79, 122), with connections to the Trees of Knowledge and Life that mark the beginning of human existence, offer wood for the True Cross, and reappear at the end of time to mark hu-

basis of Christ's Incarnation, the Ethiopian Marian hymn *Harp of Glory* is full of visual metaphors that combine spiritual and material references to praise the mother who made the union of divinity and humanity possible. To mention just one passage that demonstrates how material, sensorial means serve spiritual enlightenment: the author of the hymn invokes Mary to 'accept my prayer, as if it were the perfume of burning incense...' (McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 41). The literature on the synergy of matter and spirit in Christian religious experience and faith is extensive. To mention two of the most recent and significant publications: C. Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York 2011); and P. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon. Space, ritual, and the senses in Byzantium* (University Park 2010). For a brief study of various interrelated issues, see M. Evangelatou, 'The Holy Sepulchre and Iconophile Arguments on Relics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters', in A. Lidov, ed., *Eastern Christian Relics* (Moscow 2004), 181–204.

manity's return to paradise.²¹² In Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture, the sign of the cross and the symbol of the tree have a very prominent place in narratives about the beginning and the end of time.²¹³ In addition, stories about the Ethiopian queen of Sheba relate how she venerated the miraculous wood from the Tree of Life that was destined to produce the True Cross, when she saw it in Solomon's city.²¹⁴ In Ethiopian stories, the interrelation between Tree and Cross bears a special significance for the identity of the people who see their lineage going back to that Biblical queen and the son she bore from Solomon's seed.

In addition, the life of trees is strongly linked to the service of the Church and the protective power of the cross in contemporary Ethiopian culture. Various traditions abound about miraculous trees in the land of Ethiopia: some of them God planted specifically in the service of his people; others became active characters in the life of saints, accompanying and assisting the holy figures in their struggles. One specific tree that is still believed to survive today was said to have protected Mary and Christ by hiding inside its trunk the mother and her son who were fleeing Herod's persecution.²¹⁵ Trees are also strongly connected with the Church in the daily experience of people.

²¹² For the connection of the cross to the Tree of Life in Christian tradition see, for example, Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 46–53, Cooper, *Symbolism*, 42–47. For a study with emphasis on visual representations, see G. Dufour-Kowalska, *L'arbre de vie et la croix. Essai sur l'imagination visionnaire* (Geneva 1985). For more detailed studies of the relationship between cross and tree in Christian tradition, and extensive references to further literature, see Casier Quinn, *Quest of Seth* and Baert, *Holy Wood*.

²¹³ For example, the fifteenth-century Ethiopian text *The Book of the Mysteries of the Heaven and the Earth* mentions that on the fourth day of Creation God created 'the Cross of light, and the Censers of light, and the Trees of light. And all these things are in the Fourth Heaven, which is Jerusalem'. In addition, the Tree of Life is the Body of Christ, which would suffer on the Cross. See Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 10, 26, 131.

²¹⁴ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 71.

²¹⁵ All the above references are made by K. Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 2001), 13.



122. Detail of Fig.104a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross with the figure of Mary and Christ in the center, birds in the four arms around them and several anthropomorphic heads in the periphery (possibly meant to represent angelic figures). The whole design looks like a tree with rich foliage, alluding the the relationship between the Tree of Life and the True Cross. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Today, the land of Ethiopia faces an extreme ecological crisis because of extensive deforestation, so much so that in many parts of the country the only areas with healthy sustainable flora are the grounds of churches and monasteries, which function as natural preserves. The protection of trees and of the natural environment

reflects not only the practical but also the spiritual concerns of the Ethiopian Church, which considers respect towards creation as a form of veneration addressed to the Creator.²¹⁶ The extent to which trees are related to the service of the Church and the power of the cross in the consciousness of contemporary Ethiopians is strongly visualized by a recent incident regarding efforts of reforestation in the North Wollo administrative region.²¹⁷ The local communities objected to the enclosure of protected land when it was enforced by armed government guards. They accepted the measure only when the armed forces withdrew and the people were free to mark the perimeter of the land with crosses, referred to as 'wooden trees' that stood as signs of protection and commitment to the preservation of the environment. The ceremony was concluded with the singing of the Song of the Cross.²¹⁸ The extensive and varied links between trees and Church traditions in Ethiopia creates a rich cultural context for the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses.

Tree symbolism is often mentioned in scholarly discussions of Ethiopian crosses, but remains rather unexplored. The standard comments are that the open-work body of the cross might look like the foliage of a tree, alluding to the Tree of Life and its connection with the wood of the True Cross. At times, reference is also made to the birds inhabiting the cross, considered heralds of Christ's Resurrection.²¹⁹ A closer look at Ethiopian Orthodox tradi-

²¹⁶ See Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 7–16.

²¹⁷ Narrated by Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 16–19.

²¹⁸ Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 19, reports the song as follows: 'The cross is our power, the cross is our strength, the cross is our ransom, the cross is the salvation of our soul. The Jews denied but we believed. We who believed are saved by the power of the cross'.

²¹⁹ For example, Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 63, 65. *Ethiopian Art*, 78, 82. It is worthy of notice that the Ethiopian word used to identify weave-like decorative patterns in manuscript headpieces (very similar to the ones used on crosses) is 'harag', after the Ge'ez word for the tendril of a climbing plant (*Ethiopian Art*, 104; *African Zion*, 63). This linguistic evidence provides one more indication that Ethiopian Orthodox Christians see an allusion to the thriving forms of vegetation in the intri-

tions may yield a much richer harvest of tree-related interpretations concerning the cross. The first point I would like to emphasize is that not only the Passion of the Crucifixion but also the victory of Christ over death through the Resurrection are referenced through the image of the tree-like cross. In accordance with Ethiopian spirituality, the triumph of life is highlighted over the suffering of death in the design of crosses, both through the vitality of the open-work 'foliage' and the usual absence of the Crucifixion narrative (Figs. 41–43, 83, 85–86, 89–90, 102–104, 109–11, 114, 123, 129–30, 139).²²⁰ Instead, images of Mary and the Christ Child, or angels and saints who are powerful servants of Christ, often appear on the matrix of the cross. They are all emblematic of life, as they bring the light of God to the human realm and offer protection against the death and darkness of sin, temptation, and the forces of evil. In Ethiopian tradition, the cross is a symbol of life from the beginning of time and its protective powers are later reinforced as a result of its relation to Christ's body, sacrificed on the Cross and on the Eucharistic altar of Christian churches in order to offer life everlasting.²²¹ His sacrificial body is the fruit of the Cross-Tree of Life, destined to reverse the deadly effects of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the fruit of which introduced death to the world.²²² As the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge condemned humankind through taste, so the fruit of the Tree of Life, Christ's

cate interlocking motifs that are so prominent in their visual culture, including crosses.

²²⁰ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 64–71.

²²¹ For a useful insight into the significance of the Eucharist in Ethiopian tradition, see the Ethiopian hymn known as *Community of the Faithful* (Māhbara me'manān), presented in Italian translation by Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 213–19. The hymn is a praise to the mystery of the Eucharist as a re-enactment and commemoration of Christ's Crucifixion for the salvation of the world. It is sung during the Eucharistic ritual on various occasions, such as the monthly celebrations dedicated to Christ's Nativity and to the Savior of the World and during feasts relevant to Christ's Passion. The hymn highlights the Cross as the instrument through which Christ washed away the sins of the world.

²²² See note 212 above.

Eucharistic body, saves humankind through taste as well.²²³ The frequent appearance of Christ as a Child in his mother's arms on the body of Ethiopian crosses can indeed be seen to have this Eucharistic and salvific significance (Figs. 42a, 83a, 90c, 113, 122, 130a). He is the fruit of her womb²²⁴ and the fruit of the Tree, God incarnated so that his Passion and Resurrection would be possible as historical, liturgical, and spiritual realities. In this context, Mary is perceived as the Tree, as well as the Cross and the altar bearing the sacrificial fruit-lamb. All these typological images are well-known in Ethiopian and other Christian traditions about the Mother of God.²²⁵ They exemplify the polysemy of Christian symbols and emphasize the close connection between Mother and Son, since both Mary and Christ are related to the Tree and the Cross.

Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and in the Eucharist serve the reunification of God and humanity, so that the faithful can re-enter paradise and see themselves as followers of the Crucified Christ

²²³ See M. Evangelatou, 'Botanical exegesis in God's creation: the polyvalent meaning of plants on the Salerno ivories', in *The Salerno Ivories. Objects, Histories, Contexts*, ed. F. Dell'Acqua, A. Cutler et al. (Berlin 2016), 133–165, especially p. 147, note 48 with reference to further literature. This publication contains further discussion of the symbolism of trees in Christian tradition.

²²⁴ *Luke* 1:42.

²²⁵ These ideas are prominent, for example, in the Ethiopian hymn to Mary known as *Harp of Glory* in which she is regularly compared to a land, garden, or plant bearing Christ as a salvific or Eucharistic fruit or fragrant flower. See the passages in McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 31, 32, 35, 36, 42, 43, 44, 45, 55, 61, 63, 68, 70, 83, 99, 124, 127, 128, 132, 133, 136, 145, 146, 147, 157. In the same text, Mary is often compared with the altar of the Tabernacle or of Solomon's Temple, or with containers of bread, wine or fruits, all of which are prefigurations or symbolic references to the Christian altar holding the Eucharist (*ibid.*, pp. 28, 37, 38, 39, 41, 57, 65, 66, 71, 74, 87, 117, 144. In the *Kebra Nagast (Glory of Kings)*, Mary carrying Christ is indirectly compared with the Cross, since Jacob's pastoral rod is identified with both Mary and the Cross. See Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 219.

and as fruits of the Tree of Life.²²⁶ This reading can amplify my previous suggestion that the small crosses embedded in the body of the overall cross matrix can be seen as references to individual believers encompassed in interlocking sacred communities that offer union with God (Figs. 82, 109–111). These small repeated crosses are in a sense fruits of the Tree of Life and symbolize the union between Christ and his followers. Indeed, both the cross and the Tree of Life have a prominent role at the end of time, when the faithful will re-enter paradise thanks to their fruitful deeds of faith and virtue.²²⁷ It is well-known that Biblical scripture contains numerous plant references in relation to human morality: the virtuous are fruitful and verdant plants, while the sinful are fruitless and barren.²²⁸ Such references could inform the interpretation of tree-like Ethiopian crosses, in which the faithful might see reflections of themselves or of what they should strive to become, either in the image of the cross-fruits, or in that of the entire fruitful cross-tree. The comparison of virtuous Christians with flourishing and fruitful trees is a common motif in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian cul-

²²⁶ The Ethiopian hymn *Community of the Faithful* places particular emphasis on the Eucharist as a moment of salvation through union between all the believers and God. The mystery unites the faithful to each other, to the saints in heaven and to Jesus, bringing all of them together in unison, as the body of Christ (compare *Ephesians* 4:4). Raineri, *Spiritualità Etiopica*, 213–19, esp. 214–15, 217, 219. The fundamental Christian concept of the Eucharist as a moment of union is further reinforced in Ethiopian culture by a common practice related to marriage. Most couples marry outside the Church, without celebrating the Christian sacrament of marriage, but if they wish to renew their marital vows in Church, instead of a marriage ceremony they partake of the Eucharist as a couple. See *Ethiopian Art*, 23.

²²⁷ See note 6 for the cross at the end of time. The Tree of Life is mentioned in *Revelation* 22:2, at the center of Heavenly Jerusalem, the abode of the just.

²²⁸ Evangelatou, 'Botanical exegesis', esp. p. 140, note 25 with references to biblical passages and scholarly literature. See also Casier Quinn, *Quest of Seth*, chapter six, 'The green tree and the dry', 103–30, esp. pp. 110–15; and Baert, *Holy Wood*, 322–23, with references to further readings.

ture.²²⁹ For example, it is referenced in the daily prayers of Ethiopians who attend church school: one of their invocations in the standard prayer they address to God at the end of every school day asks for life equal to that of an ever-green tree.²³⁰ In addition, prayers recited by the deacons in front of a cross during religious processions include emphatic references to the fruitfulness of both people and nature, in combined spiritual and material terms, while the cross is perceived as the instrument through which divine blessing will bestow such grace.²³¹

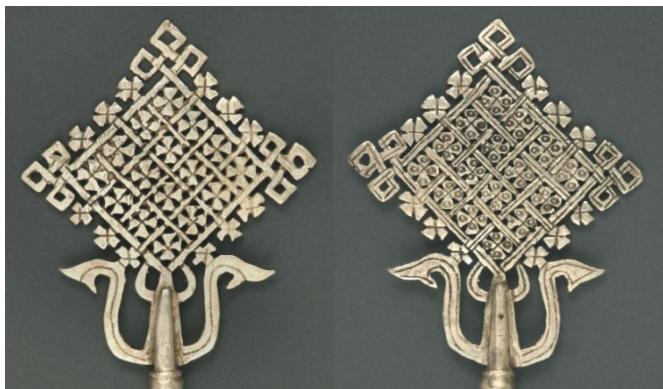
In fact, there is a formal element appearing in many Ethiopian crosses that reinforces the above references. Often, one side of the cross is plainer, while the other bears additional incisions that better define the thread-like parts of the matrix and make it look like a more vibrant foliage, full of vitality, at times also comprising dots or small circles that could allude to flowers or fruits sprouting forth. Without these elements, the other side of the cross appears more like a barren tree that becomes flourishing and fruitful when

²²⁹ For example, the *Book of Mysteries* frequently employs trees as symbols of people. The trees of paradise are prophets, apostles, priests, monks, the Old Testament patriarchs and their children. The same fruitful trees are also explicitly interpreted as people who 'bring forth good works'. On another occasion, trees are symbols of the apostles and herbs are symbols of the children of the apostles, i.e. 'those who have believed through their hands'. The Gospel quotation 'The axe is laid at the root of the trees' (*Matthew* 3:10, a warning against sin) is mentioned twice and followed by the comment 'and the trees about which he speaketh are men'. See Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 83, 95, 114, 131, 150.

²³⁰ Merahi, *Contribution*, 57. The prayer mentions a specific type of Ethiopian evergreen tree. It is followed by a reference to a kind of grass with deep roots, asking God to give the faithful the same kind of strength. See also the tree reference of Psalm 1, familiar to all Ethiopians Orthodox Christians who learn to read through the Psalter.

²³¹ Perczel, 'Abyssinian processional crosses', 21–22 (mentioned in full above): '... Bless us O lord that we may bear fruit for one thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold- Remember Lord the seed and the fruit of the fields, make them abundant- Remember Lord the sweetness of the air and the fruits of the earth, bless them...'.

turned around. Figs. 123–124 are just two of many examples. Often this difference between a ‘verdant’ and a ‘barren’ appearance is the only prominent feature that distinguishes the two sides of the cross (see also Figs. 89, 103, 110, 125, 132).



123a-b. Detail of Figs. 109a-b.



124a-b. Detail of Figs. 111a-b.

Two contemporary Ethiopian staff crosses that have richer incisions on side b (right). As a result, side a (left) looks like a barren tree and side b (right) like a verdant and flourishing tree. On the cross of Fig. 124 this impression seems accentuated by the decoration of the wedge that links the shaft with the cross-body: on the ‘barren’ side (a/left) the wedge is decorated with flowing water designs, while on the ‘verdant’ side (b/right) with a palm branch or leaf. Photos by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

At times, the 'verdant' side of the cross bears saintly figures in the center of the matrix, while the other side might bear a symbol, like Solomon's Knot. Alternatively, the 'verdant' side bears Mary and Christ, as opposed to an angel or a saint depicted on the other side (Figs. 40–42, 83, 90), or it bears Christ, while Mary holding her Child is delegated on the other side (Fig. 104). In all these examples, the 'barren' side is marked as 'a' in the photos of this book and the 'verdant' as 'b', and the visual succession from one to the other (from left to right) creates the impression of a tree that transitions into its blooming season.

The distinction between the 'verdant' and 'barren' sides that I highlight here is based only on the contemporary Ethiopian crosses that I have purchased on the market. Lack of visual material and detailed descriptions in exhibition catalogues prevents me from making similar observations on older examples. Scholarly publications usually illustrate only one side of the cross, especially if it bears only linear motifs and no human figures. This lack of documentation is also accompanied by a problematic use of terms when the publications include descriptions of both sides. The author often differentiates between the 'front' and the 'back', or the 'obverse' and 'reverse', implying a distinction between 'more' and 'less' important, or 'primary' and 'secondary'. Such terms are used both when the decoration of the cross is only linear (and might be briefly described as similar on the front and the back, without further analysis); and when it includes holy figures, in which case a list of saints and scenes is provided for the front and the back, rarely with photos of both sides.²³² Such descriptions, which are often accompanied by photos of unequal size (larger for the 'front' and smaller for the 'back'), seem to imply that the subjects on the 'obverse' are more significant than the ones on the 'reverse'. I would like to suggest that such evaluations might be entirely arbitrary and misleading. Firstly, they ignore the identity of the cross as a whole, its

²³² For both cases (with linear motifs alone, or human figures as well), see most crosses described in Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand crosses* (for example, pp. 20, 22, 27–29, 31, 33–34–35, and so on). For examples with human figures, see the cases discussed below from *African Zion* and *Ethiopian Art*.

salvific role expressed through the visual elements of both sides. Secondly, they might be based on culturally biased (Eurocentric) assumptions about the importance of human figures versus geometric motifs. And thirdly, they obscure the possible symbolic significance of all decorative motifs applied on the cross, assuming instead a problematic quantitative and qualitative approach in which more complex designs are supposed to be more significant than less so—following the constructed binarism of opposing categories such as ‘elaborate’ versus ‘undeveloped’, ‘ornate’ versus ‘simple’. Instead, I would like to suggest that both sides are equally important in articulating the meaning of the cross as a powerful symbol *and* an instrument of salvation.

For example, when one side depicts Mary holding Christ and the other St. George riding a horse and killing the dragon with a cross-surmounted spear, one might initially assume that the former is the front and the latter is the back of the cross, because of the relevant hierarchy of saintly figures. Indeed this is how the two sides are described in a catalogue that illustrates only the ‘obverse’ with Mary and Christ²³³ In reality, all figures enact, embody, and visualize protection and salvation, mutually complementing and enhancing the apotropaic function of the cross and of each other.

²³³ The two sides are described as ‘obverse’ and ‘reverse’ in *African Zion*, 96. Only the side with Mary is illustrated by a photo. A much more appropriate approach is followed in the same catalogue in the case of two cross pendants, pp. 76, 91, cat. 1, figs 3–4. Both sides are illustrated in photos and described neutrally as ‘one side’ and ‘other side’, probably in recognition of the equal significance of both sides in the construction of the object’s message. One pendant bears the image of Mary and her Son on one side and Mary as the Church on the other side, accompanied by the inscription ‘By the power of Zion’. Together, the two sides honor Mary as the most powerful intercessor of humanity. She is the instrument of the Incarnation, the embodiment of the Church, and the special patron of Ethiopians, who identify the Ark with Mary and venerate both in the church of Zion in Aksum. The other pendant bears Mary holding Christ on one side and God surrounded by the four evangelical symbols on the other. Together, the two sides assert Christ as God and Messiah, the Pre-eternal Logos incarnated for the salvation of the world.

Indeed, in Ethiopian tradition, Mary and St. George are often depicted together, because the saint is considered the messenger of the Virgin, intervening on her behalf in order to help her favorite people. She herself explains (in a miracle recorded during the fifteenth century): ‘George follows me always. He never parts from me wherever I go. I send him all places for help’.²³⁴ Likewise, when a processional cross carries images of Mary with Christ, St. George, St. Tekle Haymanot, and the prostrate donor on one side, and the Crucifixion, Entombment, and Resurrection of Christ on the other side, it is nonsensical to describe the former as the ‘front’ and the latter as the ‘back’.²³⁵ Clearly, both sides contribute equally to the overall message of salvation and protection and it would be more appropriate to refer to them as simply the one and the other side.

How do these observations relate to the two sides of the tree-cross, the one ‘verdant’ with more incisions and the other ‘barren’ with less vibrant foliage? In their complementary function, the two sides could articulate the history, process, possibility, and promise

²³⁴ *African Zion*, 96.

²³⁵ As in *Ethiopian Art*, 86–87, with the ‘back’ reproduced in a much smaller photo. Two anonymous saints are represented on the lower part of the cross, on each side, further emphasizing the interdependence and complementarity of both sides. It is worthy of notice that the prostrate donor appears at the feet of Mary and Christ, and between St. George and St. Tekle Haymanot, on the center of one side of the cross. In this way, he is literally in the center of protective energy created by all the holy figures and the arms of the cross itself. He appears personally venerating the holy figures, but it is logical to assume that he aspires to receive the gift of life after death depicted on the other side, through the narrative of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Even if the donor doesn’t appear on that side, leaving undisturbed the historical integrity of the episodes depicted, his plea for salvation clearly depends on the continuous spiritual and theological relevance of those events, which complement the power of the cross. In the same catalogue, pp. 84–85, the entry properly refers to ‘the one’ and ‘the other side’ of another cross (with Mary holding Christ, and two archangels respectively), but the captions of the photos inappropriately mention ‘the front’ and ‘the back’, and the latter is reproduced in much smaller size.

of salvation, from 'Tree of Knowledge to Tree of Life, from the cause of barren death and sinfulness to the remedy of fruitful life and virtue.²³⁶ The holy symbols or figures that might appear on the 'fruitless' side actually refer to the forces of light that make fruitfulness possible, under the leadership of Christ and his mother who might appear on the 'verdant' side. After all, both the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life are needed for the exaltation of human nature: without the Fall brought about by the first tree, there would be no Incarnation that brought into the world Christ, the fruit of the second tree. Without Eve there would be no Mary, the woman who became not just God's creation but his mother as well, honoring human nature as never before through her miraculous motherhood and through the divine child she brought into the world. Taking all this into consideration, my suggestion is that the religious message of Ethiopian crosses that combine a 'barren' and a 'verdant' side depends on the integral contribution of both, in the same way that double-sided icons reveal their complete message when both sides are taken into consideration. Individualized interpretations can be applied to such crosses on a case-by-case basis. For example, the contemporary staff cross of Fig. 130 is painted with Mary and Christ on one side and with St. George on the other. In this case, the detailed incisions of 'verdant' foliage appear not on Mary's but on George's side. Perhaps in this way the creator of the cross intended to depict the fruition of Mary's and Christ's orders, fulfilled in the actions of St. George who kills the dragon in their name: this defeat of evil is symbolically visualized through the 'verdant' rendering of the tree-like cross around him. It is also worthy of notice that the throne of Mary and Christ has a cross-like appearance, which could have been chosen in order to allude to the sacrifice of the Child on the Cross. This could be another reason

²³⁶ For the distinction between the Tree of Knowledge that dried up after the Fall and the Tree of Life that heals through its fruit, see Casier Quinn, *Quest of Seth*, chapter six, 'The green tree and the dry', 103–30; M. R. Bennett, 'The Legend of the Green Tree and the Dry', *Archaeological Journal* 83 (1926), 21–32; R. J. Peebles, 'The Dry Tree: Symbol of Death', in *Vassar Mediaeval Studies*, ed. C. Forsythe Fiske (New Haven 1923), 59–79.

their side of the staff cross is 'barren', lacking the incisions of St. George's side, as if to allude to the price of death that Christ had to pay for the salvation of the world. One might wonder if the creator of this cross put so much thought into a relatively simple element that is visible only through close inspection—namely the incised lines that enrich the thread-like motifs of the cross on George's side. Yet it is important to remember that this simple element increased the creator's labor, and therefore it is reasonable to consider that some thinking might have informed his choice.

The possible complementary reading of the 'barren' and the 'verdant' side of any cross-tree becomes more evident if we take the ritual use and presentation of such crosses into account. Let us assume for a moment that a cleric owns a hand cross that has a 'verdant' and a 'barren' side, like the examples of Figs. 125 or 131. When a cleric pulls out of the folds of his garments his hand cross in order to bless a member of the congregation he meets in the street, it is hard to imagine that he pauses in order to identify which side is the so-called 'front' or 'back'. It is equally unlikely that, in this short quotidian ritual, the faithful have the opportunity to observe all the details of the cross decoration as they kiss its top and base. The important thing is that all parties involved in this ritual acknowledge each other's social position and cultural identity through the nexus of the cross, venerated as a symbol and instrument of salvation. This is also true in the case of church services or processions, during which most participants are too far away to discern any details of the decoration that could construct a 'front' and 'back' of the displayed or paraded crosses. What they perceive is the power of the cross, radiating in all directions. Does the sun, the Tree of Life, or any tree for that matter have a 'front' and 'back'? We shouldn't forget that in this tradition the cross is not a formal element but an active agent projecting its energy into the universe like an ever-expanding sphere.



125a. Contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (13.5 x 4.5 inches, 34 x 12 cm) made up of thread motifs, smaller crosses and anthropomorphic heads (possibly meant to represent angelic figures). The whole design looks like a tree with rich foliage, alluding the the relationship between the Tree of Life and the True Cross. Bought in the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



125b. Other side of the same hand cross (of Fig. 125a), with more detailed incisions on its tree-like body, that make the cross appear like a flourishing and fruitful tree. This impression is accentuated by the decoration of the two wedges that links the handle with the body of the cross above and the base below: on the 'barren' side (a/left) the two wedges are decorated with simple diagonal lines while on the 'verdant' side (b/right) they appear like palm branches or leaves. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



126. Cross at the top of the new church of our Lady Mary of Zion, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by Anton_Ivanov/ Shutterstock.com.

This is exactly how St. Clement described the emanation of space from God, whose symbol is the cross: upwards and downwards, left and right, forward and backward.²³⁷ A vivid and literal visualization of this radiant power of the cross in all directions appears on top of the new church of Our Lady Mary of Zion (Fig. 126). This is

²³⁷ Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 14–16 uses Clement’s reference to both time and space emanating from the center of the universe (God) to illuminate the function of the cross as symbolic of this emanation. I quote the most significant passage: ‘Clement of Alexandria says that from God, “Heart of the Universe”, issue all the directions of space, each indefinite in extent, one upwards, one downwards, one to the right, one to the left, one forwards and one backwards; turning His gaze in these six directions, none of which extends further than the others, He accomplishes the world; He is the beginning and the end (the *alpha* and the *omega*); in Him the six phases of time are accomplished, and from Him they receive their indefinite extensions’.

the cathedral built by emperor Haile Selassie in the 1950's in Aksum, next to the historical church of the same name that is said to be in possession of the Ark of the Covenant (now housed in a separate chapel). The cross on the top of the new cathedral repeats the traditional design of church crosses in Ethiopia: a flat radiating circle with ostrich eggs attached to the rays (here the eggs are rendered in metal). However, in this case two such radiating circles are combined at right angles, so that the cross becomes tridimensional, its rays radiating upwards and downwards, left and right, forward and backward.

This holistic spatial manifestation of the power of the cross in all directions is particularly relevant in the case of staff and hand crosses that are kinetically used in space in order to bless the congregation. At the same time, pendant crosses that are worn on the chest appear static, but in fact share in the movement and actions of the body blessed by them. Even if only one side of such a cross is visible, and could be considered the 'front' and most important one, I still believe that we must resist such a distinction. The invisible side that touches the body of the wearers is at least as important, if not more so, for the persons who are protected through this contact and perceive the blessing of the cross projected not only forward in space, but also backwards, inside their own body. Besides vision, tactility is also central in Ethiopian culture. The ritual of interaction between clerics and congregation through the touching and kissing of hand crosses is another eloquent reminder of the importance of tactility, that shouldn't be ignored by external observers raised in the opticentric cultures of Western Europe and North America. In fact, a number of surviving Ethiopian pendant crosses bear equally developed decoration of paramount significance on both sides, such as Mary and Christ on the one and Mary as the Church on the other, or the Virgin and Child on the one and God surrounded by the four evangelical symbols on the other.²³⁸ Such examples visualize the holistic salvific nature of the cross that sanctifies in every dimension and direction, encompasses visibility and tactility, transcends space and time and renders distinctions

²³⁸ *African Zion*, 76, 91, cat. 1, figs. 3–4 (discussed in more detail above, note 233).

between ‘front’ and ‘back’ irrelevant and misleading. I will return to this complex issue of visibility in chapter four. For the moment, I will explore a few more elements that appear on Ethiopian crosses and enrich their meaning.



Detail of Fig. 89a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross inspired by a very popular older design (compare Fig. 38). Notice the motif of ‘running water’ on the four arms.

THE CROSS AND THE WATERS OF LIFE: UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS AND LOCAL MEANINGS

A motif that appears on several Ethiopian staff and hand crosses, along the sides of one, two, three, or all four arms, is made up of a long undulating line that is flanked on both sides by short lines nested in the curves of the central wave-like motif (Figs. 40, 47 left, 89, 102, 116 left, 120 right). The overall effect is that of flowing water. The possibility of various interpretations for this aquatic motif in the context of Ethiopian crosses is due to the profound symbolic significance of water in Christian tradition; it is also a testament to the kaleidoscopic potential of Ethiopian crosses to accommodate multiple meanings through their subtle visual language.

As essential for the sustenance of all forms of life, water has prominent divine associations in several Biblical passages; and any one of such references can be recalled in the memory of Ethiopian Christians through the appearance of water-like motifs on the life-giving sign of the cross. In fact, water is mentioned in the second verse of the Bible, and its divine blessing is one of the first acts of creation in *Genesis* 1:1–2: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, *and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*’ (emphasis mine). This is the first day of creation, in which God brings forth light, darkness and time through the distinction between day and night. His creation of heaven and earth in the second and third days is based on the manipulation of water, which thus becomes the element out of which the world comes into being (*Genesis* 1:6–10). In the New Testament, Christ identifies himself as the source of the water of everlasting life in his famous dialogue with the Samaritan woman in *John* 4:13–14: ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life’. In many other Biblical passages, the abundance of pure water symbolizes divine presence or blessing, salvation, protection, spiritual well-being, virtue, and prosperity, while the opposite is true of drought and dryness—they are signs of danger, calamity, punishment, de-

struction, sinfulness, and spiritual death.²³⁹ The life-giving power of water is often combined with that of a flourishing tree, together comprising an eloquent reference to a virtuous spiritual life. Perhaps the most familiar example to Ethiopian Christians, whose education depends heavily on the recitation of the Psalter,²⁴⁰ is the powerful water and tree metaphor of the very first psalm: 'Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked... but whose delight is in the law of the Lord... That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away...'. In a sense, the associations outlined above between tree, cross, and virtuous Christians seem reinforced through the binding element of water, flowing on tree-like Ethiopian crosses.

In addition, according to the Bible and to Christian tradition, a source springs in paradise next to the Tree of Life and is divided into four major rivers, which flow out of Eden to irrigate the earth. According to one visualization of this Christian geography, the four rivers flow from the Tree of Life towards the four cardinal points, forming a watery cross on the Earth; this prefigures the salvific True Cross on which Christ's blood would flow to wash off the sins of the world and purify humankind.²⁴¹ This symbolically charged interrelation of the water, tree, and cross archetypes could be also referenced by the watery motif on tree-like Ethiopian crosses. When the motif appears along all four arms of the cross (Fig. 89), a visual reference to the cross-like flow of the four rivers of paradise from the Tree of Life could be intended. But even when only one, two or three arms bear this motif, the same refer-

²³⁹ Some characteristic biblical quotations (often including references to flourishing or withered plants in connection to abundance or lack of water): *Psalms* 42:1, 63:1, *Proverbs* 18:4, *Isaiah* 1:30, 12:3, 27:3, 32:2, 35:1–7, 41:18, 43:20, 44:3, 55:1, 58:11, *Jeremiah* 15:18, 17:8, 17:13, 31:12, *Ezekiel* 19:10, *Hosea* 6:3, *Zechariah* 14:8, 1 *Corinthians* 3:8, 10:4, 2 *Peter* 2:17, *Revelation* 7:17, 21:6, 22:1, 22:17.

²⁴⁰ Merahi, *Contribution*, 55.

²⁴¹ Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 51.

ence to Eden and the paradisaical tree that provides immortality and prefigures Christ's cross could still be in place.²⁴²

It is worthy of notice that in Christian tradition, the second of the four rivers of paradise, Gihon, which 'winds through the entire land of Cush', (*Genesis* 3:13) is usually identified with the Nile. Christian Ethiopians believe that since the sources of the Blue Nile (the largest tributary of water and fertile soil to the river) are in Lake Tana in the Amhara region of their land, then Ethiopia, the ancient land of Cush, must have been part of the earthly garden of Eden before the Fall.²⁴³ In other words, the visual connection between water, tree and salvation inscribed on Ethiopian crosses has a special significance for the Christian people of this land: it suggests a unique proximity to God that bestows upon them a particu-

²⁴² Compare the poetic references made in the Ethiopian hymn *Harp of Glory*, in which Mary is a paradise containing Christ as tree, or a spring containing him as water: 'We name you a Paradise in which the perfumed tree is planted. We name you the Fountain, from which gushes forth the water of life... O Virgin, you are the gushing Spring of the Fount of Wisdom; Water me with the torrent of the Gospel of your Son, and protect me by his Cross'. See McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 31, 33. All of these references are visually reinforced when Mary appears holding Christ in the center of tree-like Ethiopian crosses decorated with water-like patterns—Fig. 130.

²⁴³ Merahi, *Contribution*, 117. Ibid., pp. 13–33. Merahi makes proud reference to the various Biblical passages mentioning Ethiopia. On the identification of the land of Cush with Ethiopia, see Merahi, *Contribution*, 19. In the fifteenth-century Ethiopian *Book of Mysteries*, it is mentioned that Gihon, the second river of Paradise 'is a symbol of the second country of the Gospel which Mark wrote in a place on the borders of Egypt and Ethiopia'. Following a widespread Christian tradition, this text relates the four rivers of paradise with the four Gospels that irrigate the earth with the word of God, but it goes beyond that. Not only does it relate Gihon with Ethiopia (and the other three rivers with other locations on earth), but it also creates a special connection between Mark/ Gihon and the Coptic Church, to which the Ethiopian Church belonged until 1959. Mark is not simply the apostle of Egypt, he is also claimed to have written his Gospel in Coptic, rather than Greek. See Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 132–33.

larly favorable place within creation. The same privilege resurfaces in the belief that Ethiopians became the chosen people of God a thousand years before all other Christians, when they inherited Jewish monotheism from Solomon, direct descendant of Adam, progenitor of Christ and father of the Ethiopian king Menelik.²⁴⁴ This genealogy, it can also be assumed, created a special relationship between Ethiopians and the garden of Eden, since it suggests that their royal family descends directly from the blood-line of Adam.

If we now turn our gaze from the past to the future, we might come to another interesting conclusion about the privileged place of Ethiopians in the divine plan of salvation. If Gihon, which flows from the Tree of Life, situates Ethiopia within Eden, then it could be also assumed that the same Tree of Life, that according to *Revelation* 22:1–5 flanks the water of life flowing in the center of the City of God, also heralds the entrance of the Christian people of Ethiopia into Heavenly Jerusalem. There they will see God's face 'and his name will be on their foreheads' (*Revelation* 22:4)—a statement that seems to echo the custom of many Ethiopians to tattoo the cross on their forehead. Of course, the earthly Eden of *Genesis* 3 is not the same physical location of the Heavenly City of God envisioned in *Revelation* 22. Rather, the former is the prefiguration and the latter the fulfillment of salvation, that in both cases is visualized through the symbols of water and tree. But according to the mirroring cross-references of this transcendental connection between past and future, the presence of Ethiopia within the earthly Eden could be understood to project a reflection of the future presence of Ethiopians within the Heavenly Jerusalem. It is possible that, when the fifteenth-century Ethiopian emperor Zara Yacob ordered his people to tattoo the cross on their foreheads in accordance with the *Revelation* reference, he was envisioning his kingdom as a prefiguration of the Heavenly Jerusalem and was preparing his

²⁴⁴ Merahi, *Contribution*, 8 states that Ethiopia has venerated the one and only God for more than three thousand years. For a concise reference to the tradition of Solomonic descent, see *African Zion*, 11–12, *Ethiopian Art*, 27–28.

people for the day of salvation.²⁴⁵ Perhaps the same foresight and wishful thinking is vivid in the mind of those Ethiopians who continue to follow this tradition today and who might be familiar with this *Revelation* reference (Figs. 11–17).

In the Biblical scripture of *Genesis* and *Revelation*, the Tree of Life marks the beginning and the end of the path to human salvation. In Ethiopian tradition, the same is also true of the cross, which appears triumphant in the first battle of light against darkness in the beginning of time and reappears as the protective sign *par excellence* in traditions about the end of time and the passage to the afterlife.²⁴⁶ Ethiopian crosses weave together all of these references into a symbolic matrix that encompasses universal history. In addition, they embed in it a specifically Ethiopian dimension. The motif of water and its possible references to the four rivers of paradise, one of which is identifiable with the Blue Nile, is one such embedded thread of Ethiopian identity interwoven into the matrix of the cross. Another such thread is traced below, in the discussion of holy figures depicted on Ethiopian crosses. But before this new theme is introduced, one more consideration about the element of water is in order.

In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, the connection between cross and water is a prominent motif in prayers, rituals and stories of protection. For example, numerous miracles attributed to Ethiopian saints are performed through the combined agency of the cross and the element of water, for the salvation of both body and soul.²⁴⁷ In the popular prayers known as *Rampart of the Cross*, life-giving water is often mentioned as flowing from the cross or from the side of Christ identified with the cross.²⁴⁸ In Church rituals, the cross is prominently used to sanctify water that is then employed to bless the congregation and to protect it against evil. This is done by

²⁴⁵ Similar to *Revelation* 22:4 is *Revelation* 14:1, ‘They will see his face. His name will be on their foreheads’. The latter biblical passage is the one actually mentioned by Zara Yacob. See Kaplan, ‘Seeing Is Believing’, 410.

²⁴⁶ See notes 5–6, above.

²⁴⁷ Godet, ‘La croix dans l’Église éthiopienne’, 64–66.

²⁴⁸ Lifchitz, *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux*, 105, 117, 123, 125, 135, 208.

immersing a hand cross in water or by letting the liquid flow over the cross and then sprinkling the faithful with it (Fig. 35). Through the belief that energy and spiritual properties can be transferred through touch, this ritual imbues the water with the power of the cross, which can be then spread among the faithful. In a sense, the water becomes an extension of the cross that can be then tactilely and materially shared among the members of the congregation through the distribution of water drops.²⁴⁹ This amplification of the cross' blessing through water is central to the ritual of exorcism, which holds a prominent place in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture and religious experience (Fig. 36).²⁵⁰ The same procedure of water sanctification through the cross is performed in the celebration of Christ's Baptism, which is one of the most important Ethiopian annual feast days and is attended by the entire Christian community (Timkat, January 19th or 20th in the Gregorian calendar). It is a re-enactment of the sanctification of water, and by extension of the whole world, which occurred when Christ immersed his body in the river Jordan.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Compare Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 64: 'Peau béni devient un prolongement de la croix, dont elle a reçu les vertus salutaires du Christ' (the blessed water becomes an extension of the cross which has received the salutary virtues of Christ). The ritual of sanctifying and sprinkling water through the cross also reinforces the connection of this sign with the archetype of the tree. In many cultures around the world, a basic purification ritual is the sprinkling of water through a twig. This is also echoed in legends about the origins of the wood of the Cross, in which Seth, Adam's son, is said to have dropped into the river Jordan the twig which would later produce the Cross. See Casier Queen, *Quest of Seth*, 97–8.

²⁵⁰ Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 64. H. Kriss, 'Le père Walda Tensae, un célèbre thaumaturge contemporain', in *Le roi Solomon*, 71–75, describes the exorcism rituals performed by a prominent spiritual healer of contemporary Ethiopia. See also Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 63–64, where it is stated: 'the cross is a medicine consulted as often as holy water'.

²⁵¹ Merahi, *Contribution*, 68–75. See also Emiru, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Festivals of the Finding of the True Cross and Epiphany*, 47–58, 68.



127. Ethiopian clerics with staff crosses and ceremonial parasols go around a cross-shaped pool during the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Lalibela, Ethiopia. They will immerse the crosses in the water in order to bless this element in commemoration of its blessing during Christ's Baptism. Photo by Christophe Boisvieux/ age fotostock.

In an agricultural land which often suffers from drought and depends on the life-giving water of rivers and rain for its survival, this feast has a special resonance: it amplifies the combined spiritual and material blessing that is always requested through Church rituals and religious devotional practices. In Fig. 127, clerics celebrating Timkat in Lalibela go around a cross-shaped pool of water, which they will bless by immersing the staff crosses they carry (after they take them off the poles). In this case, the meaningful link between sanctified water and cross is made both through the shape of the container and the use of ritual crosses that actually enact the sanctification.

The watery patterns that are often inscribed on Ethiopian crosses could be visual references not only to these important rituals, but also to the dissemination of the cross's blessing and protection in the entire world, through the medium of water that flows over all the earth. In a sense, the distributive power of water can reinforce the belief in the transference of blessing and protection through seeing and touching the cross. In other words, the *visual* watery motifs inscribed on Ethiopian crosses could suggest that

seeing and touching the cross can be as effective as receiving holy water: the liquid absorbs and transmits the blessing of the cross; likewise the vision and the touch of the faithful connect them and imbue them with the protective energy of the cross.

The above discourse has already underlined that multiplicity of meaning is a prominent feature in Christian cosmology. The lens of typology is a fundamental concept that creates a symphony out of this kaleidoscopic polyphony of meaning. Events of the past are seen as prefigurations (types) of events and rituals of later times still in the past, as well as in the present or the future. Through typology, historical events and ritual reenactments are related to each other across time, as prefigurations and fulfillments of divine revelations and interventions.²⁵² For example, the purification of the world through Noah's Flood is fulfilled in the Baptism of Christ. The latter institutes the ritual of Christian baptism through which humans are reborn into the pure body of the Church, which prepares them for ultimate salvation at the end of time.²⁵³ This network of cross-references highlights the wisdom and maps the success of God's plan for human salvation, reassuring his followers of their protection against evil. It also reflects *and* promotes a mindset according to which nothing is accidental or insignificant, but rather everything is contributing to the final goal of humanity's return to paradise. The motif of water depicted on Ethiopian crosses is an illuminating example of this multiplicity of meaning, with ramifica-

²⁵² A few basic publications on the extensively researched theme of Christian typology: J. Danielou, *Sacramentum futuri. From shadows to reality; studies in Biblical typology of the Fathers* (Westminster 1960); L. Goppelt, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen; Anhang: Apokalyptik und Typologie bei Paulus* (Darmstadt 1981); S. Schrenk, *Typos und Antitypos in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Münster 1995); C. Brown Tkacz, *The key to the Brescia casket: typology and the early Christian imagination* (Notre Dame 2002); *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, ed. P. Magdalino and R. Nelson (Washington, D.C. 2010).

²⁵³ For a comprehensive discussion of Christian baptism in theological, liturgical, and typological terms, see E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church. History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Cambridge 2009). For specific references to Noah see the following note.

tions that should be obvious at least to some members of the clergy familiar with main cases of scriptural typological exegesis that connect major biblical events with each other and with prominent rituals of the Church through the element of water. Here I will outline only a few possibilities.

The depiction of flowing liquid on the cross brings to mind the blood and water that came out of Christ's side pierced by the lance. As a sign of his Passion that would lead to his Resurrection, those fluids also symbolize the salvation of the world and the washing away of sins, not only through Christ's sacrifice, but also through the mysteries of baptism (water) and Eucharist (blood): the former ritual initiates Christians so that they can experience communion with God in the latter ritual. In Christian exegesis, the salvific flow of liquid on the wood of the True Cross is also seen as the fulfillment of previous moments of crisis and deliverance that involved the interaction of wood and water. Three of the most characteristic cases are: salvation from the Flood through Noah's ark, which ensured the survival of humans and animals from the deluge that cleansed the world; the Crossing of the Red Sea after Moses' rod parted the waters, leading the Jews into safety on their journey to the promised land, and drowning their enemies; and the Crossing of Jordan, when the Ark of the Covenant caused the waters to reverse in the riverbed, to allow the Jews to enter the promised land. In addition, the purification and salvation of the world through water, seen in the first two episodes, and the topographical specificity of Jordan as the boundary of the promised land opening to receive the chosen people of God, seen in the third episode, renders all three narratives prefigurations of Christ's Baptism in the same river, for the institution of the ritual of baptism that opens up the gates of the Christian Church: another promised land, which purifies and prepares humanity to re-enter paradise.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ The interpretation of the above three Old Testament episodes as prefigurations of the salvation of the world through Christ's Crucifixion and the mystery of baptism are commonplace in Christian literature. For example, see Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 401–5, 499–501, 641. See also G. Q. Reijnders, *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature as Based Upon Old Testament Typology* (Nijmegen 1965), and G. T.

In Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, another prominent biblical narrative that brings together the salvific power of water, wood,

Armstrong, 'The Cross in the Old Testament according to Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem and the Cappadocian Fathers', in *Theologia Crucis, Signum Crucis. Festschrift für Erich Dinklers zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. G. Klein (Tübingen 1978), 17–38. The *Kebrä Nagast (Glory of the Kings)*, a fundamental text in the formation of Ethiopian identity, clearly relates the cross with Noah's Ark, Moses' rod, and the Ark of the Covenant (Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 179–80, 189, 196–97. See also p. 110 where Moses' actions are interpreted as prefigurations of Christ's salvific mission.) Another connection between the Cross and water is made in the same text (pp. 196–97) by relating the wood on which Christ saved the world with the three rods of wood that Jacob laid in running water to affect the breeding of his flock, *Genesis* 30:37). See also the reference in the Ethiopian *Book of the Mysteries of the Heaven and the Earth*: 'The rod of Moses which smote the sea made Israel to pass over, and the Cross of Christ which smote the head of the serpent, that is to say, Satan, made the nations to pass over from death into life...', Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 75. Ibid., p. 144. Noah's Flood is interpreted as a prefiguration of baptism. In the same source, Noah's Ark and the Cross are also linked: first it is said that Noah's Ark 'was not [made of] the wood of this world, but from a shoot of a tree which an eagle had cast [upon the earth]' (p. 48). This reference echoes stories about the Cross being made of a shoot of the Tree of Life that arrived on earth in one miraculous way or another. Indeed, further ahead in the same *Book of Mysteries*, p. 84, it is said that the wood for Christ's Cross came from Paradise and an eagle cast it into Jerusalem, exactly like it is said for the wood of Noah's Ark. In Ethiopian tradition, connections between Noah's Ark and the Ark of the Covenant are also made in several ways. For example, *The Book of Mysteries* mentions that God ordered Moses: 'Thou shalt set up the Tabernacle at the beginning of the first month, for it was on the first day of the first month that Noah established the Ark (*Tabot*) and finished the building thereof...' (Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 47). Mary as a container of Christ and therefore a provider of salvation to the world is compared to both Arks, for example in the Marian hymn *Harp of Glory*, discussed in more detail below. Mary as the Ark of the Covenant is one of the most frequent typological references employed in this hymn (see note 306 below). For references to Mary as Noah's Ark see McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 62, 64, 67, 88, 93, 97, 145.

and cross is the moment in which Moses uses his wooden rod to strike a rock and produce water to quench the thirst of the Israelites wondering in the desert (*Exodus* 17:6). Although it is common in Christian exegesis to see the rock as a symbol of Christ and to relate this episode to his Baptism or Crucifixion,²⁵⁵ in Ethiopia it is also believed that the rock was split in the shape of the cross. This is reported in the *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*), which tells the story of the Solomonic descent of the royal house of Ethiopia and is therefore considered (at least by Orthodox Christian Ethiopians) the national epos, widely popular and well-known.²⁵⁶ The motif of flowing water on Ethiopian crosses could evoke this or other relevant biblical episodes and their Christian exegesis.

In this universe of typological cosmology, history becomes a web of interrelations, a fabric of memory not only through the remembrance of the past, but also through its appropriation and elaboration in every new event that acts as fulfillment or re-enactment of a previous important moment. In this way, the past remains perpetually relevant in the present and prepares the way for the future. In addition, Christ's Incarnation and salvific mission on earth, or the work of his saints, are always current and literally present in the transcendental world of religious devotion and experience, until the end of time. After all, God holds time and space in his palm, so that for him there is no past or future, but everything is in the present.²⁵⁷ Therefore, when humans are in communion

²⁵⁵ For extensive references to this exegetical tradition and some relevant visual representations, see A. Semoglou, 'L'icône sinaïte de la *Crucifixion* n. B 36 et son contenu "mosaïque". La dialectique de la Passion', *Iconographica* 4 (2005), 11–21.

²⁵⁶ Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 179. Lifchitz, *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux*, 87–88.

²⁵⁷ As Gregory of Nyssa eloquently observed, the historical information contained in the holy scriptures is not intended to teach us about the past, but about the present, by instructing us in the ways of virtuous life that are continuously relevant to the Creator and to his seamless plan for human salvation, because 'with God something is neither future nor past, but all things are in the present'. Gregory of Nyssa, *Εἰς τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν τῶν ψαλμῶν, δεύτερον βιβλίον*, PG 44:489CD, 569BC. Trans-

with him, they become enveloped in this all-encompassing manifestation of infinitely condensed and simultaneously expanded time and space. This is particularly the case in the context of the liturgy, when all the members of the Church, past, present, and future, are united in the body of Christ to celebrate the promise of salvation and receive divine blessing.²⁵⁸ In daily life, an echo of this transcendental dimension is the punctuation of linear history by the mirroring effect of cross-references between foreshadowing, fulfillment, and re-enactment according to the above typological perception of the world. This effectively turns the linear spatio-temporal continuum into a spiraling one, which also implies a progressive improvement from shadows to truths that lead closer to the final salvation of the world. This model has countless applications in Christian cultures, from the re-enactment of sacred history into liturgical ritual, to the emergence of religious or political leaders who fashion themselves as a New Moses, David or Solomon, crossing a New Red Sea, building a New Jerusalem or a New Temple. Therefore, this typological model becomes a powerful religious and political discourse of divine approval that justifies action and ensures success. For this reason, typology is very popular in Chris-

lated by R. E. Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms. Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Oxford, 1995), 126, §12, 184, §194. Compare the references to the emanation of time and space from God according to Clement of Alexandria, quoted above, note 237.

²⁵⁸ For the Universal Church and the entire creation present during the Eucharist, see the very characteristic Anaphora (prayer of offering) by St. Cyril, recited in the Ethiopian liturgy, quoted by Perczel: 'Abyssinian processional crosses', 20–21: '... God Jesus Christ, thy church worships thee- with the praise of the cherubim- with the thanksgiving of the angels- with the prayer of the watchful-... with the love of the apostles- with the prayer of the saints- with the humility of the poor-... with the remoteness of the ends of the earth- with the depth of the seas- with the flash of lightning, and with the flight of the clouds-... with the striking of thy Son, with the suffering of thine only One- with thy authority which holds all and with the prayer which ascends to the Father of our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ'. Compare Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 18: 'Like a circle, the liturgical concept of Time has no beginning and no end'.

tianity, not only in a communal and public context, but also in a personal and private context: every individual Christian may struggle against temptation and sin following the example of venerable models of the past, from David overcoming Goliath to Christ defeating sickness, storms, or even death itself. In other words, a typological mentality is very widespread in Christian cultures and should be a prominent interpretative approach in the study of their visual expressions.²⁵⁹ A very characteristic example from Ethiopian tradition, highlighted by M. Heldman, is the development of the sacred city of Lalibela as a New Jerusalem, but also a New Edessa (famous for its adoption of Christianity through Christ's direct intervention) and a New Aksum (the historic capital of ancient Ethiopia in which Christianity was first introduced).²⁶⁰ In fact, the prominence of typology in Ethiopian Christian culture is hardly matched in any other Christian tradition, since Ethiopians believe that they are the new chosen people of God not only in spiritual but also in literal biological and material terms. According to the *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*), the text that plays a formative role in the construction of Christian Ethiopian identity, the kings of Ethiopia descend from the bloodline of Solomon, and the Ethiopian Church is in possession of the original Ark of the Covenant. A most extraordinary product and producer of this vigorous typological mentality of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture is the popular hymn to Mary known as *Enzira Sebbat* (*Harp of Glory*), probably composed in the fifteenth century and still sung today as a morning

²⁵⁹ For all of the above, see the literature mentioned in note 252.

²⁶⁰ M. Heldman, 'Legends of Lālibalā: The Development of an Ethiopian Pilgrimage Site', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 27 (1995), 25–38. Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela*, 267–75, question the identification of Lalibela with New Jerusalem and consider the other two typologies more plausible. However, they also note that 'it is customary for scholars of the Ethiopian church to bestow names derived from the geography of the Holy Land to major centers of worship or religious teaching... In this way scholars gave form to their dream of living in the biblical sites and particularly in Jerusalem, with Christ.' (Ibid., 267–68). In my opinion, none of their arguments against an identification of Lalibela with New Jerusalem are conclusive.

hymn of the Church. Sometimes called the Ethiopian Akathistos, it is compared to that famous Byzantine hymn that hails the Virgin as the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament types (such as the ladder, the closed gate, and so on).²⁶¹ Although the Byzantine Akathistos seems to have been a major source of inspiration for the *Harp of Glory*, the Ethiopian hymn is an original and masterful work in its own right. In fact, its biblical typological references are unparalleled in their richness, as they include not only the most famous examples of Marian typology but also introduce new ones, based on less well-known Old Testament episodes, all of which are interpreted as prefigurations of Mary's role in the Incarnation. According to John Anthony McGuckin, the public recitation of the *Harp of Glory* is equivalent to scriptural catechesis:²⁶² indeed, it doesn't only presuppose but also promotes typology as a basic component of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture and mentality.

The above typological perception of history as the self-reflective interweaving of multiple threads offers us yet another opportunity to appreciate how the weave-like and symmetrical matrix of Ethiopian crosses is an appropriate visualization of the spatio-temporal fabric of the story of human salvation. To return to the suggested typological cross-references of the motif of water on Ethiopian crosses: today, most cross makers and users might not follow all possible threads in their interpretation of the various renderings of the sacred sign they encounter daily. But those with a church education and especially members of the clergy might still be aware of these interpretative possibilities, as they were probably aware of them in the past, when many of these symbolic forms entered the repertoire of Ethiopian cross iconography. In this cul-

²⁶¹ See L. M. Peltomaa, *The image of the virgin Mary in the Akathistos hymn* (Leiden 2001).

²⁶² For all of the above, see McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, especially pages 10, 14–15, 19–23 of the introduction. Of all of the Christian texts dedicated to Mary that I have ever read, this stands out as one of the most moving and imaginative—a truly inspired and inspiring religious and literary work. To quote McGuckin, the recitation of this hymn is at one and the same moment 'a liturgical event, a scriptural catechesis, and a great artistic performance' (p. 23).

tural context, it is not necessary for a specific interpretation to be passed down from one generation to another. Rather, individuals can re-invent particular interpretations or elaborate on them through familiarity with basic conceptual frameworks (like typology) and specific relevant events (like Noah's Flood, the Crossing of the Red Sea, the Ark's Crossing of the River Jordan, and so on) that they connect to appropriate visual symbols that can accommodate various readings (such as the motif of flowing water on the arms of a cross). It should be noted that the paramount importance of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopian culture, as an object believed to be in the possession of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, would make the Christians of this land, and particularly its clergy, particularly receptive to any possible interpretations that feature this holy container. By analogy, they might also be inclined to give special consideration to interpretations that include the other famous Old Testament ark, the one constructed by Noah. After all, he is also believed to be a progenitor of the Ethiopians, as ancestor of their forefather Solomon. These specifically Ethiopian threads will be further explored in the following pages, where I discuss the depiction of holy persons on Ethiopian crosses.

INSCRIBING HOLINESS: SAINTS ON ETHIOPIAN CROSSES

Narrative episodes from the Bible or figures of saints and angels are often represented on the main body of Ethiopian crosses, or even on the handle of hand crosses (Figs. 40–43, 47 left, 83, 90, 98, 102–104, 118, 128–130). This is a clear indication that the prevalence of non-anthropomorphic motifs on these objects is not the result of an 'aniconic' tendency; nor does it signal an aversion to the depiction of Christ's Crucifixion (that sometimes appears on Ethiopian crosses, but is not a frequent subject).²⁶³ From an early time, Ethiopian visual culture thrived in the depiction of narrative and devotional images of Christ, Mary, and the saints. Many representations of the Crucifixion survive in this tradition, especially

²⁶³ Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 64.

from the fifteenth century onwards.²⁶⁴ The basic reason for the preference of an 'abstract' matrix on Ethiopian crosses is its symbolic power that, through the combination of numerous variables (at times including narrative scenes or holy figures), can communicate a wide range of messages about divine intervention and human salvation. A narrative depiction of the Crucifixion or a representation of the crucified body of Christ on such crosses (as in Fig. 118) may draw attention on the specific historical event of the Passion. On the contrary, emphasis on the symbol of the cross obviously refers to the event of the Crucifixion, but it also allows for the inclusion of a much broader set of references that can encompass the outlines of the whole of human history from Creation to Last Judgment. Through the use of diverse iconographic variables, a cross can also make more specific references to other important religious ideas, significant in Ethiopian spirituality or particularly interesting to the makers and commissioners of individual crosses.²⁶⁵ For example, the depiction of a specific saint on the main body or handle of a cross highlights a holy figure of particular interest to its makers or users (Fig. 128). The saint is honored as a faithful follower of Christ, somebody who picks up his cross to imitate the example of the Savior in self-sacrifice, and in the process he becomes a living example of piety, steadfastness, and moral struggle for the Ethiopians who are devoted to him. As an intercessor between the human and the divine spheres, the saint also mediates between the users of the cross and the religious concepts that this symbol represents. As the saint's body is inscribed on the cross, so is the cross embodied in him, activating in a more concrete and personal manner the value of continuous striving for union with God and the hope for protection and salvation.²⁶⁶ Since

²⁶⁴ For examples, see the overview of Ethiopian religious painting in *Sacro e bellezza*, 115–151.

²⁶⁵ For the cross as a symbol with multiple meanings, which lead to its use as an instrument of passion in the Christian narrative of the Crucifixion (rather than the other way around), see Guéno, *Symbolism of the Cross*, x–xiv.

²⁶⁶ Godet, 'La croix dans l'Église éthiopienne', 64, notes that Ethiopian crosses often appear to be framing devices for the holy figures that

saints are figures of particular significance for Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality as a whole, through them the universal references of the cross become more emphatic, personal and relevant in the eyes of all Ethiopians.



Detail of Fig. 133: Ethiopian Orthodox Saints Tekle Haymanot (left) and Gabra Manfas Qeddus (right) on the left wing of an Ethiopian triptych icon of the 18th-19th century, held in a private collection. Photo by DeA Picture Library / Art Resource, NY.

are depicted on them, and this indicates the participation of the saints in the redemptive mission of Christ. I have not yet encountered a cross that depicts a female saint (besides Mary who is above all other saints), and this is why I use the masculine pronoun when referring to saints on Ethiopian crosses. It is true that Ethiopian hagiographical texts are dominated by male authors and male subjects and so is the pictorial production of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but hagiographies of female saints also exist. See for example S. Mecca, 'Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints: With Special Reference to "Gädlä Krestos Sämbra" and "Gädlä Feqertä Krestos"', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18.2 (2006), 153–167. I assume that the representation of female saints on at least a few Ethiopian crosses remains a possibility, but the dearth of evidence is striking.



128a–b. Contemporary Ethiopian wooden hand cross (12 x 4 inches, 30 x 10 cm). Front: Saint Tekle Haymanot at the top part (identifiable by his wings and single leg), and Christ at the base. Back: Saint Gabra Manfas Qeddus (identifiable by the felines surrounding him and the bird close to his right eye) at the top part, and an angel at the base. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

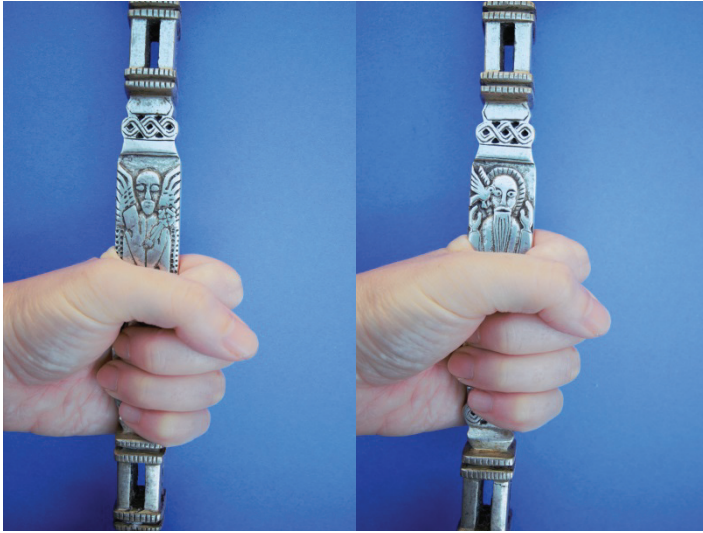


129a–b. Contemporary Ethiopian liturgical hand cross (23.25 x 7.5 inches, 59 x 19 cm), with two saints depicted on the handle. Side a: Saint Tekle Haymanot. Side b: Saint Gabra Manfas Qeddus. Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photos by Maria Evangelatou.



129c-f. Details of the handle of the same cross. c-d: Saint Tekle Haymanot (identifiable by his wings and single leg). e-f: Saint Gabra Manfas Qeddus (identifiable by the bird close to his right eye). Photos by Maria Evangelatou.





129g-h. The same cross shown held by its handle. g: Saint Tekle Haymanot appears holding a similar liturgical hand cross. h: Saint Gabra Manfas Qeddus raises his hands in prayer, while a bird approaches his right eye. Photos by Maria Evangelatou.

Highly venerable monastic saints like Tekle Haymanot and Gabra Manfas Qeddus, who are particularly popular throughout the country and celebrated once every month throughout the year, are often represented on crosses (Fig. 128) or appear together in images (Fig. 133).²⁶⁷ Their presence accentuates the values of self-

²⁶⁷ In Ethiopian tradition, the monthly celebration of specific holy figures and events is a honor reserved only to the most revered: The Holy Trinity, the Savior of the World (Christ's Passion), the Son (Christ's conception, birth, baptism, and resurrection), Mary (four different days dedicated to various events of her life), St. George, Archangel Michael, Archangel Gabriel and a few select apostles and important Ethiopian saints. The inclusion of Tekle Haymanot and Gabra Manfas Qeddus in this exclusive list clearly manifests their prominence in Ethiopian culture. See *Ethiopian Art*, 36. For a full list of these monthly celebrations, see Emiru,

sacrifice and service to others, unshaken devotion to God, unbent moral conduct, and continuous struggle against the forces of evil. They express the Christian principles encompassed in the cross through their individual exemplary human lives, giving a more personable and relatable aspect to the highest precepts of Christian faith. The protective character of the cross is coupled with the miraculous powers of the saints, whose depiction bestows an element of Ethiopian identity to the universal symbol of Christianity and enriches it with the immediacy and efficacy of personal devotion. The meaning and venerability of the quintessential Christian symbol is not limited, but on the contrary, clarified and amplified by reference to saints who dedicated themselves to a life on the cross. This visual synchronicity of the instrument of Christ's Passion with the self-sacrifice of his saintly followers, seen on the body of Ethiopian crosses, is an exemplary manifestation of the transcendence of temporal boundaries in the context of religious experience: holy people, actions, and values are of diachronic relevance, tracing the universal trajectory of salvation as an ongoing process of re-union between God and his people.

The hand cross of Fig. 129 is an illuminating visualization of the above concepts in the hands of the clergy—in a literal and metaphorical way: at twenty-three inches long, this is a liturgical cross held during the Eucharist, either by the officiating priest or the incensing deacon. The selection of saints and their placement on the handle of the cross is particularly significant. I will first discuss the importance of these saintly protectors in Christian Orthodox Ethiopia and will then explore the possible implications of their depiction on the handle of the cross. On one side is Tekle Haymanot (Fig. 129a, c, d), recognizable by his wings and his one leg that identify him as an individual of exceptional sanctity and dedication, continuously praying to God: he is believed to have stood in prayer for so long that one of his feet broke off. Tekle Haymanot is venerated as a great spiritual leader and missionary, and as a king-maker who with the help of divine guidance contributed to the establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Festivals of the Finding of the True Cross and Epiphany, 86.

According to tradition, he descended from the bloodline of Adam, Abraham, and the Jewish priest who came to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant during the time of Menelik.²⁶⁸ This genealogy renders him a venerable model not only for all humans (as Adam's descendants), but also specifically for priests. Details of his life further reinforce his venerability as a moral example. He is said to have performed many miracles of healing and to have successfully fought against all forms of evil throughout his life. He was both a priest and a monk and his extraordinary conduct, humility, powers, and favor with God make him a perfect patron for clergymen and a powerful protector of all Ethiopian Christians. His God-given name, Tekle Haymanot, literally means 'Plant of Faith', and his entire life of service, spiritual struggle, and triumph is a life on the cross. Various incidents that make part of his *gädl* tradition (texts narrating his life)²⁶⁹ weave a multilayered connection with the archetypal images of the Tree of Life and the cross, making him their living embodiment and a highly appropriate saint to be depicted on the body of tree-like Ethiopian crosses. For example, the visions that his parents had about his forthcoming birth included a pillar of light that united earth and heaven, around which priests and kings bowed and colorful birds perched (an image appropriate also for the cross/ Tree of Life).²⁷⁰ During his life, the saint often defeated evil and protected himself through the sign of the cross, and he had a special relationship with trees, which literally recognized his power and offered concrete examples of the ability of trees not only to symbolize but also to embody virtue.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 60.

²⁶⁹ The Ethiopian hagiographic genre of *gädl* (plural *gädlät*) can be loosely translated as *vita* or *acta* and, although based on Early Christian models, has its own characteristics, specific to Ethiopian culture. See Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, 'A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymanot', *African Languages and Cultures*, 10. 2 (1997), 181–198, esp. 181–183.

²⁷⁰ Tesfaye, 'Gädlä Täklä Haymanot', 193.

²⁷¹ For example, a huge tree, that was the abode of Satan and was venerated by pagans, obeyed the saint's command, uprooted itself from the earth and followed him, forcing Satan to flee. Another tree, on which the saint was hanged in order to be executed, bowed its branches until

On the other side of the hand cross is Gabra Manfas Qeddus (Servant of the Holy Spirit) who, according to tradition, has astounding powers to heal, protect, and defeat evil and is hailed in the narratives of his life as the greatest saint ever to have walked the earth, superior even to the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New (Fig. 129 b, e, f).²⁷² Such superlative statements render Gabra Manfas Qeddus instrumental in the construction of Ethiopian Christian identity. He contributes both to the pride of his people and to their confidence in divine protection through the intercession of this saint. According to traditional narratives, God gave Gabra Manfas Qeddus control over wild animals, which became his faithful servants—this being both an allusion to his absolute control over the wildness of temptation and sin as well as an actual power that is particularly useful in a land full of life-threatening beasts.²⁷³ On the cross of Fig. 129, Gabra Manfas Qeddus is identifiable by the bird that hovers close to his eyes, a popular iconographic theme in Ethiopian visual culture (the bird is also represented descending towards the saint's right eye in the cross of Fig. 128b).²⁷⁴ According to one tradition, the bird was

Tekle's feet touched the ground and he was saved. Tesfaye, 'Gädlä Tāklä Haymanot', 195.

²⁷² See P. Marrassini, *'Vita', 'Omelia', 'Miracoli' del Santo Gabra Manfas Qeddus, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 598, Scriptorum Aethiopici 108 (Louvain 2003), 2 vols. The edition includes an informative introduction to the saint and the various textual recessions that are presented in Ethiopian, with an Italian translation. In the following paragraphs, I give free English translations from the Italian text.

²⁷³ See the references to specific parts of the narrative, reported below.

²⁷⁴ Marrassini, *'Vita'*, vol. I, p. XII, note 22, with reference to specific miniatures from Ethiopian manuscripts. A Google image search under the keywords 'Gabra Manfas Qeddus' provides many representations of the saint standing in prayer, often surrounded by several lions and leopards, with a black or white bird flying towards his eye. The unidentifiable shapes that flank the lower part of the saint's body on the cross examined here could be the rough outlines of the crouching lions and leopards (see below about this). These shapes are different from the forms that flank

thirsty, and since the saint lacked water, he allowed the animal to drink out of his eye.²⁷⁵ This version of the story emphasizes the depth of the saint's selfless love, which implies his dedication to the well being of his people, for whom he continuously intercedes with God. Indeed, on the cross of Fig. 129, he is represented with hands raised in prayer, in a sense combining his powers of protection with those of the cross itself. According to a different version of the story, attested in a number of *gädl* manuscripts narrating the saint's life, Satan attacked him in the form of a raven and picked out his eyes while Gabra Manfas Qeddus was praying.²⁷⁶ The saint continued his fervent prayer and his unshaken faith was miraculously rewarded by God with the healing of his eyes and the ability to defeat Satan. The praying hands of the saint on the cross discussed here could refer to this aspect of the narrative and allude to the power of both the saint and the cross to protect against the forces of evil. In Ethiopian paintings, the color of the bird might indicate which version of the story is illustrated (in line with the Christian symbolism of light and darkness). When the bird is white, it might refer to the thirsty animal asking for the saint's help; when it is black, it probably represents Satan attacking Gabra Manfas Qeddus (Fig. 133).²⁷⁷ Since color is missing from the cross of Fig. 129, the viewers are free to read any version of the story they pre-

Tekle Haymanot on the other side of the cross handle (perhaps schematic renderings of plants that could reflect this saint's multiple connections with plants, as discussed above?).

²⁷⁵ Reported by Marrassini, *Vita*, vol. I, p. XII, note 22. It seems that this is an oral tradition, since Marrassini doesn't include it in the texts of his publication.

²⁷⁶ Marrassini, *Vita*, vol. I, p. XII, notes that this episode appears only in two of the textual recessions that comprise the corpus of written records on Gabra Manfas Qeddus, but is particularly popular and therefore illustrated in many miniatures. He doesn't mention the existence of two iconographic variations, one with a white and one with a black bird (see below for more on this). The whole episode is narrated in Marrassini, *Vita*, vol. I, p. 28.

²⁷⁷ Both variations appear in the visual record that results from Google image search under the keywords 'Gabra Manfas Qeddus'.

fer at any given time and context. This open-endedness enriches the communicative power of the cross. However, it is possible that the textually attested version of the Satanic attack is the one the maker and users of the cross would opt for, at least in an ecclesiastical, ritual setting. This episode plays a central role in a part of the *gädl* narrative that places exceptional emphasis on the salvific power of the Eucharist (during which this cross would be used). In the same narrative context, the outstanding faith of the saint convinces God to save the entire land of Ethiopia and to grant Gabra Manfas Qeddus unprecedented powers in order to defeat Satan and his demons—in other words, to resolve the main concern of protection and salvation that the cross itself is meant to address. The depiction of the nodal episode of the Satanic attack on the saint's eyes would evoke the entire narrative context in the minds of the informed viewers, reinforcing their prayers and hopes for salvation. In addition, the fact that Satan focused his attack on the eyes of the saint might be read as an indication of the importance of both bodily and spiritual vision in a moral Christian life. During his prayer, Gabra Manfas Qeddus had his eyes turned to heaven and therefore to God, as all Christians should do at least in a spiritual if not literal sense.²⁷⁸ In addition, Ethiopian Christians can focus their minds' eye to God by directing their bodily eyes to religious objects like crosses or icons, especially with edifying images like the one of Gabra Manfas Qeddus praying and defeating the ocular and spiritual attack of Satan.

This episode in the saint's life provides a vivid illustration of fundamental Ethiopian Christian beliefs, which would resonate with the viewers of this cross. It is worth digressing for a moment to present the story in more detail.²⁷⁹ The struggle of the saint against demons punctuates his entire life, but the episode of the Satanic attack in the form of a raven is central in a part of the *gädl* narrative that is self-contained as a coherent chapter of trial and triumph. It begins with a spiritual vision that Gabra Manfas Qed-

²⁷⁸ See the complete narrative mentioned below, where the saint is said to turn his face to heaven and never blink once.

²⁷⁹ For an Italian translation, see Marrassini, *Vita*, vol. I, pp. 26–30 (*71–*84).

dus has during the celebration of the Eucharist, thanks to his miraculous insight into the mysteries of the faith. He witnesses the descent of the Holy Ghost, but he sees that out of the two hundred faithful only one receives the blessing of the Eucharist, because he is the only pure one in the congregation. The rest are tormented by demons, while Satan rejoices 'like a poor man who finds gold thrown into the garbage'.²⁸⁰ At this point, the struggle of the saint against the Devil escalates in a series of confrontations that lead to extreme trials and the final triumph of the holy man. First, Gabra Manfas Qeddus prays to God for the salvation of the people and Christ replies that for his sake he will forgive six hundred thousand Christians on each of the three annual feast days that celebrate the most important events of his Incarnation: Nativity, Baptism, and Resurrection. Their salvation makes Satan cry, but Gabra Manfas Qeddus continues his prayers with even greater vigor, with four hundred thousand prostrations per day, while chanting the Psalms and other devotional texts and hitting his face with a stone to atone for the sinful. His prayers render Satan his captive. Then the saint travels accompanied by a multitude of leopards and lions and guided by Gabriel, and arrives at a lake up in the mountains. Looking around him towards the four cardinal points of the horizon, he sees all the sins of Ethiopia and immerses himself in the water of the lake, head on, vowing to pray like this forever. After forty days, a celestial voice announces that whoever will celebrate the saint's memory and whoever will invoke his name will be forgiven, but the saint replies that he will not exit from the lake until the entire land of Ethiopia is forgiven. He remains there for a hundred years, praying while terribly tormented by five thousand demons, so that he exceeds in self-sacrifice all the martyrs who died in the name of Christ. Then God announces: 'Rise and step out [of the lake]! I have forgiven Ethiopia for your sake'.²⁸¹ He touches the saint and rejuvenates his body from the demonic attacks, after which Gabra Manfas Qeddus renews his extraordinary devotional practice. He stands for seven months, erect like a column, holding his head turned towards heaven, his hands raised, and his eyes open without

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 26 (*74).

²⁸¹ Ibid., 28 (*78).

ever blinking once. It is then that Satan attacks him in the shape of a raven and picks out the eyes that were forever turned towards heaven, but the saint remains unshaken and continues his prayer for seven weeks. The archangels Michel and Gabriel arrive and restore his eyes, ordering him to travel in order to destroy his enemies (that is, the demons). On his way, the saint encounters three poor old men who ask to be carried on his back for a mile, and the saint willingly offers his help, carrying one man at a time. After the completion of this trial, the old men reveal themselves to him in their true nature: they appear to him in the majesty of their divinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as one flame, while the whole earth and heaven shake at the face of their apparition. They transport him to the seventh heaven where they take up seat on their throne, embrace him and kiss him like a son, 'him who was three times more worthy than the prophets and the apostles, the just and the martyrs'. God himself tells Gabra Manfas Qeddus that 'heaven and earth, all the just and the martyrs, the sun, the moon and the stars cannot have equal value to one of your hair!'²⁸² He is given power to destroy the demons who tortured him for a hundred years, and he descends and triumphs over them with the help of thunderbolts, archangels, and swords of flame, turning into ashes seven hundred million and nine thousand demons. After this, he retires in a land full of 'lions and leopards, hyenas and dragons'.²⁸³ At this point, the narrative shifts into a new chapter, which proves the uncontested superiority of Gabra Manfas Qeddus in comparison to other saints and his total power over nature and wild animals, including the sixty lions and sixty leopards that God appointed as his servants.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Ibid., 29 (*83).

²⁸³ Ibid., 30 (*84).

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 30–31 (*84–*88): three holy men visit Gabra Manfas Qeddus, each accompanied by two lions, but the saint is nowhere to be found. Instead, his sixty lions and sixty leopards devour the lions of the visitors who tremble in fear. Then Gabra Manfas Qeddus appears and reminds his quadruped servants that God had instructed them to feed only on the dust on which the saint steps. He then orders them to regurgitate the devoured lions, which he resurrects by invoking the help of Christ who had resurrected Lazarus. The revived animals want to abandon their holy men

The hyperbolic aspects of this narrative, akin to the fabulous element of folktales, reflect the deep devotion and faith of Ethiopian Christians to the powers of Gabra Manfas Qeddus as their supreme protector. His example inspires them in their daily struggles and encourages them to continuously pray to God, so that Satan is defeated. The hinge of the story on the eyes of the saint, perpetually turned to heaven and restored by God after they are destroyed by Satan, becomes a powerful and evocative reference on the hand cross of Fig. 129. It places emphasis on vision as a link between earth and heaven, as a nexus between material and spiritual realities; consequently, it highlights the importance of holy objects that address vision, like crosses and images, in the struggle of Ethiopian Christians for salvation. In the above textual narrative, even the Trinitarian God reveals himself in a palpable and visible form (as the three men that Gabra Manfas Qeddus carries on his back). On the hand cross of Fig. 129, it seems that a reference to the Trinity is made by the triple motif that appears above and below the portrait of the two saints, on both sides of the handle (Fig. 129 c-f). The unity of three equal persons, eternal and without beginning and end, is evoked by the continuous thread that forms three cyclical components of equal size. It is a visual reminder of the Trinitarian divinity that is worshipped by the two saints and guides their miraculous actions towards the salvation of the Ethiopian Christians who honor and use crosses like this in their religious practice.

Both saints are venerated in Ethiopia as founders of important monastic communities, moral models of exceptional faith, and powerful protectors of Christians. Standing upright within the limits of the cross handle, the praying saints appear like pillars—a frequent metaphor used in Christian literature to describe saints as the supporting structure of the Church, sustaining the edifice of the community through their teaching, service, and moral example.²⁸⁵

and serve Gabra Menfas Qeddus instead, but he instructs them to follow their original masters. He goes on to amaze his visitors with more miraculous deeds.

²⁸⁵ To mention just two examples from Ethiopian tradition: Abba Giorgis is called the ‘Pillar of Religion’. See Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 72. In the commentaries known as *Rules or customs of the Church*, the col-

In this case, the handle is framed below and above by a tri-dimensional cubical structure that resembles a small chapel perforated by four openings (Fig. 129 c-f).²⁸⁶ It looks like an architectural abbreviation of the Holy of Holies in the middle of Ethiopian churches of centralized plan: a cubical sanctuary often perforated by four doors, one on each side, forming a cross of light along the four cardinal points.²⁸⁷ The presence of this architectural element below and above the two pillar-like saints in the hand cross of Fig. 129 might have been intended to emphasize a reference to the edifice of the Church as the house of God that they support. At the same time, this visual element might define them as living sanctuaries of God. In the Holy of Holies of every Ethiopian church, God

umns of a church building are often interpreted as symbols of the twelve apostles (while other components of the structure are thought to symbolize different important members of the Church, including angels, Mary, Christ, the Trinity, the priesthood, the faithful, etc., so that the whole building becomes a material visualization of the entire Ecclesia). At times, columns in different parts of the building are related to different members of the Church, depending on their role and hierarchical importance. So exterior columns might be symbols of the faithful that haven't received the priesthood, while interior columns might symbolize the clergy. See Schneider, 'Texte Éthiopien des règles de l'Église', 84, 88, 94. Compare the comment of Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia*, 27, saying that crosses 'may be found on capitals, to meaningfully symbolize the need to uphold Faith'. Visually and conceptually, this usage reinforces the perception of columns and pillars as symbols of support, holding up the structure of the Church as an institution (and not just the church as a building housing a congregation).

²⁸⁶ Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 9, 15, describe a similar structure on the base of hand crosses, call it a 'chapel', and seem to relate it to the *tabot* of Ethiopian churches (the chest containing the altar tablet; see below for more on this). They think this 'chapel' form developed around the 17th–18th centuries out of the cube that is often used instead of a rectangle as a base for Ethiopian hand crosses.

²⁸⁷ For the analysis and illustration of representative examples, see *Sacro e bellezza*, 101–105. Also M. Di Salvo, 'The typology of Ethiopian churches from the basilica to the centrally planned churches, in their structural and symbolic aspects', in his *Churches of Ethiopia*, 57–96.

is present through the Eucharist, which is celebrated on a copy of the Tablets of the Law that contained his will on the proper conduct of his people. In the body of every saint, God is present through the virtuous and miraculous actions of the holy person, who embodies God's Law throughout his life. In Christianity, this is the Law of the cross, of the love and selfless sacrifice of Christ that his followers must imitate by lifting up their own cross, as these two monastic saints have done.²⁸⁸

When a priest or deacon holds this cross during the liturgy, as the Eucharist is prepared in the sanctuary and then offered to the faithful, God is literally present among and inside his people, who also become his sanctuary, and are invited to honor that privileged union by leading a virtuous life according to the examples of the saints.²⁸⁹ So the two holy figures and the sanctuary structures that frame them on this liturgical cross become an image of their fellow Ethiopians, blessed in union with God during the ritual of the Eucharist. The link is particularly strong between the two saints and the deacon or priest who handles the cross (compare Fig. 129 g-h); he literally holds the body of the two saints in his hand, making them an extension of his own body, while he himself becomes an extension of theirs, so that their prayers and devotion mutually reinforce each other towards a common goal. Indeed, in the spatio-

²⁸⁸ The possibility that this 'chapel' structure discussed here represents the *tabot*, the ark containing the altar tablet in Ethiopian churches (Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 15), is compatible with the above interpretation of the saint as a sanctuary of God. Both the Holy of Holies and the *tabot*/ark/tablet of each Ethiopian church are containers and signs of the presence of God. In addition, the tablet preserved in the *tabot* chest of each Ethiopian church bears the name of the saint to whom the building is dedicated, making the connection between him and the will of God even more explicit. For more on this theme, see below. Compare the poetic reference of the *Harp of Glory*: 'Engrave on the tablets of my heart the life-giving precepts of your Son', which presents every virtuous Christian as a living tablet on which the Law of God is inscribed (McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 77).

²⁸⁹ These are the main references in the Ethiopian Eucharistic hymn *Community of the Faithful*, for which see above, note 220.

temporal continuum of the liturgy, all the servants of God are present and united in holy communion with him. This idea of the participation of the universal Church, earthly and heavenly, past, present, and future, during the mystery of the Eucharist, is made concrete in a visual and tactile way through the ritual use of this hand cross. The cross is presented to the body of the congregation through the body of the clergy, and it includes the bodies of saints and the flourishing body of the Tree of Life that frames the beginning, middle, and end of salvation history—Creation and Fall, Crucifixion and Resurrection, and finally Second Coming.

Details in the visual representation of the two saints further reinforce their spiritual link with the priests and deacons who are expected to follow the virtuous example of Tekle Haymanot and Gabra Manfas Qeddus, dedicating their lives to God, carrying their cross spiritually as they also carry this cross physically. Tekle Haymanot is depicted holding a hand cross, therefore becoming the mirror image of whoever is holding this liturgical cross. Gabra Manfas Qeddus is represented with both hands raised in prayer, echoing the prayers of the clergy who celebrate the Eucharist. During this mystery, the multidimensional references of the cross to salvation are embodied in the two saints and through them are channeled to the bodies of the officiating priests and deacons who in their turn project such salvific references to the body of the congregation.²⁹⁰

During the Eucharist, the ritual context becomes the framework, the ritual objects the conduits and the participants the catalysts through which the material and spiritual dimensions of salvation interact and energize each other in order to become the living experience of the faithful. It is in the celebrants, witnesses, and partakers of the Eucharist, that salvation is activated through union with God. This psychosomatic union operates through the interweaving of multiple threads in order to create the fabric of holy communion that the cross visualizes so eloquently. Since I have used the weaving metaphor so often to refer to Ethiopian crosses, I will employ it once more to paint an image of the Eucharistic

²⁹⁰ For the priests as models of the congregation (especially when they address their prayers to God), see Merahi, *Contribution*, 43, 47.

ritual in which the cross plays a central role. In this way, I aim to emphasize the powerful flexibility of the visual language of Ethiopian crosses to embody a wide range of meanings. Let us imagine for a moment the ritual framework (architectural/ visual context and liturgical structure) of the Eucharist as the loom; the participants (laity, clergy and holy members of the heavenly Church) as the wool-workers and weavers; and the ritual objects handled (including crosses, censers, the Eucharistic bread and wine) as the shuttle. Then, the threads used to produce the fabric of holy communion with God combine the warp of underlying faith (i.e. culturally constructed pre-existing beliefs and expectations) with the weft of overlaid ritual experience (which to a large extent can be defined as ritually produced internalizations of faith). As the warp supports the weft and the weft fleshes out the warp, so faith guides experience and experience reinforces faith. In this fabrication, the threads of experience extend from the physical to the spiritual dimension. The multisensorial embodiment of the ritual through all five senses triggers emotional and intellectual reactions, so that the experience of union with God envelops the faithful in their psychosomatic totality.²⁹¹

In a sense, the liturgical cross of Fig. 129 visualizes the Eucharist as such a weaving process: the framework of the cross is the loom on which the two saints personify all the participants who work to produce the textile of union with God, itself visualized in the interwoven threads of the cross' body. The saints are members of the heavenly Church, but since the one holds a hand cross and the other raises his hands in prayer, they also stand for the officiating clergymen that handle the liturgical objects and for the congregation that participates in the ritual hoping that their invocations will be answered. So, to return to a previous observation, the saints embody all of the Christians of Ethiopia and inscribe them on the body of the cross, giving concrete form to their union with God under the blessing and protection of the Christian sign, which

²⁹¹ Needless to say, through ritual the social fabric is also woven (produced, reinforced, expanded, experienced), by culturally re-inscribing the roles and power relations of the social agents included and excluded during the ritual.

guides them in a life on the cross, according to Christ's admonition to his followers.²⁹²

INSCRIBING ETHIOPIA ON THE CROSS: MARY AND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

When the holy figure represented on an Ethiopian cross is St. George or the Virgin Mary (Fig. 130), references to salvation, protection, and union in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian identity become even more accentuated, as both holy figures are considered patrons of Ethiopia. Indeed, Ethiopians believe that Christ has placed them under the direct personal protection of Mary, an honor not bestowed on any other nation and a privilege that ensures salvation through her powerful intercession and miraculous interventions.²⁹³ In addition, Mary is believed to use St. George as her personal messenger and helper whenever she needs to intervene on behalf of her Ethiopian people. Therefore, Mary holding Christ is often accompanied by St. George (Figs. 131, 133).²⁹⁴ When St. George appears on Ethiopian crosses, he embodies the nation, which in turn is inscribed within the protective embrace of the Christian sign through the figure of the saint. If the cross is the sacred matrix of the universal history of salvation, then the image of St. George as victorious rider and vanquisher of evil depicted at the intersection of the cross arms situates Ethiopia in the center of divine providence. This idea of Ethiopians as the chosen people of God, singled out in his salvific plan, becomes even more prominent when the Virgin and Child appear on the body of the cross. For Ethiopians, Mary is not simply the instrument of the Incarnation through which human salvation is made possible, nor is she just the most powerful intercessor of humanity in front of her son's throne—functions for which she is also highly venerated in Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions alike. In Ethiopia, Mary and her son Christ are believed to be of the same

²⁹² *Matthew* 16:24–27, *Mark* 8:34–38, *Luke* 9:23–27.

²⁹³ Merahi, *Covenant*, 9–11, and, *Saints and Monasteries*, 10–11.

²⁹⁴ *Ethiopian Art*, 116, 136, *African Zion*, 185 (cat. 83).

bloodline as Ethiopians and especially their rulers, descendants of King Solomon.

So when the Virgin and Child are inscribed on Ethiopian crosses, they do not simply visualize humanity's hope for salvation; they also speak of the special connection of Ethiopian Christians with Jesus and Mary, as members of the same extended holy family, not simply in spiritual but also in physical terms. This exclusive relationship is interwoven with the belief that Christ personally bestowed Ethiopia to the protection of his mother. Therefore, in the eyes of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Christ and the Virgin are not simply the Savior and his Mother, the Groom and the Bride/ Church leading Christians to God; they are the holiest members of the Ethiopian nation, protectors but also representatives of the Ethiopian people who are enveloped in the body of the cross through the very bodies of Mary and Christ depicted on this sign of salvation. In this case, the universal Christian symbol is invested with a specifically Ethiopian identity that goes beyond the formal elements of this visual tradition or the depiction of local saints, in order to touch upon the core beliefs of this Christian community about its sacred origins and destiny.

The idea that Ethiopians share the same bloodline with Mary and Christ is based on the belief that Solomon (the forefather of Jesus) was the father of Menelik (the son of the Ethiopian queen of Sheba), who became king and progenitor of Ethiopia and its Solomonic dynasty of rulers. This belief of direct connection with the Davidic genealogy of the Messiah is unique among Christian communities and is further enriched with one more element of paramount significance for Ethiopian identity: the credence that according to divine providence, Menelik brought with him to Ethiopia the Ark of the Covenant that is still believed to be in the possession of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today. This event is seen as a sign of divine favor that defines the Ethiopians as the new chosen people of God even before they became Christian.²⁹⁵ This important tradition can be related to a very unusual feature of Ethiopian hand crosses: the developed base that appears at the other end of the main body of the cross and often bears similar

²⁹⁵ For all of the above, see the literature in notes 54 and 244 above.

intricate motifs, although on a smaller scale (Figs. 66–67, 69–70, 73, 80, 84–86, 90, 125, 129, 132). Coptic hand crosses that are otherwise very similar to the Ethiopian ones in formal characteristics and ritual use do not have this developed lower part.



130a. Contemporary Ethiopian staff cross (19 x 14 inches, 48.5 x 35 cm) inspired by a very popular older design (compar Fig. 38). Notice the four angelic figures at the intersections of the cross arms and the motif of ‘running water’ on the arms themselves. The center is painted with the figure of Mary enthroned, holding Christ and flanked by two angels who spread their wings above her like a canopy. Bought on the online market, author’s collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



130b. Other side of the same staff cross (of Fig. 130a), with more detailed incisions on its body and the image of St. George killing the dragon with a spear that has a cross at its top and its bottom part. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



131. Wall paintings at the Kidane Mihret (Covenant of Mercy) Monastery, Zege Peninsula, Lake Tana, Ethiopia. St. George killing the dragon (left) is combined with the image of the enthroned Mary holding Christ (right), together flanking the door of the church as powerful protectors. St. George and Mary are often depicted together in Ethiopian images, as the two most powerful protectors of Ethiopia (George serving as Mary's messenger). Photo by Yury Birukov/ Shutterstock.com.

It has been suggested that the base of Ethiopian hand crosses ‘adds balance... and it forms a bar at the end of the handle, enabling the hand to get a firm grip’.²⁹⁶ This may well be the case, but it doesn’t explain why such a functional feature is missing from Coptic hand crosses, or why Ethiopians show a special reverence towards the base of their hand crosses, kissing that part after they have kissed the top, main body of the cross. Clearly, functionality cannot adequately justify this idiosyncratic feature. A meaningful conceptual explanation is needed for the visual prominence, ritualized honor, and exclusive appearance of this base on Ethiopian hand crosses. Among the various suggestions that have been proposed in the literature, all without any substantial analysis, I would

²⁹⁶ Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 8.

like to elaborate on the idea that this base is a symbolic representation of the Ark of the Covenant.²⁹⁷

The wooden Ark is the most sacred object of the age of Law, proclaiming the Old Covenant of God with his chosen people. It is also a prefiguration of the wooden True Cross, which is the most sacred object of the age of Grace and the instrument of the New Covenant of God with his new chosen people, established through Christ's sacrifice. The Ark bore the Tablets of the Law and the True Cross bore the Living Law (Christ). Both manifested the presence and action of God for his people, and what the Ark foreshadowed the True Cross fulfilled: the Ark protected the Jews; the Cross saved the entire world. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe that they became the new chosen people of God through ownership of the Ark at the time of King Solomon, and a thousand years later, they renewed their privilege by adopting Christianity and venerating the sign of the cross.²⁹⁸ In other words, it is both through the Ark and the cross that they proclaim their special status. Before the Church of Ethiopia acquired a piece of the True Cross in the fifteenth century, it was said that the special power of its kingdom was due to the possession of the Ark, as Byzantium's

²⁹⁷ *Ethiopian Art*, 90, rectangular bases of two hand crosses are interpreted as 'references to the *tabot*, or altar box, venerated by Ethiopian Christians'. The same idea is mentioned by Hecht, Benzing, and Kidane, *Hand Crosses*, 15, reporting previous mentions by Skrobucha, *Äthiopische Kreuze*, 39 and Korabiewicz, *The Ethiopian Cross*, figs. 28, 141, 153–55. He distinguishes between the rectangular base as a reference to the tablet and the cubical 'chapel' form as a reference to the ark containing the tablet, for which he uses the terms *tabot* and *manbar* respectively. For issues of terminology and more information on the *tabot* (ark and tablet of each Ethiopian church) see below. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses*, 88–9, also reports that according to Ethiopian ecclesiastical sources the base of hand crosses refers to the Ark of the Covenant.

²⁹⁸ Ethiopians mention with great pride that the first person to be baptized in the name of Christ according to *Acts* 8:26–29 was the Ethiopian eunuch of queen Candace, who introduced Christianity to the land. Merahi, *Contribution*, 31–32; idem, *Covenant*, 8; idem, *Saints and Monasteries*, preface (unpaginated). See also notes 38–9 above.

was through possession of the True Cross.²⁹⁹ Although the veneration of the cross was particularly promoted under emperor Zara Yacob in the fifteenth century, it was already prominent in Ethiopian tradition from an earlier period.³⁰⁰ Likewise, although the legend concerning the ownership of the Ark by the Ethiopian Church became particularly prominent with the establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century, scholars have traced evidence that clearly suggests this tradition was already in place under the previous dynasty.³⁰¹ So both the Ark and the cross were prominent markers of Ethiopian Christian identity, and their importance continued to grow over time. In the Bible these two sacred objects are linked conceptually and theologically as emblems of the unity of the Old and the New Testament. At the same time, they are linked historically in the context of Ethiopian Christian culture, as emblems of the double special identity, Jewish and Christian, of the Ethiopian Christians.³⁰² Likewise, the Ark and the cross are visually and ritually linked on the body of Ethiopian hand crosses. If we assume that the bottom part is a symbolic representation of the Ark, while the top part is the actual cross, the two are visually linked through the handle, which is held by clergymen and holy men so that the faithful can kiss both parts. In other words, the owners of hand crosses handle the rituals and customs that hold

²⁹⁹ Kaplan, 'Seeing is believing', 408, 410.

³⁰⁰ The first evidence would be the coins of the fourth century. See the overview of the importance of the cross in Ethiopian culture by Di Salvo, 'Signum Crucis', 152–59.

³⁰¹ Heldman, 'Architectural Symbolism', 224–5, 232–33. Also, *African Zion*, 12.

³⁰² The legend about the Davidic genealogy of the Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopia and the possession of the Ark are not the only elements that connect Ethiopian and Jewish culture. Ge'ez is a Semitic language, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church preserves many customs of the Jewish tradition, such as the observance of Sabbath (in addition to that of the Christian Sunday), and circumcision. See also below about the use of a copy of the Ark in every Ethiopian church. The modeling of Ethiopian churches after the Jewish Temple, with the tri-partite division in Court, Holy, and Holy of Holies, has been already mentioned above.

together the two traditions, Old and New Testament, Judaism and Christianity, while the laity honor their bond by venerating both the cross and the Ark.

Specific visual elements of the base of Ethiopian hand crosses can further reinforce the hypothesis that the base of hand crosses is meant to represent the Ark. In many cases, this bottom part is formally very similar to the top part, although smaller in size (Fig. 132). This similarity could be intended to visualize the theological interrelation between the bearers of the Old and the New Law, and highlight the concept of progression from the one that foretells to the one that fulfills salvation (from smaller to larger). Alternatively, the base of several hand crosses has a rectangular, chest-like appearance that might be an indexical reference to the form of the Ark of the Covenant (Figs. 66–67, 69–70, 73, 80, 84–86, 90, 125, 129).³⁰³

Indeed, in Ethiopian visual culture as in many other Christian traditions, representations of well-known buildings or objects of the past are not naturalistic detailed imitations, but abbreviated depictions based on a few basic indexical features that are easily recognizable and identifiable with main elements of the original.³⁰⁴

³⁰³ See note 297.

³⁰⁴ See the insightful comments of Heldman, ‘Legends of Lālibalā’, 27, concerning the way medieval Christians cultures created visual ‘quotations’ of older venerable models, such as buildings or objects, through the replication of ‘name, dedication, measurements, and/or distinctive features’, producing symbolic reproductions that were believed to resonate with the significance and sacred properties of their archetypes, even if visually they were only very generic references to the original. Heldman analyzes specific Ethiopian architectural and topographic examples of this kind of resonance. Another characteristic case is the architectural or visual reproduction of the Tomb of Christ in the shape of structures that bear only a very generic resemblance to the actual Sepulcher, through the ‘quotation’ of easily recognizable features such as its conical roof. See Evangelatou, ‘The Holy Sepulchre and Iconophile Arguments on Relics’, 188–90.



132a. Contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (9.25 x 3 inches, 23.5 x 7.5 cm) made up of smaller crosses. The base resembles the design of the top, albeit in smaller scale. Bought online, author's collection. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.



132b. Other side of the same hand cross (of Fig. 132a), with more detailed incisions. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.



133. Ethiopian triptych icon of the 18th-19th century, held in a private collection. Central panel: Mary and Christ, with donor and angels. Left wing: St. George killing the dragon (top), and Saints Tekle Haymanot (bottom left) and Gabra Manfas Qeddus (bottom right). Right wing: Christ's Crucifixion (top) and Resurrection (bottom). Photo by DeA Picture Library / Art Resource, NY.



Detail of Fig. 133. Central panel with Mary and Christ, accompanied by a donor (bottom) and two angels (top) who hold a honorific textile and spread their wings above Mary like a canopy (perhaps alluding to the cherubim overshadowing the Old Testament Ark and thus referring to Mary as the New Ark, holding Christ the Living Law).



134. Ethiopian priests carry the *tabot*, a copy of the Tablets of the Arc of the Covenant, owned by every Ethiopian Orthodox church. Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Photo by Dereje/ Shutterstock.com.

In the case of the Ark, a chest-like shape is an adequate reference. Some additional visual elements of Ethiopian crosses might further corroborate this identification. One such element is the depiction of Mary holding Christ and flanked by two angels who overshadow the mother and child, with their raised wings touching at the top of the composition, like a canopy (Figs. 113, 130). This specific representation of the angelic guards is a particularly common motif in Ethiopian depictions of Mary holding Christ, not only on crosses but also in manuscripts, wall paintings and icons (Fig. 133).³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ In J. Mercier, *Vièrges d'Éthiopie* (Montpellier 2004) the majority of depictions of Mary holding Christ include two angels with wings arching above them in a canopy-like manner. The earliest example of this iconography included in *Vièrges d'Éthiopie* is dated in the thirteenth century (p. 38). For more examples see *Ethiopian Art*, figs. 4, 18, 19, cat. nos. 18, 20–25. Ibid., p. 124 the earliest example of this iconography is dated to the late fourteenth century, and it is said that 'the umbrella-like arrangement of the archangels' wings [above Mary and Christ] also carried imperial associations, as a baldachin, or canopy, placed above the emperor's head

I would like to argue here that this angelic canopy designates Mary as the New Ark holding Christ the New Law. Such an interpretation highlights the significance of the Ark in Ethiopian tradition and can be relevant to the interpretation of the base of Ethiopian hand crosses as yet another reference to the Ark.

First of all, as the bearer and container of Christ, Mary is frequently identified in Christian tradition with the New Ark containing the Living Tablets of the Law. This idea is prominently expressed in Ethiopian culture in various ways. Mary is repeatedly praised as the Ark.³⁰⁶ The church of Aksum purported to contain the true Ark is dedicated to her.³⁰⁷ Moreover, the Ethiopian iconography of the canopy of angelic wings spread above Mary holding Christ seems a very apt visualization of the Virgin as the New Ark, since it echoes Old Testament descriptions of the two cherubim overshadowing the Ark of Moses (*Exodus* 25:18–20, especially 15:20, ‘The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, over-

was a symbol of his authority’. This interpretation is entirely appropriate, but I believe that the most fundamental meaning of the iconography is a reference to Mary as the Ark holding Christ/ the Law, as argued below.

³⁰⁶ For example, this is one of the most frequent metaphors used in the Marian hymn *Harp of Glory*, often with reference to the tablets inside the ark (i.e. Christ), or the cherubim overshadowing the ark. See McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 28, 31, 34, 35, 53, 57, 60, 65, 70, 74, 77, 80, 83, 85, 96, 98, 107–8, 118, 119, 120, 130, 134, 136, 137, 142, 143, 144, 148, 149, 151. In the same hymn, Mary is frequently called the Tabernacle or Holy of Holies of Solomon’s temple, both of which were constructed to house the ark (McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 25, 27, 33, 37, 39, 46, 76, 98, 118, 120, 139).

³⁰⁷ Merahi, *Covenant*, 9–11, describes in detail the Ethiopian belief that Mary is the New Ark and the Church of Holy Zion in Aksum that is dedicated to her contains the Old Ark. He asserts with pride the belief of Ethiopians that their country is dedicated to Mary by her own Son, and this special relationship together with the ownership of the Ark of the Covenant have made the country invincible and protected from all enemies who are ultimately defeated whenever they attempt to overpower the chosen people of God. The same ideas are presented in Merahi, *Saints and Monasteries*, 10–11.

shadowing the cover [of the Ark] with them'). In addition, *1Kings* 6:23–28 mentions the cherubim in the Holy of holies of Solomon's temple, which overshadowed the space containing the Ark, according to the following words (my emphasis): 'And the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one touched the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; *their other wings touched each other in the middle of the house*'. This is exactly how the angelic wings touch each other above Mary and Christ in Ethiopian images, thus identifying her with the Holy of holies and with the ark containing the Tablets of the Law.³⁰⁸ The fact that this

³⁰⁸ I have rarely encountered this interpretation, as a brief reference without further analysis, in the literature on Ethiopian art that I am familiar with (for example, *African Zion*, 191). Without being exhaustive, I mention here a few relevant visual examples, to further support this interpretation. In *Ethiopian Art*, fig. 19, the iconography under discussion is painted on a fifteenth-century wooden *tabot*, the altar tablet that is the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian version of the Old Testament tablets, and is used in every church as the surface on which to celebrate the Eucharist. This object is referred to both as the ark and the tablets (and is also kept in a chest container called 'ark') and will be discussed below in more detail. The representation of Mary and Christ overshadowed by angels' wings on a *tabot* further reinforces the connection of this iconography with the Old Testament Ark which was similarly overshadowed by cherubim. As the Ark contained the Tablets of the Law, so this *tabot* contains Mary/ the Ark, who is the container of Christ/ the Law. On this specific *tabot*, the facing image (on the right diptych leaf, opening to reveal the image of Mary) represents the Ancient of Days surrounded by the four winged Evangelist symbols. The arching of their wings around God echoes that of the angels' wings around Mary and Christ, suggesting that the Old Testament God of prophetic visions (*Daniel* 7:9) is the Pre-eternal Logos incarnated in Jesus (compare miniatures of the ascension mentioned in the next note). Mercier, *Vierges d'Éthiopie*, 44–45, 60–61, presents two images (a fifteenth-century painting and a miniature of a Four Gospels manuscript dated 1480–1510) in which Mary, holding Christ and overshadowed by angels, is seated on a cube with feet. This peculiar throne is very similar in shape to the *tabot* chest/ ark which in Ethiopian Orthodox churches holds the *tabot* tablets (for similarly-looking *tabot* chests see, for example, *African Zion*, 136–37). This unusual depiction of Mary's seat visually em-

angelic canopy appears rarely in compositions of any other subject besides Mary holding Christ could be an additional indication of its specifically Mariological significance.³⁰⁹ In addition to the above,

phasizes the idea that she is the Living Ark, holding the Living Law, Christ. The fourteenth-century Four Gospels of Krestos Tasfana contains one of the most emphatic representations of Mary as the New Ark that survive from the entire Ethiopian tradition: in the scene of her entrance to the Jewish Temple (where she was dedicated at age three), she appears standing frontally under an arch, flanked by two angels who overshadow her with their wings as they offer her bread and wine from a cup and paten. The composition illustrates the apocryphal tradition reported in the *Protevangelion* of James (chapter 7–8), according to which Mary was housed in the Holy of holies of the Temple, where she was raised by the high priest and an angel, as the pure future mother of God. The inclusion of two angels rather than one in this image, echoing the description of *1 Kings* 6:23–28 about the two cherubim in the Holy of holies of Solomon's temple, and the Eucharistic references of the food they offer to Mary, clearly visualize the idea of the Virgin as the New Temple, the New Ark and the Christian Church containing Christ. (Image available at *African Zion*, 144, discussed at p. 176, catalogue no. 65).

³⁰⁹ Heldman, *Marian Icons*, 120–21 states that 'the enframing arch of angel wings is a motif often included in Ethiopian portraits of Our Lady Mary, although it is not limited to this subject', but the only other case Heldman mentions is a depiction of Christ's Baptism in the fourteenth-century Four Gospels of Krestos Tasfana. Although Mary is missing from this image, it is possible that the painter still wanted to allude to the idea of the Living Law, brought forth through the Incarnation of the Logos in Christ (and through Mary), in order to introduce the age of grace and the sacraments of Christianity that replaced the Old Testament Law. Indeed, Mary is depicted holding Christ right above the Baptism scene, in a narrative composition of the Journey of the Holy Family, which is clearly intended to emphasize the dogma of the Incarnation and Mary as the bearer of Christ/ the New Law (image available at *African Zion*, 144, discussed at p. 176, catalogue no. 65). I know of few other Ethiopian examples of the canopy of angelic wings included as an element in narrative scenes, but I would argue that even in those cases the theological reference is still on Christ as the Living Law, brought in the world through Mary the Ark. For example, see a miniature of the Nativity scene (dated 1480–1530, Mercier,

there is a striking analogy between the depiction of Mary holding Christ and overshadowed by angels in Ethiopian paintings and the way Ethiopian Orthodox priests carry on their head the *tabot* (the copy of the Tablets of the Law of the Old Testament Ark, that each Ethiopian church owns and presents during feast-day processions). Compare Figs. 133–134: The *tabot* is covered by a precious textile, which echoes the tradition of covering the Ark of the Cov-

Virgès d'Éthiopie, 122–23): Mary holding Christ is overshadowed by two angels, while six-winged and four-winged creatures (seraphim and cherubim) appear all around, their wings touching in a canopy-like manner. The reference to the Ark is further reinforced by the chest-like appearance of the cave. In a mural of the thirteenth-fourteenth century in the church of the Savior in Makina, Lasta (Mercier, *Virgès d'Éthiopie*, 52), two angels overshadow Mary riding sidesaddle on a donkey. Christ is not represented, so the implication is probably that Mary is pregnant with the Logos/Law, on her way to Bethlehem. The motif of angels' wings arching above Mary also appears in representations of the Ascension, for example two fourteenth-century miniatures, *African Zion*, photos in pp. 121, 124, discussed in pp. 130–31 (catalogue nos. 54, 56). Here Christ is no longer in the arms of his mother but is depicted above her, in a mandorla surrounded by the Evangelical symbols (inspired by *Ezekiel* 1 and *Revelation* 4). Their wings arch in a similar way to the one seen in images of Mary holding Christ, and this could be taken to emphasize the connection between Mary as the container of the Logos Incarnate and the ascending Christ as the Pre-eternal Logos who came to earth through her to provide the New Living Law. In another copy of the Four Gospels, dated in the late fifteenth-early sixteenth century (*African Zion*, 191, catalogue no. 92), the image of Mary and Christ overshadowed by angels faces the scene of the Crucifixion, in which two angels overshadow in the same way the body of Christ on the cross, while Mary appears below to the left. An inscription reports 'Image of the Crucifixion of our Savior Jesus Christ as the diligent angels guard over His honored body, which is in the nature of His divinity, to whom is glory and worship forever. Amen'. The same comment can be applied to the facing image: the angels spreading their wings as a canopy over Mary and Christ visualize the divinity of the baby, the Lawgiver and Living Law, born by Mary the New Ark, in order to be crucified on the cross for the salvation of the world.

enant with a textile when it was moved (*Numbers* 4:5–6). The *tabot* covering hangs low on either side and frames the holy object and the body of the priest like a pair of wings, reminiscent of the overshadowing of both the Old Testament Ark and Mary the New Ark by a pair of wings. In addition, a parasol accompanies the *tabot*, as another pair of angelic wings hovering above it like a honorific canopy. Visually, this presentation of the *tabot* is very reminiscent of depictions of Mary below an arch of angelic wings, especially when the angels hold a honorific textile behind Mary, as in Fig. 133. The above scriptural, ritual and iconographic cross-references might lead at least some Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, and especially members of the clergy, to see Mary overshadowed by angelic wings as the New Ark, holding not just the Tablets of the Law but the Living Law itself, Christ.

Mary and Christ honored by an angelic canopy also appear on the main body of Ethiopian crosses, visually reinforcing the connection between the Old and the New Testament, the Ark of the Covenant and the Ark of the Incarnation that are so important for Ethiopian identity (Figs. 104a, 113, 130a).

In addition, one or more angels, who among other things could allude to the cherubim of the Ark, are frequently represented on Ethiopian crosses, perhaps further enhancing the connection between the wooden instrument of salvation and the wooden container of the Law (Figs. 41b, 42, 83, 89, 90a, 102, 103, 125). Such visual cross-references through the depiction of Mary and angels are made more often on staff crosses rather than the top part of hand crosses, since the larger dimensions of the former offer better opportunities for such representations. Still, by visualizing and reinforcing the connection between the Ark and the cross, such images both reflect and amplify a cultural emphasis that could also inform the interpretation of the base of Ethiopian hand crosses as a reference to the Ark. Above I have also suggested that one of the functions of the textile appended from Ethiopian staff crosses, especially during processions, could be to visualize the theological relationship between the cross and the *tabot* covered by a textile, that is, the salvific connection between the two holiest objects of the Old and the New Testament, the Ark and the True Cross (Figs. 99–100). If this hypothesis is valid, then it provides another example of a uniquely Ethiopian tradition to relate these two holy objects, which

could also be manifested in the base of hand crosses as references to the Ark.

At this point, I would like to introduce the hand cross of Fig. 135, which seems created with the intention to offer a particularly emphatic visualization of the Ark-cross connection. This object was produced for the tourist market, since its cross-shaped window in the middle of the top part has no latch and swings open with the slightest movement, rendering this hand cross impractical for ritual use (Fig. 135f).³¹⁰ In addition, when I purchased this cross online, it bore a self-adhesive tag with the phrase 'Made in Ethiopia'. The design is unlike anything I have seen before, on published examples or crosses sold online, yet from a theological point of view, it is a masterful visualization of traditional beliefs of Ethiopian Christianity. This combination of originality and tradition is a salient feature of objects produced for the tourist market by contemporary Ethiopian creators. As mentioned already, they are trained in church school or are clerics themselves, and they also work for the local market that serves the religious and devotional needs of Ethiopian Christians.³¹¹ If this specimen was missing the impractical swinging window, it would be a perfect example of a sophisticated hand cross with an erudite visual reference to the Ark-cross link that at least the members of the clergy, if not the congregation, should be able to identify. The base of the cross is not simply rectangular and chest-like. It is also overshadowed by cherubim, like the Ark was. On one side, there are two identical-looking winged figures left and right of the chest, and a larger one on top (Fig. 135a/d). In addition, the chest contains an object that could be intended to represent the two tablets of the Law. It also looks like a book, in which case it could allude to the New Law, Christ the Logos (Word) made known to the world through the Gospel. On the other side (Fig. 135b/e), in addition to the three cherubim there is a fourth, larger

³¹⁰ As mentioned by Sobania and Silverman, 'Icons of Devotion/Icons of trade', 30–31, the insertion of windows that open up to additional decorated surfaces is the most prominent innovation on traditional Ethiopian objects now produced for the tourist market.

³¹¹ See Sobania and Silverman, 'Icons of Devotion/ Icons of trade', esp. 27–29.

one, in the center of the chest (or perhaps intended to be on top of the chest which is shown open on the other side). Biblical descriptions mention only two cherubim overshadowing the Ark, while here we have up to four. This shouldn't be considered a mistake, but an elaboration probably meant to emphasize the sanctity of the object. As already noted, the intention in such depictions is not literal and detailed accuracy, but an indexical analogy that makes the object recognizable and emphasizes its importance—here highlighted through the number of cherubim, sacred winged guardians. In addition, the Ethiopian fifteenth-century *Book of the Mysteries of the Heaven and the Earth* makes reference to four cherubim overshadowing the ark.³¹² Maybe this reflects a more widespread understanding that in the Temple of Solomon, there were four cherubim in the Holy of Holies: two directly on top of the Ark, according to *Exodus* 25:18–20, referring to the Mosaic Tabernacle, and another two above the Ark, in the middle of the sanctuary, according to *1Kings* 6:23–28, referring to the Solomonic Temple.

There is also another way to explain the presence of more than two winged creatures on the base of this hand-cross: the extraordinary handle is carefully modeled like a wooden ladder that leads up to a cross populated by numerous winged figures, most like the cherubim of the base and some with a full body and in a few cases holding swords, like archangels (Fig. 135a-c, f-g). This could therefore be a reference to Jacob's Ladder (*Genesis* 28:10–19), on which angels traveled between earth and heaven. In this context, the Ark on the base would represent earth, on which more than two winged creatures appear, having descended from above. So the two symmetrical cherubim flanking the ark on left and right could be the ones sculpted to overshadow the container of the Law, while the additional winged creatures on top of the chest could be perceived as living angelic messengers of God that have just stepped down from the Ladder. In Christian exegesis, Jacob's Ladder that bridges earth and heaven is a prefiguration of Mary, the Mother who offers her flesh so that the heavenly king can be in-

³¹² Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 46.

vested with a body and descend on earth to save his people.³¹³ Since the Ark is also a prefiguration of Mary as container of the incarnated Logos, the combination of the two Old Testament images on this hand cross is very successful: the Ladder, Mary's body, leads God down into the Ark, the maternal womb in which he is formed as Christ, the New Law, and is then offered to the world.³¹⁴

³¹³ To mention just a few examples of this Marian interpretation of the Ladder, see McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 61, 68, 110, 120. In this text, Mary is presented as the 'ladder of intercession', carrying up to heaven the prayers of all Christians. A similar idea is found in the *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of Kings*), where Mary is the censer containing Christ, and the perfume of the incense carries the prayers of the pure, while the chains of the censer 'are the ladder which Jacob saw' (Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 175).

³¹⁴ In the *Book of the Mysteries*, the same passage that mentions four cherubim overshadowing the ark also states that 'so have the Four Evangelists ornamented the Church with the shadow of their teachings. As the Ten Words [i.e. the Law] entered the *Tabot* so hath the Word of God dwelt in the womb of the Virgin' (Budge, *The Book of the Mysteries*, 46. Similar ideas repeated in pp. 74–75). This is a typical example of the web of connections that typological mentality weaves out of the threads of salvation history: Mary is the Mother of God, the New Ark, and the Church.



135a. Contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (12.25 x 4.75 inches, 31 x 12 cm), decorated with angelic figures and a cross-shaped window that opens up to reveal more figures (see Fig. 135f). Bought on the online market, author's collection. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.



135b. Other side of the same cross (of Fig. 135a), with more angelic figures.



135c. Detail of the handle, which seems shaped like a wooden ladder.
Photos by Maria Evangelatou.



135d-e. The two sides of the base of the same hand cross. d: possibly the Ark of the Covenant containing the Tablets of the Law and surrounded by three cherubim. e: possibly the Ark of the Covenant surrounded by four cherubim. Photos by Maria Evangelatou.



135f. Same hand cross (135a), with cross-shaped window open to reveal more angelic figures. Photo by Maria Evangelatou.



135g. Detail of the other side of the same hand cross (135b). Photo by Maria Evangelatou.

On this hand cross, the top part (the main body of the cross) is covered by angelic creatures that seem to be flying in chorus-like circles up in heaven, or even appear descending head-down towards the earth (Fig. 135a–b, f–g). In this way, the True Cross is visually related to the wooden Ark and Ladder, since it is the sacred wood on which the New Law was nailed and through which earth and heaven were reunited. At the same time, the cross is declared to be superior to both the Ark and the Ladder, since it is the fulfillment of what they prefigured; in comparison to them, it appears to be made of heaven itself, densely populated by angels. Indeed, the Ladder foreshadowed God's descent to earth and the Ark presented his will and teachings to the world, while the True Cross allowed humankind to return back up in heaven, which was reopened to them through Christ's sacrifice. The True Cross is also the true Ladder, which makes both descend *and* ascent possible. In addition, the heavenly nature of this hand cross and its relation to angelic figures, some of whom appear armed, could be also considered a reference to the beginning and the end of salvation history. According to Ethiopian tradition, the cross was the luminous weapon that God gave to his angels to defeat Satan and his army at the beginning of time; and it is also the luminous sign that will appear to announce the Second Coming, when angels will assist Christ during the Last Judgment.³¹⁵ The wedge that unites the handle with the top part of the cross takes the form of a leaf or palm branch, which sometimes appears on Ethiopian crosses in the junction between the body and the handle or shaft (Fig. 135a–b, f–g. Compare Figs. 111b, 125b, where the palm leaf appears on the 'verdant' side of the cross.) This motif possibly alludes to the familiar theme of the cross as the Tree of Life, which also reinforces the triple reference to the beginning, middle/center, and end of salvation history (Fall, Crucifixion, Last Judgment and entry to the Heavenly Jerusalem). This unusual hand cross offers a brilliant visualization of fundamental concepts of Ethiopian Christianity that other crosses articulate in more traditional ways, and provides a valuable insight into the vitality of typological mentality in Ethiopian culture. In addition, it presents a clear example of the base of

³¹⁵ See notes 5–6 above.

the cross as a visual reference to the Ark, suggesting that a similar interpretation could be applied to hand crosses with a simpler chest-like base.

In fact, the connection between the Ark of the Law and Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is referenced through a unique feature of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity that has a very prominent place in Church rituals: the *tabot* ('ark'), the most sacred object owned by every church, is an altar-tablet on which the Eucharist is celebrated, and is kept in an ark-chest which is also called *tabot* or *manbara tabot* ('throne of the ark', Figs. 136–137).³¹⁶ As scholars have already observed, the *tabot* is treated with special reverence that resembles the handling of the Ark in the Old Testament. For example, only the clergy can see and touch it; when it is presented in public, it is covered by a precious textile and it is carried in procession, accompanied by dancing and singing (Figs. 99, 134).³¹⁷ The linguistic, formal and ritual identity of the Ethiopian *tabot* clearly refers to the idea of the Ark as the container of the New Living Law (the tablet on which the Eucharist, the body of Christ, is prepared and sacrificed).³¹⁸ This emphatic connection between the

³¹⁶ For main information on the *tabot* and its importance in Ethiopian culture see Heldman, 'Architectural symbolism'; *African Zion*, 11, 137–39; *Ethiopian Art*, 38, 54; Merahi, *Covenant*, 12–17. Sometimes the altar-tablet is called *sellat* (tablet) instead of *tabot* (ark), but the term *tabot* is also used to identify both the tablet and the chest that contains it. See the discussion in Heldman, 'Architectural symbolism', 223, and *African Zion*, 11, 139.

³¹⁷ Heldman, 'Architectural symbolism', 223; *African Zion*, 11; *Ethiopian Art*, 54; Merahi, *Covenant*, 13.

³¹⁸ I believe that the Eucharistic use of the *tabot*-tablet identifies this holy object with the body of Christ. The ten commandments might be inscribed on the *tabot*, which also contains the name of the saint (or saints) to which each church is dedicated, but I do not see this use as transforming the *tabot* into the body of the saint (as proposed by Heldman, 'Architectural symbolism', 223). The *tabot* manifests the presence of God, whose New Testament Law is that of love and sacrifice, first embodied by Christ and performed during his Crucifixion and the Eucharist, and secondly embodied in the lives of his saints who offer moral examples to be imitat-

wooden Ark and the Passion of Jesus on the wooden Cross, re-enacted in the Eucharist, could be also referenced in the unique form of Ethiopian hand crosses with their prominent (and often chest-like) base. In fact, the rectangular proportions of the base on many hand crosses are very similar to those of rectangular *tabot* chests, which are often decorated with crosses (compare Figs. 136–138).³¹⁹

ed by the faithful. So the *tabot*-Christ contains the name of the honored servant/ saint as a living manifestation of the divine law of Grace. Merahi, *Contribution*, 74, clearly states that the carrying of the *tabots* to the water body where the Baptism of Christ is celebrated on January 6th ‘is to show the coming of Jesus Christ from Galilee to Jordan’. In other words, the *tabot* stands for Christ himself in this religious ritual, which is one of the most important in the Ethiopian Church, attended by the entire congregation. The identification of Christ with the New Law is widespread in Christianity and in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. This association justifies the hypothesis that the consecrated copy of the Old Law, the altar-tablet/*tabot* on which the Eucharist is celebrated in every Ethiopian Orthodox Church, can be also identified with Christ whose Eucharistic body is placed on that very *tabot*. See, for example, the reference to the Old Testament Ark and the Law in the Ethiopian *Book of Mysteries*: ‘The *Tabot* [Ark]... is the symbol of our Lady Mary. And the Ten Commandments which were in the *Tabot* were the symbol of Christ, the splendour of life; the Word of the Father...’, Budge, *The Book of Mysteries*, 159–60. The same identification of the Tablets of the Law with Christ contained in Mary the Ark is prominent in the hugely popular *Kebrā Nagast* (*Glory of Kings*), which presents the Solomonic descent of the Ethiopian kings. See Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 8 (Christ is the tablets), 179 (Christ is the Word of God on the tablets).

³¹⁹ See the images reproduced in *African Zion*, 137; *Sacro e bellezza*, 92–93.



136. Wooden *tabot* chest for the safe-keeping of a *tabot* tablet on which the Eucharist is celebrated in Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. From a rock-cut church in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo in the public domain (http://www.galenfrysinger.com/rock_church_ethiopia.htm).



137. Wooden *tabot* chest decorated with crosses. From a rock-cut church in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo in the public domain (http://www.galenfrysinger.com/rock_church_ethiopia.htm).



138a–b. Two sides of a contemporary Ethiopian hand cross (8 x 3 inches, 20 x 7.5 cm). Bought online, author's collection. Photo by Joe Mills, courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

It must be of particular importance that the visual reference to the Ark of the Covenant, so central to Ethiopian identity, appears on hand crosses. Contrary to pendants, which address more personal concerns of daily life and are handled only by the wearer, and contrary to staff crosses that are handled only by clerics and altar boys and are viewed by the public from a distance, hand crosses are central in the intimate social interaction of Church leaders with their flock (Figs. 74–81). When they are presented by their owners and kissed by the faithful, hand crosses become instrumental in articulating relationships of power and activating religious and cultural beliefs that together define the identity of the people involved in this ritual interaction. In the process of enacting their respective roles, they reaffirm their belonging to specific groups and hierarchies. At the same time, they acknowledge each other as members of the larger community of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, sharing

a common pride in tracing their origins to the royal house of Israel, and celebrating their privileged relationship with God manifested through ownership of the Ark *and* veneration of the cross. It is this unique Ethiopian combination of Judaism and Christianity that sets them apart and in their eyes makes them special in relation to both Jews and other Christians. As the above analysis has ventured to demonstrate, the unique visual elements of Ethiopian crosses can be better understood and appreciated as socio-cultural statements that both reflect *and* promote the unique beliefs and customs of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox tradition and its followers.



139. Silhouette of an ancient Ethiopian staff cross, Kidane Mihret (Covenant of Mercy) Monastery, Zege Peninsula, Lake Tana, Ethiopia. Photo by Steve Davey Photography / Alamy Stock Photo.

CHAPTER FOUR.

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO ETHIOPIAN CROSSES: THE FABRIC OF RITUAL AND THE TREE OF CULTURE

The above analysis was in no way intended to be exhaustive of the visual vocabulary of Ethiopian crosses. Such a goal can never be reached, not only because these crosses are created within a living, ever growing tradition, leading to the production of an inexhaustible variety of forms, but also because each cross contains a number of elements that offer the possibility of numerous interpretations, kaleidoscopically transformed in the eyes and minds of their creators and users. In the last part of this book, I would like to present some thoughts on this open-ended and multilayered significance of Ethiopians crosses that will also lead me to some theoretical explorations with wider implications in the field of visual studies.

VISIBILITY

The first issue I will touch upon is that of visibility. It is important to bear in mind that the many iconographic details laboriously engraved on staff and hand crosses remain to a large extent unnoticed by the people who handle them during rituals and formal interactions. However, as contradictory as it might sound, in religious ritual contexts the significance of visual signs is not diminished, but on the contrary increased when their visibility is limited. Simply put, those who pay for and create such signs are aware that the details will not be fully visible in their intended context, yet they still invest the labor, time, and money needed to produce them. This choice reveals that the importance of such signs resides not only in their *visibility* (which remains a factor in a lesser or greater extent),

but also in their *presence*. Firstly, the labor lavished on visual aspects of ritual objects that are not visible in all their details and complexity during their use enhances the cost and value and therefore the honor attributed to the objects themselves and by extension to God, who is the ultimate recipient of worship and the one with the power to offer protection and salvation in return for his people's devotion. This also becomes an opportunity of conspicuous display for the wealth, piety, and status of the donors who pay, the creators who labor and the church institutions that use such lavish object. By extension the whole congregation takes pride in them and aspires to receive divine favor in return.³²⁰

Such objects are meant to complement the energy of rituals as spatio-temporal realms of interaction between God and his people. The inclusion of complex and subtle details that might remain invisible to the eyes of most human participants clearly emphasizes the importance of ritual objects as dedications to God, whose eyes see everything. As declarations of faith, manifestations of hopes and needs, invocations for divine protection, and expressions of gratefulness for gifts already granted, such signs enrich and amplify the energy field that envelopes God and his people and reinforces their connection. An omniscient God can read the hearts and minds of his devotees and knows everything before it is said, but humans operate on a more concrete dimension—they need to express their faith in order to experience it, they need to declare their devotion, thankfulness, and dependence from God in order to feel worthy of his presence and hopeful about his assistance. Religious ritual is a human code of communication with the divine that involves the sensorial, emotional, and cognitive faculties of human nature in order to approach the super-natural dimension of God—

³²⁰ Similar observations can be valid in any kind of ritual designed to uphold hierarchical relations of power. Consider, for example, socio-political rituals (that might have a religious component or not) like coronations: the visual details of the regalia, clothes, throne, or architectural setting that are not visually perceived in their totality during the ceremony make eloquent references to the power, wealth, and other culturally-specific virtues of the ruler and the prosperity of the kingdom. Depending on the culture, a divinity might be included in these statements or not.

the spiritual entity that created the natural world but is above and beyond it. In this leap of faith that bridges different dimensions, the link between the material and the spiritual is fluid and flexible in order to allow objects, actions, and participants to signify, be, or become more than what meets the eye. In this way, the Eucharistic bread and wine are believed to be the salvific body of Christ, a corpse is thought to be the miraculous relic of a saint, perfumed incense becomes a medium for the heavenly ascent of prayers, an icon is supposed to manifest the presence and power of the holy figure depicted, and a cross is believed to offer protection against all evil. This link that faith creates between the material and the spiritual accommodates the belief according to which visual signs externalize (make manifest) or even internalize (attribute) sanctity to a ritual object. That same object is then acknowledged to embody power and significance regardless of whether or not its visual aspects are perceived in their totality by all (or any) of its viewers. This creative process of meaning-making is based on a kind of cultural consensus that invests objects with power and turns them into cultural agents, into subjects with influential roles that are served but not limited by their physical nature. Consider, for example, the Ark of the Old Testament in the church of Zion in Aksum, that no Ethiopian ever sees besides the single monk who is appointed as its guardian; or the Tablets of the Law, that according to the Bible no Jew ever saw after they were placed in the Ark, but all believed in their divine power to define the life of the community. In these cases what makes the holy objects powerful is knowledge of their presence and acknowledgment of their significance, both of which are heightened rather than diminished by limited visibility (in this case understood to be a sign of extraordinary sanctity that results in limited access).

In the case of the Ark in Aksum or the Tablets of the Law in Jewish tradition, the entire holy object remains invisible, and not just some of its visual aspects. When the interplay of visibility and invisibility is only partial, that is, when the holy object is visible but not all of its visual aspects are easily observed, then the concept of hypersensorial presence (presence that is acknowledged even when not fully perceived in sensorial terms) is again of great importance. In order to shed more light on this idea, it is helpful to revisit the weaving metaphor about the production of the fabric of union between God and his people in the context of religious ritual: the

weavers focus their attention on the design created by the warp of faith and the weft of experience through the instruments of the loom and the shuttle (the ritual framework and ritual objects). These instruments might be extraordinarily sophisticated and elaborate for the creation of such a precious and transcendental textile, but the weavers concentrate not on the physical appearance of the instruments, but on the result that they produce—the fabric of experienced faith and communion with God.

Ethiopian crosses are elaborate ritual instruments in a religious context that links the material and the spiritual, the personal and the communal, the past and the present with the future. In more concrete terms, crosses engage ritual participants by linking their personal concerns and aspirations with the values and traditions of their communities. Another way to understand this function is through the metaphor of a power grid in which crosses act as switches in the circulation of energy. Crosses mediate between personal networks of sensorial, emotional, and cognitive faculties and communal circuits of social and cultural beliefs and goals. In other words, when ritual participants interact with crosses, their experiences depend on the ways in which their individual networks access and process the energy (values and traditions) of the socio-cultural circuit they share with other members of the community. In this metaphor of socially and culturally constructed, communally shared and individually processed and experienced meaning in the context of ritual, crosses become switches that activate the flow of energy between the socio-cultural circuit and the individual networks of ritual participants. This flow is multidirectional as both circuit and networks, societies and individuals, depend on each other: individual experiences are energized by socio-cultural values and socio-cultural values are activated through individual experiences. In the same way that the ring and the web support each other in the structure of a dream catcher, the communal circuit of social and cultural values and the individual networks of sensorial, emotional, and cognitive faculties depend on each other for the generation of experience and meaning in a ritual context. Crosses and other ritual objects are instrumental in this context because they provide points of contact between the communal circuit and the individual networks, facilitating communication and understanding between the various social agents.

Ethiopian Christians already have in mind a set of ideas about salvation history and the role of the cross, but also about how the crosses of their visual tradition look and what their various patterns might mean. They are familiar with mental processes (such as typology), basic cultural stories (such as the Ark's crossing of river Jordan), and visual signs (such as flowing water) that they might use to produce their interpretations of the cross. So Ethiopian Christians operate within a pre-existing framework that they enrich with their personal input—interests, inclinations, and analytical skills, related to their educational and social background, their family or regional background, their gender or occupation, their individual preferences, and even the moods or needs of any given moment. Through all these filters, they are able to extract from or introduce into the visual material various interpretations in relation to what they see and what they don't see. In this fluid and multi-layered interaction with the cultural treasury of ideas to which the crosses belong, meaning is not only activated and brought into light but it is also created and deposited in order to enrich a constantly expanding tradition. Before I discuss in more detail this process, examining terms such as sedimentation, palimpsesting, and kaleidoscopic experience, I will dwell a bit longer on specific case scenarios that demonstrate the variety of approaches and outcomes possible in Ethiopian Christians' interaction with these crosses.

First of all, we must consider that in comparison to outsiders (for example, scholars from different cultures, like myself) Ethiopians are much more familiar with their visual tradition, and this perhaps enables them to recognize and perceive a rather detailed image of a cross' decoration in a ritual context even when they are allowed only a quick glimpse of the object. For example, when bowing to kiss the hand cross of a priest, they might see and process elements that untrained eyes and minds would not capture. At the same time, their familiarity with the great richness of their visual tradition can enable them to see or imagine elements that do not really appear or are not actually visible (even when they are present) on a specific cross, but are still meaningful mental images and interpretations in their cultural and ritual context. In a kind of fluid and cyclical imprint transference, previous visual images are embedded in the mind and later can be projected outwards to influence new visual experiences. For example, when looking at a staff cross from the distance imposed by a crowded procession (Fig.

140), Ethiopians might recall details that they know exist on this specific cross from a previous, closer interaction; or they might employ their cultural memory in order to mentally endow the cross with visual details it doesn't have, but can meaningfully accommodate, as integral elements of the overall cultural tradition. In both cases, the viewers engage in a cultural exercise that may be termed 'ellipsis-reversal'. By reversal I mean the comprehension of an elliptical statement: an achievement which can create a positive conscious or subconscious emotional and mental reaction. As with textual sentences (for example an elliptical quotation from the Bible or the Koran), so with visual ones, when the readers or viewers are able to contribute the missing part and comprehend the reference in its totality, they might gain a higher sense of self-esteem and belonging to a privileged community of knowledgeable, insightful, and pious individuals. This reaction can occur consciously, especially when the ellipsis is not easily overcome without special knowledge. When the process is effortless and almost reflexive, the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment is perhaps more subtle, but it can still create a feeling of empowerment through productive interaction with the textual or visual ellipsis. Or perhaps the effortlessness of the resolution of an ellipsis provides additional reason for pride. In any case, such a resolution creates a sense of peace and order by producing a clearer and more complete understanding of an important statement and a stronger bond with the values it expounds.³²¹

³²¹ My comments on the resolution of ellipsis are inspired by the observations of W. Begley on the elliptical Koranic inscriptions of the Taj Mahal. Begley discusses the ways in which such elliptical inscriptions are used to construct meaning by drawing attention to hidden messages and by emphasizing the importance of the missing parts of the holy text for the revelation of the deeper significance of the entire Koranic passages in this architectural context. See W. E. Begley, 'The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning', *The Art Bulletin* 61. 1 (1979), 7–37, esp. 27–28.



140. Procession of Ethiopian Orthodox clerics holding the Gospel, a staff cross and ceremonial parasols, while the laity watch from a distance, during the celebration of Palm Sunday, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo by Kevin O'Hara/ age fotostock.

These are not the only possible avenues of approach to limited visibility. Even though the power and meaning of a cross might not be negatively impacted in the mind of viewers by visibility limitations, the viewers' own agency might be restricted and their self-perception affected, if instead of developing an imaginative reversal of visual ellipsis they choose to dwell on their unfulfilled desire to view a sacred cross as closely as possible. It is often the case that social status and hierarchy are reflected in religious ritual by the proximity or distance of social agents in relation to the most sacred objects or spaces. After all, religious ritual doesn't only establish communication between humans and the divine, but also between humans themselves, expressing and impressing, reflecting and restructuring social hierarchies, power relations, and the cultural values that articulate them. In the context of Christian liturgical rituals and processions, the Ethiopians closer to the crosses are the members of the clergy handling them. The order in which mem-

bers of the congregation stand in front of staff crosses or walk behind or next to them might reflect hierarchical relations of power depending on local and culturally specific values:³²² the most highly regarded and powerful members of the community might be closer to the crosses, leaving less prominent and influential members further away. The distance in itself might be considered a communally recognized sign of social standing, a reference point for the hierarchical arrangement of people in space, regardless of the degree of visibility of the cross and the visual details that each person is able to see. In addition, individual participants might develop more personal reactions, in which they might internalize their limited access to the visual details of the cross as a manifestation of their limited importance in the community. In other words, visual/ material *presence* can be at least as important as visual/ sensorial *perception* for ritual objects and their specific features that are meant to address and praise divine or human agents, or exalt the objects themselves as agents. But when the same ritual objects articulate relations of power between different categories of human agents, then visual/ sensorial *perception* (i.e. visibility, tactility, etc.), rather than visual/ material *presence*, can be fundamental for the construction and reception of the intended messages.³²³ Such sensorial perception may

³²² Social standing is constructed on the basis of numerous factors that depend not only on the surrounding cultural values but also on the specific dynamics of each community, and can range from more easily measurable variables (such as socio-political alliances, wealth, profession, education, age, gender, specific skills, physical strength, etc.) to more elusive ones (such as moral character, life experiences, wisdom, mental or spiritual abilities etc.) that all together form the influence and reputation of a person in his or her community. My limited familiarity with Ethiopian society doesn't allow me to identify the specific contribution of particular factors, and I can also assume that there might be great differences between rural and urban areas, or between different ethnic groups.

³²³ In Ethiopia, the visibility of religious images might also be related to the state of ritual cleanliness, which distinguishes between pure and impure members of the congregation and therefore constructs notions of superiority and inferiority that establish power relations. Sobania and Silverman, 'Patrons and Artists', 474–75, mention the following very inter-

lead to very different experiences, depending on whether access is fully allowed, limited and regulated, or entirely denied. Below, I will briefly examine the implications of visibility and tactility for those who have full access to Ethiopian crosses—the people who produce and handle them. In many cases, these two categories overlap, as clergymen or monks often create the crosses that they also use in the context of rituals.

The people with the fullest visual access to Ethiopian crosses, those most aware of their visual details, are their makers. Since many of them have been educated in church school or are active clergymen or monks,³²⁴ we can assume that successive generations through the centuries continuously create, disseminate, and enrich

esting case: towards the end of the 20th century, a wealthy donor wanted to dedicate religious paintings to a church in Aksum and was informed that all spaces inside the building were already assigned to other donors. So he built four porticoes around the church and commissioned religious paintings to be painted outside the church, under the porticoes. In his mind, that unusual solution offered the opportunity for people to benefit from the sight of holy stories even when they were not allowed to enter the church because they were ritually unclean. On the contrary, monks thought the exact opposite—that it was inappropriate for such people to see the images. So eventually, curtains were hung in front of them, partitioned to reveal the images only on specific occasions. The authors note: ‘covering the paintings in churches is in fact an age-old practice that serves the dual purpose of demonstrating respect for sacred images and to keep the images clean’. I assume that such images are revealed on special feast days, to receive the veneration of the faithful. Thinking along the lines of this information, one might assume that people who participate in religious processions outside the church might not approach or touch the cross if they are ritually unclean, and might not be able to see the images on it from a distance, but all participants receive the blessing of the holy sign that emanates in all directions in the space around it. Restrictions of access to holy images based on notions of ritual purity enhance both the venerability of the images and the marginalization of the unclean: visibility is used to construct power relations between members of the congregation and the monks or clergy, who are the judges of ritual purity and control access to the images.

³²⁴ See notes 97–8 above.

a living tradition of visual signs whose various meanings they recognize and consciously employ in one version or another. Even if they don't apply a meaning to every single element that they add on a cross, or even if the meaning they choose for a sign varies from one creation to another or from one maker to another (and later on even from one viewer to another), we can be certain that conscious choices and interpretations go into the production of such complex and varied crosses that display so many possible links to basic cultural values and beliefs of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. We may assume that at least the makers raised within church culture perceive a multifaceted privilege in their role. They have the honor of creating holy objects that are central in the interaction of Christians with each other and with God. In that capacity, not only do they fulfill their potential as humans in the 'image and likeness' of the Creator of the world (*Genesis* 1:26), but they also become mediators and contributors in the life of communities and individuals whose experiences are marked by the symbol of the cross. If divine protection and salvation are channeled to the faithful through the cross, then the makers of that channel play an honorable role in the process of illumination. The most venerable example of this kind of mediation is Mary herself, who is hailed for her role in human salvation because she was the instrument of the Incarnation, the channel through which God descended on earth to be reunited with his people. Creators of sacred images and objects which play an important role in sustaining the experience of that reunion could indeed see the Virgin as their supreme model and inspiration.³²⁵

In fact, the act of giving birth is an appropriate metaphor for a creative process that transforms amorphous material, like blood or

³²⁵ This mentality seems at work when Byzantine painters sign with pride as the providers of 'divine gifts' next to images of Mary holding Christ who is the most precious divine gift of all and is offered to the faithful through the images created by the painters. Two characteristic examples survive in the fourteenth-century church of St. Demetrius in Peć, present-day Kosovo, and the fifteenth-century church of the Holy Cross at Agiasmati, Cyprus. I intend to discuss both in more detail in a future publication provisionally entitled 'The hand of the master: thoughts on the self-perception of Byzantine icon painters'.

metal, into a human body or the body of the cross. In a religious context, the creation of a sacred object like that of the cross, believed to be imbued with divine holiness and power, resonates even more with the miracle of the creation of life. It is worth considering the powerful impact that this analogy might have on the psychology of a creator who brings to life a cross. He generates a vessel of divine grace by giving shape to unstructured matter, in the same way that God himself created the world (*Genesis* 1). Such an intense visual and tactile process of transformation and its ideological ramifications could elevate the creation of holy objects into a mystical experience of personal realization, empowerment, and alignment with God.³²⁶

In the case of cross makers, the privilege of creation is coupled with that of an unlimited visual and tactile access to the sacred crosses and all their visual details, which is not shared by the majority of the faithful. In the choice and execution of sophisticated designs with multilayered symbolic potential, the creators may experience an elevated state of consciousness that links them both with their internal personal power and with the external divine force. As they labor on the subtleties of the cross and focus on its meaning, they may immerse themselves into an act of prayer, meditation, and devotion to God that fully integrates their physical and spiritual capacities, in the same way that Christian rituals interweave the material and the spiritual realms. So their creative processes may become rituals themselves, leading them to embody and internalize the theological and devotional significance of the intricate symbolism of the cross while they produce it. The creation may evolve into an intimate religious experience that presupposes but also reinforces faith and a deeper understanding of the visual language employed, in the same way that ritual does. The visual language itself is enriched in the process of its use, as the creators imprint the cross with open-ended expressions of meaning, visual variations of a growing tradition that is meant to accommodate numerous com-

³²⁶ Compare Heldman's observations concerning the pride monks and priests express in their production of metal objects, in relation to the term 'wax and gold' used to describe a refined literary tradition, mentioned in note 132 above.

plementary interpretations. This transformative potential of evolving interpretations makes the ritual life of such crosses a continuous process of re-creation by its various users. Yet, the original creative act remains a defining moment in which the maker exercises his power to bring to life crosses as visual generators of meaning endowed with characteristics of his choice that he intimately knows in every detail. This exclusive relationship with the sign of the cross can lead to a sense of elevated knowledge and insight into the mysteries of the faith and the subtleties of its visual expression—a sense that can have a powerful impact on the self-perception of the maker and his pride in his creative role. He may perceive himself to possess both piety and erudition that potentially set him apart from the majority of the faithful, who do not enjoy the same privilege of creation and access. I do not assume that all Ethiopian cross makers experience the creative process in this way. Especially if they produce a large number of crosses for a living and they are pressured by the practical and economic exigencies of life, they might experience a less exalted process of creation, as opposed to those who focus their energy to creating just their own personal hand cross (as priests often do, especially in the case of wooden hand crosses). Yet all possibilities are worth considering. Even a maker who produces crosses for a living can see his profession as a pious duty and might approach his work as a devotional practice.

The clergymen and monks who are custodians or owners of the crosses also have a privileged relationship with them that is not available to the other members of the community. Direct tactile access to the crosses might provide them with heightened blessing and protection. The possibility to own a hand cross, to handle a hand or staff cross during rituals and processions, and to use them in order to articulate their prestigious role as spiritual leaders and mediators in the illumination of the faithful, generate considerable social, cultural, and personal capital. These privileges afford a prominent place in social hierarchy, an influential role in cultural experience and operation, and an elevated sense of personal worth and honor. Even altar boys can develop an elevated sense of self-worth from their privileged access to crosses in the context of rituals, and may experience joy and elation as they contemplate the holy sign and the blessings they receive from it (Fig. 141) All of these perceptions are enhanced by the exclusive visual and tactile access to crosses that their owners and custodians can enjoy out-

side the context of ritual, in private moments of prayer and meditation. In such cases, the experience of reinforced faith and deeper insight into the potential significance of a cross is comparable to that of the creators of crosses who also have the privilege of unlimited visual and tactile access.



141. Two altar boys observe the body of a staff cross as they prepare to participate in a religious procession, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Feije Riemersma / Alamy Stock Photo.



142. An Ethiopian Orthodox monk holds his wooden hand cross as he immerses himself in devotional reading, while his pilgrim's staff cross rests against the wall behind him, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Mitchell Kanashkevich.



143. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds his wooden hand cross as he immerses himself in devotional reading, Tigray region, Ethiopia. Photo by Nicolas Marino/ age fotostock.



144. An Ethiopian Orthodox cleric holds his wooden hand cross as he immerses himself in devotional reading, rock-cut Church of Golgotha, Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Paul Strawson / Alamy Stock Photo.



145. Close-up of the same cleric, holding his hand cross during his devotional reading (as in Fig. 144). Photo by Paul Strawson / Alamy Stock Photo.

Once more, a privileged intimate interaction with the cross defines the people involved, both in relation to others and in relation to themselves. This is reflected in the pride with which the custodians of religious treasures, including crosses, stand next to or hold the heirlooms they display when they are photographed by outsiders, or in the pride with which clergymen and holy men display their own personal hand cross in front of their chest when they pose for a photographic portrait (Figs. 37–38, 51, 63–73). This intimate companionship between an owner and his hand cross is also manifested when these men immerse themselves in the study of holy texts while holding their cross in one hand (Figs. 142–145). Even though at that moment their eyes are turned to scripture and not to their cross, we can imagine that their intimate knowledge of their prized protective possession in all its intricacies and potential meanings enriches their meditation. Their spiritual experience is enhanced by the power of the cross, a power that they see visualized on its body whenever they cast their glance on it.

We have already seen that Ethiopian crosses accommodate a multitude of meanings on a number of intersecting planes, including the power and significance of this sacred sign in salvation history and in the relationship of God to his people, or its role in articulating social hierarchies and cultural values, defining personal and communal experiences or serving important devotional, healing and apotropaic concerns. At the last section of this book, I would like to offer some thoughts on this dynamic operation that could be useful in a more general theoretical discourse about the mechanisms and effects of visual creations in human perception, expression, and communication.

CONSTRUCTING MEANING: INVESTIGATING TERMS OF FLUIDITY AND MULTIPLICITY

I see the open-ended potential of Ethiopian crosses as generators of meaning to be based on three basic factors: their predominantly symbolic rather than narrative visual language; their Ethiopian cultural context which, within the framework of specific traditional values, encourages very diverse personal responses that reflect and ensure the vitality and richness of this tradition; and the inherent power of visual creations to accommodate different interpretations. This last factor and function also refers to what symbols are designed to do. I have already discussed how the interweaving of

simple elements such as water patterns or threads can encode a variety of meanings or possibilities of interpretation that the makers and users of Ethiopian crosses can then activate. In this process, they apply both exegesis and eisegesis (literally ‘extraction’ and ‘insertion’ of meaning respectively). In the case of exegesis as ‘extraction’, culturally constructed and personally accepted meaning is supposed to be inherently *embedded* in the cross and is *retrieved* by the exegetes, resulting in a number of consistent and widely recognized interpretations. In the case of eisegesis as ‘insertion’, personally developed and culturally influenced meaning is *applied* on the cross and can result in a wealth of idiosyncratic and ever-changing interpretations. Thus eisegetical readings might have more or less solid links to the cultural context, but their validity and power are especially strong for the individuals who create them. Although a clear distinction between exegetical and eisegetical interpretations is neither possible nor meaningful, I bring up these two terms in order to place emphasis on the potential for personal and idiosyncratic interpretations that symbolic visual creations like Ethiopian crosses can generate. Identifying such interpretations would require a fascinating and never-ending process of interviewing Ethiopians on the significance of the cross. The replies of the same individual could differ greatly over time, even on the same cross, depending on factors such as life experiences, the needs and mood of the moment, or even the identity of the interviewer. An illuminating analogy from Ethiopian culture is the interpretation of healing scrolls that have a number of similarities with crosses—they are believed to be powerful protective objects and they share many common visual elements, like threads, knots, crosses, and holy figures. According to Jacque Mercier, who has studied extensively the cultural practices surrounding healing scrolls, their creators (and, I would also assume, their viewers) offer a wide range of interpretations that are in constant flux. Some of them do not offer any interpretation whatsoever on the meaning of a scroll’s visual aspects. Others reveal only some of the meanings they have in mind. And yet others mention different or even diametrically opposed inter-

pretations (for example, protective or harmful) on the same image, depending on context.³²⁷

This open-endedness is shared by other aspects of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture. For example, it can be observed in the composition and circulation of saints' lives, known as *gädlät* (singular *gädl*). These texts play a central role not only in the veneration of holy figures and the dissemination of specific religious and broader socio-cultural values, but also in the construction of power relations that advance the prestige and influence of particular monastic communities or ecclesiastical authorities. Given this wide range of functions (that is not unlike those of crosses), when *gädlät* are composed and copied over the centuries, authors and scribes never reproduce what they have at hand. Instead, depending on the needs of the moment, they constantly change the content—altering, subtracting, or adding material so that the transmission of the text is a continuous process of re-creation.³²⁸ This flexibility is actually a cultural trait of 'traditional' societies that are not trapped by the stereotyping constraints of industrial mass production, corporate media, and highly specialized technologies controlled by economic elites. Although 'traditional' societies uphold reverence for fundamental values that to an outsider might seem restrictive, to insiders those values may provide the necessary supporting framework for a vibrant and ever-changing cultural production that promotes variation and creative diversity both in the conception and in the reception process. It is this combination of deep roots and far-reaching branches, mutually feeding and transforming each other, that lead to the vitality of a living tradition. With these observations, I do not intend to idealize any culture, but rather to recognize that each one is defined by different kinds of limiting constraints and enabling liberties. In Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition, wide plurality of meaning and potential of interpretation are culturally ingrained traits, inextricably linked to the flourishing life of a culture that is based on both continuity and change as the two complementary components of any living and thriving system. This dynamic flexibility of meaning ensures the continuous relevance of characteristic

³²⁷ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, esp. p. 57.

³²⁸ For all the above, see Tesfaye, 'Gädlä Täklä Haymanot', 181–83.

cultural products, like crosses. Based on the combination of constant features and fluid variables open to re-interpretation, such visual creations can serve constant values and expectations (such as stable religious dogma and unending need for divine protection) as well as changing historical conditions and personal concerns that enrich the process of visual experience with new subtleties and nuances.

Turning to my final comments on the function of visual creations as generators of multiple meanings, I would like to underline the complexity of this generative function through the interaction of three factors that are infinitely multilayered themselves and further feed each other's complexities as they intersect. First is the socio-cultural and historical context, with its numerous dynamic parameters in constant flux. Second are the creators and users of the visual material, with their multifaceted potentials and interests, which are formed by faculties and mechanisms developed over millennia of human evolution, by the overall values and operations of their socio-cultural framework, and by the particular individualities of their personality and life conditions. Third is the visual material itself, with all of its subtleties of form, function, and physical context. Obviously, when outside observers attempt to interpret visual material from distant times and places, the interaction of these three factors is further complicated by the introduction of new layers that intersect with the pre-existing ones—the socio-cultural and personal background of the observer and the altered internal and external conditions of the observed material (its physical and conceptual identity and context). I do not believe that any theoretical discourse, methodological approach, or defining terminology could ever capture anything more than aspects of such a complex interaction of factors when visual material is used or studied. The employment of single words in an effort to give a concise theoretical definition to the generation of polyvalent meaning through visual conduits seems especially doomed to failure, unless it is explicitly recognized as an attempt for partial definition with several limitations. After all, language is in itself another complex and culturally embedded phenomenon—not a neutral and truthful path to omniscience.

The relationship of words and images is an inexhaustible subject. Here I would like to limit myself to one comment on the familiar expression 'one image is worth a thousand words'. I do not

take this statement to mean that images are more powerful than words, but that images are as powerful as texts (that is, interweavings of words), with the difference that as visual rather than verbal expressions, images are of a more open-ended structure and can often accommodate a wider range of meanings. Even if everyone could agree on which one thousand words make up an image, they could never agree on how to order those words in one and only one authoritative text (which would still contain a number of possible meanings, as every text does). This fluidity is instrumental in the power of images to be intensely influential and relevant to so many people and in so many different contexts. Ethiopian crosses demonstrate an admirable flexibility and capacity as both depositories and generators of meaning. Therefore, they offer the opportunity to think in more generic terms about the polyvalence of visual creations in the eyes of different makers and users. I aim to identify an appropriate visual metaphor for this polyphonic function, in the hope that a concise and simple definition can make such a complex phenomenon more understandable. A rough outline of a complicated mechanism might help us to understand the basic why and how of its operation. Obviously, the intricacies of the mechanism cannot be captured in this attempt, especially since they are still a subject of study and dispute and will probably remain so for as long as images retain their polyvalence. In the following pages, I will discuss three terms that have been used in scholarly literature to refer to the polyphony and polysemy of visual creations, that is, their ability to embed multiple meanings: sedimentation, palimpsest, and kaleidoscope. I am not interested in a systematic historiographic examination of these terms, but in a practical analysis of their ability to accurately describe the generation of multiple meanings through the creation and use of visual material by different social agents.

Sedimentation is a term used by scholars in the humanities and social sciences to refer to the layering of factors and the deposition of different ideas that interact in varying degrees and produce a range of potential meanings when humans act in a given socio-cultural context and consciously or subconsciously choose to inter-

pret, evaluate, and even alter it in one way or another.³²⁹ The term derives from geology, where it refers to the deposition of transported material that eventually forms sedimentary rock, usually characterized by superimposed layers of different colors (signaling variations in consistency and conditions of sedimentation). When applied to the definition of socio-cultural phenomena, the term reflects the contribution of different components and the length of time often required for their coming into place. But it doesn't adequately reflect the intense *interaction* of diverse socio-cultural parameters, which causes the various layers to intersect, eventually forming a shimmering textile of multiple threads interwoven in various designs. The natural phenomenon of sedimentation eventually results in a rather rigid layering that through lithification consolidates the distinctiveness of separate layers and the lack of interaction between the top and bottom ones (Fig. 146). Even though the top layers might influence the formation of bottom layers (for example through the pressure of their weight or through the infiltration of water from above), the bottom layers do not normally influence those at the top, and they do not come into contact with each other unless a catastrophic phenomenon, like an earthquake, upsets their stratification.³³⁰ This lack of intersectionality between sedimentation layers doesn't correspond to the fluidity and complexity of socio-cultural phenomena.

³²⁹ For example, see Liu Kang, 'Subjectivity, Marxism, and Culture Theory in China', *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 114–140, esp. 124–35. Gu Xin, 'Subjectivity, Modernity, and Chinese Hegelian Marxism: A Study of Li Zehou's Philosophical Ideas from a Comparative Perspective', *Philosophy East and West* 46.2 (1996), 205–245, esp. 214–16. J. Cauvel, 'The Transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou's Aesthetic Theory', *Philosophy East and West* 49.2, (1999), 150–173, esp. 156–61. Li Zehou, 'Subjectivity and "Subjectivity": A Response', *Philosophy East and West* 49.2, (1999), 174–183, esp. 175–77.

³³⁰ For a comprehensive discussion of geological sedimentation see S. Boggs, *Principles of Sedimentology and stratigraphy*, 4th edition (Upper Saddle River 2006).



146. An example of the results of sedimentation lithification, through which different sedimentary layers deposited in successive stages become stone (variegated onyx). Photo by Aerodim/ Shutterstock.com.

This is evident in the way Li Zehou talks about sedimentation in his writings. Li is the contemporary Chinese philosopher who introduced the term ‘sedimentation’ to refer to the ‘cultural-psychological formation’ of fundamental concepts and principles of value (identified with reason, morality, and aesthetics), which take shape in the psyche of individuals and define their interaction with their environment.³³¹ This formation occurs at the intersection of three parameters: the multi-millennial development of the human species; the centuries-long development of a specific culture in which any given individual lives; and the life-long development of personal conditions which directly impact that same individual.³³² Experiences from all three avenues are internalized, condensed, and finally sedimented in the values that consciously or subconsciously guide humans during their lives. While Li equates ‘sedimentation’ with ‘cultural-psychological formation’, he also states

³³¹ See the articles mentioned in note 329.

³³² Discussed in similar terms by Cauvel, ‘Li Zehou’s Aesthetic Theory’, 158.

that he purposefully uses ‘formation’ instead of ‘structure’ to evoke a dynamic versus a static psychological process.³³³ However, natural sedimentation as it occurs in geological phenomena results in rather solid and rigid structures, even if the process of their creation is dynamic. So while Li uses ‘sedimentation’ to reference the lengthy and layered process of ‘cultural-psychological formation’, he also speaks of the breaking through and reforming of sediments in order to circumvent the rigidity of the geological analogy and to approximate the energetic dynamism of socio-cultural phenomena and of the ways they are processed by individuals.³³⁴

I argue that sedimentation is a rather restrictive metaphor when considering the vitality and complexity of cultural formation.³³⁵ To mention one characteristic example: in 1994, Ken

³³³ Li writes: ‘I use “formation” instead of “structure”; the latter seems to me somewhat static, while the former is more dynamic, and my point is to emphasize the psychological process of “forming”’ (Li, ‘A Response’, 177). I assume that the term ‘sedimentation’ might reflect not only the temporal duration and layering that characterize the process of ‘cultural-psychological formation’, but also a certain degree of conservatism that could be inherent in beliefs shaped in the way described by Li. Still, the dynamic interactions that are part of the same process are not adequately captured by the term ‘sedimentation’.

³³⁴ See Gu, ‘A Study of Li Zehou’s Philosophical Ideas’, 215.

³³⁵ In describing cultural and specifically visual production, perhaps the geological metaphor would be more successful if the whole process of sedimentation was considered, including the suspension of transported particles in a fluid medium like water, before they are deposited to sediment against a barrier. In this sense, whatever is contained or can be thrown in or fished out of the water of a lake could be seen as the body of ideas that circulate through visual production and use, while the particles that settle down and form the sedimentary bedrock of the lake could perhaps refer to the deep-seated cultural and personal beliefs that are formed through the experience of visual culture. Still, I find this analogy problematic, because it doesn’t adequately describe the multi-directionality and deep temporal/ historical roots of the socio-cultural phenomena in the context of which visual creations both reflect *and* shape values and identities of communities and individuals.

Parmasad insightfully discussed the multifaceted nature of community formation in the Caribbean city of Trinidad in an attempt to break the hegemonic grip of Eurocentricism in the standard discourse about colonial and post-colonial experience. He rightfully observed that Africans and Indians carry within them cultural traditions that were developed centuries before the colonial intervention, yet their depth and complexity are often overlooked in discussions of the colonial and post-colonial experience: 'The point here is that Indian and African identities in Trinidad today cannot simply be seen as a product of the last few hundred years. To assume this is to say that the essence of Caribbean peoples has been constituted by colonialism. One is not denying the colonial and post-colonial experience - but Indians and Africans were never culturally disembodied beings. The colonial and post-colonial experience represents an important phase of cultural sedimentation, but only one phase. Caribbean peoples were not constituted by this experience out of nothing. We bring with us thousands of years of other layers of sedimentation which we access even when we do not recognize it.'³³⁶ Sedimentation is used here to refer to the layering of different traditions, but as a term, it cannot adequately reflect their dynamic interaction and intersection, in the same way that in any given geological sedimentary deposit, the bottom layers don't come into contact with the top layers (unless a catastrophic event causes a total collapse and rearrangement of their stratigraphy). Therefore, a main inadequacy of the metaphor of sedimentation has to do with the different perception of internal social agents versus external cultural observers. A geologist might cut across and study a section of superimposed sedimentary layers, but the organism who live in a lake can only perceive the top layer that is being formed during their lives. An archeologist can study the stratigraphy of the soil in a cross-section of an excavation shaft, but the people who lived in that location during the centuries would usually be aware of only the uppermost layers on which they walked. The multifaceted nature of any culture and the multilayered messages of the visual

³³⁶ K. Parmasad, 'Searching for Continuity: The Ancestral Impulse and Community Identity Formation in Trinidad', *Caribbean Quarterly* 40.3 (1994), 22–29, esp. 22.

creations we study are primarily addressed to the people who produced and experienced them through time, not to the scholars who study them at any given time. Scholars are recipients of the benefit, but are not intended to be the primary beneficiaries. So we need a visual metaphor that can reflect the dynamic intersection of layers and the constant fluidity of ideas witnessed *within* a given culture by its various agents and not just by its external observers.

Previously, I have used the metaphor of weaving to evoke the complexity of cultural and specifically visual production and experience. Turning to analogies derived from nature, we might come up with a metaphor that is even more appropriate, if we cast our net far and wide beyond the paradigm of sedimentation. It would be more appropriate to speak of the interactivity and connectivity of an entire ecosystem, rather than just one mechanism of geological formation operating within it. In both an ecosystem and in a cultural system, all of the components influence each other in varying degrees and combinations, so that they all operate as subjects and objects, causes and effects. This is why a visual creation, such as an Ethiopian cross, both reflects and shapes its socio-cultural context. To quote Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarian Conspiracy*,

‘... modern science has verified the quality of whole-making, the characteristic of nature to put things together in an ever-more synergistic, meaningful pattern... General Systems Theory, a related modern concept, says that each variable in any system interacts with the other variables so thoroughly that cause and effect cannot be separated. A single variable can be both cause and effect. Reality will not be still. And it cannot be taken apart! You cannot understand a cell, a rat, a brain structure, a family or a culture if you isolate it from its context. *Relationship is everything.*’³³⁷

In this regard, cultural formation is not simply sedimentation; it is ecomorphosis. In other words, it is the ongoing development of a

³³⁷ M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles 1980). Quotation taken from M. C. Nelson, ‘Layering: Approaching the “Layer” as a Formal Element and a Significant Metaphor in Artmaking’, *Leonardo* 19.3 (1986), 224.

cultural ecosystem through the interaction and interdependence of all its components. *Oikos* in ancient Greek carries the meaning of both family unit and the building housing it.³³⁸ It therefore signifies the physical and socio-cultural environment in which all of the members of the *oikos* grow and influence each other. The *oikosystema* of our planet is made up of numerous local ecosystems, and is a network of multidirectional interrelations in constant flux, based on centuries of evolution, specific spatiotemporal conditions, and interactions of its individual members, very much like a cultural ecosystem. I describe this process of formation as ecomorphosis rather than as ecogenesis, to underline the ongoing process of transformation:³³⁹ a dynamic, incessant development that affects and is affected by all the components of the system, which are interrelated in various intersecting networks. If one wishes to pinpoint an analogy within this system to describe the life of a specific visual creation, perhaps the metaphor of a tree is more appropriate. The tree might be planted by one individual according to the means and conditions available in a specific spatiotemporal context, but it grows and acts physically and conceptually (in the minds of those who engage with the visual creation described as a tree) in layered and complex ways: the life and impact of the tree depends not only on its own species specifications, the underlying soil, and the changing conditions of its environment, but also on the activity of the various other living organisms that interact with it and perceive it differently depending on their own needs and abilities. While all visual creations are trees planted directly by cultural agents, they also produce fruits and seeds that give birth to conceptual trees—ideas that germinate in the cultural ecosystem and influ-

³³⁸ *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, 546.

³³⁹ *Morphosis* in Greek literally means not just 'form' but also 'formation', an ongoing process. *Genesis* means 'production' and 'birth', a one-time act of creation like the one described in the Biblical narrative of *Genesis* 1, when God creates the world (see *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, 162, 519). Although in nature the process of genesis is incessant and ongoing, I prefer the term ecomorphosis in order to further emphasize the continuous transformation that any ecosystem and its components undergo, whether in the case of natural or cultural environments.

ence its development through time (becoming agents of ecomorphosis).³⁴⁰ In this metaphor, the tree is the nexus of multiple intersecting networks, as is obvious even in the organic structure and operation of a natural tree organism: networks of roots and branches interact through the trunk and connect different layers of the surrounding environment, such as soil, water, and air. In this system, sedimentation may be part of the ecological or cultural context, but cannot describe the process of ecological or cultural formation and experience in all of its complexity. *Networking* is more fundamental than layering in the ecomorphosis process of cultural phenomena and their visual manifestations.³⁴¹

I will now turn to two metaphors that scholars use specifically to describe the multifaceted meaning of visual creations rather than the complexity of cultural formation as a whole. 'Palimpsest' and 'kaleidoscope' in themselves describe visual processes and therefore might offer more successful analogies to the operation of visual creations. However, a closer look at each reveals very different expressive potentials and limitations. A palimpsest is based on layering, while a kaleidoscope operates through interactions that visually result in formations that resemble networks. My preference lies

³⁴⁰ Translated in the terms employed by Gell, *Art and Agency*, 20, a tree planter and a tree in the above metaphor about visual production are primary and secondary agents. The primary agents are intentional/ sentient beings who through their actions generate causal reactions in others. The secondary agents are artefacts 'through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective'. See also the discussion by Svašek in *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 61–62.

³⁴¹ This is also why I would dispute the terms 'layering' and 'layerists' applied by Mary Nelson to contemporary artworks and the artists she discusses in 'Layering', 223–229. Based on the descriptions of works by the artists themselves (pp. 225–29), it seems that in material terms, their process of creation involves the combination of different layers. However, in conceptual terms, the same creative process involves not layering but intersections and interconnections between different time periods, cultures, memories, nature, and human experience, creating complex networks of intersectionality rather than superimposed strata.

with the latter. Still, I will first give some attention to the metaphor of the palimpsest, as it is an interesting case study on the subtleties involved in the linguistic and conceptual definition of visual creations. The specificity of the original meaning of ‘palimpsest’ might impose certain restrictions that are not always pertinent to the different cultural phenomena described by the term. In Greek *παλίμψηστος* literally means ‘scratched or scrapped again’ and was used to refer to reused writing supports on which a new text was written after an older one was erased by various techniques such as washing or scraping. Especially in the case of parchment that was treated by washing, the older text might remain faintly visible below the new one, or become more visible with the passage of time or with the use of modern technologies. But unless it is painstakingly researched, reconstructed, and transcribed, it is not easily legible. This is also due to the fact that palimpsest parchment was often cut into smaller folios and rearranged into new gatherings that broke down the structure and order of the older, erased text. This process of palimpsesting often took place in a context of cultural re-construction that involved the programmatic destruction of older information, either because it was no longer relevant or because it was considered threatening (as in the case of scientific or literary works from polytheistic antiquity, which were overwritten with Christian texts). In other words, a palimpsest refers to the layering of information that results in partial or limited visibility/ legibility and more or less intrusive fragmentation of the older layers.³⁴²

In the case of pictorial creations, palimpsesting might involve even greater illegibility, that through the passage of time can affect even the most recent layer.

³⁴² For technical and cultural issues related to palimpsesting see *Early medieval palimpsests*, ed. G. Declercq (Turnhout 2007). See also *Palimpsests and the literary imagination of medieval England: collected essays*, ed. L. Carruthers, R. Chai-Elsholz, T. Silec (New York 2011). According to the publisher, the essays of that volume examine palimpsests as ‘the processes of revision and accretion which shape medieval literary production’ or as ‘metaphor for various phenomena of loss and accumulation’.



147. The so-called 'Palimpsest Wall' with fragments of seven superimposed layers of decoration dated from the fourth to the eighth centuries, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, Italy. Photo in the public domain (<http://www.leviedelgiubileo.it/?event=santa-maria-antiqua-between-rome-and-byzantium-2>).



148. The Theatre of Marcellus, Rome. Italy. Photo by Aleksandar Todorovic/ Shutterstock.com.



149. The Tower of London, England. Photo by Alexander Chaikin/ Shutterstock.com.

A famous example is the so-called Palimpsest Wall of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, which in its present state includes fragments of seven superimposed layers of decoration dated from the fourth to the eighth centuries (Fig. 147).³⁴³ They are all partially visible under or on top of each other, as pieces of seven overlapping puzzles that have been randomly spared by time here and there, producing a multilayered image that is very difficult to read. On the contrary, when the term 'palimpsest' is used in the field of architecture, the structure described might be perfectly functional (unlike the above illegible image), even though it is made up of parts from very different periods, and its use and identity might have changed greatly over time. For example, the Theater of Marcellus built in Rome in the first century BC was converted into a fortress in the Medieval period, was surmounted by the Savelli residence in the sixteenth century, and today it functions both as a concert area in its bottom part and as an apartment building at the top (Fig. 148).³⁴⁴ Fragmentation and repurposing co-exist, creating an architectural palimpsest of dramatic cultural changes throughout a millennial life.

On the contrary, a building that has retained the same overall use through the centuries and has been gradually altered to adjust to new developments, like a living body, is a very different kind of palimpsest, in which fragmentation and re-purposing are not strikingly present as a whole, even when past moments of the structure's life might be rendered partly illegible in the process. For example, despite its varied functions through its millennial life, the Tower of London has remained a castle linked to the English monarchy, from the moment it was constructed as a royal residence in the eleventh century to its function as a tourist attraction in the

³⁴³ M. Andaloro, 'La parete palinsesto: 1900, 2000', in *Santa Maria Antiqua al Foro Romano cento anni dopo: atti del colloquio internazionale, Roma 5–6 maggio 2000*, ed. J. Osborne, J. Rasmus Brandt, G. Morganti (Rome 2004), 97–112. See also several articles in J. Nordhagen, *Studies in Byzantine and Early Medieval Painting* (London 1990).

³⁴⁴ Detailed information and photographic material posted at www.romanoimpero.com/2009/12/teatro-marcello.html, accessed online on April 9th 2017.

present day (Fig. 149).³⁴⁵ In the same way, a human body bears more or less visible traces of past experiences, including injuries, operations, physical training and aging, yet it remains the same body. It might be metaphorically described as a corporeal palimpsest of life or of the passage of time, but it doesn't experience the phenomena of radical fragmentation and reuse involved in the original palimpsest process of manuscript production. In the case of the Tower of London and the human body, continuity and change complement each other in a balanced interaction that is a prominent aspect of life and is different from the traumatic transformation of palimpsest parchment used to give birth to a different book, or the invasive re-purposing of a palimpsested structure that changes from an ancient Roman theater into a Renaissance noble residence. Even these two latter applications of palimpsesting are rather different from each other and once more caution us about the complications that might arise (and the clarifications needed) when a term invented to describe one cultural phenomenon is then applied to describe something else. In the case of parchment, the older document is systematically destroyed, while in the case of the Theater of Marcellus, the ruins of the ancient Roman substructure were used to add prestige to the Renaissance palace physically and ideologically elevated on top of it.

Taking into consideration the original meaning of the term 'palimpsest', perhaps its most successful application outside of manuscript studies would be in the realm of human memory, when the registration of more recent data and the passage of time might obscure or alter older recordings. Especially in the case of traumatic experiences, mnemonic fragmentation and reconstruction might occur as part of a coping mechanism, in order to erase painful data and replace it with less threatening or more enjoyable information, not unlike the washing away of culturally subversive texts and their substitution by more acceptable ones. But human memory is an infinitely complex mechanism with many different operations. A single word invented to describe a much simpler cultural activity, like palimpsesting, can be nothing more than a superficial approx-

³⁴⁵ See N. Jones, *Tower: an epic history of the Tower of London* (London 2011).

imation—a schematic definition unable to capture all of the subtleties of even one aspect of mnemonic function, which overall remains a daunting subject that is still inadequately understood by scientists.

Similar caution is needed when scholars try to describe the complex and multilayered ways in which images are understood by different agents within a culture. This task is much more complicated than the physical structuring of a materially layered image—and even in the latter case, we have already seen that outside of manuscript studies, the use of the term ‘palimpsest’ requires a number of clarifications. An interesting application of the term in the field of visual studies appears in the work of Claire Farago and Donna Pierce on New Mexican Santos of the colonial and post-colonial period. The authors investigate how these images accommodate not only overlapping but also contradictory messages that oscillate in the eyes of different viewers, as they are created in a context of cultural tensions and dynamic interactions between different traditions.³⁴⁶ In this case, we are dealing with ideological palimpsests whose legibility might be reversed in the eyes of various agents. What might be the dominant meaning for some viewers may be overwritten by a different or even antithetical meaning in the minds of others. In this context, the palimpsest metaphor accurately captures the aspect of cultural contradictions, including fragmentation and restructuring, which might result from the intersection of multiple realities in a colonial and post-colonial setting.

³⁴⁶ C. Farago and D. Pierce, *Transforming images: New Mexican santos in-between worlds* (University Park 2006), esp. chapter 10. The authors observe that ‘conflicting worldviews simultaneously present in the same visual field need not be synthesized or directly opposed; they can coexist, to be experienced differently by different audiences’. The New Mexican santos that operate in this way are described as ‘polysemic’, ‘semiotically open-ended’, and ‘polyvalent’. ‘Far from being direct evidence of assimilated, fused, syncretistic, or even compartmentalized world views, the coexistent palimpsesting of different artistic traditions that is visible in New Mexican Christian icons opens them to constant reinterpretation. The indexical relationship between sign and referent depends on information that the viewer supplies’ (pp. 185–86).

At the same time, it is possible for such contradictions to be reconciled by their co-existence within the images' potential of signification. Contrary to textual palimpsests which do not allow full and unhindered visibility and legibility of the original layer, such images can provide legibility for every embedded meaning, in the eyes of viewers culturally prepared to identify a specific message. After all, visual texts, unlike verbal ones, have a fluidity that allows them to morph into different statements, like liquid that can successively occupy containers of diverse shapes. While the palimpsest metaphor is valid in the case of visual creations produced within the cultural tensions of colonial and post-colonial contexts, a different visual metaphor, more expressive of the flexibility of visual language, is needed to define the function of Ethiopian crosses within their millennial cultural continuum.

As already noted, the multiple meanings that can be applied to these crosses by various social agents are not contradictory but interrelated and complementary: they are manifestations of the rich Ethiopian Orthodox Christian culture, steadily growing through the balance of continuity and change, between deep roots and ever-expanding branches.³⁴⁷ The cultural prominence of these crosses is

³⁴⁷ The Ethiopian Marian hymn *Harp of Glory* contains a vivid metaphor of cultural production as a growing tree. Speaking to the Virgin about the composition of this very hymn in her honor, the author says: 'For the roots of the tree of your love are entwined within my heart, and that tree grows in stature and extends its branches to the shores of the sea of my mind. Its beauty has appeared like a flower upon my lips. Anoint me then with fragrance from the perfume of your flower that has opened in bloom; its blood red color, from the side of your Son'. (McGuckin, *Harp of Glory*, 27–28). Clearly this metaphor resonates with basic motifs of Biblical scripture and Christian culture, like the equation of virtue with a flourishing tree and the reference to Christ as the fruit of the Tree of Life, or the attribution of any accomplishment to grace and inspiration from on high. At the same time, it captures the vitality and dynamism of cultural production and the interaction of diverse factors and agents that operate in its development, as a phenomenon parallel to the symbiotic complexity of a tree. According to this part of the hymn, Mary (or her culturally prominent veneration in Ethiopian culture) has energized and linked the

a proof and a result of their continuous relevance for all members of the Orthodox Christian community, and is based exactly on their kaleidoscopic polyvalence. The symmetry of self-same patterns in every cross is reminiscent of a kaleidoscopic image. In addition, self-same patterns can appear in countless variations from one cross to another through the inventive combination of a limited set of components (like threads, knots, circles, crosses, birds, holy figures, and so on), in analogy to the wide range of images produced in a kaleidoscope through the reconfiguration of a limited set of objects (like beads or colored glass pieces, Fig. 150a-d). But even more importantly, the transformation of meaning in the eyes of different makers and users interpreting Ethiopian crosses parallels the shifting images produced in a kaleidoscope, which is often used in the humanities as a metaphorical reference to multiplicity of meaning.³⁴⁸ In fact, many details in the operation of kaleidoscopes make the analogy with the perception of Ethiopian

author's heart and mind, as if through the roots and branches of a tree. As a result, the author has produced the flower of his hymn ('a flower upon my lips') on this tree that grows between and through him, Mary, and the surrounding culture. The hymn is the author's way of venerating but also asking the blessing of Mary and of the flower she has produced, in other words Christ who flowered on the tree of the Cross ('your flower that has opened in bloom; its blood red color, from the side of your Son'). In the same way that Mary is both the inspiration and the recipient of the hymn, and the author is both a creature and a creator of his surrounding culture (the two of them becoming examples of the various agents and factors involved in cultural production), so all of the parts of a tree are organically connected and depend on each other for survival and procreation, from the roots and the branches to the flowers and their perfume.

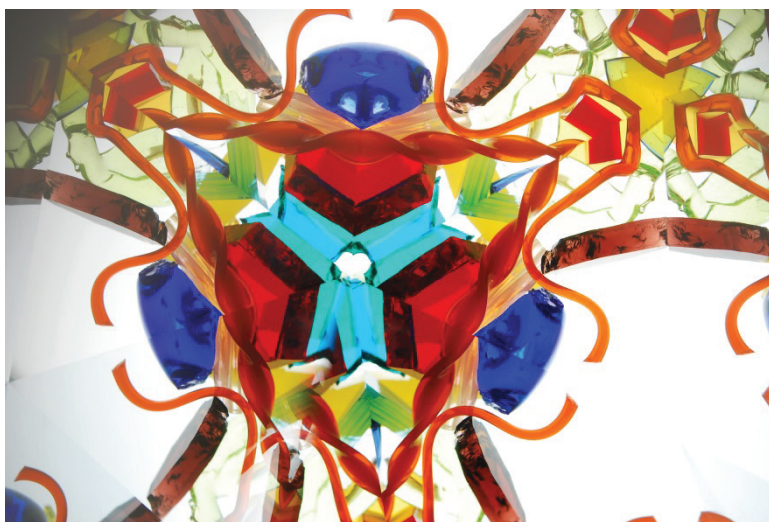
³⁴⁸ To mention just two examples of insightful analysis and application of the kaleidoscopic metaphor, which have also inspired my own use of the term, see H. Groth, 'Kaleidoscopic Vision and Literary Invention in an "Age of Things": David Brewster, Don Juan and "A Lady's Kaleidoscope"', *English Literary History* 74.1 (2007), 217–37, and I. Dulfano, 'Polyphonous Narrators and Kaleidoscopic Procedures in Isabel Allende's "Casa de los espíritus"', *Chasqui* 23.1 (1994), 3–9.

crosses (and by extension any multivalent visual creation) particularly appropriate, so I will dwell on it for a moment.

The object chamber of a kaleidoscope contains a set number of elements, like the components of an Ethiopian cross. Yet looking at the object chamber through the kaleidoscope produces infinite perceptions of those set elements, through the interaction of a number of factors (similar to the many possible interpretations that Ethiopian crosses can accommodate, based on multiple factors). The tube and the mirrors of the kaleidoscope allow the viewer to interact with the object chamber and they give structure to the assortment of elements within it. Therefore, these structural elements of the kaleidoscope are analogous to the socio-cultural context that extends from the ideological to the physical framework surrounding the viewers and the crosses. On the other hand, the light that hits the kaleidoscope and can change during the day or as a viewer moves the kaleidoscope, is not stable like the structural elements of the kaleidoscope itself, yet it remains equally important and influential in the viewing process. In a sense this light can be compared to the personal variables that each viewer introduces in the process of seeing, the particular light under which each individual evaluates an image, based on factors such as their personal socio-economic position or life circumstances, their gender, age, profession, education, and so on. Viewers are not just affected by such variables; rather they can exercise agency in how they internalize and use them to make sense of their lives, or of the images they encounter. In the same way, somebody holding a kaleidoscope can choose to turn it towards a specific source of light or another, or to shake it again and again in order to produce different visual effects. Likewise, in looking at a cross, viewers import their own interests and background in the perception of the image and its meaning. The personal interests of kaleidoscope users (or cross viewers) include the preference of specific colors and shapes that prompt them to continue shaking the kaleidoscope (or explore the meaning of a cross), until desirable results are reached—always influenced by the available visual material in the object chamber (or the surface of the cross), the mirror and tube framework (or the socio-cultural framework of the viewer), and the source of light towards which the viewer points the kaleidoscope (analogous to the personal circumstances and interests of the viewer of a cross).



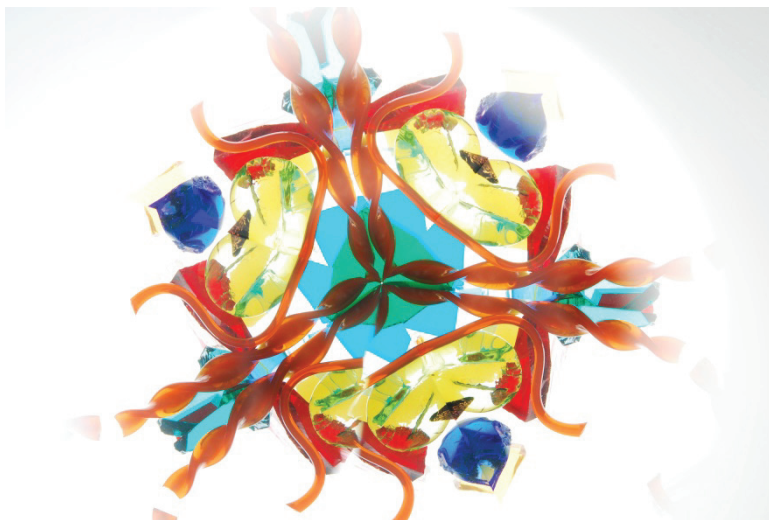
150a



150b



150c



150d

150a-d. Four different patterns produced by the same kaleidoscope. Photos by Kudrashka-a/ Shutterstock.com.

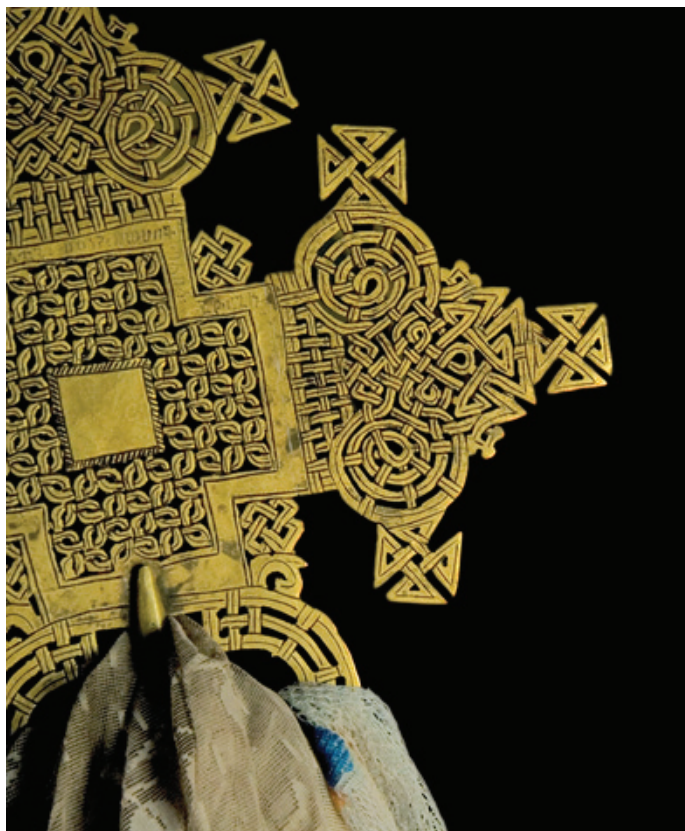
The kaleidoscopic transformation of an assortment of familiar or even banal elements (like pieces of broken glass) into an array of fascinating and gripping images parallels the cultural transformation of a number of common components on Ethiopian crosses (like threads and knots) into a sophisticated visual and conceptual statement that signifies much more than the mere sum of its parts, with shifts of meaning that depend on who looks at it and in what context.

As a mechanism of viewing rather than simply as an object viewed, the kaleidoscope offers a way of thinking about the process of visual/ conceptual perception that brings together the interaction of different factors: object, subject, and context; interior and exterior; intimacy and surrounding influence. The endless possibilities of image/ meaning production in the kaleidoscopic model reflect the open-endedness of visual creations and the potential of continuous transformations in the eyes of different people. The same person can even pursue and perceive different images/ meanings in different moments. The slightest movement/ change of viewpoint produces a new result, and this constant transformation is an integral part of the kaleidoscope's ability to fascinate and of the image's power to engage. In this production of meaning, there is no definitive, authorial discourse, but a succession of valid discourses among which viewers might choose those that appear more meaningful, appropriate, or desirable at any given moment, based on their inclinations and abilities in response to their environment. The intimacy of kaleidoscopic viewing reflects the subjective introspection of a viewer contemplating the meaning of an image. But at the same time, that intimacy is framed by the socio-cultural framework and the socio-cultural identity of the viewer, in the same way that a kaleidoscopic image is framed and structured by the viewing instrument and the surrounding light. In this transformative process of viewing, there is no fragmentation, but a dynamic restructuring of meaning, a continuous creative process within a coherent generative context. So despite infinite variations in individual perceptions, common denominators are also at work: the kaleidoscope is both the instrument of viewing and the container of the image components, and thus it corresponds to the socio-cultural context *and* to the visual object, both of which allow social agents to share their visual experiences and to communicate through them.

The way that the visual elements inside the kaleidoscope respond to the movement of the viewer and prompt further movement for the production of new results suggests that in the kaleidoscopic creation of meaning through images, the visual object itself is also a subject with the agency to generate influential fascination and desire, in the same way that the viewer is also an 'object' that is being influenced. In addition, the kaleidoscope unites in one body the visual object/ subject and the viewing mechanism. In the same way, an image is inseparable from the viewing process that constructs its meaning. The corporeal analogy is quite appropriate in this case. According to the concept of embodiment as defined by Deleuze, 'It is not the body that realizes, but it is in the body that something is realized, through which the body itself becomes real or substantial'.³⁴⁹ In other words, the body cannot be separated from and perceived outside of the experiences that occur in and through it. Likewise a visual creation cannot be separated from and perceived outside of the meaning that is generated in and through it. To paraphrase Deleuze, it is not the image that creates meaning, but it is in the image that meaning is created, through which the image itself becomes real or substantial (perceptible and powerful). This is not a negation of the agency of the body or the image, because they both influence the way an experience or meaning is created. It is an emphasis on the operation of the body or the image within a context, as neither has a life outside a relational system of experienced meaning. Neither the body nor the image can generate an experience without the participation of the thoughts and emotions of an individual conscience, operating through the body or through engagement with the image. In the same way, a kaleidoscopic image cannot emerge outside the viewing mechanism of the kaleidoscope or independently of a viewer/ user. Without the structure of the kaleidoscopic tube and the intervention of a handler, we are left with a random assortment of broken glass pieces. Likewise, an Ethiopian cross can realize its full potential as a powerful symbol and a dynamic generator of meaning only when it is viewed and interpreted within its socio-cultural context, and by a viewer open to the possibilities of various readings that are kaleido-

³⁴⁹ G. Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque* (London 2006), 120.

scopically flourishing within that context and in response to the personal inclinations and concerns of the cross handlers.



151. Detail of an Ethiopian staff cross. Photo by 2630ben/ iStock.com.

CONCLUSION.

ETHIOPIAN CROSSES AS TIMEFUL GENERATIVE ASSEMBLIES OF MEANING AND DOING

The visual language of Ethiopian crosses is the product of a vibrant, centuries-long tradition, which continues to thrive as a constantly evolving living body exactly because it is so meaningful to all of its producers and users. The various meanings that can be applied to the overall design and specific details of the crosses might not be always perceived in all their complexities and ramifications by every single person producing and using them. This is part of the communicative power of such potent symbols: they become depositories of meanings that accrue over the centuries, as their visual elements and symbolic references are enriched and can be activated in different ways by the people who handle them, on the basis of widespread socio-cultural values shared by all as well as individual concerns and potentials specific to a few. It is this ability to interweave communal and personal beliefs and needs that makes the Ethiopian crosses so powerful: they are successful markers of identity, instruments of protection, and sites of interaction, not only between different social actors, but also between different realms of existence, transcending the boundaries of time and space and establishing links between the human and the divine spheres. This is especially the case within the interactive context of religious ritual, when faith and experience are interwoven into particularly dynamic cultural results. In such settings, sophisticated visual creations like the Ethiopian crosses operate as networking devices—they generate meaning by activating both memory and imagination, and by linking together past and future, communities and individuals, humans and God. In this process, relationships are both the cause and the effect, the roots and the fruits of cultural ecomor-

phosis and of its visual manifestations. In this sense, the textile-like nature of Ethiopian crosses masterfully embodies *connectivity* as both an operational mechanism and an experiential outcome, through the interweaving of diverse elements that together create a coherent and dynamic realm of meaning and acting. Ultimately, the fabric of Ethiopian crosses reflects and advances the operation of a rich relational system that links together in diverse interactions all the components of the socio-cultural ecosystem in which these crosses belong: namely, the historical and physical contexts within which the crosses are used, as well as individual Christians and their communities of earthly and heavenly members, all of whom partake of and contribute to a rich network of personal and communal beliefs, memories, identities, experiences, and aspirations. As my ruminations on the rich socio-cultural functions of Ethiopian crosses come to an end, I would like to revisit certain observations and offer some concluding remarks that could also be relevant to the study of visual culture beyond the specific confines of the Ethiopian Christian tradition.

TIMEFULNESS

During my analysis I have often mentioned that in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian beliefs the cross transcends a linear perception of time in order to link past, present and future in the moment of religious experience. The most appropriate term to express this function would be ‘timefulness’ rather than ‘timelessness’. Timefulness has been introduced to the literature of visual studies by Diana Rose, Ph.D. graduate from the program of Visual Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In her Ph.D. dissertation, *Living Time, Performing Memory: Maya Ceremonies of Foundation and Renewal*, Rose examines ‘how Maya notions of cyclical time were practiced, looking specifically at how the past, present, and future coexisted in particular moments’.³⁵⁰ In the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition (as in many other Christian traditions), this

³⁵⁰ <http://havic-dev.ucsc.edu/people/students/diana-rose>. D. Rose, *Living Time, Performing Memory: Maya Ceremonies of Foundation and Renewal*, Ph.D. Dissertation (University of California Santa Cruz 2017).

timefulness is constructed and experienced in a number of ways, including typological exegesis that identifies relationships between different events in human history (such as Noah's Flood and Christ's Baptism), and rituals that celebrate past moments as re-enactments in the present and promises for the future. A characteristic example is the Timkat festival celebrating Christ's Baptism and re-enacting the blessing of the element of water (which initially occurred with Christ's immersion in the river Jordan). Through the ritual immersion of crosses in water and then the sprinkling of the gathered congregation with that water, blessing is distributed to the whole Christian community and its land (Fig. 127). Another characteristic example of timefulness is the celebration of the Eucharist: the ritual of eating Christ's body evokes the consumption of the forbidden fruit at the beginning of human history and reverses its effects through reference to the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of the Logos who offers salvation to the faithful in the moment of the ritual, but also promises the final union with God in the Heavenly Jerusalem after the Last Judgment.³⁵¹ The timefulness of such rituals as well as of exegetical analyses that trace connections across time and space contribute to the construction of hopeful beliefs and strong identities of belonging that ultimately reassure the faithful of their promised salvation. Timefulness transforms believers into members of a blessed community that includes the saints of the past and the saved of the future and demonstrates God's love for humankind through the wisdom of his divine plan for human salvation.

Ethiopian crosses embody these powerful and transformative potentialities of timefulness in a particularly evocative way. Not only is the cross itself a timeful symbol within Christian tradition (for example, through exegetical references that link the Tree of Life in Eden to the Cross of Christ in Jerusalem and finally to the Tree of Life in the Heavenly City of Jerusalem after the Last Judgment). In addition, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity places the cross everywhere and at all times, from the first battle of the angels against darkness to the daily lives of the faithful, inside and outside

³⁵¹ For a relevant discussion of the Eucharist along these lines, and for references to further literature, see note 223 above.

church rituals. Moreover, the formal qualities of Ethiopian crosses enhance their timefulness through the meaningfulness of their symbolic vocabulary. Instead of focusing on the time-specific event of the Crucifixion (as is the case with narrative representations of Christ on the cross), Ethiopian crosses encompass that sacrificial turning point of human history into a much broader matrix that reveals the presence and actions of God through time and space. The textile-like body of Ethiopian crosses becomes a net that holds together a wide range of hopes and beliefs concerning human salvation. These include notions of union and protection in the relationship of God with his people, eternity in the essence and presence of the divine, and order in the way human communities are hierarchically structured as microcosmic reflections of the divinely created macrocosm. In addition, specific patterns like birds, tree-like designs or running water motifs trigger exegetical interpretations about the cross foreshadowed in the past or sprouting forth blessings in the present and the future, further enhancing its timefulness. Finally, the millennial visual and ritual traditions concerning the appearance and use of the cross in Ethiopian Orthodox culture connect its various iterations and users across time and space, as members of a vibrant and ongoing cultural ecomorphosis (compare Fig. 51). In a sense, Ethiopian crosses visualize not only timefulness but also spacefulness: different locations with significant roles through salvation history are conceptually linked and *presented* synchronically during religious experiences and rituals. After all, humans experience time in spatial terms (from Eden, to Jerusalem, to Christian Ethiopia, to Heavenly Jerusalem).³⁵² Besides, the timeful matrix of the cross evokes the cardinal directions that define earthly space, inscribing the whole world within its salvific embrace. As microcosmic images of the macrocosm, Ethiopian crosses are ultimately able to remind their users of the omnipresence and omnipotence of their God, who as creator of time and space is the original source of the timefulness and spacefulness that

³⁵² For the re-presentation of earthly and heavenly Jerusalem throughout cities and churches of various Christian traditions see *New Jerusalems. Hierotopy and iconography of sacred spaces*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow 2009).

the faithful experience in their religious rituals and hope to enjoy in perpetuity when they enter Heavenly Jerusalem after Christ's Second Coming.

MEANING AND DOING

Throughout the pages of this book I have often referred not only to potential meanings but also to specific functions of Ethiopian crosses. I hope to have made clear how these two manifestations of Ethiopian crosses, meaning and doing, are inextricably linked, like the warp and weft of their textile-like body, or like the potential of the cross not only to symbolize but also to realize protection. The reason I bring this point up is because in recent decades scholars of anthropology and visual studies have sometimes claimed to focus their analysis not on what cultural objects mean but on what they do.³⁵³ This can be appreciated as an effort to consider the material presence of objects, move away from narrow and decontextualized iconographic analyses and emphasize how objects function in cultural relations, contexts and networks rather than as self-contained entities. However, I am inclined to believe that this separation be-

³⁵³ Gell, *Art and Agency*, made such a distinction that was also picked up by other anthropologists. E.g. A. Bell and H. Geismar, 'Materialising Oceania: New ethnographies of things in Melanesia and Polynesia', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 20 (2009), 3–27, esp. 16, with reference to Gell's work which has 'pushed anthropologists to approach artefacts from the perspective of what they *do* in social networks and not what they represent.' I understand 'what they represent' here as alternative reference to 'what they mean'. Compare for example, A. Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford 1994), 40–66, esp. 43, where Gell states that the iconographic approach to art fails 'to take into consideration the presented object, rather than the represented symbolic meanings.' Another relevant example, from the field of visual studies, can be found in W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Introduction', in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago 2002, 2nd edition), 1–4, esp. 1, where Mitchell states that the approaches represented in the book ask 'not just what landscape "is" or "means" but what it *does*, how it works as a cultural practice.'

tween meaning and doing, or the emphasis on doing as if in opposition to meaning, is rather artificial. Although I cannot claim that this is applicable to all human cultures and their cultural objects, I argue that the case study of Ethiopian crosses is a telling example of meaning as doing and doing as meaning. This claim can be supported even grammatically, as meaning might be used as a noun but is actually the gerund of the active verb to mean, as much as doing is the gerund of the active verb to do. When 'I mean something', I might be stating a belief, developing an interpretation, evaluating a situation, following which I might take further actions (in addition to the active stance that belief, interpretation or evaluation already embody). When an object 'means something' to somebody or to a group of people, it likewise manifests a belief, triggers an interpretation, sustains an evaluation, in other words does something that might prompt further actions. After all, meanings of culturally embedded objects are based on culturally constructed values and beliefs developed over time through the interactions (or doings) of individuals and communities. In turn, meaningful objects guide the members of a society to think and therefore act in certain ways, both collectively and individually, and thus sustain or question the belief system that those objects articulate. Within the network of cultural ecomorphosis, interaction, expression and experience, meaning generates doing and doing upholds existing or creates new meaning. For example, when individuals venerate or destroy a cross because of what it means to them, their actions are predicated upon but also confirm the meaning(s) they assign to the cross. In the case of Ethiopian crosses, meaning and doing are not just complementary and interdependent like the roots and branches of a tree that cannot exist without each other. Rather they are so inseparable that they morph into each other, like clouds and rain that share the same watery nature even if they manifest themselves differently. The function of these crosses in ritual (their doing) is another manifestation of what they mean in their cultural context for their users and viewers. The overall meaning of the sign of the cross and the enriched meaning of individual crosses with their particular visual characteristics are performative, that is, culturally active: their protective nature or the way they define personal and communal identities and aspirations are both what they mean and what they do.

Consider, for example, the interrelation between the formal elements and ritual uses of Ethiopian hand crosses. When an Ethiopian Orthodox cleric presents his hand cross for veneration by a member of the congregation, both social agents act in recognition of the meaning of the cross as a symbol *and* agent of salvation within their culture. That active meaning is articulated by the formal aspects of the cross—such as its textile-like body as an allusion to protection and connectivity, or its prominent base as a reference to the Ark of the Covenant foreshadowing the salvific Cross. This salvific meaning is also reflected in and further reinforced by the way the cleric and the faithful act and interact through the cross, the one touching the forehead of the devotee with the cross, and the other kissing the body and the base of the cleric's cross. In this specific ritual context, the acknowledgement of the salvific meaning of the cross according to a traditional protocol of body postures, gestures and actions is also predicated upon and further sustains the 'meanings' and 'doings' of the social actors themselves: they actually perform their socio-cultural *identities* as active *meanings* and their socio-cultural *roles* as meaningful *doings*. What the cross and its users mean and do for and through each other are inextricably linked. This active generativity of meaning that characterizes Ethiopian crosses in their socio-cultural context is linked both to the Christian Orthodox understanding of the cross as an active agent (protective, healing, salvific) and to the polysemy of symbolism within Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, to which I will now turn.

GENERATIVE ASSEMBLY

As my exploration of Ethiopian crosses draws to an end, I would like to return to an idea with which I begun my analysis: the generative potential of symbols, or in Victor Turner's words, "the multivocal or polysemic nature of symbols, where one meaning is related to others in an increasingly deep pool of potential meanings available for exploitation by future interpreters."³⁵⁴ Since this polysemy of symbols is often an alien concept to Western audiences,

³⁵⁴ See note 11 above.

and since it is such a formative component of Ethiopian Orthodox culture, it warrants a concluding deeper look.

In the introduction of this book, when I discussed my understanding of symbols on the basis of the etymology of the ancient Greek word *σύμβολον*, I emphasized the notion of contribution (*συμβολή*): that is, both the contribution of various possible meanings within the generative universe of the symbol and, in turn, the contribution of those meaning in the cultural universe within which the symbol operates. Throughout the book I have discussed Ethiopian crosses as powerful manifestations of this contributive function, reflected not only in the polysemic meanings and multivocal doings they contribute to their socio-cultural context but also in their formal composition—based on the contribution of various symbolic elements, assembled on the net-work of their textile-like body. In this regard, I would like to suggest that ‘generative assembly’ is a particularly apt term for the definition of polysemic symbols in general and Ethiopian crosses in particular.

The term ‘generative assembly’ has been coined by Kyle Parry, Assistant Professor of Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, to describe the dynamic potential of assembled visual material (in digital or physical form) to generate an array of meanings.³⁵⁵ Although Parry discusses specifically contemporary visual culture produced in response to great disasters like Hurricane Katrina and does not examine symbolism in his analysis, the expressive and conceptual power of the term he coined and his insightful analysis of its various implications make ‘generative assembly’ very appropriate in the study of Ethiopian crosses and their symbolism. A number of observations Parry makes about the generative potential of assemblies are directly reminiscent of statements I have made throughout this book in order to describe the meaningful potential of Ethiopian crosses. For example, when discussing the significance of the word ‘assembly’, Parry places emphasis both on the process of production and on the reception of the product. He highlights the ‘purpose-driven assembly of signify-

³⁵⁵ K. Parry, ‘Generative Assembly after Katrina’, *Critical Inquiry* 44.3 (2018), 554–81. I thank Professor Parry for sharing his work with me before publication.

ing entities' and the individual and group agency of audiences who exercise their 'willingness and capacity' to interpret the material at hand.³⁵⁶ Likewise, the active meaningfulness of Ethiopian crosses depends both on the creative production and the creative reception of Ethiopian Christians. During the creative process, cross makers purposefully reassemble elements from a pre-existing tradition that they may enrich with new motifs. During the creative reception, Ethiopian Christians (makers, owners, handlers and viewers of crosses) selectively generate meanings out of what they see and do—in a sense, re-assembling and re-creating in their minds the cross and its significance every time they engage with it.³⁵⁷ Their readings may align with basic socio-cultural values, beliefs and traditional interpretations or may lead to more 'unanticipated or esoteric' interpretations (to use Parry's words),³⁵⁸ such as some of the interpretations I have offered in this book. Parry adds: 'The point is that any given assembly presents, at least in part, a *structured* and *conditioned* field of *open* interpretation. As much is true of nearly any media form, literature included, but the architectures and features of generative assembly especially encourage the coincidence of *guided attention and inventive response*'.³⁵⁹ These last words could aptly describe how Ethiopian crosses work as generative assemblies: they offer their audiences both a supporting framework and a creative space for the generation of meanings that are not just intelligible but also powerful (for example, reassuring, inspirational or even transformative) on an individual and communal level. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope that I have used to describe the potential of Ethiopian crosses to generate a wide range of meanings for different people could also be used as an example of generative assembly: we have *purpose* in the selection of materials (colors, shapes, textures) that are assembled in the object chamber of a kaleidoscope, *structure* in its body, and *creative freedom* in how the user shakes

³⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 560–61.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 563–64, Parry also points to the significance of the words 'reassemble' and 'regenerate'.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 564.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 564 (my emphasis).

and moves the kaleidoscope to re-assemble the elements in the object chamber and generate new images.

The productive potential of generative assemblies is based on the relationality and interactivity of different components, orchestrated according to purposefully constructed frameworks. In this regard, societies and cultures are themselves generative assemblies that foster different forms of generativity, depending on what and how they assemble together. As particularly dynamic manifestations of generative assemblies in all their aspects—from production to reception—Ethiopian crosses can also speak of the strong generative and re-generative potential of Ethiopian Orthodox culture. As any living millennial tradition, this culture constantly re-assembles elements of continuity and change into new formations. This ongoing generativity allows its members to develop meaningful identities, experiences and interactions, based upon but also sustaining and enriching the vitality of the culture, in a symbiotic relationship that resembles that between tree roots and branches. In the context of this dynamic cultural ecomorphosis, Ethiopian crosses have the (re)generative potential of mnemonic devices that can store and activate multiple meanings and thus help different users to create their own meaningful responses and to experience their own purposeful interactions with and through the cross. In this regard, the interpretation of Ethiopian crosses is a creative or rather re-creative act that is based on the initial creativity of the cross maker and the collective creativity of the surrounding socio-cultural context, but is ultimately dependent on the personal creativity of Christians who relate to the cross both as individuals and as community members.

This (re)generative potential of Ethiopian crosses has lead me into my own journey of research and has prompted me to share my findings with others. I hope that this book can inspire creative readers to embark on their own generative explorations.

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