

Narratives beyond the Knife: Food Contexts as Converging
and Diverging Zones in Christian-Muslim Encounters in
Ethiopia

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Signature of candidate:

To

my mother Mewded Amakele and my father Bejital Zellelew

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List of Abbreviations

CAT: Communication Accommodation Theory

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

E.C: Ethiopian Calendar

EOTC: Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church

FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

EPRDF: Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front

NCTPE: National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia

NOAD: New Oxford American Dictionary

SAT: Speech Accommodation Theory

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Abstract

This study attempts to answer questions related to the role of culinary and dietary discursive practices in the process of religious identity formations and thereby of interreligious encounters. Particularly it explores the Muslim-Christian encounters in Ethiopia in food contexts such as at wedding feasts. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims have a unique encounter in some socio-cultural settings that involve food/eating because of a peculiar religious food taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith. This custom, which has been practiced for many centuries, has been disapproved by some as “prejudice”, “a sign of mutual aversion”, and “a barrier” in their relations. It thus seems to be in continuous battle equally against sectarian and secular pressures. The overall system built around it, however, merits investigation to understand the dynamics of the micro-level Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia. The study has thus adopted several theoretical approaches in order to explore the virtues of this custom and its implication for contemporary pluralist and multi-confessional societies. It has employed semiotic analysis, narrative analysis, speech act theory, affect theory, and critical discourse analysis, to mention but a few. As a cultural studies should do, the research combined texts and “utterances of living speaking subjects”: analysis of religious texts and oral literature, and an empirical data generated through interview in an instrumental case study in Bahir Dar City.

Although the taboo has been disregarded by some scholars on the basis of secular reasoning and by some sects on that of often-contentious scriptural verses, the current study argues that the taboo has the following functions and virtues: It has been a cause of reciprocal hospitality and of mutual understanding of culinary/dietary differences which would have made commensality or food fellowship between the religious-food-taboo-observant Orthodox Christians and Muslims very difficult. The taboo has thus resulted in a culture of food exchange that forges a community ethos marked by reciprocity and empathy. The study also maintains that, apart from its possible historical function as a “border maintaining device” between the two religions in Ethiopia, the custom built on this food taboo has until the present day been considered, among other things, as an index and epitome of managing religious-oriented

differences. The study thus concludes that whether the taboo has a scriptural foundation or not, Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have transformed over centuries the difficulties in their food fellowship into creative food context that is marked by reciprocal hospitality and mutual understanding of (dietary/culinary) differences.

A knife is the most permanent, the most immortal, the most ingenious of all of man's creations. The knife was a guillotine, the knife is a universal means of resolving all knots, and the path of paradox lies along the blade of a knife ...

Yevgeny Zamyatin: *We* (1993, 113)

Preview

This study is presented in five major chapters that are sandwiched between introductory and concluding chapters, structured as follows: *Introduction* (Chapter 1); *Conceptualizing commensality and interreligious encounters in Ethiopia* (Chapter 2); *The semiotics of the ‘Christian/Muslim knife’* (Chapter 3); *Analyzing the affective experiences of the taboo observant* (Chapter 4); *Food and interreligious Discourse in religious texts and oral traditions* (Chapter 5); *Synthesizing the paradox of commensality and difference* (Chapter 6); and *Conclusion* (Chapter 7).

Introduction: This chapter, in a customary mode, gives the background of the study and the motivations behind it. It also looks briefly into the history of Christianity and of Islam in Ethiopia. Then, it addresses the contemporary relationship between the two religions in order to show the significance of the current study. Also included in this chapter are the objectives and scopes of the study as well as its theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Conceptualizing Commensality and Interreligious Encounters: By referring to the etymological roots of some culinary concepts in the Ethiopian food culture, this chapter conceptualizes Ethiopian commensality vis-à-vis the commonly known commensality in Western culture. Then it discusses how food contexts like wedding feasts serve as cultural spaces of convergence and divergence for Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. This chapter also builds toward one of the central arguments that the study upholds, i.e. whether theologically justified or not, this food taboo has not deterred Christians and Muslims from converging in food contexts such as at wedding feasts.

The Semiotics of the ‘Christian/Muslim’ Knife: The task of this chapter is exploring the seemingly trivial moment of slaughtering performed with knife through a semiotic analysis of its function in the realm of Christian-Muslim interactions in food contexts from slaughterhouses to butcheries and restaurants to wedding feasts. It conceptualizes the knife, a synecdoche of slaughtering, as an important culinary tool that is charged with the power of religious speech acts and has a significant semiotic function in Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia. It also theorizes slaughtering as a ritual that not only transforms the

neutral natural animal into a sacred cultural food but also invests the meat with an intense aura of disgust among followers of the other faith. The slaughtering narratives continue to manifest themselves in other public signs, namely in the Cross and the Crescent, on butcheries and restaurants, for example. These two universal signs are the corollaries of an anterior sign, i.e. the knife that, in the discursive realm of food and religious identity in Ethiopia, implicates the different slaughtering rituals of Orthodox Christians and Muslims. Thus, the chapter attempts to make a semiotic analysis of the knife and its resultant food contexts in order to better understand the dynamics of the interreligious encounters of these two religious groups. This chapter also tries to point to some tentative answers to questions of why, how and when Christians and Muslims started to practice separate slaughtering in Ethiopia by exploring historical texts.

Analyzing the affective experiences of the taboo observant: This chapter analyzes the empirical data obtained from informants and from personal lived experiences of attending wedding feasts in the research area and in other parts of the country. In Ethiopia, wedding feasts, apart from being a ritual passage for the bride and the groom, are important socio-cultural contexts for interreligious encounters. In such an encounter, food plays a central role for negotiating and affirming one's religious identity. According to the tradition, a Christian family invites its Muslim neighbors and friends, and a Muslim one its Christian neighbors and friends to a daughter's or a son's wedding. Furthermore, the families of the bride and the groom in both religious communities not only invite people from the other religion to the feast but also cater them with the latter's "own" food. However, it seems that wedding attendants from the other religion pay an affective price in the shape of implicit disgust and loathing in sharing a cultural space due to the taboo in question in order to fulfill their socio-cultural obligation. The chapter discusses the affective experiences of those who observe the taboo by juxtaposing their experiences and personal narratives from different theoretical perspectives.

Food and interreligious discourse in religious texts and oral traditions: This chapter explores the seemingly banal linguistic usages in connection with food

and religion. These narratives can be useful texts for a cultural inquiry into food. Indubitably, food, beyond just filling the belly, has manifold significances and significations. Its narratives, encapsulated in the seemingly banal food-related utterances, routine food practices, and broadly in the everyday communicative discourses, are pregnant with vital socio-cultural and interreligious implications. In Ethiopia, for example, from the *sost gulicha* ('three hearthstones', a culinary object that often symbolizes marriage); *ehel wuha* ('food [and] water', which denotes destiny, symbolizing the fortuitousness of marital unions); and, *bila/karra* ('knife', referring to *Muslim* and *Christian meat* and to its slaughtering and culinary practices) to the most important, probably the most cherished and staple-food *injera* (a broad leavened bread, usually made from *teff* flour, which supposedly is everything for virtually all Ethiopians and that symbolizes success, prospects, career, etc.) are notions we find enveloped and embedded in food and food practices in the country. In Amharic, one's stepmother is *injera enat* and stepfather *injera abat*, which literally mean 'bread mother' and 'bread father' respectively. In short, the allusive references to or the direct mention of food or culinary or dietary stuff in the daily utterances and discourses are, therefore, good sources for food and identity analysis. Thus, in this chapter, legends, proverbs, sayings, metaphors, etc related to food and religion are analyzed so as to see their particular implications for Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia.

Synthesizing the paradox of commensality and difference: The main thematic focuses of this study culminate in this chapter, which attempts to synthesize the apparent paradox of commensality and difference manifest in food contexts between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The chapter deals with the functions of the system built around the taboo by outlining the virtues beyond the observance of the taboo and that of the affective experiences of those who observe it. It discusses key points related to the remarkable custom of reciprocal hospitality and mutual understanding of dietary differences between the two religious groups.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the Muslim-Christian encounters in Ethiopia in food contexts are cultural spaces for not only the manifestation of

separation or divergence but also creative ways of dealing with dietary or culinary differences. This part also attempts to square the findings of the study with the course of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia and with that of the contemporary global trend of the so-called “the return of the religious”.

Introduction

Background of the Study: the ‘Eat-iopia’ Narrative

Many nations in their history have dealt with famine or some form of food shortage. But no country in recent times has arguably been haunted by and associated with famine and scarcity of food as much as Ethiopia is — so much so that the very collocation of ‘food and Ethiopia’ seems to evoke hunger, famine, starvation, food scarcity, etc, which have been the dominant discursive repertoires in the international media for the past few decades about the country. For this, particularly, the 1984 famine has left a legacy and become a momentous event that made the current Ethiopian narrative for the decades to follow. The question of food, i.e. the scarcity of it, and the humanitarian crisis that followed has created what Paul Ricoeur would call an event capable of “epoch making” and of founding the collective and narrative identity of a certain people ([1985] 1988). Ricoeur precisely writes that such “events generate feelings of considerable ethical intensity, whether this be fervent commemoration or some manifestation of loathing, or indignation, or of regret or compassion [...]” (187).

The international media in general and the famous live-aid initiative by pop stars in particular reminded the world of arguably one of the harshest humanitarian disasters near the end of the 20th century. The media galvanized various nations, donors and humanitarians into taking action to curb the tragedy. However, as much as it represented the urgency and deliverance at a time of such seemingly unprecedented hard times of the country in modern days, the image it has created of the country and its people remains inerasable from the memory of people around the world. Consequently, the event and the

‘Eat-iopia’¹, i.e. the ‘food-Ethiopia’ narrative embodied in archival footages and images have, since then, resulted in indignation, shame and regret among Ethiopians and a sense of pity and sympathy among non-Ethiopians, which is best articulated by Peter Gill in his *Famine & Foreigners: Ethiopia Since Live Aid*:

... in 1973 it was a television programme about a famine that played a critical role in the downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1984 it was a famous television news report which revealed the dimensions of the greatest humanitarian disaster of the late twentieth century. The face of aid was transformed and the face of hunger was Ethiopian.

Over the past twenty-five years it is images of Ethiopian starvation that have held the imagination of the outside world. Instead of its glorious past and rich culture, we now associate Ethiopia with famine. It has become the iconic poor country... (Gill 2010, 2-3).

Over the past three decades, foreign media while reporting even current state of affairs in Ethiopia could hardly make any discourse without almost necessarily alluding to that “epoch making” event, which has “held the imagination of the outside world.” This seems to be so because:

Ethiopia was stamped in the minds of a generation as the defining symbol of starvation and all that was wrong in Africa. The scenes of emaciated children and parents dying on a brightly lit plain, and of Bob Geldof and Band Aid pricking the conscience of the west, are part of the collective narrative of the time (Smith 2014).

To the present day, this catastrophic event has been an important milestone in the Ethiopian, if not the African, narrative of starvation, poverty, aid, underdevelopment, etc. In a word, the food crisis in Ethiopia has been not only the image of Ethiopia but also the face of the gloomy side of Africa as regards aid and its politics in media. “Even today, the nexus of politics, media and aid are influenced by the coverage of a famine 30 years ago,” writes Suzanne Franks (2014) in her article *Ethiopian Famine: How Landmark BBC Report Influenced Modern Coverage*. It would seem no surprising then if the hegemonic food-and-Ethiopia narrative has, over the last few decades, become

¹ I came across with this coinage in the web where it is used mainly to promote eating out in Ethiopian restaurants. I have used it here to capture the narratives of food: famine, eating, not eating, etc attached to Ethiopia.

a governing discourse and an observing-lens for food-related and other studies and views of Western researchers on Ethiopia.

Some scholars have gone as far as explaining the otherwise centuries-long religious fasting tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) as a mechanism of managing sporadic food scarcity. For example, Peter Farb and George Armelagos write, “[f]asting is sometimes adaptive for the society - as in Ethiopia, where fast days often correspond with the ‘hungry season’ when food is in short supply anyway, thereby stretching out the scant supplies” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 131). In fact, similar functionalist remark has been made on “the Catholic Lent, which always occurs at the end of winter when food is scarce” (Civitello 2008, 61). However, the EOTC fasting periods are stretched rather almost all through the whole seasons accounting up to two thirds² of the year irrespective of food supply or of harvest seasons. Even better, the Ethiopian Lent, the longest fast, known as *Abiy Tsom* (The Great Fast), often starts after the end of harvest in most regions, meaning, it coincides with relative abundance rather than scarcity. As Karl E. Knutsson and Ruth Selinus observe, “[i]n the whole of the highlands of Ethiopia and the major part of the rest of the country where Orthodox Christianity has any influence, the big fast occurs when harvest and threshing are completed and the stores temporarily filled” (Knutsson and Selinus 1970, 964). In view of this, it is the influence of the recent hegemonic discourse of food scarcity that seems to form the basis for explaining perennial practices such as the fasting etiquettes of the EOTC. There is no space here to treat how the religious fasting tradition in Ethiopia antedates the recorded history of famine in the country, but it suffices to refer to Peter Garnsey who rightly notes, “unravelling the logic of the

² The number of fasting days (strict abstinence from all animal products except honey) in a year given by scholars varies: 165 days for ordinary Christians and 250 for the devout ones (Garnsey 1999, 142; Levine 1972, 232); for common people 110-150 and for the pious up to 220 (Knutsson and Selinus 1970, 958) for the most pious 254 (Ficquet 2006, 45, footnote), whereas Zellelew (2014, 139), making no distinction between the ordinary and the pious Christians, calculates the seven major fasting seasons that make 191 days in a year.

specific dietary rules is one thing, explaining the existence of the rules, dietary and non-dietary, as a package, quite another”³ (Garnsey 1999, 94).

Jon Abbink, while discussing the tradition of peaceful co-existence among Ethiopians of different confessions, writes: “[p]aradoxically, their shared poverty and desperation may have contributed to local coexistence and mutual sociability” (Abbink 2007, 67). One may not totally downplay such hypothesis because the coexistence between different religious groups may indeed have resulted from, though not limited to, “shared poverty and desperation”. However, the tradition of sharing, co-existence and cooperation is not only among the poor or the desperate but also among the haves, and between the haves and have-nots. This means co-existence, interdependence and cooperation are not necessarily motivated by economic factors. The day-to-day, micro-level interreligious relation in Ethiopia, particularly Christian-Muslim, is part of the interdependence and cooperation at times of crisis and misfortune as well as at times of happiness and rejoicing regardless of the economic status of individuals to whom the essence of food exchange and hospitality is more than an economic matter.

If, in recent decades, the food scarcity narrative in the exterior embodies the collective identity of all Ethiopians regardless of religious and ethnic identities, the interior narrative of food, however, plays an important role in the expression of distinct identities of Ethiopians with different religious and ethnic backgrounds. My objective here is not necessarily to refute scholars’ claim about food and Ethiopia but rather to reflect how the exterior food-Ethiopia narrative has become an observing-lens to view the country and its (food) culture. The contrast between the hegemonic narrative of food scarcity in the exterior, on the one hand, and the *abundance* and importance at least of food discourse in the everyday life of Ethiopians in the interior, on the other, might make another narrative in its own right. This research, which deals with the role of food in interreligious encounters in Ethiopia, is also conceived out

³ But this does not mean that some socio-cultural practices including religious fasting traditions have no “latent functions” (Merton 1968). For example, the long fasting seasons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that involve strict meat abstinence have a positive environmental effect (Zellelew 2014) based on the nexus between meat production/consumption and its environmental hazard (Barclay 2010).

of and situated between these two seemingly opposing narratives of food and Ethiopia. In view of this, this study embodies a discussion of the interior food narratives against the backdrop of the hegemonic food-Ethiopia narrative that is often enacted in images of famine, draught, hunger, poverty, etc. Like many studies, it was motivated by both personal and collective questions and experiences underpinned by the same 'Eat-iopia' narrative.

The inspiration for this study stems from my lived experience with two-confessional society, family and friends in Ethiopia. Particularly, the experience with meat that I, as an Orthodox Christian, had with my Muslim aunt in my childhood and have had with my Muslim friends to the present day act as a backdrop to the basic problem, which has grown from a childhood fascination to an intellectual question in the shape of a PhD dissertation. This study, in a nutshell, argues that whether theologically justified or not, the food taboo under study has not deterred Christians and Muslims from converging in food contexts such as at wedding feasts. Among its other functions, it has been a cause for a creative way of dealing with religious dietary/culinary differences, which would otherwise make food fellowship among Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia next to impossible, if not unimaginable. Or, to put it another way, in my attempt to deal with food and religious identity in Ethiopia, I found myself dealing with the fact that the strict dietary/culinary difference in the two religions and the resultant difficulty of commensality is ironically a cause of opportunities for the two religious groups to deal with differences in a mutually accommodating and reciprocal mode.

Before delving into details, however, it is important to briefly look at the historical account of the two religions in Ethiopia in order to get some insightful background of the apparently peculiar interaction of Christians and Muslims in food contexts and of the distinct characteristics in general and the gastro-politics in particular of these two religions in the country.

Brief Historical Overview of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a multi-religious⁴ country: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Animism have all played an important role in its history, and its name has even become part and parcel of Ras Tafariism⁵ since its inception in Jamaica in 1930 (Semaj 1980). Apart from its diversity, religion has long been a socio-cultural and -political force for many centuries in the country's history. From the presumably mythical and legendary ancestral link that forges part of the nation's ancient dynasty (the Solomonic Dynasty⁶) to the Axum Empire, which officially accepted⁷ Christianity in the 4th century and that would also later become "the first foreign relations case of Islam" (Kabha and Erlich 2006, 535) in the seventh century, religion has until the present day remained crucial in both the political and civil lives of its peoples. As Ulrich Braukaemper comments, "[a]lthough the revolution of 1974 turned Ethiopia into a pronouncedly secular state, religion has continued playing an important role in the political, socio-economic and cultural affairs of the country" (Braukemper 2004, 9; see also Girma 2012, xvi-xvii). Orthodox Christianity was especially instrumental in the political realm of the country, from its official introduction in the 4th Century until the announcement of the separation of church and state by a revolutionary communist military government in 1974 (Ahmed 1992; Braukemper 2004, 3; Gnamo 2002, 103-5; Larebo 1986, 149). With the exception of the 9th Century challenge by Queen Yodit who destroyed the

⁴ According to 2007 census, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians account 43.5% (32,138,126); Muslim, 33.9% (25,045,550); Protestant 18% (13,746,787); Indigenous 2.6% (1,957,944); Catholic 0.7% (536,827); and Others 0.6% (471,861) (Population Census Commission 2008)

⁵ Ras Tafari is a pre-coronation name of Emperor Haile Selassie I (reigned 1930 to 1974)

⁶ For 'legendary origin of the kingdom' see Jones and Monroe 2003, 10-21; Robinson 2004a, 110; for the main legend see E.A. Wallis Budge's (1932) translation of the *Kibre Negest*.

⁷ According to some historians this is unique of the Axumite Empire in contrast to that of the Greco-Roman empires, where Christianity was confessed first by the lower class then by ruling classes, whereas in the former it happened in reverse pattern (Larebo 1986, 148-9; Shenk 1988, 270). However, traditional sources contradict such views in that Christianity was accepted long ago in the 1st Century, 34 AD (see Hable Selassie and Tamrat 1970; also Hable Selassie 1972) before it was accepted officially by the ruling classes in the 4th century may mean it also had followed the same pattern as that of the Greco-Roman empires. As John D. Carlson notes, "[c]onversion to Christianity occurred slowly and was initially limited to trade routes and towns. It eventually gained broad acceptance, as embodied in the conversion of the Axumite King, Ezana" (Carlson 2011, 171).

Axumite Kingdom, the 16th Century challenge by the Muslim Ahmed Gragn⁸, and the 17th Century interlude of Catholicism (Feyissa 2011), Orthodox Christianity had been influential in the country's politics to the extent of the Church becoming "an embodiment of imperial legitimacy and official nationalism" (Gnamo 2002, 105).

It is also worth noting that the military government overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie I, who claimed to be an elect of God⁹ through adherence to the bloodline of Solomonic Dynasty (House of David), a so-claimed royal sib of King Solomon of Israel through a legendary and partially mythical ancestral account of kings from this dynasty in Ethiopian history. Speaking of the country's history, one cannot afford to ignore the role of the EOTC in state affairs so much so that church and state were next to two sides of a coin. The church, among other things, had an important role in legitimizing and sanctioning the Ethiopian kings (Erlich 2002; Larebo 1986) by, for example, solemnizing their coronation until its separation from the state in 1974. Apart from such role in politics, the socio-cultural influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Ethiopian societies is evident in the role it has played in art, literature, architecture, language, music, education, and legal system, to mention but few. In short, it would be no exaggeration to say that to read Ethiopian history is to read history of the EOTC and vice versa.

On the other hand, it is remarkable that the history of Islam in Ethiopia goes back to the time of the very inception of Islam in the Middle East. It entered the country around 615 AD, three centuries after Christianity did. Despite its long history in the country, Islam in Ethiopia is believed by many to have a limited, if not non-existent, political representation (Ayele 1975; Demoz 1969; Vangsi 1985). Some scholars surmise that Muslims are today demographically dominant in the country (Ayele 1975, 90; Carmichael 2004, 217; Desplat 2005, 486; Robinson 2004b, 14; Vangsi 1985) suggesting as if

⁸ *Gragn*, literally means 'the left handed', is the nickname of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1507-1543) who fought against Christian Abyssinia in a civil war that started in 1529.

⁹ Max Weber views this as a sociologically important phenomenon of "the hereditary of 'divine right of kings'" (Weber 1958, 49) in that kings claim that their authority and legitimacy is derived from God rather than from the people they ruled (Habermas 2011, 19; Safran 2005, 1).

their numbers were underreported to maintain the appearance of a Christian majority. In the words of François-Xavier Fauvell-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch “[...] the Muslims have always been, politically speaking, minorities in the history of Ethiopia, as is the case in the most recent period even though they may be demographically dominant” (Fauvell-Aymar and Hirsch 2011, 27). Abbas Haji Gnamo, for one, states that despite the long history of Islam in Ethiopia as far back as in the time of the prophet Mohammed, “many including in the Islamic world, do not know that almost half of the Ethiopian population are Muslims” (Gnamo 2002, 102-3). Nevertheless, the most recent, i.e. 2007, government census report shows that their number stands second with 33% next to that of Christians, who are reported to be 62.2% (Population Census Commission 2008, see *Appendix 3*).

Be that as it may, scholars of Islam in Ethiopia whose writings are concerned with its historical and political representation tend to agree that this religion has lacked not only political representation (Braukaemper 2004, 3; Demoz 1969, 53; Vangsi 1985, 127) but also the scholarly attention it deserves owing partly to the assumption by some scholars that Ethiopia is a land of Christianity and Islam is then of “secondary importance” (Ullendorff 1962 in Ahmed 1992, 15). In the past the strength of Christianity deterred Islam from acquiring a real hold in Abyssinia (Huntingford 1953, 138); however, over centuries, despite the expansion and strength of Christianity, Islam has also established itself in many areas in today’s Ethiopia, including what was “historic Abyssinia” (Ahmed 2001, 31; 1992, 15), in terms both of distribution as well as of number. But still, though Islam historically was always on the periphery of the Ethiopian political space, its very expansion, like that of Christianity, can also be seen into two ways: as a *political* factor, a post tenth century development (Tamrat 1972 in Ahmed 2001, 32; see also Trimingham 1952) and “as a religion and a culture” (Ahmed 2001, 32). Ahmed’s survey about the development of Islam in Ethiopia sheds a better light here, giving a relatively precise chronological account of the progress and expansion of Islam from its introduction in the 7th to its revival in the 19th century: 1) Early phase (7th to 11th century) marked by arrival of Muslim immigrants [Islam’s first encounter with Christianity] 2) expansion and consolidation (12th to 15th century) known for the establishment of “Muslim statelets” in the country’s

hinterland 3) confrontation (16th century) precisely famous for the “Gran episode” 4) steady expansion (17th and 18th centuries) marked by significant progress taking advantage of the Christian kingdom’s internal problems [known as *Zemene Mesafint*, ‘era of princes’] and 5) revival and internal reversals (19th century), the coming and expansion of the mystical orders both in central and southern parts of Ethiopia (57-59). Therefore, that Islam did not assume (a significant) space in the power politics of the country does not mean it did not pose political questions and challenges in its entire history, nor does it demean its being a cultural force in its own way as well as in its interaction with its counterpart, i.e. (Orthodox) Christianity and other indigenous faiths. One notable example is the so-called Gagn invasion in the 16th century, which, as many commentators noted, has more of a political, economic and demographic implication than of purely religious causes and consequences to be reckoned with (Ahmed 2006, 4; 1992, 18; Gnamo 2002, 108; see also Carlson 2011, 181-2). Since the political and territorial challenge Islam posed during this period, it was arguably only after the separation of church and state in 1974 that Ethiopian Muslim’s questions of self-assertion, Ethiopian-ness and political representation have arisen to prominence. Such questions were pursued rigorously after having gained relative momentum following the deposition of the communist government in 1991 by the current government, which introduced religious liberty at an unprecedented scale (Haustein and Østebø 2011). In a nutshell, the political changes that Ethiopia has seen in the last four decades in general and since the current ruling party EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front) came to power in particular has shaped the contemporary interreligious landscape of the country, which is briefly highlighted below.

Contemporary Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia

The overall relationship between Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia may be seen in light of an appraisal of their relationship as state and institutional issue (historical-political) at the macro level, on the one hand, and as practices and norms (socio-cultural) in the quotidian encounters between their respective followers at the micro level, on the other. For instance, at the macro level the

power balance had historically been skewed toward Orthodox Christianity, as stated before, until the separation of church and state. At the micro level, however, their encounters have more often than not been marked by a relative peace and mutual co-existence (Haustein and Østebo 2011). Perhaps failure to notice these two levels could lead to a wrong generalization about the historical as well as the contemporary status of the relationship between the two religions in the country as either too good or too bad. In other words, based simply on the micro-level relationship between the two groups, one might mistakenly label the entire history of their relationship as peaceful. Similarly, focusing only on the macro-level power imbalance and conflicts could encourage a false assumption that the historical relationship between the two religions can be simply termed as checkered, hostile, or antagonistic. In fact, one should not downplay the salience of the macro level historical power imbalance as a source of grievance and conflict with its own possible detrimental effect at micro level relationships. In similar vein, day-to-day skirmishes and misunderstandings between the two communities at micro-level could also grow into big scale conflicts and affect their macro-level engagements. As Haustein and Østebo precisely write:

Whereas the peaceful relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia has often been celebrated by both Ethiopians and foreign observers, this remains a simplification of a far more complex picture. Christian-Muslim relations on the micro-level have been of a seemingly harmonic character, yet relations on the macro-level have in contrast been more antagonistic, shaped by recurrent conflicts in the past (Haustein and Østebo 2011, 767).

It is thus difficult as well as impertinent to extrapolate the rather complex relationship between the two religions based only on one level. Therefore, the history of their encounters as well as their contemporary relationship requires systematic study that takes the two levels into consideration perhaps by viewing each one at a time, which the current study attempted to pursue.

Today, as in many parts of the world, religious identity consciousness is growing in Ethiopia, and political and historical representations of ethnic and religious groups are being questioned. Writing of the Christian-Muslim relations in Europe and Russia, in such a way that sounds, to a degree, parallel to the current atmosphere among religious elites in Ethiopia, Mario Apostolov

comments that people have a tendency of attributing to Christian–Muslim relations a meaning of inequality and discrimination: some Islamist extremists claim that Muslims are discriminated against all over the world and that their identity and culture are under threat of destruction while right-wing extremist Christians claim that their Christian culture is under siege and threat of being submerged by Muslim immigrants (Apostolov 2004, 107). Such tendencies rooted in notions of inequality and discrimination help relatively small groups of extremists to manipulate people who are vulnerable to being convinced by such ideologies (107).

As regards the interaction between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia, there is a widely held view of “peaceful coexistence”. One reason that seems to have contributed for such an interaction is a history that goes back to the time of Mohammad whose followers had to flee from persecution by the Qurayshite oligarchy in Mecca¹⁰ in need of refuge, which the Axum king in Christian Abyssinia provided at such a dire and critical moment (Carmichael 2004, 219; Erlich 2004; Robinson 2004, 112). Haggai Erlich (2004, 231) describes this as a “gesture [that] gave birth to a legacy of eternal gratitude,” which entitles Ethiopia a unique place in *hadith* (“Leave the Abyssinians alone ...”) and thus to be exempt from *jihad* (Erlich 2002, 25).

Recent scholarship on the historiography of the country in general and of Islam in Ethiopia in particular, as well as popular views among the Muslim community is, however, not only challenging the long-held picture in which the country has been depicted as “a Christian Island” (see Ahmed 1992; Ramos 2013) but also questioning the notion of the often talked-about “co-existence”. Many Ethiopian Muslims in recent times are critical, for example, of the first phrase for it apparently glosses over their existence and representation in the image it evokes of the country. However, according to some, the phrase can also apply to the geo-religious situation of the country in that Ethiopia is surrounded by Islamic states or countries with a predominant Muslim population such as Sudan in the west, Somalia in the east and south-east, Djibouti again in the east while the Middle East and Egypt are also not far

¹⁰ For discussion on the *hijra*, see Ahmed (1992, 21-22).

given their historical influence on and contact with the country. In addition, the often-used “co-existence” also appears to conceal the discriminations and under/mis-representations that Muslims endured in the history of their own country. Hussein Ahmed, for example, comments that the so-called “tradition of tolerance must not obscure the enduring sources of tension and conflict” (Ahmed 2006; see also Feyissa 2011). Conversely, one can also argue that the occasional misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts should not also overshadow the enduring tolerance and co-existence of the two religious groups. As Ahmed himself writes elsewhere “positive interactions between Muslim and Christian Ethiopians may well prove to have been of far greater importance than conflicts” (Ahmed 1992, 18). Therefore, yet again, the relationship between the two religions in the country should be put into perspective in light of their interactions in the two levels.

On the other hand, the apparently politically legitimate questions of asserting one’s religious and ethnic identity in Ethiopia today are more often than not pursued at the expense of the identity and history of other religious and ethnic groups. Tony Karbo has aptly described this when he wrote: “Sometimes the difference between the legitimate search for identity and [the] hostility towards neighbors of other religions is blurred” (Karbo 2013, 52). As a result, asserting one’s identity in one religion is perceived as necessarily a threat by another: “It is not uncommon to find a rise in influence of movements and leaders among the followers of major religious traditions who mobilize their believers in the name of preserving a perceived threat to their religion” (52). Especially in urban Ethiopia, there seems to prevail an atmosphere of competition and a lurking fear of being outnumbered among Muslims and Christians, which seems to have hung in the balance the micro-level, peaceful co-existence and friendship between the two religious groups. According to a recent study by Manuel Joao Ramos, for example, Amhara Christians, referring to Muslims, say: “They have more wives, they breed more than we do”; “We’ll soon become a minority in our own country and the government is doing nothing about it” (Ramos 2013, 17; see also Haustein and Østebo 2011, 767). It is also worth noting that as early as in the 1960’s, a Muslim author, pen-named Abu Ahmad, wrote a book claiming that 75 per cent of the Ethiopian population is Muslim, which, according to the late scholar Hussein Ahmed, is

“a startling claim” and whose authorship has “several factual errors” (Ahmed 1992, 40). Over five decades since then, similar demographic polemics and allegations are still in the air.

In addition, elitist groups and individuals from both sides release alarmist propagandas, encouraging the mass to panic and to feel engulfed by the other religion. Scholars have come up with alarming studies that since EPRDF came to power in 1991¹¹, the Christian-Muslim contact, tolerance and cooperation has been increasingly targeted by extremists and dogmatic preachers (Abbink 1998; 2011). Moreover, one can witness not only interreligious but also intra-religious polemics and tensions (Desplat 2005, 486; Haustein and Østebo 2011). And the statistical preoccupation over census data that we have noted above is also a reflection of the apparent feelings of fear of being outnumbered in both Christian and Muslim camps.

Therefore, as much as the acknowledgment of and the awareness about the injustices and oppressions that religious or minority groups have endured as a result of macro-level political engagements, and aside from maintaining the sheer rhetoric of peaceful co-existence at micro-level relationships, the study of the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia should demonstrate practical examples and practices of this often-talked-about peaceful co-existence and culture of accommodation. Except for some studies, there is a clear lacuna in the study of the socio-cultural Christian-Muslim encounters in the country, especially in geographical areas that have often been labeled as predominantly “Christian”. On a positive note, however, what is interesting and is also the motivation behind this very study is this: In the face of an apparently growing atmosphere filled with inter- and intra-religious polemics and of the propagation of hatred and mutual suspicion by some fundamentalist¹² and extremist religious elites, the “innocent mass” (the non-

¹¹ Over four decades ago, while remarking on the then representation of the Muslims in what he calls “in the corridors of power” in Ethiopia, Abraham Demoz in a prophetic tone says: “If at present the demands for greater participation on the part of Moslems are not very vocal it is only a matter of time before such demands appear” (Demoz 1969, 53).

¹² First, the weight and currency of this word when used to describe Muslims and Christians does not seem to be the same. Second, with its reference to Islam, there appears to be a sort of hesitation among scholars as to whether the Islamic revivalism in Ethiopia should be called “fundamentalism”. Hussein Ahmed argues that Islam in Ethiopia in the 1990’s was resurgent

elite Christian and Muslim society) has continued interacting on various seemingly banal socio-cultural occasions or events. These occasions are very important for inter-religious encounters, in which one observes mutual understanding of differences, accommodations and reciprocal hospitality. Such events include wedding feasts wherein Christians and Muslims converge, cooperate and share their happiness together while they duly affirm and negotiate their religious identities. One important agent through which they do so is food and/or eating. Therefore, how food has become a cause for these apparently paradoxical phenomena (i.e. for their convergence and divergence) is a question that this research primarily seeks to address.

Defining the Research Problem: Narratives beyond the Knife

“The prevalence in every society of food taboos - which to outsiders appear foolish, uneconomic, and often meaningless - has long posed an intellectual problem” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 126). In other words, why certain people or cultures wage taboo on certain foods that could be a culinary delight of other peoples and cultures is always a baffling question. Studies show that religion is one of the several factors that affect the selection of foods by a certain culture or society (Rozin 1982 in Belasco 2008, 16), which brings the notion of religious food taboo to discussion. “The taboo problem” (Williams 2004, 429), or what Freud (1950, 26) called the “riddle of taboo” has been studied by anthropology and other fields. Brett Williams precisely writes of the importance of studying taboos: “[t]o study taboos is to plumb the depths of people’s humanity and the breadths of human *diversity* and *creativity* because nothing is perhaps as interesting as those practices that so frighten and repel people that they try to forbid them, manage them, and redefine them” (Williams 2004, 427, my emphasis). Narratives of food in general and of food

thus should not be labeled fundamentalist (Ahmed 1998 cited in Carmichael 2004, 232) and Tim Carmichael, for one, corroborates Ahmed’s view, remarking, “Islamic resurgence or revivalism is not necessarily the same thing as Islamic fundamentalism” (2004, 232). This might be true of the situation in the period studied by Ahmed and Carmichael or even in the years following the fall of Emperor Haileselassie in 1974 (see Erlich 2004, 231) but the last decade in Ethiopia has seen a rather checkered interreligious and intra-religious relationship marred by sporadic conflicts, burning of worshipping houses, alleged forced conversions, killings, etc (see Haustein and Østebo 2011, 767). In view of such incidents, to use and speak of religious fundamentalism today in Ethiopia should not be an overstatement.

taboos in particular thus tell, among other things, who people are, whom they communicate with, who the powerful and who the powerless are, etc, which in turn reveal several things about individuals and the society or group they belong to. Food can be “an instrument of power” (Grassi 2013, 194) and “to know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 211).

In view of the taboo discussion above, the kind of taboo that the current study is concerned with is unique in that it is not about the avoidance of a particular diet by a group of individuals. The taboo is more of a *culinary* problem rather than a *dietary* one. It is a religious taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith, which has been observed by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims for several centuries. It thus makes commensality very difficult between those who observe it. Apart from describing the system built around this taboo, the study looks at how it functions and what purpose it serves. For example, one point worthy of consideration and that this study attempts to pursue is the notion of *creativity* attached to food and food taboos. That is, the study assumes that beyond food-oriented religious polemics within and across religions and beyond the apparently conflicting values and norms between religious groups are believers’ mechanisms of juggling religious restrictions and the mundane-will for social relations. Out of such ambivalence seem to be born creative ways and systems about which one could hardly tell whether the systems are purely religious or purely cultural. In other words, there appears to be a fuzzy line or boundary between the religious and the mundane aspect of the system built on this taboo, which in turn nuances the distinction of religion as a belief system and as a cultural system (Geertz 1973). Furthermore, such dynamics seems to be determined and affected by political, ideological and historical factors. As Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins write:

Eating is one form of creative activity in which subjects are allowed to make choices about what will come to constitute their very being, both corporeally and symbolically. It should come as no surprise that these decisions are politically charged and that they cannot escape the weight of history in their articulations (Rouse and Hoskins 2004, 246).

Needless to say, what we eat, which invokes what we do not, establishes our social, religious as well as ethnic membership in a society or group that we

belong to (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 6). Massimo Montanari writes, “[l]ike spoken language, the food system [...] is an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange—a means of establishing identity, to be sure, but also the first way of entering into contact with a different culture” (Montanari 2004, 133-4). Consequently, food, from its very preparation to its consumption, is a cause for inclusion and exclusion in the process of interpersonal and inter-group interactions.

By the title of the study *Narratives beyond the knife*, I have intended to express and capture the power and “charisma” of the knife as an important culinary tool that transforms during slaughtering the neutral animal into an identity-laden meat in Ethiopia as ‘Christian’ and ‘Muslim’. It took the inspiration from some apparently trivial linguistic usages such as *be hulet bilawa meblat* “eating with two knives” and stories that encapsulate the notion of what Eloi Ficquet (2006) calls, “meat soaked in faith,” which induces the separation of space, utensils, foods, etc between the two religious communities in Ethiopia. The study basically is keyed to the centrality of food and culinary tools as identity marker. Thus, it aims to explore the role that food plays as a religious identity marker and as a negotiating factor for Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia in certain zones of encounters. It attempts to posit food contexts that involve meat as cultural spaces that serve both as diverging and converging zones. Dubbed by some as theologically baseless and sociologically a barrier for the interaction of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, this taboo has been found to be an interesting and potentially rich subject of study as to unravel the discourses and narratives surrounding the system built on food taboo and their implication for multi-confessional societies.

The taboo observed by Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia as regards the so-called “Christian/Muslim knife” or “Christian/Muslim meat” effectively delineates the frontier between the two religions with regard to food and religious encounters by affecting the spaces as well as the materials they share. It is reminiscent of Herodotus’ account on Egyptians and the Greeks where “[...] no Egyptian man or woman will kiss a Greek man, or use the knife, or a spit, or a cauldron belonging to a Greek, or taste the flesh of an unblemished ox that has been cut up with a Greek knife” (Herodotus, *Histories*,

2.41). Beyond the prohibition of meat and its accompanying culinary materials are various reasons or foundations of meat taboo. Since antiquity meat appears to be the most forbidden food item and the reasons for avoiding meat are theological, ethical, philosophical and ‘medical’ or related to health (Garnsey 1999). Attitudes toward eating meat thus illuminate human-relationship dynamics (Elias [1939] 2000, 100). Therefore, studying and understanding the narratives surrounding food taboos in general and meat-related ones in particular help to understand the various interpretations given by the observant as to their implications for interreligious encounters, power relationship as well as the ideological underpinnings of such apparently banal practices and customs built on food and foodways.

Objectives of the Study

Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia share striking dietary similarities such as avoiding pork, reptiles, and scavenged meat, to mention but few. This study is concerned with a unique taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith that affects the commensality between the two religions. It is a catalyst that precipitates the dynamics of the encounters between these two religious groups in socio-cultural settings such as wedding feasts and in the wider public spaces. In other words, this research seeks to answer the following three interrelated basic questions:

1. What are the underlying narratives beyond the so-called “Christian/Muslim knife” and “Christian/Muslim meat” in Ethiopia?
2. How does the knife, as a synecdoche of slaughtering, serve as religious identity marker in Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia?
3. How do food-contexts delineated by knife (slaughtering) function as interreligious converging and diverging zones?

While the study basically intends to respond these questions, it seeks to:

- theorize the role of the knife with regard to food, space and religious identity in terms of the culinary practices and broadly of the gastro-politics of the two religions.
- understand how these two religious groups “as inhabitants of

interzonal spaces” negotiate their identities through affects and discourses attached to food and culinary practices.

- synthesizes the virtues of the system built around the paradoxical nature of the taboo on commensality and differences between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia and the implications of the virtues for contemporary (multi-confessional) societies.

Scope of the Study

First of all it is essential to delimit the scope of this research in terms of which Christianity and which Islam it focuses on. As much as Christianity falls under such different denominations as Orthodox, Protestantism, Catholicism in Ethiopia, to mention but few, so too is Islam in general and Ethiopian Islam in particular characterized by a heterogeneous¹³ and dynamic form, as demonstrated by the various changes and reforms it has seen through history (Østebø 2009). The current much contested and politicized “inter-Islam, Ahbash-Wahhabiyya conceptual rivalry” (Kabha and Erlich 2006, 519) in Ethiopia and elsewhere then may not also be surprising. Ahmed’s categorization of Ethiopian Islam in two strands more than two decades ago still sounds valid: “the political, often expansionist, manifestations of external Islam on the one hand, and indigenous Islam which is part of the Ethiopian culture on the other” (Ahmed 1992, 45-6). However, it is difficult to maintain this apparently simple classification when dealing with African Islam in general (see Soares and Otayek 2007, 7) and with Ethiopian Islam in particular (see Desplat 2005, 483-4) because of various internal and external dynamic forces that make this categorization inapplicable. Thus, instead of such reductionist dichotomy: the so-called political and expansionist (Ahmed, 1992) or “established Islam” (Brenner 2000, 144) vis-à-vis “popular” (Gnamo 2002;

¹³ Eller (2007, 212) writes, “As the world’s second largest religion, Islam also displays tremendous local variation and adaptation. Like Christianity, Islam is fundamentally divided, in this case into two main branches known as Sunni and Shi’a. [...] each of these main branches is further divided into numerous schools of interpretation and jurisprudence [...]” As regards Islam in Ethiopia, Abbink (2007, 66) comments: “there is considerable diversity within the Muslim communities of Ethiopia” and “notable regional divergences” (see also Patrick Desplat 2005). Therefore, one can hardly generalize about Islam in a given country, much less across countries (Eller 2007, 215).

Brenner 2000) or “popularized” Islam (Østebø 2009), this study, as noted before, takes primarily those Muslims — regardless of their belongingness to either of the two groups — for whom food particularly meat slaughtered by people of other faiths is an issue. In relation to this, the fact that whether or not food is an issue for Muslims should come as no surprise because there are still controversies over Islamic food norms (Rouse and Hoskins 2004, 245).

Similarly, food in essence is an issue for Orthodox Christians; however, because of socialization, acculturation and syncretism, it is also often an issue for some other Christians in Ethiopia. For instance, even many Protestants, who often maintain the irrelevance of food prohibitions for Christians, do not eat ‘Muslim meat’. This could be because of, what Ben Highmore would call, the “pedagogy of disgust” (Highmore 2010, 130) that such followers have grown up with, as the first generation of Ethiopian Protestants were converted mainly from Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. For example, Braukamper, writing of food avoidance in Southern Ethiopia, suggests that neither food taboos affect the “(re)-Christianization” process in this region, nor did the process change the observance of food taboos by the converts: “food taboos did not offer any obstacle on the (re)Christianization of those areas. Many people maintained them when they turned Protestant or Roman Catholic [though] there was no need to observe them” (1982, 430). It is, therefore, difficult in the scope of this study to take a detailed account of each denomination’s/sect’s view of food norms.

It must be noted that there are Muslims who do not mind eating meat whether the animal is slaughtered by Christians as long as it is in the name of One God based on the doctrine of God’s singularity. Likewise, there are also (Orthodox) Christians who do not observe this taboo, nor are haunted by the disgust it entails. Interestingly, the late Mary Armide, one of the most prominent folk singers in Ethiopia, has captured in the following lyrics one of the justifications often heard from such individuals:

እሰላም አረዳ ቺ ክርስቲያን አረዳ ቺ
 ጩቅራና ጉብት ቺ ጩቅራና ጉብት ቺ
 ያም ሰጋ ቺ ያም ሰጋ በላሁ ምናለበት። (ጫሪ አርምዴ)

*Islam arede, Kristian arede,
 Chegwarana gubet, chegwarana gubet,
 Yam siga, yam siga, belahu minalebet.*

Whether Muslim slaughtered or Christian slaughtered,

Stomach and liver, stomach and liver;
That is meat; this meat: nothing happened - both I ate. (Mary
Armide, my translation).

I believe that those groups or individuals who do not observe the taboo or dare to break it may merit investigation in their own right, but this study deals primarily with those Christians and Muslims for whom food is an issue, and despite their differences in dietary/culinary rules with their Muslim and Christian neighbors respectively manage to keep interacting in food contexts. It should be clear, however, that this is not a purely comparative study of religions or intra-religious denominations. It simply has focused on Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Ethiopian Islam for whom meat serves as a separating agent in their socio-cultural encounters. The attempt to study the two religions and their food culture is not also directed at questions regarding the truth or falsity of doctrinal beliefs (Bell 1997) but rather at the socio-cultural dynamics of the two religions. Finally, unless I mention otherwise, I sometimes use in this study the short form “Christians” which refers to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.

Significance of the Study

The decision made in this study to taking narratives related to food in general and to the knife and meat in particular is based on the assumption that important stories are encapsulated in seemingly banal food-related utterances, routine food practices and everyday communicative discourses. Especially in a predominantly oral society like Ethiopia, oral narratives and discourses reflect the collective consciousness of the society and give vital socio-cultural information. Hence, firstly, this study, as an inquiry into the food culture and its implication for religious identity and interreligious encounters in the country, demonstrates the potentialities of food as not only an object of study but also an inquiry tool and lens for cultural and interdisciplinary studies in Ethiopia.

Secondly, in today’s world where interreligious and intergroup tensions have become a daily routine, it seems high time to look for indigenous mechanisms of managing diversity and difference at a local level. In view of this, the current study attempts to show how Orthodox Christianity and Islam

in Ethiopia have transformed over centuries the barriers of a religious food taboo for commensality into creative food context that is marked by reciprocal hospitality and mutual understanding of (dietary/culinary) differences.

Thirdly, this study has attempted to ferret out and outline some virtues and functions of the system built on this religious food taboo. It is hoped that such an attempt demonstrates the potential of some indigenous, socio-cultural and religious practices that are often rejected on the basis of certain religious as well as secular orthodoxies. This, however, should not be equated to accepting blindly some perceived functions of outdated and ‘inherently harmful’ practices, which also have no viable significance to current societies.

Finally, as an endeavor in the realm of cultural studies, this study is hoped to be an input for cultural policy making and cultural political decisions as regards the relationship between cultural, religious and traditional norms vis-à-vis secular and religious views in the face of an ever-increasing change and transformation of societies, cultures and religions.

Theoretical Background and Methodology

It may be already clear from the foregoing that this study is a “micro-level research” that principally addresses socio-cultural contexts such as wedding feast where meat serves as a converging and diverging agent in Christian-Muslim encounters. It is an interdisciplinary research that attempts to unravel the narratives of food and culinary tools and their implication in interreligious encounters in the country by weaving together various disciplines.

Theoretical Framework

The study grapples with a widely observed food taboo that is intertwined with the rather complex notion of religion as belief system, and as cultural system (Geertz 1973). Tackling such complexity with a single theory is obviously impossible. Thus, “it is necessary also to consider the philosophies and cosmologies of the sign that shape religious practices and narratives in their indigenous contexts of performance” (Yelle 2013, 1). To this end, theories and approaches from various fields are used as analytical frameworks and models that include affect theory, communication accommodation theory, semiotic and

narrative analysis, and critical discourse analysis. As Warren Belasco (1999, 31) notes, “studying food is interdisciplinary. To study food you must integrate data and analyses from a wide variety of disciplines, from agronomy, literature, and nutrition and to economics, biology, and history.” Hence, the study takes food and its socio-cultural contexts as well as its discursive realms as text by involving people who interact in such contexts and whose life is affected by the discourses. So, it goes further “from texts to utterances”¹⁴ as Cultural Studies should do to analyze the utterances of persons as social actors, for which critical discourse analysis serves as an exploratory tool (Barker 2002, 40). In other words, the research attempts to combine various interpretative frameworks in order not only to describe but also unravel what people say and do in relation to their identity (Billig 1997 cited in Barker 2002, 40) through semiotics and narrative analysis (Saukoo 2003) as principal analytical tools. The overall theoretical ground for this research revolves around food, identity and intergroup space. Below, I have attempted to summarize the theoretical backgrounds from various fields as regards food under three conceptual rubrics: (1) food as an identity marker; (2) food as a sign system; and (3) food contexts as uniting and separating cultural spaces.

1. Culinary and dietary practices play role in individual and group identities (Barclay 2010; De Garine 2001; Lyons 2007; McGee 2011; Meigs 1997; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Nukaga 2008). Several studies assert the socio-cultural implication of food to identity and identity construction. Barclay (2010, 586) underscores, for instance, that what we eat and with whom we eat play an important role in the process of inclusion and exclusion in our interpersonal and intergroup relations. Scholars also treat how culinary and dietary practices can determine and shape individuals’ and groups’ identities. According to Lyons (2007, 250) cuisine creates, reproduces and modifies identities, and we learn since childhood to not only distinguish which flavors, textures, colors, and smells of food are culturally and socially acceptable to eat

¹⁴ Barker (2002, 40) says, “Cultural studies has been lopsided in its concentration on texts and in its general failure to analyse the utterances of living speaking subjects using the tools of linguistic analysis. However, once we take on board the significance of practice in the operations of language, then it is clear that we need to analyse the utterances of persons as social actors.”

but also to determine “who can or cannot be involved in food preparation and consumption [...]” Palmer (1998, as cited in Lyons, 2007) emphasized that such “complex practice inhibits or enables interaction between different social groups depending on their mutual regard for the other’s culinary practices.” This in turn nuances the distinction between one’s own food and food culture vis-à-vis the food and food culture of others, which makes food in general a social marker (De Garine 2001, 487). These all suggest that food is an important socio-cultural element on which individual and group identity can be constructed and through which inter-personal and inter-group distinctions can be maintained, according to which food-based identities can also emerge. Mintz and Du Bois (2002, 109) comment, “[l]ike all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart.” In line with this, the rules associated with food and eating “unite [and] apparently separate diverse objects and organisms” (Meigs 1997, 95), resulting in inclusion and exclusion based on dietary/culinary identities.

2. Food and its socio-cultural contexts are signs and systems of communication (Barthes [1961] 1997; Bentley 2001; Danesi 2004; Grassi 2013; McGee 2001; Monatanari 2004; Watson and Caldwell 2005). Food can also be a tool for unraveling the interwoven threads of social, religious and cultural aspects of a society. Roland Barthes ([1961] 1997) notes that food “is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, protocol of usages, situations, and behavior”. Among other things, food is used stereotypically as a template for evaluating other people and other cultures (Danesi 2004, 199). Louis Marin (cited in McGee 2001) states, “all cookery involves a theological, ideological, political, and economic operation by the means of which a nonsignified edible foodstuff is transformed into a sign/body that is eaten.” This sign thus can also bring up another sign in a Peircean model of signs as processual: “signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification” (Keane 2003, 413), making food in general a sign system. More precisely, Barthes ([1961] 1997, 25) notes, “[f]ood serves as a sign [...] and] is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used.” In addition, around food and its socio-cultural context are discourses

and narratives - texts – that can be analyzed in literary and cultural studies. As McGee (2001, 11) asserts, “[f]or all cultures, food and diet have functioned as conveyers of meaning both to those within the group and to outsiders. In this sense, the meal itself can be treated as a text: communicating its context, as well as its specific meaning, it gives us a reading of more than itself.” Elspeth Probyn, for her part says, “food and eating can be analytically productive foci in the examination of multicultural dynamics” (Probyn 1998, cited in Gunaratnam 2001). In short, beneath food and the food culture of a society, there are various meaningful elements that tell more about the dynamics of that society. What Bentley (2001, 180) states sounds tailor-made here: “Food, at the base of civilization, contains deep, multi-layered meanings.” This makes food “[...] an important and endlessly fascinating lens for social and cultural analysis – not only for anthropologists, but also for scholars of history, literature, cultural studies, political economy, and public policy” (Watson and Caldwell 2005).

In addition, food is an important factor in human communication and relationships. This study views food as a “system of communication” (Barthes [1961] 1997) and it takes the notion of “principle of reciprocity” (Levi-Strauss 1949) or “mechanisms of reciprocity” (Komter 2007) as theoretical background to elucidate the function of food in the reciprocal hospitality witnessed on socio-cultural events such as weddings in Ethiopia. Such function, as a corollary of religious food taboo, is underpinned by Robert Merton’s work on the *manifest and latent functions* of socio-cultural practices. That is, while “manifest functions” refer to “objective consequences for a specified unit and [are] intended”, “latent functions” refer to “unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order” (Merton 1968, 117). This study maintains that the taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith has, among other things, a “latent function” of reciprocal hospitality.

3. *Space unites and separates us* (Lawson 2001; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Broadly, “[s]pace is both that which brings us together and simultaneously that which separates us from each other” (Lawson 2001, 6). The spaces that Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia share and through which they bargain their religious identity can be explained by the seemingly paradoxical notion of boundaries, which “are conditions not only for separation

and exclusion, but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion [...]” (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 181). In addition, central to the interreligious interactions in food contexts is whether the item is “sacred” or not for each religion. In other words, we see “the hidden presence of the sacred” (Foucault 1967) in the inclusion (unity) and exclusion (separation) process that results in symbolic boundaries, which “are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168). Noëlle McAfee, in her study of Julia Kristeva’s claim about religious food taboos, says, “religions have served such purposes, setting up ways to cleanse or purify” (McAfee 2004, 49). Evidently, religion is one of the factors that lead to distinction of clean and unclean food, what (not) to eat, with whom (not) to eat, etc the examination of which “allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relation” (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168). A case in point can be attempting to “capture” the emotional experiences and space negotiations of individuals from different religious groups during their encounters that involve food or eating. For example, the notion of hierarchization related to [food] disgust (Miller 1997; Ahmed 2004) explains the power relation that is manifest in interreligious relations because of the affective experiences of individuals, such as disgust, caused by tabooed food. Therefore, the paradoxical notion food contexts as uniting and separating spaces underpin the various analyses and interpretations of the cultural and/or religious system built on the taboo under question.

Methodology

I have conducted this study by weaving data from (personal and collective) lived experiences, (religious) texts, (popular) discourses and socio-cultural contexts, the interplay of which is a “trademark of the cultural studies approach to empirical research” (Saukko 2003, 11; see also Pickering 2008). In order to critically examine the relationship between religious groups in a specific socio-cultural setting, this research employs qualitative methodology, which aims to deeply study a phenomenon in a specific and definable setting, involving group of people or communities (Holliday 2002, 37). In other words, the basic questions that this research has posed require qualitative rather than quantitative methodology. The phenomena that are envisaged to be studied in

this research are qualitatively researchable such that they involve individuals' and groups' beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, which define their interactions. Thus, qualitative methodology allows studying such elements in the encounters between the Christian and Muslim communities in order to understand what individuals make of their encounters in connection with their respective food norms.

The study focuses on wedding feasts because, as far as my lived experience is concerned, wedding feasts are the most effective food contexts where Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia negotiate their religious identity. More importantly, due to the religious food taboo in question, they are socio-cultural events at which one observes the converging and diverging roles of food in the encounters (food-induced unity (Meigs 1997) and food-induced separation) between the two groups. As Hilda Kuper comments, such “[a]n event can be interpreted as a series of interactions between people interested and involved in a particular issue. Their intensity may be similar or divergent, with divergencies of different degrees ranging from almost compatibility to total and irreconcilable opposition” (Kuper 2003, 252). Therefore, wedding feasts, as socio-cultural events, have been interpreted as settings as to see this apparently paradoxical “intensity” of interaction between the two religious groups.

Furthermore, obtaining in-depth data from an area and a group of people who were easy to get to and hospitable to the inquiry (Stake 1995, 24) was opted. As Stake further notes, when we have a research question, puzzlement, a need for general understanding and want to get insight into a question, we study a particular case, of which there are three types: intrinsic, collective, and instrumental (26). Bahir Dar city was selected to serve as an instrumental case whose attributes, traits or patterns with regard to the research problem can be extended to other cases. This, however, does not mean that the primary objective was to extend the study to other cases: “Case study research is not sampling research. We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case” (27). Therefore, if the research findings become instrumental and applicable elsewhere, which I believe so, it will be much more relevant; however, if they fail to be instrumental, then they can still be socio-anthropologically important in their

own right in the shape of “a tale of two religious communities” and their interreligious encounters in food contexts in the research area.

The research site

The Amhara Regional State (fig. 1) is found generally in the northwestern part of Ethiopia bordered by Sudan to the west, Benishangul Regional State to the west and southwest, Tigray Regional State to the north and Afar Regional State to the East. Its capital, Bahir Dar City, is found some 570 km away from Addis Ababa. It is located in the southern shore of Lake Tana (source of the Blue Nile) after which it is named *Bahir Dar* (“sea shore”). According to the latest 2007 census, the Amhara Regional State is populated predominantly with about 14.25 million Orthodox Christians (82.5) and with nearly 3 million (17.2%) Muslim inhabitants while Bahir Dar City, officially known as Bahir Dar Special-Zone, is a home for 220,344 people out of which 89.72% are Orthodox Christians and 8.47% are Muslims (FDRE Population Census Commission 2008).

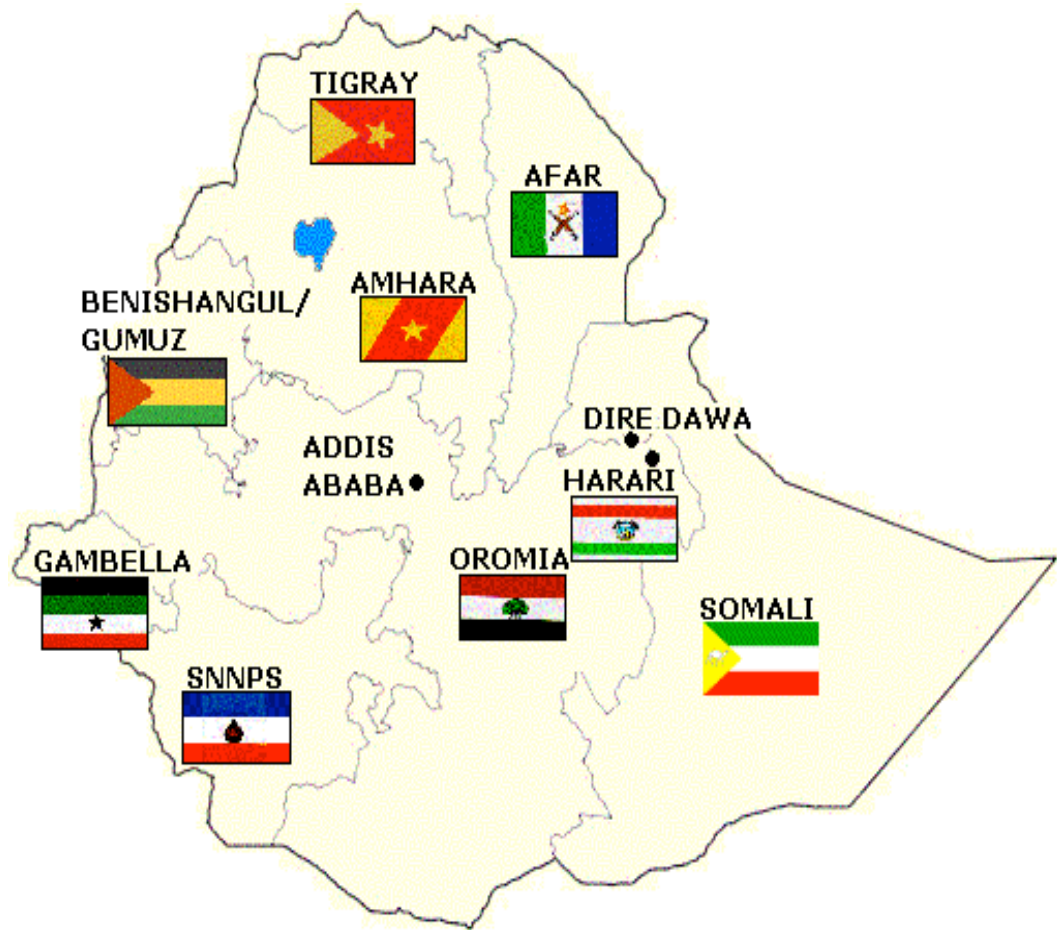


Figure 1: Map of the Regional States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE)

Source: Ethiopian Government Portal: <http://www.ethiopia.gov.et/regional-states>

Common misconceptions about the research area

እስላም ያረደውን አይበላም አማራ ፤
እንዳትቀላቅይኝ ከነ ፀመር ጋራ።

*Islam yaredewun aybelam Amara;
Endatkelakeyign kene Omar gara.*

Amhara does not eat what Muslims slaughter,
Please don't mix me up with the group of Omar.

(My translation)

Told from a viewpoint of a Christian, referred to in the lyric as ‘Amhara’, this oral poem documents a cultural and religious food norm in the society’s consciousness. In addition, the poem reveals¹⁵ a general misconception about a people in Ethiopia and especially in the geographical area where the current study was conducted. It is a confusing misnomer, which tends to equate the Amhara ethnic group to one particular religion, i.e. Christianity although “Muslims and Christians have shared for centuries many aspects of the overall Ethiopian culture, such as belonging to a common ethnic-linguistic group [...]” (Ahmed 1992, 20). As Donald N. Levine in his seminal *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* writes, “[t]o all Amhara except a small minority who are Muslim, the name of their ethnic group is synonymous with Christian. The term [Amhara] signifies Ethiopian Orthodox Christian [...]” (Levine 1972, 78). This is also evident from another saying obtained from an informant who remembered what her grandmother used to say when the latter faced something confusing and mixed-up, which itself is expressed in another mix-up of taking Amhara as a synonym of Christian and an antithesis of Islam:

ምኑ ታውቆ ፤
እስላም ከማራው ተደባልቆ።

*Minu tawko,
Islam k’Amaraw tedebalko.*

Nothing is distinguishable;
Muslim is mixed up with Amhara.

¹⁵ It might also be interesting to note that the point of view of this poem is suggestive of the notion of power relations manifested on food avoidance that this study addresses in the coming chapters. For example, ‘Amhara [Christian] does not eat what Muslims slaughtered’ shows the avoidance by the Christians of the food of Muslims, while it simultaneously makes one wonder whether there is a comparable popular saying/poem from a Muslim perspective.

As ironically mixed up as the saying itself sounds, it should also be noted that the use of such misnomer is prevalent not only among the Christians but also among Muslims themselves who yet again ironically “regard all the Amhara as Christians, even though some Muslims belonged to that ethnic group”¹⁶ (Ahmed 1992, 20; see also Ramos 2013, 21-22). In fact, as wrong and awkward as it may sound, in addition to the popular poem presented as epigraph above, there are also some popular expressions that appear to take it for granted. For example, one could often hear a linguistic usage as “Is he Amhara or Muslim?” “Is she Oromo or Christian?” Such linguistic and literary usages document and reveal the historical misconceptions related to the Amhara-Tigre ethnic groups and the religions attached to them. It is all the more surprising to see the use of this same misnomer even among scholars¹⁷.

It is, however, an undeniable fact that the current Amhara Regional State along with today’s Tigray Regional State and today’s Eritrea is historically referred to as “Christian highland” an appellation that arguably subsumes the Muslim inhabitants of this historically important region for both Christianity and Islam since the first Christian-Muslim encounter in the 7th Century, i.e. around 615 to be more precise. Indeed, this region is the core of Christianity in the history of the country as well of the EOTC. However, it has been arguably over-emphasized to the extent of blurring the existence of a considerable number of Muslim Ethiopians who belong to the same ethnic groups as their Christian counterparts in this region. Not only today, but even in the past, as David Robinson notes, “[i]n the highlands there were close significant Muslim minorities who spoke the same languages and shared much of the culture of the Christian ruling classes” (Robinson 2004a, 113). Though predominantly populated by Semitic-speaking Christians, the area has thus always been a home for people from different religious backgrounds. As Ahmed precisely

¹⁶ There is also a tendency among some to equate Oromos with Islam despite the fact that many Christians belong to the Oromo ethnic group. Even in the current Oromiya Regional Government alone, the number of Christians and Muslims is fairly equal. According to the 2007 census report, there are 13.2 million (48.7%) Christians and 12.8 million (47.5%) Muslims (Population Census Commission 2008), though such population size by region does not necessarily reveal the ethno-religious composition.

¹⁷ Getnet Tamene, presenting the unique dietary laws of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, for example, writes: “[l]ike the Jews of old an Amhara [sic] prefers never to eat with any man [sic] who is not a Christian and like them he will also fast twice a week” (Tamene 1998, 103).

writes, “[...] in spite of the preponderance of Christianity as a state religion and the dominance of the Semitic-speaking [...] Abyssinia had historically been a heterogeneous society consisting of non-Semitic pagan and Muslim elements of equal historical standing” (Ahmed 1992, 16; see also Ahmed 2004, 38-39; Abbink 1998, 119; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 2000). Therefore, labeling this region today in what sounds to be a blurring adjective “Christian highland” seems neither appropriate to the contemporary politico-religious reality of the country nor inviting for socio-cultural studies of the interaction among diverse groups in general and between the Christian and Muslim religious communities in particular.

Generally, research and publication on Islam in Ethiopia has shown progress in geographical as well as thematic coverage on such areas as central, southern and eastern Ethiopia, specifically on places like Wallo, Jimma, Arsi, Bale and Harar (Ahmed 2009, 454). However, in Ahmed’s review as well as in my attempt to survey relatively recent literature on Islam in North Ethiopia, the Amhara region (save Wallo) is conspicuous by its absence except in a couple of studies (Ahmad 2000; Ramos 2013). Therefore, I do not want to follow the same trend that tends to ignore the Muslim population of this region only on account of statistical figures or some established beliefs that this region is predominantly Christian while it is a home for many Muslim Ethiopians in areas such as Wallo, Shewa, Gojjam, Gondar and Tigray (Abbink 2007, 67; Abbink 1998, 119; Ahmad 2000; Ahmed 2004, 38-39; 1992, 20; Ramos 2013, 21-22)¹⁸.

On the other hand, it has also become common among scholars as well as activists to depict Islam in Ethiopia almost as an antithesis of the Semitic-speaking Christian Abyssinia, an assumption that presumably ignores again not only the presence of many Muslim Semitic-speaking but also Christian non-Semitic-speaking peoples all over the country. Trimingham (1952, 101) wrote, “[...] Islam’s force of expansion amongst pagans in Ethiopia was helped by the fact that it was the religion hostile to the Amharic race [sic] who lorded it over

¹⁸ For a review of European travelers’ and scholars’ accounts on the presence of Islam in Ethiopia in general and in the so-called Christian highland such as Tigray, Gondar and Wallo since the 16th to the 19th centuries, see Ahmed (1992, 25-28).

them.” Such a tendency prevails among scholars primarily because of the fact that the Christian Abyssinian Empire belonged to the Semitic-speaking Amhara and Tigre peoples. However, one cannot downplay the use of religion as a political instrument in Ethiopia. For example, while the Orthodox Christian Church was used as “an embodiment of imperial legitimacy and official nationalism” (Gnamo 2002, 105; see also Ayele 1975, 80), Islam, for some Ethiopians, was used “as an ideology of resistance”¹⁹ (Braukamper 2004, 3). But, the implication of such discourse overtime creates overgeneralizations and misconceptions to the extent of equating certain ethnic groups, namely Amhara and Tigre, with a single religion, i.e. Christianity, by subsuming, if not ignoring or neglecting, a considerable number of Muslims among these ethnic groups. Therefore, especially in today’s Ethiopia, whose political administration is based on ethnic identity, the issue of ethnicity and religion should be carefully examined²⁰ not to confuse to the extent of taking one as a synonym for the other when speaking of either. Moreover, whether the Muslim population is a significant minority in today’s Amhara Regional State in general and in Bahir Dar City in particular, how the two groups (the Christian majority and the Muslim minority) interact with each other at socio-cultural events, I believe, simply merits investigation.

Research participants and data generating instruments

This study took Orthodox Christian and Muslim participants who were purposely selected to represent the following groups: Religious fathers/learned men, local elites, people who previously organized a wedding, and various individuals from different age, gender, and educational backgrounds.

¹⁹ See also Ayele (1975, 87); Carmichael (1996, 170-1); Desplat and Østebø (2013, 5-6); Gnamo (2002, 106-7); For the attitudes of the Christian emperors and the lowland Muslims’ resistance in the 13th and 14th centuries, see Robinson (2004a, 114); also Ayele (1975).

²⁰ As Ahmed (1992, 19) comments, for example, on the 19th Century power struggle between “Amhara-Tigrean paladins of Christianity and the Yajju Oromo Champions of Islam”, two issues must be re-examined: the exact role of ethnic solidarity and of religious loyalty in the power struggle. In addition, Sven Rubenson suggest, “[f]actors other than loyalty to a particular faith may have been decisive in the conflicts and rivalries of the time” (Rubenson 1976 in Ahmed 1992, 19)

The main empirical data generating instruments were one-to-one and group interviews. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used on various topics related to the research questions from informants “who for various reasons are either very effective at relating cultural practices or simply more willing than most to take time to do so” (Davies 2002, 71). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed in order to find more resourceful persons on the subject under discussion until fairly detailed and sufficient information for analysis was generated. It should also be mentioned that relevant information was obtained from casual conversations and random group interviews depending on the informant type and situation. Interviews took place in the local official language Amharic using interview guide questions (*see Appendix 1*). Most interviews were tape-recorded after having duly requested the informed consent of each informant. Data in general were obtained at different phases of the study in accordance with the schedule of my mobility among the three Universities in three countries (Italy, Germany and Brazil). Thus they were conducted in January and February 2013, August and September 2013, and finally in July and August 2014. The data were analyzed and interpreted by listening to each audio material both for a holistic grasp of the whole interview and for specific narratives that stand out to be quoted verbatim for illuminating a theme under discussion/analysis. In addition, relevant literary and religious texts were critically reviewed. Legends, oral poetry and sayings obtained from informants constitute a substantial proportion of the analysis and discussion of various themes of the study while published materials from dictionaries to the Bible and the Qur’an were also consulted as reference and supplementary materials. Particularly, religious texts (in Ethiopic and Amharic) that treat food and religion were very useful throughout. As regards oral literature and popular sayings, they were all collected from informants unless published sources are mentioned.

Methodological disclaimer

In the current ethno-political climate of the country, historical designations attributed to certain ethnic groups are being questioned. For example, some non-Amhara ethnic groups often pose the very basic question of what it means to be an Ethiopian. And they argue that the Amhara (and Tigre) cultures as well

as Orthodox Christianity had for long time been taken as an epitome of the Ethiopian cultural identity (see Adamu 2013, 20; Habecker 2012, 1214-15; Mains 2004, 342). I, however, do not believe that the culture of one particular ethnic group necessarily epitomizes the very diverse Ethiopian culture. This, however, is not to deny, especially in food studies, the role of regional and ethnic food culture in the construction of national identity (see Kifleyesus 2006). But, the reason for conducting the current study in this region is purely methodological. For example, this site is more appropriate for my inquiry in terms of my linguistic and cultural competence, not to mention the fact that I have lived in this area for more than a decade which effectively helped me to have access to information mandatory in qualitative research, if not in any kind of inquiry. Thus, if it were not for methodological ease, the same study could have been done in other regions, where the custom of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith anyway serves as separating factor for Christians and Muslims. In my lived experience and as the available scant literatures suggests (Abbink 2007; Braukamper 1982; Carmichael 1996, 2004; Ficquet 2006), the topic I am dealing with (the Christian-Muslim interaction in food contexts) is common almost through out the country.

Therefore, any generalization or conclusion I have drawn about the Christian-Muslim encounter in Ethiopia based on the narratives from this research site should not be seen as equating the Amhara culture as necessarily “Ethiopian” in the old sense, which other ethnic groups are critical of today. On the other hand, when I study the food narratives related to religion in this area, ethnicity was not my concern. In this connection, it is important to note that the ethno-religious characteristic of most peoples in Ethiopia is asymmetrical except among Afar, Somali, Argoba, and Harari ethnic groups, whose ethnic identity is symmetrical with their religion (Islam). In the case of such ethnic groups, one may draw a maxim: “Tell me your ethnic identity, and I will tell you your religious one.” However, the religious identity of many of the ethnic majorities such as Oromo, Amhara, Tigre, etc, as researches suggest (Abbink 1998; Adamu 2014; Ahmed 1992), is not symmetrical to ethnic identity. Thus, one can find a Muslim or a Christian Amhara.

Conceptualizing Commensality and Interreligious Encounters in Ethiopia

This chapter first summarily highlights the scarce literature on food and interreligious relations in general and on Christian-Muslim encounters in particular in Ethiopia and elsewhere. It then attempts to conceptualize how food contexts at wedding feasts function as a cause of reciprocal hospitality between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia to negotiate their religious identities.

There is a lacuna in the gastro-criticism of Sub-Saharan African foodways in general. Western researchers lack of interest in studying them and fail to recognize African cookery as cuisine (Lyons 2007). Lyons points out that even those who researched the African cuisine, such as the British social anthropologist Jack Goody, hypothesize that “unlike Eurasian cultures, sub-Saharan African societies (except highland Ethiopia) lacked well-developed social hierarchies and thus failed to produce ‘haute’ cuisines.” (Goody²¹ 1982; 2006 in Lyons 2007, 348 parenthesis in original). Here, though “highland Ethiopia” appears to be presented as “exception” by Goody, some early European travelers to Ethiopia, as observed by Abbebe Kifleyesus, viewed the country’s food culture with their Eurocentric and thus condescending eyes: “The food of the Abyssinians...in no way resembles normal, proper food and the natives are not familiar with intelligent methods of preparing meals. In fact, many Abyssinians do not really know how to cook and eat or even how to sit correctly at a table,” wrote Henry Salt (1814 cited in Kifleyesus 2006, 30). Such European travelers, Kifleyesus comments, “failed to appreciate Ethiopian

²¹ Goody also goes further in depicting “sub-Saharan cookery as bland and undifferentiated products that serve only to fill the belly”, an assumption criticized by many scholars (see Lyons 2007, 348).

life because they measured it largely in terms of European civilisation” (2006, 30). In modern times, the disinterest in Ethiopian food culture seems to have continued so much so that it has barely won attention as a research topic. As a result, an inquiry on its culinary and dietary culture in general and its implication for interreligious encounters in particular is lacking except some endeavors in recent times by a few scholars, whose works are briefly reviewed in the coming sections.

Particularly, the role of food for Christian-Muslim encounters, seldom has been a subject of interest by researchers probably in part because for some “food is not an issue for Christians” (Barclay 2010)²² a remark that seems on the surface to resonate with the New Testament²³ but which subsumes all domains of Christianity into one box. However, some research has been done on the food etiquettes of Islam elsewhere (Bankhiera 1999; 1995; Kanafani-Zahar, 1997; Rodinson 1965); on the Jewish dietary laws, i.e. the *Kashruth* (Douglas 1972, 72-79; Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009), and on Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (Beyene 1994; Ficquet 2006; Lyons 2007; Pawlikowski 1972; Ullendorf 1968; Zellelew, 2014). However, very few have researched in detail the implications of these dietary cultures for interreligious relations with some exceptions (Bankhiera 1995; Beyene 1994; Finger 2007; Ficquet 2006; Kanafani-Zahar 1997; Rosenblum 2010). Katherine E. Ulrich has also studied discourses among Buddhist, Hindu and Jain dietary polemics in South India and its implication for religious identity construction and interreligious rivalry (Ulrich 2007). Here, Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* is a seminal work that treats the role of food in the different castes of India (Dumont 1970). Apart from the caste²⁴ system, there appear to be some parallels in the dynamics of social groups in India discussed

²² John Barclay basically argues that Christianity should forge food taboos, like avoiding meat consumption, to reduce global warming that is caused by meat production (Barclay 2010).

²³ For example, Mathew 15:11: “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” See also Romans: 14, 1-22.

²⁴ For the role of food avoidance in socio-economic status in Southern Ethiopia, see Braukamper (1982); also Pankhurst (1999); Kifleyesus (2006).

by Dumont and of religious groups in Ethiopia particularly at wedding feasts by virtue of the paradoxical role of food as separating and uniting factor.

In addition, Hyung-Jun Kim (1998), in describing the Muslim-Christian relations in one village in Java, discusses the exchange of food during holidays between Christians (Protestants and Catholics) and Muslims as a symbol of harmony between the two religious groups. Particularly, Kim observes that the revivalism of Islam in Indonesia in the late 1970s and 80s, however, negatively impacted the food exchange or reciprocity between the two religious groups in the Javanese village (Kim 1998). We cannot apply or draw a comparison between trends in a small village in Java (for example where Christianity barely had a century old history during the study and for whom food is not an issue, see Kim 1998, 72) with that of Ethiopia (where the two religions' perennial co-existence has been tested by many conflicts and for both of whom food, particularly meat, is an issue and a separating factor in their encounter in food context). Kim's study, as admitted by him/herself, cannot be generalized to show the Muslim-Christian relations even in rural Java. But in certain measures it not only illuminates the study of the Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia in general but also summons up the decreasing trends of their meetings in food contexts in the face of the phenomenon of the so-called the 'religious return' in general and of growing global puritan Islamic revivalism in particular.

The Study of Food and (Religious) Identity in Ethiopia

Except for some scholars making a passing reference to it, food as a religious identity marker in Ethiopia has rarely been a subject of research. Hussein Ahmed has slightly touched upon the issue of food and religion (Ahmed 1992, 20-21). Having listed what he regarded as prejudices among Christians and Muslims against each other, he stated, "[e]ach of the two communities has a taboo against eating the flesh of animals slaughtered by the other" (Ahmed 1992, 21). He argues that "such official and popular prejudices" have been strengthening the barrier between the Christian and Muslim communities such that they have led today to concentration on the themes of confrontation (Ahmed 1992, 20-21). However, Ahmed seems to generalize by saying that

their contact has little “developed into a mutual, enduring awareness of each other’s importance or the need for coexistence and reciprocal tolerance” and “Muslims and Christians have traditionally lacked mutual understanding of each other’s way of life” (Ahmed 1992, 20).

Similarly, in Tim Carmichael’s studies (1996; 2004), an Arabic document *luqtat tarikhiah* (‘Historical Notes’), which was said to have been circulating in Harar in 1994 and that treats the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia and the role of Harar in the history of Islam in the country, corroborate Ahmed’s view. The said document recounts that Christians and Muslims “avoid each other because of unfounded mutual aversion. For example, even though the Quran does not forbid it, Muslims do not eat meat slaughtered by Christians, nor marry Christian women; and the Christians also exhibit fanatical behavior such as washing or destroying dishes that a Muslim has touched” (see Carmichael 1996, 173; 2004, 245-250). Moreover, F. Peter Ford, in discussing the Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, characterizes this taboo as barrier and an example of the lack of knowledge of one group about the other’s faith (see Ford 2008, 61). However, I argue that contrary to such accounts on this custom with regard to the Christian-Muslim relation, the avoidance of meat of animals slaughtered according to the other religion’s ritual might make commensality difficult but not deter the two groups from converging in food contexts and “eating together” in many parts of Ethiopia. To wit, it looks on the surface, as is observed by the writer of the said document and the other two scholars, that the two groups seem to “avoid each other” because of meat. If we re-examine some of their contacts in food contexts such as at wedding feasts, which this study is trying to do, what appears to be “prejudice” or “mutual aversion” or barrier would rather sound a blessing in disguise for their relations. It rather is a practical example of reciprocal hospitality punctuated by a mutual respect for dietary differences of one’s religious Other. Not to deny the presence of prejudices, if not mutual aversions, in intercultural relations in general and in Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia in particular; my point is that the “official and popular prejudices” themselves merit investigation as they allow us to see the dynamics of the groups’ encounters, for example, in food contexts. In this connection, it is interesting to quote Donald N. Levine, who wrote in his *Greater Ethiopia*:

Through [...] various forms of interaction Ethiopians of diverse traditions became acquainted and developed customs for relating to one another. If their images of each other often contained pejorative stereotypes, such stereotypes were nonetheless invaluable for providing modes of reciprocal orientation that enabled them to trade, fight, worship, and negotiate with one another (Levine 2000, 46).

The degree of contact in general among Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia is a scarcely surprising phenomenon. Alain Gascon and Bertrand Hirsch, for example, studied sacred spaces as places of religious confluence in Ethiopia, which sheds some light on the extent of the culture of contact and confluence between different religious groups sharing not only a socio-cultural setting like wedding feast but also a common space even in shrines (Gascon and Hirsch 1992; see also Desplat 2005). Similarly, Jon Abbink's *Transformations of Islam and Communal Relations in Wollo, Ethiopia* (2007) is also an important study in terms of showing the degree of socialization²⁵ between Christians and Muslims. While Abbink describes "the taboo on eating meat of an animal slaughtered by someone of the other faith" as "unambiguous dividing line" (2007, 72), he also remarks that, "[a]t mixed holiday celebrations and weddings, Christians and Muslims eat only meat slaughtered according to their own religious tradition. The host provides for both groups, and the system still works perfectly well" (Abbink 2007, 80, footnote). This tradition, however, is not unique to Wollo, Abbink's research area. Similar features of these "communal accommodations" are also existent in other regions/zones in the country at large where the two religious groups interact by duly maintaining and affirming their religious identity at wedding feasts through this religious food taboo.

Another account on food taboos in Ethiopia is Ulrich Braukamper's *On Food Avoidances in Southern Ethiopia: Religious Manifestation and Socio-Economic Relevance* (1982). Braukamper studied the various food taboos including that which is related to the distinction between the so-called

²⁵ Jon Abbink writes: "Muslims and Christians frequently intermarry, socialize, attend each other's festivities, and undertake joint activities. Sometimes Muslims accept the mediation efforts of Christian priests and the healing power of Christian priests and saints, to whom there are also some shrines in the area. On the other hand, many Christians visit the tombs of Muslim shaykhs (for instance, at mawlid) and consult the shaykhs' living descendants in cases of personal problems, illness, and other affliction" (Abbink 2007, 72).

‘Christian/Muslim meat’. Although the title reads “Southern Ethiopia”, this survey is also important, for it implies that some taboos such as the avoidance of pork and of meat of animal slaughtered by people of other faith between Christians and Muslims are not limited only to the oft-thought-“pious” Amhara and Tigre Orthodox Christians in northern Ethiopia. Braukamper’s study is particularly relevant for my study by suggesting an apparently aesthetic reaction of Christians toward “Muslim’s meat” that shows the taboo’s implication as a manifestation of power relations between the two religious groups in the country (see Chapter 4).

Though very short, Maxime Rodinson’s article “Les Interdiction Alimentaires Ethiopiennes” (Ethiopian Food Prohibitions) is another important survey that characterizes the diverse food taboos in Ethiopia as vague, non-explicit and arbitrary (Rodinson 1966) while his other articles “Ghidha” (1965), which deals with Islamic food norms, and “Sur la question des ‘Influences Juives’ en Éthiopie ” (1964, On the question of judaic influences on Ethiopia) are very useful resources in the study of food and religion in Ethiopia. Still among the very few studies on food, Yaqob Beyene’s “I Tabu Alimentari e il Cristianesimo Etiopico” (Food Taboos and Ethiopian Christianity) is a work that treats in fair depth the taboo particularly of ‘Christian/Muslim meat’ in Ethiopia and in what is today Eritrea (Beyene 1994). A relatively recent study is Abbebe Kifleyesus’ *Muslims and Meals: The Social and Symbolic Function of Foods in Changing Socio-Economic Environments* (2002) that looks at the symbolic and social functions of food among the Muslim Argoba people in Ethiopia. Kifleyesus has seen not only how food expresses the Argoba people’s in-group dynamics across lines of class and gender but also their out-group relations across ethnic and religious identity lines. In his other article *The Construction of Ethiopian National Cuisine* (2006), Kifleyesus also addresses the transformation and development of the various regional cuisines into trans-national cuisines thereby constructing an Ethiopian national cuisine. In the same article, he also discusses, among other things, the role of the preparation and consumption of some food items in socio-economic status and hierarchy in Ethiopia. In addition, two unique studies on the drinking culture in Ethiopia have also been done: one in southern Ethiopia (Abbink 1997) and the other in Jimma (Mains

2004). Using interestingly everyday discourse in rumor as a source of ethnographic data, the latter addresses questions of nationalism as well as of religious and ethnic identity in Jimma. This study also touches upon the taboo under question and the attitude of people as regards Muslim vis-à-vis Christian cooking (Mains 2004, 346), which the current study also treats (see Chapter 5). Apart from these studies, to my knowledge, only Eloi Ficquet, in a book chapter titled *Flesh Soaked in Faith: Meat as a Marker of the Boundary between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia* (2006), has studied exclusively the role of meat in the encounters between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. An illuminating survey of the custom of avoiding eating meat slaughtered according to the other religion's ritual, Ficquet's study has discussed how meat marks the boundary between the two religious groups in Ethiopia by taking mainly historical notes and anecdotes. In this study, Ficquet also discusses how meat served as "a method of forced conversion" (Ficquet 2006, 47-52), which the current study also discusses at fair length (see Chapter 3).

Unpacking the Ethiopian Commensality

Commensality is one of the characteristics of Ethiopians' depiction in classical texts. Homer, in *Iliad*, describes Ethiopians as "blameless" and their feasts were attended by Zeus, Iris and Poseidon (Hall 2002, 32). Herodotus says, "In the land of the Ethiopians²⁶, it is the gods who come to men to feast with them; the emphasis is on *commensality*, a community of food that has not yet been disrupted" (cited in Vernant 1989, 167, my emphasis). Based on the classical account, for ancient Ethiopians the emphasis of commensality seems to be on food's role in uniting humans with their gods while for modern Ethiopians with their religious and/or cultural Others. The bottom line is that commensality and hospitality are literally proverbial in today's Ethiopia too where the common maxim *abro meblat abro metetat* 'eating and drinking together' is often a

²⁶ I am aware of the fact that there is no consensus on what the classical usage of the name 'Ethiopia' may refer to: for example, whether it includes areas different from or inclusive of the present day Ethiopia. However, given the geographic references (the Nile River, for example) used such as by Herodotus are clue enough to consider all or at least part of today's Ethiopia in the classical sense of the term (see Bekerie 2004; Milkias 2011)

defining discourse of collective mentality and a culture of sharing, which is further encapsulated in another food-related saying *bichawun yebela bichawun yimotal* ‘One who eats alone dies alone’. In this regard, the manner in which they eat: how they eat, with whom they eat, the utensils they use all can be objects of reflection and analysis in the study of food and the Ethiopian society. In the following sections, I shall briefly discuss some key concepts by juxtaposing their etymological roots that throw light on our understanding of the notion of commensality in the Ethiopian sense.

From *lehem* to *lemat*

In the strict sense of the very coinage of the word *commensality*, the term sounds short of defining the manner in which Ethiopians share food. The word *commensality* comes from the Medieval Latin *commensalis* wherein *com* means ‘sharing’ and *mensa* ‘a table’ (NOAD 2008). It gives us the commonly used phrase ‘table sharing’. However, in the traditional Ethiopian as well as most African food culture, *mensa* (‘table’) is not commonly used for dining. Particularly, in the case of Ethiopia, it is *lemat* or *messob*, a circular basket made from woven grass that is used as table (Fig. 2). Although both are in fact round baskets made of woven grass and the words are thus often used interchangeably,²⁷ they have different purposes: *Messob* mostly refers to the basket used to store *injera* whereas *lemat* is used as a table to serve *injera*. My interest is more on the one that acts as a substitute for table and that unites people together to share food. For clarity’s sake as well as for its Hebrew root word *lehem* (*pl. lehemat* meaning bread/*injera*), I use here *lemat*, although various commentators and cookbook writers on Ethiopian food culture often use *messob*, perhaps because some Ethiopian restaurants owned by the

²⁷ ሌማት (ዕብራይስጥ ሌሔማት) ኅብስቶች እንጀሮች።/ ሌማት (ለም ማት) መዓተ ለም ፤ ለም የንጀራ ብዛት።/ ሌማት (ቶች) ልሔምት) የንጀራ የኅብስት ማስቀመጫ መሰብ ሲከደን ግጥም የሚል ዝንብ ከልከል። (Desta Teklewold 1962 E.C., 731). መሰብ (ሰወብ) በቀሙ ሌማት የንጀራ ማስቀመጫ ማቅረቢያና መብሊያ ሰደቃ። መሰብ የግእዝ ፤ ሌማት ያማርኛ ፤ ይኸውም ከሰፊት ከንጮት ቅርጽ የተበጀ ነው። (Desta Teklewold 1962 E.C., 816). For the preparation of *lemat/messob*, see Getahun and Kassu (2014, 109).

Ethiopian Diaspora have popularized *messob* by naming their restaurants after it.



Figure 2: Messob/lemat market in Axum, Ethiopia

(Picture courtesy of Afewerki Gebrehiwot:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1089459027748094&set=a.471192139574789.116897.100000520213865&type=1&theater>)

Donald Levine (1972, 246) writes, “[t]raditional Amhara scoffs at what they regard as the excessively individualistic Western custom of sitting each person down to a separate place at the table and thus depriving the meal hour of what they feel should be its basically communal tone” (Levine 1972, 246). As much as the Ethiopians’ remark on the European food culture is ‘ethiocentric’, so to speak, it is worth noting that European travelers like Henry Salt, based on their Eurocentric lenses, also condescended the *lack* of table manner in the Ethiopian food culture (Kifleyesus 2006). Making comparison between culture and customs may not be bad in its own way, but using one’s food culture as an ultimate gauge to judge the food of others as inferior is a problem. In view of this, what I am discussing here may not be a totally different kind of commensality but a different degree of commensality. Both ‘table sharing’ and ‘*lemat* sharing’ are commensality in the sense of sharing food and the moment of eating. On the surface both seem metonymies for the food that is shared.

Nevertheless, the degree of ‘sharing’ and *what* is shared in view particularly of the notion of space are different in the two.

In the usual Western, notably European, sense of commensality, especially since the sixteenth century (Farb and Armelagos 1980), people share space, not the food itself. In other words, the sharing lies literally in the metonymy itself, i.e the table. In contrast, ‘sharing *lemat*’ is marked by a high degree of communality and intimacy in that diners share the same space and the same food in *lemat*. That is, the *lemat* is a space that binds people together. Bodies are very close to one another in a circular fashion. The common meal on the circular *lemat* at the center is a centripetal force drawing the hands of everyone taking part in the meal—one meal uniting many hands—resulting in what Humphrey Osmond coined as “sociopetal” in contrast to “sociofugal” space (Osmond 1959 in Lawson 2001, 140-2). Bryan Lawson (2001), for one, in his *The Language of Space* notes that round table creates a better social communing and togetherness among diners than a meeting table does. Even more precisely of the shape of the table, he writes, “the round table is the most sociopetal of all!” (Lawson 2001, 142). Following this, if round table brings people together, *lemat* then affords diners even a much better sociopetal setting to share the *same* food in a more communal fashion.

Here, mention should be made about the distinct characteristics that mark the difference between Western and Ethiopian ‘tables’. The first one is the use of fingers instead of fork; and the second is the special bread called *injera* that is unique to Ethiopia. There is a physical proximity and/or contact not only among diners but also between diners and the food itself. That is, scooping with fingers allows Ethiopians to get closer to one another in small space around *lemat* and to make a “manual contact” with the food itself. But the use of fork “enabled Europeans to separate themselves from the eating process, even avoiding manual contact with their food” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 207). This marked difference in ‘table’ manners essentially begs the question of civilization following Norbert Elias’ notion of “the civilizing process” (Elias [1939] 2000).

In light of “the civilizing process,” one may wrongly assume that the Ethiopian table manner has not evolved as much as the European has. In other words, the Ethiopian food culture in general and the table manner in particular

today appears to be still where the European was five hundreds years ago. This sounds to be a problematic point to extensively deal with here but an important one to address very briefly. First of all, one needs to look at the central thesis of “the civilizing process” itself particularly in connection with food and table manners. “The civilizing process” suggests that the change in the socio-cultural norms and “modes of behaviour” of Western societies has gone through a sort of evolutionary process so much so that it has reached its ‘adult’ and refined stage having evolved from and rejected several despicable manners and “‘barbaric’ customs,” which “they esteem ‘uncivilized’ in other societies today” (Elias [1939] 2000, ix), or which other cultures and societies may still embrace to the present day. In view of this “civilizing process”, other cultures and societies seem to be in their ‘child’ stage as if a long “civilizing process” is yet awaiting them. To be more precise, as regards the use of fork, Europeans abandoned scooping food with their fingers and eating by sharing from the same plate as a result of this “process”. The primary reason for the transformation from finger to fork seems hygienic as many people used to scoop food from the same dish, but scholars downplay this factor as individuals already started eating from separate dishes. Elias ([1939] 2000, 107) himself does not accept hygiene to be a motivating factor for the change:

Why does one really need a fork? Why is it “barbaric” and “uncivilized” to put food into one’s mouth by hand from one’s own plate? Because it is distasteful to dirty one’s fingers, or at least to be seen in society with dirty fingers. The suppression of eating by hand from one’s own plate has very little to do with the danger of illness, the so-called “rational” explanation.

According to Farb and Armelagos (1980, 207), “[b]y the sixteenth century people were no longer eating from a common bowl but from their own plates, and since they also washed their hands before meals, their fingers were now every bit as hygienic as a fork would have been.” The reason, thus, is more about distaste than hygiene: “The fork is nothing other than the embodiment of a specific standard of emotions and a specific level of revulsion,” inferred Elias ([1939] 2000, 107). Therefore, as the maxim “no accounting for taste” implies, a matter of taste cannot and should not be used to gauge other cultures’ manner of eating. In addition, neither fork nor knife superseded scooping food with

fingers in Ethiopia²⁸. The two, with other utensils such as spoon, are in use side by side depending on the food type. For example, the Oromo specialty called *genfo* (a thick porridge made of flour such as of barley, wheat or oat) and the Gurage specialty *kitfo* (raw meat mixed with clarified butter and hot spices) are eaten with horn spoon while *tihelo* (often with similar ingredients to *genfo* but prepared in small ball shape), a specialty of Tigre people, is eaten with a chopstick-like stick. Therefore, without neglecting common and universal developmental processes in human behavior and culture, it is possible to reject the impertinent analysis through the lens of the so-called “civilizing process” that the very diverse and complex non-European food culture and norm around the world is in its ‘child’ stage.

At this point, it is also interesting as well as necessary to return to and look once again at the role of *injera* vis-à-vis that of fork. A ubiquitous bread in almost every Ethiopian meal, *injera*, as some people would jokingly remark, is an “edible fork” that is used for scooping sauces from the *lemat* or the plate. It is a thin, flat, spongy bread (fig. 2) on which the various sauces (fig. 3) are poured and with a piece of which eaters scoop or sop up the sauce/s of their choice for each mouthful (see McCann 2009, 78-79; Osseo-Asare 2005, 110-114; Sheen 2008). There appears to be no record when *injera* was invented, but its main ingredient *teff*, which is indigenous to Ethiopia, has been one of the ingredients in Ethiopian cooking since 3000 BC (Sheen 2008). But *injera* signifies a lot of socio-cultural meanings as I have briefly highlighted in the presentation of Chapter 4 in the *Preview* section above.

From *panis* to companion and from *injera* to *balinjera*

It is interesting to note the importance of staple foods and their socio-cultural role. The word *balinjera*, as Donald Levine (1972) rightly notices, coincides well with the English *companion* (Latin: *com* means ‘together with’ and *panis*

²⁸ Judged by the modern European table manners, there appears to be even a more ‘distasteful’ custom of using one’s finger to feed others with *gursha*, a mouthful of sauces wrapped with *injera* that the host tucks in their guest’s mouth, perhaps reminiscent of one’s childhood of being fed by parents, especially one’s mother.

‘bread’. In Old French, *compaignon* literally means ‘one who breaks bread with another’, NOAD 2008).



Figure 3: *Injera* on *lemat* set out for various sauces to be poured on
Source: www.ethiopianspices.com (Accessed: 15 January 2015)



Figure 4: *Injera* with various sauces (a vegetarian dish called *beyaynetu*)
(Photo by the researcher)

Like ‘companion’, *balinjera* is made out of two words *bal* and *injera*. Desta Tekelewold (1962 E.C.) defines the word *Balinjera* as: እኩያ ፣ ባልደረባ ፣ አቻ ፣ ፀብሮ አደግ ቅዳኛ ፣ እንጂራ አቋራሽ a match; colleague; one’s equal; once childhood friend; someone with whom one breaks *injera*. In addition, the Bible translation that has undergone considerable degree of contextualization and customization into the Ethiopian socio-cultural and socio-linguistic context is also another interesting point worthy of consideration. For example, the *Last Supper* is painted with Jesus and His disciples sitting around *lemat* (fig. 4) instead of around table while the biblical equivalent of ‘bread’ is *injera* in the Amharic Bible. If bread is the synecdoche of food in the Western culture, so is *injera* for Ethiopians, and if *panis* calls companion, *injera* calls *balinjera*. The Amharic

Bible equivalent of “Give us this day our daily *bread*” goes as: “Ye’ilet *injerachinin siten zare*” meaning ‘Give us this day our daily *injera*.’ For most Ethiopians, food means *injera* and vice versa²⁹.



Figure 5: An unknown Ethiopian artist's impression of the *Last Supper* [The Amharic caption translates: “Jesus had supper with His disciples on Thursday evening”] (Source: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – London: <http://stmaryofzion.co.uk/home-temp/4541637337> Accessed: 13 October 2014)

Today, due to the advent of European culture in the country, *lemat* is used only in rural households, or in restaurants that serve traditionally. But still, even when people ‘share table’ in urban Ethiopia, they often eat from the same big plate or tray although in recent times breaking the *injera* into rolled pieces to serve individuals with separate plates like European dishes is becoming increasingly common. Even so, the very idea of commensality, however, is expressed not in the fact that people sit around the same table but in the fact that they share literally the same food by scooping from the same plate or *lemat*.

Against the above contrastive description of table manners, the basic question here in this study, however, should be: Do Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia *eat and drink together*? The answer, as paradoxical as it may sound, is

²⁹ To add a personal note, when I was a child, my mother, when she had no *injera* in her *messob*, used to say: “Sorry kids, today we *don’t have food*; we only have rice/pasta for dinner” as if the latter is not “real food”. As McCann (2009, 5) precisely writes, “[p]eople tend to know intrinsically what they consider food, its taste, and how to eat it—or what is not edible. For some, food means rice, and for others it means maize porridge.”

both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. People from both religions interact based on some commonly received, negotiating beliefs, and of course “compelling reasons” (Habermas 2005), for their ostensibly banal but very significant inter-religious interactions. One of the seemingly trivial negotiating factors for their encounters is food: their contact in various socio-cultural settings involves food or eating, which reflects group identity and becomes a bargaining tool both for their commensalities as well as separations in food contexts. Therefore, the *yes-no* paradoxical answer is manifested in “eating-induced unity” (Meigs 1997, 95) and eating-induced separation respectively, thanks to “food’s relevance for marking, maintaining, and muting [religious] boundaries” (Nukaga 2008, 342).

Negotiations across religious boundaries take place in food-contexts, which serve as interreligious meeting spaces where food, as many scholars note, establishes cultural identities and defines social relations (McGee 2001; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Montanari 2004). That is why the meat that is laden with religious identity is a cause for the ‘divergence’ of Orthodox Christians and Muslims because it inhibits sharing the same *lemat*. It may not necessarily inhibit *commensality* in the western sense of *table* sharing. When it comes to vegetarian food, for example, people from both religions who observe the taboo also share the same *lemat*. In short, if commensality in Ethiopia were defined in the original Western sense of ‘table sharing’ only, Christians and Muslims would not diverge in food contexts because of meat as both *could*³⁰ sit around the same table while eating *different* food. But ‘commensality’ with *lemat* goes beyond sharing the metonymic *table* because sharing food in the Ethiopian sense means sharing literally the same food. The following poetic Amharic saying has best captured this:

የሰላም ባልንጃራ ፣
 አያበላ እንጃራ።
Ye’slam balinjera,
Ayabela Injera.
 A Muslim companion

³⁰ While it is possible for one to see Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia literally “share table” without actually eating the same food, the disgust-laden meat taboo under study, however, in most cases forces Christians and Muslims to diverge and occupy separate spaces in food contexts such as wedding feasts (see Chapter 4).

Does not feed *injera*.

Told from a Christian point of view, this saying expresses, among its other possible interpretations and implications, the difficulty of commensality between Muslims and Christians. It is unfortunate that the wordplay is lost in my English translation. But, as I earlier made a brief etymological comparison of *balinjera* and *injera* vis-à-vis *companion* and *panis*, the ‘poet’ has played with *balinjera* and *injera* to an ironical effect thereby expressing the paradox of being ‘companion’ and at the same time not breaking ‘bread’! With this, I shall further develop in the following sections the discussion of commensality and companionship between the two religious groups against the backdrop of the underlying unique differences and similarities between Ethiopian Christianity and Ethiopian Islam in connection mainly with food.

Commensality between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia

Through commensality practices, individuals act out their self-conceptions as members of a group and their public identifications with a group to form distinct identities: namely, those with whom “We” can eat (“Us”) and those with whom “We” cannot eat (“Them”).

Jordan D. Rosenblum (2010, 7)

In order to understand the commensality and dietary/culinary differences between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, one needs to look at how the notion of food is treated in each religion and the dynamics of their peculiar encounters in wider socio-cultural contexts that involve food or eating. First of all, as much as they have influenced local and indigenous faiths and cultures, both Christianity and Islam as world religions have undergone processes of indigenization over centuries with local cultures in Ethiopia. As Lewis and Jewell (1976, 15) write, “[i]f the ‘great traditions’ of Christianity and Islam generously open their arms to assimilate the many local cultures of [... Ethiopia], many elements from the latter find their way by the back-door into the world-view of the two major religions.” Thus, these two religions have equally apparently unique features that distinguish them from their counterparts elsewhere. These features are manifest both in their relations and encounters as well as in their respective cultures. For instance, the role of meat in the

relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia is unique compared to that of Christians and Muslims elsewhere such as in Lebanon, France, Uganda, Malawi (Ficquet 2006) and Tanzania (Terdiman 2013), where the slaughtering of animals is a business left to the Muslims because food in general and meat in particular is presumably not a dogmatic or doctrinal issue for such Christians. In the case of Ethiopia, however, even public slaughterhouses have distinct sections for slaughtering animals in Muslim and Christian ways. At household level as well, each group slaughters the animal according to their own respective ritual. Hence, the following sections treat how food has become an issue for both religions and thereby for their encounters by juxtaposing it with their historical background. However, there is no need, in the scope of this study, to dwell on the details of all the unique characteristics of these religions in Ethiopia except those that throw light on their unique etiquette with regard particularly to culinary tools and food for their difference and commensality.

Food and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

Broadly speaking, food is believed by many to be no issue for Christians (Barclay 2010), usually referring to the biblical accounts on food for Christians such as in Matthew 15:11 and Romans 14: 1-22. From a historical-anthropological point of view, various religious or philosophical groups since antiquity established or abolished food prohibitions perhaps as a conscious mechanism of identity formation. The rejection of certain food taboos or the beginning of observing some others was then part of this attempt to create distinction: Judaism against Gentiles, Christianity against Judaism, Islam against Judeo-Christianity (see Garnsey 1998; Farb and Armelagos 1980). While early Christians abandoned Mosaic laws to “mark themselves off the Jews” (Garnsey 1999, 98), Christianity in Ethiopia, however, adheres to them to the present day. My own article (Zellelew 2014) on the unique fasting etiquettes of the EOTC has reviewed the literature on the possible explanations offered by scholars as regards the Mosaic laws observed by the Ethiopian Church. I will make a brief review below to illuminate the discussion in hand.

In relation to the unique case of dietary demands in the EOTC, the Church’s history of isolation from other Churches throws light: The EOTC was isolated for many centuries such that its socio-cultural requirements were very

different, the most unique feature being its Hebraic substructure (Hastings 2008). As a result “the pattern of Orthodox worship and religious life was as much one of the Old Testament as of the New” (35). Similarly, David Robinson (2004a, 110), in expounding the unique features of the EOTC that resulted from its isolation from the rest of the Christian world writes, “Ethiopian Christianity developed mainly from internal sources, encouraged by the Aksum court, local monks, and missionaries.” More to the point of dietary demands, there are several Judaic elements in the Church. For example, like Judaism “Ethiopia’s Orthodox Church forbids eating animals with uncloven hoofs and those that do not chew their own cud” (Lyons 2007, 354; see also Beyene 1994). In addition, the taboo of eating pork is a “pan-Ethiopian’ avoidance rule” (Braukamper 1982, 433), or according to Ullendorff, it is the most rigorous food prohibition observed throughout Ethiopia (1968, 103).

More importantly, one particular dietary law observed by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that plays a great role in their commensality with Ethiopian Muslims is almost directly linked to the purity concerns observed in early rabbinic food laws³¹ concerning questions like who eats with whom, who slaughters the animal, and what and where is eaten, etc. (see Finger 2007; Rosenblum 2010). More specifically, as Finger writes, “[i]n this system like eats with like [...] Some food is clean if it comes from the right kind of animal and has been prepared with the *right utensils and dishes*” (2007, 177 my emphasis). Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia is unique (Ullendorff 1968) among not only the broader Christianity but also other sister Oriental Orthodox Churches for various reasons among which are the veneration of the *tabot* (replica of arc of the covenant), the observance of the Sabbath and the observance of Mosaic food laws dividing clean from unclean, to mention just few (Ullendorff 1968; Pawlikowsky 1972; Shenk 1988; Hastings 2008, 35).

³¹ The Judaic dietary law influence among EOTC followers is all the more visible among some ascetic people who avoid eating food prepared or drinking water fetched on Sabbath, a custom similar to the Jew’s concern with regard to the question of not only who prepares the meal but also *when* it is prepared ensuring whether it confirms to Sabbath (Finger 2007, 117; Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009, 6; for discussions about the observance and controversies of the Sabbath in the EOTC, see Haile 1988; Pedersen 1999, 207-8; Ullendorff 1968, 109-13.) For a short discussion on the notion of time in food preparation as reflected in oral poetry, see Chapter 5.

Especially, some dietary/culinary rules dealt with in this study makes the Church even unique compared to the (Egyptian) Coptic Orthodox Church under whose synod the EOTC stayed for more than a millennium (Erlich 2002; Shenk 1988, 261; Tamene 1998, 96; Trimmingham 1952, 25). The data obtained from EOTC scholar informants also basically falls under these two strands: Judaic foundation of the Ethiopian culture before the introduction of Christianity and the continued veneration of the Old Testament while a third possible account by informants also points to the different interpretation of the New Testament food norms for Christians. What one Christian religious father comments on the taboo under study is worthy of a lengthy quote here:

The Bible does not forbid eating what a Muslim slaughters. As you know, the Bible is way older than Islam. So it can't say about this. However, this does not mean that this custom has no scriptural foundation either. Apart from the Old Testament, we have accounts in the New Testament on what is proper for Christians to eat. One is about not eating what is offered to idols... Should a Christian eat what is slaughtered in the name of Allah or Mohammed? Is [the Muslim notion of] Allah equal to [the Christian notion of] God? This in itself can be problematic. [...] But let's not go that far. But, you see, there are seemingly small things that we overlook but which have big meaning. ... That is why it is better to eat one's own food rather than stumbling because of food, as the Apostle Paul taught us [Romans 14: 20-21]. So, if we have some uncertainty over the slaughtering, it is better to avoid it. I think this explains the custom. Our forefathers did not establish something out of whim or without reason.³²

Overall, the Church, because of its unique history that traces back to Judaism, its indigenous elements, its veneration or imitation of the Old Testament as well as its interpretation of Christian food norms in the New Testament, has unique food proscriptions that include the taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith. And what this food culture means for EOTC followers in their encounters with followers of neighboring religions is discussed in the coming chapters.

³² Amharic version in *Appendix 4*

Food and Ethiopian Islam

There is *nothing* pejorative about the africanization of Islam or, more appropriately, the “Berberization” or “Swahilization” or “whateverization” of Islam.

(Robinson 2004a, 42, emphasis in original)

First of all, some writers are critical of the nomenclature of Muslims and Islam vis-à-vis that of Christians and Christianity which appears to nuance the status of religions in Ethiopia. For example, “Islam in Ethiopia,” according to some, demeans the status of Islam in the country compared to the common nomenclature “the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity” or “the Ethiopian Church.” Teshome Birhanu Kemal, for example, criticizes the Ethiopian media for using “*Muslims in Ethiopia*, instead of *Ethiopian Muslims*” (Kemal 2004 E.C, 9, my emphasis and my translation), for the former, according to him, implies Muslims as “foreign” to the country. This reminds one of Jaques Derrida’s remarks about “subtle but decisive distinction” in the appellation of Algerian Muslims until World War II as “French nationals” instead of “French citizens” evoking foreignness (Derrida 2000, 143). However, it should not be illegitimate to give the adjective “Ethiopian” to Islam because of its unique historical and socio-cultural features in Ethiopia as much as one uses the same adjective to Orthodox Christianity in the country because Ethiopian Islam, like Ethiopian Christianity, is also adapted to local cultures and elements of indigenous faiths (see Abbink 1998; Lewis and Jewell 1976, 13-15; Trimmingham 1952).

To begin with its very introduction, as many commentators note (Abbink 1998; Ahmed 2001; Robinson 2004a), though there were occasional conflicts and frictions between the two religious groups later on the course of history, the Christian-Muslim first encounter was a peaceful one contrary to the introduction of Islam elsewhere, which was through conquest: in Syria (636), in Persia (637), Jerusalem (638), etc. (Apostolov 2004, 25). That is, while the other two powers, namely the Byzantine (in losing Syria) and the Persian empires were defeated by the Muslims, the Ethiopian empire accommodated the persecuted Muslims from Arabia; in other words, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia was at least “initially accommodating” (Ahmed 2001) to Muslims.

Moreover, compared to other parts of Africa such as in West African Sahel and the East African coast, the process of islamization was a peaceful one in Ethiopia³³ (Robinson 2004a, 113), nor was it accompanied by arabization like in North Africa and part of Sudan (Trimingham 1952). On the other hand, though similar to elsewhere in Africa when it comes to assimilating indigenous pagan rites and beliefs by giving them “orthodox interpretations and explanatory Muslim legends”, it is only in Ethiopia that Islam faced a remarkable challenge from the Orthodox Christian Church (Baum 1953, 1; see also Trimingham 1952, 139). It is also a facet of Ethiopian Islam that it has been shaped by cultural and ethnic traditions (Abbink 1998).

The unique food norms that the two religions adhere to seem to originate from their own encounters and frictions (see Chapter 3) as much as from other local and indigenous cultures and norms. In general in Islam the law concerning *halal* (“lawful food”) originates from four sources: the Qur’an, the *hadith* (“instructions by Mohammed”), the *sunnah* (“religious tradition”) and *fiqh* (“a summary of Islamic learning”) (Lerner and Rabello 2007, 11). Although the *halal* and *haram* dichotomy of food in Islam as stated, for example, in the Qur’an is universal, there are still differences and controversies in Islam over food (Rouse and Hoskins 2004, 245), like that of the differences among various denominations of Christianity over scriptural interpretations on food proper for Christians. Broadly speaking, the debate over food in Ethiopian Islam falls in line with the long-standing debate over food in Islam. Maxime Rodinson (1965, 1065) expounded this debate as follows:

The Qur’an allowed Muslims to eat the food of the *Ahl al-kitab* and vice versa (V, 7/5). But there is attributed to be the Prophet a letter to the mazdeans of hadjar according to which Muslims were not to eat meat which they had killed as a sacrifice (Ibn Sa‘d, 1917 [...]) Even in relation to the *Ahl al-*

³³ The Christian-Muslim relations during Islam’s early period of expansion are also markedly different in Ethiopia compared to its expansion elsewhere. Writing of Muslim-Christian relations in a period he termed “an epoch of expansion (7-10th centuries)” for Islam, Douglas Pratt uses a term “direct engagement” which “refers to the situation of interaction and relationship that occurred in regard to Christian communities living under Muslim rule.” This relationship “was dominated by the concept of dhimma, or dhimmi community: the protected minority” who had the right to live and practice their religion as long as they paid jizya (tax) and “remained submissive in front of the Muslim community” (Pratt 2005, 103).

kitab, the law was more restrictive than the Qur'an, at least concerning animals killed while hunting or by ritual slaughter. It was not forbidden but reprehensible (*makruh*), according to certain *Malikis*, to eat what a *Kitabi* had slaughtered for himself; according to others, on the contrary, this applied to meat slaughtered by a *Kitabi* for a Muslim. In all cases it was reprehensible to obtain meat from a non-Muslim butcher (*Malikis*). It was advisable to make sure that the name of Allah had been invoked and not the Cross, or Jesus, etc., though it was permissible to eat, according to all schools except the Hanbalis, if no name at all had been invoked.

In view of this, in Ethiopia, too, there are two opposing views in Islam with regard to food proper for Muslims, especially what is concerned with meat of animals slaughtered by people of the other faith. The first one is a perennial tradition maintained by many Muslims who avoid eating meat of animals slaughtered by Christians. According to this group, it is not Islamic to eat meat of an animal slaughtered by Christians or non-Muslims. The second one is that which is maintained in recent times by Muslims who reject the first view. According to this one group, what is most important for a Muslim, as regards food, is to be cautious whether the animal is *halal* (lawful) first of all and second of all how pertinently the slaughtering is performed (according to the Islamic etiquette, such as blood being completely drained). This group further maintains that there is a Qur'anic warrant to eating food/meat if it is *lawful* (*Surat Al-Baqarah* 2: 168; *Surat Al-Mai'dah* 5: 88; *Surat An'nahi* 16:114) and if the meat went through proper ritual slaughter (*dhaka'a*) (*Surat Al-Mai'dah* 5: 4; *Surat Al-An'am* 6: 147) by people of the book (*Surat Al-Mai'dah* 5: 5), that is, Jews and Christians. However, the latter verse of the Qur'an that refers to Jews and Christians has a different interpretation by the first group. They argue that it does not apply to the Jews and Christians of today but to those of the contemporaries of Mohammad. Moreover, they maintain that the name of Allah should be invoked on the lawful foods, not the name of Trinity, for example, referring to various verses of the Qur'an (*Surat Al-Mai'dah* 5: 4; *Surat Al-An'am* 6: 118-121; *Surat An'nahi* 16: 115; see Rodinson 1965, 1061).

I need not dwell too much on verifying which view is theologically justified, as it is beyond the scope and concern of this study. However, in general, the avoidance by Jews, Christians or Muslims (or even different sects

within the same religion) of eating meat of an animal killed by a person in the other faith has changed through time and from place to place in the course of history (Rodinson 1965, 1066). In addition, each Muslim sect, while basically adhering to the Qur'anic food proscription, formulates its own "complete doctrine on all points of dogma and practice" (1070) by making its decisions on problems related to food prohibitions in the Quran, although "some have considered them to have only an allegorical significance or that an era was beginning in which there was no further justification for them" (1070). On top of this, there are "post-Kur'anic religious regulations" which affected questions concerning the food prohibitions in Islam (1068). Therefore, there is no consistency in terms of time as well as place³⁴ by a given religion or sect concerning its dietary rules.

As Montanari (2004, 137) writes, "[c]ulinary identities were not inscribed in the heavens" which corroborates Jack David Eller's comment: "Individuals, families, and communities [...] make their unique interpretations of and responses to the world religion, generating a distinctly local version of it [...] none can be said sensibly to be the "correct" or "real" one" (Eller 2007, 204). Nevertheless, speaking of taboos in general and of the so-called "Christian/Muslim meat" in particular, such a food taboo duly works as a separating factor for Christians and Muslims, on the one hand, because of the nature of food taboos in general as unwritten social rules (Colding and Folke 1997) or "unwritten code of laws" (Wundt 1906 in Freud 1950, 22), and of varied interpretations of scriptures by each religion and denomination/sect, on the other. In short, both Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia, in their "local construction" (Tapper and Tapper 1986) or indigenized form, have forged and developed some food related cultures (popular proscriptions and

³⁴ It may be interesting to quote here one Muslim informant's recollection of the moment at which he said he realized for the first time the apparent uniqueness of the taboo to Ethiopian Muslims: "Some five years ago I was at Bole International Airport for my travel for Hajj. I was with many other fellow Muslim Africans from Senegal, Nigeria, etc who were on transit also for their Hajj. The airline offered us lunch due to flight delay. The lunch was all meat, chicken, beef, etc. Those who were from Nigeria, Senegal, etc started eating without any question. Guess who did not eat? Muslims from places like Gondar [northern Ethiopia]. They were even saying referring to the former, "How do they eat meat slaughtered by Christians?" Then, they asked the hostess to bring them other food, like vegetarian or fish."

taboos) taking presumably some aspects of the dietary rules of one religion as essential “other” with regard particularly to the culinary etiquettes of some specific food items.

Wedding Feasts as Zones of Interreligious Encounters

It is a customary trend in Ethiopia for people to invite their relatives³⁵, neighbors and friends to a wedding feast regardless of their religious backgrounds. Even what could be regarded as a low-key wedding feast in Ethiopia has hundreds of invited guests. As space to accommodate such large size of guests is always a problem, a *dass* (temporary wooden shelter roofed with green leaves or sometimes with canvas mostly in rural areas), or tent (especially in urban areas) is erected usually outside the compound by blocking the narrow passageways between blocks of houses for a few days (see Molvaer 1980, 152-3).

What is probably unique is that the family of the bride or of the groom in both religious communities not only invites people from the other religion but also caters their Other guest with his or her “own” food. At a Christian wedding feast, the host buys a goat or a lamb for their Muslim guests and gives the animal to some assigned persons (usually the immediate Muslim neighbors) to slaughter it and prepare the food according to the latter’s own religious food etiquettes. The same goes for a Muslim wedding. As the Other guest is usually a numerical minority, a goat or a lamb is enough; but in some cases, an oxen or more than one lamb or goat could also be bought depending on the number of guests from the other religion. Sometimes the number of guests is used by the host family to brag about how lavish their wedding feast was, but I do not want to rehash here notions of extravagance and show-off in reciprocity that are well studied in anthropology (see Levi-Strauss 1949, 56; Mauss 1925 in Eriksen 2004, 88; also ‘competitive feasting’ in Farb and Armelagos 1980, 148-153).

What is more important here is that the Other guests use their own utensils, primarily their own knife and other culinary tools such as pan, plates, etc. The animal is slaughtered strictly according to the specific religious rituals.

³⁵ Cross-religious marriages are also not uncommon in Ethiopia; thus, some people in one religion can have blood ties with people of the other faith.

Here, the knife as a quintessential culinary tool plays its role of changing the ‘neutral’ animal into *Halal* (lawful) for Muslims and *Kidus/yetebareke* (sacred/blessed) for Christians. In fact, it is not the knife per se but the speech acts of “pronouncing the *tasmiya*” (Rodinson 1965, 1069), i.e. the invocation of: *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (In the name of Allah, the passionate and the Merciful) and of *BeSime Ab weWeld weMenfes Qidus Ahadu Amlak* (In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, One God”. On the wedding day, each group of guests eats food that they have prepared according to their own food etiquette. Another notable phenomenon is that, in most cases, each group occupies separate geographical space. It is food now that is the main cause of the establishment of this divergence in physical boundary: inside vs. outside; here vs. there; left vs. right, front vs. back, etc (see Chapter 4, fig. 10).

Except their difference in camel³⁶ meat, which is *Halal* for Muslims, Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia share strikingly similar dietary rules when it comes to animal products. For instance, both Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims are averse to eating pork, reptiles, dogs, and cats³⁷. They share the same ‘table’ of all food items *except meat* and that which has meat (Ficquet 2006, 45; Trimmingham 1952, 103, footnote). But at wedding feasts individuals from both religious communities converge in virtue of the feast (food) but diverge again paradoxically because of food. It is worth noting that the linguistic usage at least among Amharic-speaking Ethiopians as observed by Donald N. Levine suggests that “eating” is central to any wedding in Ethiopia: “One expects to ‘eat at’, rather than dance at, somebody’s wedding” (Levine 1972, 224). I have also noticed a phrase: “One eats somebody’s wedding” to refer to one’s attendance at a wedding, or it is a common question thrown to a bachelor or a bachelorette: “When are we going

³⁶ While camel meat is allowed in Islam, it is prohibited in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. However, whether it is due to ecological or gastronomical reasons both camel and pig are not common in the research area. But, the country’s overall Christian-Muslim population distribution appears to look symmetric with the ecological rarity as well as the religious prohibition put on these two animals. For example, camel is rare in the highlands where many Christians settle but is abundant in the lowlands, which are predominantly occupied by Muslims (See Braukamper 1982, 440).

³⁷ For extensive discussions on food taboos in Ethiopia, see NCTPE (2004); Braukamper (1982); Rodinson (1966).

to eat your wedding?” Thus, wedding necessarily involves food/eating that unites and gets individuals from the two religions together but separates them due to differences in their respective religious culinary/dietary rules.

As regards wedding feasts in Ethiopia, it should not go unnoticed that there are people who come to the wedding feast ‘uninvited’. Included in this category of ‘attendants’ are neighborhood kids, vagabonds, beggars, etc who, though mostly given the leftovers from the feast, are also cautious about the food/meat they eat. That is, they make sure, depending on their religious identity, that the food is fit for them—not contaminated with meat slaughtered by people of the other religion. In Bahir Dar, recently, while this study was underway, there was one Christian wedding held in a Muslim compound where the bride’s family live as tenants of the Muslims. According to an informant, a *kolo temari* (student of traditional church education who, like his fellows, feeds himself by begging food from neighborhood households) refused to eat food that he was offered after he identified the person who offered him was a Muslim woman who was wearing *hijab*. Then, my informant, who noticed the “uneasy conversation” between the two, said he went up to the student and convinced him that it is a “Christian wedding in a Muslim compound” by assuring him that the food was a leftover from the Christian attendants. After a few minutes of reluctance, the student took the food.

Reciprocal Hospitality

In no other socio-cultural settings do Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia seem to negotiate their religious identity as well as at wedding feasts where one observes the role of food contexts as cultural spaces of reaffirming one’s religious adherence. More specifically, inviting one’s Muslim/Christian friends and then catering them with food that fulfills their own religious etiquette and culinary demands is more than sheer hospitality. It goes beyond one of Alan Page Fiske’s (1991 in Komter 2007, 97-8) human relationships models³⁸ called “community sharing,” in which people exchange things like food based on feelings of connectedness and understanding of other’s need. The ‘need’ here is

³⁸ Fiske has four fundamental models “Community sharing”; ‘authority ranking’, ‘equality matching’ and ‘market pricing’ (see Komter 2007, 97-98).

not quantitative, but a qualitative one that should be met in a meal that involves meat fit for consumption according to the Other's religious culinary rules. It is a reciprocal accommodation and hospitality marked by an important intercultural quality - empathy. Hospitality is often viewed as a moral virtue particularly from the vantage point of a host (Telfer 2002). However, I maintain that the reciprocal hospitality built on this food taboo can be viewed as a moral virtue from the point of view of the host as well as of the guest (see further discussion in Chapter 4 & 6).

In random Christian-Muslim encounters that involve food, the host shows more of his/her generosity than of his/her sense of duty. In other words, the guest, depending on the degree of intimacy with the host, is often entertained by vegetarian food. Or, if the guests, as Telfer (2002, 93) writes, "reach a stage when they can 'drop in' and 'take pot luck', they scarcely count as guests and become 'almost part of the family'". In this case hospitality is expressed through offering the guest *Bet Yaferawun* (literally *what the house produces* referring to any food item which the host can afford to offer). The commensality, nevertheless, is expressed by eating together any food save that has and is meat. However, wedding feasts are unique cultural spaces where the host has a *duty* to treat Christians and Muslims with their respective meat. Unlike the everyday encounter in food contexts, the one at wedding feasts is a planned and empathetic offering of food marked by an unusual readiness of the host to entertain (Telfer 2002) and a duty to meet the guest's religious culinary demands. The guest will also do the same when she/he assumes a host role in another occasion. In contrast to some scholars (Ahmed 1992; see also Carmichael 1996; Ford 2008), I argue that the system established on the taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by someone in the other faith, as Jon Abbink observes, is working perfectly well (Abbink 2007) and is a cause for reciprocity between the two religious groups.

However, the reciprocity does not seem to work "perfectly" without any sacrifice, namely an affective sacrifice particularly from the Other guests' point of view (see Chapter 4 & 6). That is, to take part in and eat food in the same space with someone who is eating the food that one does not even want to think about eating demands defying one's "pedagogy of disgust" (Highmore 2010, 130). The taboo of avoiding the "meat soaked in faith" (Fiquet 2006) is

charged with disgust and revulsion because of individuals' upbringing. As Levine (1972, 104) writes of the people in this research area, "The taboos against pork and other unclean foods are taught at an early age and supported by references to unclean heathens ever after." Writing precisely of the establishment and learning of (food) taboos, Farb and Armelagos (1980, 126) note the fact that taboos are often reinforced by "divine sanctions" and are also continually observed since one's "impressionable years of childhood" inculcate in the individual a lifelong observance of the taboo. Similarly, Miller (1997, 12), writing of the learning of the disgusting, says, "[i]f the capacity to be disgusted comes with being human, actual disgust needs developmental elbow room. Culture and nurture determine some of the timing and a large portion of the precise content and range of the disgusting." As a result, at times even a food taboo that sounds ridiculous not only to an outsider but also to the observant him/herself can hardly be changed.

Apart from the common symbolic and functionalist explanations of food taboos, Daniel M.T. Fessler and Carlos David Navarrete propose an alternative approach to food taboos, which they call "evolutionary approach". According to these scholars, "meat has special salience as a stimulus for humans, as animal products are stronger elicitors of disgust and aversion than plant products" (Fessler and Navarrete 2003, 1). Miller (1997, 16) also notes, "[a]nimals and animal substances, we can safely assume, will figure more frequently as elicitors of disgust than plants or inanimate objects." In connection with disgust, Sara Ahmed comments, "[t]o be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected*" (Ahmed 2004, 86, emphasis in original). Wedding feasts, as temporary food contexts, thus, entail an aura of disgust for the Other guest. Therefore, the tabooed meat engenders disgust, and disgust in turn engenders boundary because it is "is a recognition of danger to our purity," (Miller 1997, 204) which we try to protect by bordering. The boundary, as noted before, at most wedding feasts is a physical one. Although the spatial demarcation between Christian and Muslim wedding attendants apparently helps allay the disgust, Other guests still have to pay some kind of affective price to fulfill their social obligations (see Chapter 4).

3

The Semiotics of the ‘Christian/Muslim’ Knife³⁹

Meaning, indeed many kinds of meaning, can be encapsulated in the simplest of objects.

E. Frances King (2010, xi)

... human religiosity is rarely separate from the material environment through which it is expressed, and that to conceive of material culture and religious culture as opposing or mutually exclusive spheres of human experience and activity is to limit our understanding of both fields.

Julian Droogan (2013, 1)

***Karra* (Knife): From a Folkloric “Magical” Tool to a Christian Schism Name**

As a hyponym of other cutleries *par excellence*, the knife is apparently one of the oldest utensils that mankind started to use - even older than fire (Wilson 2012)—evolving from a hunting tool in the forest to an important household utensil on the table. This evolution made the knife “the primary tool for human survival and development” Cohan (2009, 49). Even for modern humans, in the culinary process, the knife is “the earliest utensil used for manipulating food” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 206). Ancient Egyptians, well before mankind discovered smelting, used “Ethiopic”⁴⁰ flint stones as knives. It is also worth noting that the flint was used for a religious purpose— to make the first incision in the dead bodies prior to embalming (Herodotus in Wilkinson 1878;

³⁹ An earlier version of this chapter was accepted, *while* the whole research was underway, for publication in *Signs and Society* in August 2014 and appeared in vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015) Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.

⁴⁰ Gardner Wilkinson (1878) surmises that “Ethiopic” signifies the blackness of the stone while admitting that such a flint stone, mentioned as “Ethiopic stone” by Herodotus, is granite common in Ethiopia.

King and Hall [1910] 2005). The first knives, which were crafted out of stone, are believed to date back as far as two and a half million years ago, and those made of copper about ten-thousand years ago while those made out of bronze date back five-thousand years ago, by craftsmen in the Near East (Ewalt 2005). Just as the use of iron was present in Abyssinia before the rest of Africa (Wainwright 1942 cited in Carlson 2011), it is not by coincidence that the oldest examples of stone-cutting tools also date back 2.6 million years to Ethiopia (Carlson 2011; Milkias 2011; Wilson 2012).

Anthropological and ethno-archeological studies show that African knives not only have various forms, shapes and types (Thomas 1925) but also different symbolic, magical and sacrificial functions (McNaughton 1970). Before we delve into our semiotic investigation of the so-called “Christian knife” and “Muslim knife” in Ethiopia as regards food and inter-religious encounters, it is useful to have a brief look at two other functions of the knife in the country. The first one is a historical fact that takes us to the 16th and 17th centuries and subsequent history of Christianity in Ethiopia, and the second one is a folkloric practice of using the knife to ward off evil spirits. Both accounts will be important pieces of background information in understanding the “charisma” and semiotic functions of the knife as slaughtering tool and as an identity marker.

After the mission of the Portuguese Jesuits in the Ethiopian highlands from 1536 to 1632 (Milkias 2011; Shabot and Alos-Moner 2006), the Ethiopian Orthodox Church faced an internal Christological debate. The EOTC (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church—*Tewahido* means “union”) believes that Christ has two births, from His Father and from His mother St. Mary - a non-Chalcedonian Christological doctrine of One Incarnate Nature of God the Word (Ayenew 2009; Tamene 1998). But during the 16th and 17th Centuries, two other sects, *The Qibat (Uction)* and *The Tsegga (Grace) or Sost Lidet (Three Births)*, emerged in the Church following the interference of Portuguese Jesuits (Ayenew 2009; Trimmingham 1952, 98-99). While *The Kibat* (School of Anointing/Uction) believed in the anointing of Christ at Baptism and not in the incarnation of the Son, *The Tsegga* (School of Grace) maintained that Christ has three births: from the Father, from Virgin Mary; and from the Holy Spirit after the Incarnation in Baptism (Ayenew 2009; Milkias 2011, 186).

What is more relevant now for our discussion of knife is the fact that *The Tsegga* sect, which believed in three births, labeled *The Tewahido* (The Unionists) “Karra”, an Amharic word for “knife” to signify that the latter “cut off (rejected) the third birth” (Ayenew 2009, 290). However, there is no consensus among scholars whether *karra* (knife) refers only to *Tewahido*, for some believe that both the *Tewahidos* (unionists) and the *Qibats* (Unctionists) reject the third birth doctrine of the *Tsegga* (Grace/three birth sect) (Ayenew 2009, 290, footnote, 885)⁴¹. Be that as it may, the knife as a symbol of religious marker works properly in either or both cases, the verification of which does not matter for the purpose of this study. But rather, how it was named so sounds literal to the very function of the knife – cutting, separating, dividing, splitting, etc. It is also interesting to note that like other religions such as Christianity itself, the Karra sect obtained its name from others. Hence, since this time the knife has served symbolically as a schism signifier in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church although its use diminished as the debate itself has become subdued through time.

Another important tradition in the country is using the knife to ward off evil spirits, which will help us later on to contemplate well its power of giving individuals disgust by virtue of its slaughtering functions accompanied by religious performative languages in Orthodox Christianity and in Islam in Ethiopia. Putting the knife under one’s bed to ward off evil spirits is a widely practiced folkloric tradition in many places in the world, such as in Greece and China (Hedley-Dent 2011). Especially in most rural and some traditional families in urban Ethiopia, to the present day, people use the knife for this purpose. They put it under the mattress or pillow to protect the sleeping person from evil spirits. It is believed that the evil spirits cause nightmares in the sleeping person. The knife, therefore, is an important instrument to repel them. It is also an important “magical” weapon to protect a confined woman from evil spirits after she gives birth, which goes parallel with what Ticky Hedley-Dent writes: “A knife under the bed is meant to act as a painkiller during childbirth, and, in a pre-Health-and-Safety age, a knife in the cradle was

⁴¹ For an alternative analysis on the origin of the *Karra* appellation, see d’Abbadie (1868).

thought to keep a baby from harm” (Hedley-Dent 2011). In similar vein, writing of the birth customs of the Amhara people in Shoa region (Ethiopia), Terrefe Raswork also remarks about the use of this custom as a way of protecting the newborn and its mother from evil spirits (Raswork 1959, 46).

The knife has also always been an object that has affective consequences on its users. For example, according to Norbert Elias, in Europe until the Middle Ages and even beyond, the knife was an object that engendered affects of dread and fear as well as pleasure. It was also subject to prohibitions and taboos of various kinds while the manners and the taboos concerning knife ranged from how one holds it to what one should or should not to cut with it. The knife also appears to have gone through what Elias called the “civilizing curve” in the Western culture in that it came to table having replaced hand and teeth but, after becoming subject so many taboos and prohibitions, eventually came to occupy a minimized presence on the table following the preparation of food in the kitchen behind the scene (Elias [1939] 2000, 103-107).

When it comes to the use of knife in the Ethiopian food culture, however, it was and is a tool that remains often behind the scene. That is, its principal use often terminates at slaughtering, which is a decisive factor for the culinary differences and commensality between Christians and Muslims. Except its use during cooking, breaking bread and eating raw meat, the latter being a common culture almost through out the country, the knife is not a common utensil on Ethiopian table. As noted in Chapter 2, the fact that Ethiopians do not often use/need knife on their table is perhaps ironically one of the distinct identities of the Ethiopian food culture. Given this fact one may reasonably wonder how the knife is then as such an important semiotic object in interreligious encounters in Ethiopia. However, a closer look at this culinary tool through a semiotic analysis will throw light on our understanding of the role of culinary tools and food in the realm of Christian-Muslim encounters in the country. In view of this, the seemingly banal material culture and everyday life have a lot to offer in understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations. As Judy Attfield (2000, 174) notes, “[t]he material culture of the everyday is largely unexplored territory because it lies too close at hand to intrigue, there is nothing tantalisingly exotic about the quotidian.” In what follows, I attempt to discuss the role of the knife, an important slaughtering tool, in the socio-cultural

spheres that involve food or eating. And I also explore the semiotic functions of the knife as a communicating tool and, broadly its concomitant force, i.e., the “transactional symbolism⁴² of food” (Firth 1973, 253) in interreligious encounters between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia.

By now there is abundant research on food and (religious) identity (see, for example, Barclay 2010; De Garine 2001; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Finger 2007; Lyons 2007; McGee 2011; Meigs 1997; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Nukaga 2008; Rosenblum 2010). Whereas this chapter takes some of them as theoretical backdrop, it is particularly underpinned by notions surrounding speech act theory (John L. Austin 1962), specifically religious speech, whose most important aspect is what it accomplishes in contrast to its sheer content (Eller 2007, 104). In doing so, the religious speech together with other mandatory factors or “necessary conditions” (Austin 1962, 14) such as the identity of the slaughterer and the slaughtering tool/utensil are the most important factors that transform the “natural” animal into a “cultural” meat/food laden with religious identity.

In speech act theory, for the speech to be effective, there are relevant cultural and situational conditions: the speech must be performed in the right way and by someone authorized to perform it (Austin 1962, 14-16; Eller 2007, 106). For example, in Ethiopia, in a very unlikely scenario, if a Muslim slaughters the animal evoking the Holy Trinity: *BaSeme Ab weWald waMenfes Qedus Ahadu Amlak* (“In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, One God”, or a Christian performs the slaughtering uttering *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (“In the name of Allah, the passionate and the Merciful”), the speech acts are invalid, ineffective, or, according to J. L. Austin’s theory, result in “infelicity” which includes a misfire. That is, “[w]hen the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched: and our act [...] is void or without effect [...]” (Austin 1962, 16). In our case, the meat is conceivably not proper for either group. This simply implies that the right speech should be performed by the right person in the right context with the

⁴² It is interesting to note that the “economic calculation” or the transactional symbolism of sacrifices was recognized by Plato who considered offerings, which may include food, as “an art which gods and men have of doing business with one another” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 129).

right conditions (see Chapter 4 for an informant's narrative about a lamb slaughtered by a 'wrong slaughterer').

The Semiotics of Knife and Meat

“Our food is shaped by knives,” writes Bee Wilson (2012, 85). There is a great deal more truth in Wilson's statement than the seemingly simple material relationship between the knife and food. Apart from their materiality, there are other intrinsic relationships between food and culinary tools in general. Broadly, objects, which appear simple and small, possess a “charisma” that affects the physical as well as emotional awareness of individuals (King 2010, xi). Thus, beyond their simple and seemingly banal materiality, objects are charged with other meanings and functions. The notion of narrative analysis, as a methodological tool, is an attempt to get meaning not only in linguistic elements such as sentences but also in all forms of semiotic signs. As Barthes (1975, 265) writes, “Just as linguistics stops at the sentence, the analysis of narrative stops at the analysis of discourse: from that point on, it is necessary to resort to another semiotics.” This is suggestive of the potentials of other semiotic signs as reservoirs of meaning. In other words, material objects can become signs signifying meanings and functions related not only to their “inherent” property but also to the meanings assigned to them. For example, apart from its nourishing properties, food is charged with meaning and functions; so are culinary tools. In one of her most commonly cited statements, Mary Douglas says, “[a] code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (Douglas 1972, 6). Marcel Danesi also writes: “Food codes, like all other kinds of social codes, are regulatory systems—they regulate what kinds of food are eaten, when they are eaten, who is allowed to eat them, and so on and so forth” (Danesi 2004, 199-200). Similarly, Rosenblum (2010, 8), for one, says, “meals (and their concomitant social rules) form a decipherable code or language.” In short, food and culinary materials serve functions other than just what their simple materiality affords

them to. They reveal power relations between groups. Writing of this phenomenon of African cuisines, Igor Cusack notes, “[l]ike most material culture, they [cuisines] are clearly products of dominant ideologies and related power structures” (Cusack 2000, 207). More specifically, in various parts of Africa, though their importance had been in decline since the late 1800s, the very materiality (the shapes, patterns, decorations, etc) of knives continued to have such symbolic functions as indicating the tribe, the production place of the knife and the bearer’s rank and ability until the twentieth century (McNaughton 1970). The semiotic functions of the knife that this study deals with, however, are concerned with narratives beyond the materiality of the knife.

The Knife as a Synecdoche of Slaughtering

Material culture does not have meaning unless through sets of specific relationships but, when such relationships are in place, even the most unpretentious of objects are neither neutral nor passive.

E. Frances King (2010, xiii)

An object as seemingly banal as knife becomes a cause of the separation for people across identity *lines* because of its relationship and attachment with slaughtering, which marks an important turning point for a neutral animal to be invested with identity of any kind. First of all, in general terms slaughtering enables the distinction of the *carrion*, which is killed by a predator animal or by ways other than *slaughtering*. It is also a moment that *separates* what is appropriate for Christians and what is for Muslim. For some, the cultural aspect of food starts at cooking. For example, Felipe Fernández-Armesto (quoted in McCann 2009, 1) says, “[c]ulture began when the raw got cooked.” However, food may start to be laden with cultural identities in earlier stages of food production and preparation, such as slaughtering, hunting, sowing, harvesting, grinding⁴³ or milling, etc. Particularly, as regards meat, slaughtering is such an

⁴³ See Chapter 5 for some oral poems on the timing of food preparation and its implication for interreligious relations.

important step in food preparation that marks the beginning of the transformation of the natural into the cultural. Or according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, it is “the cultural moment when culture (cooked food) begins to exert its influence on nature (raw food)” making this step “a vital moment in which to insert an identity-based food prohibition” (Rosenblum 2010, 77). Slaughtering in Ethiopia is such a process that ushers in the notion of meat and religious identity by inducing separate spaces in not only slaughterhouses but also places of eating.

The dogmatic foundation of the taboo and the resulting separate slaughtering in particular is a contentious subject among the different sects of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia and is thus subject to multiple interpretations of biblical and qur’anic verses as well as of other canonical texts. For example, besides the Bible, the very body of the EOTC’s law, *Fetha Negest (The Law of the Kings, Part II)*, in its *The Food, Clothing, Dwelling-Place, and Trades Proper for Christians* says:

With regard to food, there is no prohibition in Christian law, with the exception of what the Apostles forbade in the book of the Acts and in their canons, by saying: “It is the Holy Spirit’s pleasure and ours that we should not lay upon you a burden heavier than that abstinence which is absolutely necessary, namely, that you abstain from eating blood, [meat] from strangled [animals], the sacrifice of idols, and [the residue of] what was eaten by animals (*The Law of the Kings, Chapter XXIII, brackets in original*)

Abba Paulos Tzadua (1962, 125 footnote), the translator of *Fetha Negest (The Law of the Kings)*, claims: “The prescription to abstain from the residue eaten by animals is not in the Acts of the Apostles. Although it has no basis in the scriptures, however, this prescription is still observed in many parts of Ethiopia” (Tzadua, 1962, 125 footnote). However, it does have scriptural foundations in the Old Testament and early rabbinic literatures, which once again proves the influence of Mosaic food norms in the country. In one of the sacramental books of the EOTC, *Anketse Nisseha (Gateway of Repentance)*, there is this confessional statement said by the repentant: “... for I have eaten what was killed by a beast, I have sinned/wronged; forgive me⁴⁴” (*Anketse*

⁴⁴ “... አውራ የገደለውን በበለሁ ... ገበርኩ ፍታኝ።” (አንቀጽ ንስሐ 1974, 8)

Nisseha 1974 E.C, 8, my translation). As observed by Rosenblum (2010, 69 footnote), the carrion is known as *Terefah*, which “refers to meat that comes from an animal killed by another animal and is not the product of human slaughter. Biblically prohibited, this class of meat is often paired with carrion (e.g., Leviticus 7:24; 22:8 [...]).” In Leviticus 7: 22 is also a direct prohibition of eating carrion: “And Yhwh spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the Israelite people as follows: ‘All fat from the ox or the sheep you shall not eat. And as for the fat from carrion or the fat from *ter ēfa ḥ*, it may be put to any use, but you must not eat it [...].” (Rosenblum 2010, 70). The Qur’an (*Surat Al-Mai’dah* 5: 3) also clearly states, among other things, the prohibition of eating meat of dead animals, meat of animals killed by strangling as well as leftovers of animals killed and eaten by beasts – all of which suggesting the importance of proper slaughtering. It is interesting to note that there is a practice in many parts of Ethiopia of using the fat and skin of carrion for various purposes, but its meat is not eaten. Although the scriptural prohibition of eating carrion shows, if not confirms, the importance of proper slaughtering, the wide practice by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith can be explained arguably only by justifications that are subject to multiple and controversial interpretations of food-related verses in the Bible as well as in the Qur’an.

The taboo results in the practice of separate slaughtering in Christian and Muslim ways in the country. The main public slaughterhouse in the capital, Addis Ababa, for example, has distinct sections labeled as Christian (fig. 5) and Muslim (fig. 6), and the public slaughterhouse in Bahir Dar, though not labeled (see pictures in *Appendix 2*), also has separate sections for slaughtering in Christian and Muslim ways. According to an informant who is an employee there, the ‘neutral’ animal, while on the hoof, is first *labeled* with ink as to know which one goes through the Christian side and which one through that of the Muslim. Then in each section, there are exclusive workers (slaughterers), i.e. Christian slaughterers for the Christian section and Muslim slaughterers for that of the Muslim. In addition, each section has its own manual slaughtering

tools⁴⁵, which are kept separately in their own respective places (see pictures in *Appendix 2*). During my observation, the abattoir in Bahir Dar was not that active but it was giving service to institutions such as Bahir Dar University, which also has separate kitchens and dining halls for its Christian and Muslim students.



Figure 6 Addis Ababa Abattoirs Enterprise, "Christian Slaughter Hall"
(Photo by the researcher, 08 September 2014)



Figure 7 Addis Ababa Abattoir Enterprise, "Muslim Slaughter Hall"
(Photo by the researcher, 08 September 2014)

⁴⁵ It is worthy of a brief note here about one Christian informant, who was the guard of the slaughterhouse in Bahir Dar during my visit. According to his words, he is very cautious of contamination, i.e. if he finds some slaughtering tools that belong to the Muslims, he would not touch them: "I would rather spend the night watching it than "touching" [putting it in its right place]. But if it is a Christian one, I'll put it in its proper place." "እዚህ ሰጠብቅ አድራሲ እንጂ አልነኩም። የክርስቲያን ከሆነ ግን አንሰቼ በቦታው አኖረዋለሁ።"

Whether meat is slaughtered in a slaughterhouse or at the household level, the so-called “Christian/Muslim knife” discourse, as a synecdoche of the slaughtering ritual of each religion in general, is an important semiotic sign that delineates the frontier between the two religions with regard to food/meat and religious identity in Ethiopia. Interestingly, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, in their “Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec,” have brought to our attention the following account of Herodotus on what the knife, among other utensils, meant “at the heart of the difference [and] the otherness” between Egyptians and the Greeks: “[...] no Egyptian man or woman will kiss a Greek man, or use the knife, or a spit, or a cauldron belonging to a Greek, or taste the flesh of an unblemished ox that has been cut up with a Greek knife” (Herodotus 1925, *Histories*, 2.41). What these two scholars write is worth quoting at length here in order to illuminate our discussion:

Along with the knife, the spit and kettle together and separately constitute the instruments of a way of eating that Herodotus in his accounts of Egypt places at the heart of the difference, the otherness, that the Greeks perceive in themselves with respect to the Egyptians. By showing their repugnance at using a knife, spit, or kettle belonging to a Greek because he makes sacrifices and eats according to different rules, the Egyptians described by Herodotus reveal to the listeners of the histories an image of themselves in which their sacrificial practice, seen in its instrumental aspect, is circumscribed by its alimentary function (Detienne and Vernant 1979, 3).

This account runs astonishingly parallel to the place that the knife has at the heart of the discourse of food/meat and religious identity for Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. In Herodotus’ account, it is the knife (the slaughtering) that turns the “unblemished ox” into a blemished one. In Ethiopia, too, Muslims avoid meat of animals slaughtered by “Christian knife” and Christians do the same with the meat of animals slaughtered by “Muslim knife.” Among other culinary tools, the knife particularly seems to be charged with affective power so much so that it engenders disgust and repugnance even in the very thought of such meat, much less actually eating it.

There appears to be no recorded history exactly when Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia started separate slaughtering practices and, conceivably, some religiously distinct culinary and dietary practices and habits of the two

religions. It might not be my task as well as competence to know when exactly Christians and Muslims started using “different knife,” i.e. slaughtering, and I will not thus venture to exhaustively treat that here. But one cannot overlook the importance of historical facts, which play significant part in every ethnographic study and whose careful consideration creates not only an adequate but also ideal platform for the understanding of a given problem under study (Fife 2005, 17). Thus, however scarce and patchy the historical evidences as regards this custom may be, I shall briefly look at the available ones. For example, John Spencer Trimingham’s *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952) gives us an indispensable account on the aftermath of the 16th century struggle between the highland Christian kingdom and the Muslim Adal sultanate, otherwise known as the Gragn war. Conceivably, the war between the two sides seriously affected the Muslim-Christian relations in the country (Desplat and Østebø 2013, 6; see also Trimingham 1952, 89-90).

Although there had been territorial struggle between the Christian highlanders and the Muslim lowlanders centuries prior to the Gragn invasion, after the war, the EOTC maintained an isolationist and conservative ideology (Trimingham 1952, 60-91), which probably led to the introduction of this custom or the *maintenance* of the existing separate slaughtering of animals. The composition of a literary work titled *Metshafe Keder* that the Church uses still today “for the reception of apostates” (Trimingham 1952, 90, footnote) sheds light on this matter. As there was forced mass conversion to Islam during the war, the sacrament was crucial for receiving those apostates “who defiled their body with the infidels” (“ዘእርኮሰ ሰጋው ምስሉ ኢምእመናን” *Metshafe Keder* 1988 E.C, 3; see also Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C, 782). This suggests that immediately after the war the EOTC had to engage in maintaining and fortifying the existing boundaries (strict dietary rules could also be one) by broadening the breadth of religious and cultural distinctions against Islam through the isolationist stance. This might have helped the Church to police the impermeability of its boundary, emphasizing, among other measures, dietary laws as ‘ammunition’ to fight other faiths (Ullendroff 1968, 102, 107; also Trimingham 1952, 90) or rules such as separate slaughtering as a “boundary maintenance device”, to borrow Jack David Eller’s phrase (Eller 2007, 114).

However, that the EOTC became isolationist during this period does not mean that such a tradition had not already been practiced in earlier centuries. Religious questions concerning food purity in general and slaughtering of animals in particular are very old. Judaism, to which both the scriptures of Christianity and of Islam owe a great deal, has, since its earlier days, i.e. since after the Flood (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 112), has had a firm stance on purity concerns enshrined in dietary and culinary rules with questions such as who slaughters the animal, who prepares the meal, etc which made reciprocal accommodation with the non-Jew difficult (Barclay 2010; Rosenblum 2010; Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009; Finger 2007). Particularly early rabbinical literatures consider animal slaughtered by non-Jew or Gentiles as carrion and thus impure (Rosenblum 2010, 78). Therefore, “[i]n order for slaughter to be tannaitically valid for Jewish ingestion, the butcher must be a Jew” (Rosenblum 2010, 79). Given the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity with regard to its pre-Christian and Judaic elements (Pawlikowski 1972; Robinson 1964; Ullendorff 1968), this culinary law certainly is a pre-Gragn one. It seems to have originated from Judaism. As Edward Ullendorff (1968, 102) precisely remarks on the dietary rules of the EOTC as follows: “Slaughtering and bleeding of the animal are performed according to Pentateuchal requirements (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17, 4:6, etc).” One may ask why and how the EOTC in general and its food laws have Judaic elements. As to the question of how, there are three hypotheses as regards the unique Judaic elements in the EOTC in general and the Mosaic dietary rules in particular: (1) direct contact from Christian or early Christian times (Ullendorff 1956 in Beyene 1997, 9; Conti Rossini 1928, 144); (2) direct influence from Jewish Christians who came from Syria (Isaac 1972 in Beyene 1997, 9); and (3) an internal process that imitates the Bible (Robinson 2004; Robinson 1964 in Beyene 1997, 9), when Ethiopia was isolated from external contacts (Robinson 2004a; Shenk 1988, 261–262, 276; Tamerat 1977 in Beyene 1997, 10). “Though divergent in their speculations on the origins, each of these three hypotheses clearly suggests that the Judeo-Christian element is evident in the Church” (Zellelew 2014, 136).

Although many hold with the third hypothesis above and surmise that the Mosaic elements in the Church could be adopted in veneration and/or imitation

of the Old Testament rather than of a Judaic cult (Beyene 1994, 212-14; Rodinson 1965; Ullendorff 1968, 100-03), one of the very reasons for imitation could also be seen as part of the process of the national saga of identifying the Abyssinian kingdom and its faith and culture with that of Israel after the year 1270⁴⁶ (Rodinson 1964). Here mention should be made about King Claudius (reign 1522-1559, locally known as Gelawdewos). In defending the faith and practice of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church against the accusations by Western Christianity of “the prevalence of Judaic elements” (Ullendorff 1968, 100) in the former, Claudius wrote a treaty famously known as *Confessio Claudii*. In this treaty, he maintains that the Ethiopian Church does not revere the Sabbath, or the Mosaic food laws, or practices circumcision, on account of observing the Pentateuchal laws as the Jews do, but rather in respect to the virtues of the New Testament (such as Paul’s account on circumcision and on food) and of the country’s customary habits (Ullendorff 1968; Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C.).

One of the important questions in this study should concern how the taboo of meat slaughtered by people of other faith started to be observed by the two religious groups. The justification of this taboo in general appears to go beyond the simple *halal/haram* or “clean/unclean” dichotomy of animals in the notion of food in the Bible and in the Qur’an alike. Except their difference in camel products (lawful for Muslims only), both religions in Ethiopia have remarkable similarity in what they allow their followers to eat and to avoid, out of which pork, as indicated before, is a common taboo almost throughout the country. The Orthodox Christians, although they know that the meat (except that of camel) slaughtered by Muslims may not fail to fulfill what is prescribed in the Old Testament such as in Leviticus 11, they avoid eating meat slaughtered by Muslims. Similarly, while the basic question of food for Muslims is whether the meat is *halal*, with the exception of the difference in invocation of the religious formula during slaughtering (an argument by Muslims who observe the taboo), the meat slaughtered by Orthodox Christians may not be short of meeting the dietary rules in Islam because Ethiopian Orthodox Christians also avoid eating the flesh of animals that are *haram*

⁴⁶ This is the year that the Solomonic Dynasty reclaimed power overthrowing the Zagwe Dynasty.

according to the Qur'an. The major difference appears to be the slaughtering rituals, which make the difference, thus, culinary rather than dietary.

But, if looked at closely, even the slaughtering practices of the two religions have more similarities than differences. For example, both groups slit “the animal’s throat by cutting the jugular vein, the carotid and the esophagus without beheading it. The blood must be removed from the animal as it is considered the principle [sic] source of life and is unfit for human consumption” (Ficquet 2006, 46). The difference appears to be only in the invocation of the divine in speech acts and in the direction to which the head of the animal should be turned: Muslims towards Mecca and Christians often to the east⁴⁷. Apart from this difference, the narrative of separate slaughtering maintained by both religious groups can hardly be explained by the broader long-standing debate over food prohibitions in Christianity and in Islam. This taboo, therefore, seems to have much less a theological justification than an ideological⁴⁸ underpinning. That is, the taboo could have been used, if not invented, to maintain the border and power relations between the two religions in the country. In the following section this will be addressed in light of the historical encounters of the two religions and the role of food in the process.

Separate Slaughtering: Difference Embedded in Similarity?

To begin with, food was one of the fundamental questions ‘discussed’ during the first official⁴⁹ Christian-Muslim encounter in the 7th century between

⁴⁷ Geographical directions also seem to be important markers of identity among the three Abrahamic religions. For example, *Anqetse Amin (Gateway of Faith)*, a 15th century Muslim-Christian polemical book (Trimingham 1952) has remarks, among other things, on the distinct geographical directions that Christians, Muslims, and the Jew face during prayer. “አሰመ አይሁድ፣ ይመደቡ ገደሙ መንገሉ ምዕራብ ወይደልዩ። ወክርስቲያንኒ መንገሉ ምሥራቅ።” (“The Jew turn their head to the west to pray, whereas Christians to the east.” my translation).

⁴⁸ The use of food as an ideological instrument is very old. For example, in Greek and Roman classical antiquities, food was used as an ideological device for constructing Otherness thereby dominant groups and cultures ensured the marking of their identity, singularity and superiority (Garnsey 1999). The Otherness built on food particularly on meat and knife between the Egyptians and the Greeks as reported by Herodotus has already been presented above.

⁴⁹ Here ‘official’ because the Christian Ethiopians presence in Arabia during the early years of Mohammed and that of Islam suggests that this ‘first encounter’ in Axum was not the first one between Ethiopian Christianity and Islam.

Muslim refugees from Arabia and the Christian King of Abyssinia. As was pointed out in Chapter I, during the very early days of Islam when Muslims were persecuted in Mecca by the Quraish oligarchy, a handful of them sought refuge in Abyssinia, in what is today Ethiopia. There happened to be a conversation, which bears on the question of food and particularly of meat. When asked by the Christian king to explain why they had forsaken their forefathers' religion to follow the then new religion, one of the refugees, Ja'far b. Abu Talib, cousin of Mohammed, replied: "O King, we were a barbarous nation, worshiping idols, *eating carrion*, committing shameful deeds [...] until God sent us an apostle" (Trimingham 1952, 45, my emphasis). Then the King replied, "Verily this and that which Moses brought emanate from one lamp" (Hablesell 1972, 184). The King appears to have been struck by the similarities of the two religions in the Mosaic laws, which obviously includes food proscription, so much so that he granted them the refuge they sought dire. Particularly 'eating carrion' essentially evokes slaughtering practice, which is at the heart of the very taboo we are dealing with.

However, when we further make historical inquiry, we are tempted to believe that the Judaic customs of the Ethiopian Christianity might have had its own influence on the dietary laws adopted in early Islam. As Philip Jenkins (2008, 188) writes,

Apart from Byzantine Syria, by far the most powerful Christian presence looming over the Arab world was Ethiopia, and when the first Muslims faced pagan persecution, Aksum was the natural place for them to take refuge. Recording one of the prophet's early acquaintances, the early biographer Ibn Ishaq recorded the saying "The one who teaches Muhammad most of what he brings is Jabr the Christian"—who may have been Ethiopian. This Ethiopian presence was so important because it might explain many of the Jewish-seeming customs found in early Islam.

More relevant to the issue of food, Jenkins further writes, "when Muslims encountered Ethiopian Christianity, as they must have done, they found a form of Christianity that included many Judaic customs, including circumcision and strict food regulations, which would become standard within Islam" (Jenkins

2008, 189)⁵⁰. When Islam entered Ethiopia, too, as is presented above in the first encounter between the immigrants and the Ethiopian king, the notion of food norms might have served the earlier Muslims as one of the communication accommodation strategies which “may often be asymmetrical and unilateral toward the power source” (Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991, 21), a common strategy employed by immigrants to identify themselves with and converge to the host culture (Gallois and Callan 1991). That seems why the Christian Abyssinian kingdom was “initially accommodating” (Ahmed 2001). However, the history of the expansion and penetration of Islam in Ethiopia shows that the reaction of the Christian kingdom would gradually change. That is, during its early days, Islam took hold of coastal lowland areas meant its expansion success was mainly in such areas (Carmichael 2004, 221), and thus it was not a serious threat⁵¹ to Christianity whose main strongholds were the central highlands. However, as Islam took strong root in the country by penetrating inward into the central highlands, it appears to follow, more distinct and peculiar attributes would emerge to diverge from the host culture and for the host culture also to establish mechanisms of curbing the expansion of the former. In addition, as an official and well-established religion in Abyssinia almost three centuries ahead of Islam, Christianity seems to be the ‘norm setter’ and a ‘preeminent’ religion rather than governed by norms of a religion viewed as essential ‘other’ and ‘newcomer’. Islam, on the other hand, as a minority religion, thus, might itself have emphasized the taboo “to rival the zeal of Christians”⁵² (Massignon 1954 in Rodinson 1965, 1070) and to mark difference.

⁵⁰ Various scholars observe the several kinds of influence on early Islam by Christianity in general (Reynolds 2008) and by that of the Ethiopian in particular (Kropp 2008; Donner 2008; Jenkins 2008). David Robinson (2004b, 14) also notes that what is sometimes termed as the first *hijra* “demonstrates the presence at that time of Ethiopians, including Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, in Mecca ...” For further discussions on the presence of Ethiopians including in pre-Islam times, see Erlich (2002, 23-4), Hable Selassie (1972), and Serjeant (1966).

⁵¹ Ayele (1975, 60) notes, “before and for quite some time after the rise of Islam, the consequences of these mutual misconceptions were minimal partly because the two groups of people inhabited geographically separate areas, each maintaining and living under its own political and social system and posing no serious cultural and political threat to the other.”

⁵² Massignon uses this concept to explain the ancient practice of abstinence from meat by some ascetic Muslims, a mechanism that they “adopted in order to rival the zeal of Christians, Manicheans, etc” (Massignon 1954 cited in Rodinson 1965). And Rodinson

On the other hand, the striking dietary similarity between Ethiopian Christianity and Islam might also have ironically given birth to this food taboo. As mentioned before, EOTC followers, unlike other Christians, strictly observe the taboo against eating pork, one of the fundamental identities that gave earlier Islam “a point of clear distinction” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 117). In fact, using food as a marker of distinct identity by religions is not unique to early Islam, for different religious as well as philosophical groups have used it since antiquity (Garnsey 1999). If Islam used pork as a “point of distinction” from Christianity, ironically early Christians also used eating meat of the same animal or abandoning Mosaic laws “to mark themselves off the Jews” (Garnsey 1999, 98). Aside from targeting the distinction against Christianity, Islam, at least in Medina, had to also define itself against Judaism as well as paganism (Rodinson 1965, 1061). As Rodinson (1965, 1065) further notes, “[v]ariations according to the different religious groups are of more importance ideologically. [...] each group tended to mark itself off distinctly from the others by having its own series of rules concerning food.” Thus, Islam must have found a distinction in dietary terms that would make it different from its sister Abrahamic faiths because “[t]o eat just like other implied, generally speaking, that a group did not consider itself completely split off from them. In principle one should not eat with the *kafir*” (Goldziher 1920 cited in Rodinson 1965, 1065). Even within the same religion, in the earlier days of Christianity in Europe, the conflict between the Celtic and the Roman churches seems to have been expressed by Celtic monks’ avoidance of prayer and food fellowship with Roman priests while the former considered utensils used by the latter as contaminated (Allen 2002, 12-13). Other similar cases can be mentioned of different sects’ use of seemingly reactionary dietary rules as a way of distinction from the religion that each sect purports to reform.

However, when Islam came to Ethiopia, as noted above, the distinction in food appeared to have been “muted” at the beginning, for convergence was understandably more important for the persecuted early Muslims at this stage. Thus, when the two “opposing religions came to head-on collision” (Ayele

(1965, 1070) describes such prohibitions as self-imposed by ascetics because scriptures do not prescribe them.

1975, 60) in the expansion and territorial struggle against each other at macro-level and a growing day-to-day interaction at micro-level, a food taboo that became a distinctive identity for their interaction must have been later on “invented”. And this taboo, apart from being just an identity marker, seems to have thus been serving as a diverging element in their interaction and a barricade to the religious borders. In other words, by way of conjecture, such a taboo seems to be one of the results of interactions and confrontations between the two religions. For instance, one should not rule out the possibility that Muslims for their part might also have underlined the difference in the slaughtering practice, adopting a counter-practice of avoiding meat of animal slaughtered by Christians as a gesture of resistance and reaffirmation of their religious identity: “If you don’t eat mine, I will not eat yours” or “if my food is unclean and impure for you, so is yours for me” kind of attitude. Without denying the essential scriptural basis – however debatable intra-religiously the verses may be – for the observance of this taboo, one might see the gesture as a counter-measure for Muslims against an ideology of “avoidance” by a dominant group, i.e., Christians. It is worth noting that by obscuring the power relations, which is at the heart of the dominating and the minority group, the former often uses “symbolic violence” to legitimize its own culture as superior, esthetic and distinguished and to denigrate that of the latter as vulgar and impure (Bourdieu and Passeron 1972 in Lamont and Molnar 2002, 172). Writing of the reaction of the Christian Abyssinian kingdom against the expansion of Islam, Tesfahun Ayele (1975, 56) says:

Confronted by Islamic penetration, the forebearers [sic] of contemporary Abyssinians (Amhara-Tigre) began to identify themselves and their Christian oriented values as superior to all other peoples and values. As a result, religion and religious values became the primary determining factors for the everyday dichotomy of “we” and “they” as well as “ours” and “theirs”.

It may be difficult to hypothesize here that this food taboo is a direct result⁵³ of power relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, for one cannot

⁵³ Space does not allow me to develop this hypothesis here, but I do not still want to rule out pursuing this line of argument given the function of food taboos as ideological instruments (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 117; Garnsey 1999). What is worthy of note here is the fact that the two religions in Ethiopia have very striking resemblance in their dietary rules so much so that it

altogether downplay its scriptural foundations. Nevertheless, it is possible at least to conjecture that the taboo could have been used: (1) to maintain and sustain power relations and thereby curb the expansion or infiltration of minority religions by the dominant group, on the one hand, and (2) to resist dominations and to affirm one's own religious identity by the minority group, on the other. As noted before, the taboo was exploited by conquering rulers and warriors as a symbol of conquest and triumph over their new subjects while the conquered used it as a gesture of resistance as well as piety. Tekletsadik Mekuria, writing of the Church's attempt in restoring Christianity and Christian norms right after the death of Grag in 1543, suggests that this taboo *had been observed* by both Christians and Muslims and was also used as a coercive instrument in the process of forced conversion during the war:

Even the clergy confessed Islam by force during the reign of Grag, and some superficially accepted Islam though they remained Christians at heart. While forcibly living with the Muslims, they could not avoid eating what was slaughtered by the Muslims in disgust as before. Or else the consequence was a sword. In other times, Muslims would not eat what the Christians slaughter 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit', and Christians would never eat what the Muslims slaughter evoking 'Bismilahi'. But now, after confessing Islam, though by force, if they ate, they should be considered as Muslim or defiled. Since forced eating and forced conversion was inevitable, [...] everyone was considered as they defiled their religion ... (Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C., 780-81, my translation)⁵⁴

During later centuries after the Grag period, however, there is better evidence of the culinary/dietary differences between Christians and Muslims in the country. Both Charles Jaques Poncet, who came to Abyssinia at the end of 17th century to treat Iyasu I (1682-1706) for leprosy, and James Bruce, who traveled to the country to study the source of the Nile in 18th century, give account on the avoidance by Christians of meat slaughtered by Muslims (Trimingham 1952, 102-3, footnote; see also Abdussamad H. Ahmad 2000; Levine 1972, 41; Love 2003; Bruce 1813 in Ullendorff 1968, 30). William Ian Miller (1997, 21)

might ironically have forced both religions to look for or invent a food taboo that marks distinction between them.

⁵⁴ Original version in *Appendix 5*

notes, “[d]isgust is an emotion that has large political and social theoretical consequences.” This explains the degree of affective experience of people who observe this taboo by the two religions in Ethiopia as regards eating meat slaughtered by people of the other faith. That is, most often, it is the Christians who look more sensitive about and show disgust toward the possible consumption of such meat⁵⁵. This looks evident, as noted before, in the travel account on the town of Gondar by Poncet, who recounts that Muslims were “looked down on by the Christians, and meat slaughtered by one group would not be touched by the other” while the latter also salutes with a left hand as “a mark of contempt” (Poncet 1949 [1699] in Levine 1972, 41-42; see also Ford 2008, 57; Abdussamad H. Ahmad 2000; Love 2003). To the present day, in my own lived experience in different parts of the country as well as the empirical data obtained through observation and interview in Bahir Dar, I have also come to understand that the strict observance of this taboo is more prevalent among Christians than Muslims. In other words, even if Muslims are very cautious about consuming *halal* meat, they appear to be lenient, for instance, when it comes to the very idea of trespassing and eating “Christian meat” unknowingly. Asked the same question: “what would you do if you unknowingly eat ‘Christian/Muslim meat’?” most of my Christian informants express disgust of some kind. Overall, literatures on food disgust affirm that disgust serves as a manifestation of power relations (Ahmed, 2004). The difference in the affective experience of eating or the very thought of eating the “wrong meat” among Christians and Muslims, therefore, is so big that one may be tempted by the above tentative assumption of mine about the historical residue of power relations⁵⁶ between the two religious groups as reflected on crossing the religious boundary marked by “meat soaked in faith” (Ficquet 2006).

⁵⁵ For discussion on the seemingly aesthetic reactions against and the appellations of Muslim meat/food, see chapter 4 & 5.

⁵⁶ The affective experiences of those who observe the taboo, and disgust and power relationship are discussed in fair depth in Chapter 4.

Religious Signs in Ethiopia: Public and Private

In the day-to-day Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, it is the material objects (clothing, food, language and architecture) that mark their religious identity (Ficquet 2006). Based on how and where they serve their purpose, it is possible to classify the non-linguistic religious signs into two tentative categories: private and public, which is roughly equivalent to Firth's (1973) classification of symbols. Along with the cross and the crescent, the two universal signs, there are two other non-linguistic signs that Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia use as religious identity markers. They are the "invisible" knife and the thread necklace called *mateb*⁵⁷ (fig. 7), "a simple neck cord often holding a wrought silver cross" (Levine 1972, 82). This, however, is different from the talismanic amulets worn around one's neck by Christians and Muslims and people of other faiths in the country. It is rather a thread necklace (usually in three colors, signifying the Trinity) that is tied around children's neck on their baptism (girls on their 80th day after birth and boys on their 40th)⁵⁸. As one grows, they continue to put on a replica of this necklace when it is broken or worn out. In some legends about mixed-religious families or interfaith marriages, a thread is used to differentiate the "Christian meat" from the "Muslim meat"; i.e., while cooking the "two meats" in one pan, a thread is tied as a tag around the "Christian" one (Kemal 2004; see also a legend in Chapter 5).

The knife appears to be an "invisible" sign because it is not observed until its resultant element, i.e. meat, plays its role as a dividing line between the two religious groups. It is the cross and the crescent moon that are used as more "visible" markers of religious identity in the public sphere. Other than on

⁵⁷ Desta Teklewold (1962 E.C., 718), in his definition of identity or identity marker (*melleya/metawekya*) gives the following as an example: "The identity marker of a Christian is *mateb* and Cross, and of a Muslim is the Crescent." ("የክሪስቲያን መለያ ማተብ ፣ መስቀል ፤ የሰላም መለያ ጨረቃ ነው።") The *mateb* for Christians is also so important that to *break* it means to be Muslim. As Desta Teklewold (1962 E.C., 1178) again defines the word 'selleme' (one has confessed Islam), "He has broken his *mateb*; he has become Muslim" (ሰላም ፣ ማተቡን በጠሰ ፤ እሰላም ኾነ) and 'aselleme' (has Islamized), "has made one break his/her *mateb*" (እሰላም ፣ ማተብ አሰበጠሰ ፤ እሰላም አደረገ።) while his definition of "Muslim" also reads, "one who believes in Mohammad and the Qur'an; one who has no *mateb*." (እሰላም ፣ በመሐመድ ፣ በቁርአን የሚያምን ፤ ማተብ የሌለው ...)

⁵⁸ For discussion of the "Timing of Baptism" in the EOTC, see Pedersen 1999, 205.

the steeple of churches and on the minaret of mosques, they are also used in places such as abattoirs, butcheries and restaurants, signaling whether these places are “Christian” or “Muslim” (Ficquet 2006, 44-45), although in the case of restaurants only Muslim ones are marked as such (see Mains 2004, 346). In addition, although it seems not to be a tradition anymore today among Christians in Ethiopia, except in some rural areas, there is of course the cross tattoo that mainly Christian women and girls get inked on their forehead (fig. 7), cheeks, chins, etc. Mention should also be made here that tattooing has a long history in Ethiopian Christianity: The Christian zealot King Zer’a Yakob (reign 1434-1468), for instance, “forced all his subjects to be tattooed with amulet affirming belief in the Trinity...” (Trimingham 1952, 76, footnote). Moreover, it is also common among Christians to have cross embroidery stitches on Ethiopian traditional and holiday attires.

More important to the discussion of slaughtering, as we have seen above, is that in abattoirs animals are slaughtered in separate Orthodox Christian, Muslim and European slaughter facilities (Avery 2004) while government university canteens also have separate dining halls for Christian and Muslim students. These signs can be seen as the public versions of the knife whose active role seems to terminate at slaughtering but whose effect still continues embodied in other signs. In other words, it is because of the knife, though it appears to remain in the kitchen or in slaughtering places, that the use of other signs such as the cross and the crescent in public spaces is eminently manifested.



Figure 8: An Ethiopian Orthodox girl with cross tattoo and cross *mateb*
Source: <http://www.gophoto.us/key/ethiopian%20cross%20tattoo>
(Accessed: 10 December 2014)

These two signs, especially on butcheries and restaurants, signify no other object than the meat slaughtered with the knife according to the specific religious ritual. As King (2010, xvii) notes, “we construct our own sense of who we are on the basis of difference. Initially this happens within our habitat but, moving into the public arena, it is shown that our notion of who we are is publicly confirmed through categorization.”



Figure 9: Somewhere in Ethiopia: “San’a Muslim Restaurant” (left) and “Kidus Yohannes Christian butchery” (right). (Source: unknown photographer, Facebook)

Interestingly, the knife seems to possess a transcendent power of crossing the private space to become a sign in public space enacted in other signs (cross or crescent), which make “categorization” of Christian and Muslim public spaces possible (fig. 8). Here, the knife is apparently an initial sign for other signs to follow in a seemingly Peircean model of signs as processual: “signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification” (Keane 2003, 413). It is also important to note that material culture should not necessarily possess a visual sign to be considered as communicative tool. As Gottdiener argues, we should not “see only a world of signs” and “miss the material culture that acts as sign-vehicles for signification and its relation to everyday life” (cited 1995, 49 in Thomas 1998, 100). Therefore, in Ethiopia, even if one does not see the knife, like cross or crescent, as a visual sign on restaurants or butcheries, it effectively serves as a sign-vehicle that signifies what is *halal* meat for Muslims and what is *kidus* (‘sacred’, ‘clean’) meat for Christians. As noted above, the more universal signs such as the Cross and the Crescent signs on restaurants and butcheries across the country necessarily conjure up the notion of slaughtering automatically evoking mandatory questions who slaughters what, with what kind of material, how, etc.

The Role of Speech Acts: Charging the Knife and Circumscribing Space

Words have power, not just to inform but also to transform. Speech is effective in transforming humans from one social or spiritual status to another (child to adult, single to married, profane to holy, alive to dead). [...]

Jack David Eller (2007, 106)

A critical look into the role that the knife plays, especially in slaughtering, through speech act theory helps to enunciate two important notions in religion: “the sacred” and “the profane” (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Broadly speaking, individuals from either group show tolerance when it comes to food other than meat although there are even many from both sides who do not mind eating meat slaughtered by people in the other faith. It is important to note that during slaughtering it is not the knife itself per se but rather *the speech acts*— for

Christians the *Ba Seme Ab wa Wald wa Menfes Qedus Ahadu Amlak* (“In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, One God,” and for Muslims the *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (“In the name of Allah, the passionate and the Merciful”)— that play a significant role in charging the neutral animal’s flesh with “Christian” or “Muslim” identity. Even for ancient Egyptians, the repugnance they showed to Greek knife emanates from the notion of the sacred and the profane. According to Herodotus (1925), the Greek knife and what it slaughters, which may include cows that are holy and venerated much more highly than any other animal, is taboo to Egyptians. That is why no Egyptian used the knife of a Greek or tasted the flesh of an ox slaughtered with a Greek knife.

In quite a similar vein, especially for *some* Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, the knife or any other culinary tool itself can be considered *erkus* “defiled”, if it has been used by “others,” Here contact and fear of contamination with the object is what has much importance, which agrees with Kristeva’s definition of the “abject”: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Therefore, a culinary tool and a food item, particularly meat, that trespasses, so to say, the boundary marked by the knife’s power of transubstantiation at slaughtering results in abjection because it “does not respect borders, positions, rules” of the religion in question. This is because food purity is not always determined by its cleanliness in terms of hygienic conditions, rather by factors such as: who prepared it, in whose company it is eaten; whose utensil is used to prepare it (Rodinson, 1965, 1069). And, meat that has not gone through the slaughtering practices of one’s own religion is not pure, *kidus* (‘sacred,’ ‘holy,’ ‘clean’) or *halal* (‘lawful’) to eat. Thus, eating such meat is akin to defiling one’s body, giving individuals who observe this taboo feelings of repugnance and disgust, even in the very thought of eating it. In other words, food loathing, as an elementary and most archaic form of abjection (Kristeva, 1982, 2) is, therefore, experienced as a result of the slaughtering ritual the meat has passed through.

It is also important to note that apart from making “categorization” (King 2010, xvii) of Christian and Muslim public spaces possible (restaurants and butcheries, for example), the knife just like its very nature of splitting things,

yet again circumscribes quite literally the geographical space between Muslims and Christians in socio-cultural settings such as wedding feasts. Most often, guests from the two groups do not occupy the same space. According to the custom, the host caters her/his Other guest with meat slaughtered according to the latter's religious etiquette. There is often a clear territorial demarcation between the two groups. The knife as a synecdoche of the slaughtering practices of the two religions comes here to play its role of territorializing boundaries through its concomitant force now, i.e., food. Trespassing the precinct, so to speak, made by the knife gives individuals an uncanny feeling. Thus, the knife seems to be policing the boundary such that it seems to "punish" with disgust those who transgress the "line." As a result, in socio-cultural settings where Christians and Muslims meet involving food or eating (i.e. meat), there is an affective sacrifice that attendants should pay.

In other words, in order to fulfill their social obligations, they appear to occupy a space that they might otherwise prefer to avoid, and to smell and see food that they might not prefer to smell and see. This all is because of the seemingly simple process of slaughtering ritual we have discussed above. That is, if transubstantiation changes the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ in Christian theology, the knife is an important culinary tool charged with the immense power of religious performative languages (speech acts) that transform the neutral animal into a sacred or lawful object and that invest it with intense aura of disgust among followers of the other faith who observe this food taboo. In short, in food contexts that involve meat, disgust polices the spatial territory between the two religious groups understandably because what is regarded by one group as sacred is by another a profane and vice versa.

Meat as a Proselytizing Instrument

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who observe this taboo disapprove not only Muslims but also Christians who eat meat slaughtered by Muslims. As Maxime Rodinson notes, "[t]he Christians of Ethiopia reproached Europeans with eating meat killed by Muslims, which they considered as amounting particularly to apostasy" (Rodinson 1965, 1066). But it is one of the most remarkable beliefs and traditions among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and

Ethiopian Muslims that both believe they can be converted to the other religion by eating the meat of an animal slaughtered by people of the other faith. Eloi Ficquet has discussed the historical use of meat as “a method of forced conversion” (Ficquet 2006, 47-52). But forcing people to eat what they consider as taboo in order to ensure their submission is not unique to the history of conquest between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The Jews were forced to eat pork as a sign of submission to Antiochus IV, according to the apocryphal Old Testament book of Judas Maccabaeus (Farb and Armelagos 1980). Here it is important to note that if Antiochus used pork to show his triumph and power over the Jew, they equally avoided it (117) affirming the avoidance of food “as an expression of resistance or rebellion” (Belasco 2008, 37). Similarly, in the very early days of Islam, “Muhammad is said to have obliged two newly converted Dju‘fis to eat heart, taboo in their tribe, without which conversion would have been incomplete” (Ibn Sa‘d, i/2, 62, in Rodinson 1965, 1061). In Ethiopia, too, conquering rulers of both sides used a similar strategy in ‘Christian/Muslim meat’ as an instrument to force religious conversion on the defeated one (Cecchi 1886 cited in Trimmingham 1952, 202). In all these examples, it is possible to see broadly the ideological instrument of food both as a symbol of triumph by the conqueror and of resistance or rebellion by the conquered. In other words, eating or not eating certain foods serves as a political statement (Telfer 2002, 37), which also calls to mind the modern day boycotting of certain food products (or even hunger strike) as a gesture of politico-economic resistance.

The belief in confessing another religion by breaking a food taboo exists in Ethiopia to the present day among many, given the great degree of evangelization by both religions today than ever before. Asked if eating “Muslim/Christian meat” engenders apostatizing for them, some of my informants said they do not believe that they apostatized, but they consider it as transgression and contamination anyway that requires some kind of remedy. According to Mary Douglas, “[t]here are two distinct ways of cancelling a pollution: one is the ritual which makes no enquiry into the cause of the pollution, and does not seek to place responsibility; the other is the confessional rite” (Douglas [1966] 2001, 138). The first way roughly describes what Muslims in Ethiopia do whereas the latter perfectly fits to the way

Orthodox Christians fix dietary trespassing. That is, though they do not have a comparable ritual or sacrament for cleansing dietary trespassing to the Christians, according to my Muslim-scholar informants, Muslims are expected to regret their action based on their own conscience and should try not to do it again. On the other hand, when the Christians commit dietary trespassing, they see a priest for confession and expiation. The *Metshafe Keder* (translated from Arabic to Ge'ez, Ethiopian classical language, in the 16th century) serves the church to receive apostates (Trimingham 1952; Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C) and is still used in general as sacrament of penance. The book explains that church fathers composed the prayers and sacraments for the sake of Christians who trespass and defile their body: “በእንተ ዘክህደ ሃይማኖቶ ኣው ዘኣርኮሰ ሰጋሁ ምስሊ ዘኢ.ምዕመናን ኣው ተባእት ኣው ኣንሱት ኣው መነኮሰ ኣው. [...]” (*Metshafe Keder* 1988 E.C., 3), which roughly means “... for those: male or female or monk or nun or [...] who renounced their religion or defiled their body with the infidels⁵⁹”. Dietary trespassing is one factor for defilement of the body while having sexual intercourse with “the infidels”⁶⁰ is another; both of which are often viewed as “corporal sins” – lusts of the flesh. In Ethiopia, while avoiding foodsharing forms social distinction, the rejection and withdrawal of commensality is also a form of exclusion (Kifleyesus 2006, 38). More precisely, in the history of the EOTC, dietary trespassing has a serious consequence. The individual who breaks the taboo is not only considered as an aberration, but he/she also faces excommunication. “Orthodox Christians who deliberately eat ‘impure’ meat, such as that of pigs and camels, are subject to excommunication with all its socio-religious consequences,” writes Braukamper (1982, 430). One of the reasons for Lij Iyassu (reign 1913-1927) to have been excommunicated

⁵⁹ According to another book of sacrament, *Anketse Nisseha* (Gateway of Repentance), a male repentant, for example, confesses by saying, “By trespassing [having sex] with relatives, with Muslim, with pagan woman, I have sinned; forgive me” (*Anketese Nisseha* 1974 E.C, 6, my translation) (“ከዘመድ ከእሰላም ከኣረማዊት ሴት ጋር በሳትሁ ገበርኩ ፍታኝ።” *አንቀጽ ንስሐ* 1974, 6).

⁶⁰ Even one of the popular legends about Gragn has something to do with a curious scandal that involves an apparent ‘defilement’. As the legend goes, Gragn’s father was thought to be a Christian priest who had an affair with a Muslim woman with whom he slept a night before an early morning prayer/mass in church. Unaware due to darkness, the priest made a fatal error of entering the church putting on his Muslim mistress’ *gufta* (headscarf) instead of his *timitam* (a turban-like cotton headdress worn by EOTC priests). Then the clergy killed this priest whose son, Gragn, rose to avenge the murder of his father by menacing Christian Abyssinia: killing priests and Christians, burning Churches, etc.

by the EOTC is because he was accused of eating ‘Muslim meat’ (Ficquet 2006, 53). One explanation offered by Douglas (2001, 140) is that “[t]he polluter becomes a doubly wicked object of reprobation, first because he crossed the line and second because he endangered others.” In this connection, Sigmund Freud went as far as viewing excommunication as the beginning of penal code: “[T]he earliest human penal systems may be traced back to taboo” (Freud 1950, 23) while the very notion of *taboo infringement* itself invokes a penal tone.

Overall, as the common maxim “you are what you eat” goes, in this kind of belief, “you *become* what you eat.” That is, eating and religious identity are intricately intertwined so much so that you become what you are not supposed to become if/when you eat what you are not supposed to eat. In other words, eating, especially by trespassing the dietary border across religion, is equivalent to becoming Other as if the intake of food transforms someone into someone *else*, giving the person an “edible identity,” to borrow Rosenblum’s (2010) phrase, and conjuring up the original sin, which was in the shape of eating (Genesis: 2:16-17). Indeed, according to the Bible, Adam and Eve were not the same before and after they ate the forbidden apple since eating has transformed and engendered them to have a new identity that they were not meant to have. In addition, if eating the forbidden fruit resulted in the Fall from grace and thus brought about “the punitive consequence” (Garnsey 1999, 95) of expulsion from Paradise for Adam and Eve, the eating of certain forbidden foods or the breaking of food taboos in various societies does not pass without some kind of consequence. For example, it could result in a dire consequence of exclusion or excommunication from the membership of a certain group to which the individual belongs as in the example we noted above of Lij Iyassu. Therefore, the affective experience that the taboo-observant individuals go through after dietary trespassing, how it is dealt with, and what effects it has in inter-religious interaction with people of the other faith are points that merit further discussion, and they are addressed in the next chapter.

Analyzing the Affective Experiences of the Taboo Observant

In the previous chapters, I have briefly touched upon what I termed as “the affective sacrifice” incurred by the Other guest in a food context such as at wedding feast because of a religious food taboo that involves the notion of disgust. This chapter will further look into food, its socio-cultural settings and its role as an interreligious interface between Muslims and Christians in their encounters. It gives a short reflection on wedding feasts by analyzing the notion of space and boundary in relation to food taboo and the perceived disgust it entails upon the taboo-observant Christians and Muslims. The chapter also discusses personal narratives obtained from informants in connection with disgust elicited by the taboo under discussion.

This study already maintains that wedding feasts are paradoxically converging and diverging spaces because of the dietary/culinary differences between Christians and Muslims. They are just one of the many socio-cultural settings for the encounters of the two communities. Among other things, they are settings for individuals who observe the religious food taboo (1) to show their act of piety (religious commitment) and (2) to show their solidarity with their religious Others (an act of social commitment). It is this dual purpose in the individual’s mind that seems to result in the paradoxical phenomena of ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’, unity and separation, like-guest and Other-guest, etc. To wit, invited individuals from the other religion converge at a wedding feast because of their will to fulfill their duty of friendship and social relationship with their religious Other host. However, they diverge from their Other host because of the observance of the religious food taboo owing, unsurprisingly, to food’s role as a central medium of showing one’s religious commitment (Rouse and Hoskins 2004). In other words, by avoiding each

other's food, the taboo observant individuals show an act of piety or commitment to their own religion.

The role of food in identity is perhaps best captured in the commonly cited saying "you are what you eat"; however, we are not only what we eat but also what we do not eat (Ulrich 2007). In addition, food also plays a role in exclusion and inclusion by determining with whom one eats and with whom one does not, which is best expressed in Peter Garnsey's adaptation of the same statement as in "[y]ou are with whom you eat" (Garnsey 1999, 128). In fact, at times, 'what one eats' is one central factor, but it is not a sufficient condition for determining inclusion or exclusion in a food context. Instead, 'with whom one eats' becomes a decisive factor of commensality in inter-group encounters in food contexts. Writing of the difficulty of commensality for the Jew with others, Jordan D. Rosenblum notes, "[d]espite the fact that the food is clearly kosher, the banquet at which it is consumed is not. The concern here is commensal in nature, and not culinary – it is about with whom you eat, and not what you eat" (Rosenblum 2010, 92). In the case of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, however, it seems even more complex because the concern is both commensal and culinary in nature. It is a complex kind of commensality, which is affected by the taboo under discussion that effectively involves culinary questions: *who* cooks with *what* utensil, *who* slaughters *what* and *how*, etc.

Perhaps every society has certain unifying events that involve food (Farb and Armelagos 1980). However, because "space is what simultaneously unites and separates us" (Lawson 2001, 6), the same event can be a cause for divergence. Due to this, an event like wedding feast becomes a diverging socio-cultural space. Therefore, not only who eats what and with whom but also where one sits and with whom, are important points of reflections in order to understand the unique commensality and difference between Christians and Muslims in food contexts in Ethiopia. One important key point is that the encounter in food contexts between the taboo-observant Christians and Muslims seems to be mediated by the affective experiences of individuals, namely by the disgust that they have developed since childhood toward the tabooed meat.

To begin with, it would be instructive to briefly look at the socio-cultural meaning and significance of weddings. Ronald L. Grimes views wedding ceremonies as focused, performative and social events (Grimes 2000, 156-158). Particularly, he emphasizes their social nature: “weddings do not belong only to brides and grooms but to all who attend, watch, and fantasize” (160-1). Victor Turner also views rituals in general as “social drama” (Turner 1974 cited in Bell 1997, 39) while wedding feasts can exemplify the classical notion of convivium⁶¹ or living together (i.e. con + vivere, Garnsey 1999; NOAD 2008). Rosenblum (2010, 91), for one, precisely writes of the social importance of marriage and the meal served at wedding feasts: “Because marriage affirms and reaffirms social relations and order, the meal that celebrates this occasion is clearly laden with meaning. To share this particular table is to plug oneself into a network of social relationships.” In Bahir Dar as well as in most parts of Ethiopia, wedding as a social event involves gathering, which comes to effect usually after a careful selection by the host of friends, neighbors and relatives who will attend the wedding - tantamount to “casting of actors” for this salient “social drama”. It is an important occasion for parents or families of the bride or groom to requite the ‘debt’ and gratitude they owe to people whose weddings they had attended before. The ‘debt’ and gratitude individuals reciprocally pay to each other can build interpersonal and intergroup solidarity of communities that is cemented by food exchange. As Roberto Esposito notes of the notion of community:

[...] the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn't a property or a possession [*appartenenza*].¹¹ It isn't having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an “obligation,” in the sense that we say “I owe *you* something,” but not “you owe *me* something” (Esposito 2010, 6).

Therefore, wedding feast is an important event with which the host demonstrates, as an earlier chapter outlines, their reciprocal hospitality and accommodation to their religious Others. More importantly it serves as

⁶¹ “It [convivium] was the obvious place for interaction, conversation and relaxation, the place and the occasion where friendship was strengthened and cultural attainment displayed.” (Garnsey 1999, 136)

organized, planned or consciously constructed zone of contact for Christians and Muslims in contrast to casual meetings between the two religious groups on daily basis. With this in mind, in the following sections I shall discuss the role that disgust plays in the overall dynamics of Christian and Muslim attendants' encounters at wedding feasts in Ethiopia.

Disgusting Border and Bordering disgust

There is a certain truth in the apparently banal statement that borders are disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects.

Sara Ahmed (2004, 87)

A very important point one observes in the interaction between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia in food contexts that involve meat is that disgust seems to be presupposed *for* Other guests *by* the host, that is, the hosts anticipate that their food context will engender disgust in the Other guest. But the empathetic understanding by the host to admit this fact, first of all, and then to do the necessary provisions and accommodations for the Other guest is worthy of consideration. Apart from providing food prepared according to the religious etiquette of the Other guest, it is also often part of the duty of the host to prepare a separate geographical space for this guest (fig. 10). But, no matter how presupposed the disgust of the Other guests is, the latter on their part seem to keep their disgust unknown so as presumably not to offend their host. What is worth noting here is that ironically the different geographic space people occupy seems to concretize the disgust. In this case, it appears that disgust itself becomes a 'visible' space, an interstice between two physical spaces, between bodies, between people, between attendants as Other-guest and like-guest. In addition, it is very common to observe the extreme care people make to avoid contamination of Christian food and utensils with Muslim food and utensils and vice versa. Sara Ahmed writes: "Disgust does something, certainly: through disgust, bodies 'recoil' from their proximity, as a proximity that is felt as nakedness or as an exposure on the skin surface" (Ahmed 2004, 83). Ahmed's statement may refer to the disgust experience of an individual body against the disgusting object, but it is also expressive of a group of

individuals attempting to keep themselves aloof from disgust (from the disgusting object and area). It is in this process that disgust forces the establishment of border at wedding feasts in Ethiopia.



Figure 10: Partial view of Christian and Muslim guests at a Christian wedding in Bahir Dar (19/04/2015). Behind the green plastic ribbon are sitting Muslim women attendants while in front are Christian women and men guests. (Photo credit: Gulilat Menbere)

Here, it is very crucial to note the apparent paradoxical phenomenon of disgust and border. That is, the separate space for Muslim and Christian attendants in common food contexts such as at wedding feasts seem to help allay disgust. Conversely, disgust itself seems to police the border because that area which people avoid to occupy has an aura of disgust that appears to repel and force them to occupy a space with their likes. Interestingly, Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon identify four key elements of the disgust experience: a characteristic facial expression; an appropriate action (distancing of the self from an offensive object); a distinctive physiological manifestation (nausea); and a characteristic feeling state (revulsion) (Rozin and Fallon 1987 cited in Sara Ahmed 2004, 84). If most of these elements are subject to the observer's qualitative judgment, one particular element, i.e "distancing", however, can be observed in wedding attendants, as it is often evident from the spatial layout of seatings in most weddings. The border that seems to be protected by disgust helps individuals take appropriate action by distancing themselves from the

threshold of the disgusting food. This seems to be working because disgust not only ‘punishes’ one when she/he transgresses the “line” but most importantly protects the body from contamination (Fessler 2005, 280).

It is also impossible to conceive of disgust itself without the threat of defilement, pollution or contamination (Miller 1997, 17). Similarly, Sara Ahmed underscores, “[d]isgust pulls us always from the object, a pulling that feels almost involuntarily, as if our bodies were thinking for us, on behalf of us” (Ahmed 2014, 84) Apart from establishing a temporary physical border or boundary for the two guests (the like and the Other), attendants also appear to make their own empathetic gesture. For example, *endayshetih/endayshetish*, which literally means “May you not smell it” is one of the common expressions that individuals utter to their religious Other in an empathetic gesture, while the speaker her/himself may keep a good deal of distance from the food she/he avoids eating. This appears to go parallel with Sara Ahmed’s observation about disgust and the proximity of bodies and potentially disgusting objects/subjects:

Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. The contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity: it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of ‘being offensive’, but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive. The object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted (Ahmed 2004, 85).

One may argue by brushing off the importance of disgust in such a context on account of the apparently insignificant, if not completely absent, difference in texture, type (of the animal slaughtered), taste between the so-called ‘Christian meat’ and ‘Muslim meat’. However, for attendants who strictly observe the taboo, the meat that does not fulfill the right slaughtering etiquette of their own religion does not taste and smell ‘right’ making the nexus between disgust and taste very crucial. For Sara Ahmed the relation between food disgust and taste seems to be a given phenomenon: “Food is significant not only because disgust is a matter of taste as well as touch – as senses that require proximity to that which is sensed – but also because food is ‘taken into’ the body” (Ahmed 2004, 83). Therefore, although there appears to be no actual gustatory difference, except that of the attitude about, between the so-called ‘Christian meat’ and ‘Muslim meat’, the ingestion of

such meat induces disgust, for it involves breaking of what is rejected and regarded as taboo. In the case of individuals who are very susceptible or prone to revulsion, even the very smell of Other's food is enough to occasion disgust. In other words, "[t]he very fear of contamination that provokes the nausea of disgust reactions hence makes food the very 'stuff' of disgust" (Sara Ahmed 2004, 83) although all disgust does not necessarily provoke nausea and all nausea does not necessarily come from disgust (Miller 1997, 2). Ahmed's reflection on the importance of 'history' prior to our encounter with the object we purport to be disgusting throws light on why the taste and smell of a food that we avoid tastes and smells bad and thus generates disgust:

The way in which disgust is generated by 'contact' between objects is what makes the attribution of disgust dependent on a *certain history*, rather than being a necessary consequence of the nature of things. It is not that an object we might encounter is inherently disgusting; rather, an object becomes disgusting through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting *before the encounter* has taken place (Ahmed 2004, 87, my emphasis).

This seems to explain the different affective experience of individuals who observe the taboo and those who do not. The rationalization of some non-observant individuals' goes parallel with Ahmed's points. Being disgusted is "mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies" (83). For example, Ulrich Braukamper (1984) has observed that some Ethiopian Orthodox Christians perceive 'Muslim meat' to be "dirty". This is also closely related to the earlier point of Ahmed about disgusting objects being disgusting by virtue of association with other disgusting objects or attributes, in this case the association of the 'wrong meat' with "dirt". This will now take us to the importance of the relationship between the disgusted and the disgusting in implicating power relations between the two religious groups.

Disgust as a manifestation of power relationship

Some emotions, among which disgust and its close cousin contempt are the most prominent, have intensely political significance. They work to hierarchize our political order: in some settings they do the work of maintaining hierarchy; in other settings they constitute righteously presented claims for superiority; in yet other settings they are themselves elicited as an indication of one's proper placement in the social order.

William Ian Miller (1997, 9-10)

Various anthropologists in general and scholars of food studies in particular have observed the relationship between food and ideology (Belasco 2008; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Rouse and Hoskins 2004; Telfer 2002). Thomas Sankara (former president of Burkina Faso) said: "Do you not know where imperialism is to be found? ... Just look at your plate!" (quoted in Cusack 2000, 207 who borrowed from Barrot 1994). This clearly suggests that the food we have on our plates is effectively a sign that may have various interpretations, one being ideological. In this connection, Louis Marin observes, "all cookery involves a theological, ideological, political, and economic operation by the means of which a non-signified edible foodstuff is transformed into a sign/body that is eaten" (1989 cited in McGee, 2002). In addition, not only what we have on our plate but also that which is missing in our menu is also potentially laden with meaning and various implications because the decision by an individual or a society to avoid a certain food item is also made by factors related to questions of ideology and power relations, which has already been discussed at various points in this study. As a result, as much as the food we crave for, the one we reject and show our utter disgust toward can similarly have its own implications for power relationship between consumers and producers, givers and receivers of food, and between hosts and guests alike.

In Chapter 3, while discussing the possible historical cause and/or origin of the taboo under question, I have already conjectured that the food disgust manifested on the meat slaughtered by people of the other faith has implication for power relations. If we start with two individuals, one who disgusts and the other disgusted, we will see clearly how disgust is important to power relations. Sara Ahmed writes:

When thinking about how bodies become objects of disgust, we can see that disgust is crucial to power relations. Why is disgust so crucial to power? Does disgust work to maintain power relations through how it maintains bodily boundaries? The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchising of spaces as well as bodies (Ahmed 2004, 88).

Particularly in Ahmed's notion of "hierarchising of spaces" is what she refers to as "above-ness" which essentially calls to mind 'below-ness' position between the one who disgusts and the one who is disgusted: "Given the fact that the one who is disgusted is the one who feels disgust, then the position of 'above-ness' is maintained [...]"(89). Even more precisely, William Ian Miller notes that disgust plays a role in social hierarchy and political order (Miller 1997) by making assessments of inferiority and superiority (Ngai 2005, 339). This appears to mean that for the one who is disgusted, disgust affords power or "above-ness" while the one who disgusts or the disgust-inducing object/subject assumes the position of 'below-ness'. As Esposito would say, "power isn't measured except in relation to another's powerlessness [*impotenza*]" (Esposito 2010, 26, bracket in original). It is in this view that I already speculated on the apparent manifestation of the historical residue of power relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia built on the taboo of meat slaughtered by people of the other faith. Now, in this section I further attempt to see the "hierarchisation" in the context of food disgust particularly at wedding feasts between the host and the other guest and what it means for their relations.

First of all, "the affective density of the scene" (Highmore 2010, 134) at wedding feasts is marked by ambivalent feelings created by the religious identity of guests that forces them to observe their religious food taboo and by their will to socialize with their religious Other host. As a result, these kinds of guests seem to be principal receivers of disgust when they attend a wedding feast of their Other host. This is because such a wedding feast has the atmosphere of the host's cultural and religious aura. In the context of a wedding feast and the reciprocal accommodation by virtue of meat slaughtered according to a specific religious ritual, therefore, there are certain points of power relations that define the dynamics of the encounters of the two religious

groups. In other words, if we compare the host and the Other guest, the latter seems to be often the victim of disgust as he/she is the Other and the exception in a setting predominantly filled with the host's (food) 'culture'. Therefore, that is why the Other guest often occupies a separate physical space. This phenomenon seems to be best expressed in another recent study of Sara Ahmed (2010) in the following statement:

Those things we do not like we move away from. Awayness might help establish the edges of our horizon; in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go, the things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach.

Similarly, people who attend the wedding of a host in the other religion seem to achieve the "awayness" at least partially. That is, they do not totally move away, say, by declining the invitation to the wedding feast, but most of the time the Other guest, often a numerical minority, occupies space at the periphery⁶², *away* from the epicenter of the occasion, which is often unpleasant to him/her because of the food disgust it entails.

Based on the notion of 'hierarchisation' in disgust and power relations (Sara Ahmed 2004), can we assume that the Other guest tends to maintain the position of 'above-ness' through disgust? In other words, does disgust afford the Other guest to take a superior position, however unconscious it may be? The answer, according to the notion of disgust vis-à-vis power, could be in the affirmative. However, a problem related to the virtue of hospitality appears to emerge. That is, the very *virtue* of attending the wedding of one's religious Other seems to be at stake and thus results in a paradoxical outcome. But still, the reciprocal hospitality we have already discussed at fair length before seems to hold the key to solving this deadlock we have about the apparent paradox of

⁶² At some wedding feasts, however, Christian and Muslim guests attend the feast in the same tent, but even so there could still be some kind of demarcation (see fig. 10 above) by row of seats, or the Other guest could occupy a separate corner in the tent or outside the tent. However, this is true often during eating. Once eating is completed, one could observe the atmosphere getting relaxed in that the two groups could sing, dance and enjoy together. Consequently, the disgusting aura also appears to dissipate. If the crowd does not react, it is then common to hear the popular sarcastic and motivating song "Eyebelu eyeteteu zim/yeGan wendim," which literally means "To remain silent having drunk and eaten/makes one a brother of pot". That is, not taking part in singing or at least in clapping and in replying chorus after eanjoying the feast will subject one to be compared to food/drink container/tanker.

virtue, on the one hand, and the ‘above-ness’ or superiority by/of the Other guest, on the other. It must be noted that hospitality itself does not seem to take place without some paradoxical consequences. According to Jacques Derrida, the law of hospitality is paradoxical which appears to bring about a sort of role reversal between the host and the guest in an apparently ambiguous fashion:

So it is indeed the master, he one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage - and who really always has been [...]

And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*).

These substitutions make everyone into everyone else's hostage. Such are the laws of hospitality (Derrida 2000, 123-5).

The possible “above-ness” that Other guests appear to manifest through their disgust seems to be part of the paradox of the law of hospitality. However, it should be again remembered that when one assumes a superior position because of disgust, it is at the cost of certain affective vulnerability (Sara Ahmed 2004; see also Miller 1997, 9; 204). Perhaps contrary to the implicit sense of superiority involved, disgust is also an important affect that brings out the virtue of the Other guests. First, Other guests show virtue by holding on the temptation of their disgust not to offend their Other host. Second, even if disgust engenders superiority in such guests, the superiority is ‘achieved’ through an affective vulnerability, a sort of price or sacrifice for their superiority. Third and even more important is that there is a shift of role in this kind of “power relations” between the two religious groups in that one who is disgusted as Other guest today will become one who disgusts when taking the role of a host and take the position of ‘below-ness’. In short, because of the transactional function of food (Farb and Armelagos 1980; Firth 1973) between Orthodox Christians and Muslims at wedding feasts in Ethiopia, there is not only reciprocal hospitality but also an apparent pendulum of disgust that oscillates between the host and the Other guest giving the latter a seemingly unconscious ‘above-ness’ position over its host but at the cost of affective vulnerability. This will take us now to a further consideration of the two kinds

of guests in order to better understand the Christian-Muslim encounters in food contexts in Ethiopia.

The Other-guest vs. the Like-guest

One needs to look at the two kinds of guests, i.e. the Other guest who attends the wedding of their religious Other host and the ‘like’ guest who attends a wedding of a fellow member of their own religion. This distinction helps us look at the virtues such as the empathetic offering of food by the host to his/her religious Other guest. In this section, I will briefly look at empathy, as an important virtue in intercultural and/or interreligious meetings, supported by narratives obtained from informants. First of all, the notion of empathy is a very broad and complex realm that has been named⁶³ differently and studied by various scholars in sundry disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, cognitive science, neuroscience, primatology, etc (Batson 2009). Thus it will not be easy to pin it down into one sole definition. However, I use it here because of its notion of altruist motivation, which is a common aspect of empathy in most, if not all, of its definitions by different fields. More specifically, I use the ethical and affective dimensions of empathy to throw light on the reciprocal hospitality and the mutual trust built between Christians and Muslims so as to make sure that the food one offers meets the dietary/culinary demands of the Other guest.

As noted before, the most remarkable point about the custom as regards the taboo under discussion is that at formal socio-cultural events such as wedding, the host’s duty is not treating only his likes, i.e. guests from his own religion but also Other guests who belong to the other religion. While hospitality as a notion is founded in essence on altruist motivation, the hospitality for one’s religious Other, however, seems to be marked by a high degree of Other-oriented motivation. One Christian respondent did not seem to like the very question I posed: “What would you do if you unknowingly

⁶³ For example, while some philosophers call it “sympathy”, some psychologists name it differently as “emotional contagion” and others “affective sympathy” and yet still others “automatic emotional empathy” (see Batson 2009, 6).

happened to eat meat slaughtered by Muslims?” Having given a grimace of unease, she said she does not even want to think about breaking this taboo:

There is no *if* on this issue; I don't even want to think about it [eating 'Muslim meat']. I can't think about eating meat slaughtered other than in the name of Holy Trinity. It is a sin.⁶⁴

Asked if this attitude of hers might have any negative effect on her relationship with her Muslim neighbors and friends, she insists that it does not have any. For example, she said she takes an extreme care in separating food and culinary tools and utensils such as plates when she assumes a host role and invites her Muslim neighbors and friends. This shows the extreme care that the host takes as much as the guest does when it comes to making sure that there is no contamination of whatsoever. This extreme care is also reciprocal in that her Muslim friends also do the same not only in formal settings such as at weddings but also in casual encounters that involve food:

When I [spontaneously] pay my Muslim friends a visit, they tell me, 'this food is not fit for you; it has meat,' or 'it is contaminated'.⁶⁵

Similarly, a Muslim respondent also corroborates the empathetic accommodation that she receives from and gives to her Christian friends and “Christian families” (*Kristian beteseboch*) as she put it:

We are brothers and sisters. They know what food is fit for me. If she [referring to her friend and neighbor] comes to my place, I won't give her something that is contaminated with meat. If I go to her place, she too won't give me food that is contaminated with ['Christian'] meat. The mutual understanding and empathy is there.⁶⁶

It is this mutual trust that lubricates, so to say, the reciprocal understanding of each other's dietary/culinary demands accompanied by an empathetic offering and an exchange of hospitality that marks the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. To put it another way, the Golden Rule or Ethical

⁶⁴ “በዚህ ጉዳይ ላይ ቢሆንሽ ብሎ ነገር የለም። ከቸውንም ማሰብ አልፎልግም። በስሙ ሆላሴ ከታረደ ስጋ ውጪ ስለመብላት ማሰብ አልችልም። ሀጢያት ነው።”

⁶⁵ “ሙስሊም ወዳጆቹ ቤት ስሄድ ‘ይሄ አይሆንሽም ለንቺ ፣ ስጋ አለው’ ወይም ‘ተነካክቷል’ ይሉኛል።”

⁶⁶ እኛ ወንድምና እህት ነን። የማይሆንኝን ምግብ አነሱ ያውቁታል እኮ። እሷም እኔ ቤት ብትመጣ ስጋ የነካውን አልሰጣትም ፤ እኔም እሷ ቤት ስሄድ [የክርስቲያን] ስጋ የነካውን አትሰጠኝም። መተዋወቁና መተሳሰቡ አለ።

Reciprocity, which is enshrined in many philosophical thoughts and religions, seems to underlie the actions of the host in treating their guest in such a way they themselves want to be treated, or even more to the point, in not offering food that they do not wish to be offered. It is such altruism that guarantees the ‘purity’ of the food to the Other guest. What is more, this altruist motivation is not limited only to formal occasions such as wedding feasts as is reported by another Christian respondent who gave the following narrative about his stay for two months in a Muslim family:

I spent⁶⁷ two months in a Muslim household. They used to tell me that the food was not contaminated with meat. We ate other foods together. But we made sure that the utensils were clean enough. Of course, if you are a fundamentalist, you would not even enter their house... the lady used to assure me that she washed the dishes very well before she even cooked *nifro* [boiled cereals]. She used to say, ‘*ayzoh*’ [Don’t worry!]. But, on formal occasions they borrow utensils from Christian neighbors instead of washing theirs to cook for their Christian guests.⁶⁸

Elizabeth Telfer writes, “[d]uties to others in the sphere of food arise not only out of obligations to people at large and out of contracts, but also out of personal relationships. One such relationship is that between host and guest” (Telfer 2002, 64). From the above three respondents’ words quoted verbatim, it is fair to conclude that the *lante ayhonihi* (*This food is not fit for you*) is a sense of duty out of relationships. It is a duty underpinned by an empathetic understanding of the Other guest’s dietary/culinary demands. A good point that illuminates the virtues of the Other guest is to compare them with that of the like-guest. In a system where “like eats with like” (Finger 2007, 117) as at a wedding feast where the guests are only one’s religious fellow, there are of course the attributes of hospitality such as reciprocity and conviviality that are dispositions of social virtues. However, even greater virtue seems to be attained, as Philippa Foot notes, in a situation where it is not easy to be virtuous (Foot 2002, 10-12). For example, the Other guest experiences feelings

⁶⁷ The respondent used the Amharic verb “*tekelibyalehu*,” which means, “I was fed”.

⁶⁸ Amharic version attached verbatim in *Appendix 4*

of discomfort in attending the wedding feast of its religious Other. As one Christian respondent puts it:

Honestly, it is only because it is an obligation of social life that I attend a Muslim wedding; it makes me cringe.⁶⁹

Such occasions test the virtues of attendants: first of all, whether to accept the invitation; and second, after accepting, how to behave in the face of disgust or disgust-inducing atmosphere. It is an event that demands tolerance and composure against the temptations of disgust, to say the least (Chapter 6 further discusses and summarizes the virtues and functions of the system in general).

Dietary Trespassing: Defiled Bodies and Defiled Objects

“The mind depends on the body; shame would be nothing without this dependency [...] Which means that the mind is ashamed of the body in a very special manner; in fact, it is ashamed for the body. It is as if it were saying to the body: You make me ashamed, You ought to be ashamed ... ‘A bodily weakness which mane my animal self crawl away and hide until the shame passed’”

Gilles Deleuze (cited in Probyn 2010, 80).

It is important to look at the notion of the body and the mind closely in order to see the affect of the participants as a result of their experience with regard to dietary trespassing or eating *what is not theirs*. Needless to say, those who observe the food taboo are careful no to break it. However, due to various circumstances they might break it and commit dietary trespassing, which often results in shame, regret, and spiritual as well as social compunction. As Ben Highmore writes, “[...] the bio-cultural arena of disgust (especially disgust of ingested or nearly ingested foods) simultaneously invokes a form of sensual perception, an affective register of shame and disdain, as well as bodily recoil” (Highmore 2010, 120). One informant, for example, said she ate a “meat *samosa*” (locally known as *sambusa*, a fried pastry stuffed with lentils, meat, etc.) in a restaurant she did not know is a “Muslim one.” However, as soon as

⁶⁹ “እውነት ለመናገር የጣህበራዊ ህይወት ጉዳይ ሆኖብኝ እንጂ የ’ሰላም ሰርግ የምሄደው በጣም ነው የሚሸከከኝ።”

she had savored the food, she saw “something written in Arab script” on the wall and realized she was in a “Muslim restaurant.” Then, she said, she rushed out to the bathroom to throw up. This might not be surprising given the fact that vomiting is one of the most common physical reactions upon discovering the breaking of a food taboo while even actual deaths⁷⁰ have also been reported from almost all corners of the world after a person discovers that he/she has unknowingly eaten a tabooed food (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 124-5) or following, what Miller (1997, 2) calls, “the awareness of being defiled.” The physiological and psychosocial consequences and the remedies that individuals take upon breaking a food taboo, however, seem to be an important point to briefly look at.

The regret and shame as well as other visible and undesirable physiological experiences like vomiting that individuals go through after having broken a taboo is a well-documented phenomenon in anthropological and psychological studies. In general, “[f]ood is also the object of major anxiety, for what and how we eat may be the single most important cause of disease and death. We can’t live without food, but food also kills us,” writes Belasco (2008, 2). Food kills us not only when it is lethally poisoned. A person, observant of a food prohibition, when breaking the taboo, may suffer from psychosomatic consequences or even actual death (Farb and Armelagos 1980). Sigmund Freud also notes, “[a]n innocent wrong-doer, who may, for instance, have eaten a forbidden animal, falls into a deep depression, anticipates death and then dies in bitter earnest” (1950, 25). But here, it is more important to see the remedial actions that individuals take when they commit a dietary trespassing in their respective religions. Because of an apparent conflict between mind and body, adherents need a resolution to this conflict. So the Orthodox Christians, for example, cleanse their body with holy water and repent in order to cleanse their mind and attain a psychological relief, perhaps

⁷⁰ Farb and Armelagos (1980, 125) also note, “[a] devout man who has eaten a food prohibited in his society will feel a deepening sense of dread as he awaits the consequences, and this will be increased by his social isolation; such a man can expect no sympathy from kin and friends. The body’s reaction to fear is to prepare for an emergency by producing increased amounts of sugar and adrenalin and by causing certain blood vessels to dilate.”

in a sort of placebo effect. The *Metshafe Keder* (1988 E.C., 3) orders the priest to perform the following sacrament:

Fill water in jug and add oil onto it three times making the sign of Cross [...] by saying: In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. [...] May this water transubstantiate and be a canceller of the transgression of Your servant so-and-so (My translation).⁷¹

Brett Williams, writing of taboos, says: “They [taboos] are absolutely binding for one’s whole life, and they are often self-punishing because violating them brings not only shame but also guilt” (Williams 2004, 427). Gilles Deleuze, for one, expresses the apparent surveillance that the mind makes on one’s body as if the former is a watchdog of the latter: “The mind begins by coldly and curiously regarding what the body does, it is first of all a witness; then it is affected, it becomes an impassioned witness, that is, it experiences for itself affects that are not simply effects of the body, but veritable critical entities that hover over the body and judge it” (Deleuze quoted in Probyn 2010, 80). In short, this whole apparent dialectical relationship between mind and body is best articulated in John van den Hengel’s study of Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* in the following terms: “The first other of the self is found in the experience of one’s own body. The body is ‘my body’ or ‘ownmost body,’ that is, a non-objectifiable thing, which mediates between the self and the world. One’s own body is enigmatic: it participates both in the self and in the world” (Hengel 1994, 468). It seems to follow from this that those who break a food taboo appear to have been betrayed by their body so much so that they are punished by a bout of shame and regret which necessitate them taking appropriate remedies in apparent tripartite process of trespassing-punishment-redemption. The remedial sacraments are necessary measures that appear not only to bridge the gulf between the self and the body within the individual but also to bring back the individual and/or the objects from the liminal state (Turner (1969) 1991) they were under into a full and normal status and membership in the community they belong to.

⁷¹ ወትመልዕ ማየ በኮሬ ሐዲስ ወትወዲ ላዕሌሁ ዘይተ ቪተ ጊዜ በአምሳሌ ማዕተብ [...] እንዘ ትብል በስመ ኣብ ወወልድ ወመንፈስ ቅዱስ አሜን። [...]ይትወለጥ ላዕሌ ዝንቱ ማይ ወይኩን ሰጣጤ አበሳሁ ለገብርክ ዕገሌ። (*Metshafe Keder* 1988 E.C., 3)

Mary Douglas writes, “[i]t would seem that whenever a people are aware of encroachment and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk” (Douglas 2001, 79). When individuals, in rare case scenarios, trespass the dietary prohibitions, as it has already been pointed out, they take necessary measures to put things right. It should be noted that it is not only the food but also the culinary tools that undergo defilement, requiring some kind of remedy. According to Douglas, “Christian rules of holiness [...] disregard the material circumstances and judge according to the motives and disposition of the agent”(10). This seems to go parallel with the New Testament (such as in Matthew 15: 11; Romans 14: 1-22) account on food norms for Christians. However, for the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, “the material circumstances” are also very crucial to the sanctity of the food and of their body. That is, especially for the very pious ones, the cleaning with water of utensils that have been defiled is not sufficient to expunge the defilement. This is because the purity of the food item, especially meat, and the culinary tools is not about or does not depend solely on its hygienic cleanliness. As Maxime Rodinson aptly observes, “[f]ood can sometimes be affected by impurities which have nothing to do with the food itself [...] the same applies to food prepared by infidels [...] perhaps even to that eaten in their company [...] or, in practice, that prepared in utensils which they have used” (Rodinson 1965, 1069; see also Allen 2002, 12). Therefore, not only meat that is slaughtered or contaminated by Others is taboo and engenders disgust, but culinary tools, which are known to be contaminated by Others are also subject to cleaning and rituals of expunging.

In addition to utensils used by Others, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians also consider the use of utensils known to have been contaminated with even ‘Christian meat’ or any other animal product except honey next to taboo during fasting seasons. Knutsson and Selinus (1970, 957) note, “[g]reat care is taken to avoid the slightest contamination of food and cooking utensils. Even touching the forbidden food or inhaling its smell is considered as a break in the fasting rules and must be followed by request for absolution by the church”. However, the remark by these authors, who already presented a few other erroneous facts in their article, is rather misleading because only actual eating of animal products except honey (i.e. neither touching nor smelling) during fasting equals

to dietary trespassing that needs absolution, as can one learn from the sacraments in *Anqetse Nisseha* (*Gateway of Repentance*) or *Metshafe Keder*. Apart from this, the overall observance of fasting, as I observed elsewhere (Zellelew 2014), as “periodical food taboo events” (Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009, 6) and the EOTC followers’ strict adherence to the rules is perhaps best captured by the lyric: “እርም ነው ያለውን ምን ቢርበው እንኳ/የሙን እንዳያፈርስ ነው የሞተው ለካ።” which literally goes: “If he had regarded as taboo, no matter how hungry he was/he preferred dying to breaking his fast” (*Balageru no. 2*, my translation).

Muslim informants, on the other hand, said they do not have a sacrament of penance if they commit a dietary trespassing unknowingly or being forced, which Allah forgives (referring to *Surat An’nahi* 16: 115), but they said they are careful not to. However, according to informants, because of the belief that eating ‘Christian meat’ equates to apostasy, some Muslims reportedly eat ‘Muslim meat’ right away to expunge their body from defilement and to return to Islam, a practice that Muslim learned informants vehemently condemn as “un-Islamic”. On the other hand, even if the ritual and the purpose differ from that of the Christians, washing and water are also very important for Muslims to expunge utensils. As one Muslim informant recounts, “we do not wash it for its [hygienic] cleanliness; it is rather because it might be contaminated with [Christian] meat.”⁷² Of course, as stated in the Qur’an, the importance and purifying power of water is also evident among Muslims to such uses as making ablution, whose purpose is purification in its hygienic as well religious meaning, before prayer, showing readiness for prayer (*Surat Al-Maidah* 5: 6). Apart from this, there is apparently no known particular ritual or sacrament for expunging the defiled object or body for Muslims.

However, for most EOTC followers ‘washing’ with and immersion in a holy water blessed by a sacrament recited by a priest, like the one we have seen above, is one remedy for rectifying and undoing the effect of defilement of one’s body while, for some pious ones, having defiled objects sanctified by a priest is another. This can be further explained by “the revivifying role of water

⁷² “ለንጽህናው ብለን ሳይሆን የምናጥበው ፣ ስጋ ነኩቶ ሊሆን ስለሚችል በደንብ እናጥበዋለን።”

in religious symbolism” (Douglas 2001, 162). Similarly, Mircea Eliade expounds the power of water in the following text, which may be justifiably quoted at length:

In water everything is “dissolved”, every “form” is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water [...] Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth. . . . Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores — even if only for a moment — the integrity of the dawn of things (Eliade 1958 quoted in Douglas 2001, 162).

From this statement, it is clear that water has such “power” of erasing past trespassing of individuals and objects and of affording a “break up” from the liminal identity (Turner [1969] 1991) in order to repossess former qualities anew. Among the most pious Orthodox Christians, according to informants and my own lived experience, it is common to have an object blessed by a priest if the tool is known to have been used by Others, mainly Muslims. More to the point, in situations where a culinary tool is not known as to who it belongs (Christian or Muslim), such pious people do not use it until they are sure that it is clean enough and sacred for use. One informant elaborated that even lost and found objects, most often knives, are not used automatically without making sure that a priest blesses them, which reminds one once again of the notion of liminal identity by Victor Turner.

Reflective Accounts on the Taboo

As I indicated in the scope of the study, those who do not observe the taboo are not of primary concern in this study. However, among my informants who duly observe are those who gave an ambivalent account about the taboo. That is, while some believe in the principle of the taboo and thus strictly observe it, some others found it “absurd” but still observe it, for they apparently fail to defy their disgust. Below are some interesting narratives from a few Christian and Muslim informants. I have attempted to present the quotations verbatim through translation as direct as possible in order for readers to make their own interpretations in addition to and perhaps different from the one given by myself.

Ambivalence or rationalization?

Some informants, especially the educated ones, tend to rationalize the “absurdity” of the taboo by downplaying its theological foundations. However, some keep on observing this taboo despite their belief against it. There are people like one of my Christian informants, who identify themselves with those who may not believe in the taboo but have never broken it, which suggests the importance of making inquiry about “the discrepancy between statements and actions” (Eriksen 2004, 51). It is thus important to see the reasons or justifications that people give when they do not believe in the importance of observing the taboo while they actually observe it. One informant makes an apparently outrageous remark that the food proscription as regards ‘Christian/Muslim meat’ distinction is not, as Jacob Milgrom would say, a “divine fiat” (Milgrom 1991 in Yelle 2013, 142–143). The informant said:

It is man-made. It is the invention of politicians especially during the time of the *Atses* [the emperors] ... they deliberately invented to damage the relationship between different social groups like Muslims and Christians for the sake of easing their administration through division... but now I have come to understand that as we grow up, we tend to change that attitude.⁷³

Beyond the apparent inconsistency in belief and action, one can observe, among other things, the power of some taboos and the disgust attached to them in overriding the conscious decision of individuals who attempt to break them. As Belasco (2008, 8) precisely writes, “[d]eeply rooted in childhood, tradition, and group membership, the culinary dictates of identity are hard to change.” This kind of individual, who, on the one hand, does not believe in the principle of taboo, but could not succeed in breaking it and thus continues to observe it, on the other, shows that the strength of food taboos is beyond logical justification. Thus, it seems to leave individuals with ambivalent feelings: wanting to reject the taboo and failing to defy disgust. Another informant recounted the following anecdote of what he remembered from his experience in a national campaign called *Idget Behibret Zemecha* (Development through Cooperation Campaign) in 1976/77 in Ethiopia:

⁷³ Amharic version attached verbatim in *Appendix 4*

Once we went to picnic on a weekend. When we returned to our camp, we found that the ‘Christian food’ was finished. Only ‘Muslim food’ was left. We were very starved. Some refused to eat the ‘Muslim food’ despite their hunger. Some of us dared to eat it. After a while, many students were sick. Some were vomiting. I was fine⁷⁴.

Having not only overcome his disgust but also been critical of the taboo, this informant went on to justify the irrelevance of it by pointing to the lack of proper teaching by religious institutions:

It is lack of maturity in faith doctrines and of profound knowledge. And it is because people believe that something bad will happen to them if they eat this.⁷⁵

Of course, at the one end of the disgust spectrum are those (like this informant) who seem to resist the disgust, or who do not give in to the belief and fear that something bad would happen to them if they break the taboo. On the opposite end of the affective spectrum, however, are those, like the informant’s friends, who underwent what appears to be a psychosomatic reaction to breaking the food taboo. The latter’s experience is best described by the following statement:

Sometimes, for one reason or another, individuals in the society will transgress a prohibition. If no consequences followed, the taboo would soon cease to operate. But usually something does happen: an upset stomach, an allergic reaction, or indeed any ill fortune that might be blamed upon the flouting of the taboo. Once a consequence has been paired with the breaking of a specific taboo, the evolutionary mechanism of bait shyness insures that the event will never be forgotten (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 126).

It appears to follow from the opposite experiences noted above in my informant’s narratives that individuals from both sides take their own respective lessons as regards the taboo and their disgust. That is, while those who underwent psychosomatic upsets seem to prove their fear and disgust right, those to whom no “ill fortune” befell are likely to gain the courage to break the taboo in the future provided that they do not believe in the principle of the taboo anymore.

74 “ሸርሸር ሄደን ስንመለስ የክርስቲያን ምግብ አልቆል። እኔ በጣም ርቦኛል ፤ [በርግጥ] ሁላችንም ርቦናል። ግግሮቹ እንቢ. [የሰላም ሰጋ አንበሳም] አሉ። ሌሎቹ ግን ከበሉ በኋላ ትውኪያ በትውኪያ ሆኑ። እኔ [ግን] ደህና ነበርኩ።”

75 “የእምነት ያክትሪን ላይ ብስለት አለመኖር ፤ ጠለቅ ያለ እውቀት አለመኖር ነው። ይህን ብበባ ችግር ይደርስብኛል ብሎ ማመን ነው።”

Memory of disgust or disgust of memory?

In general terms, disgust involves history because it forces us to deal with what we have rejected (Sara Ahmed 2004). The nausea, the vomiting and other psychosomatic reactions that come after we realize that we have ingested food that we purport to be disgusting makes the notion of disgust depend on history. However, the very thought of a possible breaking of food taboo, say the thought of eating one's revered totem animal, in *the future* may also induce disgust, which appears to make disgust not simply a thing of past experience that is mediated by memory of bad taste. Having these points into account, we have a seemingly unique narrative that has come from one Christian informant, whose experience points to the nexus between memory and disgust.

When we were students at Bahir Dar University, on our bus journey at the end and beginning of every academic year between Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar, we used to often have lunch in one particular restaurant with no name. But after two years or so, someone said that the owner of the restaurant is a Muslim, which means the meat we used to eat there was a 'Muslim one'. I was utterly shocked. I was about to vomit just thinking about it in retrospect. Happily, it turned out that the boy was kidding. The owner is Christian! [*laughter*]⁷⁶

The experience of this informant may also bring up the question of how far in time a person has to be from the time of the actual ingestion of the disgusting food to be or not to be affected by disgust. This sounds to be a difficult question to answer but we have recourse to the notion of memory, which produces disgust (Miller 1997, 76). However, what does the informant remember here? Is it the smell and/or taste of the food? It does not seem so because, in the first place, to the neutral observer/eater, there is basically no difference in taste, texture or smell between the so-called 'Christian meat' or 'Muslim meat'. Secondly and most importantly, it is not the memory of the sensations (smell and taste, for example) but the *knowledge* of eating Others' food that induced disgust in this informant. He seems to have savored the food of that restaurant more than one time. In addition, as soon as this informant knew that his friend was kidding, he said he felt better. Therefore, the memory of sensations does

⁷⁶ Amharic version presented verbatim in *Appendix 4*

not seem to explain the disgust he experienced in retrospection with the dietary transgression that happened months or years ago. The informant seems to have undergone disgust of memory mediated by *knowledge* rather than memory of disgust mediated by *sensation*. In other words, he was disgusted by late realization of eating what he should not have eaten rather than by remembering a disgusting taste of food, which he had not experienced in the first place.

“The goat is not Christian or Muslim. It is just goat!”

I have pointed out earlier the relative difference in the affective experience as regards this taboo between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. That is, while most observant Christians show utter disgust even in the very thought of eating ‘Muslim meat’, the taboo-observant Muslims, however, appear to be lenient in most cases, even knowing that they have eaten ‘Christian meat’. The following narratives obtained from Muslim informants prove that this is not just a speculative statement. A Muslim informant who bought a goat, which turned out to be unknowingly slaughtered by a Christian man is another interesting narrative to share as follows:

One day I went to market to buy a goat and I had to hire *araj* [‘slaughterer’]. And he brought the goat home⁷⁷. [But] I saw his *mateb* with cross on his neck after he finished the slaughtering. I asked him, ‘Are you Christian?’ He answered ‘Yes’. I was shocked. Nothing had occurred to me about his religion whether he is Christian or Muslim at the beginning.

⁷⁷ Home slaughtering is still practiced in Ethiopia while public slaughterhouses also provide meat mainly for butcheries, hotels, canteens, etc. It is interesting to note that to the present day in various Ethiopian societies, slaughtering, which involves such skills as killing, skinning, eviscerating, butchering of the animal, is a man’s task. In some rural areas or traditional societies, it is still one of the fundamental and mandatory skills that a gentleman needs to be equipped with in order to qualify for marriage. As recent as while this research was underway (April 26, 2014), Fana Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) reported that in Amhara Region, Wollo Zone, Jamma Woreda, a father has refused to allow his daughter to marry a man who reportedly failed to show his slaughtering skills and repertoires of dissecting the animal body parts according to the local culture. (http://www.fanabc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8619%3A2014-04-25-15-33-41&catid=137%3A90120-&Itemid=341 Accessed: 26 April 2014). The role of gender identity in food preparation is all the more evident in *doro wat* (chicken stew) preparation, which determines womanhood in Ethiopia. Though killing the chicken is still man’s responsibility, the remaining tasks, however, are left to women who show their skills by dissecting the chicken in 12 mandatory parts (see Seleshe, Jo and Lee 2013, 10). Failure to possess the right skills and repertoires subjects a woman/wife to criticism and mockery so much so that it may affect the life of a married couple while it could also cost a single one her potential husband.

He had already slaughtered it. Once he had slaughtered it, I could do nothing. Since it happened unknowingly, we ate the meat. [...] After all, the goat is not Christian or Muslim. It is just goat... [*laughter*]. But, I didn't tell anyone about it. However, I was not happy, as I knew about it. I had a hard time convincing myself. But, my son, my husband and some other invited guests ate the lamb and nothing happened to them, and of course to me either.⁷⁸

This narrative yet again shows the different consequences, in terms of disgust, of actual eating of the tabooed meat and knowledge of the breaking of the taboo, which has already been discussed above. This lady kept the secret to herself by apparently disguising her disgust so that her family could enjoy the meat slaughtered by a 'wrong slaughterer'. Judging by what happened to our Christian informant above who felt disgust in retrospect, there remains a concealed story in this family who might be subject to a certain degree of disgust one day when it is uncovered. It is impossible to know what the reaction of individuals from this family would be like upon discovering their trespassing. However, one thing seems clear: The affective reaction to the tabooed meat is often different between Christians and Muslims in that the latter appear to be lenient at least in the expression of their disgust. In addition, the kind of rationalization that the lady employed after having broken the taboo because of a 'wrong slaughterer' is also suggestive of the leniency on the part of Muslims as regards the degree of affective reaction upon possible breaking of this taboo.

Apart from the analysis of the affective experiences of the taboo observant, looking at what individuals make of the taboo and the way they scrutinize their fellows and their religious Others as regards this taboo can be another important source of contemplation in order to understand the dynamics of Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia. My imam informant shares the following personal account of his own:

One day, when I was in Addet, on a very rainy one, a highlander priest and his three companions who were laymen had to drop in in my house to shelter from the rain. They were wet and shivering with cold. I asked my wife to offer them some *injera be chew* (*injera with pepper*). We didn't even add butter as we thought they might be fasting. The

⁷⁸ Amharic version annexed verbatim in *Appendix 4*

three lads were happy and didn't think twice. They were about to eat, but the so-called priest shouted at them instructing them to stop eating by saying "Gezichachihalehu!" (I forbid you!). Then they refrained from eating. When I asked, 'why not?' he replied, 'It is Muslim *injera*'. 'How about my house?' I asked, he replied "It is a Muslim [house]." ... 'So what problem did you find in the *injera*? [if you entered a Muslim house] Isn't the *teff* yours? We fetched the water from the same river [to make the *injera*]. It has no meat. ... Since I had Bible, I asked him to show me the verse that forbids eating Muslim *injera*. He failed.⁷⁹

First of all, this story supports the degree of strictness that some pious Christians have toward avoiding Muslim food in general. Secondly, apart from the empathetic notions of hospitality demonstrated by the Muslim host, his pragmatic questions essentially bring up discussions about the basic and fundamental differences between the categorization and distinction between the so-called 'Muslim food' and 'Christian food' in Ethiopia. For example, it helps us see that the difference is much less dietary than culinary. As regards dietary rules, in the strict sense of the term, the foods of Christians and of Muslims in Ethiopia more often than not are prepared from similar ingredients (to use the informant's words: same *injera*, "same water," "same *teff* flour"). Mostly only lowlander Muslims use camel products, which the Christians avoid. However, food is more than the composition of its ingredients. From its production to the moment we consume it as an edible meal, it goes through complex processes that invest identity. Besides to this, the fact that the priest's reported failure to answer his Muslim host's question by citing from the Bible does not make this food taboo or other popular customs practiced in the name of religion any less important. Without neglecting the scriptural justifications given by those who are capable of referring to scriptural verses, we can say that when people observe a taboo or practise a religious-oriented custom, it is not by checkmarking whether each and every of their practices are according to scriptural truths. Religion and religious practices are more complex than textual and dogmatic truths or simple adherence to scriptures. Consequently,

⁷⁹ Amharic version annexed verbatim in *Appendix 4*

the religious-oriented culinary and/or dietary identities are also more complex than simple rejection or consumption of food (Ulrich 2007, 229).

“I have washed them well with *Ajax* and *Omo*”

It would be illuminating to wrap up this chapter by having a brief look at one example from a recent television drama in order to see the representation of the taboo in popular culture as well as the place of this taboo in the collective consciousness of many Ethiopians. In a very popular weekly television soap opera titled *Sew le Sew* that ran on Ethiopian Television for over 36 months, while this study was underway, there is one particular episode (Episode 102) that depicts the empathetic dietary/culinary understanding between Christians and Muslims in their encounters with food in Ethiopia. I have presented its synopsis very briefly as follows:

In this episode, one of the main characters, Mahlet, brings home a take-away food to her bailed-out-of-jail Muslim guest. As she arrives home, she asks if the guest woman has eaten anything. The woman says she had eaten a very good *Shiro* [stew made of roasted and ground peas/beans/chickpeas, etc]. Unsatisfied by that, Mahlet takes out of her bag a take-away food and tells her guest that she has brought very good food. Then she asks the housekeeper to bring fork and plate. When the housekeeper brings the utensils, Mahlet demands to know if they are well washed. The housekeeper replies, “Yes, I have washed them very well with *Ajax* and *Omo* [names of detergents]”). Then Mahlet unpacks the food in front of the smiling and delighted guest who, having seen the food, got surprised presumably because the food is her favorite one, i.e. *mendi*, a popular food in the predominantly Islamic city of Harar and in Dire Dawa (Ethiopia). More interestingly, Mahlet tells the woman that she had brought the food from a very good Muslim Restaurant and jokingly adds, “if you don’t believe me I can show you the bill.” Laughing at Mahlet’s humorous remark, the Muslim guest asks if Mahlet joins her in the meal, but Mahlet, gesturing with her head toward the housekeeper, replies that the housekeeper is serving her another food – a ‘Christian’ one.

This is a vivid representation of the custom of food and Christian-Muslim identities in Ethiopia and well elucidates the various themes we have been discussing about contamination and the notion of expunging. The empathy and

mutual understanding of dietary/culinary differences, to begin with, that Mahlet shows by bringing a take-away from “a Muslim restaurant” is worthy of consideration. Moreover, the housekeeper’s concern and preoccupation with washing the utensils with the detergents is also another point that reinforces what we have been discussing above the apparent absence of the rites or sacrament of expunging among Muslims.

However, one may wonder what could happen if we had a different scenario with a role reversal in the characters in this episode. In other words, what reaction would there be if Mahlet plays the guest role in her Muslim friend’s house? Judging by experiences, trends as well as historical power relations expressed through food disgust, one would have seen a different outcome. That is, the cleaning of the utensils by the aforementioned detergents, more often than not, might not suffice for a strictly observant Christian guest to use an object that is known to have been contaminated by the so-called ‘Muslim meat’. It should, however, be noted that one can not generalize about all Orthodox Christians’ reactions of defilement because individuals have their own way of dealing with disgust depending on their exposure to and socialization with their religious Others’ food culture.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the Christian character is depicted as a good-doing host who welcomes an apparently innocent bailed-out Muslim woman who came from another city. What is striking is that the relationship dynamics between the two characters goes parallel with the historical narrative of the reception of the first Muslims from Arabia by a kind Christian king of Abyssinia. Overall, the representation in this episode shows the place of food in the construction of religious identity in general and that of religious food taboo in particular in the collective consciousness of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The notion of food and religious identity in the country, however, is even more evident and reflected in oral traditions and popular sayings, which the next chapter attempts to address.

5

Food and Interreligious Discourse in Religious Texts and Oral Traditions

Historical memory and experience are not the only factors that shape people's ideas about Christian–Muslim relations. It is equally important to look at everyday human interaction and at discursive practices, which define people's positions and acts.

Mario Apostolov (2004, 120-121)

“Life, after all, is at heart an act of eating and so when we make a dish taboo, there is usually an interesting story to tell,” writes Stewart Lee Allen (2002, xvi). Around the taboo of meat slaughtered by the so-called ‘Christian/Muslim knife’, there are stories that have various implications for interreligious encounters. This chapter attempts to analyze food discourse and polemics embedded in food metaphors, proverbs, sayings, etc and the representation of food and interreligious relations in general and of Christian-Muslim encounters in particular in Ethiopia by unraveling mainly oral literatures and religious texts.

The Politics of Appellations

Some linguistic usages and metaphoric expressions we take for granted in our day-to-day utterances may have implications for interpersonal and intergroup relationships. They may show political and historical relationships between peoples. What Richard Rorty writes of “cultural politics” in his *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* suggests that the seemingly simple decision to use or not to use some words that label others in certain ways makes difference in our socio-political engagement with others:

The term ‘cultural politics’ covers, among other things, arguments about what words to use. When we say that Frenchmen should stop referring to Germans as “Boches,” or

that white people should stop referring to black people as “niggers,” we are practicing cultural politics. For our socio-political goals – increasing the degree of tolerance that certain groups of people have for one another – will be promoted by abandoning these linguistic practices (Rorty 2007, 3).

Rorty’s suggestion of “abandoning” politically or ethically inappropriate linguistic usages as a pragmatic exercise is one thing while deconstructing and demythologizing them could help understand the socio-political dynamics of groups embedded in such practices. In light of this, we can look at some linguistic usages related to food and religious identity, and their implication for interreligious encounters and relationships in Ethiopia.

To begin with, it is interesting to see that sometimes one group accepts the name another group has labeled it simply to show that the latter does not belong to the former. A typical case can be the name “Hindu” that Muslims in India gave those native Indians who were unconverted to Islam. And later the Indians themselves started “to designate their religious affiliation as Hinduism” (Weber 1958, 4). Or the name “Pente” that Protestants have been called by Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia is today almost an accepted name by the Protestants themselves (Haustein and Østebo 2011). The same can be said of early Christians and of other religions. In relation to food and religious identity in Ethiopia, ‘appellation’ plays its own role in establishing as well as sustaining certain interreligious relationships. In this regard, food and food names have their own role in interreligious discourse. Diane McGee aptly describes this phenomenon: “Used by outsiders to define a group, food is a key part of a group’s self definition” (2002, 15). This helps us to see interreligious discourse of food, which is used stereotypically as a template for evaluating other people and other cultures (Danesi 2004). In the case of Ethiopia, one group not only names a diet, culinary tool, etc. according to the Otherness of another group: *YeIslam Billa*, *YeIslam Siga*, *YeIslam Siga-Bet*; *YeKristian Billa*, *YeKirstian Siga*, *YeKristian Siga-Bet* (a Muslim knife, Muslim meat, a Muslim butchery; a Christian knife, Christian Meat; a Christian butchery, respectively), but it also goes as far as naming the Other after the latter’s diet. In addition, the food taboo attached to religion and acknowledged by religious groups helps in the cohesion of that group and in asserting one’s identity in relation to others and in creating a feeling of belongingness (Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009, 1). In

other words, the meal on our plate can be a sign that signifies our belongingness to a group making food a socio-cultural symbol or sign (Rosenblum 2010, 2).

An informant in Bahir Dar, for example, said that some Christians disdainfully label Muslims as *litalit/mukamuk bellita*⁸⁰ (roughly means “bland/insipid food eaters” in contrast to the presumably self-proclaimed “fine and spicy food eater” Christians. Ulrich Braukamper writes: “[i]t is common all over Ethiopia that Orthodox Christians also find it disgusting to eat meat slaughtered by members of another religion. [...] they said for instance: ‘Muslim meat is *koshasha* [‘dirty’] and can not be eaten by us’” (1982, 430, last bracket in original). Similarly, a relatively recent study in Jimma, Ethiopia, also reports Orthodox Christians’ claim about the perceived inferiority of Muslim cooking (Mains 2004, 346). Such a seemingly aesthetic reaction to food (Monroe 2007; Krautkramer 2007: 255; Telfer 2002, 41-60; Rodinson, 1965, 1071-2) points to the power relations I have already discussed in previous chapters. Basically, the aesthetic reaction of people as to liking the taste and smell of a certain food may depend, among other factors, on whether the food is “produced by politically respectable regimes” (Telfer 2002, 44) precisely because at macro-sociological level, food serves as an instrument of power (Grassi 2013, 194). In view of these points, I discuss below the various appellations and interreligious food discourses encapsulated in religious texts, popular sayings and legends in the country in general in and in the research area in particular.

Food Fellowship with Others in Religious Texts

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has produced (in original composition as well as through translation) many deuterocanonical and/or extracanonical texts that are used to the present day for the purpose of inculcating its the faith and customs in its followers. Some of these texts were produced as “ammunition in

⁸⁰ Another informant used an alternative derogatory epithet “muk lash” which literally means “soup leaker”: “Since Muslims like soup and porridge, they are called ‘soup leakers’. Consequently, soup-like foods are regarded as of Muslims.” (“መስሊሞች አኖሚትና ገንፎ የሚወዱ በመሆናቸው መቅ ለሽ ተብለው ይጠራሉ ፡፡ በዚህ የተነሳ መቅ መሰል ምግቦች የሚሰሉሞች ተደረገው [ይታሰባሉ] ።”

the fight against” (Ullendorff 1968, 102) accusations from other religions including Roman Catholicism and as responses to doctrinal questions in interfaith relations and polemics with religions such as Islam (see Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C., 782-3; Trimmingham 1952). From *Metshafe Keder*, a book translated from Arabic into Ethiopic (Ge’ez) in the 16th century following the aftermath of the war between Christian highlanders and Muslim lowlanders, and *Anketse Amin (Gateway of Faith)*, a “manual of anti-Muslim polemics” (Trimingham 1952) composed in the same period, to *Anketse Nisseha (Gateway of Repentance)*, *Fetha Negest (Law of Kings)*, *Te’amire Maryam (Miracles of Mary)* the latter two of which are translations from Arabic into Ethiopic in the 15th century, are all very valuable texts for interreligious encounters in Ethiopia. In what follows, I will attempt to analyze excerpts from some of these texts in relation to their importance in elucidating the various themes I have discussed above.

Anketse Nisseha (Gateway of Repentance)

This is a confessional sacrament whose title is composed of two Ge’ez words *Anketse (Gate)* and *Nesseha (Repentance)*. The book in its introductory part states how the sacrament is performed:

Let the repentant read this book, contemplate his sins and repent/cry. If he/[she] is illiterate, let the priest read for him/[her] ... When he/[she] says *fitagn* [literally ‘untie me’], let the priest say, ‘May God untie you,’ and the repentant would reply, ‘Amen’ (*Anketse Nisseha* 1974 E.C).

The book then goes on with a list of sins and their corresponding references to verse numbers and chapters from the Old Testament and the New. Among them are those concerned with dietary trespassing such as breaking fast, eating meat slaughtered by a ‘pagan’, eating meat of animal killed by a beast, as well as drinking excessively, etc. Eating as transgression is a common notion in both classical antiquity and in at least Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Ancient Egyptians, for example, used to make a “negative confession” on Judgment Day to show that they did not sin against their religious laws that included food and farming:

I have not mistreated cattle.
I have not cut down on the food or income in the temples.
I have not taken the loaves of the blessed dead.

I have not taken milk from the mouths of children.
I have not built a dam against running water (Spodek 1998 in Civitello 2008, 14).

Food or eating seems to be a foundational myth in Jewish, Christianity as well as in Islam (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 112; Garnsey 1999, 95). Evidently, according to the Bible, the fate of Adam and Eve was determined by *eating* the forbidden fruit. If the fate of humans was kick-started with the error of having eaten the forbidden food in the Garden of Eden, the end of this world, on Judgment Day, also involves questions related to food, i.e. feeding: “For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink” (Mathew 25: 42). This verse suggests that the question of food yet again appears to haunt humans even in their afterlife, making food a decisive factor in the divine-human relationship from the first Fall in the Garden of Eden to the end of the world on Doomsday. In other words, the implication of religious food prohibitions is thus not limited to the mundane interpersonal relationship among humans but also between humans and God. One of the sacraments of penance in the EOTC also has confession that involves the consumption of inappropriate food, particularly meat that is slaughtered by Others:

For I have eaten what was slaughtered by *Aremene*⁸¹ [pagan], I wronged; forgive me (*Anketse Nesseha* 1974 E.C., 7, my translation)⁸².

It should be noted that this sacrament is still used in the EOTC for the purpose of repentance. Although the Church shows its apparently lenient position over food for Christians as to putting no further burden other than which the Apostles ordered (*The Law of the Kings* 1962), other sacramental texts such as this one seem to make food a bone of contention against other neighboring religions. Although such sacraments themselves allude to and have scriptural basis, the possible source of motivation for their very composition, however, appear to have ideological implication in that the Church had to use such

⁸¹ This word has a lot of meanings. It refers to pagans, idol worshipers, uncivilized and savage people as well as non-Christians including Muslims. As Ayele (1975, 59) notes, “in the eyes of traditional Christians, all non-Coptic Christians, pagans, and Muslims were despised and labeled ‘Aremene,’ which simply means cruel and un-Christian” (see also Muhammad Ali Idris 2004 E.C, 64-5).

⁸² “በእረመኔ እጅ የታረደ በበላሁ ገበርኩ ፍታኝ።” (*Anketse Nisseha* 1974, 7)

protective apparatus to bulwark against the influence and infiltration of neighboring religions, which looks evident in another important religious text below.

Te'amre Maryam (Miracles of Mary)

Translated in the fifteenth century during the reign of Zer'a Yakob (1434-1468) from Arabic⁸³ to Ethiopic, *Te'amre Maryam* is one of the most important texts in the Church to the present day. It contains narratives worthy of consideration for the study of interreligious encounters in general and of Christian-Muslim relations in particular in Ethiopia, if not beyond. In this book, there are considerable number of miracles showing the struggle between not only Islam and Christianity (see Muhammad Ali Idris 2004 E.C) but also between Judaism and Christianity, and the triumph of Christians and Christianity "through the help and miraculous intercession of St. Mary." Here, however, a look at an excerpt of a miracle in relation only to the discussion of food and interreligious encounters in general demonstrates the problematic relationship of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians' food-fellowship with followers of other religions:

May Her prayer and grace be truly forever upon us, this is the miracle that Our Blessed Lady did: There was a Jewish man who had a herd of cows that were looked after by his son. One day the son brought his bread having wanted to join Christian shepherds who were gathered to eat their lunch. [But] They said unto him, "You are the son of a Jew whereas we are Christian, so until you become Christian, you will not eat with us." [The Jewish boy said:] Convert me to Christianity so I can eat with you. One of the shepherds rose and took water from their drinks and sprinkled it on the Jew's head. Saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and may your name be Gerinan." Then he joined them and ate with them. [...]⁸⁴
(*Te'amre Mariam* 1988 E.C, 246-249, *Miracle 67: 1-8, About a Jewish baptized by children*, my translation)

⁸³ Many of the miracles in this book are believed to have been popular in earlier centuries in Europe such as in France and in Spain before they were translated from Latin to Arabic and reached Ethiopia via Coptic monks from Egypt (Berzock 2002; Yohannes 1988).

⁸⁴ Amharic version in *Appendix 5*

To the devout Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, this book is “a tribute to the wondrous virtues and life of the Holy Virgin ... an exaltation of the tender-heartedness, the purity, and the holiness of the blessed Virgin ...” (Yohannes 1988, 103). However, the book, as some of the miracles it contains imply, can also be seen as a subtle instrument to inculcate the distinct identities of Christianity in sharp contrast to other religions, on the one hand, and to reinforce its border against other religions, which might infiltrate through day-to-day encounters such as meal fellowship, on the other. Today, this miracle may be read mainly in terms of its value as “an exaltation of [...] the Virgin” (Yohannes 1988, 103). However, in the past, as is evident from the above excerpt, the EOTC had maintained the restriction of food fellowship with not only Muslims but also Jews (*Felashas*) in spite of the presence of significant Judaic elements in the Church’s food laws. In addition, at some historical moments, Jews and Muslims had been treated similarly by being socially excluded such as in their separate settlement⁸⁵ from Christians (see Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C.). The food fellowship discourse that is enveloped in the above miracle seems, therefore, to support the hypothesis I suggested above as regards the Church’s strategy of maintaining and fortifying its border against other religions by setting restrictive food norms.

Food and Religious Narratives in Legends and Popular Sayings

Food is one of the ubiquitous subjects in oral legends. Popular accounts in Ethiopia on the ancestral convergence and divergence between Christians and Muslims use narratives that range from the biblical figures like Isaac and Ishmael (Abraham’s sons) to Jacob and Esau (Isaac’s sons) to that of legendary biographical accounts of some local saints. In this section we shall briefly look at two popular legends that contain important accounts of food and interreligious encounters between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. In addition to being corpora for diverse interpretations of the historical Christian-Muslim relations at micro-level, such legends can also have implication in

⁸⁵ Following religious controversy during the reigns of his predecessors, Yohannes Tsadeku, one of the 17th century kings, decreed that Muslims and *Felashas* (Ethiopian Jews) should “establish their own village separate from Christians” (Tekletsadik Mekuria 1966 E.C, 541, my translation)

showing the historical-political relationship or the power balance between the two religions at macro-level.

The legend of “Christian and Muslim meat in one pan”

The following is a popular legend, which may have different versions, but I retell it here as I heard it from informants by focusing on important points relevant to this study.

Once upon a time Muslim and Christian travelers/merchants/soldiers ran out of food and had thus to hunt to eat. Both groups got meat but they had only one pan. They decided to cook ‘the Christian and the Muslim meat’ at the same time in the same pan. But they had to know which meat is ‘Christian’ and which one ‘Muslim’. So they came up with a solution: tying cords/thread around the Christian meat. Then they cooked ‘the two meats’ and enjoyed their respective meals ‘together’ (my translation)⁸⁶.

Perhaps, as ridiculous and exaggerated as it may sound even from the standpoint of the taboo observant individual, this oral legend overall embodies the narrative of meat taboo and the *symbolic* meaning it signifies in religious identity. However, it would be crucial to see when or in which contexts such kinds of legends are used, and what kind of purpose they serve. Like any exemplary story or legend, it seems to have its own special moments and contexts either to transmit a positive or a negative implication of the taboo. In certain contexts, one may use this legend as to show how religiously/scripturally baseless and secularly stupid the taboo is, whereas in another context, the same legend can be used to elaborate and exemplify the symbolic meaning of ‘commensality’ and *convivium* that such a legend has for the two religious groups. But, in this legend, it is interesting to look at the “pan”, as a culinary object, playing its double role as a “pan” in its literal sense as well as an object that “unites” its contents – the Christian and the Muslim meat together, by marking the “identity” of its content. It can be an allegory of the Ethiopian society and culture that embraces different groups with their identities and norms.

⁸⁶ Amharic version in *Appendix 5*

It must be noted, among other points, that the notion of sharing is at the heart of this legend. Whether they really mean it from their heart or not, it is *de rigueur* for most Ethiopians, while they eat, to say *enibla* (literally means ‘let’s eat’) to encourage the other person to join in. This is also evident in the common quip *Bichawun yebela bichawun yimotal* (One who eats alone dies alone), making sharing and commensality essential social norms. In other words, commensality seems to be an antithesis of selfishness or extreme individualism because it has a “magical property” of transforming the “self-seeking individuals into collaborative group” (Belasco 2008, 19). Therefore, food sharing is a common social practice between Christians and Muslims even in a situation, as in the legend, where actually partaking food from the same plate appears to be impossible. In fact, given the disgust attributed to the taboo, the above legend might sound not only like an exaggeration but also far from describing the actual state of affairs when it comes to the salience of meat in the Christian-Muslim encounters in the country. However, there are some practical cases reported (see Braukamper 1982). It should be noted that the ‘commensality’ in this legend is driven by the scarcity of utensils, but the individuals did at least a *symbolic* gesture of observing the taboo by marking their respective meat in the pan. An informant who dares to defy her disgust by dining ‘together’ with her Muslim guests at her daughter’s wedding also reflects similar attitude. She recalled:

We did not attend in different tent or *dass*. Both the Muslim and the Christian guests ate together in one *dass*. We looked like children of the same father and the same mother⁸⁷.

To put what she meant by eating “together” in perspective, it should be said that she does not mean eating the same food. She is rather interested in describing the spatial aspect of the wedding: who sits where while eating. For this woman, daring to shatter the border is tantamount to the sublimation of religious difference in food context even if each group was served its own proper food prepared according to its own religious etiquette. As we discussed in previous sections about commensality between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, the

⁸⁷ “እኛ በተለያዩ ዳስ ወይም ድንኳን አልነበረም የታደምነው። የሰላሙም የክርስቲያኑም እንግዳ ባንድ ላይ ነው የተመገበው ባንድ ዳስ ውስጥ። ያንድ እናትና ያንድ አባት ልጆች ነበር የምንመስለው።”

notion of space vis-à-vis meat is important. The likes of the above woman, however, try to break the physical boundary to sit physically close to the other. One common point between the individuals in the legend and the account from this woman is that both appear to equate defying their disgust to a sublimation of religious border not by breaking the taboo but the border that the taboo often engenders. Finally, apart from the details of the commensality performance in the story, based on the right time and context, the totality of the above legend is an instrumental example used by some people to show the extent of commensality and the culture of understanding differences between the two religious groups even at times of inconvenience as the individuals are depicted in the legend. Moreover, it also shows the will to keep the balance between religious commitment (at least at symbolic level) and social relations. In short, if the social fabric of Christian and Muslim societies in Ethiopia necessitates creative ways of dealing with food taboos that would otherwise make commensality difficult, the solution that the individuals in the above legend come up with – no matter how naïve it may appear – can at least be interpreted as a tentative remedy in the face of difficult circumstances and seemingly irreconcilable differences.

The legend of “the ox that was slaughtered twice”

The following legend that is thought to have happened during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV needs to be recounted here, for it reveals the political and historical weight that the notions of commensality and difference carry in Christians-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. First of all, the Emperor is known to have taken harsh measures in a seemingly draconian style of nation building that included forced conversion of Muslims into Christianity in his 1878 edict of Boru Meda (see Ahmed 2006b). As a characteristic of many other oral legends, the legend of “the ox that was slaughtered twice” might have many variants, but the one I heard from informants is briefly presented below:

In a bid to unite Christians and Muslims in one *lemat/ma'id*, Emperor Yohannes was forcing both sides to eat meat from the same animal. At this time in Wollo, one day, people locked horns over who would slaughter the ox, which led to bitter debate that forced the locals to find a solution by bringing authorities from both sides who would decide as to who would slaughter the ox. The two authorities - the priest from the

Christian side and the sheikh from that of the Muslim - appeared before the public to solve the deadlock. A curious thing, however, happened when the priest graciously allowed the sheikh to slaughter the ox. The sheikh did slaughter the ox. But the act of the priest disappointed, if not angered, the Christian public who complained, “Is he going to have us eat meat slaughtered by a Muslim?” The priest who saw the disgruntled Christian public slaughtered the victim again out of which blood miraculously gushed out anew. [...] Then, both the Christians and the Muslims happily savored the meat exchanging *gursha* (mouthful) from this same beef (my translation)⁸⁸.

To begin with, for some, this legend is regarded not only as an epitome of the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims in Wollo but also an important lesson for interreligious co-existence in Ethiopia. In this spirit, some people say, “We shared the same meat from one ox,” showing the degree of commensality and conviviality especially in this area despite the taboo. But for others, it is wrong and theologically unacceptable. A Muslim learned informant (from the so-called ‘old Muslims’⁸⁹ camp), for example, amidst our conversation about slaughtering, brought up this legend and denounced it as an “un-Islamic practice”:

There is this talk of an animal slaughtered by a priest and a *qalicha*, which Islam does not allow. They ate after the priest slaughtered it in the name of the Father and the *qalicha* saying ‘*Bismilahi*’. But this does not go with Islam⁹⁰.

However, the legend can also be interpreted as that which confirms the perceived superiority of Christianity as a true religion vis-à-vis Islam. The apparent bullishness of the priest on letting the sheikh slaughter the ox and then to slaughter it himself again, which is followed by the miraculous gushing out of blood anew from the victim, suggests a divine intervention in favor of Christianity. In other words, the slaughtering by the priest seems to cancel the ‘defilement’ of the animal through the earlier slaughtering by the sheikh, and above all, to evoke a divine intervention that would affirm the truthfulness of

⁸⁸ Amharic version in *Appendix 5*.

⁸⁹ I use here what some Muslim informants themselves use. Such distinction comes to discussion because of the strict observance of the taboo by the so-called ‘old Muslims’ and the rejection of the taboo by the ‘new’ ones (See Chapter 6).

⁹⁰ “ይህ ቁጥር ቃልቻው ባንድነት ሆነው እንሰሳውን አርደው በሉ ፤ ቁሱ ‘በስማብ’ ብሎ ቃልቻውም ‘በስሚላሂ’ ብሎ የሚባለው ነገር ከአሰላም ጋር አይደሉም።”

the faith of the former. The order in the performance of the slaughtering by the two individuals, i.e. the sheikh's slaughtering being followed by the priest, is also another important point to note. For example, given the historical power relationship between the two religious groups as reflected even to the present day over the supposed disgust that the taboo entails, if the slaughtering had happened in a reverse order, it would have been less likely for the Christian congregation to share the meat that was known to have been 'defiled' by a person of the other faith (as is confirmed by their disappointment when the priest allowed the sheikh to slaughter). In short, even if such kind of legends show seemingly outrageous commensality— forced or otherwise— in sharing meat of one animal, a closer look at the details of the performances reveals that an attempt to officially break the taboo seems to have happened in a remarkably symmetrical pattern with the official power balance between the two religious groups in the country and with the taboo's role in the equation. It should be noted that while for some, from an orthodox perspective, such legends are unscriptural and thus have no theological justification, for others they are viewed as testimonies of coexistence and unity between the two religions in the country in a win-win situation without giving up one's religious belief/custom. In a nutshell, such seemingly banal legend demonstrates the power of food in general and that of this taboo not only in the micro-level encounters but also in the macro-level historical political relationships between Christians and Muslims in the country. Ulrich Braukamper has given an account on some taboo observant individuals' compromising solution, which effectively shows that the above two legends hold some truth:

A compromise is sometimes made when workers or members of mutual assistance associations made up of both Christians and Muslims are given an animal to slaughter. When killing it, a representative of both groups says the words prescribed by his respective faith, and then the meat can be consumed by everybody. Pious and dogmatic people, however, will not accept such a solution (Braukamper 1984, 430).

Although "pious and dogmatic" people may not accept this kind of solution, the observance of this taboo, however, is more than being pious or dogmatic. Individuals who no more believe in the taboo also find it hard to break it. As I have pointed out throughout and as some informants' narratives show (Chapter 4), the influence of "pedagogy of disgust" (Highmore 2010, 130) that one

acquires since childhood seems to override one's rationalization of any kind (religious or secular) to break the taboo. However, Braukamper's report shows that the two legends reflect actual state of affairs as regards some individuals' attempt to find "a solution" by keeping the balance between religious commitment and food fellowship with people of the other faith.

In addition to legends, day-to-day linguistic usages do also have potentials for understanding interreligious relationships. As stated in fair depth in Chapter 3, the knife, as a synecdoche of slaughtering and beyond its function of cutting, and meat, beyond its goodness in nourishing, serve as "articles of faith" in all sense of the term in interreligious encounters in Ethiopia. The following discussions on "eating with two knives" and "only the knife separates us" discourses show the place of food and culinary tools in Christian-Muslim relations. The taboo is a deep and unshakable belief held by the observant individual so much so that food and culinary tools become "articles of faith" by marking a dividing line between the two religious groups in various socio-cultural spheres.

"Eating with two knives"

Apart from practice, particularly the place of the knife in food and religious identity discourse in the country is well documented in proverbial statements. Perhaps no other phrase better captures the concept of the knife and the religious identity it marks than the Amharic idiomatic expression: "*Egele beHulet Bilawa Yibelal*" ("So-and-so eats with two knives"), which idiomatically refers to someone who is not trustworthy. While defining the phrase ሃይማኖት ቢስ *Haimanote bis*, which roughly means "irreligious," Desta Teklewold, in his Amharic dictionary, gives the following meanings: መናፍቅ *menafik* heretic; ሃይማኖት መጥፎ *haimanote metfo* one who has a bad religion, and more important to us here, በጄ በላዋ የሚበለ *BeHulet Bilawa Yemibela* one who eats with two knives (Desta Teklewold 1962 E.C.). Whereas those who eat only meat slaughtered by their "own knife" (i.e., according to their religious slaughtering ritual/etiquette) show fidelity to their faith, those who are indifferent to the distinct meat or eat both 'Christian and Muslim meat' are not only "infidel" to their religion in food contexts but also "infidel" and

untrustworthy in other aspects of social life. In short, “eating with two knives” is equated with having no religion, which amounts to being untrustworthy.

In addition, in relation to slaughtering and the resultant ‘Christian/Muslim meat’, one imam informant who denounces the taboo as scripturally baseless has the following to say about how the taboo has achieved a proverbial status in the collective consciousness of the Christian and the Muslim societies in Ethiopia:

It [the taboo] has become statement of vow: If I do this, consider me as I have eaten ‘Muslim meat’; if I do that, consider me as I have eaten ‘Christian meat’. It has no theological basis. But the so-called old Muslims — when we ask them why they don’t eat what is slaughtered by Christians — say, ‘It is the custom that our forefathers taught us.’ However, there is no better father than our Prophet. If we do not eat what he allowed us to eat, it means he is wrong. [...] In the past, I myself had to vomit having seen someone eating ‘Christian meat’ in Bure [a district in Gojjam Zone].⁹¹

This study, as noted from the outset, is not interested in verifying the dogmatic veracity of this taboo in Islam or in Christianity. However, among the points that the informant mentioned, the point that the taboo’s status in being a “statement of vow” as an article of faith is worth noting. That is, it shows the place of the taboo in the mind of those who tenaciously observe it, or how unbreakable this taboo is for such individuals. The importance of the taboo as “unambiguous dividing line” (Abbink 2007, 72) between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia seems to be even more significant than any other major and fundamental dividing lines between the two religions, the implication of which is further discussed below.

“Bila bicha new yemileyen” (“Only the knife separates us”)

It is worth looking at a statement that some people use to emphasize the commonalities of the two religions: “only the knife separates us; aside from the knife [slaughtering] that separates us, we [Christians and Muslims] are one.” Through this statement, we can, on the one hand, see the importance of food

⁹¹ “መማማያ ሆኗል። ይህን ካረኩኝ የሰላም ስጋ እንደበለሁ ቁጠረው ፤ ይህንን ባረግ የክርስቲያን ስጋ እንደበለሁ ቁጠረው። ግን የሀይማኖት መሰረት የለውም [...] ነባር መሰሉም ተብዬዎቹን “ለምንድንነው የማትበሉት ክርስቲያን ያረደውን?” ሰንላቸው “አባቶቻችን ያስተማሩን ስርዓት ነው” ይሉናል። ግን ደዎ ከነቢያችን በላይ አባት የለም። እሳቸው የፈቀዱትን እኛ እምቢ ካልን እሳቸው ተሳስተዋል ማለት ነው። [...] ድሮ ግን እኔ ራሴ አስታውኩኝ ያቃል እኮ የክርስቲያን ስጋ ሲበሉ አይቼ ቡሬ ላይ።”

and culinary tools, i.e., knife, in the religious identity consciousness of people, and the apparently almost-insignificant role of the theological differences between the two religions, on the other. In other words, the other differences between Christianity and Islam do not seem to have as much weight as dietary/culinary differences for their encounters. In the eye of certain religious elites, such a saying might be reproachable and viewed as lack of knowledge of one's own as well as the other religion (Ford 2008, 61). But, not surprisingly, what sounds irrational from the point of view of religion can be rational from that of the secular and vice versa. In short, the knife, as a quintessential slaughtering tool embodies narratives related to slaughtering and dietary/culinary differences and is charged with significations that determine not only the relationship between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in specific socio-cultural settings but also the categorization of space with other semiotic signs on broader public spheres in Ethiopia.

Food and Religious Stereotypes: Polemics in Oral Poetry

My main point of interest in this study indeed is food and religion. But as much as one hears negative stereotypes encapsulated in food names and food metaphors against one religion, there are also some general positive stereotypes. For example, one particular positive stereotype about Muslims in the Amharic language is worthy of our attention, for it could have its own role in the trust built between the 'transaction' of food in the Christian-Muslim hospitality. The positive stereotype is literally proverbial as is reported by one of my local elite informants "*Islam Kabele; ken agodele,*"⁹² which roughly literally goes, "If a Muslim lies, the day fails". This is to mean that if a Muslim lies, it is a bad sign that the period/epoch is an adverse one. This saying, apart from the positive image of trustworthiness it invokes about Muslims, also seems to play in the day-to-day transaction and communication between the two religious groups. The role this kind of stereotypical saying plays in their encounters in food contexts, which demands trustworthiness on the part of the host as to meeting the dietary/culinary demands of the guest, is very vital.

⁹² "አሰላም ካበለ ፣ ቀን አጎደለ"

Although food and food contexts, as we have seen in this study, are used to express the positive interactions and the mutual respect for one another, food is also used as a polemical tool between Christians and Muslims in the study area. There are some food-related stereotypes, food metaphors, sayings, etc that are, for example, used as markers of one’s superiority in contrast to the inferiority of the other group. Some of them are popular sayings with apparently teasing remarks about the Other group’s dietary or drink habits which are stereotypical of the religious group that the saying targets. The following poetic sayings exemplify this point:

አለህ የወደደው ሞላኝ ፣
ገንዘቡን ፈጅው በሱን።

*Allah yewededew Momin,
Genzebun fejew bebun.*

A *Momin*⁹³ who is loved by Allah,
Wasted his money on *bunna* (coffee).

Told from the standpoint of Christians, this saying refers to the association of coffee with Muslims⁹⁴. While the first line appears to sarcastically remark that Muslims are “loved by Allah,” the second sounds as a disapproval of the consumption of coffee, which in some cases is discouraged by pious Christians and some church authorities. In doing so, there appears to underlie a theme of associating coffee with others, i.e. with Muslims, perhaps as a strategy of discouraging Christians not to drink coffee. In sharp response, it seems, to the above one is the one below, which is told by Muslims who stereotypically associate the Christians with *tella* — locally brewed alcoholic ale.

አለህ የጠለው ወደላ ፣
ገንዘቡን ፈጅው በጠላ።

*Allah yetelaw wedella,
Genzebun fejew betella.*

A *wedella* hated by Allah,
Wasted his money on *tella*.

This one seems to target mainly Christians who are referred here as *wedella* (apparently means an undisciplined, unrestrained) hated by Allah although it

⁹³ *Momin* means Muslim in the area.

⁹⁴ This appears to be different from one historical case in Harar (eastern Ethiopia). That is, as reported by Waldron (1980 cited in Carmichael 2004, 223) after the era of Emperor Yohannes some Harari Muslims avoided coffee as a sign of rejecting the Christian norms as they considered coffee as a Christian drink.

may be equally used to refer to some fellow Muslims who do not abstain from alcohol according to Islamic prohibition of an intoxicating drink. If Muslims throw the above poem at the Christians, the latter also have yet another oral poem that is laden with remarks that target the abstinence by Muslims of alcoholic beverages such as *tej* (mead):

እስላም ያለባቱ [ያለቅሙ?] ማን ጠጣ አለው ጠጅ ፤
 ወትሮም ለመበጥበጥ ለማወክ ነው እንጅ።

*Islam yalakimu man teta alew tej,
 Wetrom lemebetbet lemawek new enji.*

Why the hell did a Muslim drink mead,
 Except for disturbing and troubling as usual.

Using one of the drink prohibitions that make Muslims distinct from other religions and cultural groups, the poem/poet attacks Muslims for disturbing or being notorious. The first line disdainfully poses a seemingly rhetorical question that suggests there is no good reason for a Muslim to drink alcohol. The second line answers the question by implying that there is no good reason, but if there is one, it is just “for disturbing and troubling.” However, a holistic reading of the poem appears to disparage Muslims for not handling (potent) alcohol, which they are not used to thereby implying a sort of impotence and lack of manliness and prowess. This squares with another food and religious stereotype we have seen before about the *litalit/mukamuk* (bland/insipid food) that some Christians associate with Muslims. According to popular belief, eating spicy food is associated with bravery while avoiding spicy food “makes one coward”. As an informant puts it:

Since Muslims do not [often] add *berbere* (chili) and salt, their food is often defined as *alicha*⁹⁵ [insipid]. This habit of eating *alicha* is believed to make people coward⁹⁶.

Overall, the disdain that one group shows over the other as regards the consumption of certain drinks or food between Christians and Muslims as reflected in the above oral poems is primarily a way of marking difference through stereotypes mediated by food or drink. In addition, both religious

⁹⁵ *Alicha* is a sauce made often of turmeric and other spices but not *berbere* (chili). Often contrasted with sauces made of chili, which is associated with bravery and potency, *alicha* signifies impotence and cowardice. It is common to insult a coward man as *yewend alicha* (*alicha of a man*).

⁹⁶ “ሙስሊሞች ምግባቸው ላይ በርብሬና ጨው ስለማይጨምሩ ባሉባቸው የሚመገቡት ምግብ እንደ አልጫ ተደርጎ ይቆጠራል ፡ ፡ ይህ አልጫን የመመገብ ልማድ ፈሪ እንደሚያደርግ ይታሰባል ፡ ፡”

groups seem to disapprove a certain form of social pathology⁹⁷ namely wasting money on a drink whose consumption each group disapproves while the Christians particularly seem to stereotype Muslims as if they had propensity for violence (“disturbing and troubling as usual”).

The following two oral poems also have implication for the preparation of food, particularly on the Sabbath, which is one of the Mosaic characteristics of dietary customs of the EOTC in general and of their distinct quality as opposed to the Islamic dietary/culinary culture.

እንደት ይጣፍጣል የእስላም እንጂራ ፤
በእሁድ በቅዳሜ በባል የተሰራ።

Endet yitaftal yeIslam Injera;
Be'Ihud beKdame bebal yetesra.

How delicious is a Muslim *Injera*,
Which is prepared on Saturday and on Sunday!/?

If Friday is important for Muslims so is the Sabbath for Christians. The EOTC reverses the Sabbath of the Old Testament and that of the New (see Haile 1988). This is also reflected in the second line of the poem, which lends itself to various interpretations and contexts depending on how the speaker intends to use it. For example, it can be read: (a) as exclamation, (b) as sarcasm, and (c) as question because of the word *how* (*endet*). If we read it as exclamation, it may sound positive because the poet is admiring the *injera* of a Muslim. The late Ethiopian singer Mary Armde’s rendition of this lyric with her famous *Kirar* (five- or six-stringed musical instrument) can be an example of the positive meaning. But, it can most likely be a sarcastic remark in Amharic language to show an indirect disapproval of something. Moreover, one may read it as question that tacitly suggests the unlikelihood of the ‘Muslim *injera*’ made on the Sabbath to be delicious. Or, it may also imply that it is tastier because it is fresher but also not because it is prepared at the improper time. In a nutshell, however, aside from the various possible interpretations, the fact that it has captured the notion of time in religion and the role of time in food and food preparation both of which have an implication in religious identity discourse. Another *musho* (a folk poetry roughly similar to dirge) also holds the notion of time as regards food preparation for the Orthodox Christians and thus their

⁹⁷ I made this analysis based on Jon Abbink’s study of the drinking culture in Southern Ethiopia (see Abbink 1997, 19-20).

disapproval of food prepared at wrong time — on Sabbath or on holidays — by Muslims.

አይ ቁንጅና ከንቱ (አገሌ) ባከነኛ ፤
በባል የተፈጩ የ' ስላም ዱቁት ሆነኛ።

*Ay kunjina kentu (Egele) bakenech,
Bebal yetefeche y'slam duket honech.*

Oh the vanity of beauty! (So-and-so) is wasted,
She became 'Muslim-flour' ground on Sabbath.

Like the previous poem, this one too holds another distinct notion of food and religion in the EOTC, which reveres the Mosaic food laws, especially as regards food preparation and *time*. As I noted in an earlier chapter, the question of identity related to food is not simply directed at *who* prepares the food alone but also *when* the food is prepared. This means that food which is prepared at the *right time* is believed to have blessings (*bereket*) whereas food prepared on holidays, on a Saint's day, and most of all on Sabbath (Saturday and Sunday) does not have *bereket* means it does not last long, which the poet alludes the vanity of beauty to. As it has already been noted, perhaps because of the veneration and/or imitation of the Old Testament or of the Judaic influence, some pious and ascetic Orthodox Christians observe the Sabbath (see Haile 1988) by avoiding grinding flour, fetching water, plowing, weeding, etc. Therefore, the poet has exploited this marked difference to allude to and compare the diseased with flour that is ground on a holiday. As the so-called Muslim-meat in this study goes, food that is prepared by Muslims in a manner that differs from the Christians can thus be regarded as an identity marker as reflected in the poem.

Finally, one oral poem captures the taboo under question and the notions of commensality, defilement, dietary trespassing, etc that this study dealt with. More precisely, it shows the difficulty of commensality between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia and the regrets that an individual goes through after a dietary trespassing. The poem goes:

በልቼ መጣኝ ከስላም ጋራ ፣
እንግዲህ ምኔ አማራ። (ምንጭ ፣ ደስታ ተክለ ወልድ ፤፱፻፷፱ ፣ ፻፲፫)

*Beliche metahu ke'slam gara,
Engedih miné Amara.*

I have come back having eaten with a Muslim;
What is now my identity of Amhara [Christian]!
(Source: Desta Teklewold 1962 E.C., 110, my translation)

Leaving the poetic license aside, the poem first of all demonstrates yet again the commonly used misnomer that takes all Christians as synonymous with the Amhara ethnic group and vice versa, and that depicts Islam almost as an antithesis of this ethnic group despite the fact that there are Amharas who have different faiths other than Christianity. Above all, it brings us to the notion of dietary transgression and the question of religious identity attached to food. The poem has a monologue voice that a person who realized her/his dietary trespassing questions the status of his/her Christian identity. That is, eating the wrong food or communing with Muslims seems to have defiled the sacred self and body of the speaker who should make some kind of remedy in order to return to the previous status of his/her Christian identity, the details of which have already been discussed in Chapter 4.

6

Synthesizing the Paradox of Commensality and Difference

As I indicated from the outset, food contexts in Ethiopia, because of the taboo under study, are paradoxical cultural spaces of convergence and divergence between Christians and Muslims. The role of this taboo in engendering disgust in the observant Christian and Muslim is a point worthy of consideration. Also the overall system around the taboo should be re-interpreted as to see its implications for interreligious contact. Theology, as a “systematic rationalization of customs and of the fragmentary, uncriticized ideas carried along in the practice of religion” (Ames 1928, 16), is one but not the only way of interpreting religious cultural elements. Thus, this custom should not simply be dismissed as sheer prejudice or a barrier based only on scriptural bases or on some non-religious reasonings. Rather, a cultural analysis of religious practices can help in the understanding of religions’ and religious institutions’ contribution to and power of shaping the cultural dynamics of a society (Wood 1999). It is in this spirit that I have synthesized the following tentative virtues out of the system built on the taboo and the affective experiences of the taboo observant by exploring the role of the host and of the guest at wedding feasts, for example.

Beyond Taboo

The following section sets out some of the latent functions that the religious taboo affords thanks to the system of reciprocal hospitality, mutual accommodation, empathy, friendship, etc built on it. While some of the functions attained by observing the taboo are moral virtues (such as temperance), others like group solidarity have social functions in binding people together by affirming group identity.

Observing religious food taboo as a sign of temperance

Temperance is considered to be one of the cardinal moral virtues (Foot 2002). It is an important quality of a person who shows moderation and self-restraint in eating and drinking. It involves abstinence from certain kind of food or is a moderate intake of food and drink. It is thus an important moral virtue in the Abrahamic and other Oriental religions while it is also a moral virtue in classical philosophies such as in Stoicism. In the case of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, whoever assumes the guest role (Christian or Muslim) seems to demonstrate this important virtue owing to their religious commitment of observing food taboo. We can see this more clearly by looking at the reaction of people who observe this taboo against those who break the taboo. Christians or Muslims who do not observe or who are indifferent to the ‘Christian/Muslim meat’ are often given various derogatory epithets. Some of the most common are: *agases* (equine), *jib* (hyena), *asama* (pig), metaphors used to describe people who eat immoderately and without any restriction. While the first two show the immoderate intake of food, the latter specially shows the intake of food without any *choice*. The manner in which a person eats without being selective is called ‘magbesbes’ (amassing) or the person ‘agbesbash’ (amasser) that shows gluttony⁹⁸, which is the antithesis of temperance and is thus a vice. As Donald Levine writes of the people in this research area, “[t]he Amhara learns step by step how to chasten his stomach in the traditional way” (Levine 1972, 104; see also Molvaer 1980, 67). Chastening one’s stomach might be seen as a form of temperance. A Muslim authority, for his part, also underscores the importance of temperance:

Even among what is *halal*, we should not eat too much.
Eating 1/3 of what our stomach is capable of holding is ideal,
as we learnt from our Prophet ...

Yet more to the point of disgust is the apparent positive attitude expressed in the Amharic adjective *tseyuf* referring to someone who shuns some food in

⁹⁸ In Christianity, gluttony, as a temptation of the appetite to consumption including of what is forbidden, is viewed as vice that led the first man, Adam, to Fall while Proverbs 23:2 also commands, “Put a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite” (Belasco 2008, 2; see also Garnsey 1999, 95-6)

disgust and who does not eat whatever she/he finds available to eat. It may also refer to an immaculate person who is not only physically clean but also uninterested in other people's properties or to a person who shuns the temptations of corruption and other forms of malfeasance such as bribery. Therefore, not only is a certain degree of disgust against some food items viewed positively but pickiness in general also appears to be tantamount to temperance. Therefore, as much as the observance of this taboo is considered as a sign of one's purity and religious commitment, breaking it would occasion disapproval, if not excommunication, which is discussed in Chapter 3 and 4.

Secular and religious commitments in harmony

This taboo can be seen as how individuals for whom such meat is an issue duly interact *by not only respecting but also by providing accommodative treatment of differences* related to the religious-oriented dietary demands of the Other group. As Mary Douglas writes boundary is more than a negative barrier of exclusion, rather "it bounds the area of structured relations. Within that area rules apply. Outside it, anything goes" (Douglas 1972, 79). Therefore, such a system of reciprocal hospitality established *au tour* this food taboo is effectively working without compromising one's religious identity. Individuals should not forsake their religious values and dietary commitments to please their religious Others, nor do they offend them by declining the invitation to the latter's wedding feast only clinging to observing the religious food taboo that makes commensality very hard. It is no exaggeration that in this system, to borrow Cornel West's proposition, the secular is religiously musical and the religious secularly musical (West 2011, 93). In other words, the mundane and the religious seem to be harmonized without one necessarily disenchanting the other because, as Catherine Bell (1997) notes, periodic rituals are capable of refreshing the experiences of the sacred and the profane selves of individuals and of "embedding these [...] experiences in their sense of community and self" (Bell 1997, 25). In short, when people who observe the religious food taboo are engaged in such secular settings, the context does not force them to compromise their religious commitment, and conversely and more importantly, their religious commitment also does not deter them from fulfilling their socio-cultural responsibilities.

Observing taboo as a manifestation of group solidarity

The observance of this taboo in general can also be seen as a means of group solidarity (Meyer-Rochow and Benno 2009). For example, even those who are often lenient on the taboo tend to observe it on formal occasions such as at wedding feasts where other fellow members of the same religion are present. Apart from observing the taboo related to meat, it should also be noted that Muslims show an important aspect of temperance, i.e. abstinence from alcohol. It might sound pretence or hypocrisy from the point of view of truly practicing religious people, but *temporary* observance of the taboo anyway is instrumental in giving assurance to members of a religious community who might otherwise have been offended by seeing their fellow member breaking the religious dietary taboo. However, rituals by their nature are capable of not only reanimating the sacred selves of individuals (Bell 1997) but also “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member” (Durkheim 1965 cited in Bell 1997, 25). From another theoretical perspective, the system built around this food taboo on interreligious encounters serves members of one religious group as a communication accommodation instrument according to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Although this theory concerns mainly language and speech behaviors, its pattern has also been applied to other forms and norms of communication in interethnic and cross-cultural communications (Gallois and Callan, 1991), and thus its theoretical model can also be extended to non-verbal features including food, which effectively is “a system of communication” (Barthes [1961] 1997). This theory sheds light on the understanding of meat taboo as a cause of convergence and divergence between the two religious groups in food contexts in Ethiopia. As Lamont and Molnar (2002, 181) observe, “boundaries are conditions not only for separation and exclusion, but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion”. Evidently, although the physical boundary is notable in food contexts that involve meat, the taboo under discussion basically plays an important role by being a converging agent for people of common element of identity to identify themselves in one group while it simultaneously becomes a cause for members of one religious group to diverge and assert their distinct religious identity vis-à-vis members of the other religious group, say, the host. Mention should also be made here about the role

of disgust, as noted before, in creating border thereby one group separates itself from the other, which is best expressed by Miller (1997, 194-5) as: “Disgust has other powerful communalizing capacities [...]. It performs this function obviously by helping define and locate the boundary separating our group from their group, purity from pollution, the violable from the inviolable.” This very well chimes with the central thesis that this study is pursuing: food effectively serves as a uniting and a separating agent in Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia.

Resistance against or alternative interpretation to scriptures?

It is very difficult to reduce the dietary differences connected particularly to meat between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia simply to prejudice. For it engenders many questions and/or controversies: where do we position ourselves when labeling this custom as prejudice, irrational, or scripturally baseless? Or, are we accusing such a custom from the standpoint of a non-religious person? Are we assuming a Christian or Muslim position? If so, to which sect or denomination do we belong? In any case, as Louis Brenner notes, “neither ‘Christianity’ nor ‘Islam’ is in itself an analytic concept; neither concept can act as a point of reference for identifying and analyzing the actual diversity and variation of what social actors might perceive or experience as Christian or as Islamic in any specific context” (Brenner 2000, 143). Accordingly, failure to recognize the distinction between “abstract doctrinal positions” of religious institutions and “the actual state of affairs” practiced in the wider society (Ullendorff 1968, 100; see also Brenner 2000, 144) will lead to a wrong conclusion such that some dietary customs in Ethiopia are irrelevant because they apparently have no scriptural basis, a position one witnesses in those who reject the custom under discussion as barrier. One might reasonably argue that there is apparently no explicit dictate of scripture, nor an authoritative interpretation of the oft-disputed scriptural verses in both religions in Ethiopia as to clearly and explicitly sanction the observance or the disapproval of this taboo. Therefore, if the non-observant finds scriptural basis for his/her rejection of the taboo, so would the observant for his observance.

However, beyond such apparent flexibility of scriptural warrant to observe or not to observe food laws, some of the ‘unwritten’ food taboos, such

as the one we are discussing here, might also be viewed as an alternative interpretation for or against the food laws prescribed in both Muslim and Christian scriptures and laws. Accordingly, the separate slaughtering practice can be viewed either as a resistance to scripture or as an alternative interpretation to the scant verses in scriptures about food fellowship with non-Jews in the Old Testament and with non-Christians in the New. For example, some Christians interpret certain biblical verses (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13; 2 Corinthians 6: 14; Jeremiah 16: 8⁹⁹) in such a way that makes food fellowship with Others difficult which appears to give many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians an apparent biblical justification for their separation with their religious Others on account of food in general and of meat in particular. Similarly, in the Qur'an (*Surat Al-Mai'dah* 5: 5), even more clearly, there is a reference to people of the book (*ahl al kitabi* — Jews and Christians) with whom food fellowship for Muslims is possible: "This day [all] good foods have been made lawful, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them." However, this verse of the Qur'an, as discussed in Chapter 3, has different interpretations among different sects of Islam (see Rodinson 1965) whereas in the same chapter (*Surat An'nahi* 5: 51) it reads: "O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you - then indeed, he is of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people." Some Muslims interpret such a verse as reason enough not to socialize with their religious Others while others take it as a justification for rejecting the food of Jews or Christians. It is, however, not uncommon that people often make their own interpretations to generate a local version of world religions; as a result, the world religions become "congeries of local variants, of which none can be said sensibly to be the 'correct' or 'real' one" (Eller 2007, 204). Overall, in a country where world religions have been indigenized and marked by an intricate syncretism for centuries, it is hardly possible to

⁹⁹ "Thou shalt not also go into the house of feasting, to sit with them to eat and to drink." (Jeremiah 16:8)

distinguish which aspect of a certain custom is purely cultural and which one strictly scriptural.

Food polemics as buffer against fundamental interreligious chasm?

As indicated earlier, despite some sporadic but at times very severe conflicts, the general Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia are often described as relatively peaceful. When attempts were made in the past to reconcile differences between the two religions, food polemics almost always came to the forefront on the dialogue table, to the extent of eclipsing other ‘basic’ polemics and theological chasms between the two religions. All Ethiopian kings and rulers who reigned in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century: Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Menilik II, Ras Ali and Lij Iyassu attempted to reconcile the two religions (Ficquet 2006) by targeting elements presumably of micro-level interactions. In doing so, abolishing the taboo related to meat seems to have been not only a means but also an end in their reconciliation effort although none of them succeeded in scraping this long-enduring custom. For instance, Emperor Menelik II is said to have vowed to make the two religious groups dine on meat at the same *gebeta/ma'id* (roughly table) while Emperor Tewodros also was determined to make the two religious groups share food from the same *lemat*. Eloi Ficquet has discussed the attempt of these rulers in relation to this taboo (Ficquet 2006). However, the top-down effort to unite Christians and Muslims in the name of avoiding fanaticism continued also during Emperor Hailesellasie I as was evident, for example, from a symbolic “communal feasting” between Christians and Muslims in Harar town following his coronation in 1930 (Carmichael 2004, 225). What is remarkable in all these rulers’ attempts to unite Christians and Muslims primarily in a food context is that their apparent success, unfortunately, comes more often than not at the expense of one group, namely that of Muslims. In other words, it seems that the Muslims were supposed to give up their food identity in order to conform to the preponderant influence of the Christian norms. However, any party that attempted to forcibly abolish this taboo appeared to have missed the fact that the taboo is an important marker of religious identity by serving, among other purposes, as an affirmation of one’s religious identity and as a gesture of resistance against the dietary and power

discourse of the dominant group. As a result it has served both religions as a protective discourse by muting the more fundamental interreligious differences between the two religions. As is evident from the attempt by Ethiopian Christian rulers/kings, solving the difference between the two religions primarily aimed at reconciling their dietary differences. This means other fundamental theological differences were either thought as ‘irreconcilable’ and thus ‘untouchable’ or relegated as ‘secondary’ compared to the almost day-to-day polemics of food. Ironically, the fact that the taboo has always been a primary target suggests that it effectively proves itself as a buffer and a cushion protecting other more fundamental differences from coming into play.

Today, the seemingly banal day-to-day expressions like “only knife separates us” in the mass consciousness appear to mute the fundamental and often volatile theological differences so much so that individuals from both religious groups focus on the rather seemingly relatively ‘trivial’ religious matter – food taboo. The polemics that are built around food taboo, however, seem to be a blessing in disguise by being a discursive buffer against polemics on fundamental and perpetually irreconcilable, if not precarious, theological differences. Although some argue that this custom is a barrier for Christian-Muslim encounters, I rather further hypothesize that, unless the culture itself abolishes it or amends it (which may happen as a result of the advent of buffet serving, as discussed in concluding chapter), the apparent imposition from religious and secular elites perhaps would make the Christian-Muslim polemics to go down to more fundamental and sensitive differences, which are hardly reconcilable. Today especially religious elites who tend to trivialize and reject this custom are allegedly emphasizing more fundamental differences that would do little except upsetting the status quo of the peaceful day-to-day encounters between Christians and Muslims in the country.

Reciprocal hospitality as an index of Christian-Muslim relations¹⁰⁰

If one asks any passerby in Ethiopia of what the latter makes of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country, the most likely response would be “We live peacefully; we eat and drink together.” As it has already been pointed out *abro meblat, abro metetat* (‘eating and drinking together’) is regarded as an epitome of the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The reciprocal hospitality built on this religious food taboo is thus often taken as an indicator of the degree of peaceful relationships and contact between the two religious groups. Evidently, people who observe this food taboo get together in food contexts and express their social responsibilities. However, as much as peaceful coexistence is exemplified in “eating and drinking together”, the lack of or the reported decreasing trend in “eating and drinking together” between Christians and Muslims is equally regarded as a decrease in and an endangerment against the peaceful coexistence between the two religious groups. A few informants from both sides lamented over and showed their concern over the gradual decrease in socializing between Christians and Muslims. According to informants, in recent times, those groups who claim that such food taboo is theologically unjustifiable are reported to ironically avoid converging in food contexts as well as in various other socio-cultural settings.

In Ethiopia, today, as a result of the inter-Islam rivalry between Ahabash and Wahhabism (Kabha and Erlich 2006, 519), there is a recent distinction between Muslims as “the old” and “the new”, which may correspond to the indigenized Islam and the political Islam respectively. “The old” ones are known for their avoidance of eating meat slaughtered by Christians but still converge in food contexts with Christians. “The new” ones, however, are said to reject this taboo as dogmatically baseless, but ironically avoid converging in food contexts with Christians. These groups are also accused of not taking part in many social activities with Christians. Some even allegedly avoid buying items from ‘Christian shops’. This might sound congruent with and reflect the

¹⁰⁰ An earlier version of this section with other sub-sections of this study made an article that appeared in *Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2015, www.food-studies.com, ISSN 2160-1933.

current politico-religious atmosphere in the country and with the consequences of the “global [reformist] Islamic movement” (Eriksen 2004, 46).

It must be noted that even in “those good old days” as well as today there have been Christians who do not share food with Muslims, decline invitations to a Muslim wedding, or avoid many social relations in general. But, these kinds of attitudes among such Christians more often than not were down to individuals’ level of consciousness and exposure to living with Others. In other words, there appears to be no evidence that it came as a movement (Abbink 1999) capable of jeopardizing the broader Christian-Muslim-relationship. As result, today, the downward trend in the degree of convergence in food contexts such as at wedding feasts, especially in urban areas, is being taken as an index of the decreasing degree of contact and perhaps as a source of fear and suspicion between the two religious groups. In view of this, one can be forced to predict that, in the future, the custom itself might be reported in the past tense as a roughly similar custom in Java (Indonesia) is reported as such by Kim (1998).

Beyond Disgust

Taboos are forbidden partly because people find them disgusting and reprehensible or even unspeakable and unimaginable. However, taboos involve more than simple disgust.

Brett Williams (2004, 427)

Disgust, to be sure, paints the world in a particular way, a distinctly misanthropic and melancholic way. But disgust is also a necessary partner in the positive: love, as we know it, would make little sense without disgust being there to overcome. Our own commitment to virtues of moral and bodily cleanliness, to the loathing of cruelty and hypocrisy, depends upon it.

William Ian Miller (1997, 18)

Anthropologists have studied the social, psychological and economic implications of alimentary reciprocity (Levi-Strauss 1945; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Eriksen 2004). Not many have studied the philosophical implications of food in general, and of reciprocity and hospitality in particular. A few scholars, however, have seen the ethical aspects of food, particularly the moral virtues in

relation to food (see Allhoff and Monroe 2007; Telfer 2002). Elizabeth Telfer (2002), for example, has observed the moral virtues of hospitableness in terms of the duty of the host in treating others in the context of food. However, when hospitality involves entertaining the dietary demands of a guest that includes taboo, there is also a side that can be appreciated as a moral virtue from the point of view of the guest as well as of the host. It looks straightforward that hosts have a duty to meet the dietary demands of the guest even if, as Telfer notes, they have a duty to entertain their friends without necessarily thinking of duty when they do so (Telfer 2002, 94). But when the guest has a specific dietary demand, there is duty and responsibility that the host shoulders to meet even if the taboo observed by the guest is irrelevant, irrational, and unacceptable in the eyes of the host. The duty might be relatively easier if, for example, the guest's dietary demand is of avoidance of some kind of food items. In this case the host carries out his duty by subtraction or exclusion – by excluding the food items the guest does not eat. A good example for this would be a meat-eater hosting a vegetarian whom the host entertains with anything but meat (or animal products, depending on the kind of vegetarian the guest is).

However, the issue will be all the more problematic when the host observes a taboo that is likely to be irrelevant in the eyes of the guest, who perhaps cherishes the food that is avoided by the host. For instance, a vegetarian host, while entertaining meat-eater guests, might have to push against his/her will and most of all against his/her dietary principle for the sake of entertaining such guests. This, however, might be very controversial especially if the host is an ethical vegetarian compared to health or religious one. As Telfer (2002, 81) observes:

Some vegetarians do cook meat for others, and they are subject to a conflict of principles. On the one hand if people think it wrong to eat meat, they are bound to think it wrong to cook and serve it. But they might also think it wrong to give a meat-eating guest less than the best— not what is morally best, but what will give the guest most pleasure.

Now Telfer's interesting example of the difficulty of maintaining reciprocity between vegetarians and non-vegetarian can help us in the discussion of the hesitation among some Christians and Muslims concerning the duty of meeting the religious dietary demands of the other guest on formal occasions such as at wedding feasts. As regards the Christian-Muslim hospitality, some of the

socio-cultural commitment with that of his/her religious. This in turn concurs with my previous discussion on resistance against certain interpretations of scriptural verses as regards food. However, when hospitality is reciprocal, or when there is an exchange of food, the duty lies not only in the host but also in the guest to accept the invitation and to be entertained, first of all. The question Telfer poses looks more illuminating here to see the duty of guests who “have to” be entertained in a food context or space wherein there is a food item that they avoid. That is, when a guest who observes taboo is expected to cross (not to break) some kind of dietary boarder (religious, moral, cultural, etc), this guest is carrying out an obligation to honor the hospitality of his/her host. Think of an ardent ethical vegetarian in the house of a meet-eater host, or take a guest whose most revered totem animal is a culinary delight of his/her host. We might ask: How much is the affective cost for a guest of this kind to be entertained by such a host? The Other guest, even while knowing that he/she is served with his/her own food, has to defy some level of disgust that is induced by the food aura of the host and of fear of contamination. Such a guest accepts the invitation but out of sense of duty because of the reciprocity of hospitality with a friend in the other religion. My point here is that although the degree might differ depending on circumstances and the dietary demands of each party, the question of moral virtue in the context of food is not limited to the host per se but it can also equally be a question on the part of the guest. Thus, the following brief discussion further clarifies how holding on to one’s disgust is a moral virtue that a guest manifests for the sake of others.

Holding on one’s disgust as a manifestation of Stoicism?

Beyond the disgust and the possible affective sacrifice they may incur, such individuals who observe this taboo appear to give priority to virtue over happiness, which has something of a Stoicism air to it. Bertrand Russell’s expression of the doctrine of stoicism sounds fitting here: “We can’t be happy, but we can be good; let us therefore pretend that, so long as we are good, it doesn’t matter being unhappy” (Russell 1945, 269 in Eller 2007, 257). Accordingly, these two religious communities not simply show fidelity to their respective religious identities but seem to also sacrifice their comfort and repress their disgust. Obviously, those who are disgusted cannot be happy, but

they know that they are good socially. From the point of view of the host, “[h]ospitableness resembles charity more than it resembles courage in that it benefits others rather than oneself” (Telfer 2002, 95). According to Foot (1978 quoted in Telfer 2002, 95) “moral virtues are qualities which ‘a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows’.” As indicated in the above epigraph, Miller (1997) also underscores the nexus between overcoming disgust and one’s commitment to moral virtues. Following this, we might give ‘courage’ - one of the cardinal moral virtues (Foot 2002) - to the guests who have to defy their disgust to look happy. The courage to hold on their disgust might not benefit them, but others – particularly the host. In reciprocity the parties involved can of course have psychological motivations like personal gain and social acceptability; however, reciprocity is also determined by consideration for others (Eriksen 2004). It is the thought of friendship and mutual respect that counts most. In the case of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, too, it is more than the provision of food. The hospitality is a gesture of kindness and accommodation and above all of empathizing the Other by understanding her/his dietary demands. In reciprocity “there is much more in the exchange itself than in the things exchanged” (Levi-Strauss 1949, 59). Food exchange, more than a simple act of generosity, is a complex transaction that entails obligation (Farb and Armelagos 1980). Even if wedding entails eating, the guest goes to the wedding primarily in virtue of social obligations, i.e. respecting the invitation and sharing the happiness of the host.

Although the social etiquette of being invited and accepting the invitation is basically given much weight by both the invitee and the inviter, for people who attend a wedding of the other religion, their attendance more often than not is “a matter of etiquette than of nourishment” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 160). This is mainly because such a guest is often on the receiving end of disgust, for host’s wedding feast is technically a “bio-cultural arena of disgust” (Highmore 2010, 120). Entering such “arena” can, thus, be an onerous duty for this guest. It is important to note here that those who yield to their disgust do not attend the wedding of the other religion at all even though those who attend are not totally free of disgust. The latter show virtue not only by demonstrating their will for social life through simple attendance but also by holding on their disgust. The degree of disgust seems to differ from individuals in one religion

to those in another as well as from individual to individual within the same religion. It appears to follow from this that the more disgusted one is, the more sacrifice one pays in defying one's disgust to fulfill this affect-wise demanding socio-cultural commitment. In other words, their readiness to take part in a food context that they do not fully enjoy and their will to overcome their disgust to at least symbolically attain "one-food-community" is a virtuous decision and act. That is, they sacrifice their emotional comfort to become "man" enough ("vir-tuous) toward a common good, i.e. toward a commonly shared convivial festivity marked by a food-induced unity. The unity or convergence of the two groups on such occasions, apart from the apparent fun and joy, demands of such guests an emotional strength to deal with the host's food aura. However, one may regard the commitment of these guests as a pretentious effort to please others, which brings the place of sincerity in the general notions hospitality and virtue into play.

Is hospitality-out-of-duty insincere and defying disgust pretence?

In the eye of those who do not observe the taboo, be it out of sectarian polemics or that of secular reasoning, the virtues that I outlined above might be seen as insincere, or even pretence at worst. This can be seen from the perspective of the host as well as of the guest. Telfer asks an intriguing and important question whether we are being deceitful when we entertain our friends out of duty and how much this matters. Though she admits that it is difficult to give a complete answer, she tries to answer that we do not entertain just anyone with a motive of duty; thus we should not feel hypocritical of our hospitality even if it lacks "spontaneity which normally goes with friendship proper" (Telfer 2002, 95). The point here is that if hospitality is done as an onerous duty, it tends to lack its natural and spontaneous nature. That is why Telfer is very critical about *duty* as a motive for hospitality: "there might be doubt about duty as a motive for hospitableness, not because it is ulterior but because it seems to be at odds with the idea of warmth contained in hospitality. If people entertain out of a sense of duty, are they being hospitable or merely dutiful?" (Telfer 2002, 89). She, however, suggests that people are "hospitable provided that what I called the spirit of the hospitality is generous" (Telfer 2002, 89-90). In this sense, it

seems that the very sense of duty and responsibility comes partly out of the will to entertain and please one's guests. Therefore, that one has duty as a motive for hospitality does not mean that the person is pretending to entertain people while he/she is not enjoying doing so. It rather shows the host's commitment to sociality and friendship. The duty is not an unwanted one; it rather embraces such qualities as care and preoccupation for the pleasure of others. This is best expressed by Telfer (2002, 90) as follows:

Hospitable motives, then, are those in which concern for the guests' pleasure and welfare, for its own sake, is predominant. These can include entertaining for pleasure where that pleasure largely depends on knowing that one is pleasing the guests, and sense of duty where there is also concern for the guests themselves. And hospitable people, those who possess the trait of hospitableness, are those who often entertain from one or more of these motives, or from mixed motives in which one of these motives is predominant.

Therefore, the sense of duty a host has toward entertaining his/her guests should not be seen as insincere only because it has a motive of duty, nor does it contradict with the essences of conviviality, pleasure and happiness that are embraced in hospitality.

On the part of the guest as well, taking the previous discussion on 'hiding' ones disgust into account, one might object here that the guests who hold on their disgust *pretend* to be happy while they truly are not. However, compared to those who prioritize their religious commitment over their social one or to those who succumb to the disgust that the taboo might engender, the ones who attend the wedding of the other by holding on their disgust are people with virtue and sense of duty as community members. Instead of pretention, their act is rather comparable to the function of the platonic "noble lie". If the platonic noble lie served the citizens' solidarity, the "insincerity", if it is so in the first place, must be a noble one in order to maintain the two communities sense of solidarity and friendship enshrined in the reciprocal hospitality. Above all, according to Derrida (2000, 151) the law of hospitality is at times above morality and ethics. Having invoked Kant's "On a supposed right to lie out of humanity," St. Augustine's treaties on lying, and the Biblical Lot's (Genesis 19) priority to the law of hospitality, Derrida analyzes the dilemma one faces between the law of hospitality and that of ethics: "not only

is hospitality coextensive with ethics itself, but where it can seem that some people, as it has been said, place the law of hospitality above a ‘morality’ or a certain ‘ethics’” (Derrida 2001, 151). In short, following Derrida’s analysis, the law of hospitality seems to afford one the “right” to lie but a “noble lie”.

It should be noted that those who succumb, so to speak, to their disgust do not take part in the reciprocal hospitality at wedding feasts of the Other religion in the first place. But individuals who come to the wedding feast of their religious Other host appear to have tamed their disgust. Their hidden disgust, thus, emanates not from insincerity in expressing true emotions or feelings but rather from the corrective nature of virtues (Foot 2002, 8) where they make a “prudent suppression” of their disgust (Ngai 2005, 333). Rather more to the point, according to Foot, virtues are corrective because “there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good” (Foot 2002, 8). Or even better, as Melville suggests, “tolerance is always, in some fundamental way, a negation of disgust” (Melville cited in Ngai 2005, 333). Therefore, one might not help feeling disgust, but the difference that the person can make is to hold on the expressions of disgust to be virtuous in a situation where it is difficult to be so.

Conclusion

The Ethiopian commensality on *lemat*, on the one hand, and the peculiar taboo of avoiding meat slaughtered by people of the other faith, on the other, makes the commensality between the taboo observant Orthodox Christians and Muslims far too complex. On top of this, the nature of the taboo seen from the vantage point of various interpretations of scriptures by different sects and that of secular reasoning is again another difficult subject to grapple with. Some of the analyses I have made almost throughout this study are a functionalist attempt of interpreting cultural practices rather than a dogmatic comparison between religions or sects. Particularly, my attempt has been to see the often taken-for-granted “latent functions” (Merton 1968) of socio-cultural practices and customs rather than what they are often primarily meant for. In other words, it is a pursuit of alternative meaning and function out of the broader semiotic system built around this religious food taboo, which serves as a system of communication between the two religious groups for many centuries in the country. I have argued that apart from its sheer religious functions for the taboo observant individuals, and beyond its perceived “prejudice” and “cause of mutual aversion” for the non-observant and non-religious individuals, the taboo has considerable socio-cultural and politico-religious virtues with implications for contemporary interreligious encounters. If the relative peaceful co-existence of the two religions in Ethiopia has survived the test of devastating wars and conflicts in the country’s history, so has this popular custom endured a continuous battle against pressures from religious and secular forces. It is against and/or between these two forces that such socio-cultural and religious norms and practices continue to exist, struggle to survive and at times surrender to extinction. So this study has attempted to dig out the values and virtues of the system built around the taboo.

First, despite their diversity and many local variants, world religions claim, aim and try to impose orthodoxy and consistency in their area of

influence (Eller 2007, 216). However, except for its own followers, it is hardly possible to regard one religion as absolute and only its values and norms as truly scriptural. The conflicting doctrinal positions of certain sects of a world religion as regards food in general and this taboo in particular seems to be part of this diversity. For example, both the individual who observes this taboo and the one who does not can potentially defend their respective position by citing verses from scriptures. In other words, some reject the food taboo on the basis of their interpretations of scriptures that suits their position while others observe it by taking certain other scriptural verses as warrant for their observance. On the other hand, secularism and modernization impose their disenchanting ideals to apparently liberate societies from the yoke of allegedly outdated religious and superstitious illusions. However, religions also seem to be adaptive to the demand of the day while “religious practices and identities are contested, made, unmade, and remade continuously” (Eller 2007, 217). It is by now very clear in social sciences that the theory of secularization of the world (i.e. the assumption and prediction quite a few decades ago about the world being increasingly secularized) has proved little to be true. Instead, religion seems to have surprisingly continued to be a social as well as political force in many contemporary societies around the world. As Roger Trigg writes, “[r]eligion, in many forms, has a growing influence not just on private belief but on public policy” (Trigg 2007, 9), which sounds to be an echo of the notion of “the religious return.” Thus, a simple rejection of religious practices on the basis of secular or modern ideals as irrational or superstitious cannot be a viable option today in the face of a growing revival of religious identities and beliefs. The observance of the taboo under study should also be seen from this perspective.

Second, those who reject or denounce this custom as prejudice have not proved if the breaking of this taboo may foster the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. Various kings and rulers of Ethiopia such as Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Menelik II, Ras Ali, Lij Iyassu (Ficquet 2006) attempted to scrap this taboo in a bid to unite, by fair means or foul, the two religious groups. But none of them succeeded. Although the roots of the taboo look less obvious, it has survived to the present day. A custom or a belief survives for two reasons, according to Claude Levi-Strauss: The first one is by

mere chance or by some extrinsic causes; and the second is because it still plays some kind of role that was a cause for its very creation (Levi-Strauss 1949). Even more precisely, “no religious teaching can long survive if it is maladaptive. Whether a religious belief is rational or irrational is beside the point” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 120). It is my contention that this custom traversed many centuries because it has served such a purpose as a conscious or unconscious mechanism of maintaining the religious border. But its latent function is a collective treasure for both religious groups as a practical example for their peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding of differences. Among other things, the reciprocal hospitality and the empathetic accommodative treatment offered to one’s religious Other in formal food contexts transforms the otherwise irreconcilable difference between the two religions into a compatible one. Thus, if approached in a non-judgmental spirit, such religious-oriented food culture can be viewed as a source of positive implications for peaceful interreligious relations and sense of pluralism.

Third, the indigenization processes in the two religions are so firm that the frontier between Islamic and non-Islamic; Christian and non-Christian etiquettes and practices in Ethiopian Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity respectively appear to be blurred. As a result, which practices are scripturally justified and unjustified are so unclear that the borderline between cultural and religious, or between mundane and spiritual are almost unidentifiable because religion is not only a belief system but also a cultural system (Geertz 1973). The bottom line, however, is that the taboo has not been an obstacle for Christian-Muslim encounters because of the mass’s *creative* way of dealing with dietary differences. The custom resulted in an innovative system that harmonizes the religious and mundane selves of the taboo observant.

Fourth, it seems that when a cultural practice fails to fit into scriptural doctrine or vice versa, either one is customized, adapted or shaped to fit into the other. It is one of the characteristics of world religions in general to “be ‘refracted’ by local conditions, including but not limited to the traditional religion upon which it intrudes, the specific sects or denominations that arrive, and the other world religion(s) nearby” (Eller 2007, 204) in order to be in harmony with the socio-cultural realities at local level. A characteristic in

general of African societies to accommodate religious pluralism (Soares and Otayek 2007), such flexibility or ‘refraction’ has allowed the Christian and Muslim societies in Ethiopia to maintain, barring some sporadic misunderstandings and conflicts, their centuries-long peaceful co-existence and sense of religious pluralism at least at their micro-level encounters. As Jon Abbink rightly comments, “[t]he Ethiopian societal context has, so to speak, forced the idea of ‘pluralism’ not only on the minds of the country's Christians but also on that of its Muslims” (Abbink 1998, 120). The encounter of the two religious groups in food contexts that is mediated by the taboo under discussion is ironically part of this flexibility rather than rigidity.

Fifth, the taboo usually receives criticism for creating a ‘mutual aversion’ between the two religious groups. And at the heart of this accusation is often the blame on religious fanaticism (see Carmichael 1996 and 2004) and, according to some informants, the role of Christian kings as a means of dividing their subjects for their own political advantages. I, however, argued that if the taboo was ‘invented’ by religious fanatics or exploited by political elites, it has served both Christianity as well as Islam as a point of distinction from one another based on the notion of food and its role in interreligious relations. Above all, if the taboo, as dubbed by some, is a prejudice or barrier, it owes as much to the failure of religious institutions and political elites as it does to the ignorance of ‘innocent’ Christians or Muslims. The latter, however, managed to invent creative ways of dealing with dietary differences, which has become a manifestation of their mutual understating and empathy. It can thus be seen as a creativity born out of difficulty in food fellowship.

Finally, the prejudice or barrier discourse should not be a blinder from seeing the virtues of the system. However, in discussing the possible virtues of the system built on the custom in this study, I do not mean to imply that Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have lived perfectly well in their entire history or that there are no prejudices in their communications and encounters in general and with regard to food (contexts) in particular. Nor should the attempt to re-interpret some customs be misconstrued as blindly accepting all apparently out-dated religious or other customs on account of some perceived functions, which have no actual use for modern society (see Bernhardt 1947), or on account of sheer relativism that has no common ground or framework for

rejecting what is not relevant for the common good of modern societies. What I have attempted to do in this study is that I made a conscious effort to give alternative interpretations to the oft-overlooked latent functions of indigenous customs and practices that, unfortunately, are (being) rejected only according to certain truths in sectarian interpretations of religious dietary rules or at times under the pretext of apparent scientific or secular reasoning. Therefore, this study does not suggest a conscious policy based on secular ideals, or an intervention from certain sectarian angle. Rather, the tradition should be left for itself either to continue to survive or to make itself adaptive to what the interreligious and/or socio-cultural encounters of the current as well as future Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and Muslim societies demand. For instance, the recent advent and reception of buffet serving in the relatively urban part of Ethiopia can be seen as one symptom of the culture or society's gesture in embracing 'natural' change based, not on imposition, but on the demand of the day. However, as an endeavor in the realm of cultural studies, the study is hoped to have its contribution by being an input for cultural policy making and cultural political decisions as regards the relationship between established religious and traditional norms vis-à-vis secular and sectarian views in the face of an ever-increasing change and transformation of societies, cultures and religions.

Future research

The custom built around the taboo under discussion has seen changes over the last few years. The advent of buffet that is briefly discussed below explains the change, which I view as 'natural' compared to the rejection of this custom only on the basis of sectarian or secular grounds. Such changes one witnesses today suggest that food taboos as well as the system built around them are not necessarily inveterate practices. As Adel P. den Hartog notes, "[f]ood taboos may seem rather stable, but they are often under pressure because the society is changing" (Hartog 2003, web). They change, adapt and readapt themselves to the changing state of the society that observes and practices them. Evidently, a noticeable development one may observe in the manner of serving food at weddings feasts and other occasions that involve eating especially in urban Ethiopia in the present times is the catering of guests with food served on

buffet. This new practice seems to be changing the long-established norm related to the taboo and the dynamics of the interaction of the two religious groups in food contexts that this study dealt with.

The wind of change, so to speak, in the serving style at wedding feasts may show, among other things, the advent of Western culture and its influence in local customs, but a closer look at the change in performance of this particular custom under question may also reveal the decreasing degree of accommodative treatment of dietary/culinary differences. Today, especially in urban areas, including the research site, some hosts entertain their guests with a buffet or in a manner different from the way they do traditionally. At some wedding feasts, hosts provide meat for their like-guests and vegetarian food for their Other guests. It will be up to the Other-taboo-observant guest to entertain her/himself from the list of food items provided on the buffet table. It may be important to pose questions over such a change that has come to be embraced in recent years: Is it because the taboo is getting less popular over time? If so, how and why? Or, is it because “the vegetarian diet” has neutralized the distinction that the taboo engenders in the traditional serving style? The reason may lie in answering one or more of these or even other questions. However, in light of the current study, one element attached to the taboo, i.e. the empathetic hospitality in the traditional style, seems to elude the buffet style of food offering. Finally, future research is needed to be done on such new food practices in order to keep up with the changes and/or adaptations that the current Ethiopian societies are manifesting in food contexts, which in turn help gauge the degree of interaction and socialization between and among religious groups in the country.

Limitations

One possible lens to look into the relation between food and religious identity is a review of religious scriptures in terms of their respective rules concerning dietary and culinary practices for their respective followers. In this regard, I made a reasonable attempt, but making an exhaustive comparison between religious texts in the country about what each religion says on food to its respective believers can, of course, be a daunting task partly because of language barrier. Thus, I depended heavily on Christian texts due to my

acquaintance and linguistic familiarity with them (Ge'ez and Amharic languages). As a result, the analysis I made based on the religious texts in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity shows the interreligious food discourse from the point of view of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. As far as Islamic texts are concerned, this study used verses from the Qur'an only. The same kind of analysis could not be made in the scope of this study based on what Islamic texts other than the Qur'an make of Christianity and Christians in relation to food. In addition, the very limited research visits I managed to make in Ethiopia during semester breaks or in-between mobilities from one university, country and/or continent to another allowed me to generate data through interview as well as observation of relevant loci of data (abattoirs, restaurants, butcheries, etc). Unfortunately, these visits did not coincide with actual wedding feasts, the observation of which would have refreshed my lived experiences and previous observations, which I used in this study to put the data generated from various sources into perspective. Finally, as Warren Belasco notes, "while food studies is now 'respectable,' it is also inherently subversive. To study food often requires us to cross disciplinary boundaries and to ask inconvenient questions" (Belasco 2008, 6). Some of the questions that this study pursued might have led to inconvenient questions and answers, which may upset the belief and "truth" (religious or otherwise) that some individuals/readers uphold in connection with the taboo under question. The intention, however, was purely an intellectual exercise to understand religion and religious practices as "cultural systems".

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Appendix 1

Interview guide items

Local elites

1. How do you describe the common rhetoric of “abro meblat abro metetat” (“eating and drinking together”) between Christians & Muslims in Ethiopia?
2. How much is food important for your religious identity?
3. Tell me what you think about “the Christian/the Muslim knife” i.e. about the separate slaughtering and eating culture.
4. What do you feel about eating food other than made/prepared through your religious etiquette?
5. Which food items are you very careful about whether they are prepared according to your religious food proscription/culinary rules?
6. How much are you aware of the food proscriptions of your religion?
7. How much are you aware of the food proscriptions of the other religion (Islam/Christianity)?
8. When/If you are invited to a Muslim/Christian wedding feast what do you feel about food?
9. Have you ever gone to a wedding of a person in the other faith where you just attended without partaking of food? If yes, why?
10. Where did you sit? What did you eat? With whom did you eat?
11. Tell me if you know any popular saying or proverb or legend or even personal anecdotes related to food/meat/knife with regard to Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia

Families/parents who previously organized wedding feasts

1. Who are/were your guests (e.g. Christian, Muslim, etc.) at your son’s/daughter’s wedding?
2. Did/Do you cater your Christian/Muslim guests with “their own” food? Why/why not? If yes, who prepares/d it?
3. How do you prepare food for your Christian/Muslim guests?

(e.g. Materials/utensils, whose utensils do you use? What do you do with the utensils?)

4. If you borrow a utensil from your Muslim/Christian neighbors, how do you use them? Or, if you have a utensil previously lent to your Christian/Muslim neighbor back, how do use/reuse it? What do you do with it?
5. What is your opinion about “the Christian/Muslim knife” i.e. about separate slaughtering and eating?
6. Do you mind eating food/meat prepared/slaughtered by Muslims/Christians? Why/why not?
7. Tell me if you know any popular (or personal/familial) sayings or proverbs or legends or anecdotes related to food/meat/knife with regard to Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia

Religious Fathers/learned men

1. Tell me about the theological foundations of the food proscriptions that mark Muslim-Christian food dichotomy. (How and why food/meat has become a separating factor?)
2. Since when did Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia start diverging because of food/meat?
3. How do you explain the role of the knife in serving as a religious identity marker with regard to food?
4. Tell me if you know any historical account of separate slaughtering in relation to Muslims and Christians? i.e. Since when do you think slaughtering has become such an important separating factor?
5. What is the use of *Metshafe Keder* in EOTC related to dietary trespassing? What is its (theological) foundation? (To Muslim interviewees: Is there any religious ‘ritual’ you do about if a Muslim commit dietary trespassing? (If there is any trespassing at all?))
6. Tell me if you know any popular (or scriptural, if any) saying or proverb or legend or anecdotes related to food/meat/knife with regard to Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia

Other informants from different walks of life

1. What does it feel to attend a wedding ceremony across religion?
2. How do you feel about the food served to you there?
3. How did you occupy space in the tent/house of the wedding?
4. What does it feel like eating beside someone eating food from the other religion?
5. Tell me what you will do if you find yourself eating (unknowingly) food/meat from the other religion?
6. How do you know that a certain food is OK to eat according to your religion?
7. Which food items are you most careful about in its preparation? Why?
8. Which food items you don't mind eating while knowing that they were prepared by Muslim/Christian? Why?
9. Tell me if you know any popular saying or proverb or legend or personal or popular anecdotes related to food/meat/knife with regard to Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia

Appendix 2

Pictures of public slaughterhouses in Ethiopia



Figure A: “Christian slaughtering” section, Bahir Dar
(Photo by the researcher: 13/09/ 2013)



Figure B: “Muslim slaughtering” section, Bahir Dar
(Photo by the researcher: 13/09/2013)



Figure C: Some manual slaughtering tools used only by Christian slaughterers, Bahir Dar
(Photo by the researcher: 13/09/2013)



Figure D: Some manual slaughtering tools used only by Muslim slaughterers, Bahir Dar
(Photo by the researcher: 13/09/2013)



Figure E: “Addis Ababa Abatoirs Enterprise: ‘Muslim lamb’ shop”
(Photo by the researcher: 08/09/2014)



Figure F: “Addis Ababa Abatoirs Enterprise: 'Christian lamb' shop”
(Photo by the researcher: 08/09/2014)

Appendix 3

Population of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) by religion, 2007

Religion	Population	
	No.	%
Orthodox	32,138,126	43.5
Protestant	13,746,787	18.6
Catholic	536,827	0.7
<i>Christian sub-total</i>	46,421,740	62.8
Muslim/Islam	25,045,550	33.9
Traditional	1,957,944	2.6
Others	471,861	0.6
All persons total	73,918,505	100

Source: *Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census* (Population Census Commission 2008).

Appendix 4

Amharic interviews quoted verbatim

Chapter 3, page 55:

መጽሐፍ ቅዱስ እስላም ያረደውን አትብሉ አይልም። እንደምታቀው መጽሐፍ ቅዱስ ከእስልምና መምጣት በፊት የነበረ ነው ፤ እናም እንደዚህ ሌላ አይችልም። ይህ ማለት ይህ ልማድ መጽሐፍ ቅዱሳዊ መሰረት የለውም ማለት ግን አይደለም። ከብሉይ ኪዳን ባሻገር በሐዲስ ኪዳን ውስጥ ለክርስቲያኖች ተገቢ ስለሆነ ምግብ ማስረጃዎችን ማግኘት እንችላለን። ለምሳሌ ያክል ለጣኦት የተሰዋን አለመብላትን ማንሳት ይቻላል። ወደ ጥያቄህ በቀጥታ ለመምጣት እንደ ክርስቲያን በአላህ ወይም በመሐመድ ስም የታረደን መብላት ይችላል? ... እዚህ ላላህ እግዚአብሔር እኩል ናቸው? ይህ በራሱ አስቸጋሪ ጥያቄ ነው። እነሱ አላህ አይወልድም ፣ አይወለድም ፣ አይሞትም ፣ አይሰቀልም እንዲያ አይደለም የሚሉት? እኛ ክርስቲያኖች እግዚአብሔር የምንለው ደግሞ ሰው ሁኖ ፣ ተሰቅሎ ፣ ሙቶ ያዳነንን ነው። ወደዛ ዝርዝር ድረስ ባንሄድም ፣ እንደዚህ ያሉ ቀላል የሚመስሉ ነገር ግን ትልቅ ትርጉም ያላቸው የምንዘነጋቸው ነገሮች አሉ። እናም የራስን ምግብ መመገብ የሚመረጠው ለዛ ነው በምግብ ምክንያት ከመሰናከል ሐዋርያው ጳውሎስ እንዳስተማረን። እናም በአስተራረድም ቢሆን የሚያጠራጥረን ነገር ካለ አለመብላቱ ይሻላል። እንደሚመስለኝ ባገራችን ከዚህጋር የተያያዘውን ልማድም በዚህ መልኩ ብንመለከተው ይሻላል። የቀደመት አባቶቻችን እንደው ዝምብለው በዘፈቀደ ያለምክንያት አይደለም ስርዓት የሚደነግጉት።

Chapter 4, page 111:

ሁለት ወር መስሊም ዘንድ ተቀልቤያልሁ። ከስጋ በስተቀር ሌላውን ምግብ አብረን ነበር የምንበላው። [ሌላውን ምግብ ስንበላ ታዲያ] ስጋ አልነካውም ይሉኛል። ነገር ግን የምንጠቀምበት ዕቃ ላይ ጥንቃቄ እናደርግ ነበር። በርግጥ ፈንደሜንታሊስት ከሆንክ ከነጭራሹም እቤታቸውም አትገባም። እማወራዋ ንፍሮ እንኳን ስታበስል ዕቃው በደንብ እንደምታጠብው ትነግረኝ ነበር። አይዘህ አትፍራ ትለኛለች። [...] ድግስ ምናምን ሲኖር ግን የነሱን ዕቃ ከማጠብ ይልቅ ለክርስቲያን እንግዶቻቸው ለማብሰል ከክርስቲያን ጎረቤቶቻቸው ዕቃ ይሞሳሉ።

Chapter 4, page 121-22

አንድ ቀን ፍየል ለመግዛት ገበያ ወጣሁና አራጅ ከዛው ከገበያ አገኘሁና ፍየሉን ራሱ ይዞልኝ መጣ። አርዶ ከጨረሰ በኋላ እንዳጋጣሚ መስቀል ያለበት ማተቡን ካንገቱ ላይ አየሁት። ከው አልኩኝ። ‘ክርስቲያን ነህ እንዴ?’ ስለው ‘አዎ’ አለኝ። በቃ ደነገጥኩኝ። ክርስቲያን ይሁን እስላም ምንም ትዝ አላለኝም ነበር ቀደም። በቃ እንዴ አርዷታል ፤ ካረዳት በኋላ ምንም ማድረግ ስለማልችል ፣ ካለማወቅ ስለሆነ የተከሰተው በላናት። [...] ደሞስ በጉም ሆነ ፍየሉ ክርስቲያን ወይ እስላም አይደለም። ያው በግ ነው [ሳቅ]። ለማንኛውም ግን ለማንም ትንፍሽ አላልኩም [ሳቅ]። በርግጥ እኔ ስለማውቀው ውስጤ ደስተኛ አልነበረም። ውስጤን ማሳመን ስላልቻልኩኝ ቅር

ብሎኝ ነበር። ልጄና ባለቤቴ ፣ እንግዶችም ነበሩ ተመገቡ ፤ ምንም አልሆኑም። በርግጥ እኔም ምንም አልሆንኩም።

Chapter 4, page 123:

አይት እያለሁ ፣ ከባድ ዝናብ ይመጣል። ከወደ ደጋ የመጡ ናቸው አስገባኝቸው እንዲጠለሉ። አንዱ ቁስ ነው ሦስቱ ጨዋ ናቸው ያልተማሩ ማለት ነው። ዝናብ መቷቸው ይንቀጠቀጣሉ። ሸረንደው ባክሽ እንጀራ ስጫቸው አልኳት ለባለቤቴ። እንደው ሊደሙ ይችላሉ ብለን ቅቤም አላደረግንበት። እንጀራ በጨው አቀረብንላቸው። ሦስቱ ሰፍ ብለው ሊበሉ ሲሉ ፣ “ገዝቻችኋለሁ” አላቸው ቁስ ተብዬው። ከዛ በቃ ስብስብ ፣ ስብስብ አደረጉ እጃቸውን። “ለምንድነው?” ስል “የሙሰሊም እንጀራ ነው።” “የገባህበት ቤትሳ?” ... “የሙሰሊም ነው።” ... “ተዚህ እንጀራ ላይ ምን አየህብት?” ... “የሙሰሊም እንጀራ ነው።” ... “ጤፋ የናንተ አይደለም ወይ፣ ውሃውንስ ካንድ ወንዝ አይደለም ቀድተን የምናመጣው? ... ስጋኮ የለውም አልኩት።”... “አይ ይከለክላል” አለኝ። “አንተ ነህ ህግ የምታወጣው? እስኪ አሳየኝ በል ከተሸክምከው መጽሐፍ ላይ” አልኩት። ቤቴ መጽሐፍ ቅዱስ ስለነበረኝ እንካ አሳየኝ የሙሰሊም እንጀራ አትብሉ የሚል ካለ አልኩት። መልስ መስጠት ተሳነው።

Appendix 5

Amharic texts translated by the researcher into English and quoted at length in the dissertation

Chapter 3, page 86:

ተክለዓዲቅ መኩሪያ (ሺ፱፻፳፮ ፣ ገጽ ፯፻፹ - ፯፻፹፩)

ከህጻናትም ቀሳውስቱም ምዕመናኑም የግራኝ ሥልጣን በተዘረጋበት ሰዓት በግዴታ ስለሰለሙ እስላሞቹ ያሉትን እየፈጸምን በልባችን ሃይማኖታችንን እንጠብቃለን የሚሉ ቢኖሩም በግድ ከእስላሞቹ ጋር ሲኖሩ እስላሞቹ ያረዱትን አንበላም ብለው እንደ ቀድሞው ተጸይፈው እምቢ ማለት አይችሉም። ያለዚያ የሰይፍ በትርና ሞት ይከተላል። በሌላው ጊዜ “በስመ አብ ወወልድ ወመንፈስ ቅዱስ” ብለው ባርክው ክርስቲያኖቹ ያረዱትን እስላሞቹ እንደማይበሉ እንደዚሁም “ብሰሚላሂ” ብለው እስላሞቹ ያረዱትን ክርስቲያኖቹ በፍጹም አይበሉም። አሁን ግን በግዴታም ቢሆን ከሰለሙ በኋላ ከበሉ እንደሰለሙ ወይም እንደረከሱ መቆጠር አለባቸው። በግዴታ መሰለሙም መብላቱም ስለልቀረ ሁሉም ሃይማኖቱን እንዳረከሰው ስለተቆጠረ ...

Chapter 5, page 133:

ተአምረ ማርያም (፲፱፻፳፰ ፣ ገጽ ፪፻፵፮ - ፪፻፵፯)

ልመናዋ ክብሯም በኛ ለዘለዓለም በውነት ይደርብንና አምላክን የወለደች በድንጋሌ ሥጋ በድንጋሌ ነፍስ የፀናች ክብርት እመቤታችን ያደረገችው ተአምር ይህ ነው። የላሞች መንጋ ያሉት አንድ አይሁዳዊ ነበረ ፣ ልጁም ከክርስቲያን ልጆች ጋራ ከመንደር በአፍኦ ላሞቹን ይጠብቅ ነበር። ከዕለታት ባንድ ቀንም ምሳቸውን የበሉ ዘንድ እኒህ እረኞች ተሰበሰቡ ይህ የአይሁዳዊ ልጅም መጥቶ ከሳቸው ጋራ ይበላ ዘንድ እንጀራውን አኖረው። አንተ የአይሁዳዊ ልጅ እኛ ክርስቲያን ነንና እንደኛ ክርስቲያን እስክትሆን ድረስ ከኛ ጋራ አትበላም አሉት። ከናንተ ጋራ አንድ እሆን ዘንድ ወደ ክርስቲና አግቡኝ አላቸው። የአይሁዳዊ ልጅ ይህን በተናገረ ጊዜ ከረኞቹ አንዱ ተነሥቶ ከሚጠጡበት ቋጫ ውኃ ጠልቆ በአይሁዳዊ ልጅ ራስ ላይ ረጨው። ጄድ አምላክ በሚሆን በአብ በወልድ በመንፈስ ቅዱስ ስም አጠምቅሁለሁ ስምህም ገሪናን ይሁን ብሎ ረጨው። እንደሳቸውም ከተጠመቀ በኋላ በመካከላቸው ገብቶ በላ።

Chapter 5, page 135:

አፈ ታሪክ

ከዕለታት አንድ ቀን ሙሰሊምና ክርስቲያን መንገደኞች/ነጋዴዎች/ወታደሮች በጉዞ ላይ ሳሉ ስንቅ ያልቅባቸውና አድነው መብላት ነበረባቸው። ኋላም ለየቅላቸው ካደኑ በኋላ አብስልው ለመብላት የነበራቸው ድስት ግን አንድ ብቻ ነበር። እናም የሰላሙና የክርስቲያኑን ስጋ ባንድ ላይ ለማብሰል ወሰኑ። ነገር ግን የትኛው የሰላም የትኛው የክርስቲያን መሆኑን ለመለየት በክርስቲያኑ ስጋ ላይ ክር የማሰር መላ መጣላቸው። ከዛም ሁለቱን ስጋ ባንድ ድስት አብስልው ተመገቡ።

Chapter 5, page 137-8:

አፈ ታሪክ

አዬ ዮሃንስ ክርስቲያኑንና እስላሙን ባንድ ማዕድ እንዲበላ ካንድ እንሰሳ የታረደ ስጋን እንዲበሉ ያስገድዱ በነበረበት ወቅት አንድ ቀን ወሎ ውስጥ እስላሙና ክርስቲያኑ በተሰበሰበበት በሬውን ማን ይረደው በሚል ውዝግብ ይነሳል። መስማማት ስላልተቻለም ህዝቡ ቄስና ሼህ ይጠራል ለውሳኔ። ኋላም ቄስና ሼሁ በተሰበሰበው ህዝብ ፊት ቀርበው መፍትሄ ይሰጣሉ ሲባል ፣ ቄሱ ክርስቲያኑን ያስደነገጠ ውሳኔ አስተላለፉ ፣ ማለትም ሼሁ እንዲያርዱ ፈቀዱላቸው። በዚህ ውሳኔም ክርስቲያኑ “እንዴት ነው ነገሩ እስላም ያረደውን ሊያበሉን ነው እንዴ?” ሲሉ ቢያገረመርምም ፣ ሼሁ በሬውን አረዱት። የክርስቲያኖቹን መከፋት ያስተዋሉት ቄስ ታዲያ የታረደውን በሬ በድጋሚ ቢያርዱት ተአምር ተፈጠረ። እንዳዲስ ከበሬው ደም ጎረፈ። ከዛ በኋላ ሁለቱም ወገን በደስታ እየተጎራረሱ በሉ።