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"And Unto Dust Shalt Thou Return"

Death and the Semiotics of Remembrance in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Village

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Abstract

This ethnographic article discusses funerary practice, Orthodox Christian ideas of body and spirit, and the ways in which people make memorials for each other on the Zege Peninsula in northwest Ethiopia. I pay special attention to gravestones because, here as in many other places, physical memorials to the dead become locations where latent uncertainties and conflicts about the relationship between spirit and matter, body and soul, and this world and the next, tend to crystallise. I show that material memorials highlight ambiguities in Orthodox attitudes to human embodiment and challenge priestly monopolies over relations between the living and the dead. Because of material chains of mediation and memorialisation, the disaggregating practices of Orthodox funerary ritual can never fully untangle the deceased from their worldly social entanglements.

Relations between the living and the dead have generated controversy throughout Christian history. In late antiquity, divisions between Christians and others in Rome cemented around the Christians' use of shrines and veneration of human remains in direct contravention of prevailing sensibilities (Brown 1981: 21). In the Protestant Reformation the demolition of ossuaries and the disruption of monastic prayer for the dead were integral to the reorganisation of relations of human and divine power throughout Europe (Duffy 1992: 475). In each case the material media by which the living maintain ties of memory or communication with the dead are focal points of controversy, as the desires of memory and community rub against principles of proper separation between this world and the next.

This article discusses controversies over mediation on the Zege peninsula, on Lake Tana in northern Ethiopia. The peninsula has several historic churches and its population is predominantly Orthodox Christian. This is a place in which disciplines of the body, especially fasting, are lynchpins of the religious regime, and in which human embodiment is regarded as the primary burden of existence but also the locus of salvation through religious work (Ephraim 1995). As I will show, it is at the point of death that ambivalence toward the body turns to outright distaste. Traditional burial practices entail the swift effacement of all evidence that a grave or a body was present. Part of their function is to render the remains of the body inert, by separating them from all that was once alive. But these practices come into conflict with personal and familial memorialisation, in which people tend to stress the preservation of some active material remainder of the person. Here the contradictions in local views of materiality, flesh, and spirit come to light, and it is these contradictions that I explore below.

This article is based on ethnographic material gathered during eighteen months' fieldwork in Zege in 2008-09 and on a further six months in multiple subsequent visits. The ethnographic prompt for this paper was what I perceived as a persistent and multifaceted anxiety in Zege with forgetting and being forgotten. This anxiety is tangible at funerals and in conversations about death, but also in daily discourse, in the language of greeting and parting, and in innumerable small conversations in the course of daily affairs. As an example, one of the more common ways to greet friends in Amharic is '*t'effah*' - "You disappeared"[i] – even if you saw each other the day before. The idea of disappearing is recurrent in daily speech – people also often say '*attit'fa,*' "Don't disappear," upon parting. This is more than a verbal convention, because it will be accompanied with genuine upset and anger if a person fails to maintain contact without a valid reason. Village life revolves around the maintenance of personal presence by visiting neighbours (always mediated by coffee or food), and while communication technology affords important ways of maintaining a mediated presence over distance, the loss of personal presence is a major concern in Zege.

As I have come to understand them, concerns about forgetting have everything to do with religious discourses of materiality and immateriality, and especially with the question of what we leave behind us when we die. To better understand the dynamics of forgetting, I want to trace the means and the media by which people make memorials, and the different registers of memorialization, especially the tensions between its political, religious, and emotional dimensions.

By asking how people remember each other, we can switch the focus from the anxiety which I immediately perceived during fieldwork, to a positive emphasis on the ways in which people make themselves present to each other, and integrate the lives of others into their own. Burial practices in any society are important ways of managing people's relationship with their past. They entail decisions about which parts of their forebears' lives are to be emphasised, and which people need to be marked as important beyond their own lifespan. Graves thus carry selected elements of the past into the future, and it is the selectivity that is important. They contribute to a living landscape as proof of previous habitation and therefore belonging (Kenna forthcoming).

In his discussion of how graves are vectors of history and historical claims to power, Joost Fontein (2011) advocates an "anthropology of proximity". He discusses how bones and graves, along with other parts of the landscape, bring certain aspects of the past closer to present concerns while allowing others to fade. It is the physical, affective closeness of ancestors' bones and memorials that matters, and this nearness always speaks of political choices that people make. Fontein suggests proximity as an alternative to the anthropological focus on ontology: to ask not what people think graves and ancestors are (and hence how they differ from 'our' conceptions), but how they are brought into daily concerns, emotional lives, and political struggles. I endorse this approach, but as I will discuss below, the comparative weakness of ancestors and lineages in Orthodox Ethiopia creates rather different contours of memory and belonging than are found elsewhere in Africa.

Issues of forgetting and being forgotten concern the physical status both of people being present to each other while they live, and of their physical remnants after they die. I want to consider the semiotic aspects of this problem, the ways in which people indicate the presence of themselves and other people, living or dead, to each other. I treat memorials as material signs, in that they carry some kind of reference to the person being remembered, and the physical form they take is integral to their semiotic function. My focus is on the material sign as mediator of a social relationship, a vector of interpersonal connection.

I am following the work of Webb Keane (2007: 1-42),) and others who have developed the classificatory schema of CS Peirce (especially 1940: Chapter 7) to elucidate the relationship between material form and signification. Like Keane, I emphasise the index: a sign that represents its object by virtue of some kind of physical or causal connection. The indexicality of memorials is indispensable to their effectiveness; signs need to have some kind of contiguity with the deceased in order to act as satisfactory memorials. This places limits on what kinds of semiotic forms people are able to enlist to help them remember people.

Keane provides a template for this view of indexicality in his work on semiotic form:
> "the very materiality of objects is inseparable from their capacity to signify...the realism and intuitive power of objects often derives from their indexicality, their apparent connection to the things they signify by virtue of a real relationship of causality or conjunction. That is, they point to the *presence* of something (if not here, at least at some time and place). Under manipulation, they transform the spatial and or temporal dimensions of

identity and experience – for instance, bringing the distant closer or the

past into the present" (Keane 2006: 311).

The link between indexicality and presence – in space and in time – is critical,
particularly when what is being made present is dead people about whom one cares.
Indexicality brings into the here-and-now actual, material traces of times past and
people who have passed.

This is problematic in Zege for a whole range of reasons: religious, because the dead
should not really leave any remnant after departing from this world; practical, because
good memorials are expensive and consume space; and political, because there is
competition over who will be remembered. The politics of who gets remembered and
who does not also take on religious and economic dimensions, as the two best ways of
ensuring that people will continue to remember you are to attain great wealth or
display great piety. These lines of contention meet in the graveyard.

Technologies of Remembrance and Graveyard Politics

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

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

My main reason for examining the churchyards was the presence, in each of the church-monasteries of Zege, of a significant number of concrete graves. These took the form of raised oblong blocks, with the deceased's name, birth and death dates scratched in by hand while the concrete was still wet. They often also had some kind of metal cross embedded at the head; the fancier ones had more elaborate concrete structures (figs. 1-3). I found thirty of these graves in the yard of Fure Maryam, the nearest church to the local market town, a similar number in Ura Kidane Mihret in Zege proper, and ascertained that there were also several concrete graves as far as the Mehal Zege monasteries on the tip of the peninsula. Most of these graves were constructed between 1991 and 2006 by the Gregorian (Western) calendar, from the downfall of Communism until a local Church edict was passed forbidding any further construction.

There are obvious practical grounds for outlawing concrete graves. Churchyard space is limited and the graves would quickly choke the church lands if allowed to proliferate. According to some interlocutors in Afaf, the problem came to a head

when people began trying to stake out plots for graves in advance, causing widespread conflict, and the situation became unmanageable. But there is a separate discourse against the graves. As Abebe explained to me, the priests of Ura Kidane Mihret had turned against concrete graves 'so that it does not become modern' (*zemenawí indayhon*). The traditional quality of the churches - their similarity to their past selves - is a key part of their status. As a priest explained to me in Mehal Zege, the most remote part of the peninsula, concrete graves are "what they do in town. It is not done here." This was an appeal to propriety, and to a pervasive local understanding that in Zege the traditional and the holy are isomorphic. Zege has retained its holy status, and the income that derives from tourism and pilgrimage, by preserving its church traditions.

Finally, his companion, an older priest who had been listening to us, made reference to the Bible: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3.19), for a theological explanation of the impropriety of concrete graves. Bodily dissolution, not physical permanence, was the proper end of a Christian life. Pankhurst and Aspen (2005: 873) attest that this is generally true of Christian Ethiopia: "According to an old Christian custom, the graves are deprived of inscriptions or other signs identifying the defuntes. In the case of important persons, including emperors and high ecclesiastics, the identity of remains is usually preserved by the local tradition only... Devout Christians, both nobles and commoners, were completely 'depersonified' in their corporal death (this being 'balanced' by the hope for eternal life of the soul)."

I have interviewed a local church scholar, *Mergéta* Worqé Dibebu, about family tomb practice in Zege. As well as saying that concrete graves contradict the *Mes'hafe*

Ginzet, the Book of the Dead, he told me that bodies were to be buried wrapped in a rough palm mat with its sharp edges towards the corpse; a symbol of penitence and of the fact that the body does not travel with the soul after death. In addition, it was not Orthodox for families to mark out burial spaces for their members, as this would emphasize the remains rather than the spirit. However, because there was strong demand for family members to be buried together, this stricture was usually relaxed.

There are examples in Ethiopia of graves and human remains given high public importance. One is the history of saints' relics (Kaplan 1986), which I discuss below, and another is the practice of building mausoleums or elaborate tombs for Emperors and for wealthy and famous people, which is most noticeable in Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie has a magnificent tomb within his eponymous cathedral in Addis, and the graveyard contains monuments for the resting places of a number of major figures from 20th century Ethiopia, including the singer Tilahun Gessesse and former Prime minister Meles Zenawi. Emperor Menilek has his own grand mausoleum under Be'ata Maryam monastery in Addis. The practice of building mausolea for emperors dates to the 1600s but substantial grave building seems to have been restricted to Emperors and some holy people (Pankhurst & Aspen 2005: 873). In the largest church of Bahir Dar, near Zege, there are marble statues and tombs for some of revered monks who were associated with the church. As a friend in Bahir Dar told me, "only rich people and heroes" receive such monuments in the key churches, highlighting the inequality among the dead that material monuments can produce. What is more, many people I have spoken to in both Addis and Bahir Dar have been highly critical of these inequalities in burial practice. The priests in Zege, certainly, considered tomb-building a distinctly urban, and hence suspect, practice.

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

A gravestone is an indexical memorial because it points to the actual remains of the deceased. Moreover, because it bears the occupant's name, it states that something of that person persists in their bodily remains. Yet the priest's citation, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return", describes a disavowal of human remains as a legitimate medium of proximity. The standard practice of unmarked graves enacts and reinforces this position, as graves, and hence the remains they contain, quickly devolve into indistinction. This is the central contradiction of death in Zege, and it is particularly brought to light in the way people enlist new technologies (such as concrete) in their memorial practices.

Stringent purity rules exist to ensure signs of digestion and sexuality are kept separate from church services and the Eucharistic liturgy. As well as menstruating and postpartum women, no person who has eaten food or drunk water may participate in the service, and people with open wounds or runny noses are excluded from the Eucharist. Orthodox ritual is built on principles of bodily closure. These principles are continuous with the importance of fasting in daily religious life; fasting restricts what goes into and comes out of the body and suppresses physical desires for the benefit of the soul.

When a person dies, a family member will block all orifices of the corpse with material, tie the big toes together, and wrap the body in fine white cloth (Kaplan 2003: 645). I think we must view this final closure of the body as analogous to the bodily closure and isolation required during the Liturgy (see Hannig 2012). It is logical to suggest that the body fluids that are kept as far as possible from the Liturgy and the Eucharist, are associated with putrefaction (cf. Bynum 1995: 108-113). In ritual and in death, work is required to keep body and soul separate. It is at these times that something like a loathing of the body emerges in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Friends who asked me about English funeral practice were shocked to hear that we might preserve the body for a week or more before burial, and even leave it open for viewings by the mourners.

Controversies over human remains are indicative of more general questions of material and spirit, and the proper relationship between the living and the dead. In the next section I will give an account of an Orthodox funeral in order to give a fuller impression of how people practice and conceptualise their relationships with the dead.

This will offer further evidence of the denigration of human remains, and will establish how Christians in Zege regard funerary rites as effecting the separation of the soul from the tangible world.

Throwing out the Bones: Human Remains as Dust, and the Soul's Journey to Heaven

Two months or so into fieldwork, my friend Tomas had learned enough about the sort of work I was trying to do that, when an elderly neighbour of ours died, he knew that I would want to attend the funeral. To do so would also be an unequivocally good act on my part; attending funerals is the key marker of social participation and belonging in Amhara Orthodox society. Participation, in turn, and attempting to act like the people around you, not only by conforming to custom but also by engaging in local social networks, was the surest way for me to gain people's approval. This becomes paramount in moments of loss, as people emphasise their remaining social ties ever more strongly, so attending funerals becomes the most significant indicator, for locals, that a person is a member of their group (A. Pankhurst 1992: 188, Kaplan 2003: 645). Attendance is ensured by *iddir* funerary associations, which I describe in more detail below.

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

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

The lack of solemnity among the gravediggers is significant. People's behaviour is far less important than the fact of their presence. Richard Pankhurst (1990: 195) confirms that it has historically been the case that what counts at funerals is presence. The presence of the living is particularly important in light of the absence of the deceased, and the gravediggers' treatment of the bones they unearthed is a stark demonstration of that absence. In tossing away the bones, the men were behaving in a manner

perfectly in line with Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine as expressed to me by the priests who disapproved of concrete graves. They treated the bones, and the site of the earlier grave, as if they were nothing special; or at least, they nearly did. For one man did at least consider it notable, and worth asking me what we did in such circumstances in my own country. I have since found out that at least some of my friends feel that, given the choice, they would rather not have someone else buried where their bones lie, and felt that concrete tombs would be a good way of ensuring this did not happen.

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

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

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

The term for mortuary rites, *fit'hat*, is cognate with the Amharic *fetta*, to release (A. Pankhurst 1992: 191, Leslau 2010: 243), and is understood as such by people in Zege: both in the sense of releasing the deceased from her sins and of releasing the soul from this world and from its bodily confines (Merawi 2005). The rite separates bodily things, which are tangible but will decompose, from spirit, which is permanent but elsewhere.

For each *fithat* service the family of the deceased must make a payment to the clergy – in Zege, usually an amount of *injera* bread or *t'ella* beer, specified according to the occasion. The *tezkar* remembrance feast has special importance across Orthodox Ethiopia and has traditionally entailed the bereaved giving a large feast for their neighbours on the fortieth day after death (Mersha 2010: 881-2). Messing (1957: 485-6) reports that the fortieth day was considered the first on which the soul could be released from purgatory, and describes the feast as "the greatest single economic consumption in the life cycle"

The practice has come under criticism from modernisers since Haile Selassie's time as wasteful and unproductive, a complaint I still hear from people in Addis Ababa. Older men in Zege talk about funerary feasts as a major way for a person to establish their moral status and that of their family: a man of standing should give a *tezkar* at least once in his life, at least for his father. If his father died and he did not have the resources to provide an adequate feast, it would be quite appropriate to wait until he had accumulated enough, even if this took years. A proper feast for a major dignitary could involve the slaughter of fifty cattle or more, and might aim to feed every person in the area.

Zege adds an extra element to the *tezkar* feasting, which I have not seen attested elsewhere: the family may slaughter a sheep upon the grave of the deceased, allowing its blood to fall on the burial earth. Consistent with other interpretations of death, this was explained to me as a way to help the soul away from this world, as a form of atonement. The ensuing communal consumption of the sheep then re-forms community bonds in a manner consistent with the practice for remembering saints (Kaplan 1986: 8, as *zikkir*, see Boylston 2013). The practice also contains clear analogical links to the salvific power of the blood of Christ. This is understood as further effecting the separation of the soul from this world, and trying to make sure that it is free from sin as it leaves. But any memorial sacrifice in this area is understood also to index the status of the household that makes it. It demarcates them as having wealth but also as putting that wealth to moral use.

Iddir, Community, and Recognition

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

To have an unattended funeral is to live a life unrecognised and unsocialized. It means you have established no meaningful connections, nor any of the status or respect that would compel people to attend and commemorate you. What people seek in their own funerals, and what the *iddir* ensures, is not just that their soul will be assisted to heaven, but that they will be recognised as having lived as part of the community. Often, indeed, people emphasise this recognition more than their salvation.

The *iddir* pays for food to serve to guests at the tent, which ensures that they will come, establishes the deceased as host and therefore a person of honour and a feeder of others, and reaffirms the hierarchy of the living (Bloch & Parry 1982). Since *iddir* membership is inexpensive, this ensures that most people can be mourned with enough hospitality to establish basic respectability.

Sainthood, Autochthony, and the Remains of the Past

I have said that most exceptions to the disregard for human remains are in cases of heroism, especially Emperors and holy men. Such figures can become key connectors to the past, and Kaplan (1986: 2-5) recounts several stories from hagiographies of a saint's bones being fought over by communities seeking the status and legitimacy those remains would confer.

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

In Orthodox Amhara, by contrast, not only is there no ancestor veneration; there are no lineages. Descent is cognatic, reckoned through the father and the mother, which prevents the emergence of distinct lineage groups, meaning that no particular group of people has exclusive claim to any one forebear (Hoben 1973). And while descent is crucial for the transmission of land and property rights, the Orthodox Church performs many of the functions that elsewhere would be performed by descent groups: establishing social continuity beyond the lifespan of the individual, and denoting legitimate occupation of the land. For the people of Zege, it is the antiquity

and continuity of their churches - as physical structures, and not just as institutions – that makes their land special and grants them their sacred right to reside there (Boylston 2012: 161). Per Kaplan, Saints' bones have at various times in Ethiopia served similar purposes as do ancestors' bones elsewhere, of establishing autochthony and legitimacy. Saints, then, sometimes overcome the general tradition of depersonalizing the remains of the dead. However, Kaplan (1986: 6-7) makes clear that the locus of devotional practice was not parts of the saint's body – unlike in Europe, these were never circulated – but at the burial place of his or her remains, and by extension, in the monastery that housed them.

In Zege, at least, it is more often in church buildings themselves that memory is materialised. The ultimate indexes of belonging for inhabitants are the monasteries, and especially the first two to be founded, those of Mehal Zege Giyorgis and Betre Maryam. The first was founded by Zege's patron saint, Abune Betre Maryam, probably in the reign of Amde Tsion (1314-1344), and the second, on his death, by his disciple Bartoloméyos (Cerulli 1946: 135, Bosc-Tiessé 2008: 70). Betre Maryam built Giyorgis after being commanded to in a vision, and the second monastery was built in commemoration of his great deeds. Betre Maryam's piety made possible the pact with God that legitimizes the continuing inhabitation of Zege by Christians, and the buildings are the physical indexes of that pact.

When I asked priests in Mehal Zege what one could do if one wanted to be commemorated, they responded that one could arrange (including payment) for monks to recite prayers in one's name, and by building a temporary shelter in the churchyard, ensure that they would use it for your commemorative prayer. They then

took me to the main external gate of the monastery, a large and sturdy structure built from local stone. Built into the gate above the entrance is a small cell where prayers for the dead can take place in seclusion (fig. 4). They told me that an abbot had had this gate built as his memorial gift to the monastery, and was now buried by the entrance. His bones were not treated as unimportant, but they were subsumed into the church, and they were not marked by his written name or his image.

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

This prerogative is illustrated by the one concrete grave I found which had been built after they were forbidden. This was the finest grave I have seen, made of stone, with birth and death dates neatly inscribed and displaying, uniquely, a small painted portrait of the deceased. This woman had become a nun a year or so before her death, and one of her sons had moved to Texas and become quite rich, and so had paid for

her grave to be built. Still, it was quite discreetly placed in an unobtrusive corner of the churchyard, since it was technically illegal. Abebe explained that the son must have paid quite a significant amount to the church in order to persuade them to flout the law, which might nonetheless have been unacceptable had the woman not been a respected nun.

The Orthodox Church is the institutional locus of continuity between past and present, much more than any kinship-based form of ancestry. But only certain kinds of memorial are possible within this institutional framework, and the strong overall trend is to impersonal graves. The use of concrete graves in Zege in the nineties and early two thousands was an attempt to broaden the possibilities of material memorialization of distinct individuals, but one that raised serious practical and religious questions about making permanent additions to the church landscape.

Christianity, Spirit, and Depersonalisation

The moment of death is a nexus point of practical and theoretical concerns and insecurities about matter, spirit, and community. When remembering the dead, the range of memorials one can construct is limited by factors both ideological (such as religious injunctions on the proper form of tombs) and practical (such as the cost of a gravestone). A virtue of Keane's elaboration of concepts of semiotic ideology and semiotic form is that it allows one to consider both these ideological and practical limitations as integral to the process of signification (and hence of social connection) itself, producing a semiotics which ties people into the world rather than abstracting them from it. This is especially important in light of the many ways in which

Christianity has been involved in attempts to detach ideas from things as a part of divisions between the ideal and the material (Keane 2006: 310-12; 2007:23). What I want to focus on is what memorial practice tells us about the gap between the living and the dead in Orthodoxy. This is not the same thing as the gap between humans and God, but the two are related.

This article stands in dialogue with a body of literature that discusses the paradoxes inherent in any endeavour that posits an ideal realm of existence outside of the world of lived experience. Much of this has developed in the anthropology of Christianity (especially Engelke 2007, Cannell 2006, Keane 2006) but there are precedents elsewhere: Bloch posits the incommensurability between a transcendent realm of deathlessness and the lived world as a possibly universal upshot of the ritual process (Bloch 1992). The idea of a Great Divide has been most central to scholarship on Christianity at least since Hegel (Cannell 2006:14, Engelke 2007: 13), and also seems to remain a significant underpinning of "modern" thought, particularly in the work of purification (Keane 2007: 41, Latour 1993). The work of purification is the purportedly modern tendency to draw separations: between humans and non-humans, ideas and things, nature and culture (Latour 1993: 10, 35). Keane suggests, I think rightly, that it is worth pursuing the relationships between what Latour identifies as the work of purification, and the Christian history of divisions of spirit and matter, and the problem of the fetish (Keane 2007: 23-25).

These separations are never completely achieved, because of the ineluctable material conditions necessary for human sustenance and human communication (Engelke 2012: 212). Precisely because unworldliness is such a prominent idea in certain kinds

of Christianity, anthropologists of Christianity have especially emphasised the insistently material moorings of symbolic practice (eg. Engelke 2007: 9-11, 28-32; Keane 2006: 322, 2007: 24).

Ethiopian Orthodox notions of materiality and spirit are complex, not least because of the significant disconnect between the ideas of religious experts and ordinary practitioners, and by the absence of an explicit systematic theology (Levine 1965: 67). It has been common to note that God in this tradition is considered rather more distant and unapproachable than in some other traditions (Levine 1965, Morton 1973: 65, Reminick 1975). Since God is omnipresent, this should not be construed as physical distance (Kaplan 1984: 70), but a separation in terms of purity and authority, and especially in knowability: "Above all, Abyssinians view God as *mystery*" (Levine 1965: 67). A similar mystery applies to the destination of the soul after death. Heaven is often described as the sky (*semay*), and what ordinary people emphasise is its distance from us. The gap between the living and the dead is not total: through prayers and through food sacrifices, we can intercede on their behalf and perhaps help them achieve salvation. Perhaps, then, it is better to think about Orthodox death and remembrance not in terms of an absolute divide between matter and spirit, but in terms of the dis-embodiment of the person in a context in which various material transactions between humans and divine beings are in fact possible.

Conclusion

The physical proximity of the dead, through bones or graves, matters on a number of different levels – and I would suggest that their indexicality means that graves are

usually about bodily remains, and not just about memory. There is the political register, in which bones serve claims of legitimacy and autochthony, and decide which parts of the past a collective will carry into the future. At the same time, status at local level is played out through the feasting of the dead, and used to be much more dramatically so until successive modernizing governments opposed the practice.

In the religious-theological register, bones and graves encapsulate questions and uncertainties about human embodiment, the permanence of the soul, and the correct modes of relation between this mode and the next. In the emotional register, graves are nexus points in processes of grieving and remembrance. Their materiality and their permanence or impermanence are integral to their effectiveness. These registers are interlinked, not distinct, but they frequently pull in different directions: these tensions mean that death is, in most places, a key locus of political contestation.

What is particular about the Ethiopian Orthodox case is a certain practical discourse of embodiment and human materiality, and a system in which ancestral lineage is downplayed in favor of saintly predecessors and the Orthodox Church as an overarching corporate institution. While we should be cautious about attributing causation, the Amhara cognatic descent system complements Orthodox Christianity because, in preventing the emergence of segmentary lineages, it reduces the importance of genealogical ancestors, leaving room for other indexes of continuity.

Ethiopian Orthodoxy does not negate human remains in all cases; there is ample evidence that saints' and holy people's bones are important. However, since most

people do not fall into these categories, saints' memorials do not always contribute to the emotional requirements of death and memorialization.

A material semiotic approach helps us to understand how people produce presence or proximity with living and dead others through material intermediaries and their indexical qualities. People in Zege seek personal co-presence in all parts of their lives. It is no surprise that people should seek material tokens of their loved ones' presence when they die, but it is here that relationship building enters a tension with the prerogative to de-materialize the person and speed their soul to heaven. Concrete graves insist on pointing to the bones; they do not let the body blend back into the environment. In this sense they stand against established practices for the selective preservation of the past, with the key word being 'selective'. One of the key political decisions a society makes is in which parts of its present will be allowed or made to disappear from the physical environment of its future.

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[i] Amharic transliteration is based on the system used by A. Pankhurst (1992). Where a proper name spelling is widely used I follow that version.

[ii] Assuming thirty gravestones per church, or roughly 210 on the Peninsula. Ethiopia's death rate is currently 11.29 per thousand, and Zege's population c10000, leading to a very rough estimate of 1400 deaths over a 14-year period.

[iii] My thanks to Sara Marzagora for pointing out this detail.