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Exorcizing the Spirit of Protestantism: Ambiguity and Spirit Possession in an Ethiopian Orthodox Ritual.

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Abstract

This article discusses the exorcism of Protestant spirits from Ethiopian Orthodox hosts in Addis Ababa. This controversial ritual is animated by injunctions to draw essential distinctions and boundaries between Protestantism and Orthodoxy, at a time of religious liberalization. The expulsion of Protestant spirits provides an occasion to reaffirm the centrality of local Orthodoxy to Ethiopian identity, construing Protestantism as a foreign religion at odds with the country's ancient Orthodox history. However, this ritual project is marked by profound ambiguities, as exorcism's means, aesthetics and themes are suspiciously similar to those characteristic of Protestantism. By foregrounding ritual ambiguity, I argue that exorcism publically exposes and vividly magnifies the irreparable permeability of the very inter-religious boundaries that it seeks to demarcate. In contrast to classic understandings of ritual as an ordering process, exorcism rituals become hazardous events that balance uncertainly on the edge of the ever-present risk of becoming the other.

Keywords:

Spirit possession; Ethiopian Orthodox Church; exorcism; ritual; Protestantism; ambiguity.

Introduction

Figure 1

A voice resounded in the crowded yard of the Istifanos church, in the heart of Addis Ababa. Broadcast by loudspeakers, it could be heard far beyond the church walls. 'Ethiopia is under attack,' exclaimed the priest, holding a microphone and perched on a wooden stage in the midst of hundreds of people. The enemy, I soon learned, is a cunning, spiritual one, invisible to human eyes. It is also an old one, the same since the time of Adam and Eve: the devil. But, the priest warned, 'today the devil appears in new clothes'. It speaks with new and more seductive voices, generating new kind of problems. 'Ethiopia is a battlefield', he declared; and the church of Istifanos, he seemed to imply, was a key arena for this battle.

The priest was Memher Girma¹, an exorcist who, at the time of my field research (2011-2014), had been performing mass exorcisms for at least a decade. When I attended Istifanos, his popularity was at its peak, thanks to his capacity to reach multiple audiences: not just the people in church, but those watching video-recordings of his exorcisms, which could be purchased in VCD² format on site and across the country; and Ethiopians abroad, who

¹ The title Memher refers to religious teachers, whether ordained or not.

² Video CD.

followed him on YouTube. He was unique in performing such large-scale rituals. The spirits he exorcised were equally peculiar, and included Protestant, Buddhist and European spirits, among others. These unfamiliar spirits were considered foreign, with modern cultural traits that mirror the habits and tastes of modern Ethiopians. They were spirits which attack the country by insidiously undermining the ancient faith of its Orthodox population, now captivated by the allures of western modernity as well as by alternative and exogenous spiritual traditions.

The thickset priest was an enigmatic figure, and little was known about his private life and past. He was not, however, immune from rumours. An excessive concentration of religious charisma in a single individual is highly suspicious to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Some people said he commanded spirits so effectively because he himself was possessed by a powerful demon.³ Those who attended the rituals at Istifanos sometimes found the new categories of spirits perplexing, and even doubted their veracity. Many officials of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) opposed and disdained the spectacularized format of these exorcisms, in which possessed individuals were interviewed at length on stage with a microphone – in stark contrast to the sober ritual ablutions of holy water common in more traditional exorcisms, where spirits are asked about their identity and commanded to leave soon after.

Many people felt equally puzzled by the ritual tools that the exorcist utilised—microphones, loudspeakers, electric holy water pumps, and cameras—especially given his stern condemnation of the forces of modernity corroding the ethical fibre of the country. For his detractors, Memher Girma's exquisitely modern ritual repertoire, his encouragement of public testimony, and the talk-show setting of conversations with spirits also revealed a dangerous likeness to the practices of Protestants, a group that the exorcist openly opposed.

In this paper, I examine this novel form of exorcism, focusing less on individual experiences of spirit possession than on the implications of exorcism in terms of the wider Ethiopian Orthodox community and its boundaries. Specifically, I focus on the expulsion of Protestant spirits from Ethiopian Orthodox hosts⁴. Such spirits possess Orthodox Christians who have converted to Protestantism or, more commonly, those who engage in dangerous flirtations with Protestant styles of worship, or avidly consume the Protestant media ubiquitous in the capital. In the national multi-religious context, the exorcism of Protestant spirits can be seen as a theatrical display of the superiority of local Orthodoxy, through which the demonic nature of foreign Protestant doctrines and missionary endeavours is graphically revealed, at an historical moment in which Protestants are rapidly gaining converts, unprecedented public visibility and political influence.

In a context where 'spirits resemble their hosts' in their modern and Protestant-like proclivities and tastes, by policing the boundaries of the body of a possessed individual and excising a spiritual intruder, Memher Girma also attends to the boundaries of the body of the EOC.⁵ Here, one body is the synecdoche of the other (Godelier 1996: 52; see Douglas 2002: 142). Attempts to reassert control over the boundaries of Orthodoxy rely on a complex moral

³ With the exception of angels and the Holy Spirit, every other spirit is considered as demonic and the term demon (*aganint*, *ganin*, *saytan*) and spirit (*menfes*) are used interchangeably by the exorcist.

⁴ Despite the novelty and eclectic character of these spirits, their exorcism encapsulates anxieties about social and religious changes that inform the exorcism of all types of spirits, including more traditional ones (see Malara 2017).

⁵ I am indebted to Bethlehem Hailu Dejene for extensive conversations on exorcism as a form of boundary policing.

evaluation of objects, practices and beliefs that aims to tidily differentiate what counts as properly Orthodox from that which is unorthodox and Protestant, consigning the latter to an irredeemable demonic otherness with which no productive relationship can be established, leaving it to be disciplined and purged.

Recent studies of spirit possession have revealed how rituals and spirits alike have adapted to a number of modern situations, producing creative, culturally-situated commentaries on and responses to socio-economic, political and religious changes (e.g. Beherend & Luig 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Lambek 2002; Masquelier 2001). The literature on spirit possession and modernity in Africa abounds with examples of spirits personifying various forms of cultural otherness—from spirits who embody the cultural traits proper to neighbouring ethnic groups, to spirits resembling European colonisers, and beyond. In Kramer's (1993) seminal study, embodying and representing the other through spirit possession marks an attempt to make sense of alterity and tame the dangers it might pose to local systems of meanings and sociality. Following Kramer, a prominent line of interpretation of the performances of these alien spirits sees them as 'mimetic ethnographies making use of the Other to differentiate the self' (Beherend & Luig 1999: xviii; see Boddy 1989: 356-357). Similarly, in his famous work on Hauka possession in West Africa, Stoller shows how the parodic re-enactment of the behaviours of former colonisers through the performances of spirits, helps local communities to experience a sense of mastery over historically oppressing others and navigate a present saturated by excruciating memories of colonial humiliations (Stoller 1984, 1994; cf. Masquelier 2001: 159-178; McIntosh 2004). In the exorcism ritual I examine, similar mechanics of differentiation, caustic parody of the other, and attempts to affirm mastery over it are all readily visible elements of ritual discourse and practice.

However, in the story I will tell in this paper, there are significant twists to this familiar plot. Indeed, I suggest that a granular look to the less explicit aspects and consequences of Memher Girma's exorcism reveals a more complicated dialectic of selfhood and otherness. The polyphonic discourse of possession—to which spirits, hosts, audience, and exorcist contribute, weaving together their voices and acts—is not just an unyielding critique of the foreign forces typified by new Protestant spirits originating from a western elsewhere. Crucially, it is also a chastisement of the Orthodox self, via the other, as exorcism underscores the excessive permeability of Ethiopian society to foreign influence – exemplified by the possessed body of those Orthodox Ethiopians who seek models of self-making in the lures of western modernisation, ritually construed as coextensive with Protestantism. Indeed, Protestant spirits do not merely index a distant, neatly located and incommensurable typology of alterity, but the pervasive risks inherent to the transformative potential of Orthodox selfhood (cf. Course 2013): the possibility of becoming Protestant and becoming other, at a time in which Ethiopia's autochthonous church finds itself entangled in threatening global politico-religious dynamics and a hotly contested national religious field, in which Protestantism is on the rise.

The central narrative of exorcism, then, remains ambiguously suspended between victory and defeat, the assertion of the superiority of Orthodox ritual forms and the recognition that Orthodoxy is irrevocably compromised from both its significant outsides and its problematic insides. Part of the ritual's appeal lies precisely in its capacity to broadcast different narratives at once, without forcing definitive conclusions—possibilities that in this theatre of spirits and humans remain up for grab for the unentranced audience and possessed people alike (see Boddy 1989: 355-360). In short, I propose that the ritual is appealing not in spite of these ambiguities and contradictions, but because of them.

By foregrounding the ambiguities of ritual, this paper invites a rethinking of the nature of inter-religious boundaries in Ethiopia, alongside lines of division that are not defined in *a priori* terms. As I hinted before, many of those possessed by Protestant demons are not actual converts, but Orthodox subjects who, for some time, prayed in Protestant churches, engaged in forms of worship associated with the Protestants, or used Protestant religious media. Significantly, rather than being a religious aberration, these devotional patterns are quite common among the Orthodox population (especially its younger members). The sacrilegious nature of religious crossings, or indeed the fact that an unbending inter-religious boundary has been crossed at all, is made evident only in retrospect, during exorcism. In other words, boundaries often acquire their specific substance and gravity as exorcism produces a post-hoc interpellation of sorts: a ‘calling-back’ that corrects alleged crossings of a line which Protestant spirits make evident, becoming authoritative witnesses of a deviation from the right faith.

Hence, while geared towards re-tracing definitive boundaries, the ritual engenders specific boundary-crossings in the past, and instigates crossing-backs into Orthodoxy in the present, implicitly highlighting the sheer pliability and relativity of boundaries *ab origine* (see Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon 2008: 84-93). The temporalities and multi-directionality of these processes further reinforce the argument that exorcism is not primarily concerned with a clearly circumscribed religious otherness; it rather thematises sameness and the intensely fluid continuum between Orthodox and Protestant styles and forms in everyday religious praxis.

It is from this perspective that I argue that Memher Girma’s exorcism publically exposes and vividly magnifies the irreparable permeability of the very boundaries of Orthodoxy’s supra-individual body that it seeks to demarcate. Thus, in line with Remme and Martin’s take on ritual indeterminacy (Introduction), and in contrast to classic views that see ritual as neutralizing the potential for contradictions and uncertainties inherent to the fragmented world of everyday life (Handelman 2004), I show that the ordering telos of exorcism harvests its own excessive forms of disorder, uncertainty and scepticism.

The most striking example among the ambiguities of exorcism—the meta-ambiguity of the ritual, as it were—is to be found in its overarching aesthetics. Classic studies on Pentecostalism in Africa see deliverance from demonic forces as predicated on injunctions to sever relationships with pre-Christian, idolatrous practices, effecting a ‘break with the past’ necessary to living a born-again, modern life unencumbered by malevolent spiritual influences and the burdens of local traditions (e.g. Meyer 1998; Van Dijk 1998; cf. Lindhart 2017). Memher Girma’s understanding of Ethiopian Protestantism as a religion at odds with the indigenous Orthodox past of the country (seen as idolatrous by Protestants) comes very close to this anthropological assessment. By emphasising the EOC’s ancient history – dating back to the 4th Century AD – and its non-colonial origins, Memher Girma aims to break with the Protestant ‘break with past’, and to show how the future of Orthodoxy depends instead on its re-alignment to a deep, local Christian past (see Engelke 2010). But problematically, these re-alignments are largely effected by appropriating and retooling stylistic formats, theological concerns, and technological media which are considered as characteristically Protestant. The ensuing irony is that, due these formal resemblances, Memher Girma’s exorcism not only endlessly reproduces the same uncertainties about religious identity and boundaries that it seeks to tame, but broadcasts them to ever larger audiences. Since my argument focuses on the ritual and its relation to a broader socio-historical context, I now wish to turn to some of their most salient aspects.

Figure 2

The Spirit of Protestantism in Context

Protestant spirits, known as *menfiqan* (sing. *menafiq*) or ‘heretics’, are an entirely new demonological category in Ethiopia. They made their first appearance in the early 1990s, a period coinciding with dramatic religious change. Despite severe limitations, during the Derg socialist regime (1974-1987), the EOC still retained a privileged role in the country’s multi-religious panorama (Bonacci 2000; Donham 1999). After the fall of the Derg, the lifting of restrictions on religious expression, and the recognition of different faiths as equal under the new constitutional law brought about unprecedented transformations. The EOC found itself deprived of part of its historical political advantages in a new religious market, where different groups now competed fiercely for visibility, public influence, and the expansion of their congregations. In the scramble for Ethiopian souls, the most successful evangelisers were a variegated constellation of Protestant churches. While the number of Orthodox Christians still constituted 54% of the national population in 1984, a census conducted in 2007 revealed that their numbers had diminished to 43% (Haustein & Østebø 2011). This decrease in EOC adherents coincided with the exponential growth of Protestant churches, and their aggressive campaigns to gain converts amongst Orthodox believers (ibid.: 758). The fact that Protestants significantly benefitted from modernist policies of secularisation contributed to the development of an Orthodox discourse—prominent in Istifanos—in which ‘modernity’ and ‘secularism’ are considered as quasi-interchangeable terms, tightly associated with Protestantism.

In the nineties, having previously proselytised mainly in the non-Christian south, Protestant churches started expanding more aggressively in the central and northern Orthodox strongholds. The ensuing confrontations engendered new types of religious polemics and conflicts between religious groups (Abbink 2011). Protestants’ critique of Orthodoxy is hard to pin down to a few systematic claims, in part because of the sheer variety of doctrinal positions existing within the Ethiopian Protestant universe (Haustein 2011a); I shall limit myself to a few widely known areas of contention, which are directly relevant to the context I analyze. Through their discursive emphasis on an unmediated and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, Protestants call into question some of the pillars of Orthodox religiosity—in which a plethora of intercessors and sacred materials represent the chief means through which to access an ineffable God—and negate the legitimacy and efficacy of Orthodox saints, substances and artefacts. Protestants also criticize Orthodox practitioners for their lack of scriptural knowledge, their insincere ritualism, and their adherence to religious traditions that are not firmly grounded in the New Testament (Boylston 2018). These are perceived as open attacks on a church that attaches great importance to sacraments which work *ex opere operato*; on the Old Testament, in which Ethiopia is mentioned repeatedly, and that for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians legitimizes their country’s special status in the history of Salvation; and on Biblical texts which are not included in versions of the Bible adopted in the west, as well as countless hagiographic books.

The EOC reacted to these critiques by reaffirming its centrality in national history and its identity as an autochthonous church (Marcus 2001). EOC members emphasise that for centuries their church has been in charge of the reproduction, protection and propagation of national literary, religious and artistic traditions, especially during times of foreign aggression and occupation. Protestant critiques provoked a neo-traditionalist response on behalf of Orthodox movements, which called for a renewal of the old faith while stressing the necessity of self-consciously rediscovering its ancient roots (see Meron 2015). Though not directly

traceable to any specific movement, Memher Girma's rituals are one expression of this wider climate of revivalism. Orthodox movements such as the *Mahaber Kidussan* support an increasing 'intellectualization' of religion, by sponsoring Sunday school programmes for the theological edification of the laity and encouraging lay militant activism in working places and universities. Memher Girma's exorcisms draw less on unimpassioned intellect, and more on the viscosity of embodied experience, at times openly opposing the excessive intellectualization of Orthodoxy as a fraught, modernist, Protestant-like endeavour.

The Program

Exorcisms took place at Istifanos two or three times a week. Every week, the same demonic play was reproduced in a ritualised script, known as 'the program'. The program started with a sermon after the mass, in which Mehmer Girma analysed biblical passages in the light of contemporary Ethiopian society, its history, and the role of evil spirits in both. The large crowd,⁶ comprised of people afflicted by all sorts of ailments and spirits, curious visitors, and adamant followers of the exorcist, would listen silently. Some people took notes. From time to time, a possessed person would shout insults towards the exorcist. The possessed person would be disciplined by Memher Girma's helpers, a group of men wearing lab coats with a cross sewn on them, who beat the disturber with a heavy wooden rosary known as *mekutaria*. It is the spirit that feels the pain, they said, not the human host.

The exorcist would then call various spirits by their names from the stage. The possessed responded to this interpellation with shouts and violent spasms, clambering towards and making breaks for the stage, pushing against the crowd. New people fell into trance: women bit their hair, other people yelled blasphemies, and fights were not uncommon. The helpers would be busier than ever, distributing whippings in the attempt to maintain a semblance of order in the midst of demonic chaos. A few possessed people would be invited on stage, and others would be refused and made to sit back in the crowd, rubbing shoulders with a multitude of twitching bodies.

The exorcist interrogated those chosen with a microphone. Unlike traditional exorcisms, the ensuing conversations were lengthy and thorough. He grabbed the possessed individuals by their clothes, made them kneel, and hit their foreheads with the palm of his heavy hand. He whipped them repeatedly with his *mekutaria*, until the spirits revealed their motives and plans through the mouths of their human hosts. The kin of possessed people were often invited on stage to eviscerate the plot of complex family dramas; sometimes they too fell into trance, and entire families were exorcised. Spirits were asked what they think of Orthodox symbols, what they wish for Ethiopia, and how they operate in contemporary society. These interactions were suspended between comedy and tragedy; the audience would laugh at one moment and retreat in religious dismay at another. Once the exorcist was done with his interrogation, he made the spirits swear to leave their hosts. The possessed persons were then finally commanded to perform seven genuflections (*sigdet*).

The formerly-possessed would then awake, appear confused, cry profusely, and often reach for the knees of the exorcist in order to kiss them. They would bow in front of the big posters

⁶ Those who attended were men and women, represented in roughly equal proportions; people coming from rural areas as well as inhabitants of the capital; the visibly poor, as well engineers, government workers, and small entrepreneurs. While a number of older people regularly attended, the presence of young people was conspicuous. Some possessed people, including those affected by Protestant spirits, came willingly, often following the advice of families and friends; others were dragged to the church, at time by force, by their relatives.

of various saints hanging at the back of the stage and provide emotionally dense testimonies about past moral transgressions and the joys of liberation. The exorcist admonished them not to sin again, and pronounced benevolent encouragements to live a more pious, Orthodox life. He often diagnosed their possession as the effect of a detachment from, or a betrayal of Orthodoxy.

The exorcist then drenched the audience with holy water (*s'ebel*) with an electric water pump that emitted a violent jet. He walked among the crowd, targeting individuals who appeared particularly aggressive or keen to avoid the water—including the disoriented anthropologist. The confusion was barely manageable; the loud cries of demons covered all other sounds, and many possessed people needed to be restrained. Memher Girma would then disappear discretely from the frenzy of these vehement, growling bodies, escorted by his helpers.

In the next section, I turn to an analysis of the interactions between Protestant spirits and the Orthodox exorcist to explore the ritual production of a demonised view of Protestantism, and highlight some of its constitutive ambiguities.

Figure 3

The Subtle Voice of Heresy

After having forced a Protestant spirit who claimed to ‘speak God’s words’ to admit its demonic nature, Mehmer Girma asked firmly:

Memher Girma (MG): If you are a demon, how can you speak God’s words? [Turning to the crowd] Many people are deceived for they believe that Satan doesn’t speak well of God’s word. [Turning to the possessed] How do you deceive people in this way?

Spirit (S): You know, through songs.

MG: Ok...

S: With God’s words, talking to them politely.

This excerpt illustrates the subtlety typical of Protestant spirits, who do not overtly oppose Christianity, but deploy ostensibly Christian language to carry out their demonic plans. At Istifanos, one learns that Protestant spirits attack their victims through an array of seemingly innocuous, even pious, activities linked to Protestant forms of worship. However, any involvement with Protestant practices, spaces and media is revealed to be an act of apostasy and an ‘invitation to the devil’, as the exorcist put it. The fact that the spirit declared that it deceived Orthodox Christians through songs (*mezmur*) is not accidental. As Meron, a formerly-possessed young woman, explained:

For example, you are Orthodox, but the spirit attracts you with the music that Protestants (*Pente*)⁷ have. It’s beautiful music, with many modern instruments, very appealing but worldly (*alemawi*). The music will attract you and you will have a second religion. Then you will be the toy of the spirit.

Many of my young Orthodox friends listened to Protestant hymns, and found this activity largely unproblematic, even ethically valuable: ‘a way of getting in a spiritual mood by singing along’, as Fitsum, a formerly-possessed young man put it. In Istifanos, this modern tendency was chastised, with the priest remarking that from an Orthodox perspective,

⁷ Truncated form of ‘Pentecostal’ used in Amharic to refer to Protestants.

religious music must conform to rigid rhythmical canons and should be performed with only a few traditional musical instruments. Protestant music makes use of modern electric instruments and catchy pop rhythms, which make it 'easy', 'less heavy', and 'less boring'. Yet, its worldly appeal—its very lightness—is exactly what is dangerous about it. To lure modern people with modern lives, spirits elaborate strategies that meet historically specific tastes and necessities. Through the evaluation of religious aesthetic forms during exorcism, the distinctions between the domain of Orthodox and unorthodox practice are publically redrawn and vibrantly dramatized.

Above all, those who attend Istifanos were particularly worried by Protestant spirits' propensity to prayer, and their enthusiastic invocation of Jesus' name on the scene of exorcism. Memher Girma punctually dissipated any confusion by revealing the demonic identity of the spirit. Addressing a spirit singing Protestant hymns, he asked:

MG: Are you a demon?

S: I am speaking Amharic, right? I said I am a demon.

The spirit continued to sing in tongues; only the word 'Jesus' was intelligible.

MG: Which Jesus are you talking about?

S: The fake one.

The audience laughed.

MG: The one you praise?

S: Yes, he is my guarantor [...] Jesus is Lord!

MG: Indeed, he is the Lord.

The spirit's admission of following a 'fake Jesus' (*forjit Eyesus*) marks out the distinctive features of Protestants, while effectively transducing their value in the field of the demonic. In this dramaturgical setting, the laughter of the audience expresses moral satisfaction for the humiliation of the arrogant and deceitful spirit. It affirms comedic mastery vis-à-vis ridiculed Christian others, disclosing the heresy of their belief and offering up the shame of this unveiling for the avid consumption of an Orthodox audience in need of emotive confirmation in their sense of superiority (see Bakhtin 1984:77-81; Eco 1984).

In the excerpt, the exorcist could only agree with the Protestant spirit that Jesus is indeed the Lord. But his agreement was only superficial. An ontological discrepancy exists between the referents of the exorcist's and spirit's speech: they are talking about two different Jesuses. The invocation of a 'fake Jesus' was commonly framed within eschatological narratives that Orthodox believers use to explain, among other things, the exponential growth of Protestantism. As Solomon, one of the exorcist's helpers, put it: 'Most people argue that Protestants preach about Jesus Christ, but the Bible says, "In the last days, some people will come to cheat using my name".' He was echoed by Mulatu, a formerly-possessed man: 'You know Jesus talks about them in the Gospel: "they will use my name". He didn't say the name of my mother or any other name. He said my name.' Memher Girma admonished his followers repeatedly that saying Jesus is the Lord with the Protestant is akin to satanic worship, and ignorance of such a fact does not protect from its nefarious consequences.

The revelation of a fake messiah is tightly imbricated in religious polemics surrounding Orthodox intercession, as the following interaction with another Protestant spirit illustrates:

MG: Say it: [Jesus] son of the Virgin Mary. Repeat!

S: [No answer]

MG: They stopped. I think they are angry [audience laugh].

MG: [Speaking to the audience] When it comes to the Virgin Mary it [the spirit] is trapped. No doubt, it stops here. Dead end. [To the spirit] What happened?

The exorcist hit the possessed with a heavy wooden rosary asking the spirit to repeat after him:

MG: May the mother of Jesus be blessed.

S: [No answer]

MG: A generation that doesn't accept the Virgin Mary is a generation without a mother.

Protestants not only misrecognize the authority of Orthodox intercessors, but also mock such figures by teaching that saints, including Mary, are 'simple human beings' (*tera sewoch*) and that praying to them is committing idolatry. Protestants are known as 'anti-Mariam': people who are against Mary. Their claim that Mary is no different from any other woman and, as such, unworthy of veneration, is particularly unacceptable to Orthodox believers. Indeed, Marian intercession is a cornerstone of Orthodoxy as lived religion (Boylston 2018), and Mary is one of the patrons of the country. In sight of this, the Protestant spirits' inability or unwillingness to praise Mary is an eloquent silence, confirming once more the falsity of the Protestant Jesus: a Jesus without the right kind of mother and genealogy.

Melat, a young formerly-possessed woman, recalled that a Protestant spirit entered through her nails as she was leaning on the bench of a Protestant church that she occasionally attended out of curiosity, but also because of her doubts concerning Orthodox doctrine. The spirit was able to infiltrate her because Protestant services caused her to 'forget Mary' and 'lose her motherly protection'. In Istifanos, people like Melat become public, embodied exemplars of the risks entailed by any involvements with Protestant worship, as well as living demonstrations that these entanglements amount to heinous transgressions.

Echoing Memher Girma's assertion that a 'generation that does not accept Mary is a generation without a Mother', Salomon described Protestants as 'orphans'. The persuasiveness of attacks against Protestants derives its force also from the affective language of kinship. Indeed, the effects of large-scale religious changes are felt in ways that critically affect the sphere of the domestic: the basic unit through which Orthodoxy is reproduced, through chains of intercession binding together parents, children, saints, and God (Malara and Boylston 2016). Anxieties related to demonic threats become even sharper when spirits speak of the relationship between Protestant converts and their Orthodox families:

MG: What was your goal?

S: I seized him to get all the family.

MG: Is this how you do it?

S: [...] Little by little we use him to make them all Protestant.

MG. Ok. How?

S: This is our work. We go to them [family members] with a smile, ‘don’t be angry,’ and we explain the Gospel [...] We make them doubt their religion so that the spirit can enter them.

MG: [Turning to the audience] This is how they do it. Beware because the enemy is in the house.

This dynamic is all too familiar to the audience. In the Orthodox imaginary, the progressive penetration of Protestantism through a family member, and its infectious spread to the entire household, are key Protestants politics of conversion. Salomon commented: ‘If half of my family is Protestant and prays for me... If I don’t have the protection of the Holy Spirit, their spirit may attack me.’ This logic represents both a perversion and inversion of the Orthodox mechanics of intercession—denigrated by Protestants—whereby family members solicit divine blessing on behalf of one another (Malara 2018). In a reversal of Protestant critiques of Orthodox mediation, Protestants are understood to be mediators, too, but of the demonic.

Moreover, Salomon’s worries echo a vision of Protestantism as essentially divisive. For him, the frictions generated by conversion ‘set son against father, mother against son, in a way which is not Ethiopian’. Similarly, Haustein and Østebø note that Protestant’s ‘strict prohibition of alcohol and dancing tends to divide social activities and family gatherings’ (2011: 766), thus affecting some vital reproductive dynamics of the Orthodox social fabric, especially the cycles of religious fasting and feasting regulated by the Orthodox calendar (Boylston 2013; Isaac 1995; Malara 2018). Memher Girma regularly asserted that the widespread tendency of educated youth to question the beliefs of their parents is tantamount not only to ‘planting the seed of discord’, but to ‘allowing spirits to enter a family through doubt’, by adopting a sceptical stance that is typically Protestant.

As the cases above illustrate, exorcism is explicitly geared toward the production of a demonised religious other and the demarcation of clear group boundaries. Many Orthodox Christians I met—especially young ones—were eclectic hybridizers, or simply people who saw no intrinsic contradiction between their Orthodox identity and their appreciation of Protestant styles, forms of devotion and media. The fact that victims of Protestant spirits were not necessarily actual Protestants, but commonly those numerous Orthodox Christians who regularly listened to Protestant music, attended both Protestant and Orthodox services, and challenged traditional Orthodox beliefs from the standpoint of their modern and secular sensibilities, forces the question: where is the boundary anyway?

Also in light of the epidemiology of possession, many religious boundaries seem not to pre-exist their crossing and its ritual revelation. They are instead adjudicated *a posteriori*, through exorcism, which establishes that a heinous transgression has taken place in the past, irrespective of the possessed person’s awareness and intention. Spirits intruding upon the margins of Orthodox bodies, then, are not just violators of boundaries; in the bigger picture, they are boundary-makers in their own right, drawing borders for their hosts and those who witness the gruesome spectacle of trance. In other words, spirits bring into being past crossing of religious divides—and the notion of the divide itself—in the very act of naming boundary transgression as evil. These processes help define not just the essential features of the other, but Orthodoxy, its peripheries and its limits. Crucially, these relentless ritual attempts at demarcating boundaries suggest that, in ordinary religious contexts, the inter-religious field is a far more fluid continuum of forms, practices and patterns of consumption

than some Orthodox Christian would admit, or than most scholars of Ethiopia have conceded. Exorcism magnifies the very porosity of the boundaries it tries to erect.

Protestant spirits also attacked the scaffolding of Orthodox mediation by negating the spiritual potency of sacred spaces:

MG: What do you call the church?

S: Just a building. That is where you [Orthodox Christians] gather. I lie comfortably in my bed and pray God. That's enough.

MG: No need to come here?

S: No need at all. It is even said in the Bible: 'Pray in your house and I will reward you outside'. That's it. I do what I have to do in the house [...] why would I go to the monasteries when I can be comfortable in the public park?

Mobilizing the authority of the scriptures, the Protestant spirits disparaged the spiritless materiality of Orthodox churches and sacred sites, proposing a Protestant model of allegedly unmediated human-divine communication (see Keane 2007). In this game of refracted perspectives, the exorcist elicits a caricatural and selective image of Protestants, while the spirit articulates its own religiously-situated reading of Orthodoxy, offering a dramatized, denigrating rendition of some of Orthodoxy's distinctive traits. In witnessing these events, Orthodox spectators do not merely learn something about the Protestant other; they also come to grasp something important about how the other sees them (Boddy 1989: 355-357). Here Orthodoxy is reconstituted as a shared object through the singling out and marking of mutual differences, as well as the perspectival apprehension of oneself from the other's point of view.

Despite the ecstatic climate of his own rituals, Memher Girma is particularly critical of Protestant ecstatic experiences. The classification of such experiences as demonic distances Orthodoxy from 'fake' forms of Christianity—a fakeness graphically confirmed by interactions between spirits and exorcist. After a Protestant spirit spoke in tongues for some time, Memher Girma sarcastically commented:

MG: That is a good one. It would have been better if you had translated it.

S: I don't know the meaning.

From the crowd: Thank you very much!

The humiliated spirit is forced to confirm glossolalia's semantic emptiness and insincerity. Orthodox believers are frequently mistrustful of glossolalia because of its resemblance to *megwarat* and *meleflef*: the production of nonsensical speech and guttural sounds typical of the onset of demonic trance. In the performances of Protestant spirits, they find a tangible validation of their suspicions.

'It's just to impress people,' commented Meron, who linked glossolalia to anxieties about Protestant prophesy:

The spirit is on their tongue [...]. Because they are brokers (*dallala*). They will convince you with their beautiful speech. The spirit is a spirit of the tongue, but it's a liar spirit. They are full of lies. They talk to you today, approaching you privately: 'What is your problem?' The day after they

will invite you [to their church] and the pastor will speak in tongues (*lisan*) and say: 'Diego has such and such problem.' But somebody told him what your problem was.

Prophecy is reframed as a cheap trick used to lure naïve Orthodox believers into conversion. For Meron, this strategies align with Protestants' use Biblical references to reassure potential converts that their interest in their problems is inspired by Christian concerns, rather than by aggressive politics of conversion or demonic intents. If the spirit is as cunning as to celebrate God, Protestants' use of scriptures and gentleness are consistent with the mischievous cunningness of the spirit animating efforts of proselytism.

The drama of exorcistic confrontation, however, is not just one of heated verbal exchanges, but one that thrives on the visceral experience and public display of violence and pain:

MG: What spirit are you?

S: I am the heretic (*menafiq*; meaning Protestant). We are going blind in front of you. We tried but...

Memher Girma spilled some holy water on the face of the possessed woman. The spirit screamed in agony; it begged the exorcist to stop torturing it, shouting 'I am burning!'. The body of the spirits' host violently hit the floor several times. The exorcist continued:

MG: Did you come here to exorcise me?

S: We came here to pray for you [...] But you came here with your weapons and the grenades to hit her body.

MG: What is the grenade?

S: The (holy) water.

MG: Is it a grenade?

S: Are you kidding? You are the driver of the tank and that is the grenade.

The conversation points to the arrogance of Protestant spirits—and by extension of Protestants—who claim the Orthodox Christians are host to a number of evil spirits to whose attack they are exposed because of their lack of scriptural knowledge and insincere faith. The Orthodox crowd takes particular satisfaction in the farcical turns of event: the Protestant spirit who came to exorcize the exorcist is, in the end, exorcized. The suffering of the spirit adds to this vindictive pleasure. The military idiom used by the spirit to describe the holy water, which Protestants dismiss as 'common water', confirms for the audience not only the superiority of Orthodox ritual means, but that what they see, and viscerally participate in, is indeed a violent cosmic battle in which the whole country is implicated.

In the excerpts above, the exorcist utilises Protestant rituals, modes of reasoning and experiences against themselves, to expose and violently reject their evil nature, in ways which are not dissimilar from how charismatic Protestant denominations throughout Africa deal with traditional religions (Meyer 1998). But what is the precise target of such violent interventions? As already noted, those exorcized are often not actual Protestants. And yet, their experiences, and the declarations of their spirits, are used to trace a picture of what Protestantism is really about. In a sense, exorcism highlights the contours and content of Protestantism through a trial *in absentia*, where we don't get hear the voice of Protestant culprits, but of Protestant spirits. Many people at Istifanos would adamantly maintain that the

spirits' and exorcists' rendition of Protestantism is indeed revealing of its true, demonic essence, unknown to or concealed by actual Protestants. But, for others who question the veracity of this portrayal through their familiarity with Protestantism, ritually produced boundaries and images of the other appear as Orthodox artefacts fabricated from a unilaterally Orthodox point of view. If we were to follow this line of argument, what is violently castigated during exorcism is not a vilified Protestant, but a homogenised view of the vastly diverse universe of Ethiopian Protestantism, elicited through specific perspectival dynamics within the defined confines of an Orthodox arena by Orthodox actors, and partially emptied of its substantive content (see Laclau 2005). Through a self-enclosing, auto-poietic curvature (Handelman 2004), exorcism ritualises inter-religious antagonism, crystallizing stereotyped views of the enemy-other and voicing accusations that outside the ritual space would be likely to invite severe repercussions.

As I noted, Protestants have at times considered local Orthodox Christians as a vulnerable to 'lying spirits' and prone to deceitful prophecies. Memher Girma's exorcism of the Protestant spirit who wanted to exorcise the Orthodox exorcist reverses the focus of these Protestant insinuations. However, anxieties surrounding false prophets and deceitful spirits that claim Christian status and express themselves in recognizable Christian idioms have historically been central motives in Ethiopian Protestant exorcism and theological debates (Haustein 2011a; 2011b). Thus I suggest that Memher Girma's insistence on these themes point to the percolation of Protestant apprehensions and arguments into Orthodox practice. More broadly, Memher Girma's exorcistic confrontations with Protestantism are enabled by processes of appropriation that allow Orthodox people to express themselves through the conceptual repertoire of the inimical other, and to strike back with its own weapons. In other words, we see a 'Protestantization' of Orthodox exorcism, in which the ritual discourses and acts meant to re-inscribe insurmountable inter-religious precincts are made possible by conspicuous knowledge-transfers and transits of styles across religious borders. As I illustrate below, these and other related ambiguities saturate the ways in which Orthodox identity, its place in contemporary Ethiopia and the wider world are re-imagined in Istifanos.

Figure 4

The Enemy Within

Figure 5

Mehmer Girma considers the fact that the EOC, far from being a colonial import, has existed since the 4th Century AD, and has heroically survived various waves of foreign aggression, an unmistakable sign of Ethiopia's divine election. In Istifanos, the EOC's autochthony and its deep past is contrasted with Protestants' discontinuity with the country's religious history and their 'global outlook'. Indeed, a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of Mehmer Girma's exorcisms is the portrayal of Protestants as followers of a 'religion coming from abroad' and 'a religion of the whites', which is 'incompatible with the history of Ethiopia'.⁸ These views are echoed by attendants of Istifanos who label Protestants as 'strangers', 'puppets of the foreigners (*farenji*)', and see the growth of Protestantism as a process aiming to erase 'Ethiopianess' (*Ytiopiawinnet*), which is understood as coterminous with Orthodoxy.

⁸ It is important to note that this statement does not accurately reflect the opinions of Ethiopian Protestants. Indeed, there exists an Ethiopian Protestant discourse on Ethiopia's special role in divine plans (see Haustein 2011a).

The exorcist's overall diagnosis of Protestantism, as I noted, is oddly reminiscent of classic anthropological readings of African Pentecostalism, which identify a modern break with an idolatrous, indigenous past as its foundational motive (Meyer 1998). By repurposing these tropes of rapture, Memher Girma's exorcisms attempt to break with the Protestant 'break with the past' (ibid.), demonstrating that both possessed people and the troubled fast-modernising country can 'regain God's grace' only by re-aligning themselves to Ethiopia's glorious religious history (see Engelke 2010). Yet, as I show below, these counter-breaks and re-alignments are themselves fraught with ambiguities that traverse the different ritual strata of exorcism.

The meta-narrative of exorcism is that the battle against the foreign and demonic forces with which Ethiopian Protestants are associated can be won; and that local Orthodoxy can at last prevail, despite the disproportionate economic advantages enjoyed by Protestant denominations due to their ramified transnational networks of support. In Memher Girma's global topography of spiritual warfare—an inversion of the geopolitical and historiographical imagination of African Pentecostalism—the 'African past' doesn't stand for demonised idolatry; Ethiopia is instead presented as the last bastion of true, undying faith. Having seized most of Africa, the demonic forces of Protestantism now march confidently towards the last obstacle to their victory. According to the exorcist, the resistance of the ancient African church despite all odds is the reason why 'spirits are in havoc' in contemporary Ethiopia. The nexus between geo-historical and cosmological frameworks is theatrically articulated, for example, through uplifting statements produced by evil spirits afflicting Ethiopians living abroad who visit Istifanos: 'Every time his [the host's] feet touch Ethiopian soil we burn already', said one spirit, hinting at the sacredness of the homeland. 'Here we have been defeated; I want to go back to Germany. We hate Ethiopia, here there's holy water everywhere,' declared another spirit in pain.

Nonetheless, the very same spirits that provide tangible evidence of Orthodoxy's superiority through their capitulation, also point to the moral corruption of the Orthodox social fabric, unveiling the complicity of modern Orthodox Christians in the spreading of the Protestant infection. Spirits attested resentfully that they could intrude upon Orthodox hosts because of their questioning of clerical authority, their disengagement from traditional Orthodox forms of worship, and their fondness for 'everything modern and everything foreign'. Protestant spirits appear similar to whites and foreigners in their propensities and tastes; but the problem exorcism presents to public scrutiny is that most Ethiopians, including Orthodox Christians, are becoming similar to westerners in their susceptibilities to modernity and its appetites. Orthodoxy is loudly celebrated for its stoic resistance; yet Orthodox Christians are simultaneously depicted as traitors of their ancient faith, busy as they are in their search for answers to their current problems in alternative, alien traditions. In this play of pride and identity-loss, those exorcised are called at once to be penitents and victims: people who sinfully made themselves vulnerable to spirits whose distinctive traits they resemble or aspire to, and prey to cunning spirits which adapted to changes in contemporary Ethiopian society in order to destroy Ethiopian Orthodoxy from its geographical and spiritual core. The graphic demonstration of Orthodox ritual power sits uneasily alongside to the bitter admissions of Orthodoxy's loss of followers on the national level. Crucially, these tensions are never fully resolved, but rather sustained by the recalcitrant ambiguity permeating the ritual, offering to differently disposed spectators the possibility of adopting one particular interpretation over another, or of embracing different ones at the same time (see Boddy 1989: 356; Ricoeur 1976: 47)

This ritual drama is experienced as part of a conflict of cosmic proportions whose results ultimately remain uncertain. To echo Memher Girma's statement at the beginning of this paper, 'Ethiopia is at war', and all Orthodox Christians are exhorted to take part and take sides in the most decisive of all battles. But the constant ritual re-enactment of victory in the walled ground of Istifanos resounds with the echoes of—and seems necessitated by—a profound sense of a defeat that appears already manifest in the widespread blending of religious practices and styles across religious divides. Similarly to the 'incitement to speak' about sex operating amongst Foucault's Victorians (2008), exorcism constantly reproduces what it wishes to mitigate, telling a tale where boundaries are far less definite and far more complicated and equivocal than they might appear.

As it should be evident by now, Memher Girma's rituals do not straightforwardly exemplify Orthodox anti-modern sentiments. They are rather attempts to evaluate trends, objects and sensibilities associated with a loosely defined modernity, in order to discern what of modernity can be successfully submitted and re-incorporated into the Orthodox framework to serve Orthodoxy's purposes. In this sense, exorcism is not merely a ritual refraction of religious changes on the national scale, but an ongoing reflexive exercise in re-routing the trajectory of contemporary Orthodoxy and defining what an Orthodox modernity could and should look like (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1993). Similarly, exorcism cannot be reduced to a ritual commentary that limits itself to registering Orthodoxy's loss of religious hegemony in the scenario that emerged after the post-Derg religious liberalization. Rather, Memher Girma seeks to performatively reconstitute Ethiopian Orthodoxy by aligning it with its deep past, classing Protestantism as an abhorrent deviation to be expunged, and ultimately asserting a pre-secular conception of Ethiopia as an exclusively Orthodox nation.

However, this reactionary redefinition of Orthodoxy's place in modern Ethiopia remains paradoxically predicated on a mimetic cannibalisation of Protestant aesthetics, concepts and the affordance of media technologies closely associated with Protestantism. In the use of microphones and video cameras, in the spectacularization of exorcism and public testimonies, many of my interlocutors detected perplexing similarities between Istifanos' rituals and those of the antagonised religious other. This aesthetic parasitism seems again to blur the distinctions exorcism wishes to delineate, begetting a semantic messiness that enhances the potential for qualms about the very realities that the ritual aims to order. Some at Istifanos expressed the worry that Protestant spirits could infiltrate Orthodox spectators of the ritual precisely because of these worrying similarities—an anxiety consistent with the already noted ambiguous status of Memher Girma's charismatic power, which lends itself to diverging interpretations as an exceptional divine gift or a deceitful demonic trick. Others came to question the authenticity of the new spirits involved: 'What the hell is a Protestant spirit?', commented a young man puzzled by this unprecedented epiphany of the demonic, as well as by the fact that the exorcist 'acted like a pastor'. On these accounts, Memher Girma's exorcisms are always hazardous events that balance ambiguously on the edge of the ever-present risk of becoming the other: the very risk that exorcism seeks to domesticate.

Conclusions

Far from being mere icons of ritual inversion, Protestant spirits often act as intensifications of their hosts' negative moral traits; they are, so to speak, 'echoes of the subject' (Pandolfo 2018). New spirits echo their hosts by narrating their modern vicissitudes and religious transgressive experimentations from an alien point of view, underscoring continuities between demonic and human characters. In exorcism, the Orthodox subject is not reconstituted as a singularity in relation to God; rather, the subject can be brought back into

relation to God because he or she is brought back into relation to the Orthodox community and, critically, a shared Orthodox history. The subject is first and foremost emplaced and replaced in a collective, regaining the right kind of religion. I have described this repositioning as a 'break with the Protestant break with the past'.

I traced the ways in which ritual ambiguity operates within these dynamics, generating and sustaining diverging and at times paradoxical narratives and possibilities, appealing to a varied audience. More complex than a simple instance of resistance (see McIntosh 2004), exorcism re-enacts the ritual victory of Orthodoxy, and demonstrate its superiority vis-à-vis religious others, while also coming to terms with Orthodoxy's loss of hegemony in a changing post-secular scenario. Exorcism produces an acerbic critique of a demonised Protestant other and the global, modern forces Protestantism is associated with. But this discourse exists in parallel with an equally robust critique of the self, of Orthodox people's lack of religious commitment, their doubling in Protestantism and betrayal of Ethiopia's Orthodox roots. Crucially, the reassertion of Orthodoxy's centrality to national history and the need to purify it from external influences become possible only through the mimetic adoption of the idioms and styles of the Protestant other, thus engendering scepticism about the borders that the ritual promised to clearly demarcate. Indeed, as I have shown, exorcism ends up magnifying the porosity of religious boundaries that it presents as absolute, pointing, if obliquely and unintentionally, to the magnitude of extant cultural traffics across religious divides. Similarly to what Remme and Martin argue in the introduction to this volume, here ritual does not merely work to resolve contradictions and impose certainty over a fragmented reality, but also generates surplus uncertainties and insecurities that cannot be easily contained or defused within the ritual field.

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