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Sympathy for the Devil: Secrecy, Magic and Transgression among Ethiopian Orthodox

Debtera.

Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance.

(Bataille 1962: 37)

Introduction

One of the most striking public secrets (Taussig 1999) about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) is the presence within its institutions and tradition of numerous esoteric practitioners and practices whose relationship to the moral tenets of the church is shady at best. These practitioners are usually known as *debtera*¹, itself an ambiguous term that denotes both a man of religious learning, who received advanced education in the church's traditional school system, and an illicit ritual specialist adept in the practice of magic, which often involves consorting with demons. The ambiguity of the term, as I will show, is not coincidental, but reflects the problematic emergence of illicit, secret knowledge from within the EOC itself.

This article describes the practices of *debtera*: their education, the kinds of magical services they provide for their clients, and the relations and media through which they negotiate esoteric knowledge. While *debtera*'s knowledge and practices emerge from a highly specialized Orthodox tradition of knowledge, *debtera* often violate, invert, or pervert this tradition in ways that are simultaneously secretive and performative: secretive, because the precise nature of *debtera*'s knowledge is closely guarded and artfully concealed; and performative, because *debtera* must demonstrate both their association with the EOC and the transgressive nature of their practices so as to make their powers known to others.

The co-occurrence of these dynamics is not in itself surprising. Simmel's (1950) seminal study argued that secrecy is a quintessential social fact. His enduring lesson, according to Herzfeld, is that secrecy 'must itself be performed in a public fashion in order to be understood to exist' (2009: 135). Rehearsing a view shared by various scholars, Beidelman elaborates that:

[F]or a secret to be realized, someone must not only conceal something but someone else must know or suspect this concealment. Consequently, while the import of a secret may remain hidden, the act of concealment must be revealed if the secret is to have an audience and hence social existence (1993: 43; see Bellman 1984; Nooter 1993).

This 'skilled revelation of skilled concealment' (Taussig 1999), points to the paradox of secrecy's fragility, which I elaborate on in this article. This is to say: if secrecy is so pervasive that it entirely conceals even its concealment, the secret risks losing its public efficacy; but, if the secret's content is fully dispersed in the public realm, it ceases to be a secret (see Herzfeld 2009: 145; cf. Jones 2014: 54). These perspectives seem to converge on the claim that the semiotic force of secrets is enhanced when they inhabit hermeneutical spaces close to social surfaces, thus remaining open and available for ethical negotiation (Introduction; see Bellman 1984; Gable 1997; Lambek 1993; Newell 2013; White 2000). But the concrete ways in which social actors involved in the management of secrecy themselves

¹ I use the singular form '*debtera*' also as a plural in line with my interlocutors' use of the term in common parlance.

attempt to discern the specific moral qualities and consequences of secrets has received less ethnographic attention. By foregrounding the intricacies of this discernment, I show that the elaborate forms of ethical labour that *debtera* undertake in evaluating the secrets that constitute their stock in trade are driven and made urgent by their complicated position vis-à-vis the EOC.

As I will illustrate, the secrecy of the *debtera* does not stand in opposition to an official Orthodox discourse of revelation and transparency; it rather exists in complex tension with a Christian tradition, whose moral propriety is widely accepted, but whose practices and written corpus are decidedly mysterious in themselves. The restricted character of the church tradition, I suggest, produces the conditions for *debtera*'s occult, morally ambiguous activities, which are powerful precisely because they partake in, but secretly distort, authorized sacred knowledge. Indeed, while for the EOC secrecy represents a way to protect knowledge that is considered sacred from worldly profanation, many *debtera* are inveterate hybridizers who consciously violate the boundaries of sacred and profane, and mix official church texts with ersatz, miscellaneous elements, often associated with impurity and the sinister powers of demons.

This ambiguity is further reflected in Orthodox discourses on, and approaches to, sin and desire. All Orthodox Christians are subject to sinful desires of the flesh. Priests advocate that desire must be overcome through confession and penance; *debtera*, by contrast, create an avenue to address and satisfy immoral desires through transgressive magical means. But, their transgressions notwithstanding, *debtera* are not proponents of a different moral framework than that of the EOC; they recognize instead the ultimate legitimacy of its immutable tenets – of which their religious education makes them acutely aware – while secretly performing regrettable deeds in the here-and-now. By tracing these contradictions in the lives and works of *debtera* in Addis Ababa, I show how deliberate and calculated transgression activates ever-finer modes of ethical assessment of the very thresholds that it temporarily violates, in and through secrecy, rather than announcing the definitive obliteration of such thresholds (see Bataille 1962: 39-42). As my argument is premised on the ambiguous relation between *debtera*'s secret practices and the EOC, I shall begin with a brief account of the place of secrecy and ambiguity in Ethiopian Orthodox religion and society.

Ambiguity, Occlusion and the Restricted Tradition

Levine's (1965) classic account of Orthodox Christian society in Ethiopia describes social interactions informed by a 'cult of ambiguity', in which people are socialized to mask intentions, conceal desires, and guard their knowledge through tactics of allusion. This is an account of ambiguity as a kind of survival strategy adapted to conditions of steep hierarchy and competition (see Malara & Boylston 2016). Indeed, ambiguity 'provides techniques for defending the sphere of privacy against excessive intrusion, in a society that thrives on rumour and gossip', while also allowing for an oblique critique of authority figures (Levine 1965: 9).

This view is not merely a scholarly assessment, but is consistent with local theories of society and humanity: a socio-religious ontology that conceives of humankind as fallen, untrustworthy, deceptive, and with an innate urge to domination. While Levine's argument refers to rural Amhara society in the 1960s, my interlocutors suggested that current growing urban inequalities, competition for limited resources under neoliberal policies, and political surveillance (see Di Nunzio 2019) only augmented the need for secrecy, distrust, and ambiguity.

Drawing on local imagery, Levine defines the logic of ambiguous communication as that of ‘wax and gold’ (*sem enna werk*). Words and their overt meaning are like the wax mould in which golden ornaments are cast; gold, the inner meaning, lies disguised between words, accessible only to those with the ability to infer it.² This logic is a function of socio-political hierarchies. Yet, it finds its paradigmatic form in religious poetry: the composition of a specific type of verse relying on double-meaning, called *qiné*.³ This is an obscure skill, taught only to select church students, and demanding mastery of the liturgical *Ge’ez* language. However, as Lee (2011) demonstrates, *qiné*’s double-meaning serves not only to conceal, but also to reveal divine, ineffable truths. God surpasses all description; but the art of wax and gold allows humans to grasp and convey at least some facets of God’s mysterious reality. Significantly, this form of poetry is usually the prerogative of *debtera*, and it often stands as a metaphor for their cunningness and duplicity.

Ambiguity and opacity, then, can be profoundly meaningful, even revelatory (see Tambiah 1968). Nonetheless, this meaningfulness coexists with the religious notion that enquiring too deeply into the nature of God verges on blasphemy (Levine 1965; Messay 1999). Accordingly, until recently, the interpretation of scriptures has been monopolized by clerical authorities (Boylston 2018). This restricted knowledge, however, is often perceived as problematic, echoing widespread suspicions that erudite churchmen—and especially *debtera*—double in magic. And, as I illustrate in following sections, from a lay person’s perspective, it can be difficult to evaluate whether specific clergymen or church assistants are using their ritual knowledge in appropriate ways.

As Mercier vividly put it, *debtera* ‘have two faces, one of them bright and diurnal, lit by the light of the knowledge of God, the other obscure, casting evil spells in the dark of the night’ (1997: 44). Since *debtera*’s association with churchly institutions is insufficient to guarantee correct moral conduct, further methods of assessment and discipline are necessary on behalf of the EOC’s authorities. Historically, this disciplining has sometimes involved efforts by the state or the patriarchate to define and then purge magical elements (Kaplan 2004). Today, despite the EOC’s formal condemnation of magic as purely instrumental, concerned with exacting worldly dividends through improper spiritual powers (cf. Cunningham 1999: 1-25), distinctions between magic and religion remain tenuous and situational for many Orthodox Christians. In the absence of authoritative standards and policies of evaluation, a vast morally grey area of texts and practices that one specialist would consider as expressions of superior wisdom (*tebab*) and another as illicit magic (*tenqwala*) prevails (cf. Mercier 1976). The EOC tends to tolerate unauthorised ritual practitioners so long as they do not become excessively influential, represent a blatant challenge to the clerical hierarchies, or advertise their activity too openly. Yet, as I will show, the secret practice of magic is also subject to constant ethical evaluation by *debtera* themselves, especially when they know or suspect their actions to be immoral. This complexity arises from the fact that while, as Durkheim puts it (1965), ‘there is no church of magic’—since *debtera* who perform illicit rituals act as relatively independent entrepreneurs of the occult—magic springs from the very bosom of the church: its educational system, and its opaque religious tradition.⁴

The term *debtera* denotes a class of unordained religious figures, with no fixed position in the church’s hierarchy, who nevertheless perform vital functions within the EOC. *Debtera* can be cantors of liturgical music; teachers of theology; poets and scribes; or administrators (Aspen

² Messay (1999) clarifies that, in wax and gold types of ambiguity, the raw power of authority figures is never disguised.

³ For a discussion of similar secular forms of poetry see Levine 1965.

⁴ For a discussion of classic debates on magic in relation to *debtera* see de Ménonville 2018b.

1994: 126; Kaplan 2005: 53). The division between *debtera* and priests is significant. The most promising church students are often encouraged to undertake deeper study by *debtera* teachers, who sometimes ridicule the ignorance of priests—whose religious training is typically limited to a few years (Young 1975). The title of *debtera* traditionally designated those who had completed a lengthy and varied curriculum and, at least in theory, had acquired familiarity with the highest degrees of philosophical, theological, and literary knowledge (Shelemay 1992). Today, however, the term increasingly denotes those who, having deviated from the path of Orthodoxy, engage in practices considered illicit and potentially demonic. In popular imaginary, *debtera* are ‘paragons of ingeniousness, ruse, and deceitfulness’ (Mercier 1997: 44), and thus some of them prefer the more neutral titles of *merigeta* or *yeneta*, which apply to generic religious teachers.

In a context in which written knowledge has been largely restricted to the officials of the Orthodox Church and certain offices of the imperial apparatus, the *debtera* is also a figure closely associated with literacy. The literacy of churchmen played a central role in the imperial bureaucracy of Ethiopia. Indeed, a large part of what we know about imperial land tenure between the 13th and 20th centuries comes from ‘numerous notes, which litter the margins and end-papers of church service books, notes which deal pre-eminently with issues concerning land’ (Crummey 2006: 9). Several imperial documents, that is, were recorded as a kind of liturgical marginalia.

It seems that such documents were less concerned with elaborating precise information about land grants than with approving and authorizing the grant, conferring official character upon it. Writing itself served mainly as a seal of authority. In McCann’s reading, ‘The use of archaic, ecclesiastical *Ge’ez* language to register property transactions was not merely mundane bureaucratic practice but clearly an attempt to sanctify and strengthen elite property claims by recourse to a culturally restricted literacy associated with the sacred’ (2001: 83; see Crummey 2006: 11). In this case, as in the magical practices I describe, the more impenetrable the language, the greater its authority.

The esoteric nature of the official, written tradition is evident in the training that all clergymen undergo. Starting from age seven or so, students learn to pronounce the Psalms in *Ge’ez*, and slowly move on to more complex texts. The most dedicated pupils—among which are prospective *debtera*—progress to higher levels of expertise, including votive chant-dance and the composition of *qiné* poetry, beginning to understand the classical language as they go. In the course of this training, students are exposed to a range of texts varying from the canonical to peripheral divinatory and magical works, which have no official standing in the EOC but nonetheless circulate widely among students and pupils.

The justification for the restriction and secretiveness of official church knowledge, and for the performance of the liturgy in classical *Ge’ez*, is related to the logic of sacredness. The language and practice of church ritual must be kept at a remove from the profane flux of everyday life and everyday language. Moreover, since religious knowledge is understood to come from God, learning must be, in theory, ascetic: learning is not just the accumulation of information, but entails the conditioning of the body and the soul to be in a deserving state to receive some portion or reflection of divine truth (Messay 1999).

Ritual traditions that rely on the secretiveness of arcane languages, rather than being concerned with mystification per se, seem to emerge wherever people seek to protect overriding ancestral truths considered timeless and powerful (Tambiah 1968: 180; cf. Simmel 1950). In this sense, they are understood as highly moral in their own terms. Nevertheless, as I show below, the result of these linguistic strategies is often an increasing esotericism that,

by virtue of its obscurity, also creates the conditions for misappropriation and sin—the stock in trade of the *debtera*.

Secret Names

In the course of fieldwork (2011-2013), I became acquainted with approximately ten *debtera*. As well as conducting interviews, I attended consultations with some of their clients, learned the basic principles of divination, and had them guide me through their books of spells. The following analysis concentrates mostly on the two *debtera* I got to know best: Samson and Semere. While their views are not representative of their entire class of ritual specialists, their different positions with regards to the church gives a sense of the considerable diversity in *debtera*'s practices and moral stances.

Samson was a fifty-year-old man who had been an administrator in his neighbourhood church for over fifteen years, after having completed a lengthy education in the monastic schools of the Gojjam region. He was not wealthy by local standards, and supplemented his meagre church income by performing spiritual healing in the living room of his modest house, where he lived with his wife and three children. In public, as well as when meeting a client at home, he wore the white turban distinctive of churchmen, and presented his work as being entirely for the glory of God. Some clients I talked to, nevertheless, claimed that his deep and enigmatic ritual knowledge would allow him to perform illicit magic. These speculations were based on his use of texts which showed due obeisance to God but included the names of certain demons responsible for illness, which he claimed were necessary for driving them out of his clients. Samson would point out that some of these texts are also commonly held by priests—something of a public secret—and, while certainly not canonical, they were not amongst the most morally transgressive. Most of his clients, he said, came to see him because they got to know him in the church, and this provided a relative reassurance about the purity of his intent, despite the heterodoxy of his knowledge.

By contrast to Samson's pious demeanour, Semere, an unmarried man in his early forties, always wore an impeccably sharp business suit, except while performing specific rituals. Having recently moved to the capital from a remote rural locality, he made no secret of his aspirations to become 'very rich'. During one of our first meetings, he told me that he was on track to do so, pointing to his collection of what he swore were golden watches. Semere served no specific church and made no claims to be doing official church work. He was, however, highly proficient in *Ge'ez*, and had also trained in the famous church schools of Gojjam. He never revealed where his house was; but he invited me to his 'office', which consisted of a large single-room flat in a quiet part of town, on a couple of occasions. However, we mostly met in hotels and bars, where he wouldn't disdain a few gins and the occasional flirtation with a waitress. There, he would also discretely inquire into the situation of people around us, whom he saw as potential clients. Apparently, he also enjoyed spending time with me in such venues because many people felt reluctant to build friendships with him after learning about his markedly demonic works—'It scares people and makes you lonely', Semere lamented. Unencumbered by economic dependency on the church, he was able to advertise his ability to call demons and cajole an array of spirits rather freely, but still with the appropriate aura of public secrecy and ambiguity. Being rumoured to provide immoral services can be an advantage, since it attracts customers whose needs are precisely those for which the church does not provide—as for instance, love magic, business magic, or vindictive rituals, which are in great demand in the Ethiopian capital.

The *debtera*'s repertoire is complex, and includes written spells (Griaule 1930), pictorial talismans (Mercier 1997), divinatory texts (Conti Rossini 1941; Young 1977), and herbal medicines for particular purposes (apotropaic, therapeutic, aggressive, etc.), which are all

often combined in practice. But the *debtera* I got to know emphasized that the distinguishing trait of their work is the knowledge and use of *asmat*.⁵ *Asmat* are the secret names of God, the angels, Biblical figures, and malignant or amoral spirits. The domain of *asmat* is vast, and the term stretches as far as denoting the secret names of the wounds of the crucified Christ or of the cross itself. Some traditions attribute the origins of *asmat* to King Solomon, who received this powerful wisdom in order to coerce demons into erecting his temple. Samson would say that *asmat* pre-date the creation of humanity, as such names were inscribed onto the wings of the righteous angels commanded by Michael in order to empower them in the battle against Satan's rebellious faction (see Mercier 1997: 47-50). Philological studies of *debtera*'s texts and the names contained therein show that they condense traditions as diverse as neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic, received from 'Egyptian Christians, from Muslims even perhaps, in some elements directly from the late Hellenistic world' (Mercier 1997: 41; see Strelcyn 1955). The spells (*abinet*) I have examined confront us with a promiscuous juxtaposition of names of God, demons, eclectic spirits, and Islamic magic words (*qalat arabi*).⁶

Most *debtera* would admit that some of these names were beyond their interpretative capacity. *Asmat* were described as 'powerful' (*haileña*), 'heavy' (*kabad*) and, above all, as a 'mystery' (*mistír*). While some *debtera* were able to offer a commentary on the meaning of specific names, the general effect produced for their lay clients on glimpsing a *debtera*'s books or hearing his recitations were largely of an indistinct blur of incomprehensible words. Simmel suggested that 'Writing is opposed to all secrecy', in that it 'possess an objective existence which renounces all guarantees of remaining secret' (1950: 352). Yet here, to paraphrase Nooter, the semantic opacity of the written word—in both its audible and visible forms—also functions to keep the hidden hidden (1993: 58; see Bledsoe & Robey 1986: 222), a point to which I'll return in subsequent sections.

Even for *debtera* themselves, however, the main function of secret names was not to convey information, but to command spirits. In most spells, *asmat* appear in long lists following a specific command or followed by it (e.g. 'for the power of your names destroy my enemy' or 'by the power of these holy names deliver your servant from illness'; see Griaule 1930; Strelcyn 1955, 1965). For *debtera* Samson, *asmat* should be understood as invitations and interpellations: 'I might not know you personally, but I know that your name is Diego. So if I call your name from a crowd you will turn around and come'. In the same way, the reading of *asmat* can summon benevolent or malevolent spiritual agents, and grant mastery over them. In other cases, however, Samson explained that it might be enough to read a secret name to access a portion of the potency of the spiritual entity it refers to:

Alfa is a secret name of God that was revealed to Solomon. You come to me for a treatment and this name alone can cast out the demon you have on your back, just the sound has the power of God because God is the meaning. You don't know the name's meaning, but your demon knows that it is God's name.

Secret names are thus primarily understood in terms of their efficacy and ability to convey authority. They act as a 'seal' (*mahatem*), conferring a spell its specific power, which *debtera* Semere explained with a bureaucratic analogy: 'If you have a letter from the government that

⁵ I focus on *asmat* since the production of material objects, such as talismans, is not as prominent among *debtera* in Addis Ababa as elsewhere (see de Ménonville 2019 for comparison). The *debtera* Semere commented that many clients would feel uncomfortable possessing such visible signs of their resort to illicit practitioners, and that wearing or hanging a talisman in one's home might be considered 'backward' or 'shameful' in urban contexts.

⁶ See Lambek 1993 for a refined analysis of how illicit knowledge might germinate from authoritative sacred tradition in Islamic contexts.

authorizes Diego to do research on Ethiopia, but the signature and stamp of the minister is not there, the letter has no authority' (cf. Mercier 1997: 42). This logic is consistent with the theories of writing discussed earlier: the conveyance of authority is primary, while the communication of semantic content is often actively impeded (cf. Tambiah 1968).

Whether their meanings are known or not, once *asmāt* are written down, they obtain an efficacy that is independent from the copyist's or user's intentionality. For instance, the secret name of the archangel Michael contained in a text could suffice to scare demons in its proximity, even when not read aloud. For some *debtera*, the basic fact of *asmāt*'s inscription sacralises the material onto which they are written (traditionally animal skin, but increasingly notebooks). The materiality of writing is important here, since as Keane (2013) argues, when sacred words are transposed onto a physical medium, they become durable and transportable, acquiring some of the medium's affordances; but, they also become potentially destructible and, I add, vulnerable to pollution. Indeed, the *debtera* Semere asked me to keep his books of spell while he went to the toilet of an hotel, as a text containing *asmāt* should not be brought into such impure place—a notion that informs the compartmentalization of sacred and profane spaces and the material traffic between them in Ethiopian Orthodoxy more broadly (Boylston 2018). What was striking is that many such names were names of demons, and not only of God and angels. Part of the ambiguity of the *debtera*'s work lies in the fact that they consider some demonic entities 'pure' (*netsuh*) in a similar way to angels, and thus in need of the same deference one displays towards the sacred.

This conception stems from a widely known version of the story of the Fall. As related by Semere, after the rebellion of Satan and his defeat by Michael, the rebel angels were flung to the depths of hell or cast into exile on earth, while those who remained neutral in the battle were left suspended between earth and heaven. These are the *ayerawiyān*, or 'airborne ones', whom some *debtera* think of as pure beings. If you are to call them, you must avoid sex and other forms of ritual pollution. This attitude exemplifies the ambivalence of *debtera*'s cosmological categories, as the official doctrine of the EOC does not recognize any moral distinction between the *ayerawiyān* and any other kind of demonic beings, which should all be considered inimical and exorcized. For *debtera* like Semere, though, there is a practical interest in having a different understanding of categories of spirits that might enhance the achievement of worldly aims. Knowledge of such spirits and how to control them, however, is dangerous and not easily acquired.

Acquiring Secrets

Given the ambiguous status of occult magical knowledge, it's unsurprising that its acquisition is steeped in secrecy, and that there exists something like a black market in spells. Typically, a *debtera* acquires his first spells during church studies (see Young 1975). Young pupils are often co-opted by their religious teachers, who are generally *debtera*, to copy spells for them—an activity conducted secretly, even nocturnally in some cases, as it is formally forbidden. The same teachers might teach the secrets of their trade in exchange for servitude and, more rarely, monetary payment.

Semere underlined the importance of studying in different religious centres of education and under different teachers to acquire a diverse stock of magical knowledge. Many *debtera* pointed out that this apprenticeship is a lengthy and complicated business, itself governed by the mechanics of revelation and concealment. Masters reveal their secret 'little by little' (*kas be kas*), testing continuously the character and loyalty of their pupils (cf. Bledsoe & Robey 1986). Students, in turn, suspect that their master is providing them with incomplete information, and that the fullness of secret knowledge will be revealed only further on (cf. Barth 1975). Samson commented: 'A blacksmith does not reveal all the secrets of his craft at

once, otherwise the arrogant apprentice will just leave and start selling sickles to the farmers of the same village'.⁷

For Semere, the acquisition of magical knowledge is a journey entailing other journeys. Not only does a young *debtera* travel to different masters during his long religious training; but, at the end of his formal education, he needs to visit well-known magicians and attempt to persuade them to sell some of the spells he does not possess. Semere described his books as the sum of years of wandering 'from mountain to mountain', as knowledge that costs not only a vast amount of money but also of effort and, as such, needed to be guarded by secrecy.

Samson related that upon buying a spell, one often receives few or no instructions about the meaning of the secret names it contains. For Semere, when one receives a spell from his religious teacher, the teacher is more likely to reveal some explanations about the angelology and demonology underpinning the text. For both, however, this knowledge is always incomplete, and the occult world with its elusive characters remains fundamentally murky territory. Thus, in a sense, what is revealed through the transmission of secret knowledge is often further obfuscation. One learns more about the characteristics of different spiritual agents mobilized by a spell and how they operate through practice and experimentation. *Debtera* are deeply concerned about the efficacy of the spells they acquire; but through experience and testing, they are able to determine whether spells are effective without necessarily having a full understanding their inner workings.

Semere's image of travelling 'from mountain to mountain' alludes to monasteries and centres of religious learning, often built on hilltops with a view to remoteness. By referring to the seclusion of the monastic schools, Semere also indicated the element of mystery and restriction that enfolds church education proper. Here there is a direct parallel between acquiring spells and licit religious knowledge: frequently—and problematically—both come from the same sources and instructors, stemming from within the core sites of the reproduction of the EOC's official tradition. As I show below, such a close but ambiguous relationship to the church means that the secret knowledge and practices of *debtera* are often subject to constant moral scrutiny by lay people and *debtera* alike.

The (Im)morality of Secrets

When asked about the morality of his secret knowledge and practices, Samson's immediate reaction involved a situational ethical stance. 'Listen, you can do good with bad things and bad with good things', he said. He explained that *debtera* can use licit Biblical texts to harm people by drawing on the potency of the invocations contained therein. The Psalms, for example, contain numerous prayers invoking the punishment of enemies. Portions of these texts can be recited with the names of one's enemies interposed or written on a parchment to be hidden in a person's house, causing him to become sick. Samson suggested that sometimes this procedure could be a provisional but efficacious measure to seek redress or to lead the attacked person to regret his animosity without causing permanent damage. But Samson said he would not get involved in such things, because this use of canonical texts is clearly illegitimate, as it improperly appropriates divine power and perverts their intended, institutionally sanctioned purposes.

Samson also rendered the moral complexity of his work with the example of a *debtera* who uses a demon summoned through an illicit spell in order to cure a critically ill patient: 'You do something forbidden but you save a life; you do nothing, and the person dies. What is better?' He admitted having been troubled by this conundrum. Nevertheless, he concluded

⁷ Despite the close association between blacksmiths and witchcraft in Ethiopia, here the blacksmith is merely an example of somebody who possesses specialized skills.

that summoning the demon remains indisputably condemnable, in that it presupposes negotiations with the church's spiritual enemies and stands in opposition to the broader framework of Orthodox ethics—which affirms exclusive, divine sovereignty over the life and death of all created beings (Messay 1999).

Crucially, even those *debtera* who, unlike Samson, are involved in the most heinous magical practices recognize the official Orthodox framework as the legitimate and highest source of moral value. *Debtera* are not proponents of an ethical system different from the religiously sanctioned one; rather, they strategically stretch the boundaries of authorized morals and explicitly violate them for practical ends. Many *debtera* are performatively transgressive, and work on the understanding that sometimes people, including their clients, need to break the rules. Samson, however, emphasised the inevitability of divine judgment, noting that those who transgress God's laws, consort with his demonic adversaries, or access his clean power from the back door, bending it to inappropriate ends, will eventually be punished.

Similar considerations informed Semere's moral reasoning. For him, the difference between prayer (*s'elot*) and spells (*abinet*) was that the former 'is the relationship you have with God', while the latter 'is something related to spirits and transient (*alafi*) things'. Semere justified his markedly transgressive practices, which involved summoning demons, by emphasizing that, as an immigrant from the countryside, he was struggling to achieve economic success in the viciously competitive Ethiopian capital, where networks of mutual support are weakening, and individuals compete mercilessly one against another (see Malara 2017). 'In a world of hyenas, you cannot be a sheep', he said, adding that:

Nobody thinks about others. If someone can kill you and get profit out of it, he will do it. He won't think about your life. A man is even ready to kill his father and mother. How can you call such a time? A time of hyenas. If he can use you as a bridge and walk on you he will.

However, Semere regarded his demonic activities as 'temporary' (*gizeyawi*), stating that in order 'to reach heaven (*yemicherrashaw alem*; literally: "the last world") we need to stop this and return to God'. Above all, as he said in recognizable Orthodox idiom, 'you should know your limits' (*lik mawek' allebih*)—even, or perhaps especially, when transgressing them. For him, the *debtera* who does not give up illicit practices after a certain age is unwise at best, as God's forgiveness should be solicited before it is too late. And yet, even then, a critical element of risk remains, as nobody knows the hour of his death, and God sometimes does not wait for a sinner's death to administer his punishment. Laymen often interpret the fact that many *debtera* are blind or crippled as an embodied index of their depravity and a consequence of divine wrath. While acknowledging the theoretical cogency of this explanation, Semere told me that the prevalence of disability among *debtera* is largely the result of the EOC's restriction of the priesthood to those church students who are physically 'whole' (*mulu*). And yet, he didn't discourage laymen's speculations, as these contributed to the mystique of corruption, transgressiveness and power that appeals to certain clients. Semere admitted plainly to be a sinner; but he did not want to be a sinner forever. Once he made enough money to begin a career as a merchant, he would go to confess and 'change his life'. He was looking forward to that day, but willing to take the risk meanwhile.

While involved in the business of magic and demon-summoning, Semere continued to observe all the prescribed Orthodox fasts, which he saw as necessary to balance his many iniquities and retain connection to his Orthodox identity (see Malara 2018). When I asked him why he was fasting, he retorted, in irritation: 'Am I not of Christian race/seed'? (*Ene yekrystian zer aydellehum endé?*). Significantly, respecting some ascetic injunctions was also part of an attempt to preserve some ethical discernment, as those who are enmeshed in the obscure realm of magic risk completely losing sight of the critical difference between

mundane, circumstantial considerations and the timeless deontology of divine commandments. In Semere's words, the danger is that 'When you get in the mud you can't tell mud from water' (*chika wist kegebah, chika enna wuha atileyim*). Ethical discernment, and its ascetic conditions of possibility, then, appear even more vital for people like Semere – who temporarily chose the murky path of secrecy and immorality – than for the pious Christian. Here, anxious discernment of the moral contours of the very boundaries that lend Orthodoxy its distinctive form is prompted by transgression itself. Indeed, given their deep religious training, *debtera* are intensely conscious, perhaps more than others, of the significance of religious taboos and the danger posed by violating them in order to fulfil worldly desires (*alemawi fillagot*). Semere's validation, or even defence, of the very moral prohibitions he routinely violates shows that, to echo Bataille, 'transgressions complete a taboo without rejecting it and suspend it without suppressing it' (1962: 40). Magical practices that, at a first sight, appear as expressions of a wild antinomianism, stand instead in a relation of hierarchical submission and complicated complementarity with official ethical tenets (cf. Copeman 2009; Parry 1985).

As I have shown, *debtera* think a great deal about the implications of their actions and about the difference between making requests from God and soliciting demons. For some clients, likewise, the morality of *debtera*'s secret knowledge and practices is constantly in question, though in this case the *debtera*'s openness to immoral doings is precisely what makes them attractive.

Debtera and their Clients

The relationship between a *debtera* and his client often requires ambiguity in order to maintain a kind of plausible deniability, which shrouds the full implications of the *debtera*'s and client's actions from others and from themselves. Nevertheless, when a client requests an unambiguously immoral service, the negative connotations of motives and ritual techniques becomes impossible or unpractical to mask. In such cases, *debtera* must exhibit signs that they possess transgressive secret knowledge, while occluding the interpretation of the signified content on behalf of the client, effectively making a spectacle of concealment (Jones 2014: 55).

When meeting a client, Semere boasted of the different kinds of disease he has treated, the number of problems he is able to solve, and the vastness of the knowledge he has acquired in renowned centres of religious learning. In some cases, clients were asked for some basic information about their problem and its desired outcomes, but were told that they do not need to be present when the *debtera* perform his rituals, and were thus left to wonder about the genesis of the power operating upon or for them. When clients got to witness Semere's performances, they were confronted with a specialist deeply absorbed in reading his magical text, reciting with a solemn tone at one moment and mumbling incomprehensible words at another, while swinging his torso back and forth. Most texts are written in *Ge'ez*, a language that the client does not understand, but that evokes the allure of esoteric Orthodox liturgical knowledge. Sometimes, passages in Amharic would be read in a clearer voice, only to be followed by a long series of unintelligible words murmured under the *debtera*'s breath. The *debtera* read obscure passages at great speed, displaying his mastery of arcane languages, while the client is instructed to sit quietly, unable to ask, argue, or reply.

The tension between disclosure and disguise informing *debtera*-client interactions ensures that the partial communication of disconnected bits of secret textual knowledge 'does not expose or diminish mystery but rather extends it' (Newell 2013: 141). In other words, the fragmented insights that the client might gain from intelligible or familiar bits of ritual speech allow for a process whereby 'depth becomes' ephemerally 'surface so as to remain depth'

(Taussig 1999: 5). This process activates the efficacy of the secret as that which ultimately cannot be known, but the existence of which must be selectively exposed for it to be perceived as powerful and socially immanent. Furthermore, as Young observes, the *debtera*'s secret knowledge is not just 'too recondite for the laymen to grasp' but also 'too dangerous to possess because of its demonic associations' (1975: 154)—something that contributes to clients' unwillingness to probe into *debtera*'s secrets too deeply. This pervading opacity notwithstanding, a *debtera* is also a sort of confessor to whom, as I show below, people turn to reveal their most sinful and secret desires.

Secret Desires

For the EOC, feelings of envy, vengeful wishes, and carnal desires are best dealt with through confession and elaborate forms of penance geared towards weakening passions and worldly attachments. By contrast, through their secret knowledge, *debtera* can provide services such as making one's enemy sick, making a desired person fall in love with their client, making one neighbour rich at the expense of another, and so forth. In so doing, they create alternative avenues for dealing with emotions and desires that are often kept secret, and which are illicit or sinful from an official perspective (see de Ménonville 2019)⁸.

The rising demand for such services is associated with the conditions of life in Addis Ababa, a place of moral corruption and ubiquitous temptation, dramatic poverty and mushrooming opportunity, saturated by longings, grievances, and vulnerabilities that often cannot be voiced publicly. To give one example of how *debtera* make sense of the contemporary moment, consider Semere's comment about the unprecedented number of requests for spells against impotence:

Weak sexual intercourse (*dikmet wesib*) is the name. It is [increasing] because women in the city are powerful (*haileña*). In the countryside, women are taught to hide their [sexual] desires. Even if she has desires, she feels ashamed to tell her spouse. In the city, a woman can leave somebody saying: 'he doesn't satisfy me'. She can leave her husband. Especially in this city, in Addis Ababa, women are powerful. They don't get satisfied easily.

Semere does not imply that rural women are immune to carnal desires, but that codes of shame prevent them from verbalizing and, often, acting on them. In the capital, on the other hand, desires proliferate unbridled, and many *debtera* detect in this a unique opportunity. Indeed, such conditions create a rich market of people seeking to manage or fulfil their own unspeakable desires, or to covertly control the desires of others.

Tesfaldet, a respected teacher of theology in Addis Ababa, confided to me that during his religious training he moonlighted as a transcriber of spells for his teacher. One day a childless widow with no kin presented his master with a peculiar case. For the previous three days, a man of dark complexion had visited her house after sunset, 'spending the night there'—an allusion to sexual relations—but, when she woke up, the man had vanished into thin air. The *debtera* confirmed through divination that the nightly visitor was a demon in human disguise. However, the *debtera* did not proceed to exorcize the non-human entity, as official Orthodox guidelines would demand, but asked the widow: 'So, what do you want me to do: do you want me to give you a talisman to chase him away or do you want me to make him stay?' After a pause, the widow replied, 'Make him stay.' The lonely widow, Tesfaldet related, opted for the solution that satisfied her desire for intimate companionship, regardless not just of the dubious morality of clandestine erotic relations, but of the demonic nature of her lover.

⁸ While de Ménonville speaks of 'reprehensible emotions', I find this expression restrictive as it doesn't encompass the deep desires – actualized or not – that I describe, and which my interlocutors render with the Amharic word *fillagot* (lit. desire or want). *Debtera* do not simply help people cope with the emotion of anger, but address and fulfil a desire for vengeance.

Like a priest, a *debtera* is a man to whom you can tell your secret desires; but, rather than rid you of them through confession, he can grant what you crave, and thus address needs and feelings that otherwise go unacknowledged, or are acknowledged only to be suppressed. Sometimes, as in Tesfaldet's account, the *debtera*'s services can be construed as a sympathetic act; and yet, the contemplation of this story engendered a sense of horror in many of my Orthodox friends, surpassed only by sharper feelings of repugnance elicited by 'love magic' (*mesta faker*).

Unreciprocated romantic passions are dangerous because they are tightly associated with madness, sin, and violence. But, for *debtera* such as Semere, they are a steady source of income. Semere is regularly consulted by people who wish their affections to be reciprocated by a loved one, or who wish to seduce somebody for economic gain. Some of these clients are young men working as official or semi-official tourist guides, who aspire to move to Europe or the US through a foreign, typically white, female tourist met in Ethiopia.

One such guide, named Tilahun, visited Semere after many unsuccessful attempts to migrate to Europe. He wished to make a German woman fall in love with him so that she would help him leave the country. Semere described the prospective course of action to me as follows: he would start by gathering some unspecified herbs, earth from a churchyard, and the skin of a female hyena (which is considered the utmost impure animal and associated with witchcraft). Tilahun would have to procure a piece of cloth from the intended victim. Having abstained from food and sex, Semere would mix the ingredients with his left hand while facing the east. For seven days, he would recite incantations over the concoction obtained. This would be rubbed onto the client's hand and the name of a demon would be written on it with the blood of a black hen. The spell would start working when Tilahun shook hands with the woman, and a demon would perform an oneiric coitus with her the same night, rendering her unable to feel desire for any other man except him.⁹

Priests and lay people I talked to commented that this sort of magical act amounted to a dismaying violation of divinely-granted free will. They highlighted the harmful nature of the spell by pointing out that price for the predatory fulfilment of dissolute wishes is the risk that the victim would go mad—a consequence of the abominable kind of sexual act involved. The procedures of the spell mirror the immorality of its purpose, as they rely on graphic inversions of official ritual practices. The *debtera* prays over his concoction while abstaining from food and sex, mimicking Orthodox fasting and worship, but facing east and using the left hand, which are associated with the realm of the demonic. Moreover, there is an unhallowed mingling of both ritual styles—fasting, sexual abstentions and the invocation of demons—and materials—the impure hyena's skin and the sanctity of church's ground—that belong to spheres which ought not to mix with one another. These heterodox contaminations are particularly blasphemous—but perversely fascinating—because of the value that Orthodoxy attaches to a panoply of ritual proscriptions meant to regulate traffic between spaces, times, and substances in order prevent the intrusion of impurity in the domain of the sacred, and vice versa (Boylston 2018). However, spells involving impure ingredients and defilement are powerful not just because, as Parry wrote, 'that which is anomalous ... is not only the focus of pollution and danger, but also the source of extraordinary power' (1985: 61); a *debtera*'s magic is powerful because the thing that it appropriates and transgresses, the sacredness of the church and its tradition, is powerful.

The dialectics of concealment and revelation are critical to the operations of this ominous power. The spell must be performed in secret, and the concoction must be given to the victim without her knowledge. But, the *debtera* doesn't hide his acts of desecration from the client—

⁹ See de Ménonville 2018a: 1019 for a description of a similar practice in Norther Ethiopia.

or from the anthropologist—in order to vividly signal his transgressive power. Similar performative aspects of ‘unlicensed transgression’ (Bakhtin 1984) are, indeed, quite common: de Ménonville (2019), for instance, describes *debtera* who make their homes on graves or who live in conspicuous filth to publicly broadcast the immorality of their work. Moreover, in Orthodox popular lore, the bondage between a *debtera* and the demons they command is sealed by secret ghastly acts of sacrilege such as defecating on a Bible. These are rumours that many *debtera* would neither confirm nor deny, fuelling the ambiguous allure of the dangerous and obscure powers awaiting beyond the thresholds of sacred Orthodox prohibitions for those willing to trespass them. Here, much as Taussig observed, ‘The salient property of danger present’ in the surreptitious transgression of taboos is precisely ‘its considerable if indefinable power to attract and refuse’ (1998: 349).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the interplay of concealment and revelation throughout *debtera*’s careers. I outlined how secret and illicit magic emerges from the official Orthodox tradition, which is perceived as powerful by virtue of its restrictedness and opacity. *Debtera*’s own powers obtain from the fact that they draw upon such a tradition, but also consciously transgress some of its core moral tenets and ritual proscriptions. Such transgressions, however, do not seek to abolish the boundaries they violate, but reinstate their moral validity and superiority, while requiring intense ethical reflection on the relationship between illicit, secret knowledge and official prohibitions. This moral intricacy, I suggested, becomes more apparent in ethnographic analysis that centers the ways in which *debtera* themselves attempt to make sense of, and live with, the implications of their secret work.

I wish to conclude briefly with a note on what the study of secrecy might reveal about broader socio-moral systems and how we study them. Luise White reminds us that while secrets conceal, they also tell a great deal: they signal that what is considered worthy of secrecy is perhaps ‘more significant than other stories and other ways of telling’, and ‘reveal much more about the conflict and constraints of time and place’ than straightforward, public narratives do (2000: 16-25). In this perspective, one of the troublesome truths the study of secrecy reveals about Ethiopian Orthodox society is that an official, Orthodox-inflected account of morality cannot provide the full story of everyday ethics. Such account would fail to capture the pervasive social work of desire (of lust, or for vengeance, wealth and domination) as well as the significance of ordinary sins and acts of defilement, which conspicuously inform daily living for many Orthodox Ethiopians—a public secret that ‘is generally known, but cannot be’ openly ‘articulated’ (Taussig 1999: 5). In other words, *debtera*, despite—or perhaps because—of their secretiveness, allow us a penetrating glimpse into the hidden dynamics of desire and transgression, and reveal how these are neither marginal nor anomalous, but operate feverishly underneath the visible surfaces of Ethiopian Orthodox sociality to give to the experience of fallenness its distinctive local flavour. In the wake of Robbins’ (2013) timely call for an ‘anthropology of the good’, we also need, to borrow from spaghetti-western director Sergio Leone, an anthropology of the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’.

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