

Faith as a Means of Healing:
Traditional Medicine and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church In and Around
Lalibela

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Abstract

This paper examines and explores the relationship between indigenous medical traditions in Ethiopia and the healing rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The practices still upheld by the Church today are explored in depth as is the prevalence of *debertera*, church educated traditional healers in Ethiopia. The relationship between traditional and modern modes of medical treatment in Ethiopia is explored as well as the legitimacy of both church healing and alternative medicine worldwide. Present research into the benefits of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) including mind/body healing is also examined.

ISP Topic Codes:

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I. Introduction

The values of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church undoubtedly have bearing the day to day lives of its followers. Among its many influences, the beliefs of the Church impact the decisions many Ethiopians make concerning their healthcare. A significant number of the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity believe that diseases have supernatural causes, and thus seek medical help in the Church through spiritual healing rather than in modern medical facilities; although, sometimes the two are used in combination.

Lalibela, located in the northern Amhara region of Ethiopia, functions as one of the country's religious capitals. A major site of religious pilgrimage for followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, it is not surprising that the Churches in Lalibela are thought to hold the power to heal the sick of Ethiopia. Many people travel from all over the country, and even internationally, to receive care at the renowned churches of Lalibela and its surrounding area.

The medical practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church undoubtedly have links to indigenous medicine of the country. However, the Church itself refuses to acknowledge its relationship to pre-Christian practices. The *debttera* of Ethiopia represent a class of traditional healers who have been educated and even participate in the services of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; however, the Church will not recognize their ability to heal and will even go so far as to say they deal in evil spirits. This is one example of how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has taken measures to distance itself from alternative healing practices such as herbal medicine.

The medical attention given to patients of the Ethiopian Orthodox church has both negative and positive side effects for its participants. While the healing practices of the Church certainly include a number of psychological benefits for its believers, it can also subject the patients to a significant amount of risk. The future of healing through church practice is indefinite, as more and more people are becoming educated and aware of the natural causes of disease.

This study focuses on defining the affiliation between indigenous medicine and the Orthodox Church. The link connecting the two likely lies in the practices of the *debtera*; however, their knowledge of traditional healing methods is kept secret.

A. Statement of the Problem

I knew about the existence of church healing and traditional medicine in Ethiopia before beginning research from my experiences during our initial group visit to Lalibela. My observations during that time sparked my interest in the field of traditional medicine as a whole, including religious healing. I was curious about what beliefs and teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church motivate people to seek help for medical issues through their faith rather than other resources. Also, I wondered about the effectiveness of church healing, at least on a psychological level.

Before the research period began I wondered how people in rural areas received medical care when they could not access hospitals and clinics, which are located only in the larger cities of Ethiopia. I presumed that there must be a prevalence of traditional healers in such areas. I also wondered to what extent people rely on the methods of church healing as their primary source of healthcare.

B. Objective of the Study

1. General Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the healing practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and their relationship with alternative means of traditional healing.

2. Specific Objectives

- To find the origins for Ethiopians' belief in miraculous cures.
- To clarify the relationship between religious healing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and indigenous medicine in Ethiopia.
- To study the means and techniques used by the Church to heal its followers.
- To explore the different paths alternative medicine, including church healing and traditional remedies, could take in the future.

C. Rationale

In order to make a connection between my studies in Ethiopia and my studies at my home university in the United States, I felt it was necessary to focus my independent study in field of medicine. Simultaneously, I needed to make sure that the topic of my research was fitting given the program's theme: Sacred Traditions and Visual Culture. With this in mind, I settled on the topic of church healing. It was only through the initial stages of my research that I realized the undeniable relationship between the healing rituals of the Church and traditional medicine practices of the *debtera*.

I chose to do my primary research in Lalibela because of its status as one of the Christian capitals of Ethiopia. During my initial visit to Lalibela with the group, I was

introduced to a couple of the practices unique to that region, including the use of holy honey, which cannot be found elsewhere in Ethiopia. It was obvious that this would be the best place to pursue the topic.

D. Significance of the Study and Its Relationship to the Program Theme

This study addresses the sacred healing traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and aims to explore the relationship between church practice and pre-Christian systems of traditional medicine. These rituals have been practiced and passed through a number of generations and still play a large role in Ethiopia's healthcare system, particularly in the rural regions of the country, where modern medicine is not readily available. This study is important for recognizing the relationship between the rituals of the Orthodox Church and the indigenous traditions of the region.

E. Methodology

In order to collect enough data, I have used a combination of different field research methods. First, I conducted secondary research in the library at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. I found a number of books and articles concerning the traditions of indigenous medicine in Ethiopia as well as the different classes of healers. Such literature was effective in introducing the relationship between the *debtera* class of traditional healers and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but still left room for more investigation. I also found a few scholarly articles from online research useful in showing the ongoing development of alternative medicine in the West as well as its longtime establishment in Asia. I use these articles to place the status of traditional

medicine in Ethiopian among other countries. I also used the Bible to contextualize the communal beliefs surrounding illness and healing.

After the initial period of library research, I spent a one week period of time in Lalibela in order to conduct interviews among the priests and community members of the town. Interviews with the head priests of *Bilbila Giorgis*, *Bilbila Kirqos*, *Na'aqutalab*, *Beta Giorgis*, and *Beta Mariam* revealed the rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church still used for healing today. Also, these interviews were used to establish the Church's view of the traditional healing practices conducted by *debtera* outside the Church. Observation of the use of holy water at *Beta Giorgis* was used to supplement the interviews previously conducted.

An interview with a woman cured by church means displayed the belief system of the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church including those beliefs concerning the causes of disease and misfortune. Another interview was conducted with one of the town's doctors at the Lalibela Health Center. This interview was used to show how the beliefs of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity have affected the efforts of modern medicine in the area. I followed up my research in Lalibela with a supplementary interview of an active *debtera* in Addis Ababa.

All of the interviews were conducted using a translator. I used the help of Tegegne Yisaw, a local artist in Lalibela who I met during our group visit to Lalibela, to find a translator. He recommended Fikru Giorgis to me because of his knowledge of the area and his proficiency in spoken English. In Lalibela, I used Fikru to translate all of my interviews. Fikru also helped me determine which churches would be best to examine closely for my study because of their reputation for performing miraculous cures. In each

church, he helped me to locate and interview the head priest and explained the reasons for our visit. This was vital to get the priests to disclose their knowledge, and divulge their practices to me in depth. In Addis Ababa, Haiyu Sayoum translated my interview with Seregela Tsehay. Haiyu is a friend from the guesthouse I am staying in during my time in Addis Ababa.

F. Fieldwork Experience

Primary research on the subject proved more difficult than I expected considering the secrecy and mysticism that surrounds the area of study. A number of priests I interviewed in Lalibela were reluctant at first to share their views with me, but they all eventually became more comfortable with me and were willing to answer all of my questions. However, conducting research in Lalibela proved advantageous, since it is a tourist town. Therefore, my presence and curiosity was less surprising and more encouraged than in Addis Ababa. The most challenging aspect of field research was finding a practicing *debtera* who was willing to speak with me about his knowledge. This was not as much of a surprise considering the secrecy that surrounds their knowledge as well as the apparent disapproval of their traditions by the Church. Even though this research is about the healing practices in and around Lalibela, I have interviewed an active *debtera* in Addis Ababa as a complement; however, there were certain aspects of his practice that he would not disclose.

G. Limitations of the Study

Because of the secrecy surrounding the healing practices of the *debtera* and the rejection of such practices by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, I was unable to get in contact with a *debtera* in Lalibela during the week I was there. Also, it was difficult to gain full access in order to observe the rituals of the Church itself. As a result, primary research in Lalibela was supplemented in Addis Ababa. I would have liked to conduct all primary research in Lalibela, but this was not possible in the week that I was there.

Uncovering the relationship between indigenous medical practice and the rituals of the Church today was particularly difficult as church professionals are reluctant to admit the connection between the two. However, the additional interview with a *debtera* in Addis Ababa helped me clarify the relationship between traditional medicine and the Church.

Additionally, I was unable to find a translated version of all eighty-one books of the Ethiopian Bible. As a result, all research and analysis I did in the Bible was done in the available English version, which includes only sixty-six books. Likewise, I was not linguistically equipped to read or get access to other secular books of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that contain recorded medicinal traditions.

H. Literature Review

1. General Historical Overview

It is the common case in Africa that the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine is based on oral traditions passed from generation to generation. Most medical traditions throughout Africa are kept relatively secret in this way. It is the belief of many traditional healers that the more their knowledge is shared the less powerful and effective it becomes. As a result, indigenous medical techniques are rarely recorded, and when

they are, they are kept stealthily by their owners. Such knowledge is only shared with a select few.¹

Traditional Medicine in Ethiopia is largely influenced by the introduction of Semitic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from overseas. The true beginnings of traditional medicine in Ethiopia cannot be known as it was passed orally for a number of generations before it was recorded in medical texts. Historians estimate that traditional pharmacopeias existed as early as the fifteenth century. However, the earliest found text of traditional Ethiopian remedies, *Metsehafe Fews*, dates back to the middle of the seventeenth century. This and other early medical texts are written in *Ge'ez*, a language now only used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.² This fact suggests that medical texts were first recorded and copied by priests of the Church.

The traditional healthcare system utilized by Ethiopians for centuries before the introduction of modern medicine consisted of both empirical and supernatural elements. A number of techniques were used in the prevention and cure of various diseases. Some of the remedies known and used by traditional healers include plant and animal medicine, immunization, thermal water healing, cauterization, counter-irritation, and surgery.³

The promotion of traditional medicine in Ethiopia has gone through a number of phases beginning with the prohibition of sorcery, witchcraft, and magic by Emperor Yohannes IV in 1878. His objection to such practices was fueled by his own believe in the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which promoted the idea that illness was

¹ Fekadu Fullas. *Ethiopian Traditional Medicine: Common Medicinal Plants in Perspective*. Sioux City, Iowa, 2001. pp. 13.

² Fekadu Fullas. pp. 15-16

³ Abraraw Tesfaye. "Traditional Medicine in an Urban Centre: Beliefs and Practices (The Case of Dessie Town, Northern Ethiopia)." MA Thesis, Department of Social Anthropology. Addis Ababa University: Addis Ababa, 1998. pp. 33.

caused by evil spirits and should be treated by priests with holy water. Unlike Yohannes, Emperor Menelik II was tolerant of traditional medical practices despite the fact that he himself was a believer in modern health systems.¹ However, throughout the nineteenth century the practices and ideas of modern medicine gradually spread throughout Ethiopia, especially during the reign of Menelik II (r.1889-1913). Since that time the techniques of modern and traditional medicines have coexisted, and many people use a combination of both.²

Practice of non-dangerous indigenous medicine was officially legalized in 1942 and was reinforced in 1948 when traditional healers were encouraged to register with the Ministry of Health. Starting in the 1950s, traditional practitioners were required to submit a list of herbs they use in their practice, a demand many healers were unwilling to comply with due to the secrecy of their procedures. Since the early twentieth century a number of attempts have been made to help organize, legitimize, and preserve traditional medicine in Ethiopia. The establishment of the Coordinating Office for Traditional Medicine (later the Department of Traditional Medicine) was one step in such a direction. Funding and support was also provided internationally by such organizations as The World Health Organization (WHO) and The United Nations Development Agency (UNDP).³ Today The Ethiopian National Traditional Medicine Preparation and Study Association (ENTMPSA) handles research and development of traditional medicines. This organization has collected a number of medicinal books in *Ge'ez* for study.⁴

¹ Fekadu Fullas. pp. 16

² Abraraw Tesfaye. pp. 33-34.

³ Fekadu Fullas. pp. 17

⁴ Taye Bekele. "Indigenous Knowledge of Medicinal Plants: Perspectives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church." Institute of Biodiversity Conservation and Research. In: Proceedings of the Workshop on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, Sunday School Department: Addis Ababa, 2002.

2. Prevalent Beliefs About Disease and Medicine

Despite the efforts of current research and development into traditional medicine as well as the prevalence of modern medicine throughout Ethiopia, most people still believe in spiritual causes of illness. The overriding characteristic of traditional medicine in Ethiopia is that disease is caused by supernatural forces, whether it is God, ghosts, evil spirits, sorcerers, or magicians.¹ On the subject, Molvaer offers this observation:

“One can still clearly see that in people’s mind the world or ‘universe’ is a unity, and that spirits, thoughts, wishes, words, herbs – practically everything – are interconnected and can influence the life and destiny of man. The principles behind a concept such as ‘personal hygiene’ are, however, largely or completely unknown.”²

It follows that indigenous medicine is rarely purely naturalistic. Even if it is rooted in justifiable, curative natural medicine that would take effect with or without the supernatural elements of treatment, almost all techniques of traditional medicine are carried out in conjunction with a supernatural element.³

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a major source of such beliefs. The Church preaches that misfortune is caused by Satan or evil spirits. Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tend to believe that disease is God’s punishment for indiscretion, even if they are educated in the natural causes of such illnesses. In the case of HIV/AIDS patients:

“Despite the awareness on the mode of transmission of the virus, most individuals...think that HIV/AIDS is a wrath that has been sent from God as a result of human transgressions. However, for these individuals, the realization of causal agents of the disease is higher with a specific focus on promiscuous

¹ Molvaer, Reidulf K. “Medical Anthropologie: Topics of relevance for health workers and students of health in Ethiopia.” UNICEF/The Ministry of Health: Addis Ababa, 1987. pp. 34.

² Molvaer, Reidulf K. pp. 35.

³ Molvaer, Reidulf K. pp. 24.

behavior and extra marital sexual relations. For the believers, this act is disobedience to the biblical dogma that originated from the ancient Hebrews.”¹

Even when the natural causes of disease are known, they are attributed to a higher power, as shown above. In keeping with such beliefs, people seek out cures through religious means, in order to make their way back into God’s good favor. They do so through such things as prayer, confessions, pilgrimage, and fasting.² As a result, “the classical healer has always been the priests in the Church who helped with prayers and the advice to drink water of a holy spring.”³ Even today, this is still a common alternative to modern medicine in Ethiopia today, especially among the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The healing practices that occur in the Church can be justified in Biblical cannon, as well as additional Ethiopic literature. These sources may even provide the origins of natural indigenous medicine that has been passed through the clergy of the Church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church cites both the New and Old Testaments of the Bible as the sources of its knowledge of healing.⁴

3. Biblical References to Illness and Healing

References to disease and healing can be found throughout the Bible. The Church believes that, “The Holy Bible is the base and source of all kinds of good knowledge that is prevailing in the world.”⁵ Such knowledge includes understanding of miraculous cures

¹ Roman Yiseni. “Survival Strategies of People Living with HIV/AIDS In and Around Intoto.” MA Thesis, Department of Social Anthropology. Addis Ababa University: Addis Ababa. pp. 13.

² Hecht, Elisabeth-Dorothea. “Traditional Medicine and Magic Among the Amhara of Ethiopia.” Paper Presented in the Conference on Ethiopian Feudalism: Addis Ababa, 1976.

³ Hecht, Elisabeth-Dorothea. pp. 20

⁴ Taye Bekele. “Indigenous Knowledge of Medicinal Plants: Perspectives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.” Institute of Biodiversity Conservation and Research. In: Proceedings of the Workshop on the Ethiopian Church Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, Sunday School Department: Addis Ababa, 2002. pp. 134.

⁵ Taye Bekele. pp. 135

and medicinal plants. Church scholars believe that all good knowledge including knowledge of healing was given directly from God to Solomon. His knowledge found its way to Ethiopia and was passed orally before it was written in medical texts prepared by Orthodox priests. Evidence of such knowledge can be found in the Old Testament:

“God answered Solomon, ‘Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honour, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted you’.”¹

Though this passage does not reveal that God gave Solomon knowledge of medicine, it shows where followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity believe such knowledge came from.²

Similar secret knowledge is also believed to have been given to Moses, Noah, and Isaiah. The Old Testament gives evidence for the traditions of holy water healing in Christianity:

“And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet...He said ‘If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians’...Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water.”³

These verses also illustrate how God gave Moses the knowledge needed to use the water for their benefit, as well as to prevent disease. Leprosy, often referred to as a state of being “unclean,” and its cure are mentioned a number of times in the Old Testament. Leprosy in the Bible, however, does not refer to the specific disease known in clinical

¹ 2 Chronicles 1:11-12.

² Seregela Tsehay. Traditional Healer. Personal Interview. 27 November, 2007. 2 hours. St. George Church, Addis Ababa.

³ Exodus 15:24-27.

medicine today. In the Bible leprosy is used to refer to several diseases, especially skin diseases. This could include any number of ailments, as many illnesses manifest themselves on the skin.¹ In Leviticus the story is told that:

“The Lord Spoke to Moses, saying: This shall be the ritual for the leprous person at the time of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the priest...and the priest shall make an examination. If the disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command that two living clean birds and cedar wood and crimson yarn and hyssop be brought for the one who is to be cleansed.”²

Here it is clearly displayed that God gave Moses the knowledge needed to heal the diseased, down to the very ingredients that should be used by the priest. The origins of indigenous medicine are plainly seen as God instructs the use of various plant and animal products in curing the leprous.

The New Testament can be used to see the origins of belief in miraculous cures through the Church. In the books of the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the miraculous cures performed by Jesus and his twelve disciples are clearly displayed. In the New Testament Christ heals people by a number of means including command or word, touch, his garment, and mud. One of Christ’s miracles is told in Mark: “There was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord if you choose you can make me clean.’ He stretched out his hand and touched him...Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”³ In the book of John Jesus cures a blind man using a combination of mud and water:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me’...When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud on the man’s eyes, saying

¹ Pankhurst, Richard. *An Introduction to the Medical History of Ethiopia*. The Red Sea Press Inc.: Trenton, NJ, 1990. pp. 82-83.

² Leviticus 14:1-4.

³ Matthew 8:1-4.

to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.’ Then he went and washed and came back able to see.”¹

Jesus also cures the possession of evil spirits in the Bible by simply commanding the evil spirits out of the people and drowning them in water:

“When he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him... When he saw Jesus from a distance he ran down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God, I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’...Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding ; and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.”²

The holy water treatments used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today, are likely motivated by such passages as this one. The Bible offers a number of passages where miraculous cures are carried out using water, which can be translated into the use of holy water in the Church today.

Jesus’ twelve disciples also had the power to heal evil spirits. In the book of Mark Jesus sends them out heal the sick and those possessed by demons: “He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits...So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”³ It is because of this passage and other mentions of the use of holy oil in the Bible that one of the official sacraments of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is unction of the sick using holy oil. In the Letters of St. James it says directly, “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the Church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name

¹ John 9:3-7.

² Mark 5:2-13

³ Mark 6:7-13

of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.”¹ It is apparent that the Bible has quite literally been put into practice in this respect.

4. Evidence for Traditional Medicine and Church Healing Found in Additional Ethiopic Religious Literature

The Ethiopian Orthodox Bible has eighty-one books, a number of which are not available in other versions of the Bible. As a result, much of the evidence that displays the beginning of traditional medicine in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is only available in the extra books of Ethiopian biblical cannon. One such book is Sirach, and in this book it says:

“Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king...The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them. Was not water made sweet with a tree in order that its power might be known? And he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in his marvelous works. By them the physician heals and takes away pain; the pharmacist makes a mixture from them. God’s works will ever be finished; and from him health spreads over all the earth.”²

This passage talks directly about natural medicine, or “medicines out of earth”, which contextualizes the practices of some traditional healers, especially herbalists, in biblical cannon. According to Ethiopian Christianity, God taught Noah approximately one thousand medicines, 300 of which were made from plants while the remaining were compiled from honey and butter.³

In addition to the Bible, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses *The Miracles of the Holy Virgin* and *Synaxarium* in its teachings. The Virgin Mary is greatly emphasized in Ethiopian Christianity, and a popular story in the Ethiopian tradition, told in both *The Miracles of the Holy Virgin* and *Synaxarium* is her cure of Mercurius. Mercurius was a

¹ James 5:14-15

² Sirach 38:1-8.

³ Taye Bekele. pp. 136

bishop afflicted with leprosy. Reminded by St. Zacharias that the priesthood was unfitting for him because of his “unclean” condition, Mercurius prayed to St. Mary in a church dedicated to her and awoke free of his disease.

Ethiopian religious literature attributes healing to Jesus and Mary as well as various other saints. St. Zacharias is said to have healed a deacon of his leprosy through a combination of fasting and prayer. Abba Macarius cured a female leper by allowing her to touch his face. Likewise, Abba Bifamon healed a blind leper by smearing the patient’s eyes and body with his own saintly blood.

Holy literature also fueled the beliefs that disease is called down upon wrongdoers by a higher power. Legend tells of Emperor Diocletian who, in the process of destroying a sanctuary, was splashed with the oil from a sanctuary lamp. In the spot where the oil splashed him he is said to have immediately broken out in leprosy and died. Similarly, Ethiopian religious literature expresses the idea that a person must enter the healing process with the right intentions, or the cure will not take effect. None of the healing practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith can be successful without sincere repentance. Furthermore, a person who enters the holy area with the wrong thoughts risks contaminating the space for others.¹

The Bible and supplementary Ethiopic religious texts motivate the practice of healing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Such literature encourages the healing rituals of the Church by legitimizing them in Holy Scriptures, and it also prompts the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity to seek treatment for their illnesses in the Church rather than from an outside source. It makes sense, then that those Ethiopians who believe that disease and catastrophe are sent by *Egziabher* (God), request help from the

¹ Pankhurst, Richard. pp. 83.

Church. Passages from the Bible also justify the practices of traditional healers whose knowledge may very well be passed through the Church.

II. The Traditions of the *Debtera* and Their Relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

The *debtera* make up a unique class of traditional healers in Ethiopia. However, there are *debtera* that do not practice traditional medicine, but only perform their learned duties for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is the *debtera* of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that are highly educated in *kene*, the songs and hymns performed during Orthodox services. They are also taught to read and write *Ge'ez*, an ancient language today only used in the Church, so that they may serve as scribes, copying the many manuscripts of the Church. Of all the different kinds of traditional healers in Ethiopia, the *debtera* receive the most prestige among the community because of their association with the Orthodox Church.¹ Unlike other healers, *debtera* do not practice magic or sorcery, thought to be the work of the devil, but rather they prepare medicines by combining plant, animal, and mineral products.²

A study conducted by Makonen Bisaw on indigenous medicines in Ethiopia found that eighty percent of traditional healers were Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Out of which, seventy percent had received a church education. He sites the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the primary source of learned indigenous healers. The obvious advantage of

¹ Fekadu Fullas. pp. 20-22.

² Seregela Tsehay. Personal Interview.

receiving education in the Church is learning *Ge'ez* in order for such a traditional healer to be able to read the medical texts that are available.¹

Seregela Tsehay, a retired member of the Church clergy, now has a private traditional medicine practice in Addis Ababa. He received his knowledge of traditional medicines from his priest teacher while he was still in school, though such knowledge is not typical of a church education, and he had to further pursue his medical studies individually. Seregela asserts that knowledge of traditional medicine is not maintained by the Church as an organization, but by the priests as individuals. Medical texts are kept in the personal homes of priests or in monasteries, furthering their secrecy and limiting their accessibility. Unlike hymnbooks and the Bible, medical texts are not shared with those outside the Church hierarchy.

In order to learn all the traditions, Seregela traveled around the country, learning from a number of priests, in provinces such as Shewa, Gonder, and Wollo. After thirty years of study, he believes he has mastered traditional Ethiopian medicine. Like other traditional healers, he knows treatments for diseases ranging from rabies, amoebas, headaches, and insect bites to more serious conditions like cancer, the symptoms of HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and liver and heart disease.² Treatments are given in a variety of forms, depending on the ailment. Such modes of traditional medicine include ointments for skin diseases, liquid concoctions for internal illness, and herbal fumes for respiratory and psychological syndromes.³ It seems, however that diagnosis may not be his, or any other traditional healers', strongpoint. Most patients oftentimes go to a hospital or clinic

¹ Makonen Bisaw. "Integrating Indigenous and Cosmopolitan Medicine in Ethiopia." PhD Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Graduate School of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. University Microfilms: Ann Arbor, MI, 1998. pp. 56-64.

² Seregela Tsehay. Personal Interview.

³ Makonen Bisaw. pp. 58.

first for their diagnoses. Having determined their illness, they turn to traditional medicine for the cure.

Unlike church healing, traditional healers often keep records, especially of their successful cures, and receive payments in the form of money. Seregela's story is similar to that of many traditional healers. It appears that those traditional healers who are trained in the Church have a strong disregard for magicians and witchdoctors who practice sorcery and provide poisons, and hold a high regard for the beliefs of the Church.¹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, however, does not hold traditional healers in the same regard.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church does not seem to distinguish between different kinds of traditional healers, and doesn't approve of the practices of such healers, not even the *debtera*. While the Church does acknowledge the existence of traditional medical texts among the priest community, it is not currently taking any measures to promote or transfer its knowledge of traditional plants.² The priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Lalibela believe that even the practices of the *debtera* is the devil's work because they are trained in spirits that exist outside the Church. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church preaches about the struggle between God and Satan, but does not acknowledge the existence of any outside spiritual influence. In their opinion, work in such spirits must be the work of the Devil. However, *debteras* known to be traditional healers are still allowed to perform their singing, drumming, and chanting duties during church service.³

¹ Seregela Tsehay. Personal Interview.

² Taye Bekele. pp. 140.

³ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Head Priest, Bilbila Giorgis. Personal Interview. 18 November, 2007. 1 hour. Bilbila Giorgis, Lalibela.

There is a community of traditional healers who try to pass themselves off as members of the Church community in order to gain more credibility among the community. On the subject Taye Bekele writes, “Widely spread magicians and witches/witchdoctors in this country, either wrongly use the knowledge of the Church or deceive the laity by saying that their knowledge is from the Church.”¹ He also points out it should not be assumed that all medical texts and other literature written in *Ge'ez* originate in the Church. During the reign of Emperor Zera Yaqob in the fifteenth century, all “magic” and “pagan” books were sought out to be destroyed. As a result, many of the medical texts that may have existed at the time were inscribed with the phrase, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen,” so that they might be spared.² This may have been the start of when such texts became wrongly associated with the Church.

III. Healing Rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Lalibela

There are some healing traditions that the Church does acknowledge, maintain, and regularly perform. Though the Church organization may contain knowledge of medicinal plants it does not practice or approve of the use of such knowledge. Instead the Ethiopian Orthodox Church prefers to perform healing through the use of spiritual practices such as *tsebel* (holy water), *emnet* (ash), *kiba kudus* (holy oil), and *mar* (holy honey) in combination with prayer and the cross.³

Lalibela functions as one of the major Christian capitals of Ethiopia. A place of pilgrimage, tens of thousands of people pile into the rural mountain town during the

¹ Taye Bekele. pp. 141.

² Molvaer, Reidulf K. pp. 32

³ Taye Bekele. pp. 140-142.

Orthodox holiday of epiphany every January. Accordingly, a number of people travel there seeking the famed cures of the area's churches. The entire region is believed to be blessed, and a number of the natural springs and streams are alleged to contain holy water; even the soil is used for healing. Legend says that there were four hundred and thirty-eight Syrian missionaries who came to Ethiopia to spread the word of the gospel, and the elders came to Lalibela and blessed the entire area.

Prayer and the sign of the cross are used in all the healing rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Materials such as holy water, honey, and ash cannot perform their healing duty without proper combination with prayer and the cross. It is not the substances themselves that do the healing, but they must be received with the proper intention in order to take effect; church healing will not work on those who do not believe in it. All the materials are blessed by God, and would have no curative properties otherwise. Different healing materials are oftentimes used in combination.¹ Church healing is used against both medical conditions and social misfortune such as infertility, failure to marry, and death of a child.²

Healing rituals in the Church can be used on animals as well as human beings. Unlike traditional healing, church healing is not paid in the form of money. Oftentimes after a cure has been reached, people give an offering to the Church which has cured them. When cures are performed on animals, the offering is oftentimes an animal product. For example, if a cow is cured of its illness by church means it is customary to offer the first butter of that cow to the Church.³ Other offerings include, but are not

¹ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview

² R. Giel, Yoseph Gezahegn, and J.N. Van Luijk. "Faith Healing and Spirit Possession in Ghion, Ethiopia." Pergamon Press. *Social Sciences and Medicine*, Vol. 2, pp.63-79. Great Britain, 1968. pp. 75.

³ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

limited to curtains, umbrellas, and carpets. In most cases the sick bring themselves or family members bring them to the Church to receive treatment. Sometimes, when the sick are too ill to come to church, treatments are brought back to them in their homes.¹

Though the priests do not regularly keep records of the miraculous cures performed at each church, they can personally testify to the many success stories that have taken place. Every Sunday during congregation, people stand and tell the story of the cure they received from the Church. In this way, successes are made available for knowledge by the public, but it is much more difficult to determine failures of the Church to achieve a cure.²

A. The Use of *Tsebel* in the Healing Rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Holy water is the most popular mode of healing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Used in a number of ceremonies, holy water is not reserved for healing rituals. The Church uses holy water to bless anything it wishes to make sacred. In healing:

“...demons are exorcised with holy water. If a man is sick, sometimes Holy Water is supplied for drinking, pouring over his hands, and sprinkling his face and body. Holy water sanctifies whoever is touched by it, frees him from uncleanness and attacks of the powers of darkness, and secures that wherever it is sprinkled there is freedom from pestilence and snares of Satan.”³

Fresh water in the form of springs or streams is considered holy when it runs within a church’s compound or close enough to it to be associated with the Church. Otherwise, water must be blessed by a priest using the cross in order to be considered holy.

Holy water treatments are typically administered once a day in the early morning to all patients who are present for treatment. Holy water should be taken for a minimum

¹ Abebe Abebaw, Kes. Head Priest, Na’aqutalab. Personal Interview. 20 November, 2007. 1 hour. Na’aqutalab, Lalibela.

² Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

³ Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motova (eds.). *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*. The Ethiopian Orthodox Mission: Addis Ababa, 1970. pp. 72.

of seven consecutive days and for as many as twenty-one days. If after one week a person is not cured, he or she should continue for another full week or two if necessary. Holy water can be used in a number of different ways. Besides being sprinkled or used on the outside of the body, it is also frequently drunk by ill persons. By drinking the water, the evils that are believed to cause illness are expelled from the body in resulting physical excretions of urine, feces, sweat, and vomit.¹

Tsebel is believed to be able to cure any ailment, no matter what it may be; however, it is preferred over modern medicine in the cure of mental illness. Certain churches in Lalibela specialize in the use of holy water. This is the case for *Beta Giorgis*, *Na'aqutalab*, and *Beta Mariam*. While the uses for *tsebel* at *Beta Giorgis* and *Na'aqutalab* are limitless, the baptismal pool at *Beta Mariam* is reserved only for use by infertile women.

The holy water at *Beta Giorgis* and *Na'aqutalab* comes from natural sources and runs within the Church compound. *Na'aqutalab* is especially famous for its miraculous cures by use of *tsebel*. The Church itself is built inside a natural cave. In fact, the cave provides one of the Church's walls and its ceiling. Holy water drips from the ceiling and is collected in bowls made of rock hollowed by the water. The location of the water source is significant. Since it drips from the ceiling of the Church, it is symbolically coming from the heavens. An additional spring is located outside the cave and cascades down the rock and is collected in a small pool. The water inside the Church is considered more sacred, but when necessary it is supplemented with water from outside.

¹ Wodaje Assefa, Kes. Head Priest, Beta Giorgis. Personal Interview. 21 November, 2007. 45 minutes. Beta Giorgis, Lalibela.

The legend of the Church says Emperor Na'aqutalab, who built the Church, was so devoted to his faith that after the Church was built and dedicated to him God spoke to him, saying because of his devotion to the Church, he would be rewarded with the holy water to be used to heal all people and things, and ever since the water has flowed consistently even during dry seasons.

People who travel long distances to receive treatment at *Na'aqutalab* oftentimes take up residence in the Church's guesthouse. The guesthouse can house up to ten people at a time. When it is full, patients are welcome to stay with the nuns and monks housed in the monastery nearby. This was the case for Mahai Madi, who was treated at *Na'aqutalab* in 1984. She believes that an evil spirit entered her while she was carrying firewood. Shortly after, she developed a goiter, and enlargement of the thyroid gland, visible on her throat. Her condition worsened to the point where she was coughing up blood, when she was convinced by her family members to receive holy water treatment at *Na'aqutalab*, where she stayed until her condition was treated. Mahai was so convinced by the miracle of her that ever since she has served *Na'aqutalab* as a nun.¹

Tsebel treatments at *Na'aqutalab* are administered only by one priest who has been chosen by his fellow clergymen. He was selected because he is believed to possess a special gift for healing and is highly dedicated.² *Beta Giorgis* has a similar situation. One priest has been determined the most fit for dispensing holy water treatments. At *Beta Giorgis* it is believed that the water arrived within the Church's compound after the Church was already established there. The priests claim that the holy water there doesn't

¹ Mahai Madi. Nun and cured patient by Na'aqutalab holy water treatment. Personal Interview. ½ hour. Na'aqutalab, Lalibela.

² Abebe Abebaw, Kes. Personal Interview.

mix with soap or boil for the preparation of food; almost as if it is making clear its purpose is not for cooking or cleaning, but only for healing.

The holy water healing ritual combines the use of the cross, prayer, incense and holy water. Prayers are said first, and incense is burned in the incense bowl. Holy water is sprinkled over all the people, and is drunken by those who have internal illnesses, such as gastric disease.¹ The cross and *tsebel* are both used symbolically to literally draw the evils out of the sick and possessed as they are applied to the diseased areas of each patient's body. For the mentally ill or those possessed by evil spirits the cross is used to extract the demons from the patient's body, sometimes forcefully. Occasionally the ill become violent during the later stages of exorcism, and have to be chained in order to receive treatment. Eventually spirits announce themselves, and the priest asks the spirits when they entered the person and why, before they are ordered out of the patient's body.² The ritual ends with prayer inside the Church itself, rather than in the healing room. The head priest of the Church prays over the sick people using the book of the four evangelists, in which the miraculous cures performed by Jesus are described.

Tsebel is most renowned in its treatment of mental illness, which is believed to be the result of spirit possession. Evil spirits are thought to enter a person's body during certain times of day or when a person is guilty of impure thoughts. These spirits are believed to be most likely to enter a person's body during the nighttime, especially when a person is alone and outside of his or her home.³ It is also believed that all followers of the Orthodox Church have two guardian angels, one on the left and one on the right, to protect them from evil spirits. However, when a person has polluted thoughts which

¹ Wodaje Assefa, Kes. Personal Interview.

² R. Giel, Yoseph Gezahegn, and J.N. Van Luijk. pp. 64-65.

³ Wodaje Assefa, Kes. Personal Interview.

don't concur with the teachings of the Church, the angels are not able to perform their duty, leaving open an opportunity for evil spirits to enter the individual's body and cause it harm.¹

In the case of *Beta Mariam*, where the holy water is only used for infertile women, the ritual is slightly different. The water here is meant for this purpose because it is dedicated to St. Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church puts a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the Virgin Mary, and she is a reverential symbol of fertility in the Church. The water at *Beta Mariam* is held in a baptismal pool. Though baptisms are available all year round, women prefer to receive treatment on Christmas day because it is the day of Christ's birth. The women who come to *Beta Mariam* are tied with a rope around their waist and completely lowered into the water, over their heads, by the priests of the Church, and then lifted out. This process is repeated three times. The baptism is followed up by prayer inside the Church. In this case, the head priest uses *The Miracles of the Holy Virgin* to pray over the women. It is believed that any infertile woman who receives *tsebel* at *Beta Mariam* will become pregnant within the next year.²

B. The Use of Holy Honey as a Means of Healing in Lalibela Churches

Holy honey, or *mar*, is used in the Churches of Lalibela where it is available. At the present time, holy honey exists in only two churches in the Lalibela area, while historically it existed in three: *Bilbila Kirqos*, *Bilbila Giorgis*, and *Beta Ammanuel*. The bees of *Beta Ammanuel* have since left their hive in the Church. *Bilbila Kirqos* and *Bilbila Giorgis* are located about sixty and sixty-five kilometers north of *Lalibela*,

¹ Abebe Abebaw, Kes. Personal Interview.

² Misyanaw Tarekegn, Kes. Head Priest, Beta Mariam. Personal Interview. 21 November, 2007. ½ hour. Beta Mariam, Lalibela.

respectively. Two of the oldest churches in the area, they are believed to have been built during the reign of King Kaleb in the fifth century. While honey existed in the area, and around the country – before the establishment of the Churches, it did not display curative properties until the bees inhabited the Church, making them holy.

Both *Bilbila Kirqos* and *Bilbila Giorgis* have similar histories. A swarm of bees is said to have led King Kaleb to the spot where *Bilbila Kirqos* was built. Shortly after its construction, the bees built hives in all the seven windows of the Church, representing the seven divisions of heaven. Because of climate and weather changes, only one hive still remains, above the front entrance to the Church.¹

Similarly, the bees that today inhabit *Bilbila Giorgis* are said to have arrived during the Church's first congregation in 488 A.D. They formed hives in all four window of the Church, representing the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. To the surprise of the priests, the next day the bees had already produced honey. Observing the miracle that the bees had produced honey in such a short period of time, a small amount of honey was given to each of the congregants of the day's service. All the members of the congregation took the honey, and incredibly all those who were sick at the time were immediately healed of their sicknesses. This is how the curative property of the honey was discovered. All four original hives in *Bilbila Kirqos* still exist today.

Like the water of *Beta Giorgis*, the honey of *Bilbila Giorgis* is only meant to be used for healing, and will not be permitted to be used in other ways. The story is told of a priest who tried to sell the honey of *Bilbila Giorgis*, but on his way to the market he was attacked by a swarm of bees. He decided then to bring it to his home, but the bees

¹ Teklu Yitborak, Kes. Head Priest, Bilbila Kirqos. Personal Interview. 18 November, 2007. 1 hour. Bilbila Kirqos, Lalibela.

followed him there as well. Then the angel Gabriel came down and spoke to him saying that the honey was a gift from God and must be kept in the Church and used for healing. It is not to be sold in the market, or kept for personal use. From then on none of the bees' product is wasted, and even the melted wax of the beeswax candles is used to heal.

Holy honey can be used in one of three ways. It can be applied directly to the diseased part of the body on the outside of the skin, it can be eaten by itself, or it can be mixed with holy water and drunk. There are two kinds of honey produced by the holy bees in both churches: white honey and red honey. However, the different kinds of honey do not have different uses. *Mar* is used predominantly in the treatment of skin diseases, on cuts and sores on the outside of the body. It can be put anywhere on the body where the patient feels pain. When there is a limited supply of honey, or no honey is available, the melted wax of the beeswax candles is used in its absence using the same technique. When illness is internal, the honey is mixed with water and ingested, or it is eaten on its own. The bees themselves, or bee stings, are not used for healing; however, receiving a bee sting from the holy bees at *Beta Giorgis* indicates that you are in St. George's good favor.¹ While holy honey can be used in animals or humans to treat any diseases, the honey at *Bilbila Kirqos* is said to be especially curative of rabies and poisonous snakebites.

Unlike holy water treatment, there are no priests specialized in the administration of honey treatments. *Mar* is given by the head priest of each church. Of course, the dispensation of holy honey is done alongside the use of the cross and the appropriate prayers for the sick.²

¹ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

² Teklu Yitborak, Kes. Personal Interview.

C. The Use of *Emnet* in the Healing Rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Emnet includes both the use of incense ash and soil in the Church. Most commonly the ash from the incense burned during service is collected to be used later in healing rituals. Incense ash and soil of holy grounds are used in different ways. *Emnet* in the form of incense ash is used in two different ways. First it is taken in dry form and used on the forehead or all over the face to bless one's self. Secondly, it can be mixed with holy water in a concoction to be ingested. In the same way as holy water on its own, such a concoction is thought to flush out the evils living inside the body.¹

Emnet in the form of soil from holy grounds is also used a number of ways. Soil that is thought to have curative properties can be found in two places in the Lalibela area: *Bilbila Giorgis*, and *Beta Golgotha*. At *Bilbila Giorgis*, there is a certain kind of red, saturated soil that can be found in patches throughout the Church grounds. Such soil is self-administered by believers who simply gather it off the ground and rub it on the parts of the body where pain is felt.² The ground soil at *Beta Golgotha* is believed to have curative properties because King Lalibela, who ruled from 1189-1229 and founded many of the Lalibela churches, is buried there. This soil, as well as the soil found at *Bilbila Giorgis*, is sometimes mixed with water and drunk to cure internal illnesses. However, the soil at *Beta Golgotha*, exclusively, is also gathered and packaged to be worn around the neck to ward off evil spirits.³

The use of *emnet* can be clearly seen during the Ethiopian Orthodox Holiday of *Meskel*, or the celebration of the true cross. This celebration is characterized by the burning large *demeras*, or bonfires, in various religious locations around the country.

¹ Wodaje Assefa, Kes. Personal Interview.

² Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

³ Wodaje Assefa, Kes. Personal Interview.

After the fires have been reduced to ash, many people go up to the ashes to bless themselves with it. People also collect the ash to keep at home, so they can mix it with water later if they ever fall ill. Some people also mix this ash with water and hang the bottle outside the front door to their home to keep evil spirits away.

D. The Use of *Kiba Kudus* in the Healing Rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Holy oil, or *kiba kudus*, is also used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to heal the ailing. Oils are often given as offerings to the Church. Priests of the Church first make sure they are the right kind of oil, olive tree oil, before they consecrate it to be used in the Church. If the oil is found to be the wrong kind, it cannot be accepted.¹

Unction of the sick using holy oil, or *tselote Quendil*, is one of the seven sacraments of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. During this sacrament a priest marks the body of the sick person with holy oil, asking for divine grace to help cure the patient:

“This holy oil is not used on the occasion of any kind of slight sickness, but only at the time of severe sickness. The anointing profits the sick person both in soul and body.”²

Holy oil used in unction of the sick is done according to the ritual described in *The Book of the Lamp*.³ Holy oils are also commonly used by priests on people suffering from earaches and deafness. The consecrated oil is poured into the ears and the person is prayed for by the priest.⁴

III. The Relationship Between Traditional Methods and Modern Medicine in Lalibela, and Ethiopia as a Whole

¹ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

² R. Giel, Yoseph Gezahegn, and J.N. Van Luijk. pp. 37.

³ R. Giel, Yoseph Gezahegn, and J.N. Van Luijk. pp. 73.

⁴ Liku Habtamer, Kes. Personal Interview.

While the Ethiopian Orthodox Church may not approve traditional medicines outside its own practice, it still offers a number of alternatives to the services of modern medicine in Ethiopia. In Lalibela, a place of such fervent religious belief, it could be said that the community's faith in the religious healings of the Church distracts them from receiving medical care in the areas clinics and hospitals, but this does not seem to be the case. The most common case is that people, even Orthodox followers, first seek help in medical facilities. When such medicine fails to produce adequate results or any relief at all, then people resort to healing in the Church. Even the medical workers in the town believe that it is best to use both modern medical services and church services in combination to achieve the most relief.

According to Dr. Tegegne Mamo of the Lalibela Health Center, the most commonly treated conditions in the area include pneumonia, bronchitis, scabies, and digestive parasites. All of these have cures in both modern medicine and the Church, and he recommends that patients seek help from both sources simultaneously in order to make the quickest recovery. Furthermore, even the town's doctor believes that mental illness is best cured in the Church, as there is only one mental hospital in Ethiopia, located in Addis Ababa.¹ In fact, it is the general consensus that, in Ethiopia, the use of traditional medicine in midwifery and psychosomatic illness is advantageous over the use of modern medicine.² It is apparent that in a country such as Ethiopia, where religious belief and practice are such a large part of a person's life, it is impossible to separate faith from the decisions of daily life. Unlike in the west, where doctor's would be reluctant to

¹ Tegegne Mamo, Dr. Medical Doctor. Personal Interview. 21 November, 2007. 45 minutes. Lalibela Health Center.

² Molvaer, Reidulf K. pp. 59.

admit they have any religious affiliation or even believe in God at all, in Ethiopia doctor's are active members of the Church and believe in its ability to heal.

It must be said, however, that some practices of alternative or traditional medicine can be dangerous and must be closely regulated. For instance, the consumption of supposedly "holy" stream water could be unsafe and expose already sick patients to unnecessary risk. Also, traditional practices of female tonsil removal and dentistry come with a certain amount of risk for infection from unclean instruments. Advocates for the techniques of modern medicine might go so far as to say that traditional medicine has no legitimacy, and produces no cures outside of the placebo effect, that is, the positive effects of false treatment. Some believe that traditional medicine invokes positive symptomatic results only because patients believe they are being cured, not because they are actually being cured. It is difficult to distinguish where the placebo effect ends and mind/body healing takes over; perhaps merely believing in a cure results in real positive physical results.

It is apparent in examining alternative techniques used worldwide, that some forms of traditional medicine are legitimate. Traditional medicine is a well established industry in many parts of Asia, where such practices as aromatherapy, reflexology, acupuncture, and homeopathy are preferred over modern medical techniques. Research in the fields of physiology, anatomy, and biochemistry has helped to legitimize a number of these techniques, and they are gaining popularity all over the world. Chinese and Japanese traditional medicine includes 116 herbal drugs, all readily accepted throughout both countries. The *Ayurveda* system, meaning "the science of life", is prevalent in India and uses change in diet, herbs, and lifestyle changes to maintain good health. The status

of alternative medicine in these countries allows practitioners to be trained formally, and the products to be constantly regulated for quality control.¹ Traditional medicine in Ethiopia has the potential to reach this level if it is researched and developed enough. However, traditional healers and the Church must comply and share their knowledge with The Drug Research Department and The Nutrition Research Institute if it is to gain such a status in the country.

In the west, the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is becoming more widely recommended and accepted, even by medical doctors. In the United States use of natural cures such as echinacia, garlic, ginkgo biloba, and aloe are becoming increasingly popular.² Furthermore, an increased amount of research is being done to explore the benefits of such practices as spiritual healing and prayer, similar to those practices carried out by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Though it has been long established that the mind can have a negative effect on the physical condition, as is the case with depression, it is now becoming more and more accepted that the mind can have a positive effect on physical symptoms of illness in the same way. The concept of “mind/body” healing, or the idea that thoughts and feelings can have positive effects on health and healing, is gaining legitimacy and popularity worldwide.³ This is especially true in cases of chronic illnesses such as high blood-pressure, cardiovascular disease, arthritis, cancer, and HIV/AIDS.

Prayer in particular, can provoke a positive response in the body, much like meditation. By invoking the bodies “relaxation response” through such practices, the

¹ Fekadu Fullas. pp. 9-13.

² Fekadu Fullas. pp. 9-13.

³ Maier-Lorentz, Medeline M. “The Importance of Prayer for Mind/Body Healing.” *Nursing Forum* July-Sept. 2004, Vol. 39, Iss. 3. Nursecom, Inc.: Philadelphia, 2004. pp. 23-33.

muscles of the body relax, brain waves and heart rate slow, and the presence of stress hormones lessens, all beneficial in the treatment of a number of chronic illnesses.¹ Research has shown that both prayer by ones own self as well as intercessory prayer, where others pray on a patient's behalf have physical benefits. A study of forty AIDS patients showed that, "...after six months of praying, subjects prayed for has significantly fewer new AIDS-related illnesses, lower illness severity ratings, fewer doctors' visits and hospitalizations, and fewer days in hospital than did subjects who were not prayed for."² It can be said with confidence, then, that the practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church do have legitimate benefits.

The practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church cannot and should not, however, be used exclusively by the community. While faith, spirituality, and prayer have positive psychological benefits that, in turn, result in physical healing, it is necessary to use the resources of traditional or alternative care, spiritual healing, and modern medicine in a balanced combination. None of these three mechanisms of healing in Ethiopia can cure the ill completely. All three sources of care have their shortcomings. HIV/AIDS, a chronic illness that plagues a large population in Africa today, is one disease where the use of spiritual or religious healing would be most beneficial, as both modern and traditional medicines can only provide symptomatic treatment, but not a cure.

IV. Conclusions

¹ Wallis, Claudia. "Faith and Healing: Can prayer, faith ,and spirituality really improve your physical health? A growing and surprising body of scientific evidence says they can." *Time* 147 June 1996, pp. 58-64. Time Inc.: New York City, 1996.

² Maier-Lorentz, Medeline M. "The Importance of Prayer for Mind/Body Healing." *Nursing Forum* July-Sept. 2004, Vol. 39, Iss. 3. Nursecom, Inc.: Philadelphia, 2004. pp. 23-33.

It seems obvious that the next step for traditional medicine in Ethiopia is that its techniques should be further researched and developed in order to find out if it is a safe and effective alternative to modern medical techniques. The problem is that the field of traditional medicine in Ethiopia is shrouded in secrecy. Many traditional healers are unwilling to share the formulas they use to make medicine because of the sacredness of their knowledge. This is not to say that it does not have legitimate benefits; however, if traditional healers refuse to comply with research efforts the traditions of such healers risks being lost forever. It would be for the benefit of the whole community if the Church, priests who hold medical texts, and traditional healers would cooperate with research efforts in order to determine the legitimacies of indigenous medicine.

All the different techniques used to maintain good health have their own advantages. It is impossible to say which system offers the most beneficial treatment overall. Through research and development of alternative modes of healing, it becomes easier to take advantage of all the different systems simultaneously. In Ethiopia it makes sense for believers in Orthodox Christianity to use the Church's services alongside modern medical treatment. Spiritual belief certainly cannot harm a person's well-being. More and more evidence shows that mind can actually have a positive effect on a person's physical health, but it should not be used exclusively.

Further research can be done in this field to help determine the future of traditional medicine in Ethiopia. For instance, further research should be done about beliefs of younger generations surrounding the causes of disease. It is possible that as the predominance of modern medicine spreads throughout Ethiopia the younger generation is less likely to turn to traditional medicine for treatment. The passing of traditional

medical knowledge from one generation to the next should also be explored, as younger generations may be less inclined to pursue a career in traditional healing which could result in the eventual loss of such knowledge altogether.

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VI. Appendices

A. Example of a Field Note

My interview with Seregela Tsehay, a *debtera* in Addis Ababa, revealed that traditional medicine provides treatments for various diseases that are also cured by modern medicine. Though I cannot confirm the legitimacy of his claims, it is possible that natural medicine can effectively cure a number of ailments. The information he gave

me about the efforts being made to organize traditional medicine made me wonder about the status of alternative medicine elsewhere. I knew that traditional medicine in Asia, especially in China, is widely accepted. I had heard my Chinese teacher at Villanova say that while western medicine is good for diagnosis, natural medicine is better for treatment because it is gentler on the body. It seems that Seregela offered a similar opinion, saying that his patients often go to the hospital first to find out what it is they are suffering from before coming to him for a cure.

My interview with Seregela really helped me to see where traditional medicine in Ethiopia could go if it follows the path of traditional medicine worldwide. His comments on the status of traditional medicine in Ethiopia today encouraged me to do more research into the phases traditional medicine is in elsewhere in the world. Further research confirmed that traditional medicine in Asia is very well established, while it is gaining popularity in the West. From these findings I was able to determine that traditional medicine in Ethiopia is still in the beginning stages of development.

B. Example of an Interview

My interview with Dr. Tegegne Mamo proved to be very revealing. I went to the Lalibela Health Center because I wanted to speak with a medical doctor about what he or she thought were the effects of religion on the efforts of modern medicine. To my surprise Dr. Tegegne Mamo was also himself a believer in the healing practices of Orthodox Christianity. Even though he obviously understood the natural causes of disease, such as poor hygiene, he also advocated for the use of holy water treatment. His recommendation was that his patients use both, modern medicine and church healing in

order to make the quickest recovery. This was an option I had not yet thought about, and after reflecting on our conversation I tend to agree with him.

I did, however, question his claim that all people receive treatment from the clinics and hospitals as well as the Church. There must be a population of people who rely on church healing alone, but he seemed to believe such a group does not exist. He did explain that there is a literacy problem in the area which enables the belief in supernatural causes of disease. As people become more and more educated, they start to believe in the natural cause of disease.

I was also taken back when he explained that he thought that church healing was actually preferable to modern medicine when it comes to mental illness. There being only one mental hospital in Ethiopia, located in Addis Ababa, he thought the church to be a better alternative for the local community. He also explained that Ammanuel Hospital, in Addis, had a certain negative stigma attached to it. People prefer not to go there because it is for crazy people, while most people prefer to believe that mental illness is temporary and caused by evil spirits that can be removed easily through church means.

C. Example of an Observation

During my interview with Kes Wodaje Assefa, the head priest at *Beta Giorgis* in Lalibela, he invited me to observe the holy water treatment to be given at the church the next day. Having wanted to observe the administration of holy water treatment for my research, I was excited that he so willingly extended the invitation even though I am an outsider. He instructed me to return early the next morning.

The next day I returned to *Beta Giorgis* at six o'clock in the morning. As I entered the Church's compound I was greeted by resident guard, who asked for my ticket.

From that moment on I knew I was not going to receive the friendly greeting Kes Wodaje had led me to believe I would. After showing my ticket I was able to gain access to the Church compound. However, holy water treatments were being given in a small room carved into the rock, behind a curtain. I was not allowed behind the curtain by the priest, an instead had to wait outside.

From outside I was able to draw a few observations. While I was unable to see the actual uses of the holy water, I was able to hear the noises coming from behind the curtain. I heard mostly muted moaning, but occasionally someone yelled in a louder, more violent way. I presumed these noises to come from the patient, or perhaps from the chants of the priest who was giving treatment. In the hallway outside the healing room, there were other patients sitting waiting for their turn to receive treatment. They sat outside swaying and reciting what I assumed to be prayers. I could also hear a number of people praying inside the church at the other end of the hallway, opposite from the healing room.

Of course, everything was spoken in either Amharic or *Ge'ez*, so it was impossible for me to distinguish what was being said. In retrospect, it may have been beneficial for me to bring my translator along with me, to shed some light on what was going on. I did not get as much out of that observation as I would have liked. While it was revealing just to observe the environment of the church in a different light, during that sacred time of day, I would have liked to have been able to observe the actual rituals more closely so I could describe them better for the readers of my paper. Instead I had to try to get a sense of the rituals by asking the priests how they administer treatments step by step. It would have been better if I could have seen them firsthand.