

**At the limits of sexuality:  
the femininity of Ethiopian Orthodox nuns**

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According to a legend told about the perfect Ethiopian monastery, in a mimesis of the Garden of Eden before the Fall, Ethiopian Orthodox monastics originally did not consider themselves in terms of sexual differentiation, since neither male nor female sexuality existed in the paradisiacal monastic life. The legend tells about the original, perfect monastery, Däbrä Libanos during the era of Saint Täklä Haimanot, where men and women lived together platonically. Innocent and without sin, these first monastics did not have any idea about sex. The following text is taken from the hagiography of Saint Täklä Haymanot:

Now in those days a most wonderful thing happened, for the young men and monks, and the young women and nuns were in the habit of sleeping together in the same bed, and they had no knowledge whatsoever of the commerce between male and female in connection with evil desire in their minds, for our father the holy man Täklä Haimanot prevented Satan from touching his children. And when at midnight the monks and nuns rose from their beds to pray, a man would take up the raiment of a woman and say: "This is mine", and similarly a young woman would take up the raiment of a man and say: "This is mine", and they drew together, each towards the other, because there was no sinful desire in them, and because they were like children.

Then after the death of Täklä Haimanot, the monks and nuns became susceptible to sexual temptation. In order to lessen sexual temptation, they began to live in separate communities. This mythic reflects at least two essential aspects of monasticism: the emphasis on sexuality being a crucial feature of the identity of monastics and the perspective that there is no gender distinction in paradise.

This article discusses how gender demarcates the group identity of the nuns. There are two main groups of nuns, the elderly and the virginal. This article focuses on virgin nuns who challenge traditional gender roles. The elderly Ethiopian orthodox nun takes monastic vows towards the end of her life. The life of virgin nuns differs from that of post-menopausal nuns and lay women, because they become nuns in their youth. The aim of virgin nuns is to become holy, which for many seem to

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involve freeing themselves from social, sexual and spiritual restrictions. In order to achieve their aim they must reject certain female aspects of life.

Nuns are often considered to be equally as holy as monks. In Ethiopian Christian tradition, the monastic life is predominantly contemplative. Hence, all monastics have the same aim to become holy; and both monks and nuns may achieve a holy status that is marginal to the world. This goal is aimed at by the same means by both nuns and monks through ascetic practices. Monks and nuns articulate how they consider themselves to have left the world. Some nuns say that in the monastery there is no difference between men and women, and this indicates that Ethiopian Orthodox monks and nuns together, constitute a 'holy gender' in which biological sex is of little importance ultimately. Insofar as both nuns and monks have the same ultimate ideal of monastic life, their aim extends beyond the gendered body into that neutral space where holiness is found.

Concerning important aspects of monastic life, Ethiopian Orthodox nuns and monks follow the same ideals and practices and both divest secular gender roles that signify the profane world that they have rejected. The process by which secular gender roles are divested, however, is essentially different because the female body within Orthodox theology is conceptualised as being thoroughly impure. The female body's innate impurity, therefore, demands alteration before it can be considered holy. Rather than a spiritual cleansing of the female body, a woman must become more male, and less female. The notion of becoming male in the Ethiopian tradition thus rests upon an androcentric theology wherein the male body is considered inherently closer to holiness. It is within the context of this dominating androcentrism that nuns are constrained by their gender.

Accordingly, the article considers how monasticism is shaped by gender in the Ethiopian Orthodox cultural context. Firstly, I will look at how the nuns in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are connected to the wider Christian monastic tradition, wherein 'becoming male' is a metaphor denoting spiritual women. Secondly, I identify what characterises 'the world' that the nuns leave behind. This is followed by an examination of the process through which the secular world is abandoned, and the article concludes by demarcating the boundaries and nature of the Ethiopian orthodox 'holy gender'.

### **Being a holy woman by becoming male**

Ethiopian monasticism has preserved several archaic features of early Christianity. The legend of the paradisiacal monastic life finds its counterpart in other Christian traditions, as in the Syrian Christian practice of spiritual and "continent" marriage. (Brock and Harvey, 1997:8). Giulia Sfameni Gasparro argues that virginity and marital continence were ideals for early Christians, who emphasised *enkrateia*. (Gasparro, 1995). Gasparro identifies dualism and "restoration of the original condition of humanity" as motives for the emphasis on virginity. (Gasparro, 1995:136). Sexuality and body were perceived as negative aspects of life that caused the world to be full of sin. Such perceptions were closely connected to notions of

humanity and even more so to attitudes concerning femininity. The fall of man was understood to result in femaleness and sexual differentiation, and salvation obtained by returning to a pre-sexual state of maleness. (Børresen, 1995:2). Aline Rousselle argues that the advent of Christianity broke with Hellenistic positive ideas about body and sexuality. Christianity introduced a new complexity to sexuality, and desire of another's body as "an intolerable obstacle to the accomplishment of God's will." (Rousselle, 1988:1). These perceptions about sexual desire and the gendered body, also exist in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity; for the progress to an asexual state of holy gender is a chief motivation of Ethiopian monasticism.

To become male is a metaphor by which women within various Christian traditions have denoted their transformation to becoming a spiritually advanced human being. Paul describes salvation to be such a transformation, as in "to become the perfect man." (Ephesians, 4.13). In this androcentric perspective, 'woman' connotes the obverse of maleness, and in this context is to be imperfect, as contrasted to man. In this paradigm, women who achieve a high degree of spirituality are holy women. In ancient Christianity, such holy women were described as being male.

In Gnostic texts there are examples of women who attained salvation by becoming male. (Vogt, 1993). Kari Vogt refers to the *Gospel of Thomas: Logiaon* 114 is set within the characteristic Gnostic frame of reference to the opposition between Peter and Mary Magdalene, "Simon Peter said to them: 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male (*hout*), so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male (*hout*) will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'" (Vogt, 1993: 217).

The Syrian holy women (Brock & Harvey, 1998), and desert mothers in Egypt (Vogt, 1984), were all denoted male because of their spirituality. In Syria and Egypt, during the first centuries Anno Domini, religious women lived celibate lives, but not in communities of nuns. The monastic ideal in Syria and Egypt was of asceticism. In ancient Syria holy women were understood to become male, and became so by leaving many of their female qualities behind, and changing their outlook and taking on characteristics of the male gender. The monastic tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is understood by scholars to have come from Syria and Egypt. (Kaplan, 1984). The Ethiopian tradition was influenced by ideals and doctrines from these traditions; and possibly, the metaphorical transformation of women into men, signalling the passage into the monastic life, and a transition of a spiritual dimension, can be attributed to the spread of early monasticism.

Religious behaviour is highly valued in the contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and this can be traced to early Christianity. The ancient Christians emphasised behaviour as means for salvation; hence, outer aspects of the Christian person were as important as the inner experience of belief. Salvation was, therefore, connected to the body. Brock and Harvey argue that Syrian Christians were to a great extent categorised according to behaviour, "Nowhere else in Christendom does one find so profound a sense that religious behaviour is equivalent to religious belief." (Brock and Harvey, 1987: 9). "Thus the early fourth-century bishop and ascetic

Aphrahat the Persian wrote a treatise on faith in which he listed the following practices to be necessary for Christian life: pure fasting, pure prayer, love, alms, meekness, virginity, holiness, wisdom, hospitality, simplicity, patience, long suffering, mourning, and purity." (*ibid.*). These practices are more or less the same as those my informants have listed, which they aim to fulfill. Moreover they correspond to a certain degree to the ten steps that are outlined in *The Book of Monks* (*Mās'haḥā Mānakosāt*) the steps that Ethiopian monastics go through in order to achieve their aim of holiness.

### Gender and the monastic vocation

The theologies of the Syrian, Coptic and Ethiopian Tāwahīdo churches resemble each other, as these churches are all Oriental Orthodox. A deeply significant point of comparison to note is that Orthodox theology asserts that human beings have the potential of being deified. (cf. Brock and Harvey, 1997: 13; Ward, 1980; Vogt, 1984). This theological perspective has significance in the lives of Ethiopian monastics that aspire to become holy. The monastic vocation is formulated with this ultimate goal in mind, although this is never offered as a direct explanation for the monastic vocation.

Despite the goal to achieve holiness, nuns never refer to themselves in such a way. They expressed about others what they would not say about themselves. They explained that only God is completely holy, whereas a person might be able to obtain a degree of holiness. Holy people should not be regarded as such until they are dead, but they agreed that both the living and the dead might make the monastery a holy place. Two virgin nuns, who live in a remote monastery in the Lalibela area, Waldebit Maryam, explained that it is the people who live in a monastery that imbue the cloistered area with holiness. The two nuns explained this about holiness:

*Books become holy because of the words and the message. That something is holy means that something is pure. All books are not holy, but in the Bible the message is pure.*

The meaning of purity and holiness cohere in the Ethiopian Orthodox belief system. In terms of being human, the ideal of holiness is closely linked with the value of purity. The degree of purity a human being has obtained decides his or her degree of holiness. Bodily purity and the purity of the soul are closely connected. Understanding the human being as a unity of body and soul, the nuns do not endeavour elimination of the body, but aim at turning the body into an instrument for the soul. The ascetic practices, which I will return to, are means for fulfilment of the process of purification. A human being has the potential of becoming the perfect union of body and soul, which resembles the perfect union of God and man in Christ. When a human being has reached the state of such a union, they may attain salvation. In the Christology of Ethiopian orthodoxy, Christ represents the perfect unity of God and man in one nature.

A related perspective concerning the theological doctrines on the nature of humanity is that these formulate gender roles. Kari Elisabeth Børresen, a Norwegian professor of theology, points to the historical roots of different Christian traditions, and categorises theological perspectives on Christ/God and the impact they have on gender models. (Børresen, 1995). She argues that the patriarchal concept of God gives women no opportunity to obtain a God-likeness because Adam was the one created in the image of God, not Eve. This was 'an early perspective, and was superceded by a platonified concept of God. Spirituality was connected to the soul, hence, the concept of God became metaphysical, and gender was not relevant to the attainment of a God-likeness. Børresen categorises the patriarchal concept of God under the heading 'Androcentric Monism', which implies that Christ provides a gender ideal only for men. Børresen writes, "... the exemplary human being is male, since Adam is created in God's image (Genesis, 1 26-7a; 2, 7). According to this first doctrinal stage (...) only men are considered to be creationally Christ-like, whereas women can achieve salvational Christ-likeness by 'becoming male.'" (Børresen, 1995: 247). Comparatively, Børresen also mentions 'holistic monism', "...where women and men are defined as God-like qua female or male human beings.(...) such holistic God-likeness remains unaccepted in Orthodox doctrine." (King, 1995:247-248).

Androcentric monism is equally applicable to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; moreover the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition remains appreciably Judaic. This possibly intensifies the degree of androcentrism in Ethiopian orthodoxy; because in Judaic religion, God is specifically male, "The Hebrew god's gender, from the very beginning as documented in the Hebrew Bible (known as the Old Testament), was always male/masouline." (Brenner, 1992:48). Ethiopian holy women formulate their piety and spirituality in the context of an androcentric monistic paradigm; and women who decide to become holy and pure, may reject certain important characteristics of womanhood in an attempt to 'become male'

### **Mary as female ideal/Christ as male ideal**

Nuns reject certain important characteristics of womanhood and Ethiopian lay women, on the other hand, formulate their piety and spirituality in a different relation to androcentric monism. But all women look to a divine ideal, embodied in a model for female divinity. This female ideal is personified in Mary, mother of God. Informants, both laity and monastics explain that Mary serves as a female divine ideal in a patriarchal religion. Mary is ascribed many of the qualities that are usually considered female among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.<sup>2</sup> Mary is often presented as the empathic, sensitive mother in both miracles and as depicted on icons, while Jesus is just, hard, and condemning. It is Mary who begs Jesus to show mercy, on behalf of the sinners who call upon her, by reminding Jesus of the motherly love she showed him when he was a child. From this perspective Mary and Jesus are stereotypes of female and male: the sensitive woman begging the strong man. Mary also plays a significant role in the life of Ethiopian nuns. Some nuns explain that Christ saved human beings once and for all and Mary ministers the daily, repeated forgiveness that

the faithful require throughout their lives. Her central role can partly be explained as a consequence of the view that only man is created Christ-like, and Mary can thus be understood as a source of female divinity close to the Godhead.

Mary is central both in theology and in popular devotion. She is the counterpart of Eve, just as Jesus is the counterpart of Adam; and Mary is often considered to be the female redeemer. The introduction of the most widely read books of Ethiopian Orthodox literature, the *Miracles of Mary* (*Tamirä Mariam*), proclaims the central role of Mary in Christianity. She is given the appellation 'Redeemer'. The statement made about Christ in Colossians, Chapter 1, is echoed in the *Miracles of Mary*, in which it is written that the world was created for her sake. Seemingly, Mary has taken the role of Christ as the Saviour, and she is understood to be Christ's co-redeemer. Interestingly, the book is conceived of as a substitute for the Holy Communion for those who cannot receive it, and is therefore often recited outside the churches after the mass.

These translated extracts are taken from the introduction of the *Tamirä Mariam*, and illustrate that she is the personification of a notional female divinity.

Our Lady Mary existed before the world [was created] in the mind of God. For the sake of Mary, Adam and Eve were made, and Adam called his wife 'Life' because he knew that Mary would go forth from his loins and from the womb of his wife. What book can contain the majesty of Mary? For the sake of Mary the whole world was made. Honour ye Our Lady Mary, oh children of this Church, for Our Lady Mary is the redemption for sinners, and Our Lady Mary giveth gracious gifts unto those who minister unto her with good service. Put your confidence in Our Lady Mary with all your hearts, and have no doubt whatsoever but that it is she who bringeth you salvation.

Apart from relating closely to Mary, the nuns follow a masculine ideal which breaks free from female popular devotion. Ethiopian nuns, in contrast to the veneration of Mary by lay women, tend to organise their lives according to the life of Christ. The daily prayers are regulated according to the life of Jesus, with hours of prayer seven times during twenty-four hours, each remembering one or several events in Christ's life. A usual commentary that I elicited from the nuns concerning their vocation was that they aim to live the life of Christ. Monks and nuns thus share the same divine ideal manifested in the life of Christ.

Albeit that Ethiopian nuns formulate salvation as being obtainable by living the life of a monastic, in that they follow the life of Christ in prayer, the life of a female monastic is in some significant ways different from that of monks. The way of life that a nun chooses is, to a great extent, influenced by the fact that she is a woman. I will, therefore, explore what it means to be a woman among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, and argue that there is an emphasis on the body in the Ethiopian Orthodox

context, hence biological gender plays a significant role in the individual's choice of path in order to obtain salvation.

### Being female in the secular world

Some observable characteristics of Ethiopian women are generally connected to the caretaker role that she has in the private sphere (Wright, 2002). Moreover, women are pious and active in devotion because they have many people to take care of. Ethiopian Orthodox women are normally restricted to certain roles as mothers, wives, prostitutes, nuns, or a combination of two or more of these roles during their lives. Ethiopian women generally are pious, and are regarded as responsible, caretaking, not corrupt and fearful towards law and justice.

According to many of my informants, women have no role to play in public life because they are subordinate. Women are marginalized spiritually and institutionally in the sense that all hierarchical occupations are reserved for men. Education is another male domain. Ethiopian Orthodox women in general have little formal influence in society, and are discouraged from having much influence by negative characterisations of talkative and outspoken women. Female sexuality is repressed by a society that regards women as temptresses. Women are also regarded as sensitive and more inclined to become insane than men are. All these perspectives seem to be rooted in the fact that Ethiopian gender roles are sharply divided.

Ethiopian Orthodox women are defined by the female body. A woman has the potential of bearing a child; and she is also an object of beauty because of her bodily appearance. In the lyrics of traditional Ethiopian songs, for example, there are many expressions about the female body and how it affects the male person. A woman's body is an object of beauty, and a poetic subject that glides easily into the characterisation of all women as temptresses. The role of temptress is ascribed to women because of the passions that the female body arouses in the male onlooker.

The body also plays an important role in terms of salvation. This is rooted in the understanding Ethiopian Orthodox have of the body as connected to the soul. There is a belief in bodily resurrection, hence, both the body and the soul have to be purified and saved. The importance of asceticism is outlined in *The Book of Monks*, in which, it is emphasised as essential for the spiritual process of a monastic.

Nuns say that all women belong to the same biological gender, but the break with life involves a rejection of female sexuality, and social norms. The nuns leave the world of being attractive, getting married and giving birth; they reject the social roles of wife and mother. The nuns understand themselves as women by creation; however, in terms of their aim in life lay women and nuns are different.

A nun and a novice, both between twenty and thirty years old, explained:

*Women think about the world, we think about spiritual matters. By nature, however, we are the same. The difference is that our aims are different. For*



*example, a normal man and a man with authority are the same by creation, but their positions are different.*

Paramount in the nuns' conceptualisation of the world is that women are more impure than men primarily because of their maternal function and an association with beauty, sexual temptation and the sin perceived to have been committed by Eve against Adam and God in the story of Genesis. Concurrently, maleness is thus extolled within the theology of the Church as the ideal for salvation. In order to attain holiness, the nuns must transcend impurity by rejection of femaleness, womanly roles, bodily qualities, and the female world. A nun explained how she regarded normal women compared to her:

*A woman should dress attractively, smell nicely and decorate herself, for example her ears. My ears are like they were created. I clean my body with water. Otherwise? Nothing. I am different from other women by aim and because I do not give birth. And I have no husband.*

Margaret Miles (1989) describes how women, in early Christianity, took on male roles in order to obtain union with Christ. Miles states that the female body was generally reduced to an object of male desire. She argues that the gender identity of women in early Christian literature is to a large extent focused on the body. She writes, "(...) ascetic women and martyrs insisted on assimilating their bodies to the religious identity they had chosen and developed. Their bodies became, for ascetic women, both the location and the symbol of a religious self." (Miles, 1989:54). Miles also indicates some practical reasons for this transformation, such as enabling women to travel without fear of molestation and rape. (Miles, 1989:55). Both the focus on the body and asceticism, and seclusion, draw our attention to the similarities between these early Christian women and contemporary Ethiopian nuns. Ethiopian nuns practice asceticism and focus on the body in their spiritual process of becoming holy. Moreover, Ethiopian nuns often identify vulnerability to rape as a restraining them from practicing religion, for instance from traveling to sacred sites.

The main temptation is perceived to be the human weakness of sexuality. The emphasis on sexual activity as a major source of sin and as a polluting factor, connects the body to notions of sin and impurity. The popular perception among lay people as well as the clergy is that purity is affected by sexual activity. Women and men abstain from receiving the Holy Communion in the period of life when they are active sexually, whereas children and old people usually receive Holy Communion. Children and old people are not regarded as sexually active, thus, they are considered purer. In this wider Ethiopian Christian context, virginity is of great importance for monastics because it is a sign of holiness.

As well as being the site of temptation, the body also plays an important role in terms of salvation. This is rooted in the understanding Ethiopian Orthodox have of the body as connected to the soul. There is a belief in bodily resurrection, hence, both the body and the soul have to be purified and saved. As outlined in *The Book of*



*Monks*, asceticism is emphasised as essential for the spiritual process of a monastic. The emphasis on asceticism among Ethiopian Orthodox monastics is not a result of abhorrence of the soul being encompassed by the body, as it was in medieval western Christianity. It is rather a consequence of the conception of unity between body and soul. Virgin nuns say that all women belong to the same biological gender, but Ethiopian women are expected to marry and give birth. The nuns leave the world of being sexually attractive, and they reject the social roles of wife and mother. The nuns understand themselves as women by nature; however, in terms of their aim in life, lay women and nuns have divergent values. Monastics often establish a surrogate, spiritual family that is not created out of blood relations based on sexuality and birth.

Nuns emphasise the difference between themselves and other women, but they also point to differences between men and women. The difference they explicitly mention is that women are physically weaker and, therefore, have to protect themselves in order not to lose their virginity. A nun explained:

*It is more difficult to be a nun than a monk. We are more easily tempted by force. We can more easily loose our virginity. Men are stronger physically. Women should not travel alone because they are weaker.*

Because of their vulnerability, women and nuns are prevented from frequenting sacred sites and making pilgrimages. There are some places from which women are permanently prohibited. Examples are the place in the churches where the Ark of the Covenant is located, the house where the Holy Communion is prepared and buildings where holy icons and scriptures are stored. Women are prohibited from entering a church when they are menstruating. The monthly period has a restraining effect on the spiritual progress of nuns because during the time of menstruation, they cannot uphold their spiritual practices.

The usual explanation given for menstrual taboos in the Ethiopian context is that they are prescribed in the Law of God and have to be respected. It is said in *Leviticus* that menstruation is a curse against women due to Eve's initial sin. I asked several informants to tell me why menstruation is considered impure, and an assistant priest (*deacon*) gave this answer:

"Well, I am not sure, it is the Law. Additionally, men can never know when a woman has her period."

Menstrual taboos are time and space-related, and are particularly concerned with avoidance practices. Nuns are thought impure for seven days during their menses. On the eighth day, the nuns wash themselves carefully, but until then they cannot enter a church, and must keep a distance from sanctified ground. Some nuns choose not to pray in front of their icons; and menstruating nuns will sometimes keep a distance from other members of the community. They are usually not permitted to enter precincts of holy springs, and when menstruating, only ordinary water blessed by a priest can be sprinkled on them. Nuns cannot read certain spiritual books while menstruating. There are also certain holy books that menstruating nuns are not allowed to touch: among them are: *The Gospel of John*, *Golgota* and *Kidan*. There are

a number of prayers they are not allowed to say, but among those permitted are: *Our Father, the Psalms* and *Widdase Mariam*.

Thus, menstruation may be understood as a "matter out of place" in Mary Douglas's terminology. (Douglas, 1966). Sexuality in general is regarded as impure, and is not limited to the bodies and reproduction of women. Menstruation represents fertility and it may be that men experience it as uncontrollable and threatening. On the other hand, other secretions of the body such as semen are also considered polluting, and men, who have had sexual intercourse less than twenty-four hours before they go to a service in a church, have to keep at a distance from the church building. Therefore, spirituality and purity are so intimately connected that holy gender denies the sexuality of both men and women, with celibacy being a requisite for all monastics.

### Leaving the world

Nuns use two ways to eliminate the problem of menstrual pollution. Some nuns say it is not the menstruation that is polluting, but the transgression of breaking the Law of the Old Testament. Other nuns consider menstruation as a major polluting factor which restrains their spiritual progress. They seek to terminate the menstruation cycle by praying to Mary for mercy.

The first solution involves a redefinition of menstrual pollution to be something one brings upon oneself by breaking the law. In Ethiopian Orthodoxy, holiness cannot defile itself; but the one who is in a state of impurity and goes near to a sacred place may suffer from this transgression. Hence, the need for separation is understood by some nuns to be necessary in order to protect human beings from the negative consequences of challenging something sacred or blessed. Both nuns and lay women follow the same rules of behaviour; but many nuns experience their bodies as an encumbrance, and perceive them to be unbearably impure (*rikus*). They regret that the seven-days' interruption of their prayer life every month delays their spiritual progress. The nun Wälättä Selassie illustrates the impurity of menstruating women:

*There is no difference between menstruating lay women and menstruating nuns; but nuns want to stop the menstruation cycle in order not to interrupt the prayers. I do not like my body while menstruating. I do not have pains; but I feel completely impure. How can I call upon God? I do not even want to meet people.*

Wälättä Sellassie explained how she reacted when she came to the monastery where she was going to receive the monastic hat and become a nun:

*Until that day, I menstruated with the normal intervals and it was the time for my period when I was there in the monastery. I went to the forest and said: The land is holy, the water, everything is holy. What will happen if I start menstruating in the middle of this? I cried and cried and cried.*

Wälättä Sellassie's solution was to ask Mary to relieve her from the burden:

*I prayed persistently and I preferred dying to the experience of my own menstruation in the monastery. I did not get the menses, and I have never got it since.*

Hers is not a unique story, and several of the nuns I interviewed try to control the menses and the body. Hence, there are aspects of the femaleness that nuns disapprove of and reject. The impurity of women who menstruate is overcome later in life simply by the natural cessation of the menstrual cycle. This is illustrated with an important task undertaken by post-menopausal, or spiritually advanced nuns. Such nuns, called *aqabit*, prepare the flour for the Holy Communion bread. A nun must ideally have reached the last stage of spiritual progression in order to be *aqabit*. Amätä Sellassie, a thirty-five-year-old, who has been a nun for four years said:

*I have asked Mary to bring my menstruation cycle to an end, because I want to do the work of the aqabit. To do that, you must be post-menopausal, or the menstruation must somehow have ceased. This is because she [the aqabit] grinds the flour for the Holy Communion bread, which is holy.*

Preparing the flour for the Holy Communion bread is the only task a nun can have in the Church. The work has to be done by someone pure. Besides not menstruating, the nun should have reached a certain spiritual level. The case study of Wälättä Sellassie indicates the importance of being pure in order to attain spiritual progress and salvation. Wälättä Sellassie had this reaction when she was asked, at the age of twenty-five, by a monastery of thirty priests, to prepare the flour for the Holy Communion:

*They used to call me immahoy - they decided to give me the job as aqabit. The priests numbered more than thirty. "Please take up the work we will help you in all ways," they said. I was not worthy of doing this job. I was younger and I was still menstruating then. It seemed to me they understood me to be perfect [yebäqqačč], but I was not. A perfect person has to do that job.*

When a woman becomes a nun, she first goes through a novitiate, which may last from some weeks up to several years. The degree and nature of the preparation a novice goes through is usually up to the individual. A woman will often be respected as *immahoy* (nun) according to how she spends her time, not solely because she is initiated. Thus, preparing flour for the Holy Communion is work that confers status. Ethiopian nuns leave the secular world, but specifically for virgin nuns becoming a novice is considered an act of emancipation. All virgin nuns I have interviewed left their home without asking permission from their family or informing them of their intention to become a nun. An Ethiopian Orthodox woman usually becomes a virginal

nun between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. I have met girls who started living the life of a nun even earlier, the youngest being eleven years old. I have also encountered, though rarely, virginal nuns who took their monastic vows after the age of twenty-five.

There are other gender specific reasons for why younger women become nuns very early in life. Some tell explicitly that they had to flee from their natal homes because they did not want to get married, and had they stayed, they would have been married without their consent. The nun Wälättä Sellassie told her story:

*They never tell the girl directly that she is going to get married. After the death of my mother, I stayed with a family my grandmother took me to. My real father who lived nearby accepted a priest assistant to be my husband without my knowledge. I was about twelve at that time. My new mother cried and said, "I felt that you were my daughter, but now you will be taken away from me." Then I understood something was wrong. I left the next morning. I went on foot towards the nearest big town.*

After two days Wälättä Sellassie reached the town where her mother's sister lived. After a year or two Wälättä Sellassie ran away from her because her aunt eventually also wanted to give her to a man. Virgin nuns consider life as a nun as an alternative to marriage. They leave their families before they are at risk of losing their virginity. The nuns make an effort in order to look unattractive and they may crop their hair, or not show their hair to anybody. Nuns and monks are ascetic and wear clothes so that their bodies are not visible, and dress in dark colours and clothes that look dirty. Women in the world are expected to look beautiful and this signifies their sexuality. Sexuality, and the ability to give birth are abnegated in favour of the monastic life. Some of my informant nuns tell me that a baby is free of sin when born. Nuns by denying their sexuality and by suppressing their menstrual cycle, maintain the innocence of a child.

This rejection of sexuality in preference to spirituality is ritually dramatised during their vows and initiation. When nuns and monks are initiated to the monastic life they die a ritual death, and the liturgy for the dead (*fitat*) is read and a funeral is performed. Funerals are a rite of passage that is necessary to ensure the successful travel of the deceased soul to heaven. For the novices, this is a rite of passage also, an initiation into the monastic way of life. Afterwards, nuns are believed to be free of sin for forty days, a period which is believed to be full of temptations. Some novitiates have a 'spiritual mother' with them throughout their initiation and incorporation. The spiritual mother is an experienced nun, who advises them and helps them to resist the temptations that all who enter monastic life must face during their spiritual initiation.

### **Femaleness and Holy gender**

The paradox of the impure action of giving birth and the holy aspirations of nuns is overcome by the metaphorical conception of fertility. Nuns employ a natal

metaphor in which the monastic body gives birth to Christ. Through their spiritual relationship with Mary, nuns are relieved of the burden of their female bodies; since Mary was born without sin, became pregnant without intercourse, and escaped mortality by her Ascension into Heaven. The pure body of the Virgin Mary *qua* the pure body of the monastic gives the nun access to a higher spiritual state of being. An essentially feminine metaphor is inverted in the Christian tradition because of the miracle of the Virgin Birth. It is important to be a virgin because Christ could only have been borne by a virgin, and Christ himself is also considered to be a virgin. If the virgin body is maintained, it can imitate Christ, and internalise holiness in order to achieve salvation. The holy gender is, therefore, identified with Christ.

The monastics say that they imitate the life of Christ and become like Christ. Some nuns challenge the patriarchal view that women need an additional saviour. Their saviour is Christ and they do not seek a special relationship with Mary. Many nuns oppose views that marginalise women, for example they contest the orthodox view that Eve is responsible for the fall of man. All the nuns I have talked to say that the aim of their life as a nun is to live the life of Christ and to suffer as Christ suffered. Nuns employ male roles because the primary exemplar of the monastic life is Christ himself.

A usual opinion among the clergy is that nuns have a higher status than laywomen do, because of their choice not to marry and give birth. The clergy, however, often defines nuns as laity perhaps because nuns do not inhabit any clerical positions. A traditionally educated monk explained, "Look at the stars in the sky. Aren't some stars bigger than others?" In this celestial simile, all the stars represent the laity, and the bigger stars are the nuns. The prayers of nuns are no different from the prayers of lay people. Nuns are not necessarily considered to be of a higher spiritual status than others, since all people are potentially equal. Priests and monks, however, have a superior status because they are able to perform the sacred ministry.

Gender difference between nuns and monks is apparent in the spiritual privileges that monks retain, for example, monks have a sacramental role because they can be ordained as priests. Nuns are also limited by the menstrual taboo. Nuns are marginal to the androcentric spirituality of the Orthodox Church. By becoming male, women challenge the patriarchal, spiritual dominance of men. Wäläṭṭä Selassie was disappointed with priests who were busy ploughing the land instead of teaching the people. She preached when still quite young and had many problems because she spoke against the church establishment, and consequently was imprisoned. She gave up preaching in favour of the secluded life in a monastery.

Though nearly all the nuns I have interviewed say that they meet rejection when they express a desire to study, some nuns do educate themselves in religious skills. Remarkably, Wäläṭṭä Petros has mastered several of the schools in traditional church education, after decades of studies. She explained that she started studying when she was permitted by the bishop, and was the only woman in her class. She reflected on the patriarchal relationship:

*The others would have thrown me out if the bishop had not been there. But he liked the fact that I was learning to such an extent that he gave me honey with his own finger - because of his love for me. It is very difficult for women to learn. The clergy say, 'Women are not going to serve in the church, so why learn.' And the deacons could be tempted in the classes. A priest was advising me not to study. I required an explanation and evidence from the Bible. He referred to St. Paul that a woman should not be over her husband. I told him that is for your wife. I do not have any husband. He told me I was stubborn. [däräq literally 'dry', meaning stubborn].*

## Conclusion

This article began by relating a mythic notion of the original innocence of Ethiopian monastics, and the need to resist sexual temptation (*fātāna*). Sexual segregation, though common within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is not a consistent monastic rule. In fact, monasteries where nuns and monks live together are common, and there is relaxed interaction between monks and nuns. Even if the two sexes are living in two distinct areas, they visit each other, work together, and help one another in various ways. In several monasteries I have visited, monks cook the food though it is normally a female task. Sometimes this rule is kept because women are prohibited from working in a cloistered area; but I observed that duty in the kitchen can be transferred to monks even though there may be nuns also living there. Compared to western monastic traditions and holy orders, there seems to be less emphasis placed on sexual segregation and differentiation. This can in part be attributed to the common goal of the holy gender that is shared by monks and nuns, the basis of which is the orthodox theological ideal of the human and the divine.

Nevertheless, gender difference is the source of ambivalence for Ethiopian women who seek a spiritual life. Nuns are spiritually marginal within the androcentric paradigm, and men are one step closer to holiness than their female counterparts. Though both nuns and monks struggle to leave the profane world in favour of a holy life, women reject their femininity and must metaphorically become male, in order to approach the holy gender. That women are both biologically and sociologically more associated with fertility may help to explain why women are considered impure. Men and women have to battle with sexual temptation to achieve salvation, but nuns have to overcome their gender, and purify an innately polluted body. Celibacy and asceticism are the main means of purification for monastics. This is all the more important for women, who in order to achieve a state of holiness, must overcome the state of female-impurity, to the extent that some will reject their femaleness, and experience an arrest of their menstrual cycle. Ethiopian virgin nuns leave behind aspects of life that are female, especially menstruation and childbirth. This transformation involves a transgression of gender. The goal, however, is the same for both monks and nuns: to re-establish the paradisiacal state by renouncing sexuality.

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