Approaching the *Debtera* in Context

Socially Reprehensible Emotions and Talismanic Treatment in
Contemporary Northern Ethiopia

*Comprendre les debtera dans leur contexte. Les émotions socialement
repréhensibles et le traitement talismanique en Éthiopie du Nord aujourd'hui*

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This article presents a study of contemporary North Ethiopian Orthodox Christian talismanic practices (in and around Gonder).¹ In order to contextualize talismanic practices, an introduction of the producer of the talisman is necessary. Known as the *debtera*,² the producer of the talisman is often³ a marginal member⁴ of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) clergy. Though the *debtera* are part of the EOTC clerical structure, the talismanic healing methods they employ are considered to be occult and officially prohibited by the church authorities (Mercier 1975; Boylston 2012). Ethnographic studies show that the *debtera* can be found both “inside”⁵ the EOTC, where they perform their clerical duties, and “outside,” where they are known as the producers of talisman (de Ménonville 2017).

1. Gonder is a former capital located in the Northern highlands. It is still considered to be one of the centers for ecclesiastical learning and talismanic production.
2. The system for the transliteration of Amharic used in this article does not employ any special diacritics. It is close to the transliteration established by the *Acta Aethiopica* (GETACHEW, HUNWICK & RUBENSON 1987) and is the closest to the simplified spelling habits used by Ethiopians when they use the Latin alphabet instead of the much more exact Gī'iz script, the precursor of modern Amharic, for which this term would be written *Däbtära* (KAPLAN 2005).
3. Because a wide range of talismanic practices exists within the Ethiopian context, not all producers are necessarily from the EOTC, though I would argue the considered to be the most effective come from this tradition.
4. “The most educated of clerics and may be described as ‘lay ecclesiastics.’ They occupy an intermediate position between the clergy and laymen [...]. They are choristers, poets, dancers, scribes, painters, herbalists and wizards. Special knowledge is required for the role but not special holiness” (KAPLAN 2005: 53).
5. Literally and figuratively.

The Talisman

The Ethiopian talisman is an object often cut into a long rectangular form from a processed animal hide, which is then inscribed with writing and images.⁶ Both the texts and images needed in the production of the talisman are derived from the EOTC and are transformed or altered as the individual *debtera* sees fit. The talisman can be made on demand to fit a client's needs or can be bought from a *debtera* "ready-made." The talisman is an object that has a particular agency, as it is intended to function to relieve suffering. I have used the word "suffering" to emphasize that a talisman is designed to "heal" not only physiological ailments, but also to provide solutions for emotional problems as well. The term "emotion" presents difficulties if seeking a single definition. Nico Frijda's definition of emotions as "tendencies to establish, maintain, or disrupt a relationship with the environment [...] [so that] [e]motions might be defined as action readiness in response to emergencies or interruptions" nicely encapsulates the relationship between emotions and the social world (Frijda 1986: 77). Emotions as having an "eruptive and expressive" (Strasser 1977) quality is descriptively useful, especially, as I will discuss, in the Ethiopian context which closely associates physiological ailments and emotion: both can be classified as a bodily "illness" (de Ménonville 2017). Importantly, the social response of the expression of emotion is exemplified by the *debtera* who becomes the "manager" of the client's illness. I propose that one element of the *debtera*'s activities is to serve as the mediator of socially disruptive emotions. The question can be asked, however, as to which emotions are considered "socially disruptive"? I will argue that the prevalence of emotions, such jealousy and lust, go against EOTC doctrine.⁷ These emotions are damaging, secretive and damnable, and yet, what is it about the nature of these emotions that demands the liminal services of the *debtera*? Why is it that these emotions are better "managed" through the *debtera*'s talismanic practice?

Although there exists a body of work on the study of emotions from an anthropological perspective (Rorty 1980; Rosaldo 1980; Crapanzano 1994; Lutz 1998), the research presented herein is an ethnographic study of the *debtera*'s emotional mediation agency. It is also worth noting the considerable research

6. Other types of talismans can be found as well in multiple forms: as small pieces of paper with writing and folded to be worn on the body, or even in the form of oil to be rubbed on the body.

7. In the anaphora of St. Mark, the deacon addresses the faithful with the following command: "Cut short now the enemies of your Church, and strip them of their pride, show them quickly their weakness, destroy their jealousy and their slander, let their evil accusation be one which is useless as their plots and devices' and scheming which they contrive against us" (FRITSCH 2016: 52).

on emotion and ritual (Turner 1967; Houseman & Severi 1998; Berthomé 2006; Berthomé & Housman 2010). Bruce Kapferer (1979) establishes ritual connection between conventionalized performance and “internal and private” emotion. Kapferer discusses rituals that are experienced as a group in an “performative” setting. He makes the argument that, in contrast to Durkheim, the ritual performance of emotions incites the visceral and felt experience of those emotions. Like much of the work on ritual and emotion, Kapferer relies on the idea of an audience. For Kapferer, the audience witnesses and is active in the efficacy of the healing. This is where talismanic healing practices differ considerably in that the idea of the “audience” counters the necessarily secretive nature of the talisman. The idea of the secret as it relates to talismanic practices is essential in the understanding of these practices. There is a strong sense of separation and setting apart. From an etymological standpoint, the word “secret” stems from the Latin *secretus* and means to sieve, to discriminate, to distinguish, divide and exclude. This understanding of secret, I would argue, is found in the Amhara talismanic practice in at least a triple sense: 1) the *debtera* is distinguished as set apart from others by virtue of his having power; 2) his knowledge is dirty and esoteric, as it has been separated from the EOTC, and 3) the act of consulting a *debtera* takes place away from others, in secret, and during consultations, secrets are divulged. I posit that it is the superimposition of these layers of secrecy that gives both *debtera* and talisman their power and meaning.

Secrecy is, in turn, connected to the emotional threat, which is pivotal in understanding the role of the *debtera* and his talismanic practices in contemporary Ethiopia. The *debtera*’s mediation becomes necessary precisely due to the threatening nature of certain emotions and the *debtera* is, in this sense, responsible for the transformation of an emotional threat. I propose that the articulation of the emotional threat is fundamentally linked to the “material.” I will explore the ways in which certain emotions reflect a “materiality” that is conceived as problematic, and even dangerous, for EOTC. A study of both meta-discourses from the EOTC and the micro-discourses that surround the *debtera* and the talisman are needed to make sense of the social value attributed to the talisman as a “material” system of emotional management. In so doing, the question must be asked: what is it about these emotions, within the Ethiopian context, that demand alternative management?

Approaching a *Debtera*: The Use of Gossip

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, I have found that people do not openly discuss the *debtera*, and rarer still, admit to a talisman consultation. This is not to say that the practice is in itself rare—almost everyone I have

encountered in the field⁸ has had some sort of encounter with a *debtera*—but rather that there is very little “ownership” of the consultation. When people discuss their interactions with a *debtera* it is to talk about someone else’s experience, or an experience far enough in the past so as to no longer have any social repercussions. As a result, it was through more indirect means that I was able to broach the topic of the *debtera* and their talismans. The methodology utilized includes both the “recording of gossip” pertaining to the *debtera* and his talisman and participant observation of the *debtera* in the act of creating and selling their talismans.⁹

I found that gossip, an object of the study and a component of my methodology, allowed for the expression of a lack of certainty and the “unsaid” or unspoken to find a voice. I argue that the practices and thus perceptions that surround the *debtera* require an alternative method of communication. Gossip somehow allows for the social actor to both maintain the “normative” dominant discourse and to deviate from it. It allows for a special space to be created in which the social significance of discourse takes a different form. Listening to the peripheral echoes, to the dissonant undertones, provides a more complex portrait of the *debtera* and one that creates moral shadows to the outlines provided by my own observations.

Relying on gossip and rumor surrounding occult practices (Bonhomme 2012, 2016) in order to help illustrate a larger phenomenon, I concur with Julien Bonhomme (2012: 215) that: “Rumors reveal the tensions and contradictions underlying certain social situations.” Though gossip often occurs at the individual and micro-ethnographic scale, rumor, according to Bonhomme (2016: 5), “circulates on a much larger scale, often across national borders.” Both have agency and result in real incidents, which consequently construct social identities. For my research, gossip because of its more private nature, as a discourse conveyed to me in private settings, has been useful as rumor and gossip (as per Bonhomme) defy a reliance primarily printed sources and have been used in anthropology to study social dynamics (Haviland

8. The fieldwork for this research took place in Adama and Gonder between 2013–2017.

9. In addition, since the discourse on *debtera* is the ultimate subject of my study, the descriptions based on my own observations are completed by conversations with the *debtera* and by those who know of or have had interactions with the *debtera*. My approach is to observe and record the reactions of the people who constitute the social context, using the system of values as expressed by those in the social context. I cannot claim to have the same values, as I am perhaps not as sensitive to place of the *debtera* within social context as the social actors themselves. As such, I am allowing those in the social context to contribute to the definition of the *debtera* as they assess and ultimately judge, often from a moral perspective, the significance of the *debtera* and their talismanic practices.

1977; Brison 1992).¹⁰ I find that the Amharic¹¹ term for gossip, *ilubalta*, is not insignificant as an integral part of social life and the establishment of friendship. Reidulf Molvaer (1995: 227) looks at the use of gossip and scandal among the Amhara in Addis Abeba and, in particular, how these are a means of “negative socialization” in that it defines whatever “can raise eyebrows and cause ‘scandal’ by implicitly criticizing deeds or words that break with generally accepted social norms.” Molvaer (*ibid.*) also emphasizes the idea that gossip that produces “moral shock” serves to “reinforce the standards that have been violated [...]. Both those that tell the gossip and the listeners are strengthened in their moral views.” From my own fieldwork from 2013–2017 in both Gonder and Adama, I found that gossip is also a way of both creating trust and building friendships and having “power over” people.¹² In the field, I have been told that gossip can be used to “ruin names” through exploiting “personal secrets.” It is a powerful social vector through which the dissonance that exists between the meta-discourse of the EOTC and the social value of the emotional talismanic practices can be heard. A deviance from the strictness of the EOTC’s appropriate emotional register is articulated through gossiping about what the *debtera* is capable of and why someone would consult with him.

Structural Understanding: the EOTC

The question as to why a person might consult with a *debtera* (despite the social risk) demands an examination of the social experience within the larger structural context of the EOTC.

An exhaustive history of the EOTC goes beyond the scope of this article. However, a brief description of the Ethiopian approach to Christianity is

10. M. HERSKOVITS (1947), in his study of “shouters” in a Trinidad village, looks at gossip as a cultural phenomenon. E. GOFFMAN (1956) and M. GLUCKMAN (1963) also wrote about the use of gossip as a way of instilling or breaking accepted social norms. GLUCKMAN (*ibid.*: 308–309) writes that “gossip does not have an isolated role in community life, but is the very blood and tissue of that life” and proposes that gossip has “positive virtues” such as maintaining the “unity, morals and values of social groups.” In linking gossip to morality, Gluckman draws upon the work of J. WEST (1945: 162) who writes that the “religious control of morals operates mainly through gossip.” The relationship of gossip to morality is one that contributes to an understanding of “good” and “bad” emotions. Through gossip, it is possible to hear the social value (or moral judgement) that is given to certain emotions.

11. Ethiopia’s official language.

12. The terms “power over,” “ruin names” and “personal secrets” were ones that I frequently heard in the field in conversations about gossip.

useful in providing a contextual framework for contemporary practices. Christianity came to Ethiopia in the late 300s and spread in a “top-down” fashion, beginning with the conversion of King Ezana in Axum.¹³ Having spilt from the mainstream Orthodox Churches in 451 over a Christological dispute, the EOTC is often classified among the Oriental Churches of Armenia, Syria and Egypt. The EOTC defines Christ as having one nature after the Incarnation, his humanity having been absorbed by his divinity. The incorporation of the word “*tewahedo*,” meaning “unified,” is a reference to this theological stance. The strength and place of the divine in the EOTC is masterfully interpreted by Tom Boylston. He posits that the divine represents a “physical” threat (Boylston 2018) and describes the EOTC as being defined by prohibition, mediation and hierarchy. The divine is conceived as being inaccessible, requiring mediation in the relationship between humans and God. Here mediators (such as deacons, priests, *debtera*, monks, saints, angels and Virgin Mary herself) maintain a hierarchy that helps navigate the separation between sacred and profane through act of prohibition (Boylston 2012). He understands the EOTC to function, as Mary Douglas (1966) characterized it, as an “isolation” of the divine through purity rules that limit engagement in social life. Members of its hierarchy can be defined as having a liminal social function through being “materially” set apart. One important element is the Church’s particular relationship to the immaterial, which is valued over the material and is therefore part of a dominant meta-discourse on the need for the ascendancy of the immaterial over the material (Boylston 2013). Based on the fieldwork conducted for my doctoral work, I found that the Church’s attitude towards the material, and in particular, to the body, is reflected in many of the daily and ritual practices (through fasting and abstinence). Tom Boylston (2012: 11) also describes these practices by linking them to an understanding of the Orthodox God as being, despite his humanity, “too pure and too sacred to be approached by worldly (*alemawi*) people.” In other words, the immateriality of God is both inapproachable and revered. Thus, those who aspire or mean to “approach” God must adhere to social rules in which the body cannot partake in the same commensurability or materiality. And yet this presents an impossibility: the practice of religion requires the body. Religious fervor has both a bodily dimension (kneeling, prostrating, kissing the cross and even in more extreme cases self-flagellation) (Mathews 1980) as well as an emotional one. To be close to God is to feel something. The experience of having an emotion has in itself a bodily dimension (in the physiological sense)—there is something material in the experience

13. For a concise overview of Ethiopian Orthodox history, see the introduction to É. FICQUET & G. PRUNIER (2015).

(tears, sweat or vomit for example as an emotional reaction). As follows, the Church's relationship to the material/immaterial is more complex than the meta-discourse allows for.

The complex relationship between material and immaterial is part of the cultural framework I believe to be fundamental to the way in which Orthodox Christianity is experienced in Ethiopia. The EOTC has strict rules pertaining to the body. These rules are made manifest most commonly through forms of appropriate dress, separation practices, sexual regulations and importantly, fasting. However, more extreme forms of bodily practices are found among the "holy." The EOTC is concerned with body impurity. The body is matter that must be controlled, as its inherent nature is corrupt, destined for death and sin. With certain monks and hermits (notably the *bahtawi*),¹⁴ the relationship with the body is fraught with conflict. Ascetic practices of flagellation, starvation, abstinence, bodily contempt and self-mortification are hallowed in the search for greater proximity to God. Asceticism is revered as an ideal. Hagiographies depict the lives of saints who have lived in self-denial; these saints are venerated, they represent a kind of paragon. The faithful live in the shadow of these ideals.¹⁵

The fasting required by the EOTC is one of its most essential distinguishing features¹⁶ (Boylston 2012). In the EOTC official doctrine, there are seven major fasts. Although these are observed by the clergy, the laity adhere to the Lenten fast (47 days), the Assumption Fast (16 days) as well as other more optional fasting periods according to local or individual practices (Stoffregen-Pedersen 1990: 127). Fasting also occurs every Wednesday and Friday to pay tribute to the crucifixion of Christ and therefore abstain from animal products. Some deny themselves any nourishment from 6am to 12pm. There is a definite corporal element that is experienced by Orthodox Christians. This manifests itself in two ways: firstly, through bodily denial of substance and secondly, through the communal embodiment of this denial, through the shared experience of fasting. Boylston (2012: 85) takes this idea a step further by adding that the

14. Monks who live in extreme isolation and/or engage in ascetic practices.

15. As J. HERMANN (2012: 186) writes in her doctoral dissertation: "Ce processus de déni, de purification est au centre des représentations et des pratiques religieuses. Les jeûnes, les tabous et interdits entourant la sexualité, visent à purifier le corps et à le conserver le plus possible dans cet état, afin de faire place à l'âme et lui donner le contrôle sur un corps affaibli."

16. "At the ethnographic level, people in Zege for the most part show little interest in matter of creed or doctrine. When people wanted to know if I was a Christian, they never asked me what I believed; they asked, 'Do you fast?' Fasting is necessary and, it sometimes seems, sufficient to Orthodox Christian identity. The importance of this point can hardly be overstated if we are to understand Ethiopian Orthodoxy or life in Zege. I will show

faithful's "common identity by fasting" embodies a "deferential submission to authority."

In my understanding, the faithful subject themselves to the Church in both mind and body; but why this need for submission? The EOTC provides a spiritual reasoning: to save the soul, the body must be purified. This is because of the weak nature of the body, which must be controlled.¹⁷ The battle waged against the material body ensures that the divine will not be diminished by the material.¹⁸ It is the denial that becomes essential; to deny the body and to make an enemy of desire. This is relevant to my line of inquiry, especially if this denial is a response to an emotional state. If desire is abhorred by the EOTC, where can it manifest itself? How and where are bodily states being expressed? Who takes on the responsibility for emotional transgressions and what are the consequences?

The *Debtera's* Place both Within and Outside the EOTC

The *debtera* eludes a clear definition. There is no fixed formal position of *debtera* in relation to the Church, nor beyond the sphere of the Church. The *debtera* can serve a number of different functions and, I would argue, individually interpret these functions. That is to say that a *debtera's* practice varies greatly depending on his clients. He markets his services and is often considered as a specialist in a certain domain. *Debtera* can take on a wide range of activities as choristers, poets, dancers, scribes, image-producers, herbalists or wizards. They are perceived as having special knowledge as a result of a longer course of study (beyond that minimally required of priests). In particular, they are thought to be the masters of *qiné* (a form of religious poetry), which requires an extensive knowledge of Amharic and Gĩ'iz,¹⁹ as well as having access to more esoteric texts about demonology.

that fasting is constitutive of basic social relationships and even of daily experience in Zege" (BOYLSTON 2012: 80).

17. "Pensez que la chair conduit à la mort, par contre l'Esprit est la vie éternelle. Lorsqu'on dit 'tuer' par l'Esprit la volonté de la chair, cela signifie soumettre la volonté de la chair à la volonté de l'Esprit" (ASRÈS 2007).
18. "The ascetic life is based on the principle that the weaker the body becomes, the stronger the spirit becomes, a path that is believed to open the possibility of communicating with God. The techniques of weakening the body and strengthening the spirit include rigorous fasting, adoration consisting of uninterrupted prostrations hundreds of times a day and standing for hours in prayer. At a certain stage of this strict asceticism, direct communication with God begins" (HAILE 1993: 54).
19. Gĩ'iz is the ancient Ethiopic language akin to the language of Sabea or Himyaritic used for biblical texts, though there is no conclusive evidence that the alphabet came to Ethiopia

It is difficult to understand the *debtera* without addressing their connection to magical practices. As Steven Kaplan (2004: 14) writes, it is impossible to “write about religion in Ethiopia without writing about magic as well.” The amalgamation of the normative church practices and the occult is a “notable feature” of the EOTC (Ullendorff 1967: 79).²⁰ Harald Aspen (2001: 3) points out the “co-existence of seemingly incongruous beliefs and practices” which exist within and on the periphery of the Orthodox Church. He uses the example of the *debtera* as the intermediaries between “folk religion” on one hand, and the “big tradition” or “central religion,” on the other (*ibid.*: 110).

It is clear that one of the reasons why the mention of *debtera* brings discomfort is because of the ambiguity of his position and the shrouded nature of his practices. Here I feel it is necessary to begin to weave in definitions and expressions from the field. When I first began researching the *debtera* I asked Beqele,²¹ a friend and informant, what their exact role was.²² Beqele asked me if I meant to say “*debter*” (meaning “notebook”). When I corrected him that I was interested in the *debtera*, Beqele responded: “You don’t see these things in our culture,” completely denying the existence of the *debtera*. Of course, Beqele’s position was untenable and he was later admitted not only their existence, but also his belief that his own son had been affected by a *debtera*’s magic. Later on, I was able to gossip about the *debtera* with Beqele and Daniel²³ and whether or not they used magic:

Me: Do you think maybe the *debtera* use some magical practices?

Beqele: I don’t think the *debtera* use magic practice. They know about the bible, they are educated. But as you know they are doing bad things so they are kicked out of the church by Christian law and regulations.

M: Could these “bad” practices be related to magic practices?

B: No, because they use the bible, so they cannot be magic.

through South Arabia. It is also the precursor of modern Amharic.

20. “One of the most notable features in Abyssinian Christianity is the survival of magical practices and prayers as well as a whole body of superstitious beliefs. Many of these magical prayers superimposed a layer of divine invocations or references to the Virgin Mary and the saints. It is likely that the majority of superstitious and magical practices are derived from the old Cushitic pagan beliefs, but there are indications also of a different kind [...]. There is little doubt that many magical practices formed so integral a part of the pagan folklore of Canaan that they were taken over into the Hebrew religion and given a fresh and sublimated significance” (ULLENDORFF 1967: 79).
21. Beqele has recently died due to an unknown cause. He was in his mid to late sixties. I had a particularly close relationship with him as he had taken me on as a “daughter.”
22. Conversation with Beqele, January 2013, Adama.
23. I consider Daniel to be my most important relationship. He is in his mid-20’s and accompanies me on most of my visits to the *debtera*. It is my “gossip” with Daniel that has been the most fruitful in understanding the role of the *debtera*.

Daniel: Yes it could. Take for instance traditional medicine. They use secret methods, extracting medicines from plants and animals, so maybe they are using magic practices. They don't extract the medicine by using the Bible.²⁴

Beqele again denies a well-established element of Ethiopian culture. Unlike Daniel, who goes so far as to correct him, he is unwilling to admit openly the existence of magical practices. Daniel and Beqele's differing interpretations illuminate an important point. To be clear, Daniel is a converted Protestant. Potentially, the use of his discourse could be contested as being heavily biased against Orthodox practices. Daniel could also be discredited by supposing that, as a Protestant, he lacks knowledge of more marginal Orthodox practices. I have found Daniel to be fully aware of the Orthodox practices that surround the *debtera* because he is part of a culture where their practices are omnipresent and because of his rather late conversion to Protestantism. For me, his questioning of these transgressive practices, in the presence of Beqele, forces Beqele to address them as well. From a socially protected position, he enables a confrontation that would otherwise have been elusive. My position as a foreigner was another essential ingredient that allowed for the opening discussion of the talismanic topic. The three of us constructed a relationship in which awkward questions and blunt responses could be aired. I realized that their commentary on the interviews was valuable as social commentary on transgression. I began to ask them, after every interview, what they had understood, how they felt, or even what they thought the other felt about the information received. Undoubtedly, our conversations and what I have recorded to relay exactly what these two men have said cannot presume to represent an entire population, but are relevant as an entry point into an ambiguous subject.

Generally, I felt the confrontation and the friction of their religious beliefs allowed for what Boylston (2012: 48) calls the "asymmetrical knowledge gradient" to become apparent. I would argue that Beqele and Daniel's discourse articulates their awareness of the ambivalent relationship between the *debtera* and the Church while simultaneously demonstrating that even the structure of the Christian faith is punctured by magical practices. The dialogues between Beqele and Daniel also demonstrated what Aspen calls the "coexistence of incompatible beliefs." Aspen (2001: 4) writes that the knowledge systems related to magical-religious beliefs is "non-sharing," "non-consistent," and "non-agreeing." I understand Aspen's interpretation of the Ethiopian relationship to magical practices as "non-agreeing" to mean

24. Conversation with Beqele and Daniel, January 2014, Gonder.

that these practices are “inconsistent” as they are shrouded in an effective²⁵ and powerful secrecy. Still further, secrecy survives as a cultural phenomenon because it is effective and powerful.

I want to emphasize that my interest in the secrecy in the “*debtera* culture” is not to discover the actual information thought to be secret, but rather to understand why secrecy is important as a social mechanism. As William Murphy (1980: 127) writes in his article about the use of secret knowledge in Kpelle society: “The content of the secret is often insignificant compared to the rights, obligation and privilege generated by the fact of secrecy.” Murphy’s description is a revisiting of a topic in Georg Simmel’s (1950) work on secrecy in which secrecy represents a vital side of all social affairs, as it is the manipulation of the ratio between knowledge and ignorance.²⁶ Simmel’s thesis defines secrecy as a social paradox: knowledge is needed to live among others, but such knowledge is so important and dangerous that it must be doctored, manipulated and hidden from certain social actors. It is a way of separating members of different social categories. Secrecy orders knowledge and regulates power, demarcating the differences between genders, classes, titles and professions. It is a medium for property and power. In the sphere of magical practices, we can easily see the connection to the *debtera* with regard to Simmel’s understanding of the prestige of knowing and the ownership of knowledge. The two major aspects of secrecy in talismanic magical practices are: 1) secrecy as it relates to things themselves or things that stand for a person (this includes the talisman); 2) secrecy as it relates to exceptional persons who are able to transcend ordinary societal personhood (such as the *debtera*).

The interest of the Ethiopian context is that the “exceptional persons” (the *debtera*) create the “object held sacred” (the talisman). The talisman is a manifestation of knowledge, meaning and symbols that are controlled by the *debtera*. In an interview with the Gonderian *debtera* Gerawerq²⁷, Daniel asks Gerawerq why secrecy is so important. The *debtera* responds: “Secrecy is the key that allows the talisman to be effective. The spiritual world is hidden or invisible to all except for some who are allowed to understand. That is why we need to make that talisman hidden or secret to everyone else.”²⁸

25. “Magical practices” are perhaps more effective because they require secrecy; there is an inherent link between efficacy/secrecy/magical practices.

26. The 1950 translation was based on a series of lectures Simmel gave entitled “Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903).

27. Gerawerq is a *debtera* who has become wealthy through the use of his occult powers. He lives in the Gonder area but is secretive about the exact location of his house. He also owns a travel agency in Gonder.

28. Conversation, October 2016, Gonder.

It is the *debtera* who restricts or reveals, using the agency of secrecy as he sees fit. He is thus able to define the threshold between those who “know” and those who are “ignorant.” As Simmel (1950: 333) aptly writes: “For the average person all superior persons and all superior achievements have something mysterious about them.” The *debtera*, however, uses secrecy not only to insulate himself from the sphere of the average person, but also to manipulate the average person for his own professional gain. Allan Young’s (1975: 245) formulation of the *debtera*’s monopoly in this domain is that the *debtera* is able to persist because “his public stigmatizes him as a man who lives through profaning what ordinary folk hold as sacred.” The *debtera* manages to combine his “commercial work” with his life as an ecclesiastic “since it is in the course of pursuing ecclesiastical goals that he becomes fully literate and gains entry into a network or ‘market’ within which new professional knowledge can be obtained” (*ibid.*: 263). Young’s depiction of the *debtera*’s quasi-profession as monopolizing technical knowledge fits well with Simmel’s understanding of the social mechanisms of secrecy. Is the Ethiopian context (and the role of the *debtera* in it) an example of how peripheral magical practices (and the secrecy that they inherently require) provide the *debtera* with a liminal social status and the possibility of managing socially reprehensible emotions?

Managing Socially Reprehensible Emotions

I turn now to look at two specific emotions that fall into the *debtera*’s domain: jealousy and lust. A definition of these two emotions as they relate to the Ethiopian context is necessary. Crapanzano’s solution in defining emotions across different cultural contexts is useful. His approach is one that considers emotions as a “theatralization” of epistemological obsessions. It is then the relationships between these obsessions (their theatralization) and the social conditions through which they develop that give meaning to their expression (Crapanzano 1994: 115). The meaning that is given to the expression of emotion in the Ethiopian context is directly linked to how they are treated and why they require liminality.

Jealousy

Jealousy has arisen as a recurring theme in the use of talismanic images. Many of the *debtera* with whom I have spoken, cite jealousy as one of the main reasons a client might buy a talisman. Potentially, there could be some

confusion between the jealousy and envy. In English, envy and jealous have mixed ancestry,²⁹ the distinction has evolved to imply that jealousy requires the presence (real or imagined) of a third party. For example, jealousy can arise when a third party (in the form of a human being or otherwise) becomes present in a pre-existing binary relationship. Envy, however, is defined more in terms of a feeling of discontent or resentment aroused by the possessions or qualities belonging to someone else. In Amharic, there is only word that incorporates both envy and jealousy (*qīnat*).³⁰ I use the word jealousy, instead of envy, because of the prevalence of talismans that treat emotional suffering resulting from with the unwanted presence of a third party.

Looking more closely at jealousy, it contains within it the desire to preserve, or the need to possess. It is about “having” a person, thing or characteristic. Indeed, jealousy treats the person as if he/she were a thing, making commensurability impossible. Freud (1955) writes that jealousy is both “normal” and “pathological.” It affects everyone, but can become like an illness. Looking at Freud’s analysis of jealousy, there is the idea of addiction (*sucht*) and the constant obsessive need to satisfy the *sucht* (*krankhaft gesteigertes Bedürfnis*) (Assoun 2011: 11). Jealousy thus becomes physical since the body manifests an emotional state of being, one that is constantly in demand and that craves satisfaction. Jealousy is like a physical illness. Expressions like “blinded by jealousy” demonstrate the link between the body and the emotion. In Ethiopia, jealousy can be like an illness: “The theme of jealousy and envy is a constant threat to peoples’ peace and well-being, and very often it looms in the background of other cases of health problems, conflicts, etc.” (Aspen 2001: 207). Like a sickness, it transforms its victims. However, it is often described as a spiritual disease³¹ and as such is a constant lurking danger. Daniel tells me that jealousy belongs to the sphere of the *debtera*³²:

When someone is always jealous in every corner of his life activities, we consider it like full of jealousy, there is nothing positive that can be expected from him. There is also jealousy that exists because an evil spirit is fighting him. This would mean that the evil spirit makes it so that he is jealous of his wife. In Ethiopia, some people become infected with jealousy. For example, they see that you love your husband. In order to cause you

29. P. HACKER (2018: 192) provides useful description of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew “conceptual roots” of jealousy and envy.

30. It could be suggested that the Amharic (*qīnat*) is related to the Hebrew (*qin’āh*), which appears in the Old Testament, and encompasses both envy and jealousy. It is condemned as a serious and self-destructive vice (eg. Cain and Abel, Rachel and Leah, David and Saul).

31. “*bemqegnnet yetemola*” or “*mīqegnnet yetet’enawetew.*”

32. Conversation with Begele and Gerawerq, January 2017, Gonder.

harm they go to a *debtera* so that your love, peace and respect turns to hate, jealousy and bad attitudes. At this time, we call this situation with you or your husband changed because of the spirit that is fighting in him or in you.

There appears to be no personal ownership of jealousy, as it has exterior causes: it is not something that comes from within the individual but rather inflicted upon them. The process of creating a jealousy talisman, however, does involve the individual. Gerawerq explains to me the process of collecting personal information and material objects from the individual:

Firstly, I tell them to become very close to the person they are jealous of. This way they can know very personal details of their history, which is crucial for me in preparing a talisman. After that, I asked them if they want to kill, making crazy, or other things depending on their interest. Mostly, to make the talisman effective I must to get some clothing that has contact with body, like body t-shirt or underwear to get their sweat, hair, nail or anything which is part of their body. Then I prepare the talisman depending on the order I get from my customers.

I have two observations. Firstly, the client has a certain agency in the preparation of the talisman. They decide their victim's outcome ("kill, making crazy, or other things") and must play a role by getting "close" to the person they wish to harm. Secondly, I find once again the refrain of the "body." Bodily elements must be present for the talisman to be effective. This can be thought of a common "magical" practice and correlates with Frazer's (1890) definition of sympathetic magic—the law of contagion—in that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed. What is interesting is that the *debtera* is not alone in asserting an agency. The client must also play an active role in gathering the needed materials.

Although a person may be subjected to the sickness of jealousy due to spiritual illness, it seems that a *debtera*'s role is not to cure that person of jealousy, but to satisfy their craving for the desired object or person. Boylston (2012: 148) writes that vengeful magic is the part of the *debtera*'s realm: "Most people told me about vengeful magic, summoning hail storms to rain on particular houses and their fields, or worst of all, giving people medicine to make them fart uncontrollably." Curious as to the vengeful nature of the *debtera*'s work, I was able to speak to Gerawerq about his clients' demands. He told me that people are constantly coming to him with problems that they cannot resolve openly.³³

33. Conversation with Gerawerq, March 2015, Gonder.

Sometimes when people are jealous or fight with their neighbors. They ask me to do bad things to their neighbor. I ask them what they want to have done, and then I prepare those things for them. Peoples ask me all types of things that they want to have done to their neighbor or to other people who they are fighting or having problems with. Here in Gonder, there is a tradition in which females, especially those who have a husband, go to another man [in Amharic *qimūt* for women and *wishima* for men] so that they can have sex with that man without her husband knowing about it. If anything happens between these two secret sexual lovers, and the girl begins to feel bad and refuses to sleep with her lover, the lover can come to me and ask me to do something which will make her separate from her husband. I can send an evil spirit to have sex with her, this is normally in the middle of the night, after her husband is asleep. She won't recognize that she is having sex with a spirit because they [the evil spirits] are having sex like how human beings have sex. The problem then becomes pregnancy. After a couple of months she will be pregnant, but she can't give birth, rather she will fight with her husband about that, and the spirits will have aborted the baby. As I said before, I can also order the spirits to throw stones on the roof of people's houses. My clients ask me to do these things and also changing people's food while they are eating it so that it turns into shit, or horrible insects, like larvae or flies.

Gerawerq's explanation of his work indicates the measures taken to combat jealousy. Still, the question can be asked: if jealousy is a spiritual sickness, why does the *debertera* not simply cure jealousy? Why do they enter into transforming jealousy into vengeance or satisfaction of the desire? Instead, a counter attack on the person that has occasioned the suffering (the jealousy) is enacted. I find here that the common ways to attack are through three main channels: relationships, the home, and food. The first one, relationships, is the attack on neighbors, lovers or partners, which is perhaps the most basic response to jealousy. Jealousy, as a spiritual disease, opens the doors to the evil spirits and the misfortune they can bring ("after a couple of months she will be pregnant, but she can't give birth, rather she will fight with her husband about that, and the spirits will have aborted the baby"). The attack on the home is what we might consider to be a result of envy (the resentment of, or the longing for, someone else's possession), which manifests itself in the desire to damage that possession ("I can also order the spirits to throw stones on the roof of people's houses"). The transformation of food into waste is a malicious attack with the intention of shocking or harming the well-being of your foe ("changing people's food while they are eating it so that it turns into shit, or horrible insects, like larvae or flies"). This act of transformation is an act of antagonism. The rituals surrounding eating and fasting are, as I have described, central in the daily lives of most Orthodox. Just as fasting is an important community act, the same holds true for the sharing of food. As

Michel Lambek (1993: 250) cites from Meyer Fortes: "Sharing or abstaining from the same food, means uniting in common commitment. The intangible is this made tangible." Thus, the act of transforming food—the stud of "common commitment"—into feces or "horrible insects" is a direct affront on that person's tie to the community. All three acts of vengeance—relationship, home and food—serve to destabilize the victim and isolate him or her.

Finally, I ask why is jealousy treated by the *debtera* and why does it fall into their domain? The easiest response is that the *debtera* must treat jealousy because it comes into direct conflict with Church doctrine. As William Olson and Walter van Beek (2015: 17) write of evil in Africa: "Routine motivations such as jealousy, envy, resentment, and greed for material goods are identified as evil." It is evil because of the direct conflict with the teachings of the Church? There are numerous biblical passages that condemn jealousy. Among them James 4:2-3 ("You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures") and Galatians 5:19-21 ("Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"). The feeling of jealousy is likened to the loss of the soul; to the disinheritance from the kingdom of God. Instead the Church homilizes forgiveness, most famously, in Matthew 5:38-40:

You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well.

If these are the messages of the Church, who then would admit to the feeling of jealousy? There is no place for it in the normative structure. Thus, the *debtera* take on the role of mediators. They use their spiritual knowledge to alleviate and retaliate against the illness of jealousy. I would extend this argument however to the idea that jealousy, in part, because it is perceived as an illness (as a bodily sensation) and in part because it relates to another person, is connected to the material realm as a tangible illness, jealousy must be treated by a tangible substance. The *debtera* uses the materiality of the talisman to treat "material problems."

Lust

I introduce now the other major type of talismans known as the *mestefiqir*. The central issue of sexual desire—as we have seen—falls squarely within domain of the *debtera* who uses his knowledge to treat problems related to lust. Though the Amharic word *fiqir* (meaning love) is employed (in the word *mestefiqir*, “fiqir” is at the end), I would argue that when “love” is employed in connection with a talisman, it entails a passionate urge for another person—a lustful desire. I find that, within the talismanic domain, lust (though not a direct translation of *fiqir*) evokes the latent implication that not only sexual content, but also social inappropriateness are evident.

Though sex is a complicated issue to address within the Ethiopian context, it is not without legal and theological textual references. In the *Fitiha Negesit*,³⁴ Ethiopia’s founding code of law, there are many rules which codify sexual conduct. EOTC rules regarding marriage, as defined by the *Fitiha Negesit*, are very restrictive in terms of sexual relations between husband and wife which, generally speaking, must be kept out of the public sphere. The *Fitiha Negesit* also enumerates the occasions on which sex between husband and wife is forbidden, as a woman’s fertility can be associated with impurity (Ullendorff 1967: 104). There are also strict rules about adultery and the choice of sexual partners (don’t sleep with your husband’s brother, wife’s sister, girls younger than thirteen, nuns, etc.). The transgression of these rules results in punishment, which include: being beaten, having one’s head shaven, nose cut off or exile. Depending on their rank, clergy who are guilty of fornication will be punished by: stripping his rank, fasting, and praying penances (according to the Fifth Council of Nicea marked as NIQYA in the *Fitha Negest*). The *Fitha Negest* also makes plain its legal stance on those who seek the help of the “magician” for love: “Those who put amulets on the elbow, and with this wish to gain love, shall be beaten and exiled” (Canons of Kings, Book of Tatlasat TS 49). Though the *Fitha Negest* is no longer the dominant legal code, it remained officially the supreme law in Ethiopia until 1931 when Haile Sillase granted a modernized Constitution. Ethiopia’s new Penal Code replaced the *Fitha Negest*’s criminal provisions (especially those pertaining to body mutilation as a form punishment) but it nonetheless served as the source of the code. That is to say, the codes of conduct established a mode of behavior towards

34. The *Fitiha Negesit*—or the “Law of the Kings”—is a legal code. Compiled in the 13th century, by a Coptic Egyptian writer in Arabic, and later expanded to include local laws, it was translated into Gi’iz. The laws were partly taken from apostolic writings and partly from former Byzantine legal codes. The code has a strong emphasis on the clergy as well as on behavioral rules.

sexual practices. It also shows that the visiting of a *debtera* for a *mestefiqir* is a practice with long history of condemnation.

In other theological works of the EOTC, such as the *metsihaf aniqetse nïssiha*, sins that pertain to the body/flesh, in particular, are severely sanctioned (Ancel 2006: 309-310). Ancel categorizes the penance for the more common sins.³⁵ The EOTC is thickly endowed with rules and regulations such that it relies upon its clergy to enforce the “law” and sanction the transgressors, regardless of the efficacy (or the reality) of these punishments.

From my own fieldwork, I the connection between lust and the work of the *debtera* has been articulated. Daniel attributes this to the fact “in our community everything is shame. It is difficult to speak about anything. Things like sexual problems can only be helped by the *debtera*.” He tells me: “Also a problem is people who have too much sexual desire, a psychiatrist can’t help but a *debtera* can treat this. In a secret way, people can talk to the *debtera*.”³⁶

Indeed, most people I spoke with were obviously uncomfortable addressing the issue. However, Daniel tells me about his own experiences with sexual desire during this same conversation³⁷. Before converting to Protestantism, Daniel had had a sexual relationship with a girl from his university (“At that time I was not in the right way, I was only focused on things that made me happy, fun things.”) He told me that his mother had found out about the affair and created a prayer group to save him. She invited a “prophet” to the house who confronted Daniel about “the things he had been doing with her.” Daniel admitted to his having behaved in the “bad way” but that when he tried to break things off with the girl, she suffered because of her love for Daniel (“I told her that our relationship is not in a good way, but, she loves me so much even though I don’t love her.”) Apparently, the girl also sought out help to rid her of her misery and unrequited love. She ended up drinking a talismanic poison that she had bought from a *debtera* in order to kill herself. I asked if it was a potion for unrequited love, but Daniel answered: “She just wanted to kill herself; it wasn’t for me to fall in love with her.” He relayed to me that taking the poison was an act of desperation, that is was because

35. 1. “He who pays homage to idols and stars, to trees and rocks: twelve *subaé* in supplication [*be-qennona*] and three years of penance [*be-nïss ha*]; 2. He who touches another man’s wife: three years of *subaé* in supplication and seven years of penance; 3. He who marries with a member of his family: twelve years *subaé* in supplication and one year of penance; 4. He who consults with a magician: eighteen years *subaé* in supplication and two years of penance; 5. He who has sexual relations with a woman on Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and nine other days: sixty-nine *subaé* and three years of penance” (*metsihaf aniqetse nïssiha*. 2003-2004, 12-13, as cited in ANCEL [2006: 309-310]).

36. Conversation with Daniel, November 2014, Gonder.

37. *Ibid*.

of her uncontrollable lust for him. Daniel then tells me that though he was tempted to engage in sexual activities with this woman, he knew that he had to exercise restraint. I asked him about his current girlfriend, Betty, and whether he allowed himself to have sexual relations with her. Daniel's response was that he had too much "respect" for her.

The candor in Daniel's discourse on the distinction between lust and love is unusual. Daniel confessed that the way in which he treats a lover, as opposed to a future wife, is different. It appears that with Betty Daniel is able to act with self-restraint ("Sometimes she tries to kiss me but, no, this is not good. We need to be the nice ones.") I became increasingly interested in the distinction between the two and how the debteric practices regarding sexual desire vs. love differed. I asked the *debtera* Gerawerq directly about the issue.³⁸ I asked him whether sex and love are treated differently. He replied:

Gerawerq: Regarding sex, I usually send the spirit like nightmare in the night to have sex with the girl, after that the girl won't be able to have sex with her husband or with any man in her lifetime. She will feel troubled or have pain when she thinks about doing it. I remembered that people ask especially to make other people fall in love. In the case of love, I prepare a spell that can be used when they shake the hands of a girl or a boy, who they want to have submitted to them. Or it can be transmitted through a toothbrush [a traditional tooth brush made from a Neem tree], as it is common in Lalibela and around Wello, then when they smile, the girl or boy that they desire will immediately come to them. Me: Can you give me an example of what you do to prepare this?

G: It's very hard to give you examples, since things are very secret, but for our friendship, I will tell you something. First, I search the dead body of [a] hyena³⁹, it must be [in the] middle of the night for this process, then I shave the eyebrows of the hyena including his skin. After that, there is a book which I only refer to for such kinds of medicine preparation, I referred to it and symbolized some sign depending on the age of the individual which uses the medicine, then I created the talisman and included the shaved eyebrows of the hyena in the scroll by using the hyena skin. Then I give it to the patient.

Gerawerq's response to how he treats sexual desire is a bit cryptic. It seems that here he is referring to the treatment of sexual desire by providing spiritual

38. Conversation with Gerawerq, March 2015, Gonder.

39. In the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, hyenas are described as having a particular relevance: "The GêYéz [Gi'iz] translation of the *Physiologus* (Fisalgos) interprets the hyena as hermaphrodite (for the physical appearance of the female genitals) and an impure animal. It warns not to 'be like the hyena, but follow the Law.' This argues against women who 'left their nature' practicing 'sinful' sexual intercourse or behaving 'like a man' [...]. The hyena plays a significant role in many socio-religious systems, as well as in folk literature. Most commonly, impurity, danger and a voracious character are ascribed to the hyena" (BUSTORF 2007: 123-125).

release, though it comes with certain consequences (“the girl won’t be able to have sex with her husband or with any man in her lifetime”), which has me surmise that Gerawerq’s response is in fact a treatment for a jealous lover. Gerawerq’s description of his practices for clients who desire a man/woman’s love is seemingly more straightforward though it seems that “love” is more the urge to possess an individual than a benevolent act. Here, he prepares a spell that is contained in—the toothbrush or the handshake—that will make the hopeful suitor attractive to his object of affection. The toothbrush leaves its magical properties on the suitor’s teeth, which will in turn enchant the intended recipient. The handshake is a medium of witchcraft that is found in other cultures contexts. Bonhomme (2012: 214) remarks upon the use of handshakes in penis snatching practices in Senegal: “The anonymous handshake, whose initiator is always the alleged penis snatcher, is perceived by the other party as a threatening gesture.” Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980: 114) also writes that handshakes are a trigger for witchcraft in that they are “such an ordinary gesture of recognition that one usually forgets what is involved.” This gesture, however, connotes a degree of trust and intimacy (Geschiere 2013) that is then perverted. Mercier’s description (1988: 44) of the *debtera* as the “master of spells, the paragon of ingeniousness, ruse and deceitfulness” seems to fit with the idea of disguising witchcraft in common objects and gestures. Thus, obtaining a husband or wife through the handwork of a *debtera*’s talisman cannot be considered as going through the socially appropriate channels. On the contrary, it would seem that such an act is a response to a bodily need, a possessive craving that has no other means through which to be satisfied.

Another element that demonstrates the inappropriateness of the talismanic method for acquiring a husband or wife is related to the ingredients they require. When asked how Gerawerq prepares these love charms, he tells me that they require parts of the hyena. The hyena also appears in other stories about the *debtera*, most notably in Asrès’ narrative about his becoming a *debtera* (Mercier 1988). In the story, Asrès describes in a dream how God commanded him to eat hyena flesh. Hyena flesh, normally considered to be impure, was rendered pure for Asrès. He interpreted the dream as a way of telling him that he had the “right” to practice the talismanic arts (*ibid.*). Though Asrès does not directly associate the hyena with love talismans, I find the connection valuable in that the impurity of the hyena is associated with the *debtera*. In the case of the love charm, one interpretation could be that the hyena’s affiliation with sexuality (as confused as it may be) holds a certain power that only the *debtera* can touch. This is perhaps due to their mutually “impure” status. I want to emphasize the connection between that which is

impure and the *debtera*. Judith Hermann (2012), in her dissertation on HIV in Ethiopia, writes about the importance of keeping the space of the sacraments pure and how the body, as a sexual entity, is defined by its impurity. If the body is an “impure object” as Herman suggests, it seems logical that only the impure *debtera* can interact with it as such.

To take sexuality, lust and sexual deviance a step further, I asked the *debtera* Isaiah⁴⁰ if he regularly receives requests for magic related to prostitution and sexuality. He tells me that he often receives requests to put spells on girls that would like to become more attractive to male clients.⁴¹ I then asked him if he could turn any woman into a prostitute. He responded that he is able to force women into prostitution through different means. The first way he can transform a woman into a prostitute is by affecting her environment (“I can make a spell to change her environment so that she has harsh conditions and is stressed about money so she becomes a prostitute.”) A second way the *debtera* can affect a woman is by “giving her exaggerated pleasure and happiness when she is having sex so that she wants only that thing.” Thirdly, there is the question of vengeance. Isaiah receives customers that are jealous of another woman’s beauty and want to harm the woman’s reputation by turning her into a prostitute. Daniel knows of this form of magic, and tells me:

The *debtera* do not directly put a spell on them to become prostitutes, rather what they do is make them to be more attractive, in a sexual way, for guys. This means that the spirit adds something unique, that other girls don’t have, which is most interesting for guys to sleep with them. The *debtera* did this thing depending on two things: first by a request from them, or secondly because her friends are jealous.⁴²

I see the *debtera*’s relationship to prostitution as being consistent with kind of issues he treats. He manipulates desires that cannot be overtly addressed. Daniel classifies prostitution (sexual deviance) as being a spiritual illness. In my mind, Daniel’s idea about prostitution being a spiritual disease is secondary. What is crucial is understanding the relationship between actors. Daniel tells me:

You need to pray for yourself and always watch others. Some people always want to talk about sex; about girls’ shapes and how they look. This is the spirit! They are trying to tempt you with these things. That means you have to say “No, I don’t want to hear about it.” When you hear these things you will start to think about it, and you will create a model of the body parts of a girl. You are going to develop something inside that will be born out of you and have an action—that means doing sex. So, you need to say “No, I don’t want

40. Another Gonderian *debtera* who works and lives around the Debre Berhan Sillasé Church.

41. Conversation with Isaiah, January 2017, Gonder.

42. Conversation with Daniel, January 2017, Gonder.

to hear about it.” Even there are movies that are designed for slut people. You should not see such things. Take the spirit out! For example, I have heard of demons entering girls through the Internet. The demon came because the girl was looking at pornography. You see, the demon needs her. He said “No, I don’t want to go out of her she is my wife, we have been together for six years, why are you expelling me?” The girl, every night at 6 o’clock [midnight]⁴³, she is having sex. She says that a guy comes to her and has sex with her. Even she has a boyfriend, but it is a different one who comes to her each night. She says her boyfriend does not make her feel like that. You see, this is a spirit.⁴⁴

The retelling of demonic possession through Internet pornography is about distrust. Daniel’s phrase, “You need to pray for yourself and always watch others,” is telling. From it, I glean that there is a general mistrust of others, of letting people have access to intimate places. The body, as a material vehicle, is weak and can be misguided, deceived by the demons of pleasure. The body can provide access to another person. Evil exists and can attack one at any time, but particularly through the body, through sexual desire. Olson and van Beek (2015: 2) write of evil in Africa as being “commonly associated with wildness, deviance, terror, destruction, chaos, unbridled passions and sexual lust, and predatory forces.” I would add that “unbridled passions and sexual lust” are evil because of their connection with the materiality of the body. Thus, restrictions in relation to the body are a way of protecting against the intrusion of evil.

This ethnographic study of how certain emotions, jealousy and lust, are treated by the talisman in a contemporary Ethiopian context also situates these emotions within the EOTC meta-discourse. Further exploration demonstrates how the materialization of the immaterial through the talisman is fundamentally problematic within the Orthodox context: emotions are inappropriate precisely because of their close relationship to the body. They signal an excess, an inability to contain, a loss of control, over the schism that must divide mind and body. Antoine Vergote’s phrase (1988: 74), “The dualism of the body and soul favored the idea of the body-as-instrument, which the spirit must subdue in the service of socially useful function” explicates the dichotomic relationship between the social/religious sphere and individual mastery over emotions. In the Ethiopian context, talismans serve as, what I call, a system

43. Ethiopian time differs from Western time measurement by six hours. This means that Ethiopian six o’clock at night translates to midnight.

44. Conversation with Daniel, January 2017, Gonder.

of emotional management in which the *debtera* are their mediators. However, this emotional management system is not a normative system such as Riis and Woodhead (2010: 78) describe: “Emotional ordering involves emotional clarification and emotional focusing. By means of ritual, symbolism and living example, religious emotional regimes embody normative patterns of feeling and relating that shape both personal and collective life.” Rather, the talisman functions as a “*sous-système*” (“sub-system”) (Verdier 1980), one that is controlled by the *debtera*, but shrouded in the protective coating of secrecy.

The *debtera* serve a purpose, not only for their clientele but also for the EOTC, in that they provide needed remediation for situations that the Church must eschew and cannot perform. They allow the EOTC to maintain its chaste identity while addressing the inevitability of problematic human emotions. A rigid structure however cannot be permanently and successfully imposed upon on divergent practices. These practices are allowed to exist in their chaos despite their inconsistency with an overarching system of belief; if we see belief as capable of tolerating inconsistencies that do not necessarily destabilize the functioning dominant system. The line of inquiry presented in this article necessitates further study. Questions are yet to be answered: does the *debtera*’s talismanic service allow for socially reprehensible emotions to be resolved, or does it provide fertile ground for their proliferation? From a functionalist’s perspective, does the *debtera*’s talisman (as a secretive material “*sous-système*”) allow the EOTC to maintain a kind of immaterial purity and therefore act to reinforce its dominant religious position over believers, despite, or thanks to, its transgressive means?

The question has to be asked: are Orthodox Ethiopians mind-body dualists? There is certainly a flesh-spirit dualism, but one, as I have shown, that always exist together. The social context shows the very embodied concept of emotion, not as a purely mental thing but something that is in our bodies and therefore must be a part of the same discussion with the fundamental discussions of purity, fasting, etc.—in other words as a part of a more general discussion on doctrine in the EOTC. Although these theoretical questions posed are addressed, they are ultimately left unanswered in the richly informative conversations in the context of fieldwork.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ethnographic study of the use of talismanic practices in the management of emotions in contemporary Northern Ethiopia. Here, the socially reprehensible emotions of jealousy and lust are contextualized within the Christian Orthodox system. I argue that such a study must lead to an exploration of how the materialization of the immaterial through the talisman is fundamentally problematic within the Orthodox context. Emotions are deemed reprehensible because of their close relationship to the body and the material. They signal an excess, an inability to contain, a loss of control over the schism that must divide mind and body. I ask the question: to what extent does the talisman function as a “sub-system,” managing emotions through witchcraft in parallel to the more normative systems within the Orthodox context?

Keywords: Ethiopia, *debtera*, emotions, materiality, talisman.

RÉSUMÉ

Comprendre les debtera dans leur contexte. Les émotions socialement répréhensibles et le traitement talismanique en Éthiopie du nord aujourd'hui. — Cet article repose sur une étude ethnographique menée dans le nord de l'Éthiopie contemporaine. L'étude porte sur l'utilisation de pratiques talismaniques dans la gestion d'affects, comme par exemple la jalousie, la haine ou le désir, que le système religieux en place, celui de l'Église éthiopienne orthodoxe Tewahedo, juge socialement répréhensibles. Ils sont en effet, à ses yeux, trop liés au corps et à la sphère matérielle, signifiant un excès, une perte de contrôle de l'esprit sur le corps, détournant du divin et de l'immatériel. Matérialisation de l'immatériel, le talisman, créé à la demande d'un client et sous le sceau du secret par des praticiens qui se situent aux marges de l'Église, offre une issue à l'expression de tels affects. On peut alors se demander si, dans la gestion de ces derniers, les pratiques talismaniques ne constituent pas un « sous-système », fonctionnant, de manière occulte et par la sorcellerie, parallèlement au système officiel et normatif de l'Église.

Mots-clés : Éthiopie, *debtera*, émotions, matérialité, talisman.