

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the notion of sacred promise, a grounded devotional category for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. It is based on ethnographic research among urban parishes seeking to gather the often dispersed memberships of local Orthodox communities in Dessie, a city of a quarter million residents in north-central Ethiopia. The central thesis contends that the spaces and methods of engagement by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are organized by the internal dynamics of archetypal promises. I consider the wide spectrum of social and ritual activities contained within the domain of “church” to be consistent with a developed socio-theological genre of “covenant”. Covenant is narratively defined as a dialogic of bestowal and responsibility and it is also expressed in performative, material, and associative dimensions. Starting from an investigation of the liturgical praxis of *temesgen* (the ethic of thanksgiving), each chapter explores variations of covenant: as unifying events of human/divine manifestation (e.g. feast days); as the honour of obligation within individual stances of paying respect on an interpersonal and meta-relational level, at church and during visits to mourning houses; and through customs of reciprocity by confraternities and the blessings such practices confer on the givers and receivers. Lastly, pilgrimage presents a context where personal commemorative events transform into “traditions” due to their ability to sustainably influence broader communal commitments. Analysed collectively, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians creatively distil a core monotheistic precept through their everyday devotional acts. Rather than interpreting covenant as exclusively an ethno-historical idea of “chosen peoples”, this research advances a meta-argument concerning the processual nature of creation within tradition. Presenting an original perspective on the rupture/continuity paradigm within the anthropology of Christianity, I trace how this doctrinal principle originated through an inventive merging of culture and ideology, demonstrated through the synthesis of Old and New Testament in ritual and allegory and by local conditions of religious heterogeneity within Ethiopia.