

Omtale av doktoravhandling

Marta Camilla Wright. 2023. *Saved and Healed. Illness, Illness Causation and Healing Among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at Holy Water Sites in Addis Ababa*. Bergen: University of Bergen.

BY KATHARINA WILKENS, INSTITUT FÜR RELIGIONSWISSENSCHAFT, UNIVERSITÄT TÜR
TÜBINGEN

The thesis of Marta Camilla Wright offers the reader a detailed account of contemporary ritual practice at Holy Water Sites (*ṣābāl bota*) in Orthodox Ethiopia. Grounded in ethnographic methodology it follows ritual participants through their daily activities at diverse shrines in Addis Ababa. Around 150 shrines are established around various types of water sources, typically though at natural springs or simply using tap water in a church compound (121–124). In the city of Addis Ababa water sites are generally enclosed by a small, wooded area and continue to resist urban planning. Indeed, the sites seem to be increasing in number as the demand for spiritual healing grows.

Three central topics emerge from Wright's research: entanglements of the lexical repertoire for illness, illness causation and healing between various religious and secular systems of healing; the impact of spatial, material and relational aspects of the healing process at holy water sites; and the efficacy of liturgy, faith, and the religious community in the healing process. According to Wright's key informants, illnesses can be framed in biomedical terminology (typhus, cancer, gastritis, depression, stress etc.) or in religious terms (possession by demons, malignant influences, malice). Wright emphasizes, however, in line with similar research that the *process* of recovery and redemption is foregrounded, while a specific theory of disease cau-

sation is not elaborated among patients – as it would be in the biomedical system. While a variety of demons and malignant forces are thought to exist and are generally regarded as the source of any illness, they are indiscriminately fought off in the ritual healing process with sacred objects (especially holy water), faith, prayers, and liturgical blessings. In Wright's analysis, a seemingly medical issue is thus dealt with by «doing religion».

This brings me to some reflections on Wright's theoretical background and methodology. She provides the reader with ample discussion of her approach to the field, her previous knowledge of the area, the help she received from a translator and the methods of interviewing and documentation. (On a side note: field research was conducted before the Covid pandemic.) Among her central tools were a free-listing survey of relevant terminology, participant observation at 30 water sites (including detailed spatial analyses), and in-depth interviews with nine key informants as well as shorter interviews with other patients and healers. The author reflects at length on ethical questions regarding medical aid and perceived violence during exorcisms and is honest with the limits of her own academic detachment and the need for human engagement. Her positionality is grounded in her experiences as a (alternative) therapist rather than in decolonial methodology. However, while the methods were employed diligently, the scope of the research questions was somewhat limited.

Wright commendably tackles the vexed question of how to separate and/or combine the fields of religion and healing. She does this on two levels: lexicography and spatiality/materiality. Regrettably, the author limits her observations to semantic issues such as the multilayered use of the term «illness» (*bäššəta*) which indexes both biomedical diseases as well as issues of religious affliction. Also, the discussion of bodies in movement through special spaces is used only as a descriptive, not an analytical tool. Thus, her – perfectly correct – finding that ritual and medical aspects of healing intertwine and overlap, especially among her informants at religious sites, is hardly innovative. The notion that being «Saved and Healed» (as the title suggests) are the same, is in no way unique to Orthodox Ethiopians frequenting holy water sites. The dissertation does not aspire to contextualize the case study in larger social, political, and historical developments of the Tāwahaḍo Church and Ethiopian society

at large with its long tradition of ethnic and religious diversity. An analysis of liturgical variations and intra-denominational conflicts could have enriched the analysis. Also, issues such as urbanization, modernization, medicalization, and the rise of Pentecostalism in society especially among the political elite are touched upon, but not integrated into the analysis of the medico-religious therapeutic process.

That said, Wright captivates the reader with the vivid presentation of ethnographic detail which demonstrates the productivity of her fieldwork. The rich observational detail of the study is grounded in a particular awareness of material and spatial aspects of ritual practice at the *ṣābāl bota*. Additional photographic documentation adds to the insights readers are given into this unique Ethiopian orthodox set-up. Wright presents illness and healing as emplaced both in the lives of her key informants as well as in the holy water sites. The intersection of movement, objects, bodily fluids, water, images, sounds and the functionally divided spaces of the shrines combine to provide the reader with an understanding of the multi-dimensionality of the healing process.

Of special importance is the engagement of patients with spirits, angels, and divine agents of healing alongside scripture, icons, prayer beads and the like. The process is mediated by priests, and other functionaries, at churches with holy water sites. The liturgies of the Orthodox Church, liturgical fasting and personal vows add another layer of communication between patients, families, healers, congregations, angels, and evil spirits. Wright points to the particular importance of relationships between people, spirits, places, and objects: illnesses may often be linked to broken relations while healing will involve forging new relationships, strengthening others, or re-establishing old relations. The most important relationship is stated as being that between patients and God. The material side of healing revolves around substances inside and outside of the body, thus rendering dietary instructions, cleansing rituals such as vomiting, and the ingestion of holy water and Eucharistic elements to be particularly important. Ritual and hygienic cleanliness always go hand in hand. In addition, holy objects impart their healing power through touching the body: specific parts of the scripture are read aloud and then touched to the afflicted body part. The central substance is holy water, but it is never employed outside of the liturgical

framework. It is usually created through a liturgical blessing, thus establishing the relationship between the divine and humans. It is often prepared while scripture is being read, thus absorbing further divine power. It is then drunk in such amounts as to make patients vomit out the harmful, poisonous substances in their bodies. It may also be taken home to wash with, bless the house or other objects, and to be drunk in small quantities. The materiality of the healing process is evinced most tangibly in the use of this water.

The dissertation is original in its scope and brings valuable insights to an understudied aspect of contemporary Orthodox Christian practice in Ethiopia – and is, as such, a highly welcome and important contribution to Ethiopian Studies and the study of religion in general. There are surprisingly few ethnographical studies on contemporary religious life among Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia, and this dissertation brings out a well of fascinating empirical data. The dissertation connects insights from the study of religion, material religion, medical anthropology, and African studies, thereby bringing a specific field of ritual healing into focus that closes lacunae in the comparative study of contemporary African spirit practices which have to date highlighted mostly Islam and Pentecostal Christianity.