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Review Article

A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses through Form and Ritual

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MARIA EVANGELATOU, *A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses Through Form and Ritual: Kaleidoscopes of Meaning*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies, 49 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018). xiii, 366 pp. Price: \$76.00. ISBN: 978-1-4632-0578-2.

Most of the monographs that have been hitherto published on Ethiopian crosses, except for Stanisław Chojnacki's *Ethiopian Crosses: A Cultural History and Chronology*,¹ focus on style and morphology rather than function and symbolism.² Some catalogues, such as *Art that Heals: the Image as Medicine in Ethiopia* by Jacques Mercier,³ have looked at how the cross was used for ritual purposes, but the question has been addressed unsystematically and by relying chiefly on first-hand observations. Because of this dearth of scholarship, it is good to see a book which aims to use visual analysis not 'as a tool in dating objects and creating genealogies', but as a method to link 'visual patterns' to the 'value system' of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (p. 17).

In the Introduction, Maria Evangelatou outlines her theoretical and methodological orientations; this is commendable given that most volumes dealing with the Christian material culture of Ethiopia display a startling disinterest in self-reflexivity. The author rightly emphasizes that it is impossible to impose a single and homogeneous meaning on Ethiopian crosses and that their multifaceted significance, which is at the heart of the book's analysis, should be explored by considering the 'theological beliefs, devotional needs, and broader socio-cultural concerns' of Christian Ethiopians

¹ Chojnacki 2006.

² For instance, Di Salvo 2006; or Juel-Jensen 1993, which is missing in the bibliography.

³ Mercier 1997.

(p. 20). This is where one would have expected a review of the existing scholarship, since it tends to overlook those interrelations between form, meaning, and function which Evangelatou finds important and seeks to investigate through an analysis of rituals, texts, and formal elements. This lack of engagement with the relevant literature on Ethiopian crosses, texts, liturgy, archaeology, and history recurs throughout the book, inevitably affecting its central arguments. Studies such as ‘Art and Liturgy: Abyssinian Processional Crosses’ by Csilla Fabo Perczel, which are rife with factual errors and questionable interpretations,⁴ cannot be used in support of scholarly arguments. Yet, Evangelatou frequently takes unsupported claims from such works at face value.

The volume is organized in four chapters. The first two, described as introductory, focus on the ‘history of Ethiopian Christianity’ and ‘the place of crosses in Christian Ethiopian culture’. The latter two offer respectively an interpretation ‘of the various formal elements that are prominent on Ethiopian crosses, with emphasis on theological, cultural, and social references’, and an analysis of ‘the role of visibility during rituals, and the construction of meaning in terms of multiplicity and fluidity’ (p. 21).

The chapter on the history of Ethiopian Christianity presents a cursory sketch of the development of Christianity in Ethiopia from approximately the Christian Aksumite period to near present. This chapter is refreshing in some ways but frustrating in others. Evangelatou proposes some new and interesting avenues of research; noteworthy is the call to recognize that ‘the complex ways in which ethnic and cultural identities might intersect and interact in modern Ethiopia is indicated by religious affiliations, which transcend but do not erase ethnic alignment’ (p. 34), which should be heeded by a field that often characterizes the various Christian polities which emerged in the northern Horn of Africa as monocultural and static. However, the author never comes to terms with the complexity she sets out to address and it becomes readily apparent that she is insufficiently acquainted with the relevant literature. The omissions are simply too numerous to overlook or list. For instance, concerning the history of Ethiopia, the author draws almost exclusively from *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, an introductory book by Paul Henze,⁵ without citing any of the seminal works from Tadesse Tamrat’s *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527* to the more recent *L’énigme d’une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume*

⁴ Perczel 1983. As noted in Gnisci 2018, 48, n. 1 and 53, n. 27.

⁵ Henze 2000.

chrétien d'Éthiopie, du XI^e au XIII^e siècle by Marie-Laure Derat.⁶ It is not surprising, then, that from the prolegomenon onwards the reader is presented with omissions, unsupported generalizations, and inaccuracies. To give some examples, the author claims that the Solomonic dynasty established Amharic as the 'official language of the state' in 1270 (p. 45), whereas in fact documents and land grants continued to be written in Gəʿəz long after the thirteenth century, and that 'Lalibela of the Zagwe dynasty' ruled between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (p. 3, n. 4).

The disregard of the relevant literature in this and the other chapters is especially problematic if we consider that the author has 'never travelled to Ethiopia' (p. 22).⁷ A book that wishes to grapple with as complex an issue as that of the ritual use of crosses in modern Ethiopia should be supported by a body of data gathered from field interviews and first-hand experiences.⁸ Such a deficiency might have been partly circumvented, if not through an analysis of primary sources, then at the very least by thoroughly mining all the secondary literature or by visiting diaspora communities, but there is not much of this in the volume. There are practically no references to studies dealing with the liturgy and practices of the Ethiopian Church and their socio-cultural dimension,⁹ and it is startling to not see even one of the publications by Bahru Zewde on modern Ethiopian history or by Getatchew Haile on Christian Ethiopian literature listed in the bibliography.¹⁰ Moreover, there is little in terms of modern scholarly and popular literature by Ethiopian authors,¹¹ and key art-historical studies, such as Ewa Balicka-Witakowska's *La Crucifixion sans Crucifié dans l'art éthiopien: Recherches sur la survie de l'iconographie chrétienne de l'Antiquité tardive*,¹² are like-

⁶ Taddesse Tamrat 1972; Derat 2018.

⁷ See the remarks in Girke 2014 for a discussion on the construction of identity across social groups in modern Ethiopia.

⁸ This, for instance, is the approach adopted in two recent PhD dissertations: Johnson 2011; and Boylston 2018; or in studies such as the one by Natalia Rodriguez and Bertrand Hirsch (Rodriguez and Hirsch 2000). Such studies should have been consulted by Evangelatou, since they deal with themes and issues relevant to her own research.

⁹ e.g. Marcos Daoud and Marsie Hazen 1954; Fritsch 2001; Kaplan 2008.

¹⁰ e.g. Bahru Zewde 2002; Bahru Zewde 2014; Getatchew Haile 2011; Getatchew Haile 2018.

¹¹ For instance, without claiming to be in any way exhaustive, Imbakom Kalewold 1970; Messay Kebede 1999. As for modern literature, to focus on books written in English, one could have taken into consideration, Verghese 2009; or Maaza Mengiste 2010.

¹² Balicka-Witakowska 1997.

wise missing. It should also be noted that Evangelatou does not follow the standardization of Ethiopian names that is most frequently adopted in scientific literature and that she relies on photographs that were taken by professional photographers rather than scholars. Such images may be more visually compelling, but the information they provide cannot be trusted. For instance, the priest in Fig. 37 is not holding a staff cross but a processional cross published in *Lalibela: Wonder of Ethiopia, The Monolithic Churches and their Treasures* by Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier (Fig. 5.75),¹³ and the priest portrayed in Fig. 67 is from Däbrä Maryam on Lake Tana rather than Lalibäla as the caption would have it; he reappears in Fig. 121, where the location is correct.

The aim of the second chapter, which is divided into five sections, is to provide an overview of the cross in the context of Ethiopian Christian culture. The first section provides a superficial description of the development of cross patterns and types in Ethiopia. Here too one is confronted with bibliographic omissions and inaccuracies. For instance, the claim that ‘the cross became prominent in monastic culture’ in Ethiopia soon after the conversion of °Ezana (p. 63) finds no support in the extant archaeological and textual evidence. Unsubstantiated is also the assertion that few objects from the Aksumite period survive because of a ‘sack of Aksum’ in the tenth century (p. 63). In order to discuss the Aksumite and post-Aksumite periods, Evangelatou should have at least examined the introductory literature about the archaeology of Ethiopia, but even the landmark studies by the likes of David W. Phillipson, Rodolfo Fattovich, and Stuart C. Munro-Hay are missing in the bibliography.¹⁴

The following section of the second chapter deals with the terminology the author uses to describe the ‘weave-like’ patterns that appear on Ethiopian crosses. Although a discussion of terms currently and previously used in Ethiopia to describe the cross and its parts is missing, the author does raise some interesting points. In particular when she observes that the use of terms such as ‘abstract’ and ‘decorative’ reflects Eurocentric ‘cultural hierarchies that give special importance to the human figure in narrative compositions or devotional depictions and overlook other subjects as secondary, gratuitous, or even frivolous embellishment’ (p. 74).¹⁵ Here the author

¹³ Mercier and Lepage 2012.

¹⁴ e.g. Phillipson 2012; Munro-Hay 1989.

¹⁵ But, already in the nineteenth century, Western authors—as demonstrated by the landmark study by Alois Riegl which should have been listed in the bibliography

could have made a significant contribution to the field if she had situated her discussion within the existing work on Ethiopian art, given the current lack of engagement with such issues. Moreover, in light of her call to avoid Eurocentric ideas about decorations when dealing with an African tradition such as that of Ethiopia, and her emphasis on the textile-like character of the patterns which appear on Ethiopian crosses, it is disappointing that the footnotes in this section only take into consideration a couple of books dealing with European, and especially Byzantine, traditions of ornament (pp. 75–76), overlooking the rich symbolic meaning of other African textile traditions, such as that expressed by Kente cloth, and the literature on weaving in Ethiopia.¹⁶

Section three of the chapter sets out to introduce the material considered by Evangelatou, namely a group of hand crosses that ‘derive from the contemporary commercial online market that distributes internationally objects produced in Ethiopia according to traditional designs and techniques.’ Here the author introduces another fundamental error in her analysis of Ethiopian crosses. While Evangelatou is aware that ‘Ethiopians started producing crosses for the tourist market’ (p. 79), though this is by no means a ‘recent’ phenomenon as she would have it, she fails to realize that the artworks produced for the tourist market are often made for reasons and according to criteria which are very different from those which guided the production of objects for the Ethiopian Church. Evangelatou treats this as a small matter that is of little consequence to her analysis, claiming that while ‘tourists buy such crosses as souvenirs, their makers consider them sacred religious objects, and the locals continue to buy and use them as such from the same creators who cater for the tourist market’ (p. 80). The weight of this entire statement, which has huge implications for the whole book, does not rest on field interviews or on bibliographic evidence, but on a single article on painters (not even on metalworkers!) from Aksum entitled *Icons of Devotion/Icons of Trade: Creativity and Entrepreneurship in Contemporary “Traditional” Ethiopian Painting*, written by Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman.¹⁷

It is true that some Ethiopian artists participate in the tourist and local markets, including the one born in 1947 and interviewed by Sobania and Silverman. However, as even the authors of the article in question observe,

(Riegl 1893)—had recognized the importance of studying the symbolism and development of ornamental motifs.

¹⁶ See, respectively, Picton and Mack 1979; Spring 2012; and Itagaki 2013.

¹⁷ Sobania and Silverman 2009.

many contemporary shops sell items that ‘are pastiches or innovations created specifically for visitors to Ethiopia’.¹⁸ This statement is applicable not just to the Konso-inspired figures that Sobania and Silverman mention, but to a whole range of objects, including crosses, that are only seemingly Christian in character. There are crucial differences in terms of material, symbolism, cost, iconography, and function between the items that are produced only for commercial reasons—which is the purpose for which most of the modern crosses discussed by Evangelatou were made—and the objects that are/were made for the Church, which may of course still be acquired by tourists.¹⁹ For example, some of the manuscripts that are made today exclusively for the tourist market contain garbled texts and images which are the result of a nonsensical collage of themes haphazardly inspired by the illustrations of earlier books. These works are not produced by artists with ties to the Church and, without making a judgement of value, the idea that they possess the same significance of works created in response to the past or present patronage of the Ethiopian Church and its members is simply untenable. The cross shown in Fig. 90, for instance, far from being ‘a superb example of the theological sophistication of Ethiopian crosses’ (p. 148), is an example of the ‘pastiche’ that Sobania and Silverman talk about. If Evangelatou had gone to Ethiopia, she would have seen that such crosses have only some features in common with the ones used by priests in Ethiopia today. To be clear, I am not arguing that the two creative phenomena occur in a cultural vacuum—quite the contrary: these artistic expressions can and should be explored together.²⁰ But I believe that, in overlooking this crucial distinction and, consequently, in failing to engage with the complexity of the resulting issues and relevant theories, such as those focusing on the trade and manufacturing of so-called tourist art, Evangelatou has produced a distorted reading of the material she examines.

This brings me to another key point. The title and Introduction of the book imply a primary focus on the contemporary use of crosses within the Christian Ethiopian Orthodox world, but the author positions her study as ‘trans-temporal’ and proposes to examine ‘Ethiopian crosses’—term used

¹⁸ Sobania and Silverman 2009, 28.

¹⁹ See also the relevant interviews of a professor of theology at Addis Ababa University quoted in Mercier 1997, 73–74, who distinguishes between the ‘pure’ painters of old days and the ‘impure’ work of modern artists; and of *Abunä* Gäräma in Johnson 2011, 10, who observes that artworks must be approved and blessed by a priest before they can be used for ritual purposes.

²⁰ This discussion could also be situated within the broader context of art-making in Ethiopia, since most contemporary art is also produced for foreign buyers.

inconsistently across the book to refer to crosses as a whole or to hand crosses specifically—in the light of ‘cultural traditions and beliefs of the past’ (p. 18). Evangelatou maintains that her approach is not based on the assumption ‘that the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox tradition is static’, but on the belief that ‘any living tradition is defined by both continuity and change’ (p. 18). Yet, the method adopted in the second and third chapters of the book seems to be at odds with this claim, since the author uses a small range of texts from different periods without considering whether these texts are still widely read by contemporary Christian Ethiopians.

The present continuously repositions itself in relation to the past, and the changing interpretations produced by these shifts selectively include or exclude earlier material according to ever-varying concerns and sensitivities. In most cases the unfolding of these processes leaves voids in the records historians use to interpret the past, but the Christian Ethiopian tradition preserves tangible evidence of how such process shaped the transmission and reinterpretation of written sources across the centuries. The survival of texts from the *Aksumite Collection* in a single early manuscript or the decline in the production of manuscripts of the *Gädlä sämä‘tat* in correspondence with the emergence of the ‘first recension’ of the *Synaxarium* in the fifteenth century bear witness to the fact that the attitudes of Christian Ethiopians towards texts could change significantly over time. It is clear that Evangelatou is aware of similar phenomena, since she describes meaning as ‘an *experiential process* in continuous unfolding’ (p. 131), so she should have sought to determine whether the texts she refers to, and the interpretations they present, still play a role in the contemporary liturgical or devotional activities of Christian Ethiopians, especially because her choice of sources is limited and she makes little effort to engage with the contemporary writings of Ethiopian religious and secular authors. Instances of continuity with the past surely exist but they must be demonstrated, not assumed a priori, whereas Evangelatou treats historical and current data as interchangeable. As a result, the book gives the impression of being ahistorical rather than transhistorical.²¹

²¹ One of the symptoms of the flattening of the historical dimension of Ethiopian culture in the volume is the tendency to refer more frequently to studies that deal with medieval traditions, especially the Byzantine, rather than with modernity. The author could have perhaps drawn from works such as Fabian 1983, which offers an effective criticism of the allochronic character of much anthropological work on extra-European traditions prior to the 1980s. Africanists, who are especially sensitive to these issues, have been problematizing the ahistorical characterization of non-Western art since the turn of the 1990s, contrasting it with the insistently historical

The fourth chapter is the largest of the book and is devoted to analysing the polysemy of Ethiopian crosses and their ‘formal elements’ in relation to their use in liturgical and devotional settings. The first section focuses on their textile-like patterns, the second on how crosses visualize ‘the social fabric’, the third on the ‘image of the honeycomb’, the fourth on the ‘tree of life’, the fifth on ‘wave-like’ motifs, the sixth on saints on Ethiopian crosses, while the last is entitled ‘Inscribing Ethiopia on the cross: Mary and the Ark of the Covenant’. In the first section the author notes that the patterns used for the crosses are similar to the twists which appear in Ethiopic manuscripts from the fourteenth century onwards, and that these could in turn be indebted to late antique manuscript illumination which could have perhaps reached Ethiopia through its connections with Egypt. The ample literature on this subject is again ignored,²² and the only relevant reference is incorrect: ‘for the influence of Late Antique Coptic culture on Ethiopia and Ethiopian manuscript illumination’ (p. 133, n. 136), Evangelatou refers the reader to pages 118–119 and 130–131 of the catalogue *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*,²³ which have nothing to do with this topic; since they feature a discussion by Marilyn E. Heldman on the possible impact of the Byzantine cult of holy places in Jerusalem on early Solomonic manuscript illustration, and Egypt is mentioned only once in passing (p. 118), in relation to the consecration of Frumentius.

In the fourth chapter Evangelatou stresses once more the need to go beyond a Eurocentric interpretation of Ethiopian crosses, but then devotes several pages to discussing the Ethiopian interlace patterns in connection to incantations in early Christian floor mosaics across the Mediterranean and studies that deal with the interpretation of weaving in other traditions, with a focus on the Byzantine material with which the author is more familiar. The author’s tendency to use studies that deal with foreign traditions without establishing whether their methods and evidence can be of service for understanding the Ethiopian context is open to criticism (e.g. pp. 143, 146–147, 185, nn. 142–144, 146, 148, 179). This also applies to the practice of using non-Ethiopian sources to analyse Ethiopian material without first establishing whether such sources were ever in circulation in Ethiopia (e.g.

framework of research on European art. The literature on the topic is vast, but the essays in Salami and Visonà 2013 offer an introduction to some of these issues. It is also worth mentioning Bausi 2019 for an introduction to the Ethiopian conceptualization of time and history.

²² For instance, Uhlig 1989.

²³ Heldman and Munro-Hay 1993.

pp. 146, 189–190, nn. 145, 187, 188). The first reference to an Ethiopic text, namely to John A. McGuckin’s indirect translation of the *‘Anzira sabbhat*, appears seventeen pages after the beginning of the fourth chapter (p. 147, n. 147). For Evangelatou, this single reference is enough to posit that ‘clothing as a symbol of the Incarnation, and therefore of the unity of humanity and divinity in Christ, is a prominent theme in Ethiopian literature’ (p. 147) and to embark on a long interpretation of the symbolism of Ethiopian crosses.²⁴ What follows says more about Evangelatou’s personal views about Ethiopian crosses than about the Ethiopian tradition. References to works in the Ethiopic tradition throughout the chapter are sparse and the only almost contemporary Ethiopian voice which emerges in the footnotes is that of the Ethiopian priest Kefyalew Merahi, who has authored three books that Evangelatou takes into consideration.

Regrettably, at this point the issue is no longer whether Evangelatou’s readings are relevant to the Ethiopian tradition—though in my view some of her arguments would have been quite interesting and perfectly acceptable if they had been supported by rigorous research—but that she does not attempt to situate her interpretations in the context of the contemporary tradition of Ethiopia. It is indicative of the volume’s overall approach to written sources that the first extensive quotation of the chapter comes from a work by the Greek theologian Andrew of Crete (p. 190)—taken from Di Salvo,²⁵ rather than from an edition of his work—and that the author does not seek to determine whether texts by this author were ever translated into Ethiopic and read by Christian Ethiopians.

On page 199, Evangelatou rightly notes that the presence of circular elements in Ethiopian crosses can be interpreted as a reference to the sun. This argument, like some of the other interpretations offered in the chapter, has been put forward by other authors, but, at least in this instance, the reading is supported with references to texts in circulation in Ethiopia. However, this observation is then followed by the suggestion that the circle also represents an ‘eloquent visualization of the idea of interlocked macrocosmic and microcosmic communities, radiating from the same center and reflecting each other’s order in their overall structure but also in the behaviour of their cross-inscribed members, all oriented towards the same source of light’ (p. 199). Here, as in many other sections of the book, one is at a loss to know whether the analysis is based on any kind of evidence or simply on ideas that came to Evangelatou while looking at photographs of Ethiopia

²⁴ Omitting key studies such as Getatchew Haile 1992.

²⁵ Di Salvo 2006.

and at the modern Ethiopian crosses made for the tourist market from her collection.

Despite these criticisms, the section which explores how the symbolism of Ethiopian crosses is amplified through church rituals which involve water (pp. 235–249) is among the most interesting of the entire volume. Here some of the arguments are new, convincingly presented, and supported by several lines of evidence; though again, when one reads that the multiple meanings discussed by the author ‘should be obvious to at least some members of the [Ethiopian] clergy’, one has to return to the point that this type of publication would have benefited from field interviews with cross makers, priests, and members of the congregation. Similarly, the section that deals with depictions of saints on crosses (pp. 248–269) also brings new insights, since it explores a range of symbolic and sensorial links between these images, the significance of the crosses, and the priests who hold them which have received little attention in the literature. On the other hand, the theme of Mary as the Ark of the Covenant and the related motif of the canopy of angelic wings, discussed in the final section of the fourth chapter, are subjects that have received ample scholarly attention despite Evangelatou’s claim to the contrary (p. 280, n. 308).²⁶

The final chapter of the book raises some valuable points about ‘the open-ended potential of Ethiopian crosses as generators of meaning’ (p. 315) and features an interesting discussion about the role of rituals, perceptions, materiality, individual experiences, communities, and socio-cultural values in the activation of new readings, but again Evangelatou’s arguments are poorly supported by relevant theoretical models and evidence based on the contemporary realities of devotion in Ethiopia.²⁷ I am especially ill at ease with a several-page-long description of the ‘self-perception’ of Ethiopian cross makers (pp. 309–315) that is devoid of references and appears to be based entirely on the author’s analysis of the formal features of Ethiopian crosses. Considering its focus on modernity, I am convinced that this section of the book should have been devoted to analysing how Ethiopians critically engage with their own present through their own writings. Without this type of discussion, the merit of the book lies only in its development of a rich set of analytic and conceptual ideas that could be taken up for the purpose of understanding how crosses, the ones used in church and the

²⁶ For instance, Heldman 1979, 116–117.

²⁷ Elsewhere, for example, some of the issues relevant to this book have been examined through the lens of pastoral power offered in Foucault 2007.

ones produced for tourists, contribute to the continuous and complex formation of significance in contemporary Ethiopian life.

To conclude, it is a shame that Evangelatou's efforts are stymied to a considerable degree by a lack of engagement with the relevant literature, especially that of contemporary Ethiopian authors. As things stand, one is left with the impression of a volume that could have been a landmark in the field had it not been so haphazardly compiled. One can only hope that Evangelatou will find the time to tackle this fascinating topic again, and that the current enterprise will pave the way for a more historically and culturally grounded discourse about Ethiopian crosses than the one offered by this volume.

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Summary

Maria Evangelatou's book promises to explore new research questions and challenge Eurocentric approaches to Ethiopian crosses by presenting an analysis of their use and significance among the Christian orthodox population of Ethiopia. Unfortunately, the study fails to deliver on this promise due to a lack of direct engagement with Ethiopian voices and the relevant literature, and a reliance on publications that focus on non-contemporary or non-Ethiopian contexts. This lack of engagement with Christian Ethiopians leads to significant misinterpretations. Moreover, by adopting an approach to Ethiopian sources that fails to recognize the existence of significant shifts within the Ethiopian literary tradition, the author flattens Ethiopia's historical dimension, and thus unintentionally reproduces the kind of Eurocentric representation of the country that she set out to challenge.