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Dissertation Abstracts

*Saved and Healed: Illness, Illness Causation and Healing among Ethiopian Orthodox
Christians at Holy Water Sites in Addis Ababa*

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metatexts so far. Aspects of the lists' transmission (that they derive from a common original and are not necessarily connected to their manuscripts' production) and purpose (that they are not tables of contents or indices) are discussed and careful identifications of the contents listed are given in a convenient table.

The conclusion (Chapter 6) summarizes briefly the key findings of the dissertation and describes future avenues of research. Data collected in the course of the study are presented in two appendices. The first is an exhaustive list of extant *malkə'*, quasi-*malkə'*, and adjacent poetry, all of which were simultaneously encoded in TEI XML and linked to the *Clavis aethiopica* (also with a specialized online interface: <https://MalkeaGubae.com>). The second consists of more detailed descriptions of selected anthology manuscripts showing more clearly aspects of selection and (re-)arrangement.

MARTA CAMILLA WRIGHT, *Saved and Healed: Illness, Illness Causation and Healing among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at Holy Water Sites in Addis Ababa*, PhD Dissertation in Religious Studies, Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, Faculty of Humanities at University of Bergen, defended on 12 May 2023.

The overarching theme of this dissertation is the intertwined roles of religion and health. The dissertation is a qualitative investigation into illness, illness causation, and healing in the context of religion. The investigation is carried out by studying holy water healing practices among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at holy water sites in contemporary Addis Abäba. Holy water sites are particularly suited for investigating this theme, as they are both spaces for religious veneration and spaces for handling *bäššata* ('illness').

The dissertation is comprised of ten chapters: three introductory chapters, six ethnographic chapters, and a concluding discussion. The field research was carried out for one year and employed several methods in combination: free listing method, participant observation, and interviews. Thirty different holy water sites in Addis Abäba were visited, out of a total of approximately 100–150. More specifically, twelve holy water sites were visited once, fourteen were visited two to five times, three were visited more than five times, and one site was visited twenty times. The empirical material consists of a number of interviews carried out with 44 informants, and in addition informal conversations, a free-list survey, and 58 miracle stories published locally by private persons or associations of people who support one particular holy water site. This broad ethnography forms the basis for a wide exploration of the main research question: how is religion embedded in the understanding of illness, illness causation, and in practices of healing? And

the subquestions: how is illness comprehended and explained? What are the roles of spirits, things, spaces, and interaction in illness causation and in healing practices?

In the progression of this dissertation, the topics that the three subquestions relate to, illness, illness causation, and healing, are not consistently separated in the chapters. Even though an effort is made to separate them for analytical and structural reasons, the fact underscores one of the arguments of the dissertation: the understandings of illness, explanations, and healing are rooted in a holistic and religious world view, and thus, in the view of the informants, illness needs to be taken care of in a context of religious healing.

A certain tension between continuity and change underlies the topics of the chapters. This is the tension of history and tradition, the holy water, and the practices of the ancient Church, on the one hand, and recent developments for the good or bad, on the other. The recent developments possibly change the way Ethiopian Orthodox Christians explain illness. But perhaps it does not change their healing strategies.

The first chapter provides an introduction to the area of study and clarifies the aim of the study and the research questions. The theoretical framework is presented along with the key concepts. The next chapter (chapter 2) introduces the broader context of the study, situating the study in time and place and positioning the study in relation to other relevant research literature. Chapter 3 contains reflections on methodology, including ethical considerations.

The empirical, ethnographical section of the thesis consists of six chapters (chapter 4–9). Chapter 4 lays a foundation for the chapters that follow about two of the main issues; illness and illness causation. Chapter 5 sets the scene further by presenting the holy water and the *yäṣābäl bota* ('holy water site'). The chapter is about the roles of spaces to informants in illness causation and healing and presents empirical material on the structure of the holy water sites, their rules, their users, and behaviour. The chapter gives examples of why people visit the places and explains how places are organized. The chapter goes even beyond the sites to understand thoroughly what space may be to the informants to this present study.

Evil spirits are ubiquitous at holy water sites. Spirits and spirits' behaviour are topics that are entangled in how interlocutors understand illness and illness causation and is treated in chapter 6. In chapter 7, matters are discussed in more detail asking how things are seen and used as *mädhanit*, as a remedy or a medicine. In chapter 8, experiences with spirits is explored further, more specifically focusing on interaction at holy water sites, where evil spirits, humans, angels, saints, Mary, Christ, and God interact, with the intention to excavate further how informants explain illness. Transcriptions of spirits talking, not only as exorcisms, but as monologues, conversations, and discussions between spirits are scrutinised.

People at holy water sites and elsewhere expressed commitment to and deep feelings towards saint, angels, Christ, and God. How do these relationships come about? Again, the role of things, their place in the veneration, in illness causation and healing is discussed. Chapter 9 focuses on healing practices, both individual practices as well as collective in the *maḥbār*. Finally, chapter 10 presents the findings of the study and contains a concluding discussion on illness, illness causation, healing, and things as active or as media.

One of the main contributions of this dissertation is the ethnography it presents on religion and on holy water healing practices in Ethiopia, which is an understudied area. Informants to this study express that they experience a threatening, changing world, where communal life is decreasing, and *bäššəta* is increasing. Harmful magic is commonly mentioned in the accounts of the interlocutors, often carried out by relatives or friends because of envy. The informants turn to holy water sites to tackle the challenges they experience.

The study pays particular attention to things, spaces, bodies, and sensations in the analysis of the ethnographic material. Situated in theory of materiality of religion, the study uncovers how things and spaces are both active agents for making ill and for healing and media for long lasting relational ties between human and superhuman beings. The dissertation concludes that illness is a broad concept to the informants in this study. Illness is explained in a religious worldview which includes biomedical therapies based on the understanding that God is above all, permits all, and may both save and heal all according to His will. Illness may thus, in the context of this study, be seen as a religious concept as well as a spiritual and transformative experience. Doing religion, rather than believing, and practicing religion at holy water sites help informants in obtaining a life in the proximity of God and other superhuman beings, whom they relate to in day-to-day life. It is thus argued that, as illness is often caused by broken relationships and lack of relationship with the divine, healing is most profoundly about (re-)establishing relationships.