

## 8 Faith, culture and social norms

The Church evolved and developed in socio-cultural and political conditions that deeply influenced its structure and discourses. Theologically speaking, the faith tradition may be described as a holistic way of life in light of a current condition and an ultimate objective. Here the reference point is humanity's fall from grace, and the aim is restoration of its relationship with God, the Father, and the achievement of salvation and eternal life. According to the Church, God's commandments should be lived holistically in all spheres of life, shaping thoughts and attitudes and guiding decisions and behaviour. The embedding of this tradition in local cultural life and the understanding of theology as everyday praxis anticipated a close relationship with social norms and practices. Some overlaps between Church discourses and marriage norms and standards have already been discussed in Chapter 7, which showed that clergy discourses could be influenced by and reinforce vernacular folklore norms and lifestyles, with implications for the continuation and alleviation of conjugal abuse.

The aim of this chapter is to contribute to current social norms theories that attempt to explain the continuation of intimate partner violence by developing a more nuanced analytical framework for this society.<sup>1</sup> As I discussed in the Introduction, these theories have remained fundamentally bounded in Anglo-American understandings of 'religion', affected by Western Europe's relegation of the latter to the private sphere, and cannot reveal the complex mechanisms that are at play in societies that never experienced post-Enlightenment secularisation. In such context, demarcations between religious belief and public culture may be totally irrelevant. In the research sites of Northern Ethiopia, the religious tradition encompassed a worldview and a historical memory that defined individual and collective identities, cultivated societal and individual standards of morality and governed vernacular practices. A strict separation between 'culture' and 'religion' or religious and social norms in everyday life would not capture the complex relationships observed in the discourses and practices of the people and their implications for conjugal abuse in this society.

Nonetheless, my interlocutors still distinguished between faith (*haymanot*) and culture (*bahāḥ*), albeit describing these as being integrally intertwined in

vernacular life. Importantly, how people perceived the relationship between *haymanot* and *bahāḥ* influenced how they understood and responded to social norms and religious practices around them. This was most effectively illustrated in discourses around the religious gatherings that were regularly convened for the veneration of saints or other religious celebrations. These were also related to the widely affirmed problem of excessive alcohol consumption, as an important risk factor for conjugal abuse. Examining how the laity juxtaposed social norms to their religio-cultural worldview helps to delineate some of the more subtle mechanisms that appeared to be perpetuating the normative framework, but also evidences that attitudinal changes have been occurring discreetly without antagonising openly the locally authoritative discourse and practice. These subtle mechanisms of attitudinal change, currently missed in generic theoretical frameworks from the West, could be reducing risk factors or weakening norms conducive to certain forms of conjugal abuse.

### **Researching the local religio-cultural cosmology**

In my commitment not to demarcate spheres of life on the basis of western epistemology and societal experience, I approached the investigation of the local religio-cultural cosmology and context holistically, interdependently and multi-dimensionally, as evidenced in my terminological choices. The appropriateness of this approach was validated soon in my fieldwork, which revealed the impossibility of separating non-religious spheres of life from religious spheres because religious symbolism, norms and meanings were pervasive. Many of my participants in fact asserted confidently that that theirs was a ‘religious culture’ (*haymanotawi bahāḥ*) and were defensive if one suggested otherwise. This widespread conceptualisation notwithstanding, local people still distinguished between *bahāḥ* and *haymanot* even though they perceived these to be intertwined in vernacular life.

Such distinctions raised my curiosity to explore how my interlocutors understood these concepts and defined their boundaries, especially since the dyad was often invoked in discourses of conjugal abuse or gender asymmetries and their rationalisations. In later stages of fieldwork I asked my interlocutors to elaborate on how they understood their ‘correct/proper Orthodox faith’ (*təkəkkəl* ‘*Orthodoks haymanot*; ትክክል ኦርቶዶክስ ሃይማኖት’). Numerous people thought that in the past their customs had been in full harmony with *haymanot*, but that the ‘religious’ character of their *bahāḥ* had gradually declined due to a hybridisation of local culture with western values and norms transferred with globalisation. The influence of secular ways and thinking was associated with an increasingly feeble embodiment of religious customs and traditions by people in the local community. This viewpoint, which was espoused also by many religious scholars, despite its partial accuracy, did not capture the complex connotations enclosed in the concepts of *bahāḥ* and ‘*Orthodoks haymanot* and the diverse ways in which people related to their religious tradition.

Researching local meanings of *bahəl* proved one of the most challenging aspects of this study because of my interlocutors' widespread habit to speak in examples and to provide ambiguous or incomplete answers that needed to be deciphered and to be pieced together in a comprehensible framework. Moreover, I felt that in some situations my interlocutors were split between wishing to share with me openly the more problematic aspects of their vernacular realities and fearing that this might lead to essentialist representations of their culture from the outside. For example, while many respondents attributed some men's misconduct to a certain pernicious attitude or mentality that was sometimes associated with *bahəl*, my interlocutors never explicitly referred to wider norms of socialisation, society-wide gender-specific norms or other social parameters. Other conversations revealed that *bahəl* connoted different things to different people. For example, some identified with *bahəl* the highly valued tradition of elders intervening when couples faced problems in their marriage. Others referred to the religious gatherings for the veneration of saints (*maḥbār*; ማኅበር) as *bahəl*. Since these were often criticised as having lost their spiritual character and being reproduced out of social 'habit' (*ləmḍi*; ለምድ), the notion of *bahəl* was given more negative connotations.

In general, when my interlocutors spoke about *haymanot*, they referred to their religious heritage and the glorious Aksumite history, Church teachings or the word of God and moral values and standards that should be embodied holistically. It was not surprising that most respondents reiterated to me what they had heard priests teaching in church or had learned from their spiritual fathers. These teachings came in the form of prescriptions, such as go to church and listen to its teachings, respect the one-to-one covenant of marriage, live in peace with your spouse, do not syphon ('eat') other people's money, keep the fasts, do not divorce and do not argue because God is not with you. Members of the laity who knew a little more about the Church and its history often added that the faith has been grounded in the teachings of the Early Church Fathers. The sinfulness of humanity and desired state of 'Eternal Life' (*yäzälä'äläm ḥəywät*; የዘለለም ሕይወት) were universal premises that everyone in the local society could and did articulate. Apart from these premises, however, no other explanations of *haymanot* invoked the dogmatics and exegetical language reviewed in Chapter 4. Most interlocutors displayed an experience-based understanding of the faith and a faith-based conceptualisation of human life, without eschewing some syncretism with local beliefs about the spiritual world that cannot be traced entirely to an Orthodox cosmology.

### **The *haymanot/bahəl* dyad vis-à-vis social norms**

The way in which *haymanot* was associated with *bahəl* depended on who my interlocutors were and, especially, their exposure to more informed perspectives on Church theology. The typical position among my rural

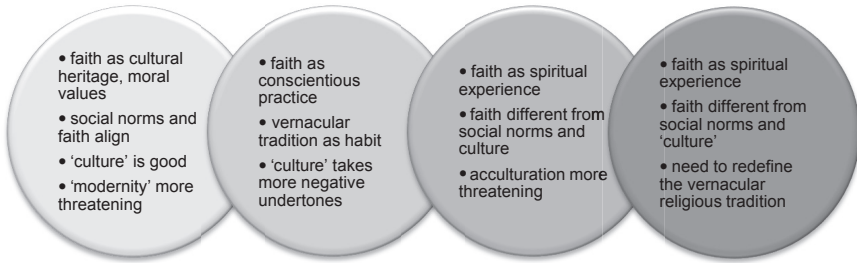


Figure 8.1 Spectrum representing local understandings of the religion/culture relationship and attitudes toward social norms.

interlocutors was that their *bahəl* was also their *haymanot*. A more critical position was also articulated: *haymanot* as having become somehow acculturated or being practised at times as thoughtless tradition. These attitudes could be placed along a broad spectrum with the left-hand side representing a viewpoint that considered social norms to align perfectly with the faith and that was resistant to any changes, and the right-hand side equating a perspective that advocated for a redefinition of the vernacular religious tradition. While the latter viewpoint drew from Orthodox teachings, it did so in diverse ways (see Figure 8.1).

The following section provides a closer look into this spectrum, evidencing the difficulty of pinning down neat categories or boundaries. For this analysis, I juxtapose discourses of rural laity and clergy to discourses of more learned clergy, *Maḥəbärä Qəḍusan* attendants and urban residents in Aksum since no single point on the continuum could be equated to any one group.

### *Position that pronounced faith as cultural heritage and moral norms*

On the leftmost edge of the spectrum were located interlocutors who pronounced faith as their distinct heritage and identity. This religious heritage was usually talked about in conjunction with societal moral norms. Pronouncements in this conceptual range made few distinctions (if at all) between *haymanot* and *bahəl*, with the latter being generally perceived in positive terms.

This position emerged in the discourses of rural interlocutors who spoke about their *təkəkkəl* 'Orthodox *haymanot* as being indigenous to Ethiopia, the only faith that they had inherited and that was unquestionably theirs. These interlocutors could also affirm that *haymanot* had been historically strong in Aksum and that it continued to be so in current times. One man observed: "Haymanot among the people has been here for a long time. It is known; we have a known church here. We believe it (have faith in it)

without any doubt.” He then spoke of the ancient history of the faith: “There is no other *haymanot* we accept other than what we’ve been raised in. We call Mary our Mother. We do not know any other.” It is important to observe that St Mary was mentioned both because in this tradition she is given the most prominent place as the Mother of God and intercessor, and because she was considered the protectress of Aksum. During one all-male focus-group discussion in the villages, a participant remarked: “Aksum, starting from the ancient times, has been a Christian region. And ‘*Ortodoks haymanot* had a stronger and deeper root in Aksum. Blessed Virgin Mary is here too.” Such statements begin to suggest that faith was not conceived outside of people’s regional/local heritage and history.

Simultaneously, the local religious tradition was associated with personal conscience and moral conduct. The man who referred to St Mary being present “here” also added:

For example, if I want to steal someone else’s money, my morals punish me because of my *haymanot*. Because *haymanot* doesn’t support lying, stealing ... and the likes. *Haymanot* has the highest value in Tigray, especially in Aksum. So *haymanot* is given the highest place.

He located thus the religious tradition and faith in his personal values dictating that he should not steal or lie and “punishing” him if he acted against the laws of God. At the same workshop another man explained: “The Christian people here understand what killing or stealing is. This is because, starting from our childhood, priests have been teaching us what is good and what is not.” In the local society it was common practice for people to be raised within a Christian ethos. After being baptised, children would be typically introduced to “the laws in the Bible” and to fasting as early as seven years old. Like other interlocutors, he made a direct linkage between becoming baptised (a Church Sacrament), fasting (a Church practice) and moral conduct (personal values and standards of behaviour). His testimony highlighted a more general belief that early initiation to Church life combined with the praxis of important religious norms resulted in the cultivation of personal morals or what participants called ‘conscience’ [*həllina* (ህሊና)].<sup>2</sup>

It was also not unusual for local people to make more explicit statements that their ancient faith was also their culture (*bahəl*). This was best exemplified in some discourses regarding the typical religious gathering (*maḥbär*). On one such occasion, a woman characteristically asserted that the *maḥbär* reflected both “our *bahəl* and our *haymanot*”, an attitude that was discernibly shared by many rural residents. In various instances, interlocutors identified *bahəl* with “good” traditions, such as one man who referred to the “culture (*bahəl*) of helping each other and sharing the work”. Another man associated cultural values that prioritised peacefulness and non-violence with their faith. These more positive discourses about *bahəl* seemed to

emanate from interlocutors' perception that *bahäl* overlapped with *haymanot*, or was heavily influenced by it.

Interlocutors in this conceptual range relied primarily on what they had learned or heard from the clergy to explain their faith, illustrated in a man's statement that "people know what the priests have told them". When asked about their understandings of the 'Ortodoks *haymanot*, individuals who understood their faith as their unquestioned tradition cited what they had heard the priests teaching them, which was understood to be the "word of God". Typically, interlocutors in this conceptual category recognised that they needed to keep the commandments of God, but were unlikely to speak of a spiritual way of experiencing the faith. Most interlocutors answered in the lines of a rural woman who explained that according to the faith one must attend church regularly, pray, participate in the mysteries, while married couples must stay together until the end. This reflected the prevalent discursive repertoire of the local clergy as outlined in Chapter 7.

Research participants in this side of the spectrum were convinced that the religious tradition continued to be strong in Aksum. However, many spoke of a deteriorated faith which they attributed to a less rigid religious lifestyle, as highlighted in one woman's comment: "*Haymanot* in Aksum does not change because there is arduous conviction. It is people's laziness. *Haymanot* cannot create bad things." The problem seemed to be located in people's problematic religious embodiment and not the vernacular religious practice itself. Some of my interlocutors opined that this had become weaker as a result of the expansion of what was described as a more individualistic and 'worldly' (*'alämawi*; ላለማዊ) lifestyle, which they associated primarily with 'modern times' (*zämänawi gize*), urbanisation and the advent and expansion of technologies (phone, radio, TV) and secular education. These were not considered necessarily evil, but were described as a 'temptation' (*fätäna*; ፈተና) that could distance people from a traditional faith-based logic and lifestyle.

A rural male interlocutor made the following comment:

[T]here is no spiritual action (*mänfäsawi tägbar*; መንፈሳዊ ተግባር). Some people say "whatever comes, comes". Now (it is all about today); for eating, for drinking, for dancing, nobody knows what tomorrow will bring, so "let me be as I wish" they say. All in all, they say "whatever comes, comes".

The man's combined use of "spiritual" with "action" evidences that he referred to people living by religious standards and norms. An older man observed that some men postponed having a marriage in church and only completed the Holy Eucharist (*Q"ərban*) when they were old:

Do you know what they think? Do you know what they say? Let me tell you: "I am a boy, I am still young. When I become old I will go to take

Qʷərbān” they say. But, the time at which God will come cannot be known (so one should always be prepared).

A man in his late 40s who would soon be ordained as a priest also noted that:

Before, *haymanot* was extensive/strong (*haymanot buzuh näbärä*; ሃይማኖት ቡድን ነበረ). Even though people had a more simplistic understanding of the teachings of the *haymanot*, they were strong about coming to church and praying. Now, they are tempted by the new ways and the desire for money.

Both these interlocutors found fault in what they perceived to be a diminished sense of piety, which they equated to a feebler embodiment of religious norms. Despite referring to spiritual “action”, it must be underscored that no interlocutor in this group described faith as personal spiritual experience and both prioritised adhering to established religious norms and participating in the sacraments.

Since traditionally the faith had been envisioned in association with a Christian conscience described by some as personal ‘law’ [Tigr.: *həgi* (ሐጊ); Amh.: *həgg* (ህግ)] that dictated moral conduct, the deterioration of the faith was associated with a deterioration in moral values in the younger generations. It was repeatedly affirmed by educators, parents and clergy in the field that in the past children would have not dared to speak in front of adults. As it was discussed in Chapter 7, conventionally, the young were always expected to respect and to serve those senior to them who were identified as having more wisdom. It was posited that with the advent of the secular school, children had changed and had steadily become more outspoken, manifesting a diminishing capacity to listen and to obey. This was paralleled to a reduction in Church education, as in the following comment given by an elderly man:

Before, in the time of our mothers and fathers, the faith or belief was strong, now it is not. We were told that children who do bad things are rude. They would tell us that God will be angry and punish us and we were afraid (to misbehave). In the modern times, there is no what you call “fear of God”. The children of the parents of modern times are spoiled. If they (parents) advise them (children), they do not listen. They do not do like this. “You are lame” they say (to their parents).

This deterioration was generally attributed to parents and in part to the deteriorated role of clergy in society, who traditionally have been in charge of children’s moral education. One male interlocutor commented:

Ay! Now the faith has been weakened. It is the reflection of modernity (*zämänawinät*). Before, the spiritual fathers found their children on

Sundays at church. If they did not find them, they would ask: “Why did you not come?” Now there is no such thing. Before, the priests if their spiritual children fought, they reconciled them and made them seek repentance and communion. But now, since priests themselves have sunk into modernity, they have abandoned these practices.

This statement highlights that what was perceived as modernity was believed to have affected both the laity and the clergy. In the past, all education had been provided through the religious schools, whose prerogative was to instil in children moral values and ethical behaviour and to encourage the cultivation of a faith-based *həllina*. With the diminution of clergy’s time in educating children this socialisation was jeopardised. Some thought that this was not unrelated to the fact that more and more priests were themselves choosing to attend secular school and to pursue modern theological education, as pointed out by one male interlocutor: “At this time, there are no more priests because they go to the science (secular) school.” Another man reasoned that learned clergy had more incentive to stay in the city due to a large salary gap in the two contexts. He cited as standard a salary for a rural priest of about 300 birr per month (about £8) and for an urban learned *māriḡeta* something in the nature of 5,000 birr (about £139), figures that could be considered generally accurate.

Still, it is important to observe that while people who held such positions spoke of the deterioration of the religious lifestyle because of diminished piety, the effects of modernity, or clergy’s reduced teaching, they still did not speak of the need to redefine the faith or to abandon vernacular norms and practices. They considered that the faith had been strong in the old times and within the established traditions and norms, suggesting that the remedy to this deterioration was probably a return to a traditional religious lifestyle, and not its redefinition.

### *Position that pronounced faith as conscientious practice*

Further down the spectrum could be located pronouncements that emphasised the conscientious character that the faith should have. These interlocutors were more likely to view some aspects of the vernacular religious tradition as *bahəl*, giving *bahəl* more negative undertones, without fundamentally questioning, however, their religious tradition.

Interlocutors in this conceptual remit believed that some of their countrymen and countrywomen lived the faith as ‘habit’ or ‘custom’ [Tigr.: *ləmḡi* (ልምዲ); Amh.: *ləmd* (ልምድ)] and replicated conventions unconscientiously. One rural man commented: “Sometimes [priests] teach after the liturgy. But, most of the times, people go [to their homes] to eat. People live by habit/convention (*lämänor bäləmd näw yäminorut*; ለመኖር በልምድ ነው የሚኖሩት).” A female rural resident in turn commented: “There is no [religious conscience]. They just do it without knowing/understanding (*zäyməfəlat*;



ዘይምፍላጥ). They just kiss the church walls and they return [home].” Yet another male rural resident opined: “... we just do it without thinking. So, I always feel bad. There exists what we call *haymanot* but there is no religious schooling.” Similar opinions were expressed by urban interlocutors who considered themselves Orthodox and who frequently attended church, such as a woman who affirmed that the faith has not been lived at the level of *həllina*, but as *ləmdi*. She stated: “They all go to church wearing their scarf (*näṭāla*; ነጠላ), they bow and pray and do the right movements. They repeat without understanding the Ge’ez prayers they hear. Then they go back home and think and do bad things.”

These and other testimonies amounted to a perception that many people followed the prescriptions of priests not because they espoused a conscientious understanding regarding the meaning or objective of these prescriptions, but due to thoughtless bodily reiteration under the imposition of custom. It is important to differentiate these concerns from a critique of impiety or worldliness due to modernity, which was associated with the previous position. Here the problem was rather one of acculturation and lack of theological understanding, whereby thoughtless reiteration that was rigidly upheld had replaced spiritual or religious motivations. This was highlighted in the comment of a church teacher at one of the villages, who explained that for the people in his surroundings “faith is culture” (*haymanot bahəl ’eyu*; ሃይማኖት ባህል እዩ), even though elements of this culture were “new things” (sing. *haddiš nägär*; ሓዲሽ ነገር) passed on from one generation to the next through habitual or thoughtless practice.

In the same group could be included many urban residents, although the population in the city of Aksum displayed probably the highest plurality in attitudes. Many had grown up in villages around Aksum city and thus made similar critical points that the vernacular tradition in the countryside had been practised unconscientiously. One young man opined that people came to church and recited by memory or by reading mechanically, without having a substantive understanding of meaning or the purpose behind the recitation, asserting: “We are there for the presence only.” He also explained that life in the villages had been conventionally based on a repetitive pattern and a time-consuming routine that left no room for spiritual matters. He thought that in their conventional experience of the religious tradition people “only follow the pattern”. Another interlocutor asserted that people unconscientiously bowed when they heard the priests’ teachings and prayers, but in effect they internalised little of what they heard and continued habitual practices after they returned home. Once, a female interlocutor imitated people’s gesture of doing their cross and bowing in church to illustrate the thoughtless bodily recitation.

Some of the interlocutors associated the lack of conscientious faithfulness to the clergy’s failure to provide the proper interpretation of the prayers and teachings in the Church, as highlighted in a man’s comment: “Nobody tells us what the meaning/interpretation is.” Others emphasised

the fact that priests were often not available when the faithful sought spiritual advice. As I observed during fieldwork, many churches were often closed during weekdays because priests worked in the field, attended ceremonies to bless, travelled to the city for meetings or to receive their salary, or visited the homes of spiritual children for celebrations and to resolve problems when they were called.

Over and over again, research participants postulated that the faith had not been experienced at the level of human conscience (*həllina*) because people lacked a more profound understanding of the message and objective of the faith. However, research participants who made such comments were still seen to participate in Church life or the vernacular religious practices, as opposed to others who had given up religious life entirely, had espoused more secular lifestyles or had moved to another religious camp. In other words, their critique was not of the vernacular religious tradition per se, but of the limited understanding with which people practised this tradition conventionally. The implication seemed to be that a more accurate teaching about matters of the faith could redress this problem of thoughtless reiteration.

### *Positions that emphasised faith as spiritual experience*

Research participants who spoke of acculturation could exist at different points along the continuum, with those closer to the centre unlikely to speak of fundamental changes in the vernacular religious experience, contrary to those closer to the right-hand side of the spectrum who emphasised a return to a more spiritual embodiment. Still, even these interlocutors abstained from making critical statements about the vernacular religious tradition, recognising that the general public valued this tradition profoundly and would not well receive departures from what they perceived as cultural heritage and an aspect of personal identity.

*Maḥəbärä Qədusan* attendees in the city of Aksum could fit in this category since they placed emphasis on the problem of acculturation. Those who were interviewed tended to avoid judgements about the vernacular religious practice and tried to find reasons in historical or ecclesiastical causes to justify the weak understanding of the faith on the ground. Some attendees expressed the desire to rediscover the faith both for personal benefit and by disseminating the proper information to others. This reflected the deeper familiarity of attendees with Church texts and teachings. Participation in the prayer sessions of the *Maḥəbärä Qədusan* evidenced also that some attendees had gone through the traditional Church educational system and that most of the attendees were generally highly educated in secular vocations.

Indicatively, a male attendee who was also a school teacher at one of the villages reasoned that believers had been impeded to a large extent in their comprehension of Church teachings due to the archaic Ge'ez liturgical

language, which was infrequently translated by clergy. However, he also spoke of priests' lack of exegetical knowledge and weak spirituality, as conveyed in the following exchange:

R: Is religious education not given in church?

M: No. Not as often as it should. In our Church, the largest part is allocated to prayer. The prayer is in Ge'ez, which makes it difficult for most Orthodox Christian followers to understand.

R: Do the priests know the meaning of the prayer?

M: Yes, they do, but they don't translate it.

R: Why?

M: The absence of the translation is a big problem. Daniel Kibret always says: "People who say love one another don't know how to love." The way people understand is different from one another and applying that and translating is the biggest problem.

R: What is the reason for this?

M: The religion exists but the big issue here is the contextual meanings found in the Bible which priests haven't understood. Hence, they have been influenced [by culture] and translated these through cultural ways.

This interlocutor believed that most clergy knew the translation but they failed to articulate it to the people. He cited a statement made by Daniel Kibret, a prominent Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Church (EOTC) deacon and prolific speaker, to suggest that many members of the clergy could speak the religious teachings, but they might not embody them in their own lives. Since they do not embody them, it is more difficult to comprehend them and to teach them cogently to others. Additionally, this interlocutor was aware of the fact that in this tradition biblical verses needed to be studied in view of the context in which they had been spoken, which priests lacking theological training might be unable to do. Not understanding these teachings through the proper hermeneutical framework made acculturated exegesis more likely.

Other urban residents, not associated with the *Maḥābārā Qədusan*, tried to re-inscribe their faith and to embody it in ways that felt more impactful to them. A young man confided that he preferred to pray alone at home but he was very secretive about it. As he attested, he was an Orthodox believer, but if he dared to speak of a more personal relationship with God to anyone in his surroundings, he risked being associated with the Protestant movement: "[A]ny deviation begets suspicion in this society. In our society, any revolution is unacceptable, in every aspect: private, religious, cultural, political, or economic." The same opposition to change was affirmed by multiple other interlocutors, including a young female store owner in the city of Aksum. She explained that she was often criticised by female acquaintances if she failed to attend church consistently due to her busy work schedule (this being a woman who closed her store every weekend to

be in church). She was also of the opinion that most people had lived their faith according to *bahəl* and had become change-resistant about the most minor aspects of religious life. She also affirmed that if one tried to question the superficiality of certain practices and to speak of a more conscientious faith, others were likely to become judgemental and call this person a *Pente* (ዳንጤ). A Tigrayan woman in London once stated that if a person was a little different and refused to abide by traditional conventions, people out-cast them or accused them even of sorcery, especially if they were female or better-off.

The case of a married young woman in Aksum city may also be mentioned. This interlocutor thought that the Church in her country presented many problematic aspects, including the failure of members of the clergy to embody the faith's teachings in their own living. However, she appreciated the more profound value of the faith and tried to experience it in a way that could bring more fulfilment in her life. She did not appear to be typically religious, in the sense that she did not attend Church liturgy every Sunday and she wore non-traditional clothes (including trousers) which one rarely saw in women with an active Church life. However, she expressed a very strong faith and was thankful to God for the blessings that she had received in her life. She was convinced that a relationship with God could be cultivated at all times and she had developed a habit of frequently praying internally. She confided that every night she said a number of silent prayers before sleeping and she felt that these were having a positive effect on her marriage.

It is important to underscore that while all these interlocutors expressed concerns about the way the religious tradition had been conventionally perpetuated, they still appreciated it or partially embodied it. Both the rural and the urban interlocutors who were cited considered their faith to be indigenous and uniquely Ethiopian and did not want to see it harmed, but wanted it to be strengthened in ways that would make it more impactful at a personal level. In addition, many of the vernacular conventions and practices, such as regarding church attendance and behaviour, or the typical religious gatherings, were generally upheld even by more critical interlocutors.

### **Religious idiom and social norms**

The analysis so far has sought to provide a sense of the diverse ways in which different research participants juxtaposed *bahəl* to their religious tradition and the implications for how they felt about socio-religious norms. My interlocutors could be located at any point of this spectrum and no neat categorisations could be proposed. The fact that someone considered the faith to be part of the local cultural heritage or identified it with a set of moral rules did not exclude the possibility that they also experienced the faith conscientiously or more spiritually. The spectrum was proposed to

accommodate better the plurality and dynamic character of the attitudes that were observed during fieldwork.

How rural residents thought about their religious tradition had to do with who they were, their level of exposure to urban lifestyles and discourses of learned clergy and their personal spiritual state. However, undoubtedly more rural residents were found on the left side of the spectrum where *bahəl* was less likely to be criticised. This is not unrelated to the fact that historically the large majority of rural residents relied on rural clergy to learn about their faith, who could be overlapping with vernacular norms significantly, as discussed in Chapter 7. Generally speaking, rural residents who were likely to identify *haymanot* with *bahəl* were less likely to be preoccupied with the clergy's limited training, while those who found faults with the vernacular religious tradition tended to pronounce also the clergy's deficiencies. Whilst many rural residents recognised that clergy in the city of Aksum tended to have higher theological training than rural priests, few thought that the teachings of the rural clergy did not suffice.

Moreover, rural residents seemed to be generally unaware of the activities of the *Maḥəbärä Qədusan* or their teaching and prayer sessions in the city of Aksum, with exceptions including a school teacher at the village who resided in the city and occasionally participated in these sessions. The lack of *Maḥəbärä Qədusan* pronouncements of faith as spiritual experience and the rural clergy's own limited invocations of the spiritual aims of the faith resulted in a situation where few rural residents spoke about spirituality. Still, many rural residents thought that *haymanot* in the countryside was more tangible than in the city of Aksum where the effects of secular thinking were more discernible, with one man commenting: "Still *haymanot* is strong here and people are simpler in their thinking. In the city, they are all business-oriented and care only to make money and maximise their profits." 'Simpler' captured a popular belief that people in the countryside were less calculative and showed genuine faith in God. Such statements illustrated a widespread understanding in the villages that 'modernity' brought a deterioration of the faith, making it a more salient threat than was the problem of acculturation.

These rural attitudes are important to understand because they had implications for people's adherence to or departure from established practices, including social norms that could be fostering gender asymmetries or pernicious situations within marriage. Despite the distinctions made between *haymanot* and *bahəl* by some rural interlocutors, these were not sufficiently potent to displace the more prevalent discourse that considered the religious tradition and social norms to overlap considerably. In the following section I take a closer look at how people spoke about alcohol consumption in the religious gatherings. While many interlocutors affirmed that this practice comprised part of their vernacular religious practice, some expressed more critical opinions that these had absorbed innovations and had become socio-cultural events without spiritual

benefit. Even clergy considered alcohol consumption on these occasions to have become a thoughtless habit, a practice that they were nonetheless unable to abandon. In the end, the religious gatherings were perpetuated according to convention by both laity and clergy. The example suggests that the dual understanding of *bahäl* (one as equivalent to *haymanot*, another as its contradiction), has contributed to the perpetuation of the status quo, whilst enabling local people to criticise or de-legitimise certain social norms and practices.

### **Religious gatherings, alcohol consumption and the *bahäl/haymanot* binary**

Drinking was an extensive phenomenon in the local society, with both women and men playing a key role in the supply of alcoholic drinks. Traditionally, it was women who prepared the traditional beer, which they often sold in their own rural homes at certain hours of the day or days in the week. In the village where I lived, for example, about 10 women (three only were married) were known to make beer and to sell it for a living – typically the poorest residents who had no other livelihood to sustain themselves and their children. Some alcohol consumption can also be attributed to the rise of modern drinking houses (sing.: *səwa* or *tela bet*; ስዋ or ጠላ ቤት), which have proliferated in the villages and have made alcohol more accessible to rural populations. The advent of factory-produced beer has given young men the possibility to become involved in this profitable business and it was a common practice for young men to purchase beer from the city of Aksum and transport it to the village to sell, contributing to the mushrooming of drinking places at the local level.

However, some drinking was also taking place during the religious gatherings, which were convened for the veneration of the saints or big religious celebrations and functioned as a central component of rural and urban life. Two types of religious gatherings were named by my interlocutors: the *zəkər* (ገዥር) or *šwä' mahbär* (ፅወፅ ማኅበር) and the typical *mahbär*. What differentiated the two were the principles under which they operated. The *zəkər* was open to an unspecified number of people according to the host's capacity and the rule of reciprocity (*ləfanti*; ለፍንቲ), and usually one invited those who had invited him/her before. The *zəkər* gatherings also seemed to be segregated by gender, with women and men being seated in separate rooms. If the house had only one main room, men or women were seated in the yard on tree stems. In contrast, the typical *mahbär* was for a select group of people of a specific number (12 or 21) and was held by rotation each month. For example, *mahbär* gatherings held on *Mikael* day were for men only (12 persons), although in the countryside women were also invited to the same house but they stayed in a separate room, apparently treating the occasion as a *zəkər*. On the other hand, *mahbär* gatherings held on *Maryam* day were both for men and women (21 people). Many of the religious occasions were

Table 8.1 List of most popular days observed monthly in Village 1

'Abunä Libanos (አቡነ ሊባኖስ)	3
Səlasse (ሰላሴ)	7
'Arba'atä 'Ənsäsa (አርባዕተ እንሰሳ)	8
Mika'el (ሚካኤል)	12
Gijyorgis (ጊዮርጊስ)	13
'Abunä 'Abəyā'əzgi (አቡነ አብዩ እገዢ)	19
Marəyam (ማርያም)	21
Mädhani'aläm (መድኃኒዓለም)	27
Bä'alä 'Əgzi'abher (በዓለ እግዚአብሔር)	29

celebrated both monthly and annually, with the most prevalent celebrations being dedicated to patron saints of surrounding churches. I counted at least 17 such occasions per each month, with some of the most popular shown in Table 8.1.

Typically, the family who hosted the gathering prepared enough traditional beer [Tigr.: *səwa* (ሰዋ); Amh.: *ṯäla* (ጠላ)] and bread ('*ambaša*; አምባሻ) for the guests and if they were wealthier they served also roasted legumes (*ṯarä*; ጥረ). On the day of the religious gathering, when a new guest arrived, she or he was first seated with the other guests of her/his gender. Then, the male host or an older son proceeded to fill a cup for the guest with home-made *səwa*, while the woman of the house brought a tray with bread to offer a large chunk to the newcomer. The bread was offered always only once, while the beer was offered multiple times. It was a norm for the host to appear overly generous and to apply pressure on guests to drink more. The *səwa* was held in traditional large clay containers and transported with a smaller plastic container into individual cups. Wealthier households used their own traditional cups, but the majority used old tomato cans which could be quickly and easily washed. The religious gatherings started late in the evening and continued into the next day.

Participation in about 15–20 *maḥbär* and *zəkar* gatherings during the field-work period confirmed that the pattern almost never changed. Female attendants first took some *səwa* with their finger and made the sign of the cross on their (and their children's) forehead before taking a sip. While sipping their *səwa*, they chatted a bit with their neighbours and soon they departed to return home where chores and older children awaited them. Men seemed to engage in deeper conversations and stayed for lengthier periods of time. In most gatherings, people spent their time discussing what seemed to be mundane matters, such as money issues, livelihoods, meetings and trainings at the local administrative office or other events that had happened during the day. A single occasion on which men and women had been stranded in the same room provided me with the opportunity to overhear also the men's discussions. This was on a *Mikael* day during which

men typically met as a *maḥbār*, with women joining in a separate room as *zəḵər*. Due to the pouring rain and lack of space, this being a poor household comprised of a single room and a small yard outside, women and men sat together as a unique occasion. No one seemed to mind the arrangement and readily justified it on the basis of the rain. Initially, men and women did not directly interact, but eventually the discussion extended to both parties when people started to entertain prospects of finding gold in the area, in view of recent reports that such existed in the area.

The numerous gatherings that I observed started to evidence the more practical and social function that these had in the local society. When I asked about their meaning, various interlocutors readily said that they participated in these gatherings to obtain the blessing of the saint or because they made them a promise (*mäbš'a'a*; መብሻአ). However, other reasons emerged to be more salient in the everyday social scene, as highlighted in this man's comment: "The *maḥbār* is also a socialisation event. They [attendees] counsel each other and give advice. They also know their place in society. People see who is getting richer and they know their place in society." A female interlocutor affirmed also that the *maḥbār* provided a context for eating and drinking together and for "playful conversation (*čäwata*; ጭቃ)". As Helen Pankhurst had found to be the case in Menz, the religious gatherings in Aksum appeared to "provide an event to which women can look forward, and occasion to think about, to dress up for, and one which is socially approved".<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the all-male drinking places, in these, women could also drink without being criticised. This aspect of the religious gatherings was especially pronounced in the discourses of women, such as in occasions when women teased each other playfully of drunkenness after returning from these gatherings or when they let go in other ways.

Since it was the custom to offer the traditional beer (*səwa*) to the guests when hosting them, drinking was a common practice among both the laity and the clergy. The fact that I consistently declined to drink generated the most surprise among my hosts and other attendants, especially when I justified this on the basis of my own religious reasons, such as due to fasting. *Səwa* continued to be consumed as a staple of these events, even though numerous interlocutors recognised the problem of excessive drinking, which was also associated with instances of domestic violence. The following narrative by a man in the village is instructive:

There are a lot of religious gatherings here and they drink there. The man comes home drunk after spending the evening there, then his wife will tell him: "Drunkard, where were you? Drunkard!" If she insults him, he will take a heavy stick (*dula*) and strike the woman's head. This is the origin of divorce. In short, drinking alcohol is the beginning of hitting. In this country there was no other drink than milk and they never got drunk. The drink of this country is *ṭäla*. It is made of *qolo*



(ቆሎ), *gäbs* (ገብስ) and *gäšo* (ገሻ). It is really strong. It is not the same with manufactured beer. And when you drink it, it comes up to the head. Then, the brain does not work. Then, there is hitting. To divorce becomes an obligation (OR necessary). In conclusion, it is culture (*bahäl*). Today, for example, it is the 21st of the month, it is the celebration of Mary, the holy feast; there are many religious gatherings [today]. And there is in these a lot of *ṭäla* consumption. When I drink beer my brain will soon start spinning. And then there is no sleep, one vomits. So, for the woman to live with such a person is bad. He is very bad, he does not listen.

Similarly to this interlocutor who described this pattern as *bahäl*, other rural residents tended to distinguish between the stipulations of the faith regarding drinking on these occasions and people's own practices, as highlighted in the comment of another male resident: “[O]ur *haymanot* forbids fighting. ‘Drink if thirsty’ says the [bible/the faith] and then go home when you are full (you had enough).” In other words, faith and drinking were not considered incompatible, but people took issue with drinking excessively and irresponsibly, which could result in un-Christian conduct. Another man opined: “If the person has faith, he will not drink like this.” Yet another observed:

*Täwahädo haymanot* teaches one not to be violent but to love by mutual concern, to discuss and to advise each other. As I told you, although one knows the Church's teaching, some get intoxicated soon. After they go home, they become indiscriminately violent against children and the spouse.

In these pronouncements the religious gatherings were differentiated from the pernicious practice of drinking excessively. The latter was described as a norm or culture (*bahäl*) with clearly negative undertones, but it was always the individual who was held responsible for choosing to drink excessively. The broader culture which incorporated holding the religious gatherings, or the convention of serving alcohol on this occasion, however, was never questioned, even though some interlocutors affirmed that previously the norm had been to serve water or milk. For example, on a certain day, two religious gatherings took place in the village, one of which was hosted at the house across from my compound. The gathering continued, as per convention, until around midnight, at which time a fight broke out in the road, creating a pandemonium of male voices. The next day I was told that a police officer came and mediated the situation. Conversations I had about it evidenced that such behaviour was considered bad. Still, this recognition did not trigger any open problematisation of the norm of serving alcohol at religious gatherings, and the responsibility was again attributed to the individuals involved.

Along with drinking, other interlocutors criticised the departure of the conventional religious gatherings from their more spiritual character. One man affirmed that these should include “[r]eading books and the life of the saint”. In attending religious gatherings for six months in the villages, I did not generally encounter active teaching in their midst, which was confirmed also in the following remark made by a male interlocutor: “In this country, what is called *ṣwä’ maḥbär* exist. In this community people meet in order to eat and to drink. So, they are not used to talking and learning about spiritual matters.” A priest who was also a church teacher opined that the gatherings had become acculturated overtime. The local clergy were not immune to this convention and generally consumed *səwa* alongside the laity. A conversation that I had with a local priest during a car ride from the city of Aksum to the village is particularly illustrative. Sitting across him, it became noticeable to me that he was slightly inebriated, which I queried him about politely. The priest smiled and explained that he had been to a *maḥbär* in the city where he had been served *səwa*. He first tried to justify his light-headedness by referring to his small frame, which made him easily influenced by alcohol. After a while, he explained with a tone of assumed helplessness that everyone kept offering him drink and that this had become a habit (*ləmdi*) hard to give up.

On another occasion, I joined a group of 10–12 priests after one Sunday liturgy for a religious gathering held in the back of a local church. Like other gatherings, this included eating traditional bread and drinking *səwa*. This setting offered a unique opportunity to explore what the priests thought about drinking during the religious gatherings. After I declined the offer to drink, as I typically did, a solemn discussion followed with the attendees about the issue of drinking alcohol in the context of religious activity. Many reiterated that drinking *səwa* had become a habit (*ləmdi*) and that it was hard to give it up. Simultaneously, an older priest expressed uncertainty as to why it would be theologically inappropriate for them to drink. The most learned teacher present, trained in Gondar, was unable to address this question and I was asked to offer my opinion. I did so by discussing the effects of alcohol on cognitive capacity, memory and judgement and the possible effects on one’s ability to make progress in spiritual life and to provide effective pastoral support. Everyone listened carefully and nodded with acceptance, but it was clear that much more systematic work on behalf of the Church would be needed to ensure that the clergy became confident enough to change their practices.

Since most priests consumed *səwa*, the laity would not be expected to contradict the practice. On the other hand, the fact that the norm had become a habit or addiction that was difficult to abandon, made it unlikely that members of the clergy and laity who indulged in drinking would openly oppose it. Even if some priests did so, in view of the fact that other priests continued to drink and became at times visibly inebriated, they would have little credibility in teaching the laity to abstain from it. This

being said, an attempt was made by certain individuals to experience the religious gatherings differently on the basis of a deeper commitment to spiritual living. A local church teacher, who conscientiously provided teaching about the faith and was cautious about drinking, seemed to be inspiring people locally. During the monthly gathering at his home, he followed the customary norm of serving *səwa*, but he did so in a stronger ambience of quietness that was rarely encountered in the *zəkar* gatherings of the laity and most priests. He seemed to belong to the right hand-side of the spectrum together with those who spoke of the need to experience the faith more spiritually. In our conversations, he stressed many times the objective of achieving meekness and likeness to God and spoke about the spiritual effects of the religious gatherings. Still, it is important to note that he did not abstain from the vernacular norms.

Such subtle divergences need to be assessed in parallel with the profoundly communal character of the rural society and recent changes on the religious front, but especially the spread of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> Many interlocutors affirmed that their society did not tolerate deviations that were perceived to subvert the local religious tradition and heritage. As already discussed, if one tried to question the superficiality of certain practices and to speak of a more conscientious faith, others were likely to become judgemental and antagonistic and call this person a deviant from the Orthodox faith. Such charges acquired even more urgency and weight with the alarming expansion of Pentecostal or the local *Tähaddäso* movement in Ethiopia. These charges could result in the person's alienation from the rest of society, which could then interfere with their livelihoods and social life since the society was largely based on rules of reciprocity. It could de-legitimise the work of the clergy if they were perceived to deviate from accepted religious tradition and practice. And while normally clergy should not receive monetary payments from the laity, they typically relied on kind offerings from the public, which they could not afford to lose.

It is possible to see, then, how even those who did not agree with widely upheld conventions and tried to redefine them by embodying them more piously, visibly still adhered to the status quo. Their attitudinal deviations and more private understandings should not openly contradict publicly observed behaviour or antagonise others who followed the conventions, if they wanted to remain influential and integrated in society. Still, attitudinal divergences and shifts within the local normative framework have been evidently occurring, and while they have been subtle and marginal, they have been visible enough for others to be inspired by them and to follow them in their own lives.

## Notes

1 World Health Organisation, "Changing Cultural and Social Norms that Support Violence", 2009, [www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/norms.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/norms.pdf);

- E. L. Paluck and L. Ball, "Social Norms Marketing Aimed at Gender Based Violence: A Literature Review and Critical Assessment", New York: International Rescue Committee, 2010; R. Marcus and C. Harper, "Gender Justice and Social Norms – Processes of Change for Adolescent Girls: Towards a Conceptual Framework" 2, 2014, [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8831.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8831.pdf); C. Bicchieri, T. Jiang and J. W. Lindemans, "A Social Norms Perspective on Child Marriage: The General Framework, UNICEF, 2014; M. Alexander-Scott, E. Bell and J. Holden, "Shifting Norms To Tackle Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)", DFID Guidance Notes, 2015; G. Mackie, F. Moneti, H. Shakya and E. Denn, "What are Social Norms? How are They Measured?", 2015, [www.unicef.org/protection/files/4\\_09\\_30\\_Whole\\_What\\_are\\_Social\\_Norms.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/4_09_30_Whole_What_are_Social_Norms.pdf); K. Manji, "Articulating the Role of Social Norms in Sustaining Intimate Partner Violence in Mwanza, Tanzania" (PhD thesis, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2018).
- 2 Related to the Ge'ez verb *hallaya* ገለጸ, which means to 'consider, think, ponder, keep in mind, mediate, look after someone, take care of, watch, reason, reflect upon, turn over in one's mind, perceive, decide, devise, imagine' (W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), 262.
  - 3 H. Pankhurst, *Gender, Development and Identity: An Ethiopian Study* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1992), 154.
  - 4 J. Haustein and T. Østebø, "EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 4(2011): 755–772; T. Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community* (Oakland, California: California University Press, 2018).