ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

THE EFFICACY OF BENEDICTION AND PRAYER AMONG THE AMHARA SOCIETY:

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS RITUALS OF *'ERFOMEREBA'* AND *'SHENECHA'* AROUND RAYYA QOBBO *WEREDA* OF NORTH WOLLO ZONE

BY:

KIYA GEZAHEGNE



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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANRS Amhara National Regional State

ATRs African Traditional Religions

CSA Central Statistical Agency

EOCEthiopian Orthodox Church

EPRDF Ethiopian People's RevolutionaryDemocratic Front

FGDsFocus Group Discussions

Fig Figure

KmKilo meters

°**C**Centigrade or Celsius scale

GLOSSARY OF LOCAL TERMS

AFAN OROMO TERMS

Abbagahr- Community elders which are in some cases considered as religious leaders and in other times conflict litigators. The term has different connotation in different parts of the Amhara region.

Afan Oromo- The language of the Oromo people

Baraytuma- Amajor division of the BoranaOromo which followed different routes of movement in the 16th century. It includes the Warra, Daya, Marawwa, Karrayyu, Akkachu, and Warantisha fractions.

Chefe/Caffee-Freshly cut grasses

Duberti- Literally,it denotes a woman. It is also a religious practice of benediction and prayer carried out by women in the RayyaQobbo area.

Erecha- A communal gathering of the Oromo people once a year around the Hora River. To some this is considered as a religious ritual while others denote it as an insignia of being an Oromo.

Gufta/Guftaa- A long strip of red cotton cloth pawned around the head of religious adepts of *Shenecha* and *Erfo Mereba*

Jalele/ Jaalallee- lover, friend

Marawa- A branchfrom the Baraytumathat has moved to the RayyaQobbo area during the Oromo expansion of the 16th century

Miju- Milk that is used in the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*

Muda- Fresh butter used in the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba,* especially when it is performed for a pregnant woman

Qolle/Qolee- A benevolent spirit that is believed to be protector of the community. It is usually used interchangeably with *Adbar* in the RayyaQobbo area.

Quni/Qunnii-Butter coagulated with different incents and odiferous plants. Meanwhile, it also refers to the odiferous plant.

Ragicha/Raagaa- A religious leader of a "traditional belief system" of the Oromo people. They are also assumed to be prophets.

Shan- It refers to the number five

Shanqo- A type of *zar* spirit common in the RayyaQobbo area and associated with the coming of a governor called Aba Shanqo.

Tufuu- Spluttering saliva or any kind of liquid from the mouth

Wadaja- A group prayer

Wayyu- A religious institution of women among the Arsi Oromo people

AMHARIC TERMS

Abagam-A type of *zar*spirit which is included under the category of*Tikurbela*

Abigem-A religious ritual performed in the highlands of RayyaQobbo area to renew the vows of couples

Agot-A kinship terminology referring to uncle

Agoza- Animal skin, especially bovine animals, that has been cured by salting and drying thempromptly to produce a strong and flexible material suitable for seating and sleeping accommodations

Akeste- A kinship terminology which denotes aunt

Akrari-Pious Christians and strict observant of church sacraments and rituals

Anbessa-A type of *zar* spirit which is considered to possess Christians only and thus called as Christian *zar*

Angot-Original settler of RayyaQobbo area who retreated to the highland area after the coming of the Oromo people in the 16th century

Awraja-A formal political structure in the earlier days which make up the present day political classification of zone

Awgar- A term used to refer to evil spirits

Ato-A title equivalent to Mister

Ba'edAmleko- Idolatry practices

Balabbat-Affluent families which are well established economically and socially respected by the community

Balezar- An individual knowledgeable of the *zar*cult

Barya- A slave

Beleq- A wooden rod used in religious rituals such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*

Betemekdes- The interior part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church building where sacraments are performed in most cases

Buda- Craftsman who are believed to possess evil eye

Chat-A stimulant drug which is chewed. It is usually an integral element in religious rituals in the Wollo region, especially those performed by Muslims.

Chenger- A *zar* spirit which is believed to possess Christians

Chiqa Shum-A community magistrate during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie

Dega-An area within high altitudinal range, afro-alpine vegetation, and cold climate

Dob'a- Original settlers of the RayyaQobbo area

Egziabher- God

Emahoy- A term used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition to refer to a nun

Erfo- A spirit which is called upon in the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*

Erfo Jalele- A phrase that emphasize the love of the people towards *Erfo*

Erfo Mereba- A religious practice of benediction and prayer of which women carry out in the RayyaQobbo area

Et'an- A type of incent

Fatimaye- Women's ritual which is performed for expecting mothers in South Wollo area

Ferenji- A *zar* spirit which is associated with the coming of foreigners into the RayyaQobbo area

Gacha- A small pot used to burn incent

Ganen- Name given to an evil spirit

GashaHalafi-Administrative official of a village during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie

GodoloQen- Literally means partial day. Monday and Wednesday are regarded as godoloqen.

Gojjame- A *zar*spirit that is common in the RayyaQobbo area which is associated with the Gojjam region

Grar- Acacia tree

Injera- A fermented indigenous food made from *teff* flour (a native grain)

Kebele- The smallest administrative organ of the country

KefuMenfes- An evil spirit

Mahteb- Athread necklet with a cross pendant and representation of Orthodox Christianity

Melkegna- Head of *Chiqa Shum*, a community magistrate, during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie

Memre- A term which denotes to a clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which reached to the level of a priest

Merekat- Blessing

Meri- A Leader. In the religious rituals of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, these are the people responsible for instigating and being in charge of the ceremony.

Mislene- A title for a district headman in the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie

MuluQen- Literally means full days. Days of the weak except Monday and Wednesday are regarded as muluqen.

Nechbela- A type of *zar* spirit which is fulfilled by sacrificing animals that are white in color

Rayya- A name given to the people living in the RayyaQobbo as well as RayyaAzebo area. It is also a name which refers to the livestock found in the lowlands of the RayyaQobbo area, which are distinctive from other areas.

Rayigna- The language of the RayyaQobbo people

Teklehaymanot- An Ethiopian saint venerated in the 24th of every month and yearly revered on January and August

Seteto- unleavened bread prepared for religious rituals

Shegye-A type of *zar*spirit associated with the coming of foreigners to the area. Hence, it is commonly called as *Ferenji*

Shemglena- A process of conflict resolution by community elders

Shenecha- A religious practice of benediction and prayer, by men, in the RayyaQobbo area

Teff- A type of indigenous grain, with the scientific name Eragrostistef, widely cultivated within Ethiopia for its seed

Tella- A traditional alcoholic drink brewed in the house

Tereche- A type of *zar* spirit common in the RayyaQobbo area and associated with the coming of EPRDF to the area

Tikurbela- A *zar* spirit where animals slaughtered for sacrifice are black in color

Tsadiqu- A *zar* spirit which is believed to possess Christians, hence, dubbed as Christian *zar*

Tselot- Prayer

Tufta- A religious practice of benediction and prayer among the RayyaQobbopeople which is interchangeably used with the term *Shenecha*

Qeda- An indigenous settlers of the RayyaQobbo area

Qeybela- A *zar* spirit which is appeased by the sacrifice of animals which are red in color

Qolla-An area within the topography of the lowlands and dry climate

Qoti- A wooden rod held by practitioners of religious rituals to call upon spirits and to keep them in the house. It is used interchangeably with *Beleq*.

Welmbita-a porridge prepared by milk for the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*

Wereda- District

Weyera-A plant with the scientific name of Oleaeuropaeasubsp Africana

WoinaDega- An area characterized with temperate climate. This area is considered to be more suitable for agriculture and living in general.

Wondem-The kinship terminology for brother

W/ro- An equivalent term for Misses

Wuqabi-A spirit which is considered to be benevolent and protective of the community

Yechefewmeskel-Literally means the cross of the wet grass that is revered by community members

Yesebehatmegeb-An ort from a meal that has been blessed by a priest or any men

Yeset acid-Literally means, female acid, and denote a venomous natured woman

Yetebareke-Something which has been blessed

Yetewalele-Lenient Christians who are not strict observant of church sacraments

Zamad-The kinship terminology for consanguine as well as affine kin and sometimes close friends

Zar- a spirit possession cult

Zebenay-A type of *zar*spirit associated with the coming of foreigners to the area. Hence, it is commonly called as *Ferenji*

Zebu-A collective name given to the livestock found in the highlands of the RayyaQobbo area

Zeweld-A traditional conflict resolution mechanism which is widely extant within the RayyaQobbo area, especially in the lowlands

ARABIC TERMS

Kadamit-Avirtuous girl or a married woman who has not been divorced or widowed

Hijaba- A transitory word used in the religious ritual of *Erfo Mereba* to move benediction from one person to another

GEEZ TERMS

Adbar-A Geez term which refers to an assortment of churches.However, in Amharic language, it refers to a spirit that is believed to be a protector of the community.

ABSTRACT

The field of anthropology of religion has thrived in recent decades with creative intellectuals. Shying away from general definitions, present scholars dealing with religion, in one way or the other, are more concerned with how religion is exhibited in everyday interaction of individuals and the society as a whole. Thereby, locating the study of religion in a specific cultural setting, the highlands of RayyaQobbo*wereda,*this paper is an account of how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is expressed at a local level. By focusing on the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha,* which embodies benediction and prayer, this thesis describes how the RayyaQobbo people negotiate the orthodoxy of these religious practices in line with EOC tradition. The different narratives and counter narratives encircling the question of orthodoxy and efficacy of these religious practices are, hence, at the center of this paper.

My goal in writing this thesis has been to construct an ethnographic account which includes the major as well as emerging issues typically addressed in anthropology of religion; syncretism, lived religion, religious orthodoxy, efficacy, and rationality.In similar manner, by briefly explicating the different orthodox and heterodox religious practices performed in this study area, the analysis of this thesis rests on the efficacy of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* in line with the efficacy and rationality of religious practices and religion in general. In addition, syncretic elements and how these elements are used to authenticate their religious experience are also part of this paper.

As an anthropologist as well as an individual who happens to be religious, therefore, having leniency towards biased views, I have tried my best to write in a manner and style which is both indulgent and interesting. By considering the historical and cultural milieu, I have sought to avoid unnecessary technical jargon.Giving antecedence to the people's voice, I alsostrived to be non-partisan,as I can be, in a work covering such exciting and contentious topics. I have attempted, therefore, to present as clearly and concisely as possible, the major positions, arguments for, and rebuttals to the topic at hand.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

"Once, when a band of Kung Bushmen had performed their rain rituals, a small cloud appeared on the horizon, grew, and darkened. Then rain fell" (Douglas 2001:60). It is not unusual to hear such convictions in scientific researches related to religious rituals. After generations of anthropologists have dealt with the notion of religion, since the establishment of the discipline, as far back as the nineteenth century, it became known that different societies ritualize various events to different degrees and that different societies seize on different occasions to perform rituals. With such notions and convictions at hand, anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars from religious studies pondered on religious rituals and practices from different perspectives. Following such tradition of interest in religious rituals, I set out to study and understand religious rituals and practices performed within northern part of Ethiopia, which is considered as the "land of Christians".

After reading Donald Levine's book 'Wax and Gold' (1972), I was convinced that the Amhara people, inhabiting northern part of the country, are characterized by, 'austerity' in their religious belief, which is Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, contrariwise to his argument, during my visit to the research area in 2010, I was able to observe religious practices which, dogmatically speaking, probably are best described as "sacrilegious" or at least "blasphemous". Furthermore, my reading of Harald Aspen's (1994) dissertation on the 'Spirits, Mediums and Human Body among the Amhara Peasants', which incorporated the same observation as mine, brought up inquisitiveness and interest on the topic of religious rituals in the Amhara region. From these, the review of literature on the Amhara belief system, therefore, presents to a reader a paradoxical image of a religious mode of the Amhara people caught between strict observance of Christianity and a syncretic religious landscape as is expressed in the works of Aspen (2001), Setargew (2010), Meron (2012), Kelklachew (1997), and many others. Thereby, starting with a problem set by an apparent paradox, I choose this study to focus on a peculiar mode of religious practice

of benediction and prayer within '*Erfo Mereba*' and '*Shenecha*' performed by people residing in Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of Amhara National Regional State (ANRS).

Following Robert Redfield's argument on coexistence of different forms of religion and knowledge that might be radically different but often interrelated (Erikson 2010:225), and Brøgger's study (1990) on coastal Portuguese communities where villagers believe in a wide range of healing rituals, sorcery, and magic alongside the official doctrines of the Catholic Church, the same contention can be forwarded in the religious rituals of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.

In a society dominated by the religion of Christianity, individuals and families come together to perform prayers and benediction to the deities that are regarded as guardian of the community-the *Adbar* or *Qolle*. In such events, which are experienced as social gatherings, these prayers and blessings are performed through lyrical language reserved for such rituals. This liturgical language reserved for the few knowledgeable individuals is communicated through singing, which requires a considerable vocal interdependence, strict harmony line, and lyrically interwoven such that each adept must come in at the right moment. While the intonation of the chant rotates among the group of ordained individuals performing the rituals, there is no conductor, no obvious beat or percussion instrument setting a tempo to coordinate the interdependence. In consort with such hymns and feasts as well, *Erfo Mereba* denotes a group of women who perform these religious practices of benediction and prayer. The same is true for the case of *Shenecha*. However, what makes it different is the fact that the adept of it are solely men.

These religious practices of propitiating God, pacifying demons, making merit, persevering perplex or intricate situations, and more through invocation, praise, thanksgiving, petition, and appeal for forgiveness are performed by people who ostensibly allege to be followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Also of note, these religious practices have different perception among members of the community. On one hand, there are people who regard these practices as part of the EOC and accept that they are an integral part of the community. On the other end of the spectrum also lie people who believe that such religious practices are related with witchcraft, magic, sorcery, and the '*zar*' cult. Nonetheless, people turn to these religious practices in the hope of reaching a specific goal, such as the healing of physical, emotional, or

social ills, which in turn furnishes the ideology of common purposes, and values that support the wellbeing of the community.

In saying these things, therefore, I reveal myself as an adherent of the epistemological tradition, which stresses on what Meredith McGuire (2008) calls "lived religion" or "religion on the ground". With this aspect in mind, the primary intent of this study is to examine, describe, and analyze the processes as well as the importance of the religious practices of benediction and prayer within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Besides the efficacy of the rituals, this study also aims in explaining how they are legitimized or authenticated and even encouraged among the society in a context where the Abrahamic or world religions tend to be critical of such practices. Through this, the focus of this study revolves around the religious elements, featured in *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, which have been syncretized within the tradition of EOC by followers as well as adepts of these religious practices. Thereby, this study is engaged in the discourse of 'agency', 'process', and 'syncretism' within the study of religion.

Moreover, the other core element of this study relates to the discourse of gender. Depicting the engendered dimension of these religious practices, with regards to the deities addressed, the adepts and participants involved, or the statements forwarded within the benediction and prayer, the study further tries to integrate the gender relation embedded within the narratives and syncretic elements- or what Meron (2013) calls "the act of discursive gendering strategies"- within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.

With the aim to provide a work of considerable scholastic merit on religious rituals and practices integrated within the analytical and theoretical framework of religious syncretism, rationality, efficacy, and gender relation, this thesis is organized into six chapters, each with its own theme and focus. Starting with a general introduction of the topic at hand, chapter one identifies the research gap that this study attempts to fill. In dealing with the conceptual and theoretical framework, chapter two is dedicated to the different literatures exploring on religious rituals and practices. In this section, an attempt has been made to reveal the different literature materials existent, especially on Ethiopia.

Thereafter, chapter three pins down the geographical location of the study area and provide an account of the physical, demographic, historical, socioeconomic, and religious aspects of the

study area, which is regarded to be significant for the analysis segment of the paper. It, therefore, gives a general introduction to the empirical base of the study. Meanwhile, chapter four includes an extensive account of the fieldwork on the historical events, concepts, praxis, and adept of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. The chapter also gives a brief introduction to the different religious practices performed within the study area. Consequently, chapter five follows with a brief and summarized analysis of the empirical data in relation with the analytical framework stated in chapter two. Finally, chapter six provides summarizing conclusion of the paper. Thus, each chapter in this thesis, centered on the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, broaches the notion of religious syncretism and religious efficacy pertaining to the concept of rationality and the discourse of gender.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

There is a good deal of evidence that 'official' religious institutions shape cultural norms, social rules, and behavior. Numerous literatures in fact illustrated that religion has the capacity to change or sustain the status quo of a certain society. Anthony F. C. Wallace, for instance, voiced this notion by regarding religion as "a set of rituals...[with] the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature" (1966:16). Nonetheless, these materials dealt with what is noted as 'official' religions and relegated the status of religious practices that people perform alongside or outside these 'official' religions. For example, Hillary Rodriguez and John S. Harding (2009:13) argued that, as one of the most common schemes in the study of religious experience, scholars tend to divide religions of the world into "-isms", which "are widely accepted labels and cut a wide swath through the religions of the people of the world". Following such schemes, scholars considered 'other' religious practices as 'irrational' or as 'irrelevant' to the majority or quite problematic (Stewart and Shaw 1994; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Ortner 1989). Or in other words, their importance has been constricted to the few that practice them or not at all. In consort with such emphasis on 'irrelevance', this study delves into the concept of efficacy of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* to the ordained individuals practicing them as well as others who are engaged in it. The practice of benediction and prayer is rather believed by adherents to provide a solace and explanation for harsh, difficult, and insecure lives. They also seem to uphold the amity, harmony, and peace of the community as a whole. As part of this scholarly endeavor, this study attempts to bring in to

the picture the fact that such religious practices are imperative part of the community. The study is, therefore, anticipated to enhance the understanding of such religious practices and the functions they serve to people involved other than the religious aspect and the meaning it provides to the actions of its followers.

In association with this, another problem that this study addressed relates to the notions of belief and practice. A large range of practices and beliefs that are, in fact, important parts of the lived religions of many individuals have been excluded from the purview of anthropologists as well as other social scientists. Following the classification of religious practices and beliefs by a number of anthropologists such as Anthony Wallace and Robert Redfield, scholars have failed to notice those practices and beliefs that do not meet such categorical themes such as 'official' and 'popular' religion or 'real' and 'other' religion. With a hierarchical tone within such classification, giving precedence to what people believe, affirm, and think as indicators of their religion and religiosity rather than to what they actually performed, scholars have privileged belief over practice and "official" religions over "others". It has been a recent trend that anthropologists came to grips with the lived religious practice of individuals and their acclaimed "official" religiosity (McGuire 2008; Schielke and Debevec 2012).

In relation with such hierarchical categorization and relegation lays the conception of authority, authenticity, orthodoxy, and different types of religiosity and religious experience. This in turn brings us to the notions of religious efficacy and rationality and elements of syncretism, which signposts the analytical framework of this study and the research gap it attempts to satiate. By demonstrating the case of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* where individuals who are part of EOC engage in blessing and praying events which otherwise are considered as practices beyond the conventional church rituals and practices, this study has the potency to explain the fact that such attention to syncretized religious practices should be widely present in the study of religion in anthropological disciplines.

Being a contentious notion, the term syncretism has been used to draw on religious experiences which are appropriated, mixed, or synthesized (Leopold and Jensen 2004; Stewart and Shaw 1994). Negotiating on this term, an assortment of anthropological studies has been conducted in different parts of the world. In the meantime, they all capitalized on different approaches in dealing with such notion. While some, such as van der Veer (1994) and Leopold and Jensen

(2004), emphasized on the debate of authenticity, being 'impure' or 'mixed' and 'orthodox', others concentrated on the meaning making of the boundary between the different religious practices (Droogers 2004). However, being heavily criticized, the notion has failed to grasp the eyes of most anthropologists. Among the strife lies the question of mechanical solidarity and lack of process in the notion of syncretism. Following this, therefore, by going back and forth between historical antecedents and present narratives, I have tried to show the process integrated within syncretization. Furthermore, by pulling back from the debate of 'pure'/'impure' or redefining the term, I tried to study how agents contest, negotiate, and act on attributions of syncretism within their own religious practices, especially towards religious orthodoxy, rather than emphasizing on the imposed narratives from others.

By emphasizing on elements of process and agency, thereby, this study depicts elements of syncretism with that of religious rationality and brings into picture what others failed to do so, the interplay between men and women within the notion of syncretism.

Another point that this study aims to allude to is, therefore, the relation between gender and religion. Many scholars dealing with the study of religion, especially Christianity, argued that women's role in religious practices is limited to spectatorship and recipient of the upshot. As D. Pull Sullins (2006) noted though women are more religious than men, their performative role is preserved to the individual level and hence limited in other practices. Chaillot (2002) furthermore argued in the case of Christianity, the EOC have no sacrament in ordaining women-leaving them out as spectators.

In relation with this, though a wide variety of voices are in evidence in relation to religion and religious practices, many literatures related with gender and religions are confined in scope. For instance, the majority of the materials reviewed focus on how religion and religious practices preserve patriarchy at the expense of women's right and the notion of gender equality. Seguino and Lovinsky (2009), for instance pointed out the impact of religion and religiosity on gender attitudes and outcomes in promoting hierarchical structures and gender inequitable attitudes. Others who oriented their focus on religious practices performed by women either emphasized its importance solely to domestic realm where women are supposed to be present or tailed off their practice. Thereto, the anthropological study of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* shun such misapprehension.

Alongside this, the prevailing assumption that gender underlies difference in both religiousness and religious practices entails that men and women engage into different sets of values and roles and norms of religious behavior (Jule 2005). In most cases, men are supposed to engage in religious practices, which are integral to society whereas women are condemned to practice religious rituals, which are malevolent such as witchcraft and sorcery. Contrariwise, the presence of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* acquaints us with the fact that difference in religious practices with regards to gender is not universal. The fact that both engage into similar religious practices prove that it is impossible to universalize the relation between gender difference and religious roles and religious practices.

Last but not least, though religious practices like this are deemed to be important and must be documented, prior studies on religious practices, which are integrated within 'official' religions, are limited in number. In regard to anthropological studies on various Ethiopian societies, though religion has rarely been their major concern, the great majority of such research studies dealt with religion briefly. In instances where religion is given fare share, the studies deal with exclusive traditional religious beliefs and practice such as the '*zar* cult' and spirit possession which most of them touched upon in different degrees. Messing (1958), Hamer and Hamer (1966), Reminick (1974), Lewis (1971), Natvig (1987), Young (1975), Shack (1971), Vecchiato (1993) among others reviewed religion in this sense. Brøgger's study of the Sidama (1986), Aspen's study of the Amhara of North Shewa (1994), Setargew's study on spirit mediumship in North Shewa and South Wollo (2010) are also among these categories. Nonetheless, the fact that they somehow pointed the presence of religious beliefs and practices integrated within the "official" religion makes their work different.

However, such studies have been crammed with data drawn from a wide range of culture and religious institutions, especially Islam, but not on EOC. The most reputable articles and books on syncretization and religious practices performed within Ethiopia have been in fact concentrated on Islamic tradition. Works by Trimingham (1965), Østebø (2007), Meron (2012), Hussien (2001), Bruakämer (2001), Despalt (2005), and Abbink (1998) illustrate this fact. With this in mind, the religious practices within EOC have been far from being researched.

Inquiring on how communities live with and 'reproduce' Christianity as a socio-cultural system, John Abbink (2003:5) further argued that researches on the role and meaning of Christian beliefs

and values among northern Ethiopian communities have been done. However, such researches have failed to systematically understand 'Ethiopian Christianity' as a living social practice. As also noted by Cressida Marcus (in Abbink 2003:5), "the general study of Ethiopian Christianity is a field of enquiry still in its intellectual formation". Taking this into consideration, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge gap evident within the study of Christianity in Ethiopia and the EOC.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1.3.1. General Objective

The general objective of this thesis is to study the efficacy of benediction and prayer within the religious practices known as "*Erfo Mereba*" and "*Shenecha*" as performed among the people living within the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of ANRS with accent on the syncretized lived religion of the society and the gender dimension of such religious practices.

1.3.2. Specific Objectives

More explicitly, this study also takes in hand the following specific objectives:

1. To explore, identify, and explain the religious practices of benediction and prayer within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.
2. To explain and analyze the lived religious experience of the people. By doing so, this study tries to understand how people still practice, as integral parts of their religious experience, benediction and prayer within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* that were defined out as no longer properly "religious" by the EOC. At this junction, therefore, the study aims to understand the local meaning makings in what is rather perceived as "Category crashing" practice.
3. To understand the role that these religious practices serve to members of the society and the ways in which it lends meaning to their lives especially in regard to the gendered roles within the society.

1.4. Research Questions

With the attempt to elucidate and analyze the religious world of the society under study into a common professional language of the discipline, the study is designed to look at issues, dynamics, potentials, and constraints associated with the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. In line with this, thereby, this study is formulated with the primary purpose of answering the following interrelated research questions that are central to the topic under investigation.

1. What kind of processes do such religious practices involve?
2. Who are involved in these religious practices and how do people carry out these religious practices in their day-to-day activities?
3. What is the significance of these religious practices and to whom is it relevant?
4. How are these religious practices framed in a gendered manner?
5. How are these religious practices legitimized within the EOC tradition?
6. What are the competing narratives existing among the society about such religious practices?

1.5. Research Methodology

With the aim to gather relevant information, this study exhausted a number of research methods that enabled to acquire an ample amount of data of predominantly qualitative nature. As Fontana and Frey (in Kelklacaw 1997:7) noted, "it is the researcher's responsibility to understand the variety available and the different purposes of each [research method] to become astute in selection of one method over the other". Bearing this in mind, this study generally used different qualitative methods as a means to offset the weaknesses inherent in one method with the strengths of the other.

Therefore, to acquire data efficient enough to retort to the research questions posed above, the study is enriched both by secondary and primary data sources with the bulk of data gathered through the latter approach. The following section briefly expounds the different methods incorporated in the study.

1.5.1. Methods of Data Collection

1.5.1.1. Secondary Data Sources

Through the consultation of dependable and relevant documents, both published as well as unpublished materials, an effort has been made to gather pertinent information for the study. Since the study is mainly qualitative in nature, the data obtained from these secondary sources were analyzed in an interpretive (qualitative) way. Aside from giving potency to the data gained through primary data sources, the data acquired from these already existing sources provided an insight to theoretical and analytical frameworks that are relevant to the analysis of the material at hand. Moreover, by investigating historical documents on the study area, the study attempted to see the causal link between past historical events and present religious beliefs and practices and take into consideration past experiences which might have been internalized by the people of the time and have become part of the knowledge tradition available to the present generation.

1.5.1.2. Primary Data Sources

Maurice Bloch (in Erickson 2010:235) argued, "Rituals are events that combine the properties of statements and actions". Thereby, to capture these statements and actions and search for firsthand information, the following primary data sources have been employed in this study.

Systematic Observation

"Observation begins by listening to what British anthropologist Audrey Richards called 'speech in action'. As ethnographers watch and listen [...], they learn to understand culturally meaningful conventions and formulate culturally appropriate questions" (Sanjek 2010:246). Following this, I choose systematic observation so as to understand what is unmediated by communication with the actors as well as relevant scenes of communication within the study area. Other than the fact that such method is an efficient way to collect data on human behavior, additional justification for choosing this method is to validate or triangulate the information gathered through other methods like interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies.

By living among the society, therefore, I was able to apprehend valuable information on how the religious practices of benediction and prayer within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* operate. For this purpose, I stayed in the study area for at least two months with my host family so as to observe

the religious practices and the everyday religious experience of the people. This was also followed by more than five short-term visits to Qobbo town so as to observe how these practices are performed in the lowlands and to contact culture and tourism experts of the *wereda*.

Hence, through this method, I was privileged to observe the process, the different participants, the place and time, and the adepts of these religious practices. In addition to this, I was able to optically scan the materials used and symbols integrated within the practices. As observer, I was able to scrutinize the number of people involved in the practices, their positions, their comings and goings, objects, exchanges, physical actions and movements, gestures, sequences and orderings, and so on. Furthermore, the data obtained through this method shed some light, to some extent, on what is happening among the community on day-to-day basis. Thereby, to secure such data, intensive field notes and photographs were included in the study. These materials served as a bridge between my own observation and analysis of the data.

In-Depth and Key Informant Interviews

As a source of primary data, face-to-face in-depth interview, with both structural and descriptive questions, was another best method to guide the attempt to understand the religious practices within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. The first method, structured questions, was preferred for the purpose of saving time whereas the second one was carefully chosen in order to have larger pool of information. Had it been solely structured interview, it would have limited the informant from explaining certain aspects of the topics under investigation. In addition to the general interviews guide approach, the informal conversational interviews were also employed in this study.

All in all, I was able to listen and learn the views and personal experiences of the people being studied in detail through this method since it, among others, provided opportunities for participants to describe the phenomenon in their own terms. Thus, it balanced my own view with that of the people's. It, in other words, avoided the possible bias present in systematic observation. Other than this, the ease in undertaking this research method and the range of content areas it can cover made it also preferable.

Confined within the two months of fieldwork experience, the study undertook thirty three intensive interviews with inhabitants of the area, of which seven were regarded as key informants. In addition to these informants, six interviews were held with officials from the

Tourism Bureau of the zone as well as the *wereda*. The individuals interviewed have been selected on the bases of their age, sex, religious as well as social status within the community and their availability (see appendix II: 2.1 and 2.2). Among these stratifications members have been selected randomly but in most cases it was based on their willingness and availability. In addition to these informants, the numbers of individuals incorporated in the informal conversational approach were sixteen. From this were religious fathers, elders, youth, and mostly women (see Appendix II: 2.3). To assist the data collection phase through this method, I utilized checklist, notes, and audio tape recorders.

Focus Group Discussions

In this study, focus group discussion is of two advantages. As a self-contained method, it served as a means to collect data. Meanwhile, as a supplementary source of data, it enabled me to crosscheck what has been collected through other research methods. With this in mind, by using a structured interview together with my involvement as a moderator, this method enabled me to acquire additional data and check any biased information that might be provided by individuals. In addition to that, the interaction among informants provided me with relevant information since it provides unrestricted platform for individuals to discuss their ideas and to clarify each other's impressions and opinions. In fact, given the delicate nature of the topic under scrutiny, this method was by far the best in gathering imperative data next to observation.

In designing these discussions, the group composition was intended to be homogeneous initially; homogeneity, in this case, characterized by the background of individuals who are involved in the discussions so as to create a comfortable ground for participants and to encourage them to speak unreservedly. Besides this, the similarity and cooperativeness of participants with each other was thought to make this method fruitful and easier to undertake. Nonetheless, in the field, due to availability of discussants, the groups ended up to be heterogeneous. However, it turned out to foster discussion and arguments between discussants.

With this in mind, the people integrated into these discussions include both those participated in the interviews as well as those who have not. The selection of participants in the discussions was based on their willingness to participate as well as the level of knowledge they possess on the topic.

Being chosen through a snowballing mechanism and interview with knowledgeable elders, discussants within this method was twenty in number, ten female and ten male. Meanwhile, the group discussions conducted were four in number where participants ranged from three to seven depending on the discussant available in each discussion lasting for not more than two hours (see appendix II: 2.4).

Case Studies

Last but not least, the other research method employed in this study is case study. As a comprehensive description and explanation of cases considered as pertinent to the matter at hand, I was able to gather extensive data on multiple sources of information on individual cases so as to further illustrate, strengthen, and validate the data obtained through other research methods. The cases gathered through this method took into account all pertinent aspects of cases demonstrating how, when, and where such religious practices will be performed as well as life histories and events of individuals. In this manner, I meticulously selected cases from observation and interview, emphasis given to the later method. Based on the relevance, evenhandedness, and lack of embellishment in the description of the cases, I choose five cases that are peculiar as well as representative of the topic under investigation.

1.6. Methods of Data Analysis

Quoting Catherine Bell in the book "Introducing Anthropology of Religion", David Eller (2007:110) mentions that scholars have taken two different approaches in analyzing data related to rituals. On the one hand, they view ritual as "a distinct and autonomous set of activities" whereas, on the other hand, they may see ritual as "an aspect of all human activity". Taking the second integrative approach to the study of religious rituals, this study took into account the conversational analysis, which calls forth the sequential organization of discourses, narratives, and conversational features.

Other than these approaches, in conveying the steps that have been taken in analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data, with the aim to make these data meaningful and draw some results from it, I analyzed, synthesized, and interpreted the data thoroughly and meticulously. This process of data analysis, therefore, involved making sense out of the texts and images where

taped interviews are transcribed verbatim, field notes organized in transcripts, and image data as in photographs.

After organizing and preparing the data categorically and chronologically in such a way, I began a detailed analysis by translating from Amharic language into English to reduce the data into themes through the process of coding and condensing the codes. These involved generating categories of information (open coding) and then explicating story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding). Afterwards, these thematically organized data were analyzed through triangulating the data sources so as to build a coherent justification for the themes and validate the findings. Moreover, to check the accuracy, reliability, and credibility of the findings, this study embraced an assortment of techniques such as expert opinions; literature reviews, asking the same question with slightly different wording in different parts of the data collection process, and using thick description to convey the findings. Finally, the data had been interpreted and presented in a discussion. In the meantime, since it is virtually impossible to complete a scientific analysis without using some form of statistical processing, some relevant qualitative data other than the quantitative data obtained in this study had been quantified and presented in tables.

1.7. Scope and Limitations of the Study

1.7.1. Scope of the Study

The phenomenon, which constitutes the empirical base of this study, is dynamic and widely distributed in time and space. Nonetheless, due to time and budget constraints accompanied by the need to inscribe genuine and credible depiction of the situation under investigation, the scope of the study was limited both with regards to the topics under investigation as well as the research area.

With regards to the themes to be considered, this study is a comprehensive ethnographic analysis of benediction and prayer within the religious practices of "*Erfo Mereba*" and "*Shenecha*". In accordance with this, the study focused on details of the synthesis, establishment, and praxis of these religious practices and connected it with a variety of factors in other milieus of the community. However, emphasis has been given to the efficacy of these practices both to the

people who advocate it as well as to the entire community within the analytical framework of religious rationality. It also focused on how such practices are syncretized and authenticated within the societal structure as well as the framework of the EOC and how they lend meaning to their lives of the people especially in regard to the gendered roles of the community. Thus, the scope of this study included elements of synthesis between these religious practices and the EOC together with the rationale behind which practitioners justify their action. Another point of discussion within this study is the notion of gender. Claiming the adeptness, participation, and sphere, the ambiance of these religious practices voice gendered roles and specializations, which in turn is articulated within this study. Following this, therefore, the scope of this study is subject to the notions of religious syncretism, efficacy, rationality, and, most of all, gender relation.

Having this in mind, therefore, for reasons associated with budget, resources, and time constraints, this study is bounded to the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as carried out by people residing in Rayya Qobbo w*ereda* of Northern Wollo Regional Zone situated within the ANRS. After a thorough and meticulous investigation of the *wereda*, I came to choose four related villages around the market area of Qalim, namely Kerkat Teklehaymanot, Lanquso, Ayda, and Amsteya. Inhabiting the boarder highland areas of the *wereda*, the people residing in these villages are Orthodox Christians. Unlike the lowlands of the *wereda*, these villages are known for the fact that there are no religious denominations other than Orthodox Christianity. Their affiliation with the church is also considered as fervent and conservative. Nonetheless, in view of the church, "heretical" religious practices are conspicuously observed in these areas. Though the prevalence of such religious practices and accessibility of the area might favor the lowlands, the sole ascendancy of Orthodox Christianity in the highlands makes it possible to shine a light upon syncretic elements and efficacy of such religious practices. Since the lowland area is characterized with an assortment of religious institutions and religious practices, it makes it difficult to pinpoint such elements and stick out the importance of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as such. Other than that, the ease of access to such locality made it predisposed to academic researches. However, with the rugged mountains, the highlands have been far away from the eyes of researchers. It is, therefore, these factors that induced the scope of this study towards these villages.

1.7.2. Limitations of the Study

Being engaged within a two-month fieldwork, this study faced some encounters. The first problem I came across was identifying appropriate site. Due to the fact that the religious practices are performed in both Northern and Southern Wollo, I was in a state of bewilderment of identifying specific field sites where the study should be conducted. Even after I decided to move to North Wollo, after speaking with some informants, weather to work on the lowlands or the highlands, became the next dilemma I was confronted with. Thereby, though the task was tedious, I had to observe practices, for a weak, from both areas prior from engaging in the fieldwork.

Reluctance in providing information on these religious practices was also another impediment in this study. Ideally, because the government is campaigning in the eradication of 'traditional beliefs and practices', informants were not willing to be interviewed or being observed since they were suspicious of being reported. Furthermore as preexisting studies conducted on religion discuss one methodological challenge I faced relates to informants hesitance to comment on and or share their experiences on matters related to religious practices which they often feel as the Given or something that needs to be questioned (Aspen 2001, Meron 2013).

What should be left unmentioned is the time and financial constraints. The fact that such kind of study requires movement from place to place in quest for basic information and systematic investigation, the time provided posed as an impediment in the attempt to contact informants and thoroughly analyze the outcomes of the fieldwork. The delicacy of the topic also added up to this difficulty. For a young female anthropologist working on religion which has not been that much inquired, getting recognition from the society takes a lot of time, which I have none to spare. Nonetheless, being female gave me the freedom to capitalize on the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, which is female only gathering. Finally, the financial constraint is also another impediment worth mentioning.

1.8. Significance of the Study

In specifying the value or benefit this study furnishes, apart from imparting an ethnographic analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, taking into

consideration the fact that religion is hardly "a phenomenon totally unto itself" (Blakely et.al. 1994:1), this study also throw light upon other aspects of the society such as economics, politics, social processes such as illness and healing, marriage, birth, conflict and many others. Thereby, the study somehow provides a coherent ethnographic data on the people residing within the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of the Amhara National Regional State, which can be an input to different projects designed to enhance the living condition of the society.

Nonetheless, the primary significance of this paper is its contribution to the scholarly literature. A need exists to fill a gap in the literature, as aforementioned in section two, by providing a voice for such religious beliefs and practices. In line with this, hence, this study have a scholarly significance in that the theoretical and empirical issues it raises may at least initiate or entice other anthropologists to further pursue such topic of interest so as to contribute something of value in this respect.

Given that the fieldwork experiences are interpreted against theories and contextual documentary materials, it stimulates theoretical thinking in relation to the study of religion, which in turn might hint at new problems and interpretations to be resolved through further ethnographic fieldwork. Last but not least, since it is to be one of the very few anthropological works on the religious practices of the Amhara people as well as the religious belief and practices of EOC followers, its significance can be seen as a contribution to the body of ethnographic knowledge on Ethiopian societies.

1.9. Fieldwork Experience

As Roger Sanjek (2010:243) noted, in ethnographies, "anthropologists do more than merely 'write up' the field notes they record, as part of the process of doing fieldwork." They are put in situations, which seek their decision-makings and are in some instances confronted with challenges within a society that considers them as a stranger. While significant analytical and empirical data bring ethnographers to particular society, once they arrive, they have to gain access to informants and the community in general. By negotiating and renegotiating with the researched, ethnographers strive to gain entry into the natural setting of the community, the first milestone often described in the anthropological literatures as "establishing rapport". Starting from the veneration of *Saint Teklehaymanot* (January 02) going through Epiphany, the revelry

with lavish feasts continues up to the reverence of the death of Virgin Mary (January 29). As an entry point to the field, these weeks were favorable to be acquainted with the people and key informants in particular.

Nonetheless, dealing with such intricate and delicate topic, religion and religious practices, I have stumbled upon a number of situations where I have questioned whether this was the right topic or not. Starting with the sense of discomfort people have when questioned about the religious practices and the fact that they actively avoid such topics and do not want to admit that they are taking part in the religious practices were quite discouraging encounters. They do not want to directly speak of these religious practices and risk bringing down retribution consciously or unconsciously upon them. In many instances, I was also not able to observe the rituals because of their suspicion towards me and in cases when I could, I was forced to disguise myself as participant of the ritual rather than as an observer, reaching the ethical dilemma of being honest about my role. The suspicion towards such research was aroused in the fact that the government as well as the church condemned such religious practices, which lead to distrust that I was going to report the adept of these rituals. This was more visible in the case of *Erfo Mereba* in relative to the religious practice of *Shenecha*.

In observing *Erfo Mereba* in weeding ceremonies, I had to take a four hours journey by foot into another village. Besides that, the fact that I had to stay three days in the coldest place in the area was also challenging. Being beaten up by the best man, pinched by the groom's friends and being thrown out of the house by the bride's relatives were among the many that could be mentioned as an unanticipated but astonishing field experience.

The six hours journey to the study area and the rugged topography of the area was unbearable to walk by foot. In my first field visit I was able to ride a mule, which made it less painful. Other than that, climbing up three mountains to reach the research site and to go back and forth between the villages, which almost take three hours walk, was the most difficult encounter.

The lack of any kind of facility within and around the study area was also another problem. There is no electric power in the research area. That was a hurdle to communication and to use field equipment such as camera, voice recorder, laptop, and cell phones. In order to charge these materials, one had to walk at least a three hours to a nearby market place. Nevertheless, the rich

and bulky ethnographic data that was evident in the area and the geniality of my host family as well as the community ware quite inspiring to pursue the study despite what seems quite frustrating instances. Yet, what should not be left unsaid, is that these are not long lived challenges but rather encounters that I have experienced at the early phase of the research.

1.10. Ethical Consideration

As an anthropological study, which prides into the private as well as social lives of participants, it is needless to say that ethical considerations are essential. In this study, therefore, I attempted to bring about a relatively safe ethical ground to the community that forms the focus of the study.

In ensuring the rights, privacy, and welfare of the people, I made an effort to verbally inform the purpose, aims, process, use of results, and consequences of the study to potential participants in a language that is clear and understandable. Hence, though some covert roles were used at first in approaching informants, I, eventually, had informed consent of my informants. Other than informed consent, the confidentiality and anonymity of the information shared by informants have been kept. I, therefore, paid due attention to confidentiality. I also committed to the justness of participant selection and evasion of any discrimination or bias in the selection process, an ethical element that relates to representativeness of the research to the subjects of the study. The ethical mandate of respect for informants in regard to treating them as capable of making decisions autonomously on what kind of research they want to be involved in and avoidance of any harm (do-no-harm principle) to participants were also among the ethical requirements that had been taken into consideration in this study. Meanwhile, in taking photographs and in recording conversations and events, informants have been asked for permission to use the devices and were assured that their photographs and comments will be used solely for this academic purpose.

Finally, what should not be left unsaid in this section is the notion of neutrality. Throughout the data collection and writing up phase of the research, the ethical dilemma of maintaining a value neutral position was one challenging ethical element. Akin to the predicament faced by Evans-Pritchard (Morris 1995:92), being an Orthodox Christian believer and an anthropologist was perhaps tricky to mesh up. Nonetheless, the ethical obligation of value neutrality was attained to some degrees.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

2.1. Definition of Key Concepts

Universality, as an abstraction without essential or substantive reality, has been considered as a romantic illusion. Yet, in the case of religion, while it is evident that not all individuals have belief in a supernatural force, religious beliefs are present in every known society on earth. There is no group of people anywhere on the face of earth, who is shorn of some manifestations of religion. However, the varieties of religious beliefs seem to be profuse in number.

Nonetheless, in their attempt to explain religion in a single anthropological argot, anthropologists pored over religion by emphasizing on certain aspects and excluding others. Ergo, multifarious definitions of religion have been forwarded throughout the years. Starting from the pioneer of the study of religion in anthropology and the discipline itself, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who defined religion as "belief in supernatural being" to contemporary scholars such as Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire who gave emphasis on lived religion and religious experience, the anthropological study of religion had undergone a long history of kaleidoscopic events.

In this variegated tradition of the study of religion, though consonance on what religion is far from being realized, there have been attempts to explicate the term from different approaches. By focusing on the distinction between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim for instance, gave an account of religion being confined within the sacred realm. Thus, he arrived at his classic definition of religion as:

> A unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, -beliefs and practices, which unite one single moral community-, all those who adhere to them. (Morris 1995:115)

Giving prominence to the understanding of ritual, scholars such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, Melford Spiro, and Victor Turner stressed on amplifying the symbolic meaning of religious practices and experiences. Arnold Van Gennep, on the other hand, wrote the influential Rites de Passage looking at rituals of transformation.

Coming to continental focus in the study of religion, being relevant to this study, religious studies in Africa, especially the sub-Saharan African, argues that religion is integrated in the everyday life of Africans. Despite the fact that Western scholars regarded African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as superstition, magic, idolatry, African scholars, according to Chitando (2008:110) "have re-positioned the study of ATRs as a viable academic undertaking". Mbiti also presents ATRs as "religions worthy of human allegiance" (ibid: 115). In attesting that religion is an integral part of the people through the notion "*homo Africanus* is *homo religious*", African scholars have insisted that religion is built into the various aspects of life. In accordance with this notion, Mbiti writes (in Chitando 2008:114):

> Wherever the African is, there is his [sic] religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the University; if he is a politician, he takes it to the House of Parliament. (Mbiti 1969: 2)

By calling for a multidisciplinary approaches and methods, he claims that the trend is towards practical concerns such as the role of religion in conflict resolution, peace-building, environmental conservation, and others. Seen as a school of thought, erudition for its own sake is sumptuous that studies should center on applied and feasible concerns (Chitando 2008:115).

Refraining from dealing in detail with the notion of religion in general, considered as one hunk of religion, I now pass to rituals, which have been center of attention for many anthropologists of the 20thcentury. Therefore, it is safe to say that anthropological study of religion is abreast of the concept of ritual and ritualization. Though I personally prefer the term 'practice' since it is neoteric in the field of anthropology, it is necessary to succinctly highlight the definition and elements of ritual. To make my case, therefore, I must first indicate what I understand by the concept of ritual. Religious ritual, to my understanding, is a repetitive action and performance carried out as a part of the religious experience of an individual or the community in general and performed with intent.

By and large, rituals are defined as rule bounded symbolic activity, which provides ideologies so as to express religious beliefs. They are also considered to be a means of communication and institution of relations in which performances and actions are given prominence. Encompassing all these features is Victor Turners' deep analysis of ritual in his book "Dramas, Fields, and

Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society" (1974) and "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure" (1969). By explaining ritual from ideological, social, and performative dimension, Turner wrote that rituals are:

> "an immense orchestration of genres in all available sensory codes: speech, music, singing; the presentation of elaborately worked objects, such as masks; wall paintings, body paintings; sculptured forms; complex, multi-tiered shrines; costumes; dance forms with complex grammars and vocabularies of body movements, gestures, and facial expressions" (1984: 25). (Eller 2007:127)

In professing rituals as segmented into 'phases' or 'stages', Turner insinuated the multifarious aspect of ritual, which may take hours or days to complete. He also made an allusion that performances and actions are imperative in understanding rituals. Claiming that many rituals occur at key moments in the life of individuals, groups, or society, Turner relates rituals and ritual behavior to what he termed as "social dramas" (1974). Rituals as social dramas consist of overt, symbolic communication, effective action and performance, social and political power, and finally entertainment (Eller 2007:128).

What is more interesting to me in this context than the definition of ritual is the connection between power and rituals. According to Maurice Bloch, rituals have the power to legitimize ascendancy with regards to gender hierarchy and state domination. Further than this, Bloch indicated that rituals are highly formalized processes where everyday life is provided with ancillary position in regard to the supernatural (Van der Veer 2010:613). Other than this hierarchical relation within rituals, Anthony Wallace suggested an overall picture of the tiered relation between religion, ritual, and their elements. He noted that religion is made up of morsel of which rituals are one part. In similar vein, Barfield (in Eriksson 2010:237) also explained ritual as an "enacted religion".

Other than Wallace and Turner, Jennings (1982:112) also provided a comprehensive definition of ritual. He stated, "ritual is not a senseless activity but rather one of the many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world". In doing so, he argued that a ritualized action is a mechanism of acquiring knowledge which later is transmitted to participants. The activity and performance is also believed to convey the ritual as well as the actors involved to an outside observer (1982:112f). Though Jennings was able to remark on a number of aspects of ritual, his emphasis weighted towards the interactional analysis of ritual. Even if, traditionally, rituals have

been connected with perpetuating 'tradition', 'stasis', and the 'sacred', therefore inclining towards a synchronic approach of generalized ritual form, the anthropological study of rituals turned towards practice, performance, and experience. As a result of this shift towards anthropology of practice and performance, notions such as syncretism emerged in the study of religion, which brings us to the next section.

2.2. Syncretism: The Contentious Concept of Syncretism Process and Agency

As one sphere of life which is in a flux, religion attempts to construct and re-construct boundaries and thereby identities. In this continuous nature of change, the incessant alteration of boundaries and identity making can be attested to the process of interface between individuals, groups, or societies in general. Thereby, as an anthropologist who is intrigued in this interaction, I will set out to succinctly elucidate a notion that have been a center of contention in the study of religion, syncretism.

Starting from Sir Edward B. Tylor, father of anthropological study of religion, a number of anthropologists have strived to win over or have preeminence within the field by accounting the whys and wherefores of religious syncretism. Tylor, for instance, discussed elements of syncretism in being a scent of previous culture out of which they emerged. In integrating this with the notion of "survivals", Tylor wrote:

> "[...] processes, customs, opinions and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which the power has been evolved". (Morris 1995:99)

But before going to the premise and debate on the notion of syncretism, it seems to be fruitful to outline the etymology and meaning of the term. Derived from the Ancient Greek prefix *syn* meaning 'with', and *krasi r*eferring 'mixture', syncretism is a compound word such as *syngkrasis* signifying 'a mixing together, compound', or *idiosyngkrasis*, meaning 'peculiar, individual temperament'. Starting from Plutarch (AD 45-125) who coined the term for the first time, thereafter, syncretism has been used in an assortment of realms and disciplines of which anthropology and religion are part of (Stewart and Shaw 1994:3; Leopold and Jensen 2004:14).

While, historians and phenomenologists of religion, for instance, noted that an element of syncretism is present in every religion, an important aspect of this notion within anthropology came from Robert Redfield (1960), who argued that "qualitatively different forms of religion and knowledge exist side by side in many societies; they may be radically different, but are often interrelated." By describing the dominant culture which for religion incorporates sacred book, story-element, teacher, ceremony, or supernatural being as "the great tradition", Redfield claims that these traditions "amalgamate, or syncretize, with indigenous traditions (the little tradition) to form 'secondary civilizations'" (Schielke and Debevec 2012:3). But religions are not 'given' entities. Hence, in order to amalgamate, the elements that are going to be synthesized must be perceived as equivalences and eventually legitimized (Stewart and Shaw 1994:16).

In explaining such amalgamation and legitimization, it goes without saying that the process and meaning making of agency are essential in understanding syncretism in general. Both methodologically and analytically speaking, the approaches taken towards understanding syncretism differ in line with the interest of the scholar. Methodologically, the term syncretism has been located in historical precedents (historical genetic approach), power relation (phenomenological entry), or in the mind (cognitive or evolutionary approach) (Leopold and Jensen 2004:5). In the meantime, the levels of analysis of syncretism can be regarded as

1. *Social*- issues of power and politics, innovations and cultural interpretation, anti-syncretism
2. *Semiotic*- dynamics of syncretism (mechanism of change and innovation in religious meaning)
3. *Cognitive*- nature of conceptual blending and religious categorization from the structure of human cognition. (Leopold and Jensen 2004:378)

By conflating the historical generic with the semiotic function in meaning making, this thesis gives emphasis to process, agency, meaning making, and narratives of Orthodoxy within the notion of syncretism. Even if the term has been regarded as a dead end by many scholars in anthropology, the critics provided stipulate the perplex nature of syncretism hidden in the very history of the term and its application rather than the notion. As Adogame et.al. (2008:5) noted, "though it was a hub in the earlier periods, this emphasis of syncretism has been lost". The very fact that other notions, such as 'new', 'creolization', hybridity', 'bricolage' are provided as

alternative, shows the strife within the notion of syncretism. However, as Leopold and Jensen (2004:11) argued, "the study of syncretism is now moving from the problem of defining the category of syncretism towards finding new aspects of syncretism and explaining them in different ways". Hereby, by re-engaging with the notion of syncretism, I will engage in the recent discourses related with understanding syncretism, process and agency.

The term syncretism within the discipline of anthropology is often used as "the borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation" (Van der Veer 1994:196). Ascribing it as a means of promoting diversity and tolerance, syncretism has been given a "neutral and positive significance". Stewart and Shaw (1994:4) further argue that this construal of the term can be associated with the studies of New World syncretic phenomena by American anthropologists and America's melting-pot ideology. Following this tradition, using it as an analytical tool, Herskovits reinforced this conception of 'integrative syncretism' along with 'importance', 'significance', 'fundamental', 'reconciliation', 'retrieval', and 'survival' of cultural meanings and identities. Furthermore, Kenneth George commented that "the arena of syncretism is a deeply politicized site of difference, contact and reconciliation, and its application demands the consideration of past and present sociability (ibid).

On the contrary, syncretism has been purporting 'confusion', 'ambiguity', 'contamination', 'inauthenticity', and 'deviation'. Since the 19th century, syncretism has also been considered as "the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other 'incompatible traditions" (Stewart and Shaw 1994:1). Seen as a channel through which pure faith is lost, it is through syncretism that the truth is corrupted and attempts are made to secure unity by betraying principles. Thence, this notion of truth and purity will bound up to the construction of 'authenticity'. Embedded within the western history, this often taken pessimistic definition, led to the vitiation of the term among scholars.

On the crest of these two contrary connotations of syncretism, one can identify the politics of power, rhetoric, difference, persuasion, identity, and interpretation of meaning. Especially with the case of authentication, the notion of syncretism has been recurrently criticized on the question of 'who has the authority to describe a particular religious tradition, including their own, as syncretic?' Reflecting on this question, Meyer calls forth 'from above' syncretism and

syncretism 'from below'. While in the first type of syncretism religious synthesis is imposed upon by others, the other represent the development of religious synthesis by those who create meanings for their own use (Stewart and Shaw 1994:21f). It is because of this power relation that scholars claimed it is important to meticulously observe the ways in which people negotiate and redefine the boundaries of their ideas and practices. In line with this, syncretism is regarded as the "politics of interpretation and re-interpretation of religious beliefs and practices showing how and why people transcend religious boundaries" (Werbner 1994:212).

Another rhetoric in syncretism is process, agency, and meaning making. After arguing syncretism as a momentary or an ongoing process (Stewart 2004:278; Leopold and Jensen 2004:4), it has been noted, "the causes as well as effects of historical processes that led to syncretism formation vary a great deal depending on the historical, cultural, political, and social climates (ibid). Therefore, Syncretism can be taken as "the negotiation and interaction of new elements into a particular group/ domain that stem from 'essentially" different groups or domains" (Leopold and Jensen 2004:2-3) within the historical and socio-cultural processes and frames (Drooger 2004). Thence, in this process, beyond the mechanical mixing syndrome which underplays the agency of different actors in the syncretization process (Meron 2012), agents serves as conduits in the meaning making process of syncretism. By capitalizing on what Meron (2012) calls 'conceptual compatibility', Stewart's (2004) idea of 'tolerable variations', or Schenk's (1989) notion of 'the finding of one's own in the other', agents give justification for their participation and thus orthodoxy of their religious practice. They try to negotiate authenticity and orthodoxy by capitalizing on similarities and bringing it down under a certain framework, especially a text based religion. However, most syncretistic formations could "go unnoticed" which Drooger (2004) referred as an "unconscious" mode of syncretism.

All in all, regardless of its consideration as pejorative term by its past use in theology, as Leopold and Jensen adduce "syncretism has entered the study of anthropology and religion for the purpose of describing processes in religion of integration, acculturation, transformation, and innovation" (2004:10). With this in mind, I consider syncretism to be the incorporation of elements in the historical antecedent, which are later, interpreted and re-interpreted by actors.

From this, syncretism, then, can be contended as a contentious term full of controversies and which has been historically constituted and reconstituted. As Werbner (1994:214) noted:

> The study of syncretism has its own Scylla and Charybdis. At one extreme is that hard place packed by much of the chorus of high (or 'post') modernity. There intercommunication across cultural differences is no less than the universal truth. At the other extreme is the sea of evaluation judgments, often of a pejorative kind, filled by reference to some idealized, now usually textual, standard, such as 'pure Christianity' or the 'incontrovertibly Christian'.

If we recast the term syncretism with Christianity and Christian theology, attributed to more than four centuries, the notion has been used to denote "an attempt to sink differences and effect union between sects or philosophical schools" (Van der Veer 1994:196; Leopold and Jensen 2004:8). In his classification of doctrinal mode and an imagistic mode of religiosity, Harvard Whitehouse noted that religions, such as Christianity, which emphasize on doctrines and standardized belief, consider syncretism as problematic (Leopold and Jensen 2004:379). Unlike the claim that religions of the text tend to be impervious of syncretism, Turner argued that many of the symbols of Christianity are 'multivocal', which means that 'several voices can be heard' (Erikson 2010:232).

Since Christianity is, as Wilson (1999:114) argues, a living tradition, throughout its history, it has "constantly changed and metamorphosed to meet the challenges of new ages". Accounting for this change, synthesis of 'other' religious beliefs and practices provide additional options and efficacious approaches to problems and crises. Stewart's (1991) analysis on Greek Orthodoxy and the syncretization of local belief into this tradition ploughs on such notions of syncretism in Christianity.

In postmodern Christianity, therefore, Christianity has pursued syncretism openly than ever. Besides blending non-Christian practices, many Christian practices are also being rejected or ignored. Meanwhile, long ignored Christian practices are being rediscovered and renewed. In line with this, Wilson claims that Christian institutions are loath to sanction such religious synthesis (1999:114).

Coming to the case of Ethiopia, religious syncretism has been discernible. Nonetheless, though there are researches on syncretism here and there, scholars inclined to the religious diversity extant within the country especially the attendance of Christianity and Islam. In dealing with religion, syncretism has failed to be systematically studied within Ethiopia. Abbink (1998) for instance focused on the occurrence of mixed Christian-Muslim participation in certain

pilgrimages. Similar to Abbink, Pankhurst also provided a through explanation of syncretic contents in reference to pilgrimages of the EOC (Despalt 2005:486f). In explaining spirit possession cult in south Wollo and north Shewa, Setargew (2010) tried to give a glimpse of the dialogue between churches, mosques, and religious shrines by pointing to elements of syncretism within the spirit mediumship centers. Meanwhile, Meron (2012) also contested the syncretization process and meaning making process of agency in the Islamic shrine of Teru Sina. By situating the concept of syncretization within dispute settlement, she tried to pin down the polemics of agencies in religious orthodoxy as well. Aspen (2001) and Kelkilachew (1997) also draw attention to the notion of religious syncretism in Shewa and Wollo respectively. Further going down, Ulrich Braukämper (1992) explored religious syncretism in spirit possession in Southern Ethiopia. All these accounts illuminate intensely on the processes of religious syncretism within Ethiopia by giving emphasis on the historical processes. Nonetheless, by giving undue emphasis on spirit possession, they seem to lack the manifold levels and ways in which syncretism is realized.

In similar vein, by taking syncretism as the "interaction and combination of different historical traditions and knowledge", I set out to illustrate how religious identities ad boundaries are expressed by legitimizing difference within the tradition of the EOC. As Camilla Gibb (1999) argued "religious orthodoxy [. . .] is flexible, absorbent and heterogeneous and provides the framework through which the threat of difference and annihilation of the [foreign] group is transformed and often overturned" (Despalt 2005:487). Thus, religion cannot be treated as having clearly defined boundaries. Rather, it should be perceived as being a flexible system.

2.3. Gender and Religious Practices

Moving out of the concept of syncretism and religious orthodoxy, I now come to the discussion of gender and religion, which is another point of contention within religious studies as well as Anthropology of religion, one of the central themes of this study as stated in the problem. Since Edwin Ardener's publication of *"Belief and the Problem of Women"* in 1975, the discipline become cognizant on the issue of gender and how it failed to capture their 'voice' in ethnographic studies and the androcentric bias within the discipline of Anthropology. Thenceforward, publications on gender came in profuse quantity. Among these were Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's edited collection, *"Women, Culture and Society"* in 1974, and

Shirley Ardener's *"Perceiving Women"* in 1975 emphasizing on the androcentric nature of anthropological fieldworks with regards to method and theory. On the meantime Judith Butler's book *"Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity"* in 1990 gave a wider understanding of gender and its difference with the notion of sex.

An important facet of this development has been, however, the accent on dealing with gender from a number of perspectives. Among these, therefore, lies the analysis of gender asymmetry and sexual stereotypes. Being interested in exposing power relations in gender differentiation, often described through the idiom of female subordination and the tendency to universalize in analyzing women's role in society, anthropologists strived to explicate the gendered cultural experiences. For instance, Sherry Ortner (in Rapport and Overing 2000:145) argued that women are "universally devalued because of their reproductive capacities, which place them culturally on the side of nature, the emotions, the particular, the domestic, the private, and *thus* the irrelevant". What should be emphasized here is not the question of universality of female subordination. Neither is the reason behind this notion. Rather, it expounds on the power relation between gender and the distinction in realm. As a result, in dealing with the gender dimension of a specific cultural experience, one can stumble on issues of irrelevance, paltriness, peripheral position in the importance of the perspectives women have on the procedures and life ways of their communities. Therefore, as Henrietta Moore (2000) pointed out, the difference in power relations between men and women results in different gender roles and socially appropriate characteristics and behaviors. These differences, hence, are treated in different manner, according to Ortner (2005), portraying domination and subordination.

Underwired with post-modernism and post-colonialism, emphasis shifted from what I would like to call "the female perspective" towards gender relation and gender analysis. Defining gender as "the social construction of differences between men and women" (Butler in Bristow 1997:214) or as "a set of characteristics, roles, and behavior patterns that distinguish women from men socially and culturally and relations of power between them" (Hirut 2004:5), scholars argue that to fully comprehend anthropological understanding of a society, it is necessary to examine both male and female perspectives, and hence the gender relation.

In line with this, thereby, anthropologists began to integrate gender analysis in their different ethnographies which refers to a variety of methods and techniques used to understand the

differences between men and women in terms of roles, behaviors, activities, needs, opportunities, access to and control over resources, and constraints in relation to one another. As aforesaid, the roles, experiences, erudition, and status of men and women vary across as well as within different aspects of the society.

As one setting of a society, the relation between gender and religion has been neglected for long in the field of religious studies. In cases, where gender relations have been indicated within such studies, it epitomized the power relation integrated within gender, however, relegating women's role, action, and status within the religious realm. Accordingly, Women are to be found, in most cases, in studies of spirit possession cults, especially in Africa. As Kilson (in Ben-Amos 1994:119) argued that spirit mediumship is a means through which women who are "existentially inferior.....and jurally subordinate" resolve their emotional problem. This, the ritual itself, holds a subordinate position, thereby, handing into the notion of subordination of women (ibid). According to the structural functionalist account of spirit possession cult, developed by I.M. Lewis, such cults "articulate a subaltern position of women" (Meron 2013:116).

With this in mind, Rapport and Overing (2000:148) notes "the work, ritual, obligations and pain of men are all tribute to their high status as controllers of society, while women's work, ritual, obligations and pain become evidence of their subordinate status and exploitation". Such disenfranchising of women's role in religion has been linked with the sociopolitical status of "the disadvantaged women" and the notion of patriarchy (Meron 2013:115).

Another related dominant gender discourse which marginalized women is the debate between religious spirituality and the public/domestic, sacred/profane dichotomies. By claiming that women have been excluded from the hierarchies of canonical power and subjected to male domination in the family (Raday 2003:672), it is assumed that women's religiosity is confined into the domestic sphere (Sullins 2006; Jule 2005). By making the distinction of affective religiousness (personal piety) and active religiousness (ritual practice), Sullins (2006) alluded the difference in realm based on gender differences. In relation with this gender based division of spirituality comes also the notion of gendered orthodoxy. In her article on religious practices performed by women, Meron (2013) attested that, embedded within the patriarchic dominion of religious practices, women are missing in the polemics of religious orthodoxy. In showing the

role of gender in the narratives of religious orthodoxy, she further noted that religious practices of women are relegated as unorthodox whereas men are often represented as the guardians for the "orthodox" way (2013:133).

On the contrary to such 'victimization' of women, there are ethnographic evidences where women are given preeminence based on the knowledge they hold. For instance, David Guss writing on the Yecuana of the Orinoco Basin noted that the advantage that women have on plant knowledge makes them privileged. Alongside its healing purpose, the ritual performed by these women aid or prevents birth, frighten snakes, stop rains, secure lovers, dispel ill humor, deter evil spirits, protect travelers, and cause death (Rapport 2000:150). Theology has also been attentive to religion and spirituality implying that since women are an "image of God" and imbued with humanity, they should not be excluded from the sacred domain (Vuola 2009:220). Paying special attention to the sexism, feminist theology emphasizes on the lived religion of women where their experience is scrutinized. Nonetheless, it is not common to find such ethnographic data on rituals or religious practices where women are adept. Borrowing the term *"feminist blindness"* (Voula: 2009), contemporary studies on the relation between religion and gender contends that religion's importance in women's life. On the other hand, the term *"religious paradigm"* entails religion as "chief explanatory factor of women's lives in a given culture, but mainly as a monolithically negative, misogynist, and immutable force over people's lives" (ibid:221).

Commenting on such arguments, Bell consistently emphasized that women do not see themselves as submissive or dependent to men in ritual. Instead, they are quite independent and devote significant time and energy to these performances. She writes:

> I came to understand that in ritual women emphasize their role as nurturers of people, land, and relationships. Through their yawulyu (land-based ceremonies) they nurture land; through their health and curing rituals they resolve conflict and restore social harmony, and through yilpinji (love rituals) they manage emotions. Thus in women's rituals their major responsibilities in the ares of love, land and health fuse in the nurturance motif with its twin themes of the "growing up" of people and the maintenance of harmonious relationships between people and country. (Gross 2002:53)

Thus, in order for us to understand and analyze the complex and often contradictory relationship between women and their religious traditions, identities, and beliefs, it is important to recognize their own 'voices'. It is through this that one can understand women's religious agency.

Otherwise one might ask a critical question on what is meant by religious experience and practice.

Furthermore, this question can be extended to the critics of religious indoctrination and women's subordination, especially for religions of the text. Scholars concerned with women's participation in religion, it is claimed women are passive victims of religious indoctrination. Taking the example of the religions of Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism where women are constrained from performing text based religious practices. As Gross (2002:43f) accounts, women seem to "often disappear altogether" in text based religions. Indeed, women are refrained from such practices and activities. Conversely, such accounts evade other religious performance outside these texts. For example, Indian women have been engaged in an "extensive, rich, and significant religious lives despite the fact that their religious practices usually are not closely linked with classic texts or undertaken with men present" (ibid: 47). Moreover, aboriginal Australian women perform religious ceremonies that parallel men's ceremonies within that area. In Ethiopia also, some scholars have tried to point out religious practices, which give women the upper hand. For instance, the *Wayyu* institution within the Arsi Oromo people also entails the eminent role women have in the religious realm of the society (Østebø 2009). In this sense, thereby, it is evident that women's religious experience goes beyond religion as an institution. Either paralleling men's religious activities or performing independent religious practices, the relation between women and religion is assorted. Hence, understanding women's many-sided, rich, and prolific religious experience is prominent since "no religious community consists only of its dominant or preferred males but also includes women who have religious lives of some sort" (ibid).

As the aforementioned points cogently demonstrate, knowledge about women and their involvement in religious practices is ill furnished with theoretical, methodological, and ethnographic evidences. Though this is an essential element in understanding any culture, or any religious phenomenon, as I shall indicate, perhaps the patriarchal nature of religious studies overshadowed anthropology of religion, especially in the case of Africa.

Though the approach and methodology utilized is still questionable, the theme of gender and religion has been exploited in other parts of the world. However, there is an obvious gap on religious studies in sub-Saharan Africa especially in recent academic writings. The step towards

a more ethnographic direction in this study, therefore, stems from this growing interest in the tense relationship between gender and religion, which has been often neglected. One could go about how scholars have missed these aspects of religious studies; however, space and time restrain me from doing so. Ergo, following the premise that women have parallel religious practices regardless of the sacred/profane dichotomy and sexual hierarchy, I have set out to study *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* and the gender relation extant within these religious practices and how such relations have an input on the discourse of meaning-making and religious orthodoxy.

2.4. Religion in Practice: The Question of Efficacy and Rationality

Though 20th century anthropologists struggled in giving prominence to belief or practice, contemporary scholars have moved towards anthropology of practice while studying religious related themes. Bearing this in mind, Malinowski made an effort to expound more on the two-visage facet of religion and religious study by claiming that it "is a mode of action as well as a system of belief" (Eller 2007:109). Inferring from this claim of Malinowski, viewing religion as action obliges anthropologists to look beyond religious beliefs and more into religious practices, lived experiences.

Following this tradition, therefore, in this thesis, I focused on one aspect of religious practice, which Fortes (1987:22) believes is the "heart and soul of religion", prayer. Whether they are individualistic/communal, regular/ad hoc, silent/spoken, prayers have been consistently defined as an act of communication with the celestial. Within this notion of communion and interaction with the divine, prayer is believed to bridge the relationship with what one believes to be the ultimate, which power relations are believed to be present. In amplifying this power relation, Giordan (2011:78) noted, "the human being is weak, mortal, in need of help, forgiveness, health, and salvation. [Therefore], praying is a dialogic intercourse". Other than deific power relation, it is claimed that the act as well as the language of prayer, are thought to create and perpetuate patriarchal community structures. Thus, the communion extends further into societal interaction and power relation within community. Thereby, firming up this position, Victor Turner analyzed prayer other than its communicative connotation arguing that it creates "essential" and "generic" human bonds (Rothgery 2004:337).

Despite the act of communion with the divine and the institution of power, prayer can also be regarded as a means where people ensure God's presence. It is a channel where God's reality and presence can be felt and hence be empowered. Further explaining the practice of prayer in terms of power is Catherine Bell who stated that, "it is an evocative language, imbued with its own creative power" (Eller 2007:113). Thence, unlike the previous definitions, Bell went further in explaining prayer in terms of language alongside action. Borrowing heavily from Christian hermeneutical and liturgical activities, Ricoeur (in Rothgery 2004:336) also stated that the role of linguistics is eminent in understanding prayer. Consequently, if prayer is thought of as communication and the language, interpretation of prayer is bound to performance and syntax as well. In this sense, Durkheim's asserted that prayer reflects and shed light on the nature of the divine (Rothgery 2004:336).

Reflection, however, is not bound to the supernatural or the divine. In fact, prayer can serve as a 'cathartic element of ritual' where crisis, either visible or not, are made public together with the social acceptability and the state of affairs of the crisis. Fortes (1987:27) say:

> It enables the crisis to be grasped and interpreted and finally mastered. The fears and compunctions evoked by the crisis are openly expressed, the faults in question are admitted; and promises of the appropriate ritual services for restoring amity with the ancestors and other mystical powers are announced.

In general, pointing out the value of prayer and the source of exhilaration in studying it, Marcel Mauss argued:

> Of all the religious phenomena, there are few like praying that, even if it is observed only from the outside, offer so immediately the impression of vitality, richness and complexity. Starting from a low level, little by little it has risen up to the top of religious life. Infinitely flexible, it has assumed the most various forms: of worship and constriction, humble and menacing, condensed and rich with images, immutable and variable, mechanic and mental (...). Rite and belief are united in praying. (Giordan 2011:80)

Further than the social explanation of prayer, Marcel Mauss, in his book "On Prayer" asserted that praying can be integrated as a mental, and therefore an interior act. This is so because, "through praying the believer acts and thinks. [So] the religious thought, the beliefs, are linked to the action of praying. Praying then puts myth and rite, belief and action together" (Giordan 2011:80).

Moreover, the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud noted great similarities between the obsessive actions of neurotics and prayer. Since it involves repression, displacement, and coping, prayer is considered as "a potent sifter of society" where religious specialists are given status. Ergo, Fraud states that due to the fact projection (transference of neuroses onto another's personality) is part and parcel of prayer, it can be thought of as "a universal social neurosis". Dealing more on the psychological orientation, prayer is also considered to exonerate conscience of the believer by affirming his moral position in the community (Rothgery 2004:337).

Hitherto, I have discussed the definitions and premises on prayer. Moving now to content and elements of prayer, as a means, human bodies have been used as a vehicle for prayer. In addition to body positions such as kneeling, standing on tiptoe, hopping, turning towards a geographic point, standing before an image or an icon, or prostrating, body parts, feelings, and emotions of human beings also convey prayer. For instance, the eyes, the arms, the hands, the head, the voice, emotions of laughing or crying play conspicuous role in the event of praying (Giordan 2011:79). Besides these elements, material aids to prayer are also included such as prayer beads, prayer wheel, or prayer rug.

With regards to the content of praying, Rothgery (2004:336) noted that prayers most often involve invocation, praise, petition, benediction, meditation, intercession, supplication, dedication, litany, Beatitude, or penitence. Based on this assertion, thereby, there are request prayers, thanking prayers, praising prayers, blessing prayers and many more. In this respect, being the most common type of prayer, petitionary/request praying, where specific appeals and demands are made, are considered to be oriented towards material needs and immediate interests. On the other hand, types of prayer considered to be the 'purest' and the 'noblest' kind are thanking and praising prayer, which focus less on material concerns (ibid).

In between these types of prayers lies benediction (blessing prayer), which is the focus of this thesis. Being a formal invocation of the divine blessing upon people, things, or places, benediction addresses both material as well as non-material yearning and entreaty, which makes it all inclusive and attention grabbing (Giordan 2011:79). On top of that, the fact that it has been an important part of Christian belief and public as well as individual worship makes it momentous in this study.

In one or more forms, it is clear that prayer is at the heart and center of worship and thereby religion. It is global in way that it puts into a single relationship the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite. Meanwhile, it is also holistic in such a way that it puts all aspects of a human's life together. Without prayer, hence, religion would be stripped of its main means for connecting individuals to a divine and therefore its power.

With this in mind, I will now summarize the efficacy of religious practices, in general, in somewhat systematic way. As one sphere of life, religion serves a number of functions of which anthropologists attempted to look at. In "*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*", Emile Durkheim (1965) stressed on the social function of religion and religious practices where social solidarity are achieved. By reaffirming the collective consciousness, religion expresses and reinforces the sentiments and solidarity of the society. In his distinction between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim asserts that, by defining as a sacred, where a great deal of power converges, religious ideas and values have the competence to direct human action. By creating moral forces that were not present, religious practices periodically re-affirm the presence of a greater external reality, which is the society. Thus, not only does religion reinforce the relation with the divine, but it also makes societal relation sturdy by transforming human personalities into becoming more stronger, courageous, certain, and giving them new abilities.

In worshiping society, Durkheim asserts that people are in effect recognizing the importance of the social group and their dependence upon it. In this way, according to him, religion asserts the authority of the social group and, therefore, strengthens the group and promotes social solidarity, either mechanical or organic. Through collective effervescence which is "a state of excitement, suggestibility, and mental contagion" when there is a large gathering, religion creates and perpetuates social order (Morris 1995:141f). It "makes us act and helps us live". Religious practices, according to Durkheim, therefore, are "work by them-selves, and their efficacy depends upon no divine power; they mechanically produce the effects which are the reason for their existence" (Rawls 2004:115).

In similar manner, Robertson Smith (in Morris 1995:113) interpreted religious practices, as he succinctly put it: "Religion did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society." Furthermore, Turner (1969) came to see religious practices as having a

politically integrative role and restoring the equilibrium and solidarity of the group. Hence, religion provides stability within a society, for it nurtures solidarity.

Another premise with regard to the social efficacy of religious practices came from Radcliffe-Brown who argued that the effect of religion extends up to regulating, maintaining, and transmitting 'sentiments' across generations (Douglas 2001). In line with this, religion also serves the social function of education and perpetuating knowledge. And Malinowski states that religious practices "are [...] an extremely efficient means of transmitting tribal lore, of insuring continuity in tradition, and of maintaining tribal cohesion." (Douglas 2001:65ff) Though his emphasis was more on how religion fulfills the psychological and physiological needs of an individual, he also pointed out that religious practices are the "very cement of the social fabric". By dealing with situations of emotional stress, anxiety, and tension that threaten social stability, religion gives confidence and a feeling of control. Thereby, it enhances social solidarity (ibid).

Along with this, in providing individual needs, Rodney Stark and William Sims states that religion offers compensation (either material reward or eternal life) to an individual which in turn leads to stability within the society. It is through the individual that religion serves its purpose to the society (Meister 2009).

Further explaining on the stability of society, Sally Moore argues that the very nature of religious practices lend to the stability of the society by stating that:

> "Rituals are cultural representations of fixed social reality, or continuity. They present stability and continuity acted out and re-enacted; visible continuity. By dint of repetition they deny the passage of time, the nature of change, and the implicit extent of potential indeterminacy in social relations, they act to provide daily regenerated frames, social constructions of reality, within which the attempt is made to fix social life, to keep it from slipping into the sea of indeterminacy" (Turner 1987:41)

Following similar line of reasoning is Talcott Parson who emphasized on religion and value consensus. Akin to Malinowski, Parson sees religion addressing issues that disrupt social life, which are unforeseen and uncertain events. In this manner, religion maintains social stability by revealing tension and frustrations. Parson also further contends that religion, as part of cultural system, provides guidelines for human actions and standards through which such actions are evaluated. It also lends meaning to experiences that seems perplexing and futile (Morris 1995).

In dealing with religion and meaning, Myerhoff pointed out that religion is a means through which the past is made to makes sense in the present, thus, providing meaning diachronically (Turner 1987:41). Claude Levi-Strauss also noted that religion give meaning to existence of human beings and their very human nature. Sherry Ortner also defined religion as "a meta-system that solves problems of meaning generated in large part (though not entirely) by the social order, by grounding that order within a theoretically ultimate reality within which those problems will 'make sense'". Even if all three are dealing with meaning providing and religion, there benchmark differ. For instance, while Myerhoff is stating how religious practices enlivens the memory by providing a memorable occasions and a frame through which experiences will be limited, Ortner is dealing on how religion unravels the meaning of events and situations, which appears nonsensical and irrational.

Corresponding to Ortner's assertion, Karl Marx forwarded his famous quote of religion as "an opium of the mass". Being an illusion, religion serves the purpose of legitimizing and justifying the subordination, exploitation, and alienation of the subject class. By doing so, it eases the pain produced by such operation, thus acting as opium to make life bearable. Besides this, religion also functions as a social control mechanism where the existing system is reinforced and the status quo is maintained (Storey 2009). On the contrary, Fortes argues that the goal is "to produce persons who think and feel certain things and, therefore, *do* certain things" (Eller 2007:145). Rather than operating as a "spiritual gin", religion, for Fortes, makes people conscious of their action.

Consciousness, being the pinnacle of irrationality in the claims of Marx and Freud, I will now set to the debate of religious rationality. After Niche's declaration of the "death of God" and Frietchbert's assertion that "Christianity is an illusion", scholars dealing with religion continued to hammer the point that the notion of religion is lucid. Due to the ineffable, noetic, transient, uncertain, and transcendence quality of religion, religious practices have been relegated as irrational. Influenced by the 17th and 18th century movement towards rationalism in the field of philosophy, anthropologist regarded at first "primitive religion" to be irrational and therefore an illusion (Morris 1995:91f). The same type of conviction is also found within the stance of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Freud, for instance, wrote:

> These [religious ideas], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. (Meister 2009:16)

Following such arguments, Evans Pritchard asserted that anthropologists considered religious belief as incongruent and absurd (Morris 1995:91). Since, religious beliefs are devoid of a uniform set of attitudes and practices and exist beyond the grasp of the five senses or instrumental apparatus, they cannot be tested. The triumph of scientific rationalism being testing, therefore, the rationalism behind religion became a moot point. Pursuing such alignment, one might ask then, "Why do people continue believing in religion?"

The same reservation was brought up by Tylor who gave three reasons as to why magic has been eminent in man's life regardless of the fact that it is observed as 'patently false' by the scientific community. These are:

1. It appears to work empirically: rain rituals are often followed by rain, even though it might not come immediately.
2. Failure can be attributed to errors in the prescription, ritual, or spell, or to inadequate preparation or observance of taboos.
3. What is accepted, as evidence is variable, for there is flexibility about judgments of success and failure. (Niehaus 2010:434)

Moreover, in an attempt to rationalize the notion of religion, Durkheim and Geertz succinctly pointed out that it portrays and communicates reality through experiences. By claimed that "there is a concrete and living reality" behind worship a totem, Durkheim noted that "religion acquires a meaning and reasonableness" (Morris 1995:119).

In the same manner, Radcliff- Brown outlined that rather than declaring religion as something erroneous and illusory belief, emphasis should be given to religion as a means of maintain social solidarity and peace. Durkheim further alludes the focus on belief which makes religion to be incompatible with science.

> If religion is seen as a system of beliefs, then those beliefs conflict in essential ways with scientific theories. However, if religion is seen instead as sets of practices that produce necessary social experiences which have a transforming effect on participants, and beliefs

> are understood as only a secondary and contingent result of practices, then religion is no longer incompatible with science. (Rawls 2004:270)

The aim of this study is therefore, to unravel and demystify the ideology of irrationality in relation to religion and religious elements. As Rodriguez (2009:75) commented, religion is "Sui generis; it is of its own kind". Thence, it is intricate to measure its rationality. To bring home my point, let us consider Paul Tillich definition of religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life" (ibid: 4). Since rationalism is concerned with the role of reason in obtaining knowledge, religion as knowledge as well as a source of erudition is fueled by a number of psychological, social, political, and economic reasons. Hence, regarding any religion as irrational is futile from any ground of rationalism.

CHAPTER THREE

BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AREA

3.1. Geographical Location and Physical Features

A fairly look into the geographic, ecological, and ethnographic makeup of the study area is necessary to give readers a comprehensive picture of the study area and of the subjects of the research, the Rayya Qobbo people. From the nine *weredas* within the North Wollo Administrative Zone, the present area of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* lies some 570Km northeast of the capital city of Addis Ababa, 170Km south of Mekele, the capital of Tigray National Regional State, and 50Km north of the Zonal capital of North Wollo, Woldiya.

Topographically, the total surface area of the *wereda* comprises approximately 2,312 square kilometers within ANRS and is situated within the spatial range of 11°55'40'' to 12°11'11'' north latitude and 39°22'30'' to 39°48'44'' east longitude. This geographic location covers an extensive area extending from Ibo River in the north up to Alawuha River in the south. Being located within the Great East African Rift Valley, this area is bounded by two national regional states and three *weredas* from the North Wollo Administrative Zone. Enderta of the Tigray National Regional State share the northern boundary, while the Gubalafto and Habru *weredas* of North Wollo Administrative Zone adjoins the southern boundary. Afar National Regional State and Gidan w*ereda* also bounds the Rayya Qobbo area in the east and west respectively.

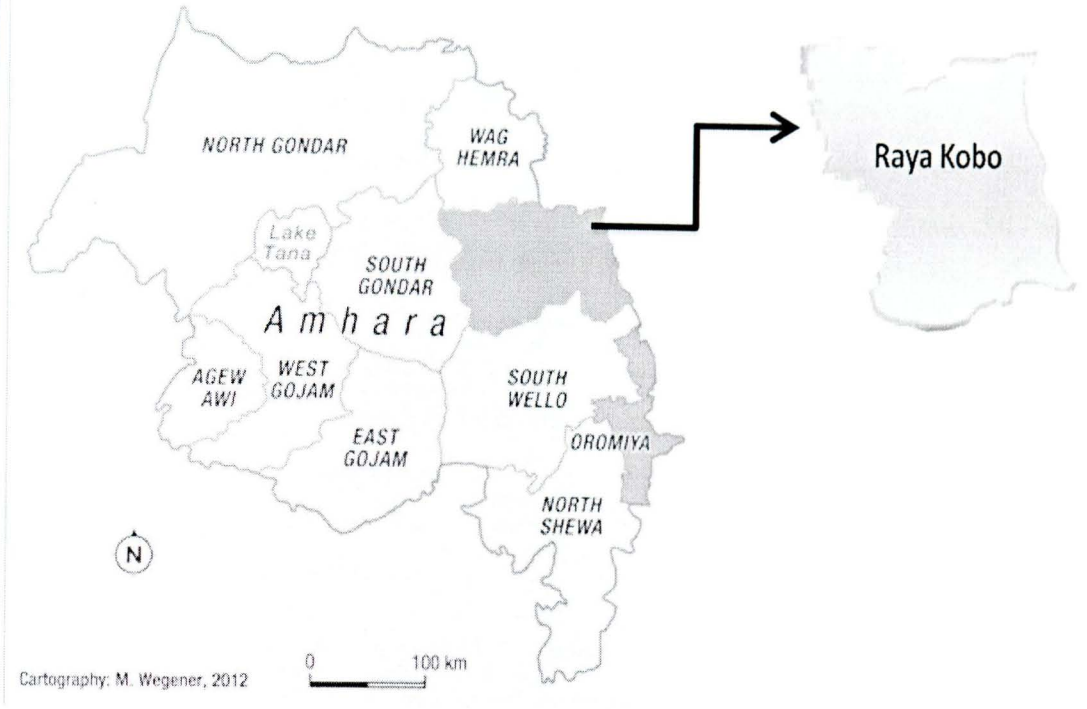


Fig 1: Map of ANRS by Michel Wegener (2012)

Bounded by highly rugged mountains, valleys, and volcanic ridges, the *wereda* is apportioned into thirty four rural and six urban *kebeles* where the hub of this study pivots around four rural villages within *kebele* 018 and 034, namely *Ayda, Kerkat, Lanquso,* and *Amesteya* areas surrounding the market area of *Qalim*.

Rayya Qobbo *wereda* encompasses three major agro ecological zones. The tropical zone (*Dega*) comprising 7% of the total area of the district, is characterized within the altitudinal range of 2,000-3600m and afro-alpine vegetation. It is less productive and sparsely populated. The main cereals cultivated in this area are wheat, beans, and barley. Meanwhile, the temperate zone (*Woina Dega*), including the study area, ranging from 1500 to 2000m, is more suitable for agriculture. Due to the fact that the temperature is moderate, the population is also relatively dense. Dry evergreen mountain forest is common within this area, which comprises almost 37% of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*. Finally, the semi-arid zone (*Qolla*) covers vast area, 56% of the *wereda* surface area. With an elevation of 1400-1600m, this area is hot and prone to mosquito and vermin which made it unfavorable for the living until recent times (Kibrom 2013; Haimanot 2007; and Abdella 2011). In his account, Alvarez quoted,

"... the nature of the country had changed, I say that it was two months since we began to travel, and it was winter, but in this country which we were entering, and where we lost our selves, it was not winter, rather indeed it was a hot summer..." (in Kibrom 2013:12)

Alvarez's note brings us to the climatic season which is characterized with an average temperature of 16°c to 30°c and an average of 600-1000 million liters of rainfall with two rainy seasons. The short rainfall season ranges from February to April while the longer one extends from June to September. The rains, within these seasons, are a result of the current arising from the Gulf of Aden and evaporation from the different headwaters that flow into the major rivers in the area. Some of the rivers, filled to the brim, gush into the desert and water is lost. On the other hand, others wind their way through the dichromatic landscape of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*. Among these Sulula, Oda, Dayu, Tengego, Alawuha, Golina, Hormat, Gerebhara, Gerebetu, Ibo, and Haya are some to mention.

Coming to the topographic feature of the area, embracing a considerable proportion of the landscape, even if undulated features of rugged mountains, hills and steep lands are evident, as Kibrom (2013) and Haimanot (2007) noted, plain land feature is dominant in the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*.

3.2. Demographic Characteristics

The total population of Rayya Qobbo *wereda*, according to the data taken from the administration office population projection in 2007, is 240,478 of which 50.2% are male and 49.8% are female. According to the same source, the average family size of households is estimated to be five.

	URBAN		RURAL		TOTAL	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
	16,311	16,824	95,260	93,499	111,571	110,323
TOTAL	33,135		188,759		240,478	

Table 1: Demographic survey of Rayya Qobbo *wereda* (CSA 2007:42)

3.3. Historical Background

Though there is not much historical evidence that might throw some light on the communities of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*, Hussien Ahmed's (2001), Kibrom Assefa's (2013), and Alvarez's (1540), accounts will suffice to briefly explicate the different historical events that are germane to the focus of the study.

As Hussien (2001:2) remarked, "the Wollo region commanded a pivotal strategic position in the north-south geographical axis, it has served throughout the medieval and early modern periods as a natural route for population movements and military conquests as well as a line of retreat for regional and imperial troops [.....] Wollo has been a cultural melting pot where a process of constant intermingling and fusion of heterogeneous elements has been going on for quite a time". Broadly speaking, the melting pot, the cultural and political geography of the area, is related mainly with five major historical events which relates with the establishment of Christian communities, the Oromo expansion movements, the conquest of Ahmed Gragn, the introduction and expansion of Islamic religion, and finally, the imperial regime of the 19th century (Hussien 2001:2). To this end, from these historical currents, based on accounts from community elders, the Oromo expansion and the introduction of Islamic religion seem to have been the hallmark in shaping the socio-cultural setup of the area, especially the northern part.

With emphasis on the political and religious history of the people, the Rayya Qobbo area seems to have been the scene for an array of historical incidents that played an imperative role in the history of the country in general. While historical accounts prior from the 12th century demonstrate territorial, political, and religious contention between the *Dob'a*, *Qeda,* and *Angot* people, original settlers of the Rayya Qobbo area, with the coming of the Zagwe dynasty in the 12th century, the area marked the onset of northern Wollo, in general, as a political, economic, religious, and historical center (Kibrom 2013).

Owing to the long distance trade and the advent of different political powers, the Rayya Qobbo area has undergone a series of socio-economic, political, and religious integration and reintegration (Kibrom 2013). Such process was even more discernable with the introduction of Islamic tradition and the Oromo expansion movement.

Though the Dob'a people were claimed to be originally Muslims, different historical accounts attest that with the coming of the Christian Zagwe Dynasty, these people were forced either to renounce Islam, embrace Christianity, or else retreat. This trend of forceful Christianization has also continued up to the 19th and 20th centuries where emperors attempted to build a nation through religious homogenization (Muhammad 1997; Bahiru 2001; Hussein 2001).

Regardless of the claims that Christianity was introduced to the area through population settlement during the Aksumite period (Hussien 2001; Kibrom 2013), according to the clergy of EOC, Christianity has come to express the socio-cultural identity of the area long before the establishment of the Aksumite kingdom. In due course, the coming of Islamic religion to the area and establishment of Islamic sultanates, owing to the coming of Ahmed Gragn and the long distance trade, according to Kibrom (2013) led to socio-cultural, political, and religious changes.

Next to the coming of Islam into the area, the Oromo expansion movement is another incident that played an important role in the socioeconomic dynamics of the area. Following the successive waves of the various Oromo groups, the original settlers of the Rayya Qobbo area, the *Angot* and *Dob'a* people, have retreated to the highlands leaving the lowlands to the new comers. Though consecutive conflicts have been palpable within this area in search of fecund grazing and arable land, starting from the end of the 16th century, through time, coalescence of cultural layers of the different people living in the area became evident, especially through marital relations and economic interdependence through trade (Kibrom 2013: 11-21).

From the seven clans of eastern Cushitic speaking Oromo people who penetrated and settled in northern, northeastern, and southwestern Amhara region from the last quarter of the 16th century, the *Marawa* clan from the *Baraytuma* Oromo was the group that migrated northwards to the Rayya Qobbo area. What is referred, as the Rayya Oromo was, ergo, the "offspring of a marriage between the eponymous ancestor of the Tulama and the former wife of one Muhammed Yusuf, possibly of the Afar origin" (Hussien 2001:19). As he further pointed out, though the impact of this movement still needs further scrutiny, the oral testimonies from the area elucidates social, cultural, demographic, economic, and religious synthesis, the fusion of elements being from both sides (ibid: 20).

Though the influence of the movement was visible in many aspects of the people's socioeconomic profile, the role they played in the politics of the area was trivial, in respect to other historical events. In explaining this, Crummey argued that

> The Oromo migration was an important factor which contributed towards the ethnic diversity of north-central Ethiopia, thereby complicating for the imperial administration the task of establishing its control over the old Amhara region (in Hussien 2000:21).

However, the *Dob'a* and *Angot* people, being later inhabited by the Yeju Oromo, the contribution of the Oromo people to the political aspect of the Rayya Qobbo area was enlivened once again. The Oromo were considered to be resistant to the political structure of the warlords. It is with the change of central rulers of Ethiopia, the Rayya Qobbo area has been fragmented into various administrative regions most commonly between the Amhara and Tigray (Kibrom: 2013:1).

Besides the Oromo expansion which has more or less intermingled with the indigenous settlers of the area, the settlement of people from the Tigray region and other Amhara regions during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV also contributed to the political and socio-economic changes of the area. From the 1957 'divide and rule policy' of the Ethiopian rulers, from the time of Menelik II to the Derg administration, the Rayya Qobbo area was administered under the Yeju *awraja*, the Wollo administrative province, the administration of Tigray region, and for some time under General Abebe Damtew by virtue of marital law enacted by the time of Emperor Haile Selassie I (Solomon 2006:1). In the meantime, the coming of the imperial regime disenfranchised the political structure of the area, keeping out of other aspects.

In general, the historical background of the area attests an ongoing negotiation and renegotiation between different events that occurred before and after the 16th century. This, I believe, attributed to what Hussien (2001) indicated as "melting pot". In case of the Rayya Qobbo area, these historical events made the area home of variegated features.

3.4. Social Organization

Being conveyed as the "rainbow of northern Ethiopia" (Kibrom 2013:9), the people of Rayya Qobbo have a sundry of ethnic composition. Within this ethnic composition, the social

organization of the people lies in the homestead, which is the primary nub of the Rayya Qobbo society. The homestead varies in size from that of a nuclear family to a hamlet of six to twelve houses of related families, which consisted, in previous times, relatives, servants, and slaves. It is within this homestead that one can understand the power hierarchy, gender relation, resource management, social values and relations. It is, thereby, within this realm that this study focuses on.

Bearing this in mind, with regards to the power and gender relations, the institution of patriarchy is apparent within the Rayya Qobbo people. This can be unveiled, according to Reminick (1974: 279-280), through the land system inherent within the people.

> Land is the fundamental requirement of the patriarchal system, for without it a man cannot fulfill his basic role of supporting his dependents and providing a legacy for his children as a reward for their loyalty and service. But land is a scarce resource, and there are often more claims to land than can be supported.

While the domiciliary head, the man is accountable and in authority of family members and kindred, the hegemony of the domestic realm lies in the hands of the women. After distinction of roles at the age of six or seven, while plowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing the farmland and clearing the bushes is the role of men, the woman fetches water, kneads the dough, bakes bread, grinds grain and any other arrays of domestic arrangements within the house. Thereby, the social system fosters children and adolescents to be accustomed to the responsibilities that the society shoulders them with.

Besides the sphere of work, the patriarchy can also be seen in the pattern of residence. Because the man plays a predominant role in subsistence, patrilocal residence is favored among the Rayya Qobbo people. However, this residence arrangement is prominent and customary if the father is no longer living. In such case, the oldest son usually assumes jurisdiction for the affairs of the hamlet. Other than this, the residence pattern seems to be virilocal.

Above and beyond this residence arrangement, descent seems to be bilateral, where a person affiliates genealogically through both mother's and father's line. The absence of formal structure in extended kin relations is also another point noteworthy to mention. This is visible via the kinship terminology, which regards all male relatives, close friends, men of same generation, or countrymen as *wondem*, brother. Similarly, the terms for uncle and aunt, *agot* and *akeste*, are

sometimes used for nephew, niece, and cousin as well and often replaced by the abstract generic word for kin, *zamad*. This term refers to consanguine as well as affine kin and even goes beyond this proviso to close friends.

Though the kinship and descent system of the Rayya Qobbo people seem to have a broad relationship, emphasis is more given to the independence of the household, which brings us to where I started, the homestead. A family has to satisfy its needs through production and exchange. Any consumption need outside the reach of the household should be bought from the markets, which are normally held once a week (see Appendix III: fig 19).

In these markets, one can become aware of the fact that the Rayya Qobbo people are multilingual society for they speak Amharic, Afan Oromo (the main language from the time of the Oromo expansion up to the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV), Tigrigna commonly known as *Rayigna*, Agew, and Afar. A mileage of blending of these languages, therefore, resulted in different dialect than the original languages (Solomon 2006:1).

According to the information obtained from community elders (KI1, KI2, I8), the political structure of the Rayya Qobbo area have been administered by a series of offices headed by the *Mislene*, a district headman. Next to this administrative office lies *Chiqa Shum*, a community magistrate, which in turn is supervised by the *Melkegna*. Other than these, the *Gasha Halafi* had the role of considerable importance. It carried out the duties of tax collection, adjudication, promulgation of official decrees, supervision of occasional work projects, levying of men for military service, and officiating at civil marriages and divorces at the level of a village. Being under the mandate of the *Mislene*, the *Gasha Halafi* is responsible for the subjects under his jurisdiction only.

This office is circulated, usually annually, among a small number of men whose eligibility is based on their hereditary descent and ownership of certain pieces of land. In addition to these offices which vanished with the reorganization of provincial administration since 1942, the community elders, which are called *Abbagahr*, and religious leaders play an important role in the leadership and social control realm of the society. Though masculinity seems to tower above the social, economic, religious, and political arenas, women play a prominent role in social control

and solidarity. Involving in conflict resolution mechanisms, termed as *Shemglena*, women of the community partake in the political and social sphere of the society.

In general, living in a circular hut with a conical thatched roof (see Appendix III:18), the people of Rayya Qobbo are disputably mistaken to be aggressive, full of abhorrence, and perfidy towards one's country by helping out foreigners' raid of the country in the past times (Kibrom 2013). Nonetheless, the Rayya Qobbo people seem to be humble, frisky, and prideful.

3.5. Economic Activities and Livelihood Strategies

All human beings strive to meet their basic needs to survive in this world. In this struggle for survival, human beings developed a walkway to resources and a means to make the most of it. As an imperative aspect to be au fait with a certain society, modes of subsistence, "a cultural infrastructure that best suit a society's need compatible with the natural resources available and the limitations of the various habitats" (Haviland et.al. 2007:370), should be taken into account when dealing with an ethnographic study of a society. With this in mind, the economic activities and livelihood strategies of the Rayya Qobbo people swivel around agriculture, which involves both crop production and livestock rearing.

Comprising about 85% of the population, agriculture is the main bases of the economy of Rayya Qobbo *wereda*. Depending on the scenery of the areas, the resources available, and therefore, the technology required to effectively utilize them, the livelihood strategy on which the people capitalized on vary within the *wereda*. For instance, areas of high altitude and sufficient amount of seasonal rainfall engage in intensive rain-fed plough agriculture. In such *dega* and *woina dega* zones (a rugged highland with a temperate climate), people eke out a living mainly on barley, *teff*, beans, chickpeas, flax, and wheat. Meanwhile, due to their drought resistance qualities, crops that are commonly produced in the lowlands are sorghum, *teff*, and maize. Recently, however, with the coming of irrigation system from underground water and alluvial soil eroded form the highlands, onions, chilies, tomatoes, peanuts, cotton oil seeds, and various types of fruits are cultivated in the vicinity of water sources. With regards to the production process, the people in this *wereda* use simple technologies, and different mechanisms including the ox plough, crop rotation, soil furrowing for drainage, and some irrigation where streams are

accessible. With such methods at hand, the Rayya Qobbo people maintain three harvest seasons annually.

Nonetheless, during recent times, according to Haimanot (2007:34), the land is lacking fecundity as a result of

- adverse climatic conditions due to erratic rainfalls and long standing drought periods
- relatively small land holdings; which range from 0.25 to 0.75 hectares
- insufficient application of basic agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pest control techniques.

Another livelihood strategy adopted by the Rayya Qobbo people is pastoralism. As Hussien (2001) and Kibrom (2012) accented, unlike the highlanders, people residing in the lowlands were pastoralists in the old days. Nomadic pastoralism was the principal mode of life of the people inhabiting the region. Even with the coming of the Oromo people, this type of livelihood preponderated the area. According to Kibrom (2013:16ff), it was with the advent of the Tigray people and some Amhara people that crop production was introduced to the area. In addition, the transaction with the highlanders further chipped in to this shift in modes of subsistence.

Aside from crop cultivation, cattle rearing is an eminent part of the livelihood strategy of the people residing in this area. Beyond being the means of livelihood, it is a conspicuous wealth ranking mechanism defining ones socio-economic status in the community. As Alvarez (in Kibrom 2012) noted, in his account of the geography of the Abyssinian provinces, this area is well known for its substantial number of livestock. In addition to yielding milk, meat, hides and skin, and dung for household fuel, livestock is considered as a source of income in cases of impecunious situations. Small stocks consisting of goats and sheep are also reared in the lowlands. Depending on the topography of the area, the highland livestock are called *Zebu* whereas those in the lowland area are referred as *Rayya*. Serving as a means to accord privilege, camels and mule are raised in the lowlands and highlands respectively. Besides as a ranking mechanism, these animals are also used as a means of transportation. In general, however, the two modes of subsistence complemented each other.

Moreover, starting from the earlier populace of the area, trade transaction between the lowlanders and highlanders has also been evident as a livelihood strategy. Serving as guides for

the caravan traders from Afar in bar salt, the people of Rayya Qobbo *wereda* also engaged in long distance trade (Kibrom 2013:19). Perpetuating such tradition, at present times also, trade and craftsmanship such as weaving are another means of subsistence adapted by the people in this area.

3.6. Synopsis of the Religious Milieu

In sketching out the religious profile of the people residing in Rayya Qobbo *wereda*, Christianity is, as Reminick (1974:280) quoted, the "legitimate religion" among the highlanders. With the political power exercised by Christian kingdoms, from Zagwe up to the Solomonic dynasty, northern part of Wollo, according to Trimingham (in Hussien 2001:3), was Christian. Other than these features, which developed prior from 16th century, the existence of churches and monasteries in the area also attested the long hold of Christianity in the area. Meanwhile, Hussien (2001:8) argued that early settlers of the Rayya Qobbo area, the *Dob'a* people, have been pagans until they became Muslims with the conquest of Ahmed Gragn and the long distance trade which runs through the Afar to the coastal areas. Moreover, with the coming of the Oromo people, other religious beliefs came into the picture (Kibrom2012: 170). Therefore, Christianity as well as Islamic religion is found along with other beliefs among the lowlanders, first and foremost those religious beliefs procured from the Oromo people that migrated to the place in the 16thcentury.

In the meantime, the highland areas of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* are remarked as strict observant of Orthodox Christianity. The fact that Levine (1972) favored the word "parish" for a village in the Amhara society signposts the importance of the church within the Amhara community, including the Rayya Qobbo area. In view of this, because a village unit is coterminous with a surrounding church, the highland communities within the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* are, in most instances, alluded with the name of the church, such as Kerkat Teklehaymanot, Lanquso Egzeabhera'b, Selelhula Kidanemhiret.

Hence, the nexus between the church and the community seems to be fervent. Community members are expected to attend the mass or any other church sacraments or ritual ceremonies. And by contributing certain quantity of what have been produced, they avow their support to the

church. Meanwhile, the church provides moral codes and behavior that guides the lives of the people. As a corollary of this synergy and interdependence, Christianity, namely EOC, is seen tantamount to the ethnic group of Amhara in general (Levine 1972). With this in mind, "Protestantism", "Catholics", "Islam", or any other religions of the book are equated with "paganism" in the highlands. They are, thereby, sequestered and scorned. The statistics from the Amhara region, in general, also reveals this matter. The fact that traditional religions account to 0% also reveal the fact that people situate their religious experiences within the 'official' religious institutions, especially Christianity and Islam. It also entails the flaw in the methods exhausted by the CSA in collecting the data. Nonetheless, in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo area, people seem to regard their affiliation with and only with Christianity.

Religion	**Urban**	**Rural**	**Total Average**
Orthodox	78.9%	83%	82.5%
Protestant	0.2%	0.1%	0.2%
Catholic	0%	0%	0%
Muslim	17.2%	16.8%	17.2%
Traditional	0%	0%	0%
Others	0.1%	0%	0.1%

Table 2: Religious distribution of ANRS (CSA 2007:65)

Unlike this outlook towards Christianity among the highlanders, people residing in the lowlands have an assorted orientation towards religious beliefs. Though Christianity still has preeminence, "Islam", "Protestantism", and "Catholicism" also are contemporaneous with EOC. Besides this, traditional practices such as the '*zar*' cult, '*Wadaja*', '*Abigem*', '*Tufta*', *'Duberti'*, *'Ye'abwara guzgwaz'* and the *'Qolle'* are extant among the people living in the lowlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RELIGIOUS RITUALS OF *ERFO MEREBA* AND *SHENECHA*

4.1. Genres of Religious Rituals within the Study Area

As aforementioned in previous chapters, rituals are one means of articulating religion in action. With this in mind, among the people of the Rayya Qobbo highlanders, rituals are believed to irradiate the religion of Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, the people engage in multiple memberships in the various forms of religious expressions which bring us to the notion of polychromic belief, doing and believing more than one thing at a time (Blakely and Blakely 1994:403). In explaining the Hemba funeral rituals of the Bahemba people, Pamela Blakely and Thomas Blakely forwards that, outside the beliefs and practices of Christianity, introduced to the area through missionaries, people partake in various religious expressions which are "fundamentally irreconcilable with some form of Christianity" as providing additional options and resources for constructing efficacious approaches.

In similar manner, though Christianity is adhered at large in the Rayya Qobbo area, as Rodrigues and Harding (2009:14) adduces "for the true constellation of beliefs and practices in any one person is unique to that person, and varies from every other, even those who profess the very same faith. No two Christians believe exactly the same thing, perform exactly the same religious activities, or share exactly the same interior disposition towards their religion".

Thereby, extending such variations right down to the level of individuals, one can see the multifarious genres of religious rituals and practices, outside the dominion and ambit of EOC, being performed within the Rayya Qobbo people. Having an assortment of choice in the means of recourse and remedy for problems, these people have many beliefs about the malevolent and benevolent beings that surround them. It is based on this belief that the rituals are, therefore, enunciated.

Alternating back and forth or concurrently on these religious rituals and practices, the people seize upon different strategies to live a peaceful and secure life within the society. Concealed in the notion of "*our forefathers' tradition and custom*", the Rayya Qobbo people, thus, perform a number of religious practices, which are claimed to have their own precept and practitioners. In the lowlands, these practices are mainly undertaken by Muslims, whereas in the highlands, the Christians are the ones responsible for such religious practices (KI2: Woldiya town, 28-01-2013). Though a wide range of such practices are evident within the area, the most common ones in the highlands can be pointed out as follows.

Being the most extensively exploited topic in the anthropology of religion in Ethiopia, the *zar cult* is one of the religious practices that is existent in the area (Trimingham 1965; Leslau 1958; Messing 1958; Setargew 2010; Young 1975; Natvig 1987).

Borrowing elements from the Agaw, the Oromo people, and Islamic neighbors (Young 1975:571; Kibrom 2013:174), *zar* spirits are of many kinds. They may be male or female, Christians or Muslims, mischievous or somber. Though "the cult is not a unitary phenomenon [...], hence, having important ritual and cosmological differences from place to place" (Young 1975:568), such kinds of practices are carried out to exonerate evil spirits and rinse oneself from bad health. In the Rayya Qobbo area, for instance, there are seven distinctive types of *zar* cult which are believed to have eminent place among the society, namely

- *Tikurbela- Abagam* and *Gojjame*
- *Nechbela*- Oromo *zar*
- *Ferenji- Zebenay* and *Shegye*
- *Tereche*
- *Qeybela- Anbessa* and *Chenger*
- *Tsadiqu*
- *Shanqo* and,

Another religious practice that is evident among the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area is *'Abigem'*. Akin to wedding anniversaries of westerners, this religious practice enables couples to renew their vow to each other and relish their union in public. Accompanied with lavish feasts, this celebration stays for three days and slot in the *zar* cult as a means to bring blessing to the marriage (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013).

The religious practice of is also another religious practice performed by the people in this area. *Wadaja* is a communal prayer and blessing where the relationship with the supernatural is

bridged (Kelkilachew 1997; Meron 2012). Among the highlanders, however, the notion of *Wadaja* is expansive. Unlike the above religious practices' peculiar orientation, it puts the accent on a wide range of concerns like wealth, health, peace and security, marriage, productivity and so on (I7: Kerkat village, 008-02-2013). Aside from this, while the *Abbagahr*, religious clerics, Muslim in religion, are the ones conversant with this practice in the lowlands, the adept of this religious practice among the highlanders could either be an *Abbagahr* (which denotes community elders, Christian in religion, involved in conflict resolution) or *Balezar* (an individual knowledgeable of the *zar* cult) (KI3: Woldiya town, 28-01-2013). As a result, a range of religious practices accentuating on blessing and prayer are incorporated in this conception including *Erfo Mereba*, *Shenecha*, and *Abigem*.

This brings us to the religious rituals of *merekat* (blessing) and *tselot* (prayer). As one manifestation of religious belief, blessing, and prayer are regarded as the lifeblood of the people and landmark of the Rayya Qobbo area in general (KI1: Kerkat village, 09-02-2013). With regards to blessing, men as well as women are engaged in blessing everything and everyone either by words or by proverbs or other genres such as genealogical legend and historical narrative, praise formula, phatic gesture, song drum poetry, parable, story, and folktale.

Embraced within the day-to-day life of the people, blessing is sought when a group of people sit to eat or drink coffee, when a construction of a new house is commenced and completed, when an animal is slaughtered, when leaving a house and so on. In each case, blessing is incessant passing around from one person to the other until a priest, monk, or deacon wrap up the benediction. Ergo, one can envisage blessing as benediction and prayer rather than as a consecration.

As a corollary of this outlook, the Rayya Qobbo people deem prayer and blessing as the main route to achieve anything on earth. As a popular practice, despite their religious affiliation to any institution, everybody partakes in these religious practices; they pray and pass on their blessing on a daily bases. If one prays properly like this, "*A God who feeds up the hyena, our forefathers Lord, everything happens in your will*" "*May you keep the day from trouble and keep me safe*" "*May the night be peaceful*", the homeliest aspect of the everyday life is affluent and secure. If she/he passes on his blessing to others like this, "*May God fulfill your wishes*" "*May he keep you safe and healthy*", the compliments conveyed will become discernible in her/his life (I5:

Amsteya village, 14-01-2013). In such prayers and blessings, the conception of deity could be either Christian God or other spirits such as *Adbar* or *Qolle* (protective spirits of the community.

Generally speaking, with regards to the whereabouts on which such practices are performed, the most common fields of practice centers on the household. Within this enclave of the domiciliary, the religious practices broadly cover artfully demonstrative proverbs, and other oral forms such as myths, narratives, epics, lyrics, laments, and riddles combined with gestural performance.

Hence, it can be reckoned that there is a wide spectrum of religious beliefs and practices among the Rayya Qobbo people, including practices such as the evil eye, sorcery, and seer, in bringing wealth and health, exorcising demons, interpreting dreams, and predicting the future. But being primarily concerned with and interested in understanding and examining the religious practices of prayer and benediction, I have the space to describe only one of the complex and solemn practices entitled *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. I will now, thence, turn to some of the evidences from ethnography, which is, in effect, a recapitulation of these religious practices.

4.2. *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*: The Concepts, Performers, and Practice

Ammerman (2003:224) noted that, "describing religious identities is not a matter of asking a checklist of categorical questions, but a matter of analyzing a dynamic process". In pursuing such conviction, therefore, I will now set out to explain and further explore the vigorous and erratic aspects of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as performed in the Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of North Wollo zonal administration. In an attempt to observe and examine with some degree of neutrality, the next sections of this chapter will shed some light on the historical background, knowledge and practice, and purpose of these religious practices.

4.2.1. Purported Origin of the Religious Rituals

The complex of religious practices such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* cannot be properly understood without ushering into the historical accounts. Since these religious practices are historically and socially situated within the society, such attempt to elucidate historical antecedents inevitably brings to light the polyvalent formation of these practices.

The alleged origin of both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* is not perspicuously stated. However, from the different accounts that were written on the area, it has become evident that such religious practices are foreign conceptions introduced to the society (Kibrom 2013; Demeke 2012). Conversely, by taking into account Donald Levine's argument that "the Amhara people are adamant to new customs that strikes them as outlandish like the case of conversion to Catholicism in the 16thcentury" (1972:88), it can be attested that the historical background of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* can be situated within the society as well. In fact, both outlooks turned up in the interviews held with community elders.

For those who claim that these religious practices have roots in places other than the Rayya Qobbo area, the stronghold of Christianity in the area served them as substantiation. With the coming of Christianity to the region, either through Emperor Amde Tsion (r.1314-1341) or even earlier, dating back to the Aksumite period, there have been attempts to expand Orthodox Christianity especially by Emperor Yohannes IV (Kibrom 2013:166-168). As a result a number of churches and monasteries were constructed within this historical period and thus Christianity became conventional religion of the Rayya Qobbo people, mainly in the highlands. Yet, the expansion of the Oromo people to this area in the 16th c and the incursion of Gragn Ahmed, from 1527 to 1543, acquainted the people with other religious beliefs and practices, of which Islamic religion and practices such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are part of (ibid).

Accentuating on the arrival of the Oromo people and the introduction of religious beliefs and practices, some argued that political integration later led to social and religious fusion especially with the institution of Christianity. During the Oromo expansion of the 16th century, it is believed that the Oromo clan with "traditional belief system" and religious leaders called '*Abbagahr*' and '*Ragicha*' conquered the lowlands of the Rayya Qobbo region (Kibrom 2013:170; Demeke 2012:4). Mainly, a clan led by an individual called 'Senye Seged' came to the area with rituals and practices that enabled productivity by expelling out evil spirits from places and especially farm lands that are in danger of spirit possession. In the meantime, in fear of the Oromo people, the Christians retreated to the highlands (Demeke 2012:4). However, in time, integration and syncretization seems to be inevitable. After the beginning of expansion and a long period of conquest and settlement, as a result, the original denizens of the area were interspersed with the Oromo people.

The Oromo people retaining much of their indigenous beliefs and customs and the Rayya Qobbo people preserving their Christianity may have led to the existence of syncretized religious practices among the Rayya Qobbo people and their assimilation with the Oromo people. Thus, the development of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* may be brought about by the interface with the Oromo people whereupon can be regarded at least as old as the 16th century.

Another explanation given for the origin of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* within the Oromo people lies further back from the 16th century and hinges on the history of slavery and slave trade. According to oral accounts of the Rayya Qobbo people, what is referred as 'Oromo', with no connection with the ethnic group, are *barya* (slaves) from the south in general traded to the well-off, notable, and affluent families in the area called '*Balabbat*'. In an encounter with community elders, I came to understand that the highland region, which is the study area of this research, have been inhabited by Christian *balabbats* who moved to these places in fear of the epidemics in the lowlands. Within the household structure of a *balabbat*, servants and slaves are incorporated in providing labor force and other spiritual needs. Being considered as the nethermost in the echelon of the society, they served as "sacrificial lambs" in matters of exigency with dubious outcome. For instance, in cases of pregnancy their sacrifice was considered to ease the pain in labor. In case of death, as well, their sacrifice and eventually their corpse were believed to provide coziness and serenity to the dead (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013).

These people were insulated from socializing and mingling with the highlanders, which sooner or later became inexorable. Thereby, through marriage alliance, which hitherto is proscribed, the slaves (the Oromo) came to engender socioeconomic and religious thoughts, expressions, and actions of which *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are part of.

Apart from such contentions that the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* diffused from the Oromo people, some people claimed that such religious practices developed out of the perennial and inescapable uncertainty and unpredictability of the physical world, and thus, threat that the society faced for generations (KI2, KI3, I8, I28). Since such problems were erratic and ambiguous, the human power was unable to unravel the cause and ultimately the way out from such problems. This called for an intervention from external forces and agencies through the channel of rituals and practices. As a result, one of the religious practices, which gave remedy to some of the problems of the society, came to be known as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Thereby,

according to this discourse, the purported origin of these religious practices lies within the Rayya Qobbo people.

Meanwhile, in relation with this assertion, Mulu Assefa (FGD2: Kerkat village, 02-01-2013) commented that such religious beliefs and practices are inherent; "*it is in your bone*". In addition, Assefa Yimer (FGD2: Kerkat village, 02-01-2013) claimed that the genesis of such practices can go up to the time of the creation of Adam and eve. In this historical narrative, he stated that

> Adam and Eve gave birth to 30 children. However, while God asked them about the number of their children, Eve answered 15. So, he said, "*let it be as you told*". Then after, the rest of them (15 in number) became 'Satan' reminiscing different wild animals. These animals later on befriended the people and manipulated them into serving them. Afterwards, the people were incapacitated to cease this manipulation because of the wrath wreaked upon them by the 'Satan' in cases of such attempts. Holding 1/3rd power on the world, given by God, the 'Satan' is believed to be capable of anything. As a result, our forefathers continued to ask for these 1/3rd power through the rituals and we followed their footsteps.

Expounding on this narrative, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are associated with certain ancestral spirits or mythical beings that are supposed to have arisen in the 'mythical' period at the beginning of time. Though a careful study of this origin, for in mystical form, is quixotic, one can understand from such accounts that people emphasize on belief and that such practices are inviolate and has been handed down for centuries by hallowed tradition including Christianity. "*No matter what you believe in*", they argue, "*brings you what you desire*" (FGD4: Kerkat village, 04-01-2013). Thus, such practices are reconsidered as something which brings this into reality. On the other hand, for those who does not have faith in such power, religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are a means of perpetuating tradition and thereby armor from retribution of the devil (I21: Kerkat village, 09-02-2013).

What these histories unfold, therefore, is a broad and multivalent network of discourse that has spun itself over time with no discernible common pathway. In view of this diverse discursive history, it is evident that the present conceptions of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* or for that matter any other religious practices cannot be grasped apart from the past. Thus, to consider the historical accounts of these religious practices is, to say the least, preeminent for understanding the conception and praxis of the practices and thereby the next section of this chapter.

4.2.2. Conception and Praxis of the Religious Rituals

Through the life of the Rayya Qobbo people, the venerable religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* held the tenor of their existence and livelihood. Through divination, where demands are claimed and benevolence is ascertained from the supernatural, crises are sorted out and desires come into effect. Illness, misfortunes, accidents, and frustrations are superseded with births, good health, success, wealth, and long life. These religious practices are, therefore, culturally loud and vivacious whether or not it is deemed as imperative or amiss in the public gaze.

To borrow Turner's term, the exegetical meaning of these religious practices on the whys and wherefores of the rituals and the account of the praxis, which will be adduced in the next section, will provide concise understanding of both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as well as the different cultural ethos of the people residing in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo area.

Erfo Mereba/Duberti

Being practiced at large within the Rayya Qobbo area, *Erfo Mereba* is an artistic and lyrical means of performing benediction and prayer by a group of ordained women. Even if the practice remains the same, the name assigned to it varies within the society; while the highlanders call it *Erfo Mereba*, the lowlanders regard it as *Duberti*. With no definitive studies, which explored the etymology of these terms, from an encounter with community elders and religious leaders, the word *Erfo Mereba* has its origin in Arabic language whereas *Duberti* is associated with the term "*dubartii*" which means "woman" in Afan Oromo. Derived from the word "*Rabi*" which implies God in Arabic, and "*Erfo*" which is a spirit gendered to be female, *Erfo Mereba* is believed to denote the recognition of *Erfo* as a deity or supernatural being with the utmost divinity (KI3: Woldiya, 27-01-2013). According to Demeke (2012:4), *Erfo Mereba* also means, "let it be done by the name of _____."

Aside from comprehending the semantics of these terms, reciting Mesfin Ayele, the name *Erfo Mereba* and *Duberti* stand for two different notions. The groups of women, which are locally

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The blank refers to the different spirits that can be addressed, depending on the person passing on the benediction.

known as *Duberti*, perform the group prayer of "*Wadaja*" for healing purpose and the blessing of "*Erfo Mereba*" for expecting mothers (2004:66). Hence, according to Mesfin, the name *Erfo Mereba* is solely applied to blessing whereas *Duberti* are the women responsible for performing this religious practice. On the contrary, as of the information gathered from the study area, in addition to implying the same religious practice, these terms are also used interchangeably to insinuate the ritual leaders as well; the difference being geographical rather than conception. Following this argument, henceforth, this paper will use the term *Erfo Mereba* to infer both to the practice as well as the people involved, as used among the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area.

Embarking now on the procedure and process of this religious practice, upon the request of a family, *Erfo Mereba* is performed in times of pregnancy especially during the last days of labor, wedding, illness, conflicts, natural environmental disasters such as drought and seasonal disparities, farming seasons, and while undertaking journeys where accidents are not uncommon. This religious practice is also carried out to bring down rain, peace, love, and prosperity to the community. Thence, given the fact that this religious practice is anticipated to bring good luck, wealth and opulence, and triumph in every endeavor the people face, it is performed in what they convey as '*muluqen*' (full days). Even though the logic behind is hazy, days of the week except Monday and Wednesday are considered as full days and thereby optimal for performing such religious rituals. In the meantime, Monday and Wednesday are thought to be '*godoloqen*' (partial days) (I13: Kerkat village, 25-01-2013). Beside the days, the months are also explicitly stated whereby January, February, March, April, June and September are described as high seasons to perform *Erfo Mereba*. This is so because, these months, especially January, April, and June are seasons for harvest and weddings. On these occasions, therefore, people are able to throw lavish feasts.

For the three consecutive days of carrying out *Erfo Mereba*, the host family should be able to provide what is needed. When I had the privilege of attending this ceremony, however, the number of days for performing *Erfo Mereba* was rather limited to one day. Neither were the feasts that lavish. Accommodating the religious practice with the present situation, that is the value of time and the dearth of individuals to perform this ritual in fear of inculpation by the government, the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* only takes a day. As a recent parlance, the

Culture and Tourism Bureau of Woldiya town has reproached these religious practices as "*Ba'ed Amleko*" (idolatry practices) under the category of 'harmful traditional practices'. In a claim that these religious practices are an impediment to the development of the country by instilling wishful thinking and hope rather than hard work, the censure against these religious practices are considered by the people as impositions not to perform them and eventually inculpation (I11, I12). Yet, since tradition has to be followed and revered from generation to generation, the three days ceremony is carried out three times within a day as a replica for the three consecutive days performance.

Furthermore, the number of the group to perform *Erfo Mereba* has also changed through time. As per to the custom, five or seven women are needed to carry out the ceremony, akin to the number of clergy needed to perform church sacraments. Following the emphasis on the numbers being odd, nowadays, three is the common number of women to perform *Erfo Mereba*. As Kathleen Gossman (2004:88) noted, even though rituals are "often accompanied by carefully defined clothing worn only by those directly involved as participants and observers", the regalia and jewelry which accoutered *Erfo Mereba* women are also missing these days. '*Gufta*', a long strip of red cotton cloth pawned around their head, and ornaments of the neck and arm embroidered with colorful threads has become a tale of the elderlies.

Nonetheless, the time for performing *Erfo Mereba* has been unswerving throughout the years. Taking from two to three hours maximum, the time between 12:00 noon and 2pm, time when the body is believed to become numinous and able to converse with the supernatural, are conducive for performing *Erfo Mereba*. The sayings serve up the logic behind the mysticism of the time to perform such religious rituals (I9: Lanquso, 02-02-2013).

"*Doro saychoh ateramed seatu yelela new*"

"Do not take a walk before cockcrow. It is the time of the others"

"*Qeter lay atewta seatu yelela newna*"

"Do not get out of the house in the noontime. It is the time of the others[1]"

The time allotted to the 'others' hence makes it possible to call upon the spirits for *Erfo Mereba*, especially the *Qolle* or *Adbar*, and show gratitude or present entreat. In the meantime, priests

[1]The 'others', according to this saying, implies, in general, spirits

construe the meaning of the 'others' as malignant spirits with ill will. Thereby, any appeal to these spirits is considered as developing affiliation with the evil, which in turn marks *Erfo Mereba* as malevolent.

Briefly presenting the processes and procedures that abound within the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* will help to advance the discussion and throw light upon the contention of either being malevolent and gratuitous or benevolent and prominent. In this level of processes that are integrated in the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, the groundwork starts with the planning, scheduling, and then setting up provisions. After a host family contacts the adept of this religious practice at least a month earlier, they start to make ready requisites for the ceremony. Specific cuisines such as porridge and butter, different types of incense depending on the spirit to be addressed, and coffee are primarily prepared.

At the day of the ceremony, after a meal and other requisites are prepared and close friends as well as relatives, only women, come together, a young boy will bring *Chefe*, freshly cut grasses, and put it by the gateway until the *Erfo Mereba* women come. Aside from providing money for buying necessities from the weekly market of Qalim, this is the only means where men can partake in this religious practice. Yet, though it is considered to be indecorous, men practicing the *zar* cult (*Balezar*) are called upon, now and then, by some people to take part in *Erfo Mereba* (KI4: Kerekat village, 27-12-2012).

At noon, the *Erfo Mereba* women will either come together forming a queue or individually. As was evident in one of the ceremonies I attended, if the "*Meri*" (leader), the one that instigates and then primly moves the practice, comes earlier, she will wait for the others at the gate of the host family's house. Either way, the *Erfo Mereba* women do not enter the house up on their arrival.



Fig 2: *Erfo Mereba* women lie in wait for others at the gateway of the house; Photographed by Kiya Gezahegne

They have to wait for the invitation of the host being seated at the gate. Thereby, as a sign of respect and welcoming them into the house, the wife of the host family will kiss their knees and wash their feet at the gate (see Appendix III:22). It is after this that the *Meri* will lead the way into the house after she apportions the grass to the others. Holding *Beleq* or *Qoti* (a wooden rod) on their hand and burning *Et'an* (incense) and other odiferous wood, they enter the house giving precedence to their right leg which all epitomizes the entry of good thing into the house.



Fig 3: *Erfo Mereba* leader entering the house, preceding her right leg; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

After circling the house three times, from inside, while spreading the grass, they prostrate to kiss the grass covering the ground and take a seat on *Agoza*, an ox skin, where they straighten out their legs and cover it with a clean cloth made ready for this purpose. Accompanying all this, a woman referred, as *Kadamit,* a girl or a married woman who has not been divorced or widowed, will prepare coffee and put forth a jar full of water and *Muda* (fresh butter). The leader will then put the butter, apportioned into three pieces, into the jar and breathe into it. The remaining portion of the butter will be put on the head of the host as well as that of attendants'. At this point, they position their *Beleq* or *Qoti* on the gate signifying that spirits are being called upon, and therefore, no one is allowed to leave or enter the house.

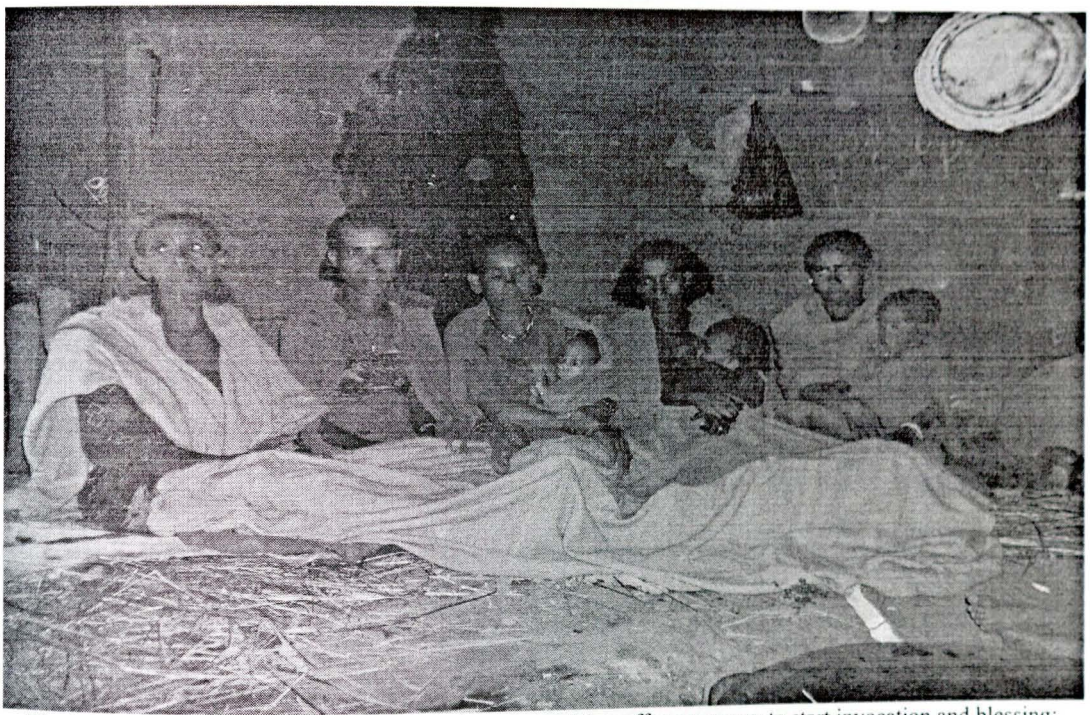


Fig 4: *Erfo Mereba* women await for the closing stages of the coffee ceremony to start invocation and blessing; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

While incense is being burnt unceasingly, the women start invocation and blessing when the coffee is ready. As a way of announcing the beginning of the ritual, the *Meri*, rehearses the following couplets, which are believed to express the best wish of health and wealth. This is done while the coffee is being poured into cups.

Sabiw jebenawn yetenawn	Pull out the health pot
Sabiw lekown yebeqlown	Pull the saddle of the mule

By means of a rendition of benediction with choral background, hence, *Erfo Mereba* women will continue their blessing and prayer. They are exhorted to give a lengthy, vivid, reverent, and pious prayer to the *Adbar/Qolle* spirits, which are believed to be existent receiving adjuration and offering. Though the benediction varies alongside the emphasis of the ceremony, the principal theme of this intonation of prayer seems to revolve around in riposting to the different crises in life and transitions such as weddings, pregnancy, conflict, and drought (FGD1:Kerkat village, 09-01-2013).

As marking transition to womanhood, weddings are one phase of life where a girl needs blessing and prayer. With such conviction, after the coming of the groom to take his bride, while the people are celebrating along with the groom's family and friends, the bride will sit along with *Erfo Mereba* women to get their blessing.

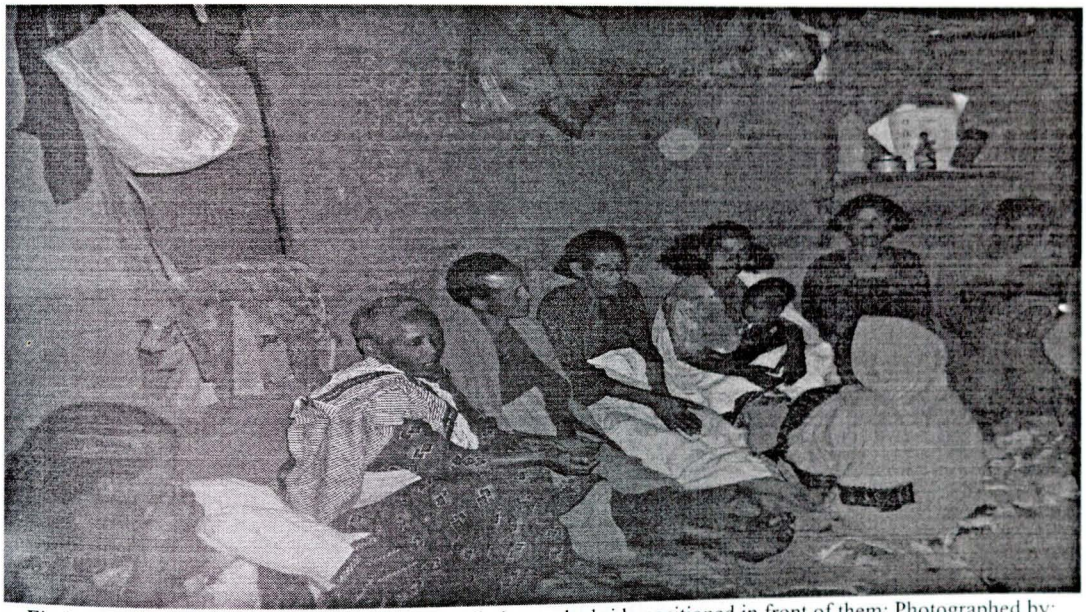


Fig 5: *Erfo Mereba* women passing their benediction to the bride positioned in front of them; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

The benediction for good future runs as:

Erfo Mereba - Mereba (2x)

Kehulu belay hugne- Mereba

Keziya getmesh yehune- Mereba

Yelejochesh enat yebalesh mist hugne- Mereba

Bekursh wend yehune- Mereba

May you be above everyone!

May he be your soul mate!

May you become the mother of your children and the wife of your husband!

May your first born be male!

Erfo Mereba women also participate in the indigenous conflict resolution mechanism dubbed as *Zeweld*. In this ceremony, the women will spread grass in between disputants within the church compound and, alongside the priests plead, asks for forgiveness with a melancholic and supplicatory benediction (I10: Kerkat village, 24-01-2013). Taking individual crisis as community crisis and addressing collective calamities such as natural disasters and epidemics, the *Erfo Mereba* women are also called forth in performing benediction and prayer which is harmonically sung as,

Erfo Mereba- Mereba (2x)

Yemotew genet yegeba- Mereba

Dem meqabatu aybejen - Mereba

Selam degenet yebejen- Mereba

Erq yewredelen- Mereba

May the dead go to heaven!

Bloodshed will not do us good!

Peace and kindness do us good!

May we reach to a resolution!

In line with this, another area of concern, which *Erfo Mereba* tries to address, is childbirth. Unlike the previous concerns, the ceremony of *Erfo Mereba* for pregnancy is peculiar. Being both public and private at the same time, and thus Janus faced, the *Erfo Mereba* women pray with apotropaic nature in a shade prepared within the house. Akin to the *Fatimaye*, a group prayer performed for an expecting mothers in a women-only gathering in Wollo and North Shewa (Meron 2013:122), sitting alongside the pregnant women, by taking turns to bless her, they will ask for the protection of the mother as well as the safe delivery of the baby. Whether

performed during pregnancy or delivery, to facilitate the welcoming of the baby into the community, both spiritually and socially, the women gently apply butter coagulated with different incents named as *Quni* on the belly of the pregnant. This process is called *Muda* (I28: Woldiya town, 26-12-2012). Meanwhile, as aforementioned in previous pages, the butter that has been blessed by the *Erfo Mereba* women is also referred as *Muda*. This, according to Yeshuma Adane (I15:Amsteya village, 16-01-2013), is

> A way to make sure that the child is sweat as butter and unctuous so that the labor as well as the delivery will be an easy one. Not only that, the blessing of the *Erfo* can be passed on to the child while she/he is in the womb. In addition to the butter, porridge that will be eaten at the end of the ceremony will ensure the safe delivery of the woman, since the porridge is prepared by using *Miju* (milk). So, both *Miju* and M*uda* are essential in passing on blessing and safe childbirth.

With this in mind, the *Erfo Mereba* women continues their benediction which can be pointed out as

Erfo Mereba- Mereba (2x)

Yeweledshew genet yegeba- Mereba

Erteb das yemtash- Mereba

Yetebareke mahtsen yehun- Mereba

Befitsh yalew beshntesh yezur- Mereba

May your child go to heaven!

May you be able to marry off your child!

May your womb be blessed!

May what is in front goes to your back! (meaning may you be able to give birth and hold him on your back)

In all these benedictions, beyond the wishes and appeals, one can recurrently observe the word *Erfo Jalele* and *Hijaba*. Originating from the meaning of love in Afan Oromo, *Jaalallee* emphasize their affection and reverence towards *Erfo*. Meanwhile, *Hijaba* is a transitional word, which passes from one woman to another. It is also a means to set up the tempo of the rhythm.

After the benediction is completed, a meal will be handed out to them. The meals served on the occasion are: *Injera*, *Welmbit*a, a porridge prepared by milk, and sometimes a type of unleavened bread called *Seteto*. To be considered as salvation, cleansing, and wrapping up of the

benediction, the meal offered will be passed around for all those who were present in the ceremony, after the leader throws three pieces of the dish towards the gate. In expounding the meaning of this, one of the *Erfo Mereba* women, (I12: Kerkat village, 25-01-2013) indicated,

> It is an offering to the *Qolle* spirits so that they can taste what we are going to eat. Hierarchically speaking, they are the ones that have the privilege to bless a meal like the husband blesses and tastes the food before other members of the family does. We are upholding the tradition and custom here on earth as that of the other world. After these we can share the meal together showing our amity through the spirits.

Apparently, the sacrifice is not bound to meal. The oblation to the *Qolle* or *Adbar* also extends to animal slaughtering. Being selective of the color, depending on the craving of the spirits, the animal sacrificed could be red/black sheep and hen. For instance, the red will be slaughtered to appease and satisfy the desire of *Anbeso* (KI2: Woldiya, 28-01-2013). Especially in the case of sickness, alongside anointing the patient with the blood, the slaughtered hen will be gyrated around the head of the person and rub his/her body with it. This is believed to bring back his/her health.

Thereby, the meal and sacrifice mark the end of the ritual. Thereafter, after washing their faces, to cleanse themselves and get protection from any kind of evil spirit, they will ask for the permission of the host family to bring some firewood from the surrounding and go off, which is believed to deceive the spirits not to leave along with them. The logic behind such action lies, therefore, in the belief that the spirits will leave the house if the *Erfo Mereba* women exit with farewell. Roughly speaking, leaving or entering the house, particularly while the ceremony is being undertaken, is considered as upsetting the spirits that has been called upon during the ceremony. Unless and otherwise, a person is cleansed with the blessed water from the ceremony, they cannot come in or go out of the house. It is during sundown that it is utterly free to move in or out. Based on this principle, the *Meri* (leader) will set out to her home at the end of the day. Nonetheless, the grass spread around the house has to be removed. If the religious practice is to be carried out for three days, then she is obliged to stay until the end of the third day, since it is then that the grass will be wiped out (KI4: Kerkat village, 27-12-2012). In fact, besides restriction on movement, the grass spread on the ground also turn the house into a temporary shrine.

This brings us to another discussion. From my observation and interview with some, I came to the understanding that the house where *Erfo Mereba* is practiced becomes sacred for a brief period of time. Resembling *Betemekdes*, the interior part of the EOC, after the *Chefe* is scattered around the house, people ought to walk bare footed while entering and moving around the house. They have to kiss the floor, which they call as *Yechefew meskel* (the cross of the wet grass) before proceeding into the house. They have to sit as well as sleep on the ground. Taboo is also passed on sexual intercourse during this time. Any invited guests to attend the ceremony must also observe these rules and must stay in the house until the grass is taken out. This situation also holds true when we come to *Shenecha*.



Fig 6: *Erfo Mereba* women prostrating and paying respect to '*Yechefew meskel*'; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

All in all, when *Erfo Mereba* women were asked to interpret the lyrics and their actions in the religious practice, many women dissimulate with responses such as "*oh, these are just our culture*" or "*we just sing them to bring good luck and health*" which illustrates the difficulty of conducting interview with people on religious themes which are often described as a sensitive topic or an act of questioning the unquestioned.

Coming to the polemics, narratives, and counter narratives within the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, in an attempt to better understand the nuances in the conception of the delicate web of performance within the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, one of my informants alluded:

> No matter what others say about this ceremony, *Erfo Mereba* became our way to encounter the difficulties we were and are still facing. By contacting the supernatural entity, *Erfo Mereba* conveys a warm and comforting milieu for those participating in it. Beyond that, the conception of *Erfo Mereba* has gone on the road of shifting patterns within the community. While we say that this ineffable experience reveals knowledge of the present as well as the future, therefore important to our existence, they (the government officials and other Christians) claim that it offers no particular knowledge and thus alien, frightening, and work of the devil. (I8: Lanquso, 02-02-2013)

Since this religious practice is conducted in an idiom that highlights mysticism and the supernatural, the conception is largely reserved for descriptions of invisible interrelationships, which no words can communicate or rationalize. This can be accounted to the wide ranging conception of *Erfo Mereba*. As pointed out in the above quotation, advocators of *Erfo Mereba* argue that the religious practice enables them to placate the *Qolle* or *Adbar* spirit and grant them their needs and wishes. Rather than perceiving them as extraneous to the church and therefore parallel to EOC belief and practices, the observance of rituals related with these spirits are believed in and venerated as part of the church by the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area. Being associated with large trees, especially the *Grar* (Acacia), these spirits are reckoned as protective spirit of the community as well as the land (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013). Hence, retaining the same task with that of any celestial beings, such as angels, which are believed to be messengers or intermediaries between God and humankind and watch over the people from all sorts of ailments, the existence of belief in the *Qolle* or *Adbar* is justified as benevolent and part of the church. In addition, the meaning of *Adbar,* in Geez language, as a church further amplifies their position.

Nonetheless, the same fact has been regarded as backward traditional belief and mischievous by some segments of the society such as the government officials. Meanwhile, some followers of the EOC also regard this religious practice and the belief it embraces as satanic and evil worship. However, their number as well as their influence is not that much conspicuous within the community. It is the reservation of the few.

Shenecha/Tufta

In construing the etymology of *Shenecha* or *Tufta*, Demeke (2012:11) noted, "*Tufta* is spluttering and avoiding any filthy or undesired thing". In simile vein, the word "*tufuu*" in Afan Oromo entails spitting out and spluttering saliva or any other liquid from the mouth. Meanwhile, *Shenecha* can be traced back to "*shan*" in Afan Oromo, which means five, indicating the number of men performing the religious practice (KI3: Woldiya town, 27-01-2013).

As widely practiced among the lowlanders of the Rayya Qobbo people, *Tufta*, according to Demeke, are two kinds; namely men's *Tufta* (*Abbagahr)* and women's *Tufta* (*Duberti*) (2012:11). Nonetheless, what Demeke has apparently left out is the interpretation given to such practice among the highlanders where the focus of this study gyrates.

From a discussion with a key informant, Mulu Belay (KI7: Lanquso, 02-01-2013), the meaning of *Tufta* as well as *Shenecha* is described as follows:

> For us, we prefer *Shenecha*. But nowadays, since most people know it by *Tufta*, we do not mind using it as well. After all, they are representing the same thing. The word *Tufta* comes from the sound that comes out of your mouth when you splutter. By spitting out *tella* on the blessed object or person, they are making a statement such as '*let what we have said so far adhere onto you*' or '*let the truth reveal itself to you*'. *Shenecha* also resembles the same religious practice. Similar to the Oromo tradition of *Erecha*, it is a means to give thanks to *Egziabher* and ask for forgiveness and good fortune. The name literally implies '*being five*' inferring to the minimum number of ordained individuals that ought to be present in performing the religious practice.

For I will continue with the name *Shenecha*, as been used recurrently by the highlanders, what I am interested in is the peculiar apparel, song, speech, conduct, and observance that the ethnographic data on *Shenecha* reveals. Parenthetically, similitudes in many respects are witnessed between the religious practice of *Shenecha* and *Erfo Mereba*. For instance, the days and months that are considered as peak times to perform the ceremony, the purpose, and some of the processes involved are similar to that of *Erfo Mereba*.

With five, seven, or nine maven, following the conception of 'time of the others', *Shenecha* is carried out starting from midnight until sunrise. In this effervescent and tuneful benediction, entreaty and pledge of gratefulness are performed to *Egziabher* (God). Ipso facto, though both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are performed for parallel cases except for some, which are related

with the gendered division within the community, the entity addressed is entirely different to their claim. While *Erfo Mereba* is associated with the *Qolle* or *Adbar*, *Shenecha* is addressed to the omnipotent *Egziabher*. This principle has been and is accountable for the insinuation of *Erfo Mereba* as malignant and *Shenecha* as benevolent and excerpt from the blessing of the church. To some of the clergy, as well, *Shenecha* is considered as a blessing of the elderly, which has been part and parcel of the church tradition. Nonetheless, from my observation as well as opinions of few, the benedictions are forwarded to the same being in both religious practices.

The gendered discourse of religious orthodoxy within these religious practices also passes on to the conception of the domestic/public sphere. *Shenecha* is mainly focused on benedictions pertaining to matters of agricultural products and farmland, new house, health, fortune, natural calamity, and new business. Unlike *Erfo Mereba*, which gives precedence to domestic matters, *Shenecha* is more of concerned with the public, farming in particular. Thereby, having the acceptance of the community by large, *Shenecha* is performed without any reticence. The fact that women and children could be participants in the religious practice also adds up to its openness.

Coming to the process involved in this religious practice, in addition to coffee, incenses, porridge, chicken, and sheep that were evident in the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, *tella* (a traditional alcoholic drink) plays an imperative role in *Shenecha*. One of my informants, Kassaye Molla (I14: Amsteya, 16-01-2013) in fact claimed that "*if there is no tella, then, there is no Shenecha; if there is no coffee, then, there is no Erfo Mereba*". Since *tella* is the crux of the religious practice, it is prepared with caution so as no one is permitted to drink from it before the ceremony. As a matter of fact, following the request by a host family, the date set by the *Shenecha* men to perform the religious practice depends upon the time needed for preparing *tella*.

At the day of the ceremony, akin to *Erfo Mereba* women, *Shenecha* men enter the house holding *Chefe* (freshly cut wet grass), *weyera* (Oleaeuropaeasubsp Africana), and *Qoti* (wood rod) redistributed to them by the *Meri* (their leader). Preceding their right leg, they will enter into the house following the *Meri*. After circling the house three times while spreading the *Chefe* and *weyera*, they prostrate, kiss the ground, and sit on the *Agoza*. So far, the same procedures are observed with that of *Erfo Mereba*.



Fig 7: *Shenecha* leader sharing out *Weyera* at the gate; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

However, after they come into the house, they will tie up together three types of trees, *weyera, welagaw*, and *sifaw*, on the gateway resembling the echelon within the community. *Weyera* represents *balabbat* (affluent household) whereas *welagaw* and *sifaw*are believed to stand for *barya* (servants or slaves) and *buda* (craftsman who are believed to possess evil eye) respectively. Since these plants are wet by nature, they are also fixed together to pass on good wishes to the household. In addition, selecting out the *weyera*, the leader will tie it up around the nozzle of the pot, which contain the *tella*. Besides indicating patriarchal headman and good luck, *weyera* is also armor against the wrath of *Egziabher*. In explaining this further, Molla Tadesse (Kerkat village, 05-01-2013) indicated,

> When the *Shenecha* men decide to perform the religious practice, they convicted themselves with the burden of pleasing and satisfying *Egziabher*. So, unless and otherwise they give out their blessing enthusiastically and in an energetic manner, the *Shenecha* will hit them. Hence, they are at all times in fear. It is the *weyera* that keeps them safe if something went bad.

Alongside the protection of the *weyera* plant, this quote indicates that the term *Shenecha* is also extended to the ordained individuals as well as the spirits that is called upon during the religious practice, further strengthening the claim of the few that it is external to the church.



Fig 8: The *Shenecha* leader trussing *Weyera* around the neck of the vessel that contained *tella*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

Burning incense in *gacha* (a small pot), thereafter, the men will sit in circle or semi-circle placing the pot containing the *tella* in front of them. Before starting any benediction and prayer, they are served with meal, a dinner, contrariwise to *Erfo Mereba*, where comestibles are served at last. After this, akin to *Yesebehat megeb·* within the EOC, they leave some leftovers for the host family to have a taste. Since it is blessed (*yetebareke*), the meal cannot be consumed by people outside members of the nuclear family. If so, it is believed that the fortune will leave the house (FGD 2: Kerkat village, 02-01-2013). Thenceforward, it is after the *Meri* pours *tell* that the blessing and prayer will start. Yet, the commencement of the ceremony depends upon the direction the drink whirled while pouring it into a cup. If it is to the right, then they are good to go. If not, the *Meri* will pour again and again until it does (KI1: Kerkat village, 09-02-2013).

It is a leftover meal, which is blessed and prayed upon either by priests or any other men. Though this meal is shared by all that are within a house, regardless of their relation with the family, it is considered to bring upon blessings.



Fig 9: *Shenecha* men eating dinner before engaging into the ceremony; Photographed by; Kiya Gezahegne

As mentioned in previous pages, the purpose of performing *Shenecha* cannot be meshed into one. Hence, the benediction and prayer within the religious practice also varies accordingly. For instance, when it is carried out for the farmland and agricultural production, the benediction centers around being fertile, producing surplus, and improved crop or livestock yields. In this type of *Shenecha*, both the husband and wife along with their agricultural tools sit in front of the *Shenecha* men. *Welmbita* (porridge prepared with milk) will be served in this case. The cereal within the porridge signifies crop yields and the milk implies wetness and fruitfulness (I28: Woldiya town 26-12-2012). After that, the *Shenecha* men will bless the people, the land, and the agricultural tools. Similar to the Greek's 'Festival of flowers', wishing to halt floods, famine, infestation of insects, scorching or withering of crops and livestock, the men will drink the *tella* and splutter it on the husband and the wife as well as the tools. As the pot was full of *tella*, they wish them lavishness whereas as it became drained of it later on, the men bless the tools to be protected from any evil curse that affects productivity. Furthermore, they continue their blessing like this.

Bewerehabun/Habule- Amen (2x)

Agegne tegenagne- Amen

Sisayunm amta dul- Amen

Beklown yemitaser yehun- Amen

Mareshaw Yemereq- Amen

Azmeraw tiru yemihon yehu- Amen

May you have plenty and may you get along with!

May you add up the good fortunes!

May you be able to tie up a mule! (Mule is one of the wealth ranking means of the community)

May the blessing be upon the tools!

May the crops sprout!

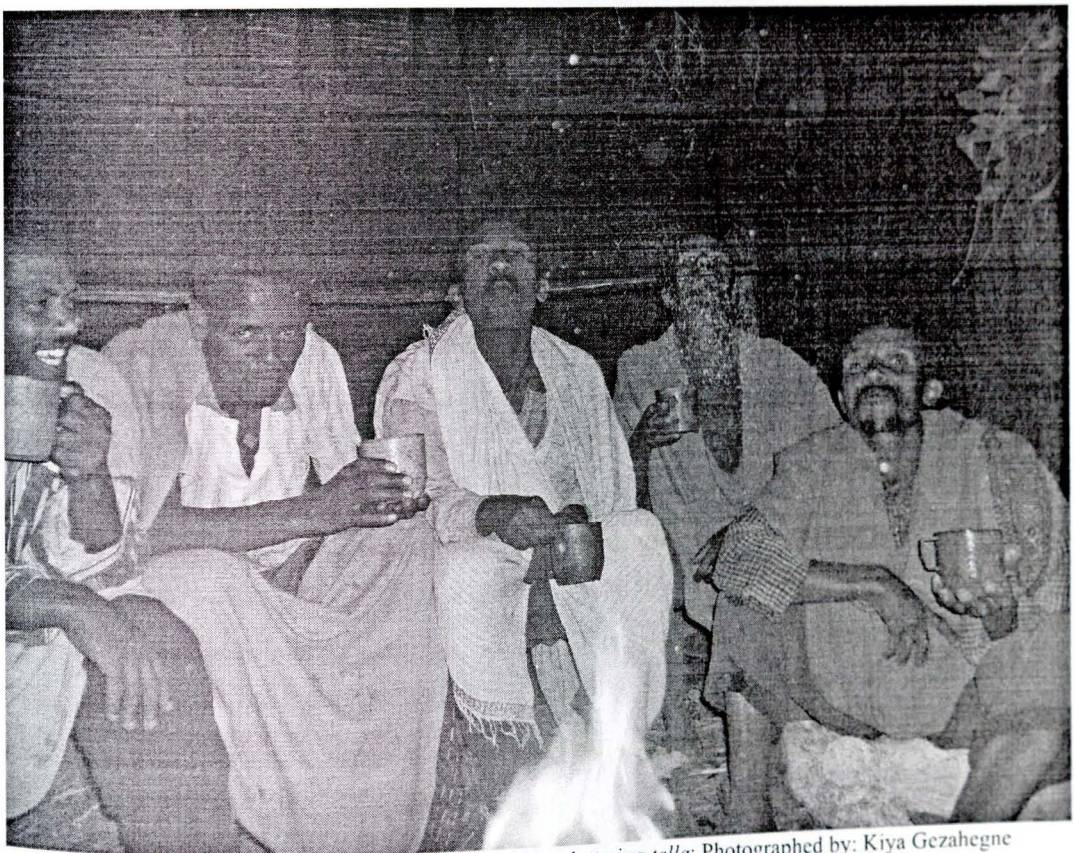


Fig 10: *Shenecha* men passing their blessing while spluttering *tella*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

In those instances when *Shenecha* is held for a man who is unwell or ill, they splutter the drink to cleanse him from his illness and serve him with the leftovers, which is believed to bring him strength (I16: Kerkat, 10-02-2013). They also perform benediction and prayer to ward off "*kefu menfes*" (evil spirits) from newly built houses. In this case, the men will splutter *tella* in all sections of the house and predict the doorway following the smoke of incense. The door should be built ensuing on the direction of the smoke. However, if the smoke is directed straightforward to the outside, then, they advise the head of the family to leave the village (Kibrom 2013:179). The benediction for a new house goes on like this;

Bewerehabun/Habule- Amen (2x)

Bunu endaleqe hodeh yebeqah yehun- Amen

Behabtna betena yemtqom hun- Amen

Destah ayleq- Amen

Yebret mesoso yadregeh- Amen

Qollew yetebeqe- Amen

Ye'enat wuqabi ye'abat atena yetebeqeh- Amen

As the coffee wind up, may you replete!

May your happiness never end!

May you become lovable and support your hamlet!

May the *Qolle* protect you!

May your mother's *wuqabi* and your father's *atena* protect you!

In all cases, while the men recurrently pass their benediction and prayer, other participants follow with a response of 'Amen'. It is only their exhaustion that can put an end to the blessing. Indeed, the presence of *tella* as a livener contributes to the time length of the ceremony. Unlike the proverb about *tella,* "one [glass] whets the appetite; two quenches it; three heats one up; four makes one quarrel; five brings fighting; six causes killing" (Levine 1972:80), it transcends them to tell the truth. "*Though they drink all night long*", it is claimed, "*Shenecha men never get drunk*" (KI2: Woldiya town, 28-01-2013).

At the end, then, the men will have a revelation if the ritual has been satisfactory and efficacious. Depending on that, if the vision is appalling, they will set another appointment to perform the

religious practice. After this, to avoid any encounter with people, they will leave the house at crack of dawn, so that nobody will see them. In the morning the host family will slaughter white sheep and cock as sacrifice and serve it to the *Qolle*, neighbors, and other guests. The color of the animals demonstrates cleansing from evil spirits. Meanwhile, their maleness expound on the fact that men must shoulder the responsibility of providing security and safety (I26: Woldiya town, 29-12-2012).

In a nutshell, within a spiritually defined context, both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* point out the value attached to blessing within the community. Generally being engaged in it from morning to dawn, historically as well as culturally speaking, blessing, particularly in these religious practices have become;

> It is our life's pedestal. It is what made the area conducive to live in. Unless it is transferred from generation to generation, the area will face drought, famine, disease, *kefu menfes*, dispute and conflict. It is like the saying "*Ager siqena be'Erfo Mereba; Meret siqena bekorma; Gudef silaqeq betufta"* (a country prospers through *Erfo Mereba;* a land becomes fecund through an ox; an illness is remedied through *Tufta*) (Demeke 2012:11)

Therefore, a well-executed, energetic performance demonstrates connection with the supernatural through human mediumship. Where words and rhythm, passed on through an aural tradition, are important elements, these religious practices are intense by nature and, to use Rhea White's (Rankin 2008) term, 'exceptional human experiences' are evident in these practices when the adept summons spirits. From these religious experiences, possession and trance, as a means of communication and spirit mediumship, are apparent. As Erika Bourguignon (in Eller 2007:121) attests, possession, in this case, is actually seen as "a positive condition and is literally sought and voluntarily induced". Furthermore, apparition is also existent in both practices. Hence, in addition to spectators, spirits are believed to be part of the audience. The quality of these religious practices, thereby, relies upon the aid of the spirits and observation of restrictions. Uninspired, lackadaisical performances from an individual are severely critiqued and admonished by other adepts of the religious practice. By uttering the phrases "*Shenehca neqa endatebea" (liven up Shenecha, so you would not be battered)* or "*Erfoye neqi endatebeqi" (liven up Erfo, so you would not be battered),* they try to incite them once again by insinuating on the retributions. Lest, however, we must bear in mind that there is no institution or any kind of scripture that ensures uniformity or ascribe a performance as mediocre or fervent.

4.2.3. Adepts of the Religious Rituals

Grounding on the ethnographic evidence forwarded in the previous section, it ought to be straightforward to say that the people with the privileged access to the knowledge or ability in carrying out *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are imperative to be au fait with these religious practices. Their prominence being evident on-the-spot inventiveness, these specialists are at the prime of both practices.

In a place where a single monolithic practice of Orthodox Christianity is ostensibly alleged, elders, priests, and others, merely men, may be referred as ritual experts. However, by coming to grips with the praxis of benediction and prayer, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are conducted by ordained individuals, both women and men. Alluding them alike to the name of the religious practice, these 'specialists' are endowed with specialized technique and erudition.

The esoteric knowledge required to perform the ceremony effectively, though it is not furtive, gives these experts power and accrues them the privilege to converse with the supernatural entity. In the case of *Erfo Mereba*, where the adept of the religious practice are female, the practitioner accepts the role through discovery, guild membership, and long years of learning through colloquial apprenticeship. A candidate for such, in Fortes (1987) terminology, 'office' is considered to be a 'child' of a woman performing this ritual in her advanced years. The undertone of being a child, they point out, is having years of incessant relationship with the knowledgeable woman undertaking *Erfo Mereba* within the household of the 'child' rather than biological relationship (I13: Kerkat village, 25-01-2013).

Thereby, through this long term affiliation, the child will discern the abilities, concepts, and practices behind such belief. Nonetheless, the adherence and membership into such practices can be ascertained with a trance and spirit possession. This state of trance, which was initially her calling into such religious practice, will later serve her as a source of information from which message will be conveyed to the audience. As I was told in a colloquy with Mulu Qelemu (Kerkat village, 20-12-2012), during *Erfo Mereba*, the women performing the ritual, especially the leader, can go into a trance or reverie and, in this manner, can obtain contact with a supernatural entity.

Moreover, a child has to unearth her ability for and interest in such line of work through experiments. For instance, through assisting the leader in the religious practice is one way to discern her knack in performing *Erfo Mereba* (ibid). The same holds true in the case of *Shenecha* where a boy is groomed to become an expert in blessing and prayer. It is through a happenstance that most become a maven in the area of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. By virtue of their talents and age, thence, they will continue to perform these religious practices. Given that proficiency and technicality is an issue within these religious practices, as Fortes noted, "the conceptual curtain between knowledge of the occult and knowledge of the patent must be kept in place" (1987:11).

In light of the fact that these religious practices were passed on from generation to generation orally and are devoid of verbatim texts that may be systematically memorized, the aged are the ones who generally hold control of this occult knowledge, which is acquired through progressive maturation, which draws on the concept of spiritual gerontocracy. In fact, for the case of *Erfo Mereba*, it is desirable for a woman to be at the age of menopause, from forty nine to sixty, to be an adept. In addition to the age preference, being a widow or divorcee is appealing for a practitioner in *Erfo Mereba*. This is to steer clear any domiciliary responsibilities and thereby elude any distractions (I14: Amsteya village, 16-01-2013). On the contrary, *Shenecha* men are preferred to be married and respectable irrespective of their age. If knowledgeable on the matter at hand, a young man can be regarded as a good candidate to perform the religious practice. This, I believe, hints on the gendered difference on spiritual maturity required to carry out religious practices. In both cases, however, ordained individuals must be free from infidelity and have reverence from the community with the fact that their lineage is endowed with the virtue of successful blessing.

It can be noted that it is not enough for the offices to exist and have their knowledgeable incumbents. Other than being conversant, they must be trustworthy, candid, and endowed with the ability to make their voices be heard by the supernatural entity. As such, they must also be dressed for their parts and observe ritual restrictions and abstention. This period of restriction commences from the time of preparing the feast, by the host family, which might take at least a weak prior from the initiation of the religious practices. The people, both the practitioners and the spectators who are beneficiaries, have to abstain from sexual intercourse, conflict or quarrel,

and alcoholic beverages. Ergo, the person is deemed to be cleansed from any transgression and eventually sin. It is in consort with this, therefore, that notification is given to the practitioners no less than a month earlier.

Another point noteworthy to be mentioned in this section is the number and traits of the people performing *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Based on the aforementioned attributes, a leader will be carefully chosen by the host. Being at the helm of identifying the people to assist in the religious practice, the leader will pick out two to six people that are best suited to follow her/him depending on their knowledge, age, relationship with the host family, and sometimes acquaintance with the *wuqabi* or the *zar* cult which is believed to expedite the communication with the supernatural. This, so to speak, substantiates the claim of the church and some people who are critical of these rituals by claiming that it is encompassed within a *zar* cult.

For a practitioner who wants to host these religious practices, since "a man cannot be a judge in his own cause" (Fortes 1987:14), other ordained individuals are responsible in performing these practices. Other than acting out as a host and a spectator, she/he cannot intervene in the ceremony.

Fixing the attention to the socioeconomic and religious aspect of the practitioners, they are ordinary people engaged in such practices as part-time by virtue of their erudition. Otherwise, their main source of livelihood is farming and trade. Since they do not ask for money or any other favor in return, other than ritual prestige, it is unviable to earn a living on these religious practices. On the other hand, though they profess to be Orthodox Christians, participating in the church sacraments and attending communal worship in Sundays, the practices they engage into are reckoned as 'traditional beliefs' and therefore verboten within the church. Nevertheless, they are not excluded from church membership. In a nutshell, their relationship within the society is not induced with their religious affiliation. Regardless of the power they are accrued within such religious practices, it is believed that they are not capable of engendering harm to the community. Hence, they are thought to be an ordinary member of the community.

In summary, therefore, the adepts of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are both women and men who assume positions of leadership in the performance of the religious practices. Serving for the

community satisfaction and fulfillment, these are individuals performing religious practices for ad hoc or short-term need.

4.2.4. Purpose of the Religious Rituals

The ground for taking part and performing the religious rituals and practices lies in a range of intents, both for the community and the individual. As part of this tradition, therefore, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are performed with the aim of reaching an assortment of purposes. By addressing the most crucial issues of everyday life, fertility, food security, health, and wealth, these religious practices strive to embark upon the difficulties in these aspects.

Influencing the course of event whereupon people will become richer, more prosperous, or more successful, the Rayya Qobbo people call upon specialists performing the religious rituals of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Thence, one can conclude that these religious practices are performed for a better future of an individual or the family. In line with this, *Erfo Mereba* is carried out at weddings to wish the bride good luck in her future relationship with her husband as well as with her in-laws. Thus, the religious practice is aimed at safeguarding harmonious relationship and affluence in a place where she will establish her own family.

Another related purpose for carrying out these religious practices is associated with the notion of uncertainty. As Meyer Fortes remarked on the Tallensi, "one never knows when misfortune may strike or good luck supervenes;[...] one cannot know from day to day or year to year what the ancestors and other occult powers and agencies are demanding and expecting" (1987:24). Therefore, akin to the Tallensi belief, since it is difficult to envisage the future, the Rayya Qobbo people accommodate the performance of both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* to dispel and assuage a person from anxiety produced by the unpredictability of the future. The ground for performing, thereby, rests on averting uncontrollable processes of nature and unexpected human accidents. This, according to the community elders (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013), is mostly the rationale forwarded when they start to carry out the religious practices. "*But once you start to host these religious practices*", they continue, "*you ought to persist with it; even when there are no problems in your life*".

In further explaining the reasons other than trepidation and uncertainty, the logic behind performing *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha,* embedded within the notion of obligation, are

> After you have been to the market, a child expects something from you (especially if he/she is used to getting something). And if it is missing, the child will be disappointed and will eventually cry. With the same logic, the rituals are performed for the sake of the tradition that has been there for a long time. If your forefathers have been performing these religious rituals, the failure to conform to this tradition is believed to lead to severe mystical penalties. So, people call upon ordained individuals performing *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* to shun away from these punishments. (KI16: Kerkat village, 05-01-2013)

> If your close friend has been calling out for experts to perform *Erfo Mereba* or *Shenecha*, then you have to do the same. If you fail to do so, the misfortune that has fled his house will join yours. Any disease he got rid of will be a potential threat to you. So, in order to best avoid such problems, performing these religious practices become a necessity. (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013)

Here I might just borrow Radcliff Brown's term "ritual avoidance" which is "rule of behavior [that is] associated with a belief that an infraction will result in an undesirable change…usually involving the likelihood of some misfortune" (Morris 1995:130). Thus, people mark out the obligation to carry out the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as a significant part of their lives in which mystical penalties ensures attention to be paid to the obligation. Further noting the notion "*this is the way our ancestors did it. So, we should persist with these religious practices*", a favored legitimizing frame for the practices are set out. The conception "*Guadegnah endaygafefh*", which literally stands to mean, "so that your friend will not take what is yours", also insinuates the need to execute this obligation.

Further obligation featured within the performance of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* is pleasing the *'Adbar'* or '*Qolle*'. By calling out the names of the *Qolle*, that are responsible for the protection of the community, these religious practices present an offering, mainly gratitude, where peace and well-being are expected in return. Anything ominous for the peaceful living of the individual or the community at large should be forestalled. As a result, conflicts and quarrels are never allowed to fester for long. Therefore, in the endeavor to bring conflicting parties together for reconciliation, without further sense of grudge, the role of *Erfo Mereba* women together with church priests, in persuading disputants to come to a resolution, is eminent.

Additional area where the role of *Erfo Mereba* women and *Shenecha* men are prominent is fertility. Calling attention to the gender hierarchy and power relation within the society, the role of these incumbents is carved out based on this relation and sphere of influence. While the men manage fertility in the public sphere, i.e. fecundity, women are responsible for pregnancy and child birth. The purpose of *Shenecha*, in this case, is to improve the production of crops and livestock or avoid poor growing conditions such as drought or famine. Thus, since crop and livestock are considered as the life force of the people where wealth and health are determined, through appeasing the supernatural entity, they will ensure favorable crop and livestock production.

Another life force within the Rayya Qobbo people where the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* focuses on is childbirth. Children are seen as a gift from *Egziabher* (God) and a reward of a good deed (I10: Kerkat village, 24-01-2013). Therefore, through the channel with the supernatural, a mother's pregnancy and childbirth is given preeminence and observed with vigilance. The religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*, thereby, ensures safe labor and avoids any complication in the delivery process.

The function of divination in these religious practices also goes into relieving people from *ganen* (evil spirit) or 'Satan' (devil) and establishing a channel of communication with the omnipresent supernatural. In relation with this, what should not go without saying is the explanation of the religious practices in reference to the existent scientific knowledge. According to Haji Ahmed (Woldiya town, 28-01-2013),

> These religious practices give us answers to the ones science has failed to resolve. Scientists could not give explanation to illnesses that are associated with *zar*. It is *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* that are healing the people.

Furthermore, where science gives us an inkling of the universe and the worldview, there is knowledge that is far from being described through scientific knowledge, such as transcendental and paranormal experiences. Thereby, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, alike to other religious practices performed in this area, provide explanations that will reinforce their confidence in the universe. By explicating aspects of life with which science rationalize as chance or luck, *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* provide the ability to communicate complex ideas and identification of such streak to participants.

In short, the religious rituals of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* maintain traditions and serves as a bridge with the supernatural. Though the full significance of this would require an intense inquiry than the scope here, it is enough to note that the religious practices give a foundational support to the community's worldview. What is important here, in identifying the purpose of the religious practices, therefore, is not the mere mentioning of words harmonically addressed to participants, rather the world that it signifies and purports.

Chapter Five

Unpacking Syncretism and Religious 'Irrationality'

The purpose in this chapter is not to unduly pursue the complex literature on the notion of syncretism and religious rationality/irrationality. Suffice to say that, whatever the reasons are, these notions have been neglected within the study of religion in Ethiopia. Thereto, given the information provided in previous chapters, as a focus of this study, the data obliges me to return to these theoretical points and critically analyze it in reference to the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.

5.1. The Polemics of Syncretism and Religious Orthodoxy

In an area where orthodoxy along with orthopraxy are to be anticipated from individuals who are followers of EOC, the lives of highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area seem to be strongly regulated by the church and the clergy. Dogmatically speaking, the church expects its followers to observe all the sacraments and rituals, which eventually have a hand in absolution and eschatology. Canonically speaking, people are envisioned to oblige in conscience, which arise from certain laws and principles; laws that impose a penalty and the exertion of the divine plan. As part of these laws and principles, people wear a thread necklet with a cross pendant locally called as *mahteb,* as a sign of their faith (see Appendix III: 35, 36, 37). They, merely men, visit the churches during Sundays and avoid any arduous activities during days which venerate saints or angels, and thus considered as holy. There attachment to the church, thereby, appears to be fervent and profoundly integrated into the socioeconomic life of the community.

In incongruous way, however, with critical observation, one can understand that people really seem to shun away from these canons and dogmas. Ostensibly alleging to be followers of the church, the laity as well as the clergy fails to notice the rules and principles that guide the congregation. Church prayers and sermons are neglected. The relation of Christians with religious fathers is narrowed down to the sacrament of reconciliation, which usually involves payment as repentance rather than penance. With such 'defective relation' between the clergy and worshipers, the presence of a church appears to be a representation of a village and an

occasional place of veneration. On top of that, the presence of deities and religious rituals outside the church realm marks reservation about the fervency of the people to the church.

Christianity, to the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area, thereby, is never an 'either/or' thing, rather a 'more or less' conception; from piety Christians (*Akrari*) to those who are lenient (*Yetewalele*) to the ones who are believers of Satan, the devil (KI1: Kerkat village, 01-01-2013). Thereby, Christianity is marked with an echelon depending on religious zeal. Following this, it is important to note that by using the different deities at hand alongside the Christian belief in the omnipotent God, the Rayya Qobbo people try to cope up and survive in this world. Besides request to God, they try to make invocations to benevolent spirits such as ancestral spirits (*Qolle/ Adbar*) or malevolent ones such as the evil spirits (*Kefu menfes* like *Awgar* or *Ganen*), whatever they believe will provide an answer. Hence they make pragmatic choices. As Mulu Assefa (Kerkat village, 26-01-2013) forcefully argued,

> "People may believe in different things, since the whole point of faith is to believe and procure what you seek out for. So, what matters is not on who you bestow your believe on, but rather how much. After all, they all have power to grant your wishes. But this does not mean your faith has changed. We are all Christians. But our choices differ."

From this vantage point, thereby, elements of syncretism come into sight. Therefore, by pointing out to these elements, as Stewart and Shaw (1994:11) posits, I must put forward the ways in which the Rayya Qobbo people negotiate and redefine the boundaries of Christianity in line with religious practices such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.

Regardless of the absence of ratification for such practices, of which *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are part of, by the church, people seem to be oblivious to the differences and the denunciation. Rather, they seek to somehow legitimize and make it genuine part of the church's tradition. Thereto, in explaining such endeavors, the conception of benediction and prayer becomes central.

Benediction and prayer are thought to be features of piety in Christianity. Bearing in mind, therefore, the weight of benediction within the history of Christianity in general, such form of invocation alongside with prayer are given as raison d'être for the performance of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Such legitimacy or authorization by consensus of these religious practices has been long identified within the community. The motives and actions of individuals in *Erfo*

Mereba and *Shenecha* were, therefore, given societal mandate through benediction and prayer, which are indispensable requirements in becoming pious Christian. One explanation given to such practices is, thus, "*It's just blessing, endowing good wishes and praying to the wellbeing of others*".

Other than that, spirit possession and ancestral worship are also pointed out as a way of certifying these religious practices. Within the spirit possession, ancestral spirits, such as the *Adbar/Qolle*, provide noetic knowledge of the reality, which is unviable to apprehend otherwise. In addition, the conception of the *Adbar/Qolle* as protective deities of the community brings to mind the guardianship role of saints and angels and, thereby, pronouncing it as attuned to the church's tradition. Thus, in such ways, both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* become licensed or legitimized.

These are not the only facts, which make it appealing to followers of the church. In line with EOC's tradition and services, the processes and procedures they entail are made congruent with some forms of Christianity, thus, magnifying elements borrowed from EOC. Other than unifying beliefs of benediction and prayer, which are postulated to resolve contradictions or explain such 'non-fitting' experiences, addressing the name of *Egziabher*/God and the response as *Amen*, makes the religious practice of *Shenecha* congruent with the services of the church. Meanwhile, the way the benediction and prayer is pronounced in *Erfo Mereba* with the hands extended and the way they breathe into the water resembles with that of the clergy within EOC. Akin to the reverence to the church, the respect given to the house and notions such as "*Yechefew meskel*" (the cross of the wet grass) further reinforce the legitimacy. The existence of the term '*meskel*' (the cross), within this notion, also provides us with another explanation on syncretized elements. Given the fact that a cross is a symbol of the crucifixion and, ergo, Christianity, the presence of such term entails the legitimization of such religious practices within EOC. Other than the above mentioned elements, the number of the adept required to perform these religious practices, usually five, also resembles to the number of clergy obligatory to carry out sacraments. The use of blessed water for cleansing, similar to the holy water, and the prostration while entering the house remind oneself of the EOC traditions of entering the church.

As explained by Deseye Molla (Qobbo town, 22-02-2013), besides blending such elements from the EOC, the conception of the '*Chefe/Caffee*' (wet grass) and the communal prayer of the

Wadaja borrowed from the Oromo tradition are also assimilated into the practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Thereby, these religious practices, not only accommodate the different religious traditions from EOC and Oromo traditions, they also strive to legitimize it under the framework of EOC. The elements syncretized into these religious practices, thereby, serve as a means of authentication.

This is essentially a line of enquiry about the ways in which boundaries are altered as a result of negotiation and consonance within community members. As W.K. Clifford argued (in Meister 2009:156), "a person shouldn't believe something unless he or she has good evidence for the belief". The belief in the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* also foster such convictions. Owing to the triumph of these religious practices through generations, people often prefer to count on them in agreement with their faith in Christianity. The best example could be the case of priest Temere Aragaw. In the colloquy I had with him (FGD4: Kerkat village, 04-01-2013), he pointed out that he called out for *Erfo Mereba* women to perform the ceremony for his son, which was sick of tonsillitis at the time. Given the family history in association with the *zar* cult, his mother as well as father being *Balezar*, he hosts these religious practices every now and then to appease the ancestral spirits. At the same time, as a clergy, he carries out the services and sacraments of the church, accenting on dual loyalty. In some other cases, where people are considered as devout and spiritual, they still believe in these religious practices as a result of fear of chastisement from these spirits. Death of a child, illness, impoverishment and others were mentioned as punishment from failing to host these religious practices, once established. In similar conviction, Mulu Assefa (FGD2: Kerkat village, 02-02-2013), mother of ten children and my host family, stated

> "My husband's family performed not only *Erfo Mereba*, *Shenecha*, and *Abigem*, they also called out for *Balezar* in some instances. My husband, however, does not believe in these practices. He thinks it is calling out for Satan. And ever since his parents died, since he is the oldest son, he should have continued their tradition. But he failed to do so. He is not afraid of any consequences. He claims that if you do not believe in it, then you have nothing to be afraid of. For some time I believed him. But then, I lost my third child after a year he was born. It became difficult for me to give birth without risking my life. I am being diagnosed of hypertension for more than ten years now. My fifth child is having eyestrain. She might become blind someday in the future. So, I had to do something. Each year, we throw out a celebration venerating Saint *Teklehaymanot*. So, with the help of my mother, I have the opportunity to prepare some feast to the *Adbar* as well, without my husband knowing. Otherwise, we are going to vanish!!!"

Embraced within such fear, the practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* have been perpetuated throughout generation. However, unlike the previous days, such religious practices are performed with concealment. With the government injunction in performing these religious practices, people seem to rummage around for a way to carry out *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. In consort with this, it has been a recent parlance that the church condemned these practices as sinful and part of the *zar* cult. Thus, to avoid any reprehension from the church as well as the community at large, highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area try to authenticate it under the "legitimate" tradition of Orthodox Christianity.

Following this, while the church raises the question of authenticity and orthodoxy, proponents establish these religious practices as valid within such notion of orthodoxy. In line with this, some of the religious fathers I interviewed pointed out that, even if such practices are condemned as 'unorthodox', the constitutional right to worship freely made this disparagement of these religious practices, by the church, feeble within the community, giving the competence to the claims raised by the adept as well as advocators of these religious practices. On the other hand, Mollash (Kerkat village, 24-01-2013) said

> "Our forefathers have been Christians and have performed *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. They were not regarded as "worshipers of Satan" back then. Besides, the priests are also performing these rituals. So, when had it become demonic to practice *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*? We are blessing, just like the priests are doing. What is wrong in wishing good health to a person?"

Hence, what constitutes as authentic or inauthentic, syncretic or orthodox, legitimate or spurious depends on who interprets the experiences of these religious practices. It depends on the process of negotiation and renegotiation of the narrative of the agency. As Meron (2012:41) asserts "nobody calls one's own religion as syncretic. Rather they all strive to achieve coherence despite or because of extensive borrowings from 'others' which are otherwise labeled 'impure' or 'radically different'. They, therefore, strive to shine out the "conceptual compatibility" and legitimize it under the skeleton of world religions such as Christianity. By taking Boyer's notion of 'inference system', which is "a specialized explanatory device of the mind" (in Leopold 2004:9), these religious practices have been grasped under the notion of the "great tradition", which evoke authority and give bedrock support to current actions.

5.2. The Discourse of Gender in *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*

As an analytical tool for understanding the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, another point that this study attempts to dissect is gender. Here I will not examine even a fraction of the extensive academic discussions that has gone into analysis of gender but will simply regard it as "relation of asymmetrical power and opportunity" (Rapport and Joanna 2000:145). By expanding the notion of Judith Butler's 'gender performativity' to describe "how the body provides a surface upon which various acts and gestures accrue gendered meanings" (Bristow 1997:214), the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* exhibit an array of gender relations that exist within the community.

As has been shown in previous chapters, specialists as well as partakers of these religious practices are apportioned in line with gender. Nonetheless, my concern at this point is not so much to shine upon the gendered polarities in participation and adeptness. Rather, the orientation of this study is slanted towards how the conception of gender is perpetuated in the artfully veiled verses and the practice in general.

At first, it may seem that the domestic/public dichotomy is vested within these religious practices. Given that the domains of both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, comprising specific fields of practice, tribute to the cultural medium of gender, these religious practices uphold the domestic and public arena. Albeit the fact that the purview of *Erfo Mereba* intersperse into the public sphere now and then, such as conflicts and natural disasters, prominence is given to the domestic realm, namely pregnancy, illness, personal journeys and so on. The same holds true for the case of *Shenecha* where accent is on the public such as farming and natural calamities. Nonetheless, from the ethnographic data gathered, both religious practices seem to fit into a spiritual theme, which pervades and organizes the religious lives of the people within the domestic arena. Even if the ambits of these religious practices seem to be parallel, the issues addressed are mainly concerned with the household rather than the community at large. Parenthetically, both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are performed within the household premises, which further strengthen this claim and adduce to the debate on the sacred/profane dichotomy of the whereabouts of religious practices. Though religious practices are expected to be performed in a sacred place, which in most cases is to be set apart for such purpose, the performance of *Erfo*

Mereba and *Shenecha* within the household proves that what is regarded as profane can also be at times sacred.

Yet, apart from general concern on issues of the household, the orientations within these religious practices seem to adduce converse division of labor within the community. With a generative scheme verbal classification, *Erfo Mereba* revolves around an axis of childbirth, relationship with the ancestors, and with descendants. Meanwhile, *Shenecha* tries to assert the provision of needs and security of the household, thereto, the protective responsibility of men.

As Chad Meister (2009:19) argued forcefully "religious claims, belief, and practices exist within a given social context and involve human language and concepts". Following this, though the focus is the household, which has been claimed for so long as the dominion of women, these religious practices bring about and perpetuate patriarchal community structures within the domestic sphere. Roughly put, while *Erfo Mereba* is concerned with bearing and caring, *Shenecha* contends production, provision, and protection within the household.

Another prominent point noteworthy to mention is the notion of irrelevance. Ensuing on the conception of *Erfo Mereba* with regard to the reproductive capacity and emotion of women, this religious practice is relegated to 'traditional belief' and the '*zar* cult' during which *Shenecha* is considered as part of the EOC tradition. Despite the fact that both religious practices address deities other than God, which is the nub of Christianity, it is only *Erfo Mereba* that is thought to be outside the realm of the church. The justification of this religious practice, by claiming it to be benediction and prayer, within the skeleton of EOC only legitimizes it to those who believe in it. In general, however, *Erfo Mereba* is condemned by the church as malevolent. Nonetheless, *Shenecha* is given credence within the church. Here, thence lies the gendered orthodoxy discourse which focuses on the religious debate on orthodoxy in line with gender difference and questioning religious syncretism of women and relegating their religious practice as unorthodox. Contributing to such narratives, I believe, is the fact that *Shenecha* is practiced without any reticence whereas *Erfo Mereba* excludes men from partaking in these religious practices. Hence, integrated within this exclusiveness, which entails reticence, the consideration of *Erfo Mereba* as malevolent can be contributed to such bases. Since, men, including the clergy, are the dominating agency in meaning making, rhetoric, polemics, narratives, and counter-narratives, the

relegation of *Erfo Mereba* and the gendered orthodoxy discourse can be explained from these perspectives as well.

Taken that women are mere observant and participants of sacraments in the EOC tradition, one could ask the question "how then should one take seriously women's religious experience outside the church, especially as an adept?" According to the canon of the church, the privilege of performing religious practices such as congregational prayer, preaching, benediction, any sacramental practices or divine liturgy goes to men whereas women are supposed to attend these practices and keep their faith intact. The church is opposed to the admission of women to the priesthood or episcopate who are responsible for almost all religious practices. The only religious practices that women are permitted in engaging are private prayers and monasticism (I6: Amsteya village, 14-01-2013). Bearing this in mind, many believe that women are active participants of the church rather than practitioners. As a result, an explanation could be given to the peripheral and low status of *Erfo Mereba* in accordance with the EOC tradition and the concern on the subordinated roles of women within the community in relation with reproduction and taking care of the domiciliary.

Nonetheless, regardless of the extraneous claim, women achieve permanent social as well as religious status. Though rarely translatable into real social power, psychological benefits are also evident within the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba*. The power vested within this religious practice and their knowledge of it makes them respected within the community. Thereby, the notion of irrelevance could be regarded as misapprehension by those who believe in it.

In general, as Rita Gross (2002:43) noted, women seem to 'disappear' when dealing with accounts of women and religion, especially religions other than text dependent. These accounts seem to be "hazy, vague, inaccurate, and highly incomplete". With this in mind, I set out to trace the role of women in the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* as well as *Shenecha*. Hence, I found that there were a whole series of beliefs, which emphasized that women are ambivalent. For some, *Erfo Mereba* women had in them power for evil whether independent of their conscious volition or otherwise. Hence, the practice was regarded as malevolent, which brings us back to the gendered orthodoxy debates and ambivalence of women's religious practice. On the contrary, some regard *Erfo Mereba* women as benign.

In a nutshell, I share Kelly Pollock's notion that "all ritual is gender ritual as long as people live gendered lives" (2004:145). With the proviso that highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area experience the world gender wise, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, only performed by women and men respectively, make gender distinctions in their actions, like the deities they address to. While '*Erfo*' is mentioned in the verses as a female, '*Shenecha*' is regarded in the intonations as a man. Besides the gendered aspect of the deities, participants are also gender dependent, especially in the case of *Erfo Mereba*. In this religious practice, no men are allowed to attend the ceremony. In the meantime, other than female family members, women do not appear as participants in *Shenecha*. Other than this, at times when a girl/woman intrudes into such religious practices, both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are regarded as quasi or incomplete. In fact, she is dubbed as "*yeset acid*" (literally meaning, female acid) emphasizing on the venomous natured of women and, therefore, their low status within the community. However, when it is a man, it is considered as full and successful *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* (KI5: Woldiya town, 19-12-2012).

5.3. The Efficacy of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*

As Pierre Bourdieu (in Moore 2009:338) wrote "understanding ritual practice is not a question of decoding the internal logic of a symbolism but of restoring its practical necessity by relating it to the conditions in which its functions are defined". Later again, further advancing on the efficacy of religious rituals, Roy Rappaport noted that ritual "is an order of acts and utterances [which] is enlivened or realized only when those acts are performed and those utterances are voiced" (Eller 2007:127). In uttering these performances, which signify different things to different people, the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area are able to provide a range of implications and thereby efficacies. So, what are the different implications and efficacies of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* to highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area?

As an anthropologist not only recording and deciphering the sequenced rules but also acknowledging what people expect to gain from these religious practices, the actions, the assertion they make, and the experience within *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* bears its imprinting on the Rayya Qobbo people. Even when participants could not agree upon, understand, or even

perceive these religious practices in similar manner, they are deemed as necessary and proper and so efficacious.

To some, it control situations and modify experiences in the world. At times, it brings together and unites people through the sense of the ceremony, which reminds us the notion of communitas, which is "a transcendent feeling of social togetherness" or an intrinsically dynamic feeling of sociality (Mitchell 2010:618; Rapport and Overing 2000:233). For others, *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* give meaning to the world they live in and entail explanations in the face of adversity and loss. And at times, it is a gateway from hopeless, profitless, hapless, and hence pointless life. Thereby, after carefully analyzing interviewees' reply, it seems that the efficacy of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* goes beyond the instrumental efficacy, as has been mentioned in section 4.5. Material requests such as asking for more health or wealth do not appear to be adequate enough. Rather, the efficacy of benediction and prayer within these religious practices seem to be far reaching across the board.

As the nub of societal life, benediction and prayer can provide a range of importance to the society. To start with, it is a means of teaching societal value, custom, and tradition or preaching religious values, dogma, and canon. In the midst of benediction or prayer, it has been accustomed to tell related stories or anecdotes that are relevant to the point being mentioned. In relation with these stories, the ordained individuals attempt to give grounding to participants on such matters. Therefore, at times, it can also be regarded as a testimonial element or disposition whereby such inferences pass out message on the efficacy of a certain belief. Other than stories, benediction and prayer also entails environ where one's position in a community is acclaimed. Other than passing good hopes and wishes to the person, within these religious practices, benediction embrace the relation a person has with the community and its place within it. Specialists can either acknowledge the virtuous deeds of a person showing the respect he/she has from the community or they can point out the mischievous nature of a person whereupon being alive by itself is considered as a gift to the person and his family. This, as they call it, is *Ye'ergeman merekat*, blessing and imprecating at the same time. Therefore, from this, it can be understood that benediction does not always entail passing good wishes and hopes. It can, in this case, be execrating an individual or a family (KI1: Kerkat village, 09-02-2013).

At times, by taking into account situations such as the cleansing process from evil spirits, people claim that both *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* provide answers to problems and situations of which science failed to explain. This, in turn, gives them certainty and assurance to the world they live in. Other than that, for women, the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* strikes a balance between being an actor and being acted upon. As mentioned in previous chapters, women are considered to be participants within EOC. However, with practices such as *Erfo Mereba*, they transcend into being an actor providing them with the feeling of being in control and respected.

With this in mind, now we can turn to the role of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* in terms of

1. **Family building**- People deploy these religious practices to gain hope, certainty, control, and poise. Offering an emotional and psychological response to frustrating situations as well as an impasse, these religious practices enforce material needs as well as psychological contentment. Hence, though difficult to assure it in certain terms, *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* morally bind together members of the family and provides them with means to fulfill all the necessities needed to sustain a household, both material as well as psychological.

   In the initial phase of establishing a family, these religious practices also play a vital role. Starting from the wedding ceremony, where *Erfo Mereba* serves as a rite of passage, for the bride, from a girl to a lady and from a child to a wife, these religious practices engage in every aspect of establishing a family, including in determining the place of residence, through the religious practice of *Shenecha*.

2. **Community building**- Other than practical effects such as healing, safe childbirth, or good productivity, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* have also social effects. In other words, the efficacy of these religious practices can be accredited to the community social network as well. By serving the purpose of 'cultural intensification' (Davies 2008), they foster sentiments, feelings and memories that bind together believers, or what Turner (1967;1969) coined as, communitas. As Liv Stutz (2004:59) pointed, through rituals "participants develop a chain of complex associations, forming a logical system of embodied experience, with clear, hierarchically organized order that [...] can draw in a whole coherent world of social and cultural values and rules". Following this, as the society's time unfolds at varying paces, by solidifying social group and working out

tensions, *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* opens the way to social awareness and consciousness about the processes of communal life.

With this in mind, it would take me too far and wide to mention all the efficacies of these religious practices. Rather what I want to draw attention to is only its relevance to the people and how such practices are perpetuated through time regardless of the censure of the religious thoughts encapsulated within it. Through time, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* has undergone some changes. Because of the condemnation of these religious practices by the church and the government as well (see Appendix III), people are reluctant to perform these practices. Not only that, the change in believes and practices of the '*zar* cult' from a communal performance to an individual power have a hand in this reluctance. According to some of the informants, nowadays, people claimed to be knowledgeable are becoming extinct and those who are not well aware of it do not dare to perform such practices. As has been indicated in the focus group discussions,

> "If you are entering a house to perform *Erfo Mereba* or *Shenecha*, you have to be prepared. Otherwise you will face the consequence. You will be 'hit' by the *Shenecha* or *Erfo*. So unless and otherwise you are sure that you can carry out these religious practices, you do not enter a house." (FGD 3: Amsteya, 28-01-2013)

Nonetheless, regardless of such factors, people desire to carry out these religious practices. Indeed, facts from observation here come to the rescue. In my stay in one of the villages, Lanquso, the church has a strong hegemony on the lives of the people, and thus, performing such religious practices is thought to be worshiping the devil. However, especially in the case of labor and injury, where the urge for safety and certainty is enlarged, people open a cassette of *Erfo Mereba* to heal the wounded or to assist safe delivery (KI7, Lanquso village, 03-02-2013). This shows that, even if the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area are deeply attached to the church, they are also, at the same time, desirous and keen to religious beliefs and practices acclaimed by the society and condemned by the church, which they think are more appealing to the mundane of everyday life. Paradoxical as it may seem, I believe this to be the case integrated within the notion of efficacy rather than belief.

In general, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* are important part of the lives of the Rayya Qobbo people. They bespeak of the socioeconomic experiences of the people and how these are organized to make sense of the world. They also bring together members of the

community who believe in its efficacy. There, *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* notably bring into picture the choices made by people in terms of the efficacy of such religious practices since they provide options to a variety of ills, problems, and crises.

Finally, having said all this, by taking Jürgen Habermas concept of rationality as "a form of 'communicative action' oriented toward attaining agreement with others", the rationality of religious practices such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* can be ascertained in so many ways. Unlike Sigmund Freud's assertion that religion is "a wish fulfilling mass illusion" ingrained in our unconscious self (Thurschwell 2000:104), the strategic calculation on how to achieve some chosen ends and the legitimization approaches that these religious practices has taken to come to consensus gives us the raison d'être for the rationality of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*.

Chapter Six

Concluding Remarks

As a relatively new field of study, anthropology of Christianity has come into the picture of religious studies and anthropology of religion. Situated within such flourishing tradition, this study attempted to give a glimpse of orthodox Christianity as a living social practice through a systematic understanding of the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as performed in the highland areas of Rayya Qobbo *wereda*.

As Thomas Ryba (2004:109) attested "the study of religions does not aspire to make progress in discovering the truth [about] religion". Instead, it aspires to understand and explain human religious thought and behavior (Alles 2008:6). By setting relationship with supernatural beings, men, women, and children together make religious worlds. Embedded within this interaction, therefore, lies the onset of bonds and boundaries which can be comprehended in practice and experience.

Many studies have now ploughed lines parallel to the practice and experiences of religion in the day-to-day lives of the people which vindicated the need to analyze religious practices and every day experiences. After all, religion does "no longer designates some sacred, mysterious, transcendental, or metaphysical reality that sets it wholly apart from the mundane world and therefore beyond the methods of inquiry applicable to the study of everyday, ordinary reality" (Wiebe 2002:xxiii).

With this in mind, to recapitulate what has been said all along, this thesis brings into light questions like "how do communities live with and 'reproduce' Christianity? What are the narratives and counter-narratives associated with the patterns of religious practices existent within the society, such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*? How are gender conceptions and roles identified and expressed in these narratives? And finally, how efficacious are these religious practices?

Religion, as Robert Orsi (2005:2) puts it "is a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together". These relationships

include all the complexities, all the evasions, narrations, projections, misunderstandings, conflicts, polemics, and so on. Within these intricate relationships lie the concept of syncretism and the notion of orthodoxy.

Among the highlanders of the Rayya Qobbo area, an assortment of religious practices is carried out alongside the 'official' EOC. In retracing the narratives involved within these religious practices, such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, one can notice the ambivalent attitude towards such practices. While some consider it as an integral part of the church tradition others contemplate it as 'worshiping the devil'. Featured in these paradoxical polemics, the problem of inclusivity and exclusivity, orthodoxy and heretics, becomes part of a process of negotiation and renegotiation situated within historical and socio-economic context. By legitimizing the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* within the framework of Orthodox Christianity, by incorporating elements from the 'official' tradition, these religious practices have been perpetuated throughout history. Hence, we can argue that syncretism may serve here as a 'legitimizing element' and a means of intruding into the religious authority of meaning making.

Proceeding from this, therefore, the ethnographic data entails the apprehension of meaning of these religious practices relatively and entangled in perpetual change. Though the multitude believes that, with these religious practices at hand, their religion is "an integrated Christian whole", a recent discourse exhibit that, it is quite a handful that are professing these religious practices overtly nowadays. Since these elements, as Kibrom (2013:163) indicated, "were incorporated in the early centuries of Christianity when ancient religions were still viable traditions followed by large number of adherents", even the clergy were claimed to partake in these religious practices. Meanwhile, pious Christians seem to reproach and condemn *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*, or any other religious beliefs and practices beyond the sacraments of the church. Nonetheless, regardless of their alleged fervency towards the theological and cosmological tradition of the church, these people are also inconspicuously involved in these religious practices.

Hence, with regards to the syncretic meaning making, the focus of this study gyrates around strategies of concealing and revealing the historical processes of mixing, legitimizing, and discerning religious orthodoxy. In this stretched process of narratives and counter-narratives lies the the notion of power and gender relation. In their attempt to negotiate the orthodoxy of the

religious practices in line with EOC tradition, the narratives and counter narratives surrounding debates of orthodoxy entails the gender relation extant within the Rayya Qobbo community. The fact that *Erfo Mereba* is condemned unlike *Shenecha*, irrespective of the similitudes integrated within the religious practices, gives us an inkling of the interplay between gender in relation to syncretism and religious orthodoxy. In addition, the authority endowed to women, on condition that they are adept of *Erfo Mereba,* brings into light another insight to the discourse of gender and religious syncretism. In this sense, in my view, the benediction and prayer within the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* provides an important observation point to study 'discursive gender strategies' and 'polemics of religious orthodoxy'. In relation with this also lies the efficacious approach towards benediction and prayer within the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*. Aside from material (instrumental) efficacy, the role of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* to the community of the highland areas of Rayya Qobbo extends up to providing explanation to the world they live within.

Associating religious syncretism and legitimization with the perpetuation of these religious practices, as a social anthropologist, I seek out for an explanation of a different kind. These practices, I have been considering all along, endured the paradoxical narratives and ambivalent accounts of different agencies. In this sense, I would like to pinpoint syncretism as a means to impel these religious practices across the historical antecedents. By following the postmodern desire to balance beliefs and practices, these people are long way from abandoning their faith in such religious practices. By realizing that EOC or religious practices, such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha,* alone cannot provide all the answers to the difficulties they face in life, these people engage in meaning construction through a dynamic balancing from both elements, regardless of the concern from the clergy or pious Christians for a rigidly defined orthodoxy.

By drawing on the similarities and at the same time the range of variations between these religious practices and the 'institutional Christianity', as can be seen among the Rayya Qobbo people, this study considers the roles and importance that such religious practices provide to the life of the individual as well as the society. We tend to take the existence of religious practices such as *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* as given. In this pursuit of religious practices, the notions of syncretism, legitimization, and meaning making all stretch out to the efficacy. As has been argued succinctly in this thesis, the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* provide

members of the community with sociopolitical, psychological, and material efficacy. By providing the community with a shared sense of 'communitas', these religious practices also serve the function of social solidarity.

Up to now, therefore, it has been argued that religion serves an array of efficacy for the society, which brings us to the notion of religious rationality. Unlike scholars like Freud, Marx, and Weber, who argued religion to be an "illusion", the presence of these efficacies and the meanings attached by the society provides us with the bases to claim for religious rationality.

Glazier and Charles (2003:5) claimed that "Anthropologists of religion confront not only a landscape that has shifted fundamentally, but a landscape that is still shifting". Whereas anthropologists continue to shower us with different explanations on the efficacy and rationality of religion in general and religious practices in particular, the aforementioned points can be recapped within this simple quotation: "religion plays many functions in a society; It is a social process that helps to order society and provide its members with meaning, unity, and peace of mind" (Nanda and Warms 2002:361). With this at hand, therefore, one can argue the rationality of religious practices.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1. In-Depth and Key Informant Interview Guide

General Introduction: The purpose of this interview is to gather information related to **The Efficacy of Benediction and Prayer among the Amhara Society: An Anthropological Study of the Religious Rituals of '*Erfo Mereba*' and '*Shenecha*' in Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of Northern Wollo Zone.** The data to be collected from this interview will be used only for educational research purpose. Your responses will be kept confidential. So, I kindly request you to participate in this study voluntarily. The quality of this study depends on your genuine response and I would also like to ask your voluntariness to record your voice through tape recorder because it is hard to jot down your responses.

Thank you in advance for your time and kind cooperation!

***Part One*: Research Site Identification and Background of Interviewee and Key Informant**

1. *Wereda* _____
2. *Kebele* _____
3. Sub- *Kebele* _____
4. Specified place of Interview_____
5. Time of Interview_____
6. Date of Interview _____

- Name _____
- Sex _____
- Age _____
- Religion _____

Marital Status _____
Educational Level_____
Occupation_____

Part Two*: Questions forwarded to the adept of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* performed in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda

1. Where did these religious practices originated?
2. What are the processes and procedures integrated within the religious practice of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*? What kinds of rhetoric, narratives, or objects are used in these religious practices?

3. To whom are these religious practices addressed to?
4. When and why are these religious practices performed?
5. Who are qualified to be an adept or practitioner of these religious practices? Are they restricted in age, gender, marital status, societal status, or any other criteria? How can one become an adept?
6. What are the benefits or advantages gained by being an adept? Is there any monetary, material, social, political, or psychological gains?
7. Who are qualified to participate in these religious practices? Is there any exclusion?
8. What kind of roles does *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* play within the community? How do you describe the place of these religious practices within the community?
9. What is the relation between the EOC and these religious practices?
10. Any additional points?

Part Three: Questions forwarded to the clergy of EOC in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*

1. How long has the tradition of EOC been established in the area?
2. What are the sacraments and rituals provided by the church? Who are the practitioners and when are these services performed?
3. Do women have any kind of role within the church?
4. What kind of relation exists between the clergy and the laity?
5. How do you describe, then, the place of the church within the community as well as the lives of an individual?
6. Are there any religious beliefs and practices that are performed within the community outside the dominion of the church? If so, what are these beliefs and practices?
7. What is the stand of the church in regard to the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*?
8. Is these religious practices considered mischievous or benevolent?
9. To what extent and on what grounds does the church condemn/accept such practices?
10. What is the response of the church to the proponents of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*?
11. Any additional points?

Part Four: **Questions forwarded to proponents/opponents of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* performed in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda***

1. What is your view on the religious practices of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha*? Is it eminent in the lives of the people or mischievous and therefore irrelevant?
2. What is the logic behind performing these religious practices?
3. When and why are these religious practices performed?
4. To whom are these religious practices addressed?
5. What kind of status do the adepts of these religious practices have within the community?
6. How do you explain these practices in light of your religious affiliation (EOC)?
7. What is the difference/similarity between EOC and these religious practices?
8. Have you hosted these religious practices? If so, for what purpose and what was the outcome?
9. Do you attend church sacraments and rituals?
10. Any additional points?

Thank you very much for your valuable information!

1.2. Focus Group Discussion Guide

General Introduction: The purpose of this FGD is to gather information related to **The Efficacy of Benediction and Prayer among the Amhara Society: An Anthropological Study of the Religious Rituals of *'Erfo Mereba'* and *'Shenecha'* in Rayya Qobbo *wereda* of Northern Wollo Zone.** The data to be collected from this FGD will be used only for educational research purpose. Your responses will be kept confidential. So, I kindly request you to participate in this study voluntarily. The quality of this study depends on your genuine response and I would also like to ask your voluntariness to record your voice through tape recorder because it is hard to jot down your responses.

Thank you in advance for your time and kind cooperation!

Part One: Research Site Identification and Background of Participants

1. *Wereda* _____
2. *Kebele* _____
3. Sub- *Kebele* _____
4. Number of Participants _____
5. Specified place of Discussion_____
6. Time of Discussion_____
7. Date of Discussion _____

- Name _____
- Sex _____
- Age _____
- Religion _____

Marital Status _____
Educational Level_____
Occupation_____

Part Two: Questions related to the establishment and process of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* performed in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda*

1. What kind of historical narratives exist with regard to the origin of these religious practices?
2. What are the processes and procedures evident in these religious practices?
3. To whom are these religious practices addressed?
4. When and why are these religious practices performed?
5. Who are considered to be adept? How are they accorded such position?
6. What are the advantages or gains they receive?
7. Who are allowed to partake in these religious practices?
8. Any additional points?

Part Three: **Questions related to the lived religious expression and syncretic elements of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* performed in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda***

1. What are the dominant religions present within the community?
2. What is the role of EOC within the community on the daily life of the people?
3. How do people practice benediction and prayer in their everyday lives?
4. What kinds of religious practices incorporate benediction and prayer within the community?
5. Any additional points?

Part Four: **Questions related to the meaning making process and the efficacy of *Erfo Mereba* and *Shenecha* performed in the highlands of the Rayya Qobbo *wereda***

1. Are there any religious practices that are considered to be marginal to the EOC?
2. How do you explain the roles and significance of these religious practices?
3. What is the role and significance of EOC within the community?
4. How do you explain these religious practices in the eyes of EOC?
5. What is the difference/similarity between these religious practices and EOC?
6. Any additional points?

Thank you very much for your valuable information!

APPENDIX II: PROFILES OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

2.1. General Characteristics of Respondents

PERSONAL INFORMATION	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS		
	RURAL	URBAN	TOTAL
Age Groups			
15-29	8	3	**11**
30-50	18	4	**22**
>50	13	1	**14**
Sex			
Male	20	8	**28**
Female	19	-	**19**
Religious Affiliation			
Orthodox Christian	39	5	**44**
Islam	-	2	**2**
Protestant	-	1	**1**
Catholic	-	-	**-**
Others	-	-	**-**
Marital Status			
Single	3	2	**5**
Married	33	6	**39**
Divorced	2	-	**2**
Widowed	1	-	**1**
Educational Level			
Illiterate	31	-	**31**
Primary Education	7	1	**8**
Secondary Education	1	2	**3**
University/College	-	5	**5**
Occupation*			
Student	1	-	**1**
Farmer	18	-	**18**
Trader	5	1	**6**
Clergy	4	1	**5**
Housewife	17	-	**17**
Office Employee	-	6	**6**
Others	1	-	**1**
TOTAL	**39**	**8**	**47**

* Individuals with different occupation are included in this section. Therefore, the sum might exceed 39.

N.B. The total number of informants indicated excludes those who were part of the informal interviews.

eda: Rayya Qobbo *wereda*

Place of nterview	*Date of Interview*
rkat village	01-01-2013 09-02-2013
oldiya town	28-01-2013 3:10-4:00Am
oldiya town	27-01-2013 4:15-5:00Am
erkat village	27-12-2012 1:30-2:05Am
oldiya town	19-12-2012 01-01-2013 3:25-4:10Am
erkat village	20-12-2012 05-01-2013 10:15-10:45Am
nquso and erkat village	31-12-2012 02-01-2013 03-02-2013

eda: Rayya Qobbo *wereda*

Place of Interview	*Date and Time of Interview*
erkat village	26-01-2013 9:00-11:00Am
erkat village	05-01-2013 8:00-10:00Pm
erkat village	05-01-2013 3:10-4:25Am
nsteya village	15-01-2013 7:30-8:05Am
nsteya village	14-01-2013 9:25-5:10Pm
nsteya village	14-01-2013 8:00-9:10Am
erkat village	08-02-2013 4:55-6:40Am
nquso village	02-02-2013 10:00-12:00Am
nquso village	02-02-2013 2:00-9:00Am
erkat village	24-01-2013 10:00-11:00Am

I11) Mollash Wudu	Female	32	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Kerkat village	24-01-2013 2:45-4:00Am
I12) Akeley Fentaw	Female	35	Divorcee	Illiterate	Trader	Orthodox Christian	Kerkat village	25-01-2013 9:00-11:00Am
I13) Mergiya Denekew	Female	68	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Kerkat village	25-01-2013 2:00-3:00Am
I14) Kassaye Molla	Male	73	Married	Illiterate	Farmer/ Community Elder	Orthodox Christian	Amsteya village	16-01-2013 7:30-9:05Am
I15) Yeshuma Adane	Female	65	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Amsteya village	16-01-2013 11:00-12:30Am
I16) Tadesse Temere	Male	47	Married	Illiterate	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Kerkat village	10-02-2013 9:15-10:30Am
I17) Yedersal Wudu	Male	29	Single	Grade 7	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Ayda village	19-02-2013 2:45-3:40Am
I18) Desale Sisay	Male	36	Married	Grade 8	Tailor	Orthodox Christian	Ayda village	20-02-2013 12:00- 1:30Am
I19) Yedersal Adnew	Male	28	Single	Grade 8	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	05-02-2013 2:00-4:00Am
I20) Genet Biset	Female	26	Married	Grade 4	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	04-02-2013 11:00-12:00Am
I21) Bihon Amare	Male	41	Married	Illiterate	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Kerkat village	09-02-2013 6:00-8:00Pm
I22) Biresaw Fentaw	Male	65	Married	Illiterate	Farmer/ Business owner	Orthodox Christian	Ayda vllage	19-02-2013 9:00-10:30Pm
I23) Negesti Sisay	Female	54	Married	Illiterate	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Ayda village	19-02-2013 7:00-8:00Pm
I24) Deseye Molla	Male	27	Married	Bachelor Degree	Government Employee	Orthodox Christian	Qobbo town	22-02-2013 11:00-12:00Am

ɔbo town	22-02-2013 3:00-4:00Am
ldiya town	29-12-2012 10:00-11:00Am
ɔbbo town	24-02-2013 9:00-10:00Am
ɔldiya town	26-12-2012 10:00-11:00Am
ɔbbo town	22-02-2013 3:00-4:00Am
ɔldiya town	29-12-2012 10:00-11:00Am

2.4. Informal Interview Participants

Name	*Sex*	*Age*	*Marital Status*	*Educational Level*	*Occupation*	*Religious Affiliation*	*Place of Interview*	*Date and Time of Interview*
I1) Aregash Belay	Female	54	Widow	Grade 10	Beauty Parlor Owner	Orthodox Christian	Addis Ababa	20-11-2012 27-02-2013
I2) Shishig Adnew	Female	-	Married	-	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	01-02-2013 9:10-10:00Am
I3) Mestawet Sintayehu	Female	32	Married	-	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Addis Ababa	22-11-2012 4:15-5:00Am
I4) Amare Fentaw	Male	-	Married	-	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Ayda village	20-02-2013 5:00-6:10Am
I5) Guzguz Derebew	Female	-	Married	-	Trader	Orthodox Christian	Qobbo town	24-02-2013 12:00-2:00Am
I6) Tsehay Molla	Female	-	Married	-	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Woldiya town	27-12-2012 12:00-1:00Am 29-12-2012 1:00-1:45Am
I7) Zenabe Semaw	Male	-	Married	-	Trader	-	Robit town	23-02-2013 2:00- 2:30Am
I8) Akele Belay	Male	-	Married	-	Farmer	-	Lanquso village	01-02-2013 1:00-1:45Am
I9) Adnew Fentaw	Male	-	Married	-	Farmer	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	03-02-2013 8:00-9:00Pm
I10) Belete Wudu	Male	-	Single	-	Student	-	Kerkat village	24-01-2013 6:00-6:40Pm
I11) *Memre* Tesfaw Abate	Male	-	Married	-	Clergy	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	04-02-2013 6:30-7:00Am
I12) *Memre* Tadesse Feleqe	Male	-	Married	-	Clergy	Orthodox Christian	Lanquso village	04-02-2013 7:15-8:00Am

I13) Negesti Alemayehu	Female	29	Divorcee	-	Housewife	Orthodox Christian	Addis Ababa	15-11-2011 3:00-5:00Am
I14) Melkamnesh Wudu	Female	-	Single	-	-	-	Addis Ababa	15-11-2011 3:00-5:00Am
I15) Serke Ayalew	Female	-	Single	-	-	-	Ayda village	20-02-2013 7:00-2:00Pm
I16) Abebe Amare	Male	28	Single	-	Business Owner	-	Addis Ababa	22-11-2012 4:15-5:00Am

Wereda: Rayya Qobbo *wereda*

tion	***Religious Affiliation***
wife	Orthodox Christian
wife	Orthodox Christian
wife	Orthodox Christian
wife	Orthodox Christian
ewife	Orthodox Christian
ewife	Orthodox Christian
der	Orthodox Christian

Time of FGD: 10:00-11:00Am

eligious Affiliation
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian

GD: 2:00-4:00Pm

Religious Affiliation
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian
Orthodox Christian

GD:8:00-9:00Pm

	Religious Affiliation
der	Orthodox Christian
	Orthodox Christian
	Orthodox Christian

FGD: 10:00-12:00Am

rmants respectively while I.I. e interview conducted as being

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APPENDIX IV: LETTERS

Letters from the government on the condemnation of religious rituals as 'Idolatry Practices'

APPENDIX IV: ILLUSTRATIONS





Fig 11 and 12: An overview of the landscape of *Kerkat* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 13: An overview of the landscape of *Ayda* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

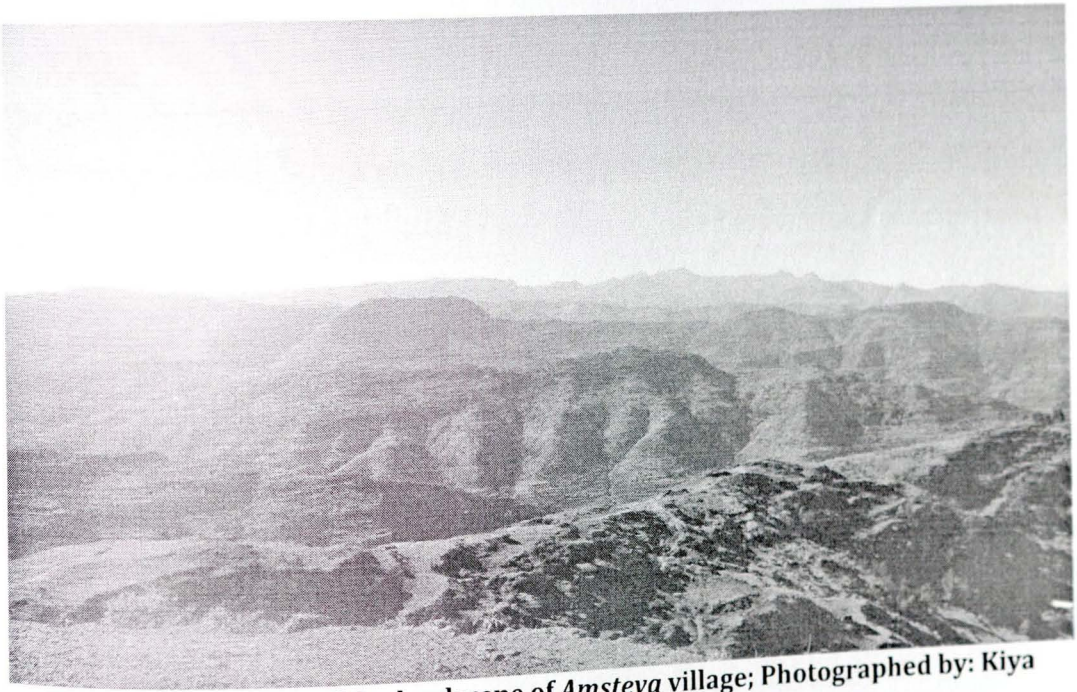


Fig 14: An overview of the landscape of *Amsteya* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 15: An overview of the landscape of *Lanquso* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

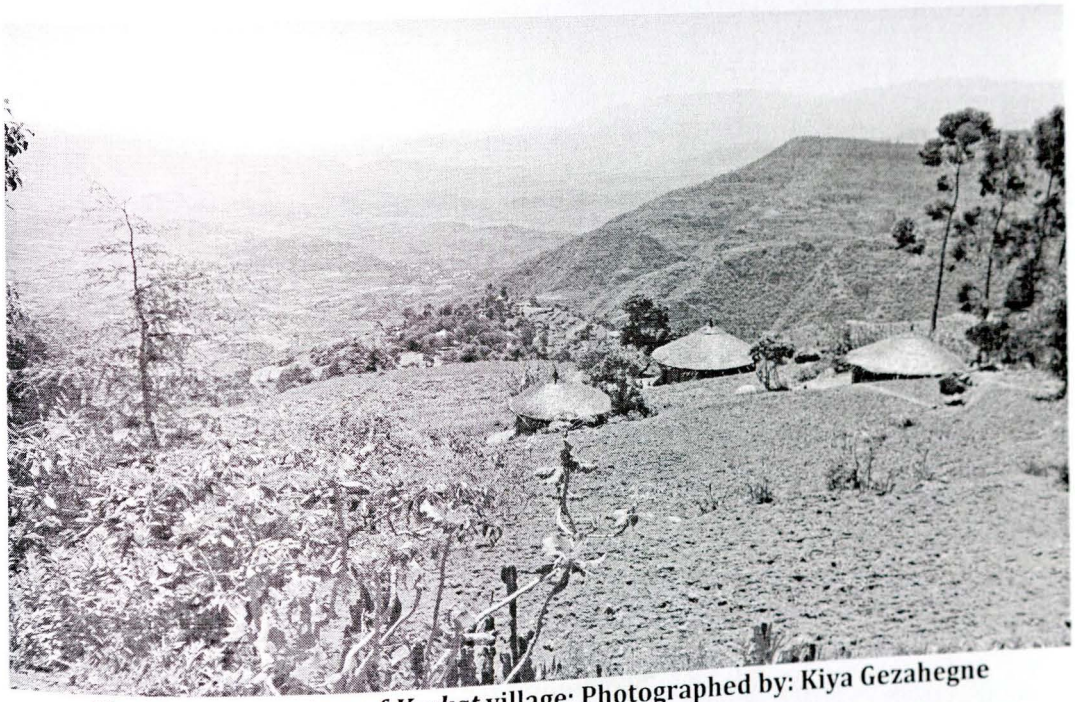


Fig 16: An overview of *Kerkat* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

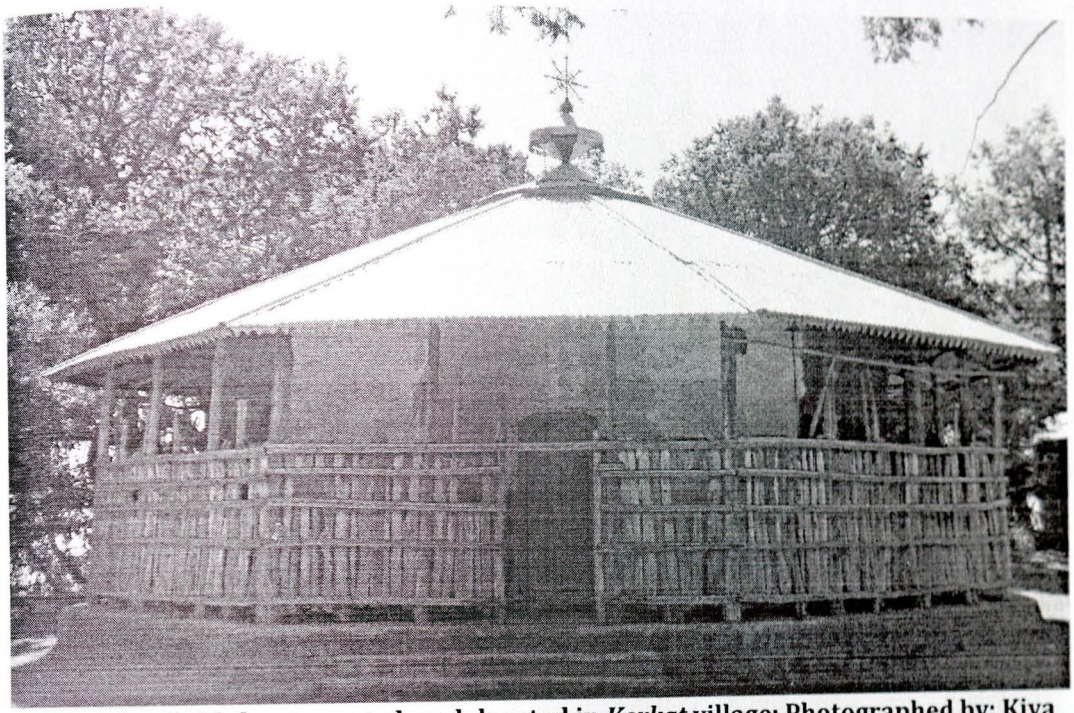


Fig 17: Saint Teklehaymanot church located in *Kerkat* village; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 18: Household structure in the highlands of Rayya Qobbo area; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 19: The market town of *Qalim*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 20: *Erfo Mereba* leader getting ready to apportion the *Chefe*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 21: *Erfo Mereba* leader distributing the *Chefe*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

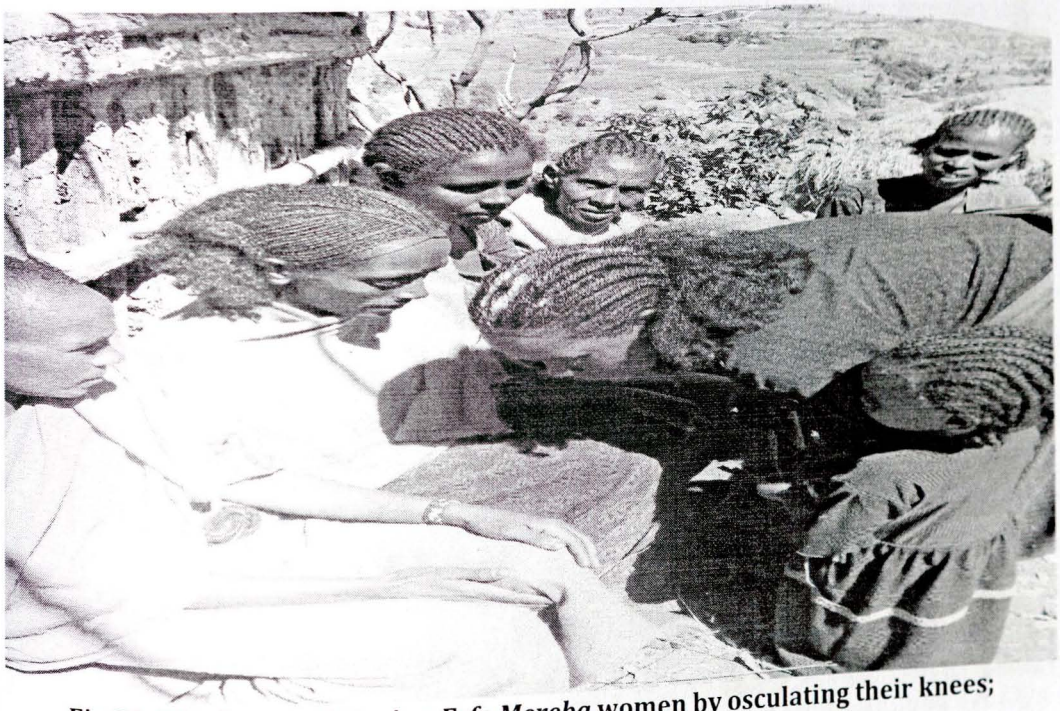


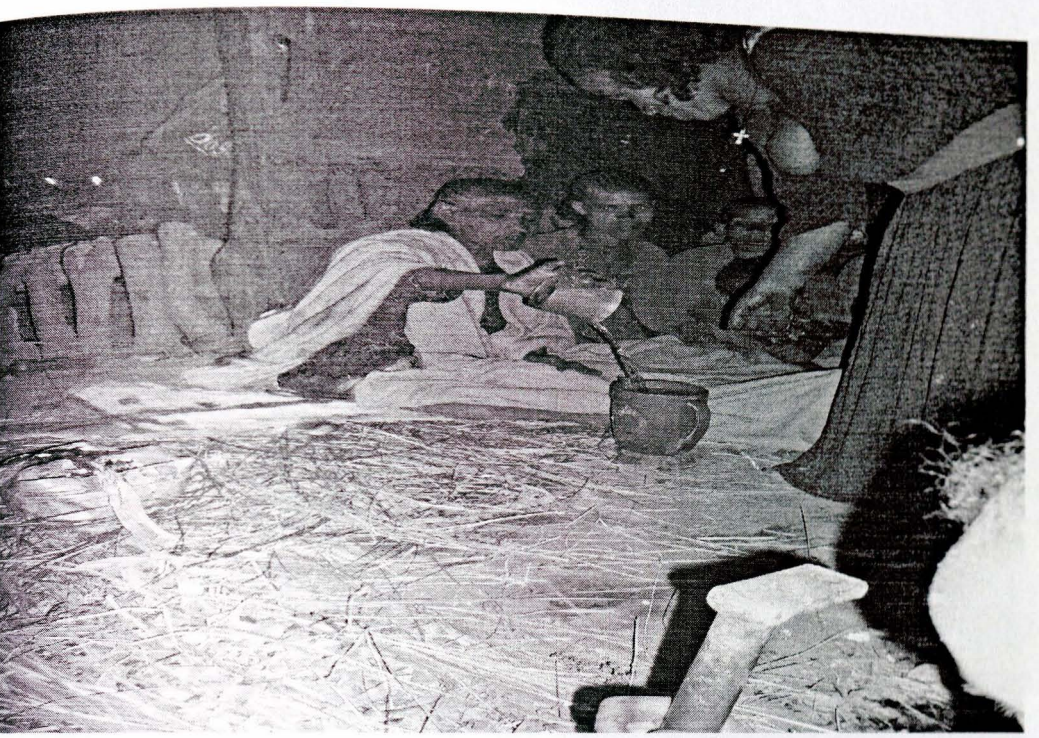
Fig 22: The host welcoming *Erfo Mereba* women by osculating their knees; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 23: *Erfo Mereba* women waiting to enter the house; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 24: *Erfo Mereba* woman strewing the *Chefe* in the house; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



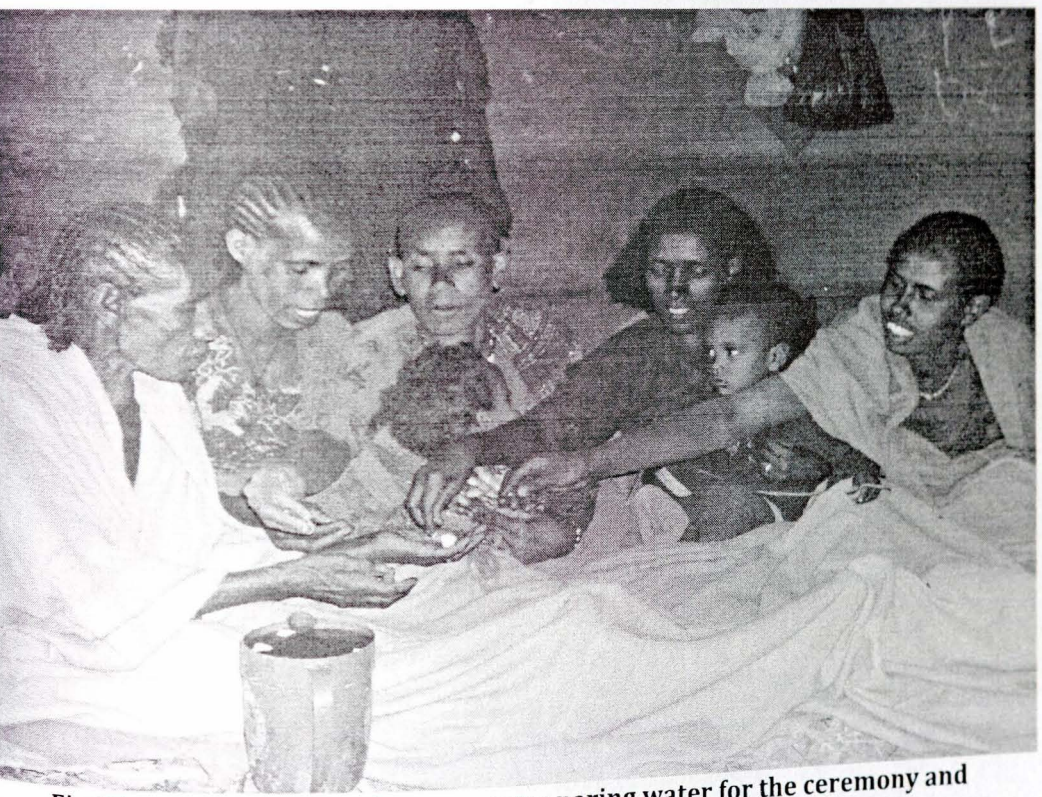


Fig 25 and 26: *Erfo Mereba* women preparing water for the ceremony and apportioning butter into the water; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 27: *Erfo Mereba* women cleansing themselves with water and *Chefe*;
Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 28: *Erfo Mereba* women served with meal at the end of the ceremony;
Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 29: The *Kadamit* preparing coffee for the ceremony; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

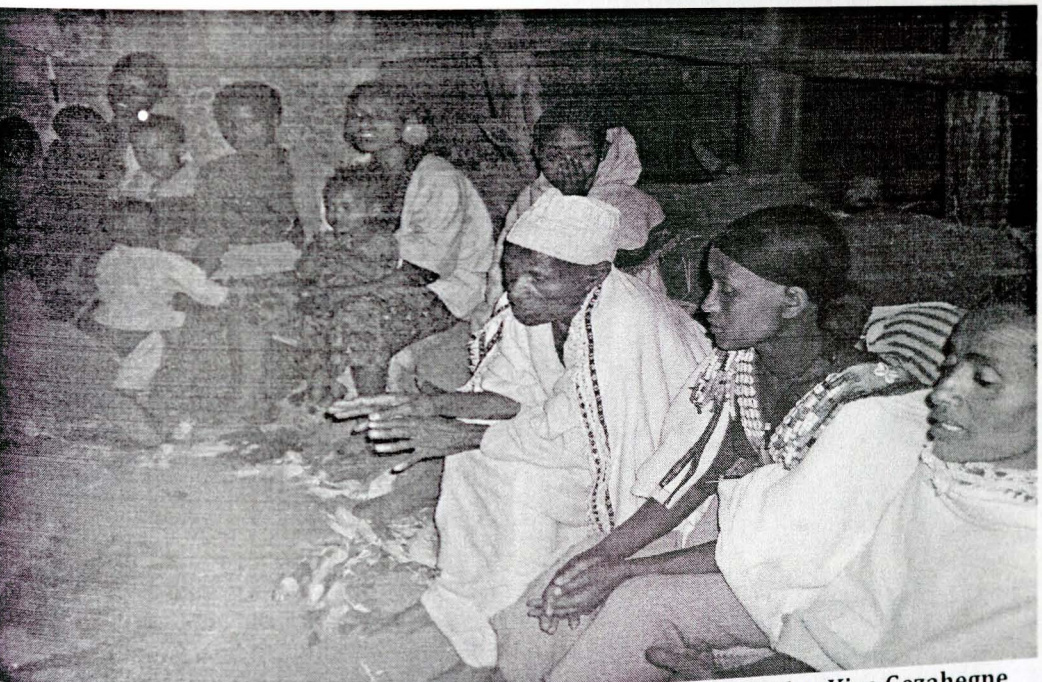


Fig 30: Participants of *Erfo Mereba* ceremony; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 31: *Shenecha* men geared up to commence the ceremony and ready to enter the house; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 32: *Shenecha* leader apportioning *Weyera*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

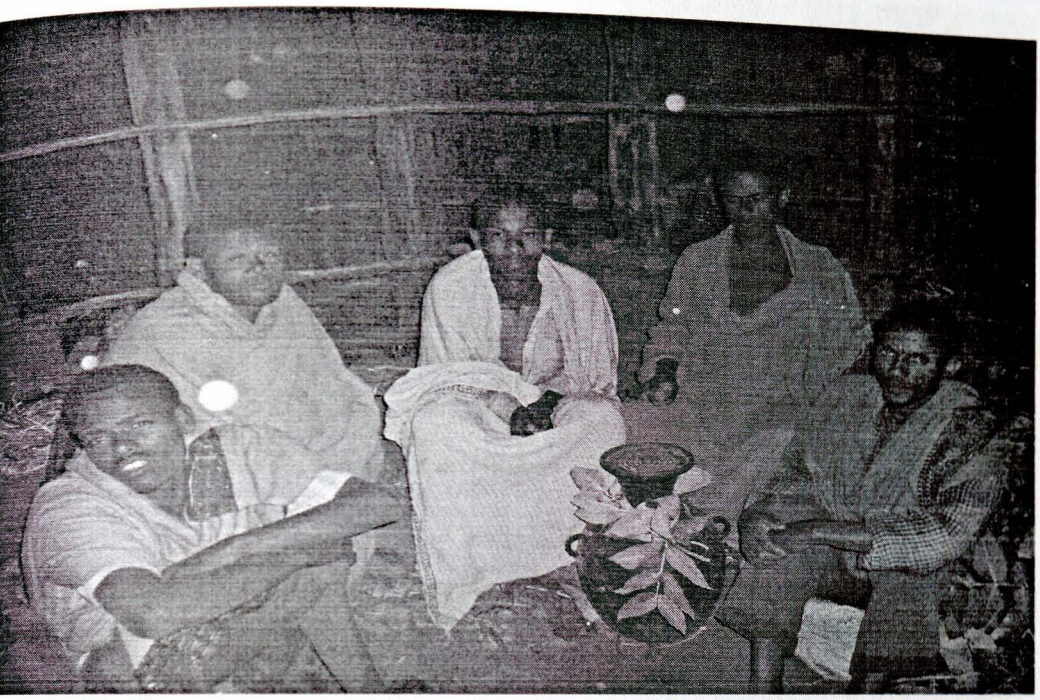


Fig 33: *Shenecha* men waiting to start the ceremony; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



Fig 34: *Shenecha* leader passing out benediction holding a mug of *tella*; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne



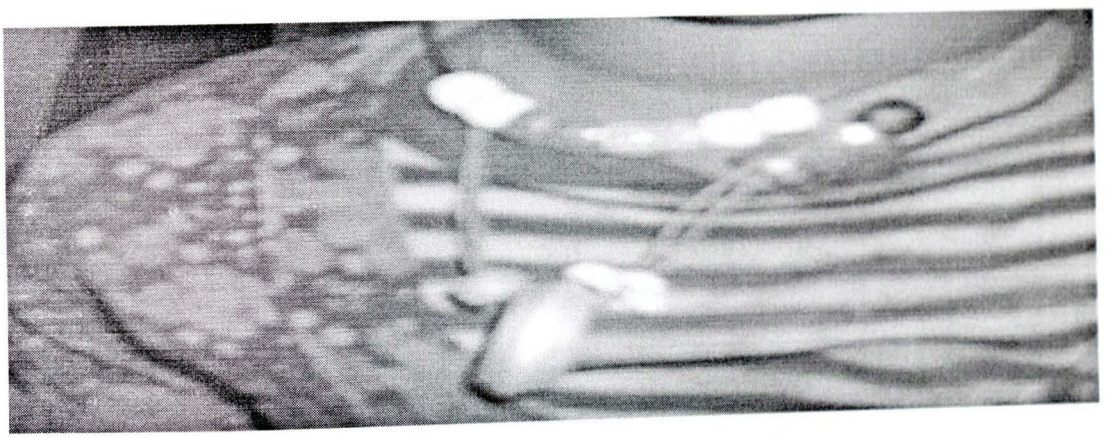




Fig 35, 36, and 37: Different types of *Mahteb* worn within the society; Photographed by: Kiya Gezahegne

DECLARATION

This document describes an ethnographic work undertaken as part of Social Anthropology Master Degree program at Addis Ababa University. All views and opinions expressed in this thesis, therein, are my original work and all material sources featured in the thesis are duly acknowledged.

Student: **Kiya Gezahegne**

Signature:

Date: May 31, 2013

This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as a university advisor.

Advisor: **Dr. Meron Zeleke**

Signature:

Date: May 31, 2013