

# The Semiotics of the “Christian/Muslim Knife”: Meat and Knife as Markers of Religious Identity in Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

The knife, a synecdoche of slaughtering, is an important culinary tool that is charged with the power of religious speech acts and that has a significant semiotic function in Christian-Muslim encounters in Ethiopia. The slaughtering rituals not only transform the neutral natural animal into a sacred cultural food but also invest the meat with an intense aura of disgust among followers of the other faith. The slaughtering narratives continue to manifest themselves in other public signs, namely, in the Cross and the Crescent, on butcheries, and restaurants, for example. These two universal signs are the corollaries of an anterior sign, in other words, the knife that, in the discursive realm of food and religious identity in Ethiopia, implicates the different slaughtering rituals of Orthodox Christians and Muslims.

As a hyponym of other cutleries par excellence, the knife is apparently one of the oldest utensils that mankind started to use—even older than the fire (Wilson 2012)—evolving from a hunting tool in forest to an important household utensil on table, as Cohan (2009, 49) observes, making “the evolution of the knife as the primary tool for human survival and development.” Even for modern humans, in culinary process, the knife is “the earliest utensil used for manipulating food” (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 206). Ancient Egyptians, well before mankind discovered smelting, used “Ethiopic”

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flint stones as knife.<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that the flint was used for religious purpose: for making the first incision in the dead bodies prior to embalming (Herodotus in Wilkinson 1878, 260; King and Hall [1910] 2005). The first knives, which were crafted out of stone, are believed to date back as far as two and a half million years ago, and those made of copper about ten thousand years ago, while those made out of bronze date back five thousand years ago, by craftsmen in the Near East (Ewalt 2005). Coincidentally, the oldest examples of stone-cutting tools date back 2.6 million years to Ethiopia (Milkias 2011; Wilson 2012). Anthropological and ethno-archeological studies show that African knives not only have various forms, shapes, and types (Thomas 1925) but also different symbolic, magical, and sacrificial functions (McNaughton 1970). Before we delve into our semiotic investigation of the so-called Christian knife and Muslim knife in Ethiopia regarding food and interreligious encounters, it is useful to have a brief look at two other functions of the knife in the country. The first one is a historical fact that takes us to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and afterward history of Christianity in Ethiopia, and the second one is a folkloric practice of using the knife to ward off evil spirits. Both accounts will be important backgrounds in understanding the “charisma” and semiotic functions of the knife as slaughtering tool and as an identity marker.

After the mission of the Portuguese Jesuits in the Ethiopian highlands from 1536 to 1632 (Shabot and Alos-Moner 2006; Milkias 2011), the Ethiopian Orthodox Church dealt an internal Christological debate. The EOTC (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church—*Tewahido* means “union”) believes that Christ has two births, from his Father and from his mother St. Mary—a non-Chalcedonian Christological doctrine of One Incarnate Nature of God the Word (Tamene 1998; Ayenew 2009). But during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, two other sects—the *Qibat* (school of anointing/unction) and the *Tsegga* (school of grace) or *Sost Lidet* (three births)—emerged in the church following the interference of Portuguese Jesuits (Trimingham 1952, 98–99; Ayenew 2009). While the *Qibat* believed in the anointing of Christ at Baptism and not in the incarnation of the Son, the *Tsegga* maintained that Christ has three births: from the Father, from the Virgin Mary, and from the Holy Spirit after the Incarnation in Baptism (Ayenew 2009; Milkias 2011, 186). What is more relevant now for our discussion of the Knife is the fact that the *Tsegga* sect, which believed in three births, labeled the *Tewahido* (unionists) “*Karra*,” an Amharic word for “knife” to

1. Gardner Wilkinson (1878) surmises that “Ethiopic” signifies the blackness of the stone while admitting that such a flint stone, mentioned as “Ethiopic stone” by Herodotus, is granite common in Ethiopia.

signify that the latter “cut off (rejected) the third birth” (Ayenew 2009, 290).<sup>2</sup> How it was named so sounds literal to the very function of the knife—cutting, separating, dividing, splitting, and so forth. It is also interesting to note that like other religions such as Christianity itself, it obtained its name from others. Hence, the knife served symbolically as a schism signifier for the centuries since then in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church although its use diminished as the debate itself has subdued through time.

Another important tradition in the country is using the knife to ward off evil spirits that will help us later on contemplate well its power of giving individuals disgust in virtue of its slaughtering functions accompanied by religious performative languages in Orthodox Christianity and in Islam in Ethiopia. Putting the knife under one’s bed to ward off evil spirits is a widely practiced folkloric tradition in many places in the world, such as in Greece and China (Hedley-Dent 2011). Especially in most rural and some traditional families in urban Ethiopia, to the present day, people use the knife for this purpose. They put it under the mattress or pillow to protect the sleeping person from evil spirits. It is believed that the evil spirits cause nightmares in the sleeping person. The knife therefore is an important instrument to repel them. It is also an important “magical” weapon to protect a confined woman from evil spirits after she gives birth, which goes parallel with what Hedley-Dent (2011) writes: “A knife under the bed is meant to act as a painkiller during childbirth, and, in a pre-Health-and-Safety age, a knife in the cradle was thought to keep a baby from harm.”

As regards the history of knife and its relation to identity, it is particularly Herodotus’s account on the role of the knife in the commensality of the Greeks and Egyptians in the antiquity that best elucidates the subject this article is dealing with. That is, according to Herodotus, an Egyptian used to avoid meat that was cut with a Greek knife, a custom that is parallel with that of Christians and Muslims with regard to avoiding meat slaughtered by a person from the other faith. However, as far as the predominant food culture of Ethiopia in relation to knife is concerned, the knife’s main use often terminates at slaughtering, which is a decisive factor for their dietary differences and commensality. Except its use during cooking, breaking bread, and eating raw meat, the latter being a common culture almost through out the country, the knife is not a

2. However, there is no consensus among scholars whether *karra* (knife) refers only to *Tewahido*, for some believe that both the *Tewahidos* (unionists) and the *Qibats* (Unctionists) reject the third birth doctrine of the *Tsega* (grace/three birth sect) (Ayenew 2009, 290 n. 885; for an alternative analysis on the origin of the *Karra* appellation, see d’Abbadie 1868). Be that as it may, the knife as a symbol of religious marker works properly in either or both cases, as we basically are not interested in verifying which particular sect it exactly refers to.

common utensil on the Ethiopian table. Perhaps that Ethiopians do not often use/need knife on their table is ironically one of the distinct identities of the Ethiopian food culture. So, one may reasonably wonder how the knife is then such an important semiotic object in interreligious encounters in Ethiopia. And a closer look at this culinary tool through a semiotic analysis will throw light on our understanding of the role of culinary tools and food in the realm of Christian-Muslim encounters in the country. This article assumes that the seemingly banal material culture and everyday life have a lot to offer in understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations. It attempts to discuss the role of the knife, an important slaughtering tool, in the sociocultural spheres that involve food or eating. Thus, it explores the semiotic functions of the knife as a communicating tool and, broadly its concomitant force, that is, the “transactional symbolism of food” (Firth 1973, 253) in interreligious encounters between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia.

### Theoretical Background

Both Islam and Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia,<sup>3</sup> in their “local construction” (Tapper and Tapper 1986) or indigenized form, have forged and developed some food related cultures (popular proscriptions and taboos) taking presumably some aspects of the dietary rules of one religion as essential “other” with regard to some specific food items. McGee (2002, 15) aptly describes this phenomenon: “Used by outsiders to define a group, food is a key part of a group’s self definition.” This helps us to see interreligious discourse of food, which is used stereotypically as a template for evaluating other people and other cultures (Danesi 2004, 199). In the case of Ethiopia, one group not only names the diet, culinary tool, and so forth, according to the otherness of the group: *YeIslam Billa*, *YeIslam Siga*, *YeIslam Siga-Bet*; *YeKristian Billa*, *YeKirstian Siga*, *YeKristian Siga-Bet* (a Muslim knife, Muslim meat, a Muslim butchery; a Christian knife, Christian Meat; a Christian butchery, respectively) but also goes as far as naming the “other” according to its diet.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the food taboo attached to religion and acknowledged by religious groups helps

3. According to the 2007 census, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians account for 43.5 percent (32,138,126); Muslims, 33.9 percent (25,045,550); Protestants, 18 percent (13,746,787); indigenous religions, 2.6 percent (1,957,944); Catholics, 0.7 percent (536,827); and other, 0.6 percent (471,861).

4. Rosenblum (2010, 2) succinctly comments, “the food on one’s plate serves as a social symbol (or sign) that communicates group association and disassociation.” An informant in Bahir Dar, for example, said that some Christians label Muslims as *litalit bellita* (roughly means “bland/insipid food eaters”) in contrast to the self-declared “fine and spicy food eater” Christians. It is interesting to note that, according to Telfer (2002, 44), the aesthetic reaction of people as to liking the taste and smell of a food may depend, among other factors, on whether the food is “produced by politically respectable regimes.”

in the cohesion of that group and in asserting one's identity in relation to others and in creating a feeling of belongingness (Meyer-Rochow 2009, 1). By now there are abundant researches on food and (religious) identity.<sup>5</sup> Whereas this article takes some of them as theoretical backdrop, it is particularly underpinned by notions surrounding speech act theory (Austin 1962), specifically religious speech, whose most important aspect is what it accomplishes in contrast to its sheer content (Eller 2007, 104). Slaughtering is such an important step in food preparation that marks, according to Claude Levi-Strauss, the beginning of the transformation of the natural into the cultural, that is, the raw into the cooked where the "identity-based food prohibition" is inserted (Rosenblum 2010, 77). That is, the religious speech together with other mandatory factors or "necessary conditions" (Austin 1962, 14) such as the identity of the slaughterer and the slaughtering tool/utensil is the most important factor that transforms the "natural" animal into a "cultural" meat/food. In other words, in speech act theory, for the speech to be effective, there are relevant cultural and situational conditions: the speech must be performed in the right way and by someone authorized to perform it (Austin 1962, 14–16; Eller 2007, 106). For example, in Ethiopia, in a very unlikely scenario, if a Muslim slaughters the animal evoking the Holy Trinity *BaSeme Ab weWald waMenfes Qedus Ahadu Amlak* ("In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, One God"), or a Christian performs the slaughtering uttering *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* ("In the name of Allah, the passionate and the Merciful"), the speech acts are invalid, ineffective, or useless, or according to J. L. Austin's theory called "infelicity" which includes a misfire, that is, "When the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched: and our act . . . is void or without effect" (Austin 1962, 16). In our case, the meat is conceivably not proper for either group. This simply implies that the right speech should be performed by the right person at the right context with the right conditions.

## Method

This study is part of an ongoing broader research<sup>6</sup> on Christian-Muslim encounters in food contexts in Ethiopia. It employs empirical data obtained through ethnographic study in Bahir Dar City. Apart from in-depth qualitative

5. See, e.g., Farb and Armelagos 1980; De Garine 2001; McGee 2002; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Finger 2007; Lyons 2007; Meigs 1997; Nukaga 2008; Barclay 2010; Rosenblum 2010.

6. The title of the research project is "Narratives beyond the Knife: Food Contexts as Converging and Diverging Zones in Christian-Muslim Encounters in Ethiopia."

interviews, observations, analysis of religious texts, and research findings on food and religious identity in Ethiopia and elsewhere, I have used my own lived experience<sup>7</sup> for over ten years in Bahir Dar. The research participants were Orthodox Christians and Muslims who represent four different groups: religious scholars, local elites, wedding feast attendants, and families of brides and of grooms. The research site, Bahir Dar City, is found in the northwestern part of Ethiopia, some 570 km from Addis Ababa. According to the latest 2007 census, the Amhara Regional State is populated predominantly with about 14.25 million Orthodox Christians (82.5 percent) and with nearly 3 million (17.2 percent) Muslim inhabitants, while Bahir Dar City, officially known as Bahir Dar Special-Zone, is a home for 220,344 people out of which 89.72 percent are Orthodox Christians and 8.47 percent are Muslims. Concerning ethnicity, the city is relatively homogeneous in that 96 percent of the population is reportedly Amhara ethnic group (Population Census 2008).

### **Food and Religion in Ethiopia**

At this point, it is essential to look at the characteristics of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia in order to better understand the dynamics of their peculiar encounters in wider sociocultural contexts that involve food or eating. The two religions have equally apparently unique features that distinguish them from their counterparts elsewhere. These features are manifest both in their relations and encounters as well as in their respective cultures. For instance, the role of meat in the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia is unique compared to that of Christians and Muslims elsewhere such as in Lebanon, France, Uganda, Malawi (Ficquet 2006), and Tanzania (Terdiman 2013) where the slaughtering of animals is not a concern for Christians means; it is a business left to the Muslims because food in general and meat in particular is presumably not a dogmatic or doctrinal issue for such Christians. In the case of

7. In the current ethnopolitical climate of the country, historical designations attributed to certain ethnic groups are being questioned. For example, some non-Amhara ethnic groups often pose the very basic question of what it means to be an Ethiopian. And they argue that, for long time, the Amhara culture has been taken as an epitome of the Ethiopian cultural identity. I, however, do not believe that the culture of one particular ethnic group necessarily epitomizes the very diverse Ethiopian culture. The reason for conducting the current study in this region is thus purely methodological. In my lived experiences and as the available scanty literatures suggest (Braukamper 1982; Carmichael 1996; Abbink 2007), the topic I am dealing with (the Christian-Muslim interaction in food contexts) is common almost throughout the country. Therefore, any generalization or conclusion I might draw about the Christian-Muslim encounter in Ethiopia based on the narratives from this research site should not be seen as equating the Amhara culture as necessarily "Ethiopian" in the old sense, which other ethnic groups are critical of today. If it were not for methodological ease, the same study could have also been done in other regions where the custom of avoiding meat slaughtered by the other religion anyway serves as separating factor for Christians and Muslims.

Ethiopia, however, even public slaughterhouses have distinct sections for slaughtering animals in Muslim and Christian ways. At household level as well, each group slaughters the animal according to their own respective ritual. Hence, the following sections of the article treat how food has become an issue for both religions and thereby for their encounters by juxtaposing it with historical background. However, there is no need, in the scope of this article, to dwell on the details of all the unique characteristics of these religions in Ethiopia except those that throw light on their unique etiquette with regard particularly to culinary tools and food for their difference and commensality.

### **Food and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity**

Broadly speaking, food is believed by many to be no issue for Christians (Barclay 2010), usually referring to the biblical accounts on food for Christians such as in Matt. 15:11 and Rom. 14:1–22. However, it is an issue for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians for their own relation to God as well as to people of other faiths, mainly Muslims. In relation to this, the EOTC's history of isolation from other churches illuminates our discussion. As Adrian Hastings observes, the EOTC was isolated for many centuries such that its sociocultural requirements were very different, the most unique feature being its Hebraic substructure (2008). As a result "the pattern of Orthodox worship and religious life was as much one of the Old Testament as of the New" (35). The Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is unique among other sister Oriental Orthodox Churches as well for various reasons among which are the veneration of the *tabot* (replica of arc of the covenant), the observance of the Sabbath, and the observance of Mosaic food laws dividing clean from unclean, to mention just a few (Ullendorff 1968; Pawlikowski 1972; Shenk 1988; Hastings 2008, 35). David Robinson (2004, 110) states about "the relative isolation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the dominant forms of Christianity around the Mediterranean, led by the Roman Catholic Pope and the Patriarch in Constantinople." More to the point, he writes, "Ethiopian Christianity developed mainly from internal sources, encouraged by the Aksum court, local monks, and missionaries" (110). Concerning food laws, there are several Judaic elements in the church. For example, like Judaism, "Ethiopia's Orthodox Church forbids eating animals with unclen hoofs and those that do not chew their own cud" (see Beyene 1994; Lyons 2007, 354). In addition, "The pig is subject to . . . 'pan-Ethiopian' avoidance rule" (Braukamper 1982, 433). A feature also of Islam, pork abstinence is the most rigorous food prohibition observed throughout Ethiopia (Ullendorff 1968, 103). Therefore, the church, because of its unique history

that traces back to Judaism, of its indigenous elements, as well as of its veneration or imitation of the Old Testament has unique food proscriptions (Beyene 1997; Zellelew 2014). More importantly, the dietary law of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians that plays a great role in their commensality with Ethiopian Muslims is almost directly linked to the purity concerns observed in early rabbinic food laws concerning questions like who eats with whom, who slaughters the animal, and what and where is eaten, and so forth (see Finger 2007; Rosenblum 2010).<sup>8</sup> More specifically, as Reta Finger (2007, 177, my emphasis) writes, “In this system like eats with like. . . . Some food is clean if it comes from the right kind of animal and has been prepared with the *right utensils and dishes*.” These and other elements such as the fasts and feasts make the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity unique (Ullendorff 1968) among not only the broader Christianity but also its sister Oriental Orthodox Churches including the Coptic Orthodox Church, under whose synod the EOTC stayed for centuries (Trimingham 1952, 25; Shenk 1988, 261; Tamene 1998, 96).

### Food and Ethiopian Islam

There is *nothing* pejorative about the africanization of Islam or, more appropriately, the “Berberization” or “Swahili-zation” or “whateverization” of Islam. (Robinson 2004, 42)

One could give the adjective “Ethiopian” to Islam because of its unique historical and sociocultural features in Ethiopia as much as one uses the same adjective to Orthodox Christianity in the country. Islam, just like that of Christianity, in Ethiopia is also adapted to local cultures and elements of indigenous faiths. To begin with its very introduction, as many commentators note (Abbink 1998; Ahmed 2001; Robinson 2004), though there were occasional conflicts and frictions between the two religious groups later on the

8. The Judaic dietary law influence among EOTC followers is all the more visible among some ascetic people who avoid eating food prepared or drinking water fetched on Sabbath, a custom similar to the Jew’s concern with regard to the question of not only who prepares the meal but also *when* it is prepared ensuring whether it conforms to Sabbath (Finger 2007, 117; Meyer-Rochow 2009, 6; for discussions about the observance and controversies of the Sabbath in the EOTC, see Ullendorff 1968, 109–13; Getachew Haile 1988; Pedersen 1999, 207–8.)

9. Some writers are critical of what appears to be a subtle distinction in the nomenclature of Muslims and Islam vis-à-vis that of Christians and Christianity in Ethiopia. For example, “Islam in Ethiopia,” according to some, demeans the status of Islam in the country compared to the common nomenclature “the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity” or “the Ethiopian Church.” Teshome Birhanu Kemal, for example, criticizes the media for using “*Muslims in Ethiopia*, instead of *Ethiopian Muslims*” (Kemal 2012, 9, my emphasis and my translation),

course of history, the Christian-Muslim first encounter was a peaceful one contrary to the introduction of Islam elsewhere, which was through conquest: in Syria (636), in Persia (637), Jerusalem (638) (Apostolov 2004, 25). That is, while the other two powers, namely, the Byzantine (in losing Syria) and the Persian empires were defeated by the Muslims, the Ethiopian empire accommodated the persecuted Muslims from Arabia; in other words, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia was at least “initially accommodating” (Ahmed 2001) to the persecuted Muslims from Arabia by the Quraish oligarchy. Moreover, compared to other parts of Africa such as in West African Sahel and the East African coast, the process of Islamization was a peaceful one in Ethiopia (Robinson 2004, 113), nor was it accompanied by Arabization like in North Africa and part of Sudan (Trimingham 1952). On the other hand, though similar to elsewhere in Africa when it comes to assimilating indigenous pagan rites and beliefs by giving them “orthodox interpretations and explanatory Muslim legends,” it is only in Ethiopia that Islam faced a remarkable challenge from the Orthodox Christian Church (Baum 1953, 1; see also Trimingham 1952, 139). It is also a facet of Ethiopian Islam that it has been shaped by cultural and ethnic traditions (Abbink 1998).

In general in Islam the law concerning *halal* (lawful food) originates from four sources: the Qur’an, the *hadith* (instructions by Mohammed), the *sunnah* (religious tradition) and *fiqh* (a summary of Islamic learning) (Lerner and Rabello 2007, 11). Although the *halal* and *haram* dichotomy of food in Islam as stated, for example, in the Qur’an is universal, there are also differences and controversies in Islam over food, like that of the differences among various denominations of Christianity over scriptural interpretations on food proper for Christians. As Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins (2004, 245) comment, “Controversies about the ‘right’ form of Islamic diet are not yet resolved.” Broadly speaking, the debate over food in Ethiopian Islam falls in line with the long-standing debate over food in Islam. What Maxime Rodinson (1965, 1065) wrote about this debate is illuminating:

The Qur’an allowed Muslims to eat the food of the *Ahl al-kitab* and vice versa (V, 7/5). But there is attributed to be the Prophet a letter to the mazdeans of hadjar according to which Muslims were not to eat meat which they had killed as a sacrifice (Ibn Sa’d, 1917 [. . .]) Even in relation to the *Ahl al-kitab*, the law was more restrictive than the Qur’an, at least

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for the former, according to him, implies Muslims as “foreign” to the country. This reminds one of Jacques Derrida’s remark about “subtle but decisive distinction” in the appellation of Algerian Muslims until World War II as “French nationals” instead of “French citizens” evoking foreignness (2000, 143).

concerning animals killed while hunting or by ritual slaughter. It was not forbidden but reprehensible (*makruh*), according to certain *Malikis*, to eat what a *Kitabi* had slaughtered for himself; according to others, on the contrary, this applied to meat slaughtered by a *Kitabi* for a Muslim. In all cases it was reprehensible to obtain meat from a non-Muslim butcher (*Malikis*). It was advisable to make sure that the name of Allah had been invoked and not the Cross, or Jesus, etc., though it was permissible to eat, according to all schools except the Hanbalis, if no name at all had been invoked.

In view of this, in Ethiopia too there are two opposing views in Islam with regard to food proper for Muslims, especially as to what concerns with meat of animals slaughtered by people of the other faith. The first one is a long enduring tradition maintained by many Muslims who avoid eating meat of animals slaughtered by Christians. According to this group, it is not Islamic to eat meat of an animal slaughtered by Christians or non-Muslims. The second one is that which is maintained in recent times by Muslims who reject the first view. According to this one group, what is most important for a Muslim, as regards food, is to be cautious whether the animal is *halal* (lawful) first of all and second of all how pertinently the slaughtering is performed (according to the Islamic etiquette, such as blood being completely drained). This group further maintains that there is a Qur'anic<sup>10</sup> warrant to eating food/meat if it is *lawful* (2:168, 5:88, 16:114) and if the meat went through proper ritual slaughter (*dhaka'a*) (5:4, 6:147) by people of the book (5:5), that is, the Jew and Christians. However, the latter verse of the Qur'an that refers to the Jews and Christians has a different interpretation by the first group. They argue that it does not apply to the Jews and Christians of today but to those of the contemporaries of Mohammed. Moreover, they maintain that the name of Allah should be invoked on the lawful foods, not the name of Trinity, for example (5:4, 6:118–21, 16:115; see Rodinson 1965, 1061).

I need not dwell too much on verifying which view is theologically justified, as it is beyond the scope and concern of this study. However, in general, the avoidance by Jews, Christians, or Muslims (or even different sects within the same religion) of eating meat of an animal killed by a person in the other faith has changed from time to time and place to place in the course of history (Rodinson 1965, 1066). In addition, each Muslim sect, while basically adhering to the Qur'anic food proscription, formulates its own "complete doctrine

10. All references to the Qur'an are based on Al-Hilali and Khan (1993).

on all points of dogma and practice” (1070) by making its decisions on problems related to food prohibitions in the Quran, although “some have considered them to have only an allegorical significance or that an era was beginning in which there was no further justification for them” (1070). On top of this, there are “post-Kur’anic religious regulations” which affected questions concerning the food prohibitions in Islam (1068). Therefore, there is no consistency in terms of time as well as place by a given religion or sect concerning its dietary rules. As Montanari (2006, 137) writes, “Culinary identities were not inscribed in the heavens” which corroborates Jack David Eller’s comment: “Individuals, families, and communities . . . make their unique interpretations of and responses to the world religion, generating a distinctly local version of it . . . none can be said sensibly to be the “correct” or “real” one” (2007, 204). Nevertheless, speaking of taboos in general and of the so-called Christian/Muslim meat in particular, such a food taboo is duly working as a separating factor for Christians and Muslims unsurprisingly, on the one hand, because of the nature of food taboos in general as unwritten social rules (Colding and Folke 1997), and of varied interpretations of scriptures by each religion and denomination/sect, on the other.

### **The Semiotics of Knife and Meat**

Bee Wilson (2012, 85) writes, “Our food is shaped by knives.” There is a great deal of truth in Wilson’s statement than the seemingly simple material relationship between the knife and food. Apart from their materiality, there are other intrinsic relationships between food and culinary tools in general. Broadly, objects, which appear simple and small, possess a “charisma” that affects the physical as well as emotional awareness of individuals (King 2010, xi). Thus, beyond their simple and seemingly banal materiality, objects are charged with other meanings and functions. They become signs signifying meanings and functions related not only to their “inherent” property but also to the meanings assigned to them. For example, apart from its nourishing properties, food is charged with meaning and functions; so are culinary tools. In one of her most commonly cited statements, Mary Douglas (1972, 61) says, “A code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.” Marcel Danesi (2004, 199–200) also writes: “Food codes, like all other kinds of social codes, are regulatory systems—they regulate what kinds of food are eaten, when

they are eaten, who is allowed to eat them, and so on and so forth.” Hence, food and culinary materials, unsurprisingly, serve functions other than just what their simple materiality affords them to. In various parts of Africa, though their importance had been in decline since the late 1800s, the very materiality, that is, the shapes, patterns, or decorations of, for example, throwing knives continued to have such symbolic functions as indicating the tribe, the production place of the knife and the bearer’s rank and ability until the twentieth century (McNaughton 1970). The semiotic functions of the knife that this article deals with, however, are concerned with narratives beyond the materiality of the knife.

### The Knife as a Synecdoche of Slaughtering

The so-called Christian/Muslim knife, as a synecdoche of the slaughtering rituals in each religion, is an important semiotic sign that delineates the frontier between the two religions with regard to food/meat and religious identity in Ethiopia. Interestingly, Detienne and Vernant ([1979] 1989, 3) have brought to our attention the following account of Herodotus, which I have evoked in the introduction part, on what the knife, among other utensils, meant “at the heart of the difference [and] the otherness” between Egyptians and the Greeks: “no Egyptian man or woman will kiss a Greek man, or use the knife, or a spit, or a cauldron belonging to a Greek, or taste the flesh of an unblemished ox that has been cut up with a Greek knife” (Herodotus 1925, 2.41). What Detienne and Vernant ([1979] 1989, 3) in their *Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* write is worth quoting here in order to illuminate our discussion:

Along with the knife, the spit and kettle together and separately constitute the instruments of a way of eating that Herodotus in his accounts of Egypt places at the heart of the difference, the otherness, that the Greeks perceive in themselves with respect to the Egyptians. By showing their repugnance at using a knife, spit, or kettle belonging to a Greek because he makes sacrifices and eats according to different rules, the Egyptians described by Herodotus reveal to the listeners of the histories an image of themselves in which their sacrificial practice, seen in its instrumental aspect, is circumscribed by its alimentary function.

This account runs astonishingly parallel to the place that the knife has at the heart of the discursive of food/meat and religious identity for Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. In Herodotus’s account, it is the knife (the slaughtering)

that turns the “unblemished ox” into a blemished one. In Ethiopia, too, Muslims avoid meat of animals slaughtered by “Christian knife,” and Christians do the same with the meat of animals slaughtered by “Muslim knife.” Among other culinary tools, the knife particularly seems to be charged with affective power so much so that it engenders disgust and repugnance even in the very thought of such meat, much less actually eating it.

It is not my task as well as competence to know when exactly Christians and Muslims started using “different knife,” that is, slaughtering. But one cannot overlook the importance of historical facts in illuminating the theme we are dealing with in such a study, however scarce and patchy the historical evidences are as to know exactly when and how these two religious communities started this custom. For example, John Spencer Trimingham’s *Islam in Ethiopia* (1952) gives us an indispensable account on the aftermath of the sixteenth-century struggle between the highland Christian kingdom and the Muslim Adal sultanate, otherwise known as the Gragn war (referring to Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim Al Ghazi, nicknamed *Gragn*, “the Left-Handed”). Conceivably, the war between the two sides seriously affected the Muslim-Christian relations in the country (see Trimingham 1952, 89–90; Desplat and Østebø 2013, 6). Although there had been territorial struggle between the Christian highlanders and the Muslim lowlanders centuries prior to the infamous Gragn invasion (Trimingham 1952, 60–91) after the war, the EOTC maintained an isolationist and conservative ideology (90), which probably led to further maintenance of the existing dietary and culinary differences, including separate slaughtering of animals. The composition of a literary work titled *Metshafe Keder* that the church uses still today “for the reception of apostates” (90, footnote) throws light. As there were forced mass conversion to Islam during the war, the sacrament was crucial for receiving those apostates “who defiled their body” (ዘእርኮሳ ስጋሁ ምስለ ኢምላመናን; *Metshafe Keder* 1988, 3). This suggests that the EOTC, immediately after the war had to engage in maintaining the existing boundaries (strict dietary rules could also be one) by broadening the breadth of religious and cultural distinctions against Islam through the isolationist stance. This might have helped the church to police the impermeability of its boundary, emphasizing on rules such as separate slaughtering as a “boundary maintenance device,” to borrow Eller’s phrase (2007, 114). However, that the EOTC became isolationist during this period does not mean that such a tradition had not already been practiced in earlier centuries. That is, given the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity with regard to its pre-Christian and Judaic elements (Rodinson 1964; Ullendorf 1968; Pawlikowski

1972) this dietary law almost certainly is a pre-Gragn one. It seems to have originated from the Jews' fear of contamination with the Gentiles, which makes meal fellowship for the Jew with non-Jews difficult (Barclay 2010, 585–86; see also Rosenblum 2010). Perhaps it could also be part of the process of the national saga of identifying the Abyssinian kingdom and its faith and culture with that of Israel after the year 1270 (Rodinson 1964) although many surmise that it could be a veneration and/or an imitation of the Old Testament rather than of a Judaic cult (Ullendorff 1968, 100–103; Beyene 1994, 212–14). During later centuries after the Gragn period, however, we have better evidences about the dietary differences between Christians and Muslims in the country. Both Charles Jaques Poncet, who came to Abyssinia at the end of the seventeenth century to treat Iyasu I (1682–1706) who had leprosy, and James Bruce, who traveled to the country to study the source of the Nile in the eighteenth century, give account on the avoidance by Christians of meat of animals slaughtered by Muslims (Trimingham 1952, 102–3, footnote; also Bruce 1813 in Ullendorff 1968, 30; Levine 1972, 41).

The more basic question, however, is how or why such food taboo started to be observed by the two religious groups. The justification of this taboo in general appears to go beyond the simple *halal/haram* or “clean/unclean” dichotomy of animals in the notion of food in the Bible and in the Qur'an alike. Except their difference in camel products (lawful for Muslims only), both religions in Ethiopia have remarkable similarity in what they allow their followers to eat and to avoid, out of which pork, as indicated before, is a common taboo almost throughout the country. The Orthodox Christians, although they know that the meat (except that of camel) slaughtered by Muslims may not fail to fulfill what is prescribed in the Old Testament such as in Leviticus 11, they avoid eating meat slaughtered by Muslims. Similarly, while the basic question of food for Muslims is whether the meat is *halal*, with the exception of the difference in invocation of the religious formula during slaughtering (an argument by Muslims who observe the taboo) the meat slaughtered by Orthodox Christians may not be short of meeting the dietary rules in Islam because Ethiopian Orthodox Christians also avoid eating the flesh of animals that are *haram* according to the Qur'an. Thus, the major difference appears to be the slaughtering rituals. But, if looked at closely, even the slaughtering practices of the two religions have a lot of similarities than differences. For example, both groups slit “the animal's throat by cutting the jugular vein, the carotid and the esophagus without beheading it. The blood must be removed from the animal as it is considered the principle [*sic*] source of life and is unfit for human

consumption” (Ficquet 2006, 46). The difference is only in the invocation of the divine in speech acts and in the direction to which the head of the animal should be turned: Muslims toward Mecca (46) and Christians often to the east.

Apart from this difference, the narrative of separate slaughtering maintained by both religious groups can hardly be explained by the broader long-standing debate over food prohibitions in Christianity and in Islam. This taboo therefore seems to have much less a theological justification than an ideological underpinning in that it could have been used to maintain power relations between the two religions in the country. As an official and well-established religion in Abyssinia almost three centuries ahead of Islam, Christianity seems to be the “norm setter” rather than governed by norms of a religion viewed as essential “other” and “newcomer.” Islam, on the other hand, as a “minority” religion, thus, might have emphasized the taboo “to rival the zeal of Christians”<sup>11</sup> (L. Massignon in Rodinson 1965, 1070) and to mark difference. After a relatively slower pace of expansion during its early years, Islam gradually gathered momentum later on to become a cultural and political force in addition to its religious one. And, contrary to the common assumption of Islam’s political exclusion in Ethiopia, its very expansion, like that of Christianity, can also be seen into two ways: as a *political* factor, a post-tenth century development (see Trimmingham 1952; Tamrat [1972] in Ahmed 2001, 32) and “as a religion and a culture” (Ahmed 2001, 32). Therefore, that Islam did not assume the status of a state religion in Ethiopia does not mean it did not pose political questions and challenges<sup>12</sup> in its entire history, nor does it demean its being a cultural force in its own way as well as in its interaction with its main counterpart, that is, (Orthodox) Christianity and other indigenous faiths. Thus, one does not rule out the possibility that Muslims on their part as well might have underlined the difference on the slaughtering practice as a counterpractice of avoiding meat of animal slaughtered by Christians probably as a gesture of resistance and reaffirmation of their religious identity: “If you don’t eat mine, I will not eat yours” or “if my food is unclean and impure for you, so is yours for me” kind of attitude. One might see this as a counter-measure for Muslims against an ideology of “avoidance” by a dominant group, that is, Christians. It is worth noting that by obscuring the power relations, which is

11. Massignon uses this concept to explain the ancient practice of abstinence from meat by some ascetic Muslims, a mechanism that they “adopted in order to rival the zeal of Christians, Manicheans, etc.,” although it is not prescribed by the Law (Rodinson 1965, 1070).

12. For example, the so-called Gagn invasion in the sixteenth century, as many commentators note, has more of a political, economic and demographic implication than of purely religious (Gnamo 2002, 108; Ahmed 1992, 18; 2006, 4).

at the heart of the dominating and the minority group, the former often uses “symbolic violence” to legitimize its own culture as superior, esthetic and distinguished and to denigrate that of the latter as vulgar and impure (Bourdieu and Passeron [1972] in Lamont and Molnár 2002, 172). Though it may be difficult to hypothesize here that this food taboo is a result<sup>13</sup> of power relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, it is possible at least to conjecture that the taboo could have been used to maintain and sustain power relations.

The degree of affective experience of people who observe this taboo in both religions as regards eating meat slaughtered by a person in the other faith substantiates the above proposition. That is, most often, it is the Christians who look more sensitive about and show revulsion against the possible consumption of such meat. Ulrich Braukamper, in a study that surveys the food avoidance in Southern Ethiopia, writes: “It is common all over Ethiopia that Orthodox Christians also find it disgusting to eat meat slaughtered by members of another religion. According to my personal observation, they said for instance: ‘Muslim meat is *koshasha* [‘dirty’] and can not be eaten by us’” (1982, 430, bracket in original). Such seemingly aesthetic reaction on food (Rodinson 1965, 1071–72; Telfer 2002, 41–60; Krautkramer 2007, 255; Monroe 2007) points to the power relations I have discussed above. Particularly, Telfer (2002, 44) notes that the aesthetic reaction of people as to liking the taste and smell of a food may depend, among other factors, on whether the food is “produced by politically respectable regimes.” This looks evident, as noted earlier, in the travel account on the town of Gondar by Poncet right at the end of the seventeenth century, which recounts that Muslims were “looked down on by the Christians, and meat slaughtered by one group would not be touched by the other,” while the latter also salutes with a left hand as “a mark of contempt” (Poncet 1949 [1699] in Levine 1972, 41–42; see Ford 2008, 57). In my own lived experience in different parts of the country as well as the empirical data obtained through observation and interview in Bahir Dar, I have also come to understand that the strict observance of this taboo is more prevalent among the Christians than among the Muslims. In other words, even if Muslims are very cautious about consuming *halal* meat, they appear to be lenient, for instance, when it comes to the very idea of trespassing and eating “Christian meat” unknowingly. Asked the same question: “what would you do if you unknowingly eat ‘Christian/Muslim meat?’” almost all my Christians informants

13. Space does not allow me to develop this hypothesis here, but one may not still rule out pursuing this line of argument given the function of food taboos as ideological instruments (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 117). That is, the fact that the two religions in Ethiopia have very striking resemblance in dietary rules might ironically have forced both religions to look for or invent a food taboo that marks distinction between the two religions.

show utter disgust. Some of them say that they will force themselves to throw up the meat. One informant, for example, said she ate a “meat *Samosa*” (locally known as *Sambusa*, a fried pastry filled with lentils, meat, etc.) in a restaurant she did not know is a “Muslim one.” However, no sooner had she savored the food and looked up the wall “something written in Arab script” than she realized she is in a “Muslim restaurant.” Then, she said she rushed out to the bathroom to throw up. This might not be surprising given the fact that vomiting is one of the most common physical reactions upon discovering the breaking of a food taboo while even actual deaths have also been reported from almost all corners of the world after a person discovers that he/she has unknowingly eaten a tabooed food (Farb and Armelagos 1980, 124–25). Muslim informants, on the other hand, said it does not matter if they did it unknowingly but they said they are careful not to. Literatures on food disgust affirm that disgust serves as a manifestation of power relations (Ahmed 2004). It is important to note that those who are disgusted are the ones who feel disgust (Ahmed 2004), which gives them the position of “above-ness” (Miller [1979] in Ahmed 2004, 89). In other words, the one whose food engenders disgust therefore takes the position of “below-ness” at least in the mind of those who are disgusted, which goes parallel with the historical-political power relations between the two religious communities in Ethiopia. The difference in the affective experience of eating or the very thought of eating the “wrong meat” among Christians and Muslims, therefore is so big that one may be tempted by the above tentative assumption of mine about the historical residue of power relations between the two religious groups as reflected on crossing the religious boundary marked by “meat soaked in faith” (Ficquet 2006).

### Religious Signs in Ethiopia: Public and Private

In the day-to-day Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, it is the material objects (clothing, food, language, and architecture) that mark their religious identity (Ficquet 2006). Based on how and where they serve their purpose, it is possible to classify the nonlinguistic religious signs into two tentative categories: private and public, which is roughly equivalent to Firth’s (1973) classification of symbols into public and private. Along with the cross and the crescent, the two universal signs, there are two other nonlinguistic signs that Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia use as religious identity markers. They are the “invisible” knife and the thread necklace<sup>14</sup> called *mateb*, “a simple neck cord of-

14. This is different from the talismanic amulets worn around one’s neck by Christians and Muslims and people of other faiths in the country. It is rather a thread necklace (usually in three colors, signifying the

ten holding a wrought silver cross” (Levine 1972, 82). The knife is “invisible” because it is not observed until its resultant element, that is, meat plays its role as a dividing line for the two religious groups. It is the cross and the crescent that are being used as more “visible” markers<sup>15</sup> of religious identity in the public sphere. Other than on the steeple of churches and on the minaret of mosques, they are also used in places such as abattoirs,<sup>16</sup> butcheries and restaurants, signaling whether these places are “Christian” or “Muslim” (Ficquet 2006, 44–45). These signs can be seen as the public versions of the knife whose active role seems to terminate at slaughtering but whose effect still continues embodied in other signs.

On the other hand, necklace and the knife can be seen as private signs in contrast to the cross and the crescent because they are confined to the individual’s body and their households, respectively. Most EOTC followers can be identified by the *mateb* tied around their neck. Among the two, the knife is the most powerful sign. For example, it is because of the knife, though it appears to remain in the kitchen or in slaughtering places, that the use of other signs such as the cross and the crescent in public spaces is eminently manifested. These two signs, especially on butcheries and restaurants, signify no other object than the meat slaughtered with the knife according to the specific religious ritual. As King (2010, xvii) notes, “we construct our own sense of who we are on the basis of difference. Initially this happens within our habitat but, moving into the public arena, it is shown that our notion of who we are is publicly confirmed through categorization.” Interestingly, the knife seems to possess a transcendent power of crossing the private space to become a sign in public space enacted in other signs (cross or crescent), which make “categorization” of Christian and Muslim public spaces possible. Here the knife is apparently an initial sign for other signs to follow in a seemingly Peircean model of signs as processual: “signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification” (Keane 2003, 413). It is also important to note that material culture should

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Trinity) that is tied around children’s neck on their baptism (girls on their 80th day after birth and boys on their 40th. For discussion of “Timing of Baptism” in the EOTC, see Pedersen 1999, 205). As one grows, they continue to put on a replica of this necklace when it is broken or worn out. In some legends about mixed-religious families or interfaith marriages, a thread is used to differentiate the “Christian meat” from the “Muslim meat”; i.e., while cooking the “two meats” in one pan, a thread is tied as a tag around the “Christian” one.

15. Another sign that seems not to be a tradition anymore today among Christians in Ethiopia, except in some rural areas, is the cross tattoo. Tattooing has a long history in Ethiopian Christianity. The Christian zealot King Zer’a Yakob (1434–68), for instance, “forced all his subjects to be tattooed with amulet affirming belief in the Trinity” (Trimingham 1952, 76n).

16. In abattoirs, e.g., animals are slaughtered in separate Orthodox Christian, Muslim, and European slaughter facilities (Avery 2004). It is also worth noting that government university canteens also have separate dining halls for Christian and Muslim students.

not necessarily possess a visual sign to be considered as communicative tool. As Mark Gottdiener argues, we should not “see only a world of signs” and “miss the material culture that acts as sign-vehicles for signification and its relation to everyday life” (Thomas 1998, 100). Therefore, in Ethiopia, even if one does not see the knife, like Cross or Crescent, as a visual sign on restaurants or butcheries, it effectively serves as a sign-vehicle that signifies what is *halal* meat for Muslims and what is *kidus* (sacred, clean) meat for Christians. As noted above, the more universal signs, the Cross and the Crescent signs on restaurants and butcheries across the country necessarily conjure up the notion of slaughtering automatically evoking mandatory questions who slaughters what, with what kind of material, how, and so forth.

### **The Role of Speech Acts: Charging the Knife and Circumscribing Space**

A critical look into the role that the knife plays, especially in slaughtering, through speech act theory helps to enunciate two important notions in religion: “the sacred” and “the profane” (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Broadly speaking, individuals from either group show tolerance when it comes to food other than meat although there are even quite many from both sides who do not mind eating meat slaughtered by people in the other faith. However, those who do not observe this dietary rule are of no concern for this study. It is important to note that during slaughtering it is not the knife itself per se but rather *the speech acts*: for Christians the *BaSeme Ab waWald waMenfes Qedus Ahadu Amlak* (“In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, One God,” and for Muslims the *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (“In the name of Allah, the passionate and the Merciful”) that play significant role in charging the neutral animal’s flesh with “Christian” or “Muslim” identity. Even for ancient Egyptians, the repugnance they showed to the Greek knife emanates from the notion of the sacred and the profane. According to Herodotus, the Greek knife and what it slaughters, which may include cows that are holy and venerated much more highly than any other animal, is taboo to Egyptians. That is why no Egyptian used the knife of a Greek or tasted the flesh of an ox slaughtered with a Greek knife (*Histories*, 2.41). In quite a similar vein, especially for some Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, the knife or any other culinary tool itself can be considered *erkus* “defiled,” if it has been used by “others.” Here contact and fear of contamination with the object is what has much importance, which agrees with Kristeva’s definition of the “abject”: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, 4). Therefore, a culi-

nary tool and a food item, particularly meat, that trespasses, so to speak, the boundary marked by the knife's power of transubstantiation at slaughtering results in abjection because it "does not respect borders, positions, rules" of the religion in question. This is because food purity is not always determined by its cleanliness in terms of hygienic conditions, rather by factors such as: who prepared it, in whose company it is eaten; whose utensil is used to prepare it (Rodinson, 1965, 1069). Thus, meat that has not gone through the slaughtering practices of one's own religion is not pure, *kidus* ("sacred," "holy," "clean") or *halal* ("lawful") to eat. Thus, eating such meat equals to defiling one's body thanks to the slaughtering ritual that includes speech acts and is mainly enacted in the knife, which has the power of changing the neutral meat into a sacred one. Moreover, meat that does not fulfill one's own religious ritual would give individuals who observe this taboo feelings of repugnance and disgust never mind in eating but even in the very thought of eating it. In other words, food loathing, as an elementary and most archaic form of abjection (Kristeva 1982, 2) is therefore experienced as a result of the slaughtering ritual the meat has passed through.

It is also important to note that apart from making "categorization" (King 2010, xvii) of Christian and Muslim public spaces possible (e.g., restaurants and butcheries), the knife just like its very nature of splitting things yet again circumscribes quite literally the geographical space between Muslims and Christians on sociocultural settings such as wedding feasts. Guests from each group do not occupy most often the same space. According to the custom, the host caters its "other" guest with the latter's "own" food (meat slaughtered by members of the "other" religion). There is often a clear territorial demarcation between the two groups. The knife as a synecdoche of the slaughtering practices of the two religions comes here to play its role of territorializing boundaries through its concomitant force now, that is, food. Trespassing the precinct made by the knife gives individuals an uncanny feeling. Thus, the knife seems to be policing the boundary such that it seems to "punish" with disgust those who transgress the "line." As a result, on sociocultural settings where Christians and Muslims meet involving food or eating (i.e., meat), there is an affective sacrifice that attendants should pay. In other words, in order to fulfill their social obligations, they appear to occupy a space that they might otherwise prefer to avoid, and to smell and see food that they might not prefer to smell and see. This all is because of the seemingly simple process of the slaughtering ritual we have discussed above. That is, if transubstantiation changes the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ in Christian theology, as noted

before, the knife is an important culinary tool charged with the immense power of religious performative languages (speech acts) that transform the neutral animal into a sacred or lawful object and that invest it with intense aura of disgust among followers of the other faith who observe this food taboo. In short, in food contexts that involve meat, disgust defends the spatial territory between the two religious groups understandably because what is regarded by one group as sacred is by another a profane and vice versa.

### **Meat as a Proselytizing Instrument**

It is one of the most remarkable beliefs and traditions among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Ethiopian Muslims that they believe as if converted to Islam and Christianity respectively if they eat meat of an animal slaughtered by a person from the other faith. Ficquet has discussed the historical use of meat as “a method of forced conversion” (2006, 47–52). But forcing people to eat what they consider as taboo in order to ensure their submission is not unique to the history of conquest between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. The Jews were forced to eat pork as a sign of submission to Antiochus IV, according to the apocryphal Old Testament book of Judas Maccabaeus (Farb and Armelagos 1980). Similarly, in the very early days of Islam, “Muhammad is said to have obliged two newly converted Dju‘fis to eat heart, taboo in their tribe, without which conversion would have been incomplete” (Ibn Sa‘d, i/2, 62, in Rodinson 1965, 1061). In Ethiopia, too, conquering rulers of both sides used a similar strategy in “Christian/Muslim meat” as an instrument to force religious conversion on the defeated one (Cecchi 1886, in Trimmingham 1952, 202). In all these examples, it is possible to see broadly the ideological instrument of food both as a symbol of triumph by the conqueror and of resistance by the conquered. As Telfer (2002, 37) observes, “People can also be making a broadly political statement in eating or not eating particular foods,” which also calls to mind the modern day boycotting of certain food products as a gesture of politico-economic resistance.

The belief in confessing another religion by breaking a food taboo exists in Ethiopia to the present day among many, given the better degree of evangelization by both religions today than ever before. Asked if eating “Muslim/Christian meat” engenders apostatizing for them, some of my informants said they do not believe that they apostatized, but they consider it as transgression and contamination anyway that requires some kind of remedy. According to Mary Douglas, “There are two distinct ways of cancelling a pollution: one is the ritual which makes no enquiry into the cause of the pollution, and does not seek to place responsibility; the other is the confessional rite” ([1966] 2001,

138). The first way roughly describes what Muslims in Ethiopia do, whereas the latter perfectly fits to the way Orthodox Christians fix dietary trespassing. That is, though they do not have a comparable ritual or sacrament for cleansing dietary trespassing to the Christians, according to my Muslim-scholar informants, Muslims are expected to repent of their action based on their own conscience and should try not to do it again. On the other hand, when the Christians commit dietary trespassing, they see a priest for confession and expiation. The *Metshafe Keder* (translated from Arabic to Ge'ez, the Ethiopian classical language, in the sixteenth century; Trimmingham 1952, 89) is used until this day for cleansing Christians of various sins. It is also a sacrament used by the church to receive apostates (89). The book explains that church fathers composed the prayers and sacraments for the sake of Christians who trespass and defile their body: “በእንተ ዘክህደ ሃይማኖቶ ኣው ዘኣርኮሰ ስጋው ምስሰ ዘኢ ምመናን ኣው ተባእት ኣው ኣንስት ኣው መካኮስ ኣው” (*Metshafe Keder* 1988, 3), which roughly means “for those: male or female or monk or nun or . . . who renounced their religion or defiled their body with the infidels.” Dietary trespassing<sup>17</sup> is one factor for defilement of the body, while having sexual intercourse with “the infidels” is another, both of which are often viewed as “corporal sins”—lusts of the flesh. Overall, as the common maxim “You are what you eat” goes, in this kind of belief, “you *become* what you eat.” That is, eating and religious identity are intricately intertwined so much so that you become what you are not supposed to become if/when you eat what you are not supposed to eat. In other words, eating, especially by trespassing the dietary border across religion, is equivalent to becoming “other” as if the intake of food transforms someone into someone *else*, giving the person an “edible identity,” to borrow Rosenblum’s (2010) phrase, and conjuring up the original sin, which was in the shape of eating (Gen. 2:16–17). Indeed, according to the Bible, Adam and Eve were not the same before and after they ate the forbidden apple since eating has transformed and engendered them to have a new identity that they were not meant to have.

## Conclusion

Religious questions concerning food purity in general and slaughtering of animals in particular are very old. Judaism, to which both the scriptures of Christianity and of Islam owe a great deal, has, since its earlier days (i.e., since

17. Dietary trespassing has a serious consequence. The individual who breaks the taboo will not only be considered as an aberration but he/she will also face excommunication. One of the reasons for Lij Iyassu, who reigned 1913–27, to have been excommunicated by the EOTC is because he was accused of eating “Muslim meat” (Ficquet 2006, 53).

after the Flood; Farb and Armelagos 1980, 112), had a firm stance on purity concerns enshrined in dietary rules with questions such as who slaughters the animal, who prepares the meal, and so forth, which made reciprocal accommodation with the non-Jew difficult (Finger 2007; Meyer-Rochow 2009; Barclay 2010; Rosenblum 2010). The questions: who slaughters the animal and how are big concerns for both Ethiopian Christians and Ethiopian Muslims and are determining factors in their sociocultural encounters. Apart from practice, particularly the place of the knife in food and religious identity, discourse in the country is well documented in the following Amharic proverbial statement: [*Egele*] *beHulet Bilawa Yibelal* (“[So-and-so] eats with two knives”), which figuratively refers to someone who is not trustworthy. That is, whereas those who eat only meat slaughtered by their “own knife” (i.e., according to their religious slaughtering ritual/etiquette) show fidelity to their faith, those who are indifferent to the distinct meat or eat both “Muslim and Christian meat” are not only “infidel” to their religion in food contexts but also “infidel” and untrustworthy in other aspects of social life. In short, “eating with two knives” is equated with having no religion,<sup>18</sup> which amounts to being untrustworthy. Finally, it is worth looking at a statement that one informant used to emphasizing the “commonality” of the two religions: “only knife separates us; except that knife [slaughtering] separates us, we [Christians and Muslims] are one.” Through this statement, we can, on one hand, see the importance of food and culinary tools, that is, the knife, in the religious identity consciousness of people, and the almost-insignificant role of the theological differences between the two religions, on the other. In other words, the other similarities and/or differences between Christianity and Islam do not seem to have as much weight as dietary differences for their encounters. In the eye of religious elites, such kind of saying might be reproachable and viewed as lack of knowledge of one’s own as well as the other religion (Ford 2008, 61). But, not surprisingly, what sounds irrational from the point of view of religion can be rational from that of the secular and vice versa. In short, the knife, as a quintessential slaughtering tool, however, embodies narratives related to slaughtering and dietary differences and is charged with significations that determine not only the relationship between Orthodox Christians and Muslims on specific sociocultural settings but also the categorization of space with other semiotic signs on broader public spheres in Ethiopia.

18. While defining the phrase ሃይማኖት ቢስ *Haimanote bis*, which roughly means “irreligious,” Desta Tekleweld, in his Amharic dictionary, gives the following meanings: መናፍቅ *menafik* heretic; ሃይማኖት መጥፎ *haimanote metfo* one who has a bad religion, and more important to us here, ቢጅ ቢለዋ የሚበለ *BeHulet Bilawa Yemibela* one who eats with two knives ([1962] 1970).

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