

# SYMBIOSIS OF CHURCH AND STATE DURING THE መስቀል [MESKEL] CELEBRATION IN ETHIOPIA.

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Abstract: This study examines the መስቀል [Meskel] festival<sup>1</sup> based on a nine-minute archival YouTube video authorized by UNESCO as its primary artifact.<sup>2</sup> As one of the oldest and indigenous Christian Churches in Africa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has preserved the *Commemoration Feast of the Finding of the True Cross of Christ* for centuries.<sup>3</sup> The Meskel celebration functions as a primary vehicle for identity formation and transcends the liturgical rite, serving as a ritual reaffirmation of the historic bond between its divine obligation and the historic Ethiopian state. This study then argues that, despite the official

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<sup>1</sup> The term መስቀል [Meskel] literally means ‘the Cross’ in *Ge’ez* language (one of the ancient Ethiopian languages since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, which is now an ecclesiastical language), considered the predecessor of both Tigrigna and Amharic languages.

<sup>2</sup> The nine-minute YouTube video is an authoritative document that was submitted to UNESCO in 2012 by the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARRCH), which is the government office that promotes the culture of Ethiopia both nationally and worldwide. The federal government in Ethiopia has given the office the full authority to preserve cultural and historical heritage, keep scientific registration and supervision of historical sites, and assist them financially. The exact date of the inscription of the *Meskel* festival on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (RLICH) was on December 10, 2013. The inscription was authorized and decided during the eighth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICSICH). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX9NQ3UmhI>.

<sup>3</sup> The official name of *Meskel festival* is known as “*The Commemoration Feast of the Finding of the True Cross of Christ*,” which is exclusively celebrated annually only in Ethiopia and among the EOTC diaspora communities in the world.

institutional separation of church and state in Ethiopia, their enduring relationship is clearly demonstrated in the festival. Contrary to the modern perceived antithesis between the sacred and the secular, this study shows a convergence of interests where the historical symbiosis of the two continues to manifest. The study also reaffirms that while the historical and ritual elements embedded in the festival are vital, the church does not claim them to be an end in themselves; rather, they serve as a medium and pathway to lead the adherents to a cruciform life. Therefore, this study first demonstrates how the Meskel celebration serves as a historical and contemporary manifestation of the symbiosis between church and state in Ethiopia. Then, it advocates for a renewal of the ritual’s theological core, suggesting that adherents move beyond outward ritual participation toward an internalized lived Theology of the Cross.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is a country with a diverse range of cultures, religions, and peoples, including more than 84 ethnic groups. These groups beautifully showcase diverse cultural and religious traditions, including traditional music and dancing, as well as attractive religious and national festivals. For this study, however, the focus is on one significant and popular religious event, the Meskel Festival, which commemorates the discovery of the True Cross of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The historical narrative of the discovery of the True Cross by Saint Helena (locally known as Saint Eleni) is a shared tradition across the Oriental Orthodox Churches, such as the Armenian, Coptic, Malankara, and Syriac traditions.<sup>5</sup> This study, however, is specifically delimited to the EOTC context, focusing on how the celebration possesses unique socio-political and theological

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<sup>4</sup> Getatchew Haile, “Wəddase Mäsqäl, by Abba Giyorgis of Gasəčča.” *Aethiopica* 14 (2011), 47–120.

<sup>5</sup> Please read Jan Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

dimensions rather than a comparative dogmatic analysis between the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Besides, spanning the late 19th-century unification of the modern state of Ethiopia to the present, the study adopts a comprehensive framework to explore the festival’s continuing significance across successive political transitions. It prioritizes a thematic legacy over regime-specific analysis, laying a broader historical groundwork for future and specialized studies.

Therefore, in what follows, first, the historical and cultural foundation of the Meskel Festival will be established. Second, a focused ritual and symbolic analysis of the celebration’s key moments will be presented, particularly the construction and burning of the ደሞራ (*Demera*) [meaning “bonfire”], exploring the integration of the traditional meaning with the national elements layered into the ceremony. A socio-political analysis and an examination of the strategic presence of national symbols and their convergence with the historical and cultural message of the Meskel celebration will be conducted. Then, the use of these core components of the festival allows for a more concrete examination of the interplay between the EOTC’s stewardship of the historical, cultural, and theological core message of the Cross and national representation. Finally, the article proposes a renewed focus on the essential theological message of God’s grace as revealed in the church’s redemptive understanding of the True Cross of Christ.

## THE HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

Upon examining the YouTube video, the Meskel Festival derives its historical authority from the search for and discovery of the True Cross of Christ by Saint Eleni. The celebratory video establishes this historical narrative as the primary foundation for the Ethiopian observance. Tracing its origins to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Meskel Festival commemorates and symbolically reenacts her search and discovery of the

True Cross.<sup>6</sup> While the video narrates the event’s historical development and the importance of its legacy, other EOTC documents provide crucial context on Saint Eleni’s personal commitment to seeking the True Cross. For example, according to Meregeta Berehan’s book, titled *Metshafe Tefut*, the mission of Saint Eleni to Jerusalem was to fulfill a divine victory for her son, Constantine, and to fulfill her vow to search for the True Cross. For three centuries following the cross’s burial, Christians suffered under the cruel persecution of Greco-Roman rulers, such as Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Decius, and others. Such a period of darkness only began to lift after Constantine the Great faced the joint forces of Diocletian and Maximian and defeated them.<sup>7</sup> Although Saint Eleni had introduced Constantine to Christian teachings and traditions, Constantine remained an unbeliever until he personally experienced a divine intervention. An angel of the Lord appeared to Constantine in a dream, holding the sign of the cross as a promise of victory in the battle against the joint force of Diocletian and Maximian.<sup>8</sup> After winning the battle through this heavenly sign of the cross, Constantine declared liberty for all Christians. In gratitude for this miraculous triumph of her son, Saint Eleni traveled to Jerusalem to unearth the Holy Cross that had been buried for about 300 years.<sup>9</sup>

These sources emphasize that Saint Eleni’s dedication to recovering the sacred relic was rooted in a profound vow to God, which was conditioned upon her son, Constantine, who was said to be “the first Roman to convert to Christianity when, on his deathbed, he accepted the

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<sup>6</sup> Meregeta Yemane Berehan Adse, trans., *Metshafe Tefut* (Addis Ababa: Gishen Debre Kerbe Kidist Mariam Parish Council, 2014), 8–10. Hereafter, this material is refed as “Meregeta Yemane Berehan, *Metshafe Tefut*.”

<sup>7</sup> Meregeta Yemane Berehan, *Metshafe Tefut*, 7–8.

<sup>8</sup> *Metshafe Deresane Meskel: BeGeez-na beAmharic [The Book of the Homily of the Cross: In Ge'ez and Amharic]* (Addis Ababa: Tensae Zeguba-e Printing Press/EOTC, 2010), 244–50.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 81–82; see also the EOTC sources, Yemane Berehan Adse, *Metshafe Tefut*, 7–8, See also *Metshafe Deresane Meskel*, 244–49.

faith.”<sup>10</sup> It was following his conversion that his mother undertook the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to search for the Holy Cross. This act of a vow fulfilled instills the Meskel Festival with deep spiritual significance, making any vow undertaken in the name of Meskel highly respected and upheld by members of the EOTC.<sup>11</sup> Beyond establishing the historical foundation, the introductory section of the video emphasizes the festival’s enduring value as a faithful preservation of ancient Christian customs. The celebration carries a rich historical legacy into the contemporary form for the new generation.

Then the video describes the Demera and its procession, which revolves around building the bonfire. During the eve of Meskel, the bonfire is decorated with flowers, colorful signs, and green leaves. Drawing in the entire populace from different parts of the world, the event platforms an enchanting combination of contemporary and historical music and dance, captivating audiences from all corners of the world. The firewood is decorated with daisies before the celebration, and the daisies (locally known as Adey Abeba), a seasonal flower that grows only during the Ethiopian New Year in September. Yellow Ethiopian daisies are placed atop the *Demera*, symbolizing the promise of new life and hope for the adherents. The final torching ceremony is jointly led by the Patriarch of the Church and the mayor of the city or a high-ranking state official, symbolizing a peaceful and respectful symbiosis between the church and the state. The faithful adherents of the festival collect charcoal afterward and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads with the dark ashes. Much of the meaning behind the church's teachings on Demera's beliefs is not presented in the video. For example, Edward Ullendorff notes that, “It [the *Demera*] marks the ultimate act in the

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<sup>10</sup> Tarikua Getachew Woldetsadick, “The Right and the Duty to Meskel: Lessons on Narrative Crafting,” in *Ethiopia Observer*, September 28, 2025, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com>. See also Christine Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition: A Brief Introduction to its Life and Spirituality* (Bialystok: Orthdruk, 2002), 116–17.

<sup>11</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations*, 2nd ed. (Addis Ababa: Tensae Publishing House, 1996), accessed on November 5, 2025 <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org>.

cancellation of sins, while others hold that the direction of the smoke and the final collapse of the heap indicate the course of future events, just as the clouds of smoke of the Lord over the Tabernacle offered guidance to the children of Israel (Exod 40: 34–38).”<sup>12</sup>

The *Demera* and the smoke of the bonfire represent the historical search for the Cross. According to EOTC witnesses, Saint Eleni was told in a dream to build a bonfire whose smoke would reveal the location of the True Cross.<sup>13</sup> Saint Eleni ordered the community to build a bonfire, and a large quantity of incense was placed on it so the smoke would guide her to the Holy Cross's burial site. The smoke ascended high into the air. Then it bent down to the ground, indicating the site where the Holy Cross was buried.<sup>14</sup> The video intentionally and repeatedly displayed the large accumulation of the smoke of the *Demera* and the ways this smoke helps attendants remember how Saint Eleni's smoke and incense directed her to the correct location of the Holy Cross. This incense tradition during Meskel is vital to the EOTC because the use of incense during the *Demera* is only celebrated in Ethiopia. Likewise, the video highlights the necessity of this custom for witnessing to the early Christian church and preserving its legacy for both Christians today and those concerned with historic and traditional customs.

Another crucial phenomenon not included in the video but preserved in the EOTC's teachings and documents is that, after discovering where the Cross was hidden, Saint Eleni ordered the people to dig the site, which took about six months.<sup>15</sup> After six months of digging, the Holy Cross was discovered on March 19 (Megabit 10<sup>th</sup>), as well as two other

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopian and the Bible: The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 114.

<sup>13</sup> EOTC, *Faith, Order of Worship*, accessed on November 03, 2016 <http://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/deltion/article/viewFile/4619/4395.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> *Metshafe Deresane Meskel*, 169–83. See also Archbishop Yesehaq, *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church: An Integrally African Church* (Nashville, TN: James C. Winston, 1997), 144–46.

<sup>15</sup> *Metshafe Deresane Meskel*, 170–82. See also Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, *Anbir Mesqelye Be-Dibe Mesqel* [Place My Cross Upon the Cross] (Addis Ababa: Negede Matemeya Derejet, 1985 [E.C.]), 66–87.

crosses upon which the two criminals were crucified.<sup>16</sup> It was challenging for the Queen to distinguish among the three crosses to determine which was the True Cross of Christ. So she asked Bishop Macarius to help her identify the True Cross, and Macarius advised Saint Eleni that the Cross that could heal the sick and raise the dead was the Holy Cross.<sup>17</sup> Then, the Cross was placed on the dead and sick people, and it raised the dead from the grave when they placed it upon the tomb and healed the sick when they touched it.<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon is profound today because, following the *Demera*, attendees often rush to the fallen tree and take some of the charcoal and/or ashes for loved ones who are sick and/or unable to attend the festival. It is believed that by making the sign of the Cross with the ashes on the foreheads of these absent individuals and applying the ashes on the sick part of the body, they will impart “healing power both for humans and animals,” and humans may receive peace and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>19</sup>

The video also presents significant historical figures (such as Saint Eleni, shepherds, soldiers, and the chariot) alongside the living beings to help viewers and adherents recall the festival's historical roots and their search for the True Cross. This representation helps us see history within the present, with certainty and context, and to make the past a present reality. The analysis of the video deliberately emphasizes the Meskel Festival's contemporary vitality to ensure that those watching can grasp and appreciate the depth of the historical and spiritual commitment invested in honoring the Cross of Christ. This detailed account of Meskel's historical, cultural, and symbolic integrity establishes a foundation for subsequent analysis. It also highlights the sacred purity of the tradition that is now merged with socio-cultural and political elements, to which the focus will now turn.

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<sup>16</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Debre Meheret St. Michael Church, “Sunday School Lessons Level IV,” accessed October 21, 2016, [http://www.stmichaeleoc.org/SundaySchoolLessons\\_Lev\\_IV.pdf](http://www.stmichaeleoc.org/SundaySchoolLessons_Lev_IV.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Archbishop Yesehaq, *Ethiopian Tewahedo Church*, 144–46.

<sup>18</sup> St. Michael Church, “Sunday School Lessons,” 180–82.

<sup>19</sup> Ullendorff, *Ethiopian and the Bible*, 114. See also Woldetsadick, “The Right and the Duty to Meskel.”

## THE CONVERGENCE OF THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

Although the relationship between church and state has been constitutionally separated since 1974, the Meskel Festival has continued to display symbiosis in Ethiopian public spaces. The EOTC played a significant role in shaping Ethiopian history, which became the core of the empire and the center of political power for centuries. While the church is the ultimate guardian of the festival’s historical, cultural, and theological integrity, its long-standing symbiosis with the state witnesses an exceptional ceremonial space where national affirmation and religious consecration harmoniously coexist. It is within this context of peaceful cooperation between the two that the socio-cultural and historical traditions, as well as the state’s participation, strengthen the nation's unity.

The state’s historical involvement in the Meskel Festival has been attested to by various historians. For example, Steven Kaplan notes that Emperor Haile Selase used the “Meskel festival to display his power over his subjects and command economic resources. Moreover, in the 1900s, during the Italian occupation and the reign of the emperor, the festival was used for political promotion and had an imperialistic character.”<sup>20</sup> Earl Shenk correctly noted, “Meskel was frequently a time for political promotions and awarding traditional honorary titles.”<sup>21</sup> Kaplan further unveiled that the religious festival became a conducive public space for political purposes, and he noted, “Meskel once again assumed its clear imperial character with the central celebrations taking place in Addis Ababa.”<sup>22</sup> Kaplan’s work focused on the imperial families, emphasizing Emperor Haile Selase’s authority and the hierarchy displayed in the very celebration of the festival. The monarchs and kings also used the festival to exercise their authority over their subordinates, making

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Kaplan, “Finding the True Cross: The Social-Political Dimensions of the Ethiopian *Meskel* Festival.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, no. 4 (2008): 452–53.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin Earl Shenk, *The Development of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its Relationship with the Ethiopian Government from 1930 to 1970* (New York: University Microfilms, a Xerox Company University, 1972).

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, “Finding the True Cross,” 453.

it a means of ensuring political governance throughout the century.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the appearance of both the Patriarch and the Emperor or high officials during the current annual celebration at Meskel Square communicates and symbolically concretizes the interdependence between the church and the state in the nation’s history.

#### JUXTAPOSED SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

The first two juxtaposed symbols in the Meskel celebration are the Holy Cross and the national flag. Before exploring their convergence, however, the vitality of the symbol of the Cross must be understood in its own distinct religious context. In the EOTC, the Holy Cross is both an inherently real and metaphorically meaningful object, venerated and/or respected in the ritual and religious experience of the adherents. It has become an identity formation deliberately used for public display, identification, healing, and status. In the church liturgy, ritual, architecture, and festivals, the Cross remains at the center. Many churches and monasteries in Ethiopia are shaped like a cross, or have the Cross engraved on their walls. The best example of this is the Lalibela rock-hewn churches. Thus, in the EOTC context, the Cross is not principally an artifact but a functional religious object and not judged on its material or artistic value alone.

The UNESCO-approved YouTube video shows a prominent location of church history, namely the Ameba Geshen (a mountain in Southern Wollo), where King Ats Zereyacob placed part of the True Cross in the fourteenth century A.D.,<sup>24</sup> is decorated with the national flag.

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<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, “Finding the True Cross,” 449–53.

<sup>24</sup> Ameba Geshe is “A place where, as history’s irony would have it, for centuries, according to royal practice, the brothers and close male relatives of reigning Ethiopian Emperors would be banished until they were called back to succeed the emperor or for another mission (often they died there).” Woldetsadick, “The Right and the Duty to Meskel.” See also Yemane Berehan Adse, *Metshafe Tefut*, 13–14. See also, EOTC, *Ambr Mesqelye*, 66–87. Atz Zeryacob passed a declaration for every Christian to prostrate before the Cross and to wear a Cross and/or have it marked on their clothes or necklace that led the king into conflict with Deqiqe Estifanos. Please read more on this

Moreover, the *Demera* (the bonfire) itself, as well as most of the main streets, taxis, and billboards in Ethiopian major cities, are decorated with the national flag alongside the symbol of the Cross. While the Cross appears on necklaces, bracelets, rings, and clothing, most of the performances conducted by the clergy are also decorated with the beauty of the national flag. The clergy and the adherents of the festival are either clothed in the colors of the national flag and/or hold pieces of the national flag in their hands during the festival. An analysis of the Ethiopian national flag and its symbolism provides a necessary framework for understanding the peaceful coexistence of sacred and national emblems during the celebration. These practices, then, may lead one to pose a significant critique against the current sharp opposition placed between church and state across the world.

The flag’s three colors and their meanings honor a shared national and cultural legacy within Ethiopia’s multifaceted history. It has three major colors that have different meanings.<sup>25</sup> The green color represents the hope and richness of the land. The yellow symbolizes justice, peace, and harmony between various ethnic groups and religions. The red represents the victory and heroism of the nationals and the blood they spilled in the war against the Italian invasion in 1941. Although these messages are common across all governments in Ethiopian history, they have taken on even greater meaning through the insertion or removal of additional symbols at the center of the flag. For example, below are three of the most significant national flags in Ethiopian history:

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Getatchew Haile, ed. and trans., *Deqiqa Estifanos: Beheg Amelak* [The Children of Estifanos: By the Law of God] (Collegetown, MN: Getatchew Haile Publishers, 2004), 85–110, 165–78.

<sup>25</sup> For further references, see Ethiopia, *Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1995), Article 3; and also, Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 654/2009.



(1897–1974)



(1974–1991)



(1991–Present)

Emperor Haile Selase (1930–1974) used the first flag with the Lion (of Judah) and a crown placed at the center. The Lion of Judah was said to represent the Solomonic dynasty, in which the emperor traced his lineage to King Solomon of Jerusalem through the tradition of the Queen of Sheba.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the symbol affirmed the majesty of the emperor and the subordination of the whole people to the royal family, thereby establishing both the monarchy and authority. This flag is still used by the Rastafarian Movement, a group of people from Ethiopia and Jamaica who believe in the emperor’s divinity.<sup>27</sup>

The second flag was the official national flag during the Derg Communist Regime led by President Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974–1991), who deliberately removed the imperial sign from the center. Instead, the Derg government strongly emphasized the people’s unity and the country’s oneness in his politics at the expense of ethnic diversity. At that time, the Ethiopian people widely accepted the removal of the imperial symbol from the flag, unaware of the unintended consequence of overlooking ethnic rights. The elimination of the emblem increased the hope of liberation from the dominance of the imperial royal families and its reference to the unifying ideology of the communist

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<sup>26</sup> Queen of Sheba, who is locally known as Queen Makeda, had a son from King Solomon, and the Solomonic Dynasty was established in Ethiopia. Ethiopian Kings claim authority, tracing back to their lineage from King Solon of Jerusalem. Some historians claim Queen of Sheba to be from Yemen; however, the two authoritative primary documents of the EOTC, *Kebrä Nagast* and the *Fetha Nagast* clearly claim that the Queen was from Aksum. Please read for these scholarly discussions on Harry John Bridger Philby, *The Queen of Sheba* (London, Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1981); and also see E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Kebrä Nagast* (New York: Cosmio Classics, 2004), 19–33.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald Hausman, *The Kebrä Nagast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 15–16.

government. However, even though the flag was widely welcomed as a good unifying symbol, eventually the communist government was criticized for executing the forced assimilation of various ethnicities.<sup>28</sup>

The third flag belongs to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and is also maintained by the current Prosperity Party as the national flag (1991–Present). This flag has gained popularity to date, as the star at its center represents both the unity of the nation and the diversity of the eighty-four ethnicities,<sup>29</sup> each having an unlimited democratic right to exercise their culture and language to the extent of voting for “independence.” Article 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) notes, “Every Nation, Nationality, and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.” The FDRE also permits the use of flags to represent the different ethnically constituted regional states. But there were objections when critics began to see the third flag’s central symbol as a sign of ethnic federalism, a move that drew significant pushback from some scholars and politicians.<sup>30</sup> The new structure developed strong regional autonomy that, over time, contributed to localized tensions between the regional and centralized state governments.

Thus, one may interpret the consistent display of the current official flag at such a prominent religious festival as a strategic attempt to affirm the necessity of the third flag in public consciousness. The symbolic presence serves to broadcast a vision of national unity that simultaneously acknowledges ethnic diversity and asserts the government’s commitment to its citizens’ democratic rights. It, thereby, also

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<sup>28</sup> See Ethiopia, *Federal Flag and Emblem Proclamation*, Proclamation No. 16/1996, *Negarite Gazeta* (Addis Ababa, 1996), Preamble; and see also Ethiopia, *Federal Flag Proclamation*, Proclamation No. 654/2009, *Negarite Gazeta Addis Ababa*, (2009), Preamble.

<sup>29</sup> Please see *Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 654/2009*, which defines the current legal standard for the flag’s usage and official symbolic representations of each emblem.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the dispute over Welkait and Raya between the Amhara and Tigray regions, or the border conflicts between Oromia and the Somali region, are long-standing living witnesses that have led millions of people to be displaced. Please read more on this Assefa Fiseha, *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study* (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal, 2006).

communicates the associated political ideology that necessitates freedom of nations and nationalities within the unified country. Moreover, the flag’s significance is repeatedly broadcast and celebrated by government officials and festival adherents to proclaim the promising achievements of the existing government. Since the celebration incorporates various artistic religious symbols alongside the national flag, adherents can develop a strong sense of patriotism alongside their religious commitment.

The next juxtaposed set of symbols, at the Meskel Festival, is the attractive marching band of the federal police and the EOTC’s spiritual rhythmic dances [ሽብሽባ] and hymns, called *Yaredic Zema*. The police band often marches to Meskel Square for other national and non-religious public holidays, such as on March 2 for Victory Day, May 1 for International Labor Day, May 5 for Patriots’ Victory Day, May 28 for the Downfall of the Derg, etc. The representative of the Ethiopian Patriotic Association attends the Meskel celebration, holding and/or wearing the national flag and their medals, as they do on Ethiopian Patriots’ Victory Day, commemorating the Ethiopian government’s victory against the Italian invasion in 1936. In all these occasions, including the Meskel Festival, the national brass band presents the same secular songs, such as the national anthem, military victory songs, and secular love songs, mainly sung for the country. These songs are presented in parallel to the EOTC’s rhythmic *Yaredic Zema* (spiritual songs) sung by the EOTC priests and deacons around the *Demera*, delivering deep historical and spiritual meaning. The EOTC clergy stand before the pyre, chanting traditional hymns and performing the unique *Zema*. During the Meskel celebration, the religious and cultural dances, known as ሽብሽባ [*shebesheba*] and ወረብ [*wereb*], and the music are conducted according to the church’s music rhythm with spiritual meanings.<sup>31</sup>

There is a marked symbiosis between the *national songs* and the *spiritual Zema* during the festival, deeply rooted in Ethiopian culture, religion, and politics. While the national songs inspire the adherents with pride in their patriotism and ignite their love for the nation, within the

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<sup>31</sup> Chaillot, *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, 110–14.

EOTC, *Zema* is respected as a heavenly gift, a liturgical bridge to the divine that facilitates the worship of the Triune God. It is considered God’s heavenly and angelic gift, given to Saint Yared through his miraculous subjective experience.<sup>32</sup> As Edward Ullendorff noted, “While the importance of music, song and dirge, dance and accompanying instruments, is common to most peoples of the East, we are, I suggest, able to recognize certain specifically Old Testament elements in the musical manifestations, largely of a religious character, of the Ethiopians.”<sup>33</sup> The particular musical instruments, the *Bagana* (the harp) and the *Kabaro* (the traditional drum), and the two categories of the EOTC clergy men, the *Kahens* and the *Dabtaras*, who sing around the *Demera* (the Bonfire), are parallels to Jewish spiritual and traditional musical instruments and the twofold categories of the priesthood ministry in Israel.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, however, some observed tensions between the sacred and the secular. This is apparent in the controversy between Abba Estifanos and King Zara Yaqob in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The former refused the declaration of the King that demanded worship and/or bow to the holy Cross. The Estifanosites (a reformist movement within the EOTC) challenged the state-mandated fusion of political loyalty with liturgical duty, arguing that worship belonged only to God alone not to the Cross.<sup>35</sup> The refusal to worship the Cross had resulted in condemnation for both heresy and rebellion because the king claimed his rule by divine right, and any rebellion was a direct challenge to his divinely oriented political sovereignty.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, in our modern context, some scholars have observed tensions between the church and the state during various religious celebrations. Such tension, according to Mohammed Girma and Jon Abbink, becomes apparent when Meskel Square occasionally becomes a public

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<sup>32</sup> Kifle Assefa, *The Significance of St. Yared’s Music in the Age of Globalization* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2009), 167–68.

<sup>33</sup> Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 91–92.

<sup>35</sup> Getachew, *Deqiqa Estifanos*, 165–67.

<sup>36</sup> Getachew, *Deqiqa Estifanos*, 168–75.

space in which the state shapes political discourse for its secular consumption. For example, Jon Abbink argued that, despite the Ethiopian constitution's command to separate church and state, the latter often intervenes to ensure that religious celebrations align with state narratives of unity and/or diversity, sometimes dominating traditional religious autonomy.<sup>37</sup> Mohammed Girma, focusing on the Marxist and EPRDF regimes, argued that the Ethiopian state's policies of rapid modernization often overlooked and/or suppressed indigenous religious worldviews, leading, in his own words, to a “volatile dynamics” by decoupling its religious traditions.<sup>38</sup>

However, it could be argued that these tensions do not signal total hostility between church and state in Ethiopia; rather, they reinforce the connection, as the Meskel celebration remains the most enduring and powerful means of national identity formation and of religious identification within the broader Ethiopian context. The state's recognition of the Meskel Festival as a national event and its pursuit of UNESCO registration as Intangible Cultural Heritage elevate the religious celebration into a symbol of national heritage, inviting all citizens to respect the church's traditions. Besides, the peaceful conduct of millions of believers in a shared space like Meskel Square is only possible through high-level coordination between the church's spiritual leadership and the state's administrative capacity, with police deployed to ensure the festival's peaceful observance. Such cooperation primarily reflects interdependence between the church and the state, grounded in mutual respect and recognition rather than domination or hostility.

Therefore, the presence of the national flag alongside the cross, and the federal police brass band's marches following Saint Yared's spiritual Zema, should be viewed not as a sharp contrast or tension, but as a harmonious convergence of dual identities familiar to the Ethiopians. This dynamic allows for the co-existence of the church and the state's

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<sup>37</sup> Jon Abbink, “Religious Freedom and the Political Order: The Ethiopian ‘Secular State’ and the Containment of Muslim Identity Politics.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 346–65.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammed Girma, “Religion, Politics and the Dilemma of Modernizing Ethiopia.” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–9.

interests in a shared public space. It also reminds the Christians of their role as citizens of both this world and the world to come. The integration of the non-religious elements creates a holistic celebration that honors Ethiopia’s earthly sovereignty while also pointing toward its eternal hope. By witnessing this peaceful cooperation, the faithful can be drawn closer to their nation and the One and True God. They realize that the beauty of the earthly ritual is a vital medium that leads to the ultimate spiritual and redemptive implications of the commemorative feast of the finding of the True Cross of Christ.

In sum, the presence of ecclesial and governmental elements at the Meskel celebration demonstrates an established tradition of peaceful, respectful cooperation, in which the government’s ceremonial involvement affirms the festival’s public significance. Within this grand public setting, the church continues to shepherd the adherents toward the festival’s national status as a medium for communal living. The archival video reveals that the juxtaposition of the national flag placed alongside the sign of the True Cross communicates the peaceful coexistence of the two institutions. For example, in the opening sequences of the video, the prominent and repeated display of the relic of the True Cross along the national flag serves as a great visual testimony to the long-standing partnership between the church and the state. This intentional arrangement reflects a harmonious convergence in which the church’s ancient traditions are celebrated as a foundational pillar of the nation’s collective identity. This symbolic merging highlights the Meskel Festival as a site of national inclusive heritage, where the state’s presence advocates and honors the church’s historical role in shaping the cultural and moral framework of the adherents.

## THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF MESKEL

The EOTC emphasizes the historical act of Saint Eleni unearthing the True Cross of Christ and is repeatedly depicted through live and artistic representations of the festival, as shown in the YouTube video. The Meskel Festival, however, is more than a holiday; it is a manifestation of the Ethiopian covenant. According to Wallis Budge, during the

Meskel Festival, the Holy Cross functions as a defining element of the relationship between the Divine and the Ethiopians, holding a status of dedication and grace that is concealed only by the Holy ታቦት [The Ark of the Covenant].<sup>39</sup> This highlights the core theological divide between the EOTC tradition and other Christian denominations’ perspectives concerning the ritual power of the cross. This tradition gives the church a unique position in Christendom as a guardian of an ancient and indigenous form of Christianity. While Western Christianity was considerably influenced by the Greco-Roman philosophical worldview, the Christianity of the EOTC is deeply rooted in Semitic (Hebraic-Jewish) and indigenous traditions.<sup>40</sup> It is within this theological framework that the cross of Christ and the celebration of Meskel are viewed not as a static symbol but as a living power and ransom. Such a claim resounds with the Christus Victor motif or interpretation, articulated by Gustaf Aulen, who asserted that the cross was not a passive instrument of suffering, but the site of “divine power,” “victory,” and the “ransom” that liberate humanity from the powers of evil and darkness.<sup>41</sup> Besides, the EOTC liturgy positions the Cross among the seven sacraments and identifies it as the preeminent element of ritual life.<sup>42</sup> The festival’s high religious status explains the cross’s central role in both private devotion and massive public commemorations.

Another document in the EOTC is the *Wudasse Mesqel* [Praise of the Cross], composed by the 14th-century Saint Abba Giyorgis of Gasacca. This document serves as a decisive theological anchor for the exaltation

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<sup>39</sup> Wallis Budge, trans., *The Queen of Sheba and her only Son Menyelek* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Please refer further for the historical connection between Ethiopian religion and Judaism on John T. Pawlikowski, “The Judaic Spirit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Case Study in Religious Acculturation,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4, no. 3 (1972): 178–99; Edward Ullendorff, “Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1956): 216–56.

<sup>41</sup> For further discussion on this topic, please read Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 4–7, 20, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970), 69.

and the primary liturgical bridge between scriptural truths related to cross theology. According to the *Wudasse Mesqel*, the cross reclaimed what was lost in the Garden of Eden by frequently contrasting the “Tree of Knowledge,” which led to the human fall into sin, and the “Tree of the Cross,” which gives eternal life and becomes the source of believers’ boast.<sup>43</sup> This implies that cross theology is deeply rooted in Pauline theology that says, “But far be it from me to boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”(Gal 6:14). Within this framework, the Pauline concept of “boasting in the Cross” is transformed from a personal emotion into a communal liturgical obligation.<sup>44</sup> It employs high Christological metaphors and depicts the cross not merely as a historical relic and commemoration, but as a cosmic “weapon of power” against sin and evil and a staff of salvation that replaced the tree of knowledge with the Tree of Life.<sup>45</sup> Thus, by presenting the cross as a “Banner of Peace” and a “Staff of Power,” the document provides the theological justification for Meskel as a recurrent symbol of social and national unity that transcends specific political regimes.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, the EOTC preserves the theological implication of the celebration of the finding of the True Cross not merely as a historical commemoration, but also as the central ontological reality of human redemption. The Cross is often referred to as the “Ark of our Salvation” and the “Weapon of Light.”<sup>47</sup> For example, one of the documents of the church, very significant to the Commemoration of the Finding of the True Cross for Christ, is the *Metsihafe Senkessar* (Synaxarium). This document is regularly read by the faithful and contains the sacred biographical history and theological record of the discovery of the True

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<sup>43</sup> Haile, “Wəddase Mäsqäl,” 48.

<sup>44</sup> Haile, “Wəddase Mäsqäl,” 52.

<sup>45</sup> Haile, “Wəddase Mäsqäl,” 104, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Haile, “Wəddase Mäsqäl,” 112.

<sup>47</sup> Wallis Budge, trans., *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Synaxarium), vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 53. See also the discussion of the *Anaphora of Saint Mary* in Marcos Daoud, trans., *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church* (Cairo: Egyptian Book Press, 1959), 112–15.

Cross.<sup>48</sup> In this document, the celebration of Meskel represents a divine soteriological event that transcends mere historical commemoration. It functions instead as a ritualized reaffirmation of a cosmic victory over eternal death and human’s broken relationship with the Creator.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the *Meskel* is not just an inert artifact but an active, powerful life-giving instrument and a weapon used to conquer demonic forces and to sanctify the physical world.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the True Cross is a “boast” and a crown of “glory” that mediates mercy and provides a tangible link to the miraculous power of Christ’s resurrection.<sup>51</sup> One can observe in this source the shift from the physical object (the wooden cross and the festival) to the spiritual effect of the cross, granting sinners redemption and restoration.

A well-known *Yaredic Zema* played at the very celebration of Meskel further demonstrates the theological implications of the cross: the power of God, the universal Lordship of Jesus, and the redemptive work of Christ made manifest through the victory on the Cross. For example, the priests and the deacons sing a popular spiritual song in the *Ge’ez* language during the *Demera*. The song is seen as the theological summary for the Commemoration of the Finding of the True Cross of Christ and reads both in *Ge’ez* and Amharic, respectively:

መስቀል ኃይል ውእቱ፤ መስቀል ቤዛ ውእቱ። [Ge’ez]

መስቀል ኃይል ነው፤ መስቀል ቤዛ ነው። [Amharic]

The Cross is Power; the Cross is Ransom (Redemption).

The central spiritual and theological claim of the celebration is made in the classical *Ge’ez* formulation of the song. It says, መስቀል ኃይል ውእቱ፤ መስቀል ቤዛ ውእቱ. This ancient liturgical chant of the church, which is also popular today, transcends contemporary socio-cultural discourse, anchoring the celebration in an eternal truth that serves as the foundation for the believer’s dual identity as both a citizen of heaven and a citizen of the nation. The spiritual *Zema* also publicly confesses

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<sup>48</sup> Budge, *Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> Budge, *Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Budge, *Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, 61, 65.

<sup>51</sup> Budge, *Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, 59–60.

the power of the cross of Christ, including to the state. When the song is sung in such a religious community context, it conveys public recognition and autonomy for the Christian belief in God’s redemptive work through the cross, inviting all to be part of and beneficiaries of God’s redemptive work in Christ. Through their active participation in the Meskel celebration, the attendants publicly identify with the cross of Christ and the community of faith that believes in Christ's crucifixion. Then, building upon these traditions of the church, this study proposes that such identification be expressed in an affirmative relationship with God, with fellow brothers and sisters, and with the God-given authorities.

However, the deep spiritual meaning of the Meskel Festival, the impact of the celebration on followers’ lives, and the proper relationship between God and humanity are somewhat vague to ordinary members. And such a theological implication of the Meskel is sometimes unrecognized by a few adherents. This lack of recognition is evident, for example, the official display of the national flag is often countered by a minority who hold the flag used by the former communist regime, which is linked to the historical suppression and forced assimilation of various ethnicities. This was also evident, for example, when some adherents violently protested against a few government officials, calling by name, for various political issues, especially before the current political reform took place. Some adherents express their political resistance and reaction through violent acts and property damage, including public buses and government offices, during or after the festival.<sup>52</sup> “Even the feasting at Meskel was not immune to such displays. Violence was never far from the surface... the feasts often deteriorated into violent brawls and even resulted in deaths as drunken participants came to blows and even drew swords.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The detailed account of the destruction of government infrastructure and the political utilization of the flag during pre-reform protests is widely broadcasted and recorded in the Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: Beyond Law Enforcement: Human Rights Violations in Amhara and Oromia* (London: Amnesty International, 2020), 12–15.

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan, “Finding the True Cross,” 457.

As presented earlier, even though the strong convergence between church and state has coexisted in the nation’s history, the wide range of the shared public square, such as at Meskel Square, has occasionally been subject to misuse by a few individuals who misinterpret the festive atmosphere as an opportunity to protest certain politicians. These personalized deviations from the socio-cultural unity and most importantly the spiritual and liturgical solemnity reflect a misunderstanding of the event’s sacred message and temporarily divert attention from its core spiritual focus on the cross. However, such instances never undermine the overarching symbiosis between the two institutions in Ethiopia. The festival continues to invite all participants into a deeper national unity and spiritual reflection on the redemptive significance of the cross and the call to a peaceful coexistence regardless of the political divides.

On the one hand, while the church maintains the historical facts of Saint Eleni’s discovery of the True Cross and the UNESCO-inscribed heritage of the state-guarded *Demera*, this study observes a need to move from socio-cultural and national tradition towards personal redemption and a call to live a cruciform life. It could be argued that the historical facts, the cultural and traditional celebration of Meskel, and its international recognition are all means to its theological and spiritual end. While the church attractively retains the tradition and historical legacy of the discovery of the True Cross of Christ, it does not clearly claim that the festival is a decisive end in itself. All participants must understand the theological implications of celebrating the cross as the most transformative power in the present lives of believers. The disciples of Christ are called upon not only to derive the benefits from Christ’s historic crucifixion but also to crucify themselves with him daily. The Christian life paradoxically means dying with Christ. The believer’s call is to live a cruciform way of life daily (Gal 2:20 and Rom 6:4–6).

On the other hand, in the EOTC’s view, the representation of the cross is not just a symbol; rather, it is an intentional participation in what the symbol itself implies theologically. Although the outward historical and ritualistic celebration of the Meskel Festival is an expression of a unique, indigenized characteristic of Ethiopian Christianity, this

rich tradition must be understood by all adherents and emphatically taught by the church as an instrument pointing toward a deeper theological reality of divine redemption. The cross in a necklace, a tattoo on the body, and cruciform decorations on clothes are not ends in themselves. Building on the theological foundations of the cross as a living power, this study recommends that the church reinforce the connection between the *Demera* bonfire and the believer’s internal discipline. By doing so, the church can guide the faithful to recognize that the external performance of the Meskel ritual is a holistic embodiment of their faith, transforming a seasonal rite into a daily commitment to discipleship. When believers fully die to the Law, only then, through faith, can they perfectly live up to a life worthy of the cross (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), and have peaceful cooperation with others.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study first argued that the celebration of the Meskel demonstrated the historical symbiosis of church and state despite their official separation in the Ethiopian constitution. The historical unearthing of the True Cross, its socio-cultural value, and the striking ritualistic celebration of Meskel have become a unifying factor between the sacred and the secular and a source of pride in the nation’s solidarity. The study's findings confirm that the festival is a critical example of how art and symbols are already at work, shaping the public’s perception and challenging the presupposed historical antithesis between church and state. Finally, the study argued that while the Meskel Festival remains a foundational pillar of Ethiopian socio-cultural and political identity, its ultimate value lies in its capacity to serve as a channel for theological transformation. The findings suggest that the emphasis on the historical, socio-political, and ritualistic beauty of the feast overshadows the invitation to a cruciform life. Therefore, the EOTC scholars should intentionally bridge the gap between Meskel’s ritual observance and its theological depth. By moving beyond a commemorative tradition, the festival can be reclaimed as a dynamic call to embody the cross, transforming it from a seasonal event into a daily ethical imperative for the believers.

Ultimately, the cross’s divine significance depends on a lived theology that refuses to sacrifice spiritual transformation at the altar of mere ritual and socio-political traditions.

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