

Ethnographic Event Description: An Anthropological Investigation of Baptism among Orthodox Christians

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Abstract: Any typology of rituals wouldn't be complete without including a number of very important rites that can be found in practically all religious tradition and mark the passage from one domain, stage of life, or vocation into another. Such rituals have been classified as rite of passage. Among the church persons, entry into a religious society or the assumption of any other new religious role is customarily an event celebrated by rites such as those of baptism and confirmation. Baptism is a sacrament of admission to the Christian church. The overall objective of the study is to explore how baptism as a rite of passage contributes in fostering collective sentiment and solidarity among members of a given society. The paper deals with a christening rituals carried out on Sunday 11 November, 2018 at St. Mark church in Addis Ababa. The study used merely qualitative approaches to collect information pertinent to the topic under investigation. In-depth interview, participant observation, group discussion, and casual conversation were used as primary data sources, where as books and journals were referred as secondary sources of data collection. Functionalism and symbolic anthropology were looked into as the major theoretical approach in the study. Christening of a child, from the practitioners' point of view, is a status change for the baby-- from the status of non religion to the status of orthodox Christian immediately after the child is made to tie the thread-- the badge of the orthodox church symbolizing one's being member of the church/religion. From etic view, baptism, can be viewed as one of the traits of Christian religion performed to be identified with the group; to express conformity towards social values of society; to create temporary or permanent solidarity/unity among the people--forming a social community, and hence helps in fulfilling the needs of individuals (families) there by contribute to keep the solidarity of the society.

Key words: Baptism, Ritual, Rite of passage, Orthodox Christian, Functionalism, Symbolism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Baptism is the mystery of starting a new, of dying to an old way of life and being born again into a new way of life, in Christ. In the Orthodox church, baptism is "for the remission of sins" and for entrance into the church; the person being baptized is cleansed of all sins and is united to Christ; through the waters of baptism he / she is mysteriously crucified and buried with Christ, and is raised with him to newness of life, having "put on" Christ (that is, having been clothed in Christ). The cleansing of sins includes the washing away of the ancestral sin. Christian ritual of water baptism traces back to Saint John the Forerunner, who the Bible says baptized many, including Jesus. Baptism is more than just a symbolic act of burial and resurrection, but an actual supernatural transformation. Baptism is believed to impart cleansing (remission) of sins and union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection [1].

Baptism is normally performed by the three-fold immersion of a person in the name of the Holy Trinity; in other words, a person is immersed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," with one immersion at the mention of each person of the Holy Trinity.

It is through baptism that one is initiated into Christianity and becomes a member of the church. Baptism is the "door" through which we enter the Church, the sacrament which qualifies the baptized to receive God's spiritual help through the channels of grace which He has established.

One of the chief effects of baptism is that it removes the stigma of original sin. The sin of disobedience to God committed by Adam and Eve affected not only themselves but also their descendants, so that the soul of every child born into the world is tainted by this sin. Through Baptism, the original sin is cleansed away; man is spiritually reborn and is admitted into the Christian religion. The baby to be baptized is first of all given to the Godparent. This Godparent is supposed to undertake the obligation of teaching the Orthodox Christian faith and truth to his spiritual child when he or she becomes of age [2].

There are ocean-full events that could be evaluated through anthropological lens. However, the major reason for selecting this topic is my easy access to the ritual (event). In Ethiopia, at least one child is baptized in most Orthodox churches on every Sundays; and since the topic is a religious issue one can discover emic (native peoples') views and etic (the ethnographers') views more easily than other topics. The mystery of Orthodox baptism has not been sufficiently studied. Many nominal Orthodox Christians think of baptism as some quaint initiation rite. But the mystery of baptism is said to be much more than that. There is no or little scientific research on the contribution of baptism among the orthodox Christians from the view points of anthropology. The church people say that baptism transforms the entire person—body and soul. After baptism we embrace a new life, spiritually restored to the state of innocence and purity for which God created us.

This piece of research deals with a christening ritual carried out on Sunday 11 November, 2018 at St. Mark church in Addis Ababa. The overall objective of the study is to explore how baptism as a rite of passage contributes in fostering unity/solidarity among members of a given society. To achieve this end, the study specifically attempts to investigate the rituals of baptism among the orthodox Christians; uncovers the native account of baptism; and discusses scientific explanations of baptism from anthropological the view points.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Qualitative approach is adopted as a sole method in this study. Unlike the quantitative technique, “which rely on collecting data that is numerically based and amenable to such analytical methods as statistical correlations, often in relation to hypothesis testing” [3], the qualitative epistemological foundation of the study depends on methods that help in interpreting detail and sensitive human actions. Therefore, throughout the study, I have totally dependent on qualitative research approaches and data were qualitatively gathered, analyzed and interpreted. To this effect, both primary and secondary data collection methods were used to obtain relevant information pertinent to the topic under investigation. The primary data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interview, focus group discussion and casual conversation with informants purposively selected for this study. Secondary data were also collected from different sources, which include books and journals.

Participant observation is the major technique adopted in this study. I have established rapport with my informants. "In participant observation, researchers are expected to take part in many events and processes they are observing and trying to comprehend. By participating, they learn why local people find such events meaningful, as we see how they are organized and conducted" [4].

At the christening room I arrived on time as the other group members; wearing ceremonial garment (*netela*) appropriate for the occasion. Going to the temple with the group, I participated in every type of bodily movement, singing and praying led by the lead priest. I then observed the child receiving the Holy Communion and finally attended a memorial lunch party held at the residence of the father of the christened child on the same date.

In-depth interview was also part of this study. Parents of the baby, priests and deacons (participated in the ritual) are interviewed as to their view regarding each event carried out during the christening practice; of course, as noted above, secondary source materials from Addis Ababa university were also referred to get scientific explanation about the event.

One goal of ethnography is to discover native views, beliefs, and perceptions, which may be compared with the ethnographer's own observations and conclusions. In the field, ethnographers typically combine two research strategies, the emic and the etic. An emic approach investigates how local people think; how they perceive and categorize the world; what their rules for behavior are; and how they imagine and explain things. Operating emically, the ethnographer seeks the "native view point," relying on local people to explain things and to say whether something is significant or not [4]. Similarly, using an etic approach, as a trained scientist, the ethnographer should try to bring an objective and comprehensive view point to the study of the cultures. Of course, the ethnographer, like any other scientist, is also a human being with cultural bias that prevents complete objectivity [4].

The 'meaning' of a ritual is ambiguous, since ritual acts manipulate symbolic values which are in turn complex and ambiguous [5]. However, to minimize this problem, I have used different validation strategies to check whether or not data collected from informants are truthful. To validate data, I have asked a number of different people the same question and found that people independently of one another answer the question in essentially the same way. Another method of checking the validity of interview data was through asking a person the same question over a certain period of time. If a person answers the question differently, there is reason to believe that one of the responses might not be truthful. A third way to determine validity is to compare the responses during, and confirmed that my informants do was as what they say they do.

Regarding ethical consideration, all research participants took part in the study on their own free will after having been briefed on the purpose and use. All informants were given the option of being referenced anonymously. Furthermore, due appreciation was given to the beliefs, values systems and views of the

informants. Administrative procedures were also strictly observed by securing appropriate permissions from concerned church authorities.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study will have relevance in providing information to anthropology, sociology and religion researchers and post graduate students how baptism among Orthodox Christians, apart from its intrinsic religious values, contributes towards harmony and solidarity among members. The study is relevant in that it tries to uncover the ambiguous and difficult interpretations of religious event through ethnographic techniques. The result of the study is expected to broaden the existing literature and knowledge on anthropology and religious studies. The study can also be a spring board to other related studies.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Ritual

It is extremely difficult to define ritual, or to delimit it from ceremony on the one hand or from instrumental or practical action on the other. Ritual is regarded by some anthropologists as a category of behavior, in which case it may be defined as a form of ceremony characterized by its religious nature or purpose. Thus [6] distinguished ritual from ceremonial, by defining ceremony as "any complex organization of human activity which is not specifically technical or recreational and which involves the use of modes of behavior which are expressive of social relationships", while ritual is a more limited category characterized by its reference to mythical or religious notions, ends or agencies. Ritual is thus regarded as being symbolically more complex and involving more deep social and socio-psychological concerns. "Ritual is regarded as the aspect of behavior related to its symbolic value rather than to its practical utility. Even the most practical or technical act is performed in such a way as to express the particular cultural identity or values of the actor, so that it has a symbolic or ritual dimensions" [5].

An important contribution to the study of ritual is that of [8], who has described a rich system of ritual symbolism among the Ndembu (1967) and has also contributed important theoretical orientations in the field. Ritual symbolism among the Ndembu of Zambia is dominated by the existence of a set of key symbolic objects and qualities (for example colors) which consistently recur in ritual acts and settings. Each symbolic object or quality possesses a broad fan of meanings ranging from physiological and psychological referents to social and abstract ones. The 'meaning' of a ritual is thus complex and ambiguous. So ritual has many levels of meaning and many possible ambiguities, but serves ultimately to relate abstract principles and special relations to physiological and psychological realities, though not in a simplistic or deterministic fashion [5].

Rituals are formal--stylized, repetitive, and stereotyped. People perform them in special (sacred) places and at set times. Rituals include *liturgical orders*-- sequences of words and actions invented prior to the current performance of the ritual in which they occur. These features link rituals to plays, but there are important differences. Plays have audiences rather than participants. Actors merely portray something, but ritual performers ---who make up congregations ---are in earnest. Rituals convey information about the participants and their traditions. Repeated year after year, generation after generation, rituals translate enduring messages, values, and sentiments into action. Rituals are *social* acts. Inevitably, some participants are more committed than others to the beliefs that lie behind the rites. However, just by taking part in a joint public act, the performers signal that they accept a common social and moral order, one that transcends their status as individuals [4].

There are several definitions of 'ritual', some of which restrict its use to describing behavior of a religious nature, but most anthropologists these days prefer to adopt a broader one which can include secular activities like greetings. For example, ritual is behavior prescribed by society in which individuals have little choice about their actions.

To test a form of behavior to see whether it might qualify to be called ritual or not, one could try to change it, or omit it, and see how others would react. Refusing to reply to a greeting could be seen as most offensive. Omitting to greet someone on entering their house would seem churlish at the very least. Similarly, a birth party, especially for a child, would hardly qualify to such if it lacked certain elements; balloons, cards, presents, the cake, candles, the singing of a special song, and possibly the playing of games as well. In some areas, there are further expectations, perhaps about the provision of increasingly large gifts to take home, the wrapping up and distribution of pieces of cake, and a ceremony when the birth day presents are opened, one by one, to a series of 'oohs' and 'ohs' from the assembled company. A parent who put on a party without the appropriate paraphernalia would run the severe risk of disapproval on the part of their own offspring, and possible voluble complaints from the young guests [9]. A more restricted definition of ritual, which several anthropologists have used and which may therefore be referred to, is "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" [8].

Even in the case of religious ritual, the rites themselves must be examined separately from beliefs that may be associated with them, since people may participate for entirely social reasons. A funeral, for example, is attended by those who were close to, or who wish to express their respect for the deceased. Such participants will mourn, wear black or some other somber color and, if appropriate, they will attend religious service. This says nothing about the individual beliefs of the participants with respect to God or gods and the service they are attending. It may not even say very much about the feelings for the dead. Perhaps they are attending to express sympathy for the bereaved.

Similarly, in the case of a marriage, or a christening, the participants may have very different views amongst themselves about the religious nature of the event. As social anthropologist [10] pointed out, a Church of England wedding tells us nothing of the bride or her beliefs, only about the social relations being established. In other words, we must separate personal beliefs from the social aspects of ritual behavior. The latter is the domain of interest of the social anthropologist.

Ritual is sometimes described as 'empty', or meaningless, and there are people who make conscious efforts to pare it away; they may decide to have a simple wedding 'without any fuss', or a small family funeral, with 'no flowers please'. Some Christian churches make a virtue out of simplicity of design, cast away the ecclesiastical robes, and even abandon their notion of an order of service on some especially open occasions. In each case, there is an expression of rejection of the more complicated forms which may be regarded as wasteful of time and resources, or unnecessary adornment of the event. Any way, it's like leaving the wrapping off a gift in the interest of saving trees...but let us look at ritual a little more closely [9].

4.2 Rites of Passage

Rites of passage are ceremonies that make a change in a person's social position. These ritualistic ceremonies, which have religious significance, help both individuals and the society deal with important life changes, such as birth, [baptism], puberty, marriage, and death [11].

According to the classic study by [11], first established in 1909, in French, and translated into English in a book called *Rites of Passage* (1960), rites of passage are those which accompany the movement from 'one cosmic or social world to another'. It involves a move from one social category to another, the passage of a person or persons in a society from one *class* to another [7].

The rites of passage of contemporary societies include confirmations, baptism, etc. Passage rites involve changes in social status, such as from boyhood to manhood and from non-member to sorority sister. More generally, a rite of passage may mark any change in place, condition, social position, or age [4].

All rites of passage, in whatever culture they may be found, have three phases: separation, liminality (transition), and incorporation (. In the first phase, people withdraw from the group and begin moving from one place or status to another. In the third phase, they reenter society, having completed the rite. The liminal phase is the most interesting. It is the period between states, the limbo during which people have left one place or state but haven't yet entered or joined the next. Similarly, [7] listed these four main types of moves:

1. The passage of people from one status to another (for example, marriage or initiation to a new social or religious group).
2. The passage from one place to another (for example, a change of address or territory).
3. The passage from one situation to another (for example, taking up a new job or starting at a new school).
4. The passage of time (when the whole social group might move from one period to another, for example at new year, or into the reign of a new king /queen or emperor) [7].

In sum, rituals, wherever they are found, mark out the social categories for the people in question. They may be more or less related to the natural cycles of the seasons, the moon and the human body, but they will always order them in a cultural way related to ideas about the social world in which they are found.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Being informed by one Deacon that there will be a christening ritual to be carried out on Sunday 24 November, 2002, I went to St. Mark church on that day very early in the morning. Of course I had secured permission of the church before I go to attend the ritual.

When I arrived the church (on the aforementioned day), at the gate of the christening house, located at the sanctuary, I got a group of people (a mother holding her baby, the father of the son, the would be god father and two neighbors accompanying them) waiting for the opening of the door. Helped by the Deacon whom I knew before, I had introduced myself to the group and got their permission to participate in the ritual.

As soon as the door was opened, we entered and sat on the seats arranged in a way appropriate to attend the christening ritual. In the middle of the room there was a trough like structure full of water, and on one edge of the trough there was a bowl. There were also pictures of Angels hung on the wall at different sides. The mother of the baby, having embraced her child, sat in the middle near by the trough where the actual christening is to be carried out.

Later, a priest in his ceremonial garment, holding an Antiphon (a prayer text), and a vessel containing the holy oil came in. We all stood up immediately and remained standing. Bending from his shoulder, the priest saluted all of us while going just to the middle of the room and stood at one side of the trough where the bowl is located. He put the vessel which contains the unction (*kibakidus*) on the edge of the trough; then raised the bowl and filled it with water from the standing tap over the trough, and put it back. The priest requested the mother of the son if she brought thread. No sooner than her replying, “yes” the father of the son gave the thread to the priest.

According to the father of the baby, “the three colors (red, black, and white) of the thread symbolize the Holy Trinity... God is one in God head, three in persons, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Later, the lead priest gave spiritual name (for the baby) “Gebrekirkos” relating to the religious Holiday of the specific day (Sunday 11 November, 2018), started offering the prayer or reading the psalm loudly. But interrupted by other colleagues. Three priests and one deacon, being in their vestments, come in. Specially one of the priests dressed differently. I was told by one of the participants stood beside me that it is this priest who is to lead the ritual. Each of these new comers held different things. The one expected to lead, the already started ritual, held his hand cross and censer; the other priest came with Antiphon (a prayer text), and his hand cross; the third priest held only his hand cross; the deacon held a lighted baptismal candle or bees wax candle (*Tuwaf*), and the master or biggest cross used in rituals.

All stood encircling the trough and the baby in his mother’s embrace, then started reading different prayer texts turn by turn loudly. The chief priest stood in front of the baby to be baptized. In the censer held by the chief priest there is smoking fire with incense. While walking here and there around the baby/through, the priest intentionally moves the censer so as to stir up the fire from going out.

According to one of the deacons participated in the ritual, while the fire in the censer is associated with Christ, the cup of the censer symbolizes the womb of St-Marry. And the movement of the censer relates to the afflict / trouble on Christ by Jews while they were taking him to hang. The lighted Bees wax candle symbolizes the savior and his mission to enlighten the world; the cross symbolizes the redemption through the death of Jesus Christ.

Having said this let me take you back to the ritual. As it is mentioned above, all the priests and the deacon stood encircling the child continued their prayer. Later, the chief priest, after confirming the baby’s being given spiritual name, requested the god father (*Yekirstina Abat*) to make promise before the church. The god father, having caught the right thumb of the son, declared his being in favor of Christ and against devil. Then he returned to his place.

Following this, the mother put off the clothes of the son and handed the baby over to the deacon. Then the chief priest poured the holy water three times from the bowl over the head of the baby, who is in the arms of the deacon by saying, “I baptize Gebrekirkos in the name of the Father, the Son the Holy spirit, Amen.” Later, the priest consecrated the holy oil (*Kibakidus*) and anointed different parts of the body of the child, and blowed three times on the head of the child signifying the giving of the Holy Spirit. In ancient times oil was used as a salve to cover wounds, protecting them so that they could heal faster. The anointing with the holy oil or “Oil of Gladness” is a symbol of baptism as an act which heals our broken relationship with God. Following this, the priest tied around the infant’s neck the holy sign, the thread, (*Matab*), the badge of Christianity worn by everyone. As to the mother of the baby, the thread symbolizes the child’s membership to the Orthodox Church as of that moment. After the baptism, the baby is dressed in white, "symbolizing their new life as a servant of Christ," as to one of the deacons participated in the ritual.

Latter, the chief priest requested the god father to make a promise before the church ones again. The god father agreed and acted accordingly, “I promise in the name of the Father, His Son and the Holy spirit that I will follow up/control every religious concerns of my spiritual son as I am doing for my natural children. I will teach him all the principles of the church/religion until he will be able body”. Then he handed over the child from the priest’s hand. This shows the end of part one of the rites-of- the passage.

Before we move to the temple and continue the remaining part, one of the priests in the christening room briefed us about baptism and offertory (*kurban*) as briefly as follows: baptism is the sacrament through which a person is born again and accepted into the membership of the church after being dipped into water three times in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Those who have been validly baptized must not be baptized again. This is simply because baptism is the rebirth or regeneration as man is born bodily once, so we can’t be spiritually born more than once. Moreover, baptism is the partaking of Christ’s death and resurrection, Christ died and arose only once. It is by order of our Jesus Christ that baptism is administered. As soon as the child born his/her father should notify the church. In case of a boy, baptism takes place forty days after birth; with a girl, eighty days after birth. This is to remind you that God after creating Adam and Eve on earth took them to heaven on the 40th and 80th day after their creation respectively. Preceding his speech, the priest

elaborated by saying when a priest baptizes a believer, two kinds of signs are believed to be seen. These are the visible and the invisible signs/graces.

The visible signs are immersion in water three times, and the words said by the priest, "I baptize you (name) in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy spirit." The invisible grace is Rebirth, Regeneration, Remission of sins, purification and Sanctification, Salvation and Adoption. As far as the Holy communion (*Kurban*) is concerned, the priest stated the Holy Communion is the culmination of all Sacrament of the church. Holy Communion means offering of sacrifice, or sacrament offered for our salvation.

The Hibt and wine which are blessed and consecrated by the word and help of the Lord and by the hands of the priest one unified with His flesh and blood, and truly changed, the Hibt is the flesh of the Son of God, and the wine is the blood of the Son of God. The purpose of receiving the Holy Communion is for the memorial of Christ's death, forgiveness of sins, for the strengthen of faith and for eternal life. But he who eats and drinks when he ought not eat and drink is condemnation to himself; it doesn't profit him.

According to one of the priests in the christening room, the major types of prayer in the baptizing room are offering of the christening text and related prayers. And it is after this prayer that the visible signs (the water, the Holy oil, etc) are expected to change to the real grace, and we also acquire the invisible graces-rebirth, salvation, adoption, etc.

On the way to the temple, I asked one of the priests regarding the age of the baby; he replied that there is an agreement among different churches as to the age of the candidate. While the protestant church insists that a person must be sufficiently matured to make a profession of faith before receiving baptism, the Orthodox church believes in christening during early ages of children on the ground that no one knows when to die, and he/she should be baptized and guarantee his /her eternal life.

Finally, I asked the father of the child what will follow in the temple in connection with the baptized child. The father told me that what is going in the temple is the weekly mass, and it has nothing to do with the christening ritual. The child is taken to the temple simply to receive the Holy Communion with other persons. The father of the son further elaborated by saying christening is the pre request to enter the temple. No one is allowed to enter the temple unless and otherwise he/she is christened. It is after having christened that the child is admitted to join member ship of the church.

It is after these all, having been sprinkled with the Holy water, and offered dismissal... a form of praise to God referring to the end of part one of the ritual, we all went to the temple to attend the second and the last part of the ritual.

Latter, I went to the temple, of course with my group, and observed the child when receiving the Holy Communion, only the blood for that he is unable to take the flesh and it become the end of the ritual. Of course, there was also a praises to God referring the end of this part as well.

Before we depart, the father of the christened child requested all of us who accompanied them in the christening ritual to attend on the memorial lunch party to be held at their residence. I used the opportunity and observed the lavish christening party going on. It seems the poors' wedding party. So much people were enjoying the party when I arrived the area.

VI. CONCLUSION

Christening of a child, from the practitioners' point of view, is a status change for the baby-- from the status of non religion to the status of Orthodox Christian immediately after the child is made to tie the thread-- the badge of the Orthodox Church symbolizing one's being member of the church/religion. However, from scientific point of view, it is a rite- of- passage accompanied by a ritual. In many societies one is not fully or properly a human being unless he has undergone a rite-of- passage appropriate for his age/sex.

As birth rite is interpreted as a sympathetic symbol reinforcing/stressing of the relationship between the husband and the wife, and her kin, which is institutionalized when the child is born, christening can be symbolized as one of the means to extend relationships to non-kin or ritual or spiritual kin ship. In our case also the parents of the child established kin-like ties with the god father and his families as of his promise before the church to take all spiritual responsibilities of his spiritual son.

When we see the name and social identity conferred upon an individual by the ritual kinship, baptism can be seen as a ritual which is established to have mutual support with a person/family with social and economic equals/better off, or with persons of superior status in order to obtain benefits or access to extra-community power sources. It is a form of ritualized personal relationship which is under pinned by some form of instrumentality. In our specific case the godfather is in a better economic status compared to the family of the christened child. This indicates that the new relationship from the child's family side may be aimed to get benefits other than religious--economic, social and psychological.

One of the primary function of rites of passage often over looked is the role of the rites in providing entertainment, in our case also I have seen people from neighbor, relatives, friends, and work mates were enjoying the lavish christening party carried out on the residence of the host.

Baptism, being one of the traits of Christian religion, can also be performed to be identified with the group; to express conformity towards social values of society; it fosters unity/solidarity among members of society, and hence helps in fulfilling the needs of individuals (families) there by contribute to keep the society together. Here we see the functional interrelationship among the two social institutions (the family and the religion) and their contribution towards the solidarity of the society at large.

Being among Orthodox Christians, one is supposed to christen his child within the specific time frame stated by the religion. Unless, the individual may be treated as if he left/out of the group. Therefore, this idea supports the functionalists' perspective which argues that the existence of any custom, social relation should be interpreted in terms of its contribution to the satisfaction of the needs of the society.

To sum up, during most man's history, rites-of- passages have generally been religious frame work and regarded as religious act and hence possessed special authority. From the view point of modern social sciences, however, their nature is generally seen as being fundamentally secular.

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