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Rose Marie Beck / Frank Wittmann (eds.)

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WALL PAINTINGS IN ETHIOPIAN CHURCHES

VERENA BÖLL

The visual art in the highland areas of Ethiopia is mainly connected with Christianity. The walls inside the Ethiopian churches are decorated fully with beautiful pictures, showing biblical scenes and moments in the lives of the holy family, the apostles and the saints. These paintings depicted on the walls have a long tradition and are an important medium not only for the large number of illiterate Christian inhabitants in the rural areas – but also in the urban centres – in North and Central Ethiopia. Icons and a lot of illuminated manuscripts are in addition to the wall paintings traditional media, but also other materials transmit the Christian message, such as the silver crosses which the believers wear with chains on their hands, and as necklaces with different miniatures. The traditional painting of Christian Ethiopia is in that case not a traditional, but a very actual medium. The body itself is used as message – many faithful are tattooed with symbols of Christianity, like the cross. Obviously this visual material culture accompanies the believers during their whole life, being the elementary expression of their belief system.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia, in former times called Abyssinia, is known as the African country with the most churches, even in the remotest corner of the sparse settled highlands at least one church exists.

Christianity was already established in Ethiopia by the 4th century and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) became the official church of the court directly from the beginning.¹ The EOC had influenced the whole history of the country, the history and the development of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is completely connected with the general history of Ethiopia (Tadesse Tamrat 1972). The Christian culture is universal in the Ethiopian highlands (Stoffregen-Pedersen 1990). Churches have been always the most

¹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is part of the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches (Coptic Church, Armenian Church, Syrian Church, Syro-Malabar in India and also recently the Eritrean Church), which separated from the other Orthodox churches after the council of Chalcedon in 450, cf. Albert et al. (1993).

important buildings, not only as houses of God, and therefore as the religious centre for the inhabitants, but also as a flourishing social and cultural meeting point of each village or neighbourhood. The construction and decoration of the church buildings depended on the support of the monarchs, rulers and rich people. The religious system was organised in a way that all believers had to support their local church by giving alms for the priests or material and working hours for the construction or upkeep of the churches.² The construction of a new church integrates the painting of the murals and therefore the wage for the painter was collected from all believers.

2. The wall paintings in the Ethiopian churches

The church murals are of interest for historians and art specialists, but for anthropologist, sociologists and researchers of religion studies they are a real treasure trove. Usually religious paintings and icons are understood as art and consequently the practice of decorating church walls in Ethiopia could be considered only as art. Art is attributed to the material media, but the murals in Ethiopia are in fact part of a complex system of signs which could not be interpreted only as religious material art and the Ethiopians themselves regard the wall paintings not as art or something artistic.³

The originality of the Ethiopian media phenomena is eminent in the murals and the wall paintings in the churches are a medium within the religious system of the Ethiopian society. The paintings are as institution an integrated part of the Orthodox Christianity, wall paintings in churches had existed in some other Christian countries belonging to the Oriental Orthodox Churches like Armenia and could consequently be interpreted as something universal to Christianity. The wall paintings in Ethiopia are due to their uniqueness in style and meaning - an important part of the original local Ethiopian culture.

A painter did not paint the paintings, instead God 'painted' them with the 'assisting the hand' of a monk. They are seen as a divine message, translated by monks into a system of signs which can be understood by the believers.

² I would like to thank Steven Kaplan for sending me his unpublished paper, read at the First International Enno Littmann Conference in Munich, May 2002.

³ Cf. Chojnacki (1983:18), fn.7, where he calls the murals a collection of image-signs.

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The phenomenon of the centuries old tradition of Ethiopian wall paintings cannot be easily determined. The earliest mural paintings, as yet discovered, were found in an Ethiopian church and are dated from the 13th century, however earlier paintings may possibly exist.⁴ Due to the overwhelming amount of churches in Ethiopia, the distribution of the wall paintings is considerable, which provides all believers access to at least one decorated church.

The ecclesiastical architecture

The architecture of the Ethiopian churches was characterised during the centuries by two different forms. The rectangular form of the buildings was dominating until the 14/15th century, but since the 15th century the rectangular was slowly replaced until today by the circular concentric architecture.

The round churches were mostly constructed on hilltops. The whole area of the round churches is encircled with a hedge or wall of stone and in the middle of the churchyard stands the rotunda with a conical roof. In the inner part of these churches there is a threefold division into three concentric circles. The first circle is the entrance hall, called ቅኔ፡ማገልቲ (qəne mahlet, chant of praise), followed by the second circle, called ቅድስት (qəddəst, holy, saint) as the inner church room, and finally the third circle is the so-called heart of the church, the inner sanctum or ቅድስተ፡ቅዱሳን (qəddəsta qəddusan, Holy of Holies).⁵

The threefold division of the churches can be explained by an imitation of the Temple of Jerusalem or as a symbol of the trinity (Lagopoulos/Stylianoudi 2001:93). Only the first outer circle, the entrance hall, is accessible for all believers, and the daily prayers and the liturgy are celebrated here. This outer circle is also divided into three sections, one for the women, one for the men and one for the lay clergy (däbtāras). The inside of the church is semi-dark due to the lack of windows, but during the liturgy there will be an electric light switched on or light provided by the burning of candles.

⁴ The St. Mary's Church (Betä Maryam) in Lalibäla, North Ethiopia, is probably the oldest one, cf. Playne (1989:1) and Chojnacki (1983:42).

⁵ Cf. Di Salvo (1999:57-96), where he describes the development and typology of Ethiopian Churches, and especially pp. 64-68 with references to the tripartition.

The wall paintings

The wall between the entrance hall and the second circle is completely decorated with mural paintings. The paintings, which run around the entire inner wall and even the doors into the other circles, are completely decorated with pictures. These paintings on the doors are sometimes covered with a light curtain; during the prayers the priests open the curtains and the people have access to these pictures, too.

The material

There are two ways to decorate the walls of the inner circle, firstly the paintings are depicted on canvas hung up on the walls or alternatively they are painted directly on to the walls.

The paintings are very colourful and the vivid colours of the murals, even after centuries, are fascinating. The preconditions for the production of the colours are especially favourable in the high plateau of North Ethiopia. The weather is not so hot as in the south of Ethiopia and the conservation of the colours is easy to achieve. The colours are made from plants and earth or other natural organic elements.⁶ The red colour is produced from different kinds of red soil, mixed in a special way known only by the painters or scribes of the EOC.⁷ The white colours are made out of the white of the cotton (*abuğädi*) and the calico, the blue ones from Indigo, Lapis lazuli⁸ or Smalte, the yellow from the liquid substance of the wood of the Aloe and the black from carbonised iron (Rodriguez/Hirsch 2000:301).⁹

After the production of the colours they will rest in their specific box for some time to get the right consistency. The murals are prepared during that time by being oiled; the canvas or cotton-material is fixed with flour paste, enriched with a little juice of Aloe as protection from parasite, and then again undercoated with the *Olea Africana*. Finally the colours are applied on the walls with specific handmade brushes; the lines of the figures are drawn with charcoal. Sometimes there will be an inscription created with the use of charcoal or black colour.

⁶ On the technique of producing these colours in Ethiopia, cf. Fitz (1994) and Wehlte/Denninger (1994).

⁷ The recipes of the different colours were handed over only to very trusted pupils.

⁸ For the blue colours see in particular Marx (2001).

⁹ The specific capacity to produce the colours is even nowadays limited to few persons.

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The production of the paintings is an individual process; the painter and perhaps only one assistant are the producers of the pictures. They have the full responsibility for their murals, which is never suggestive of mass production – individuality always being retained.

The process of painting

The construction of a church did not take long and the painters could start to paint right after the completion of the building. It is not clear until today who determined which paintings had to be on the walls, but the painters knew the Christian themes and had a very clear vision of what to paint and to include the images of the biblical subjects into the mural decoration of the church.¹⁰

The conditions for the production of the paintings were favourable considering the Ethiopian circumstances. The painters were normally monks, because as messengers of the divine spheres they needed to be without sin. The painters learned their capabilities in the monasteries and church schools, and although the church schools were teaching different styles the subjects always remained the same. For the church-trained painters it was more important to transmit the biblical story and the gospel rather than to become a famous artist, consequently it is rare for the name of the painter to be shown.

Before starting to paint, the painter would normally participate in some rituals and ceremonies. The most important of which was ‘the retreat from the world’ for several days retiring to a lonely place and strictly fasting for the duration of the retreat. This ascetic time was filled up with lengthy prayers and religious reading.¹¹ This strict ritual allowed the painter to achieve a purity of mind; consequently he was also protected against the ‘Evil Eye’ and all bad influences.

The themes of the wall paintings

The themes of the mural paintings were until the 18th century exclusively religious and fixed upon the Holy Scriptures. The images have many subjects, but the biblical content of the pictures is prevalent. The images are related mainly to the Old Testament and the Gospel. Nevertheless it can be said

¹⁰ Some painters were dreaming which picture they had to paint, see Rodriguez/Hirsch (2000:302).

¹¹ To find a suitable place for the retreat was not difficult, the nature of the highlands offers a lot of hidden caves or inhabitant areas. Especially the temptation to speak with females had to be avoided, see Rodriguez/Hirsch (2000:302).

that the wall paintings reduce the narrative to a few figures - the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity, the Theophany and all hierarchies of the angels are depicted in a great variety, reflecting the theology of the EOC.¹² Furthermore the saints, especially St. George, and the figures of the patristic writings are also portrayed.

The scientific analysis of the major themes of the Christian art of Ethiopia, achieved by studying many of the icons and wall paintings had shown that the main figure in the pictures is the Virgin Mary (in Ethiopic Maryam: ማርያም). The veneration and the worship of Mary, as the mother of God (Theotokos) is very elaborate in Ethiopia. Beside the New Testament other writings like the Miracles of Mary (Tä'ammerä Maryam) transmit the story of Mary (Böll 1998; Grohmann 1919). The iconography of Mary shows a great variety, the tradition of depicting Mary in the churches has shown a lot of different cycles or sequences of Mary (Chojnacki 1983: 171-359). The figures of the Annunciation, the Dormition and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin are prominent in the paintings, but also the above-mentioned innumerable miracles of Mary.¹³ The image of the Theotokos shows in detail her human traits, per example by nursing the little child (Rodriguez/Hirsch 2000: 304). The paintings of Mary made it even possible for the scientist to determine which books, like the apocryphal writings, about the Virgin Mary have been or are in use in Ethiopia.¹⁴ The wall painting shown here gives a typical example of the Ethiopian wall painting. The picture is dedicated to the Theotokos, the mother of God.

The illustration (see next page) shows a decorated wall, which is part of the church Ura Kidanä Mehrät at the great Lake Tana, in the north of Ethiopia.¹⁵ A priest stands in front of the wall paintings. The painted scene belongs to the iconography of the enthroned virgin. It shows how the Virgin Mary sits on her hidden throne, holding her child Jesus in the left arm. The Virgin Mary wears a long red robe and a blue mantle, which is painted with large pleats.

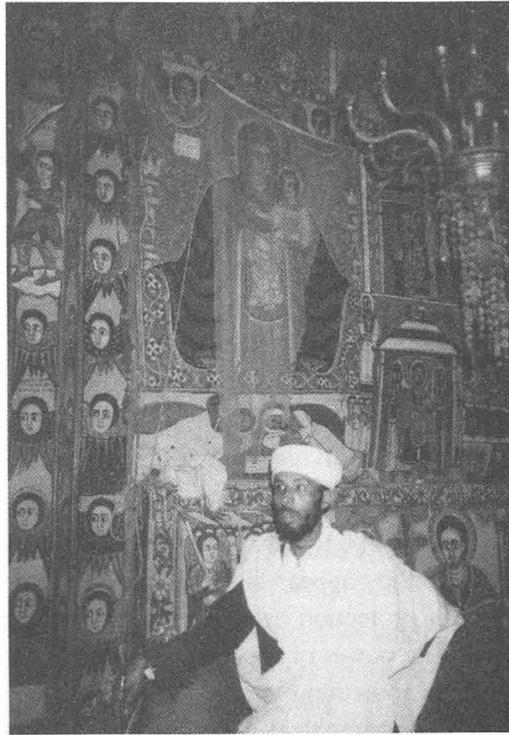
¹² During the centuries the EOC have had different dogmatic controversies with several councils, these controversies are reflected in the scriptures and in the paintings, cf. in general Getatchew Haile (1981).

¹³ One of the miracles is showing a cannibal, whose soul is saved by the Virgin because he gave a dog some water, cf. Cerulli (1943).

¹⁴ The mural of the Maryam Church in Lalibäla depicted the date palm from which Mary and Joseph could pick up the fruits on their flight to Egypt. This scene is described in the gospel of pseudo-Matthew, see Chojnacki (1983:49).

¹⁵ A detailed description of this Church and all the other churches in the Lake Tana can be found in Bosc-Tiessé (2000); cf. also Annequin (1975).

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**Church Ura Kidanä Mehrät,
Lake Tana. Photo by the
author.**

Both hands of Mary support Jesus. The left hand of Jesus holds a book, the right hand is directed towards his mother, on the level of her neck. The mantle of the child is painted yellow to suggest a warm golden shade. In the background two angels hold a red curtain, and the whole picture is ornamented at the side by flowers. Mary and her child have a blue and yellow nimbus, the outer halo is painted in a dark blue.

Beneath the throne one däbtära, a lay ecclesiastical person, and the donor of the picture are portrayed, in the typically lying position to show their insignificance. The painting beneath it shows Jesus, flanked by the army of the archangels. On the left side the angels are painted in a hierarchical way from the bottom up to the top. In front of the portrait of the Virgin Mary hangs a very slight curtain, demonstrating her holiness.

2. The Ethiopianisation of the wall paintings

The Ethiopian murals differ stylistically from other Christian wall paintings. The iconographical and structural particularity of the Ethiopian wall paintings is impressive. In general it can be said that the paintings are produced in a schematic way following the fixed standard. The painters did not focus on perspective pictures with superimposed details.¹⁶ The characteristic trait of the subjects is both flat and static; the paintings are done without a three-dimensional view. The vividness of the motif was the decisive factor, not the reproduction true to life. The most important people are portrayed bigger and from the front, posted in the centre of the picture. Foreigners, enemies, bad people, or the devil are portrayed typically from the side (Stäude 1954). The paintings are divided into different areas; mostly the celestial figures are painted on the upper area and the mortal at the bottom.

The paintings always focus on the eyes; in relation to the other parts of the face they appear disproportionally large. The big open eyes are believed to be a protection against demons and other bad influences like the 'Evil Eye'. The power of the imaginary forces such as demons and devils is understood as something very real, and the big open eyes could avoid the danger. Other iconographical codes are the fair colour of the skin of the important people, contrasting with the dark faces of the ordinary people. The people are always the main topic, landscape, buildings, animals, or the background are additions.

The contextualization of the paintings in local use can be dated to the 16th century. The subjects and material objects shown in the paintings are taken from the Ethiopian daily life, the so-called material culture is present here. The local context is manifest in details from the Ethiopian daily life like clothes, hair-dress, jewels and accessories that are integrated step by step into the pictures thus equipping the holy figures with Ethiopian occurrences. The Ethiopian Kings and Queens and the members of the nobility were painted sometimes on the walls, too, but not portrayed in the usual signification of the word, rather portrayed in the fixed scheme of depicting important persons, the individual characteristic of a subject was not relevant. Furthermore, some portraits of the laity and general information about the history of the country

¹⁶ The iconography of the Orthodox Churches is described in Chojnacki (2000). Cf. also the detailed homepage: Mäzgäbä séyélat – Treasury of Ethiopian Images. In: <http://128.100.218.174:8080/ethiopia/index.jsp> [username: guest; password: deeds].

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were added, normally in connection with special events such as a religious feast. Sometimes the donors of the paintings, who had given a large amount of money or material goods for the church, were placed lying on the side at the bottom of the picture.

The paintings are arranged in a special way, similar to the structure of a picture story or comic. Picture by picture follows around the way of the inner circle inside the church. The whole picture story offers a comprehensible programme, either the paintings chronologically tell a biblical story, or each picture has a different theme, the various scenes and separate personage are also understandable alone due to their content. This makes it easy for the believers to follow the incorporated story presented by the paintings. Each picture is separated by a black stroke or other hyphen like a floral or abstract pattern.

3. The communication between the wall paintings and the people

The preferential use of a certain medium within a culture indicates the religious practice of the believers. The semiotic theory that sees a picture as part of a visual communication is valid for the Ethiopian context, too. The wall paintings are sacral as such because, firstly, the picture as picture is holy and, secondly, the message of the picture is holy, too. The paintings have the function to transmit the gospel, but they are in themselves a message, a veneration of the divine. The paintings therefore cannot be interpreted as a pure symbol because the believers see the content as real, even when the subjects on the murals are not shown in a realistic way. Consequently, the paintings cannot be interpreted as mere illustrations of the biblical and theological texts, but as a pictorial text by themselves.

The Ethiopian wall paintings form a picture - script unity. The reference to the literary sources is always present (Cerulli 1968). The double structure of visual and textual signs is a significant element of the Ethiopian culture.¹⁷ The script is considered as holy, because the sacral and religious books, like the bible, it is written in this language, and for the believers, both the church and the Ethiopian script belong together. The script explains the paintings, describing the biblical and the Christian scenes and naming the portrayed subjects. The text helps to identify the scene, but for the believers the script is

¹⁷ Each picture of the murals has its own inscription, written in Ethiopic (Gə'əz).

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only part of the picture, because most of them cannot read or understand Ethiopic (Gə'əz), the old Church language.

The practice of decorating church walls also helped the Ethiopian highlander to get a Christian identity. Because everywhere in the country the churches and the interior décor were standardised, the identification with the church was so efficient that it became equivalent to the identification with the nation. All Ethiopian Christians see the same pictures, so that the people have the feeling of being one group, the wall paintings as part of the church could give a feeling of unity to the believers. Although it is not possible to speak in the Ethiopian context of a nation, the EOC had something of a nation-building element; the murals are part of the national communication network. All these wall paintings have in common that they represent the development of the Christian society; through the pictures the religious and political world were connected (Biased 1994: 550).

Speech and pictures transmitted the Christian religion; especially the visual possibilities made it easier for the Ethiopian missionaries to spread the new belief. To transmit the message of Christianity they needed a method, which could reach easily the people. Most of the Ethiopian inhabitants were illiterate; they learned their biblical and religious knowledge from the readings in the church and from the paintings. The visual reminder, like the paintings were the solution, the believers could visually follow the life story of the biblical figures, especially of the Virgin Mary and Christ (Chojnacki 1983:19). The wall paintings gave them the possibility to apprehend the divine; the intertextuality of content and representations is evident.

The relation between this medium and the 'consumer' is structured. The communicative function of the paintings and the structure of the society are dependent on each other. The believers pray before the devotional images, it is a communication face-to-face. The communication is not a one-way situation, the paintings tell a story and the people are able to 'read' these messages. The colloquy between picture and prayer is very intimate. On the one side there is God, the Virgin Mary and the Saints, answering directly the believers through the pictures. On the other side the believers answer by praying or beseeching. The divine enters into the life of the believers through the paintings, they see and feel the divine message in the pictures; each story comes to life. The believers can feel the divine power presented by the paintings; the image-signs of the murals are not interpreted symbolically, but

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as something real (Mercier 1997).¹⁸ The relation between images and people is so a very close one (Kaplan 2002:4).

But there is still another aspect. The stories that involve the direct intervention by the pictures are understood by the believers. It is a cultural 'good' that the pictures can help in time of distress and difficulties. The believers prostrate before the paintings and pray to them. The paintings respond to the believers by their piece of advice or support. That means that not only the figures depicted on the paintings help, but also the paintings themselves intervene in times of help.

The paintings are also a medium to teach the laity and to transmit the gospel. The capability of the people to memorise all stories they ever heard is enormous in Ethiopia, not only due to the circumstances of living, but also because the technique to memorise is highly developed.¹⁹

The wall paintings can be regarded therefore as a memory training exercise; by seeing the pictures the believers recall the story. The paintings are a good medium through which information and knowledge may be accumulated. The people will learn the content of the Christian message and the legends; each time they see the pictures they can recall the content and so they are well acquainted with the histories the pictures tell. Therefore the message of the paintings is not only the story painted as such, but the Christian context will be understood through the picture, for example when the believers look at the picture of the enthroned Virgin, they are don't see a woman holding a child, but Mary who has born God.

The religious images were made to enable the believer to apprehend the divine gospel and follow visually the life story of Christ and the others (Chojnacki 1983:19). When they then hear again the gospel while listening to the liturgy or elsewhere outside the church, they immediately imagine the paintings they have seen on the walls. In this way their consciousness is influenced and fed by these pictures. This is perhaps one of the reasons for the conservatism of the Ethiopian Christianity.

The paintings are also a possibility for the church to exercise a form of control. The message of the paintings is fixed because of the divine authority,

¹⁸ The general discussion about the relation between image and content is presented by Belt-ing (1998).

¹⁹ Cf. Imbakom Kalewold (Alaka) (1970) for the description of the techniques of the traditional church schools.

but the explanations given by the clergy can instruct the believers into the direction they want. The church can determine in this way the content of the belief.

The didactic role of the wall paintings is immense, the life of the biblical persons and saints are taken as an example for the believers. Beside the religious aspect the wall paintings also transmit political and sociological aspects of Ethiopian life. The contextualization of the paintings reflects a specific picture of the society. The non-realistic style of the murals is furthermore interpreted as a proof of eternity of the gospel. Finally the wall paintings are as a medium a message in themselves, - they show that this house of God is a Christian church.

4. The present situation in Ethiopia

The situation in modern day Ethiopia regarding the visual culture differs through the introduction of other medial possibilities, but with respect to the importance of the wall paintings the changes are only peripheral. The visual images in the churches still endure today and play a key role for the Ethiopian Christian culture. The narrative character of the murals is still one of the elementary parts of Christianity.

With the deposition of emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974) certain political changes since 1974 took place, together with the establishment of a socialist regime under Colonel Mengistu (1976-1991). Combined, this provoked for the first time the separation between government and church and had enormous political and cultural consequences (Bahru Zewde 1991:209-220). The traditional homology between the church and the palace broke down, and as consequence the Ethiopian Orthodox church lost a good part of her power and wealth and therefore the possibility to influence in the daily life of the believers. Nevertheless, despite the introduction of the atheistic social regime and the inherent changes, the church remains the most important factor within the Christian society. All efforts to break down the Christian monopoly status failed, and the church is today the most important structuring element within the life and habits of the Christian Ethiopians, although processes of innovation and conservatism in the Ethiopian society alternate.

In the Ethiopian case the practice of decorating church walls cannot be seen as agents of social change. On the contrary, they are agents of conserva-

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tism. Like all humans, the believers want to have a factor of stability in their lives and the church paintings are able to give them this stability. More and more people are able to read, but the increasing literality hasn't reduced the need of the believers to see the content of their belief visually expressed in their churches. The people are used to see the wall paintings, they are a real piece of their identity and by seeing them they visualise the message; the pictures narrate in colour the events which are miraculous.

The difference between the urban and the rural situation in general grows continuously, but a closer look at parish life in the cities reveals that even today the murals are not part of a dichotomy between the cities and the rural villages, like all the other kind of new media, but in contrary they produce continuity. In former times the visual culture connected the urbanity and rural areas, but nowadays the gap between them is too big to be reconciled. In rural areas the religious instruction plays a greater role than in towns, but illiterate believers are common until today even in towns. The illiterate people are instructed by seeing and hearing and the church has taken over the duty of education like in the past. The transformation process and the changes are mainly to be found in the disturbed feeling of being or building a Christian unity.

The continuity of the practice of decorating church walls can be noticed also in the new churches in the cities, they are like always decorated with wall paintings. The Christian contents of the decorated murals have to be contextualised, but they are still the same like in former times, although the technique and the style have changed and surely there has been a process of innovation, like that the painters are using different colours and also a lot of paintings and pictures in non-religious contexts exists. Although the church had to give up slowly her monopoly for the visual culture, it can be said that the religious function of the medium is the main aim like always. The habit of the depictions on the walls of the churches is a sign of the capability of the Ethiopian people to integrate traditional and modern elements into their lives.

Nowadays the painters are mostly known artists and not monks, but in the process of painting the walls inside the church they try to reduce their own specific style. Nevertheless, each painter can step by step integrate his (currently there are only male wall painters) own particular rules of composing a picture and interpreting the divine message.²⁰

²⁰ Rodriguez (2000). The authors analyse the biography of the painter Aläqa Ayyalä as an example for the painters of religious themes in contemporary Ethiopia.

The decorated walls are still channels of communication and an important medium for the Ethiopian society and this non-verbal pattern of their religious life will be a constant companion for the future. In contemporary Ethiopian society the communication between the images and the believers' works as before, and the wall paintings in the churches as a visual code continue to be an easily accessible and understandable medium for the mass.

5. Summary

The wall paintings in Ethiopian churches as a medium belong to the visual culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. With the decorated murals the church has got a method to teach the gospel, and the paintings offer a structure of communication for the believers, which can be used by all Christian Ethiopians, women and men. The believers communicate directly with the paintings and the divine powers depicted in the images answer them. Beside this religious function the tradition of the wall paintings makes it possible to transmit the Ethiopian culture to the following generations. The murals as part of the Christian Ethiopian society are a factor of stability and conservatism for the Christian Ethiopians, the phenomenon of wall paintings demonstrates how important the visual religious world is still today.

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²¹ Note: Ethiopian names are listed always with the first name.

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