

Replacing Indigenous Sacred Sites by Churches and Cultural Resilience among Cheha Gurage of Ethiopia: An Ethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the processes leading to replacement of sacred sites of indigenous religion with Christian churches in the Cheha area of south-central Ethiopia. In particular, it shows the deconstruction of indigenous religion and the dispossession of its sacred sites. It also explores new discourses and aspects of the resilience of indigenous religion. The article is based on empirical field data collected through ethnographic fieldwork at the sacred site of Ogepecha and its surroundings. The data reveal the processes of replacing the sacred site of Ogepecha of the *Waq* deity with St. George Church of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC). The article argues that the replacement of indigenous sacred sites with churches represents a complex intersection of religious, cultural, and historical dynamics. It highlights the impacts of dominant religious expansion, religious assimilation, and the struggle for cultural preservation among the local people.

Keywords: Sacred sites; churches; deconstruction; resilience; indigenous religion; Cheha Gurage

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1. Introduction

Indigenous religions survived in Ethiopia for long before and after the advent of Christianity and Islam. They are still in existence, particularly in the southwestern parts of the country. In this part of Ethiopia, various communities follow indigenous religions that are marked by a plethora of sacred sites ((Doda, 2019). Sacred sites and indigenous religions are inseparable and have had an inextricable affinity. Sacred sites tend to concentrate in areas where indigenous religion thrives (Bhagwat et al., 2011). In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia, sacred sites mainly exist in the form of ancestral burial grounds, groves, palaver trees, and initiation grounds that have been playing vital role in the religious, socio-cultural, and ecological aspects (Park, 1994). Oviedo and Jeanrenaud (2006: 261) defined sacred sites as "areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They may include primarily natural areas (such as forests or rivers, or primarily built or monumental areas (such as temples)". Thus, the pervasiveness of sacred sites is the key feature of African indigenous religion. Sacred sites are important centers for ancestral religious practice, and the ancestral spirits and gods are believed to inhabit them (Gottlieb, 2008; Siebert, 2008).

The Gurage people long practiced their indigenous religion and sacred sites were pervasive. But after centuries of persistence and being a rallying force in the overall life of the Gurage people, indigenous religion has been challenged and affected by new forces. With the overall changing religious landscape, the sacred sites also undergo peculiar changes. Rather than totally abandoning the sacred sites as is the case in some parts of Africa (see for example Asongue, 2020; and Doda, 2019), the sacred sites in Cheha Gurage are now becoming a center of the religious locus for different groups. The Orthodox Christians and Protestants have developed interest in the sites. They wanted to replace the sacred sites with their own respective churches. The EOTC redefined its historic accommodative approach towards indigenous religion and it has now become the major actor actively working to replace sacred sites with churches. The Protestants, who consistently followed a radical approach of detachment from indigenous religion are now striving to build churches over indigenous sacred sites. Such overlapping interests created a competitive situation in Cheha with immense ramifications on the alteration of indigenous religion and sacred sites. With such a dynamic process, new discourses about indigenous religion and an attempt to formulate an association between indigenous religion deities and Christianity is emerging.

Despite such a dynamic process, empirical studies that address emerging issues related to indigenous religion and sacred sites in Cheha are rarely available. The existing pieces of literature did not show the recent developments and processes of changes in indigenous religion and sacred sites. This article shows the processes leading to replacement of indigenous sacred sites with churches. It also considers emerging discourses and aspects of resilience of the adherents of indigenous religion focusing on the Ogepecha sacred site of *Waq* deity in Cheha Gurage.

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2. Methods and Materials

This study draws research engagements among the Cheha Gurage in southwestern Ethiopia, as part of a PhD fieldwork from January 2022- December 2022. Data and lessons from this fieldwork coupled with the researchers' close contact with the study area, experience, and observation are used to show the changes in the Ogepecha sacred site. Broadly, an ethnographic approach is employed in this study. Data relevant to this article were collected using diverse data collection methods comprising of in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, participant observation, and ethnographic conversation. Since religious change is complex and involves multiple actors, multi-sited ethnography is used to collect relevant data. Multi-sited research is an emerging method in ethnography that better fits with contemporary, globalizing societies, and more complex research sites (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995). This approach offers a more conceptual perspective and understanding of issues in a broader sense. Being strategically located at Ogepecha, data are collected from Ogepecha and its surrounding, Cheha *Woreda* (sub-district), Gurage *Zone* (district) in south-central Ethiopia. Document analysis which involves consultation of published and unpublished materials, and government office reports were used to triangulate the data

3. The General Context of the Study Area

The Gurage are an ethno-linguistic group living in the area southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, lying between 37:30' and 38:50' E and 7:46' and 8:45' N (Dinberu et al., 1995). The Gurage, which forms an administrative *zone* in the Southern Nations National Regional State (SNNPR) of Ethiopia, is surrounded by Hadya to the south, Silte to the east, the Oromia region to the north and southeast, and the Yem special *Woreda* to the west. According to Getinet (2009), the Gurages are divided into three linguistic groups: Western Gurage, Eastern Gurage, and Northern Gurage. The northern subgroups are referred to as the Kistane or Sodo Gurage, and the eastern subgroup is represented by the Siltie language group. Today, the Siltie are no longer categorized under the Gurage umbrella. They have asserted their non-Gurage identity following a referendum that culminated with the establishment of the Siltie administrative *Zone* in 2001.

The Western Gurage are commonly known as *Sebat-bet Gurage* (lit. seven houses) to refer to the seven groups that formed a loose confederation to fight against external invaders in the nineteenth century. These seven groups that formed the *Sebat-bet Gurage* are Cheha, Gumer, Muher and Aklil, Enmor-ener, Geto, Meqorqor, and Endegagn (Tekela, 2005). Each of these groups has its own specific dialects, and today each of them forms an administrative *Woreda* (sub-district). The *Sebat-bet Gurage* are linguistically linked groups of people who inhabit a specific area with which they are closely associated. The Gurage never had a centralized political leadership, but a seminary political system in which authority was exercised by clan chiefs and elders (Shack 1966; Alemu 1999). However, they have much in common, being related in history, culture, and economic activities.

Cheha is one of the thirteen *woredas* of the current Gurage *Zone*. Its administrative town is Emdibir, which is about 188 km from Addis Ababa. It is located south of Ezha, north of Enemor-Ener, southeast of Oromia, northeast of Abshega, and west of Gumer *Woreda*. The total population of Cheha *Woreda* is reported to be 121, 298; of which 63,798 are female and 57,500 are male. The population growth rate of Cheha is 2.9% and the population density is 252.2 people per sq.km (Cheha *Woreda* Statistical Office, March, 2022)

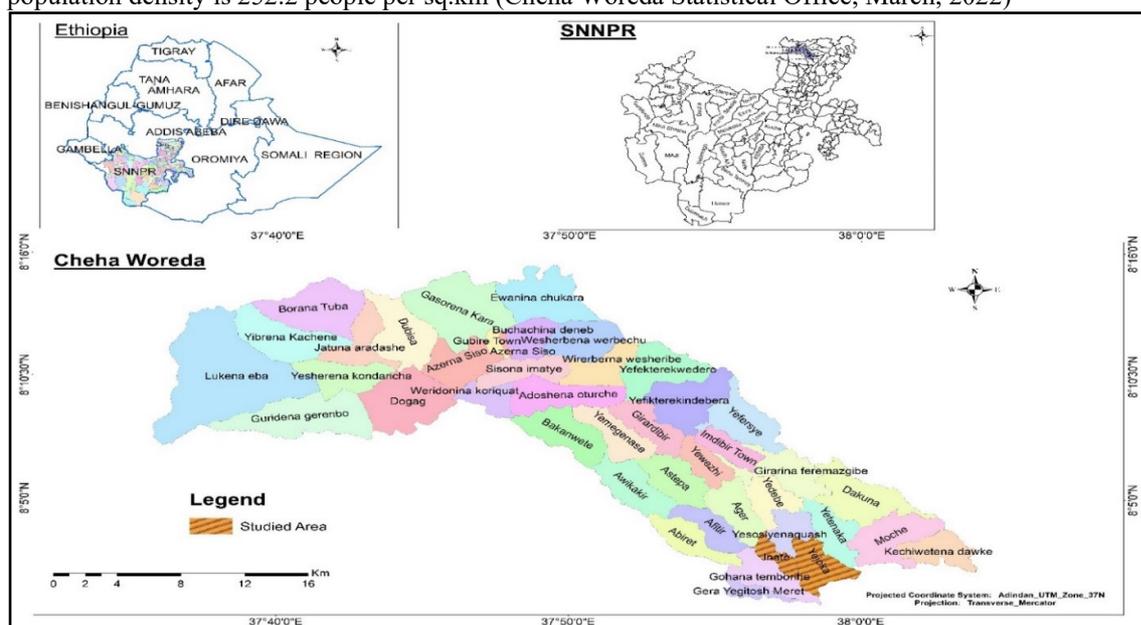


Fig 1. Map of Cheha Woreda

Source: Clipped from Ethiopia Shape File in ArcGis 10.8 Software

In Cheha Gurage, subsistence agriculture forms the basis of the local economy. The cultivation of *asat* (*Enset Adulis*), a type of false banana plant that produces edible roots and stems, is an important agricultural practice. *Asat* is not only a staple food, but also an important component of the economic and socio-cultural activities of the Cheha Gurage. In addition to *asat*, the Cheha Gurage also cultivate cash crops such as coffee and *khat* (*Catha Adulis*). Livestock, including goats, sheep, poultry, and cattle, is a vital economic activity across Cheha region. Cattle play a crucial role in *asat* cultivation, as their dung serves as a natural fertilizer. Dairy products such as butter, cheese, and milk supplement the household diet (Cheha *Woreda* Agricultural Office, March 2022).

4. Glance at Indigenous Religion in Cheha Gurage

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam into Gurage land, the Cheha Gurage were followers of indigenous religions (Trimingham, 1952). After the sway of Christianity and Islam, the Gurage did not abandon their native religion. Rather, Christianity and Islam were adapted to incorporate the indigenous religion. This position of religious hybridization became the main feature of the rural Gurage religious landscape. Their commitment to indigenous religion was very strong and shaped the political, economic, and daily lives of the Gurage people (Shack, 1966; Gabreyesus, 1991).

The indigenous religion of Cheha Gurage involves belief in *Egzer* (God). The followers of the indigenous religion could pray directly and individually to *Egzer*. *Egzer* is regarded by the Gurage people as the father of the angels he sent to serve his creation. These spiritual beings are considered as the sons and daughters of *Egzer*. They are believed to have the power to control life, weather, and the destiny of humans. Shack (1966) uses the term "deities," while Worku (1998) uses "god" for these spiritual beings worshipped by the Gurage.

The indigenous religious beliefs of the Gurage focus on three main deities: *Waq* (warrior deity), *Bozhe* (thunder god), and *Demamuit* (female fertility deity). Each deity has its intermediaries, priests, spirits, rituals, large annual gatherings, and celebrations at their respective shrines and sacred sites. Like most African societies, the Gurage indigenous religion is rich in symbols, sacred groves, trees, riverbanks, and forests believed to house the spirits of these deities. They are used to make offerings to the deities and spirits (Tekela 2005; Palmisano, 2016).

Bozhe is a god represented by thunder and is celebrated during *Nepuar* (a kind of fire festival). The representatives of *Bozhe* are known as *Gwetakiya*. According to the myth, *Egzer* has given *Bozhe* the responsibility to regulate the daily behavior of the Gurage. There is only one *Bozhe* for all Gurages and he protects the houses from theft and destruction by fire (Palmisano 2016). *Bozhe* is greatly feared by the Gurage, even by those who have converted to Christianity and Islam. This is because he is believed to play a destructive role for those who misbehave. The other deity is represented by the goddess *Demamuit*, who is central to the religious activities of Gurage women. *Demamuit* is a Chthonic deity, goddess of fertility, "mother earth," ritual illness, and social well-being. She is celebrated during *Senche* (in the month of February), the main ritual festival dedicated to her at a place called *Mokere* (Palmisano, 2016; Mohammed & Kishan 2016).

The other important deity is *Waq*, the warrior god of the Gurage. *Waq* is considered as a warrior spirit and has the special task of protecting the Gurage from outside attacks. The deity is described as a sky god and is associated with strength and courage. In addition, *Waq* is the male spirit and is mainly worshipped by men. *Waq* is the most important deity of the Gurage and its worship increases the prestige and power of the believers. According to informants, the ideal number of *Waq* angels is ninety-nine. Each *Sebat-bet* group has its own *Waq* with a specific name. For example, the Cheha Gurage has a *Yecheha Waq* or *Oget* and the Geto group has a *Yegita Waq* or *Mandewe* (named after the area and the particular group). The office associated with the guardianship of the *Waq* cult is inherited through male descent (Tekela 2005; Palmisano 2016).

5. Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) was established by Henri Tajfel (1978) in the context of the study of cognitive group formation. SIT commences its premises with the idea that individuals define their own identity in relation to other social groups. Social identification serves to protect and reinforce self-identity (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT introduces the concept of in-group (us) and out-group (them). "There is a tendency for in-group members to favor their in-group over the out-group, in-group favoritism or in-group bias," explaining 'self-perceived membership' in an identified group" (Worley 2021:1). The creation of group identities is "an identification with a collective, depersonalized identity based on group membership and endowed with positive aspects" (Islam 2014: 1781). SIT assumes that social identity is the result of three different processes that occur sequentially. These are social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Worley 2021: 2).

SIT is applied in various fields of study: intergroup relations, intergroup conflict, and religion. Samson Kamei (2023) recently applied SIT to religious studies. He used SIT in his study of the indigenous religion of the Romgmei people in Manipur, India. Using SIT, he argued that the Romgmei are different from others in terms of their beliefs and practices. Through this theory, Kamei explained the resilience of the Romgmei indigenous belief system called Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak. Despite the various changes their belief system has undergone, it

struggles to survive. The reason for its resilience is that people consider indigenous religion to be the religion of their ancestors and collective identity. It enables believers to recognize and understand the differences between their own group and other groups.

This theory is consistent to this study, particularly to understand the resilience aspect of the Cheha Gurage indigenous religion. In the face of all the challenges and threats posed against the Cheha Gurage indigenous religion, it is struggling to survive. The Gurage mythology and beliefs are rooted in the narrative of common ancestors and origins with their own religious beliefs and practices. Their beliefs, prayers, and songs are language and culture-specific and descended from ancestors. The foundation of their social institutions and patterns of social interactions are embedded in their beliefs in indigenous religion. The beliefs and practices are rooted in and closely tied to the ancestral religion and religious identity. Adherents of indigenous religion are committed to ensuring the continuity of indigenous religion as an ancestral religion. Indigenous religion is considered more identity-forming than other religions introduced from outside among the Cheha Gurage. This means that people are still struggling to survive with their indigenous beliefs and practices despite the challenges.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is synonymously referred to as deconstructionism, poststructuralism, and sometimes relativism (Rosenau, 1991). Since its emergence as a reaction to modernism, postmodernism has influenced virtually all areas of scholarship. It has intervened in the political, sociocultural, and economic aspects of human engagement. Sim (1998:3) describes postmodernism as a “philosophical movement in the form of skepticism that subverts philosophical claims to authority, knowledge, political and cultural norms”.

Postmodernism emerged after World War II and gained popularity in the 1960s, particularly in the context of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation. It seeks to reevaluate and reorganize various aspects of modernity, including the social sciences and anthropology (Elaati 2016). Inspired by thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, postmodernism was further developed by French philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, and Lacan. Anthropologists like Tyler, Clifford, and Marcus have embraced postmodernism, which challenges traditional modernist approaches, theories, and the pursuit of a single, absolute truth. Instead, it emphasizes diversity, heterogeneity, and multiple interpretations acknowledging different realities and promoting the consideration of various perspectives (Naugle and Hanson 1992; Caputo 2001; Rosenau 1991).

Proponents of the postmodern perspectives are cognizant of the study of socio-cultural realities in Ethiopia as a multilingual and multiethnic country. There are diverse socio-cultural realities that are situated in different localities or contexts. Even within a single group of people like Cheha Gurage, there are different religious orientations. Moreover, not only do there exist different interpretations of "realities" between different religious groups, but there are various views on a single issue among followers of the same religion. Thus, I found some perspectives of postmodernism are relevant to the study since the intention of this study is to look at religious change among the Cheha Gurage from different vantage points and the multiple constructions and interpretations related to the changing religious landscape of this specific context.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. Ogepecha and *Chisite*

Ogepecha is a sacred site in Yejoka *Kebele* of Cheha *Woreda* associated with the powerful *Waq* known as *Oget*. It holds immense significance in Gurage culture, serving as a place for ritual and annual celebrations honoring *Oget*. Followers of indigenous religion consider Ogepecha as the dwelling place of *Waq's* spirit, permeating everything in the site, including *Adebar* (sacred natural groves) in the site. Only authorized individuals are allowed to interact with the site and its possessions. The site is surrounded by huge natural trees which have been an important part of the biodiversity of the area. People come to visit the sacred site of Ogepecha at different times. They may come to the site in groups or individually to pray and offer sacrifices. They make a special offer of animal sacrifices in times of calamities like drought and the delay of the rain. They beg *Oget* for mercy and forgiveness, beg kneeling in front of *Yewaq zigur* (*Waq's* temple).



Figure 2: The Sacred site of Ogepecha
Source: Fieldwork data January 8, 2022

Chisite is the annual celebration dedicated to honor *Oget* with great gatherings from *Hidar 20-21* (November 29-30). This festival has been the great rallying point of the *Sebat-bet Gurages* coming from different corners. People who are from far away areas arrive to the site of Ogepecha one day before the event. They spend the whole night praising *Oget*. Field observation reveals that, when attendants come to celebrate *Chisite*, they bring a variety of gifts like umbrella, honey, bulls, and cash. After a while, *Zuryashwork Zerga*, the woman who is the representative and intermediary of *Oget*, comes from Abeze area of Yejoka accompanied by her husband, *Damo Tsekkel Asfaw*. Her arrival is welcomed with great shouting by the attendants as if feeling the actual presence of *Oget*. They shout by saying *waq chenem* (*Waq* has come).

After sitting half an hour under one of the *Adebar* tree, she gets up and moves around, accompanied by believers offering praise. Finally, she enters *Yewaq zigur* to accept gifts brought to *Oget* after the attendants tell her their problems and beg *Oget* for mercy and solution. Around the end of the festival, bulls brought by attendants are slaughtered in front of *Ywaq zeger* (*Waq's* temple). There are people who are given special authority to slaughter bulls in Ogepecha. The attendants and priest of *Oget* has their own share of the meat.



Figure 3: Attendants of *Chisite*, offering gifts to *Waq's* representative
Source: Fieldwork, November 14, 2022

6.2. Christianity and the Accommodation phase of Indigenous Religion

As the available sources and key informants show, Orthodox Christianity was introduced in the Gurage area with the territorial expansion of King Amdetsion of the Christian Highland Kingdom in the fourteenth century AD.

However, until the end of the nineteenth century, Orthodox Christianity could not establish itself among the broad masses of society. For a long time, it was limited to the ruling feudal classes who came from the northern part of Ethiopia. The local population and clan leaders continued to practice their native religion. The firm establishment and spread of Orthodox Christianity among the Gurage, including Cheha, is mainly associated with the territorial conquest of the Gurage by Emperor Menelik II at the end of nineteenth century (Denberu et al., 1995; Tekela, 2005). The incorporation of the Gurage kingdoms into the Ethiopian Empire brought significant changes not only in religious aspects, but also in the political and cultural life of the people. Since EOTC enjoyed the privilege of government patronage, the newcomers and settlers from the northern part of Ethiopia were involved in the government-sponsored conversion of the native population to Orthodox Christianity. Upon their arrival, they had participated in building churches and brought deacons and priests with them. With this development, many northern cultures were brought to the Gurage area.

During its early stages of expansion, the EOTC in Cheha Gurage followed an accommodative approach towards indigenous religion. The local people were not forced to abandon their indigenous beliefs and practices (Butsorf, 2005). Without taking radical and offensive measures, the local people were encouraged to embrace the new religion. Over time, the interplay between EOTC and indigenous religion in Gurage resulted in religious hybridization where converts continued to practice their indigenous religion side by side with EOTC. The converts continued without compromising their commitment to the beliefs and practices of the indigenous religion.

Ethnographic interviews and field observations reveal such religious hybridization. In particular, interviews with elderly people in the Enata and Yejoka *Kebeles* confirmed that even after conversion to Christianity, there is still such a religious attitude that relates to indigenous religion. They continue to practice their indigenous religion, but rarely attend services at local churches and know little about Orthodox Christianity. In this regard, one informant, aged about 65, who considers himself a follower of the indigenous religion but identifies himself with the EOTC, said:

I embraced Orthodox Christianity before the age of 30 around 1985. Although I became an Orthodox Christian, I never stopped believing in and worshipping *Waq* and *Bozhe*, who are descended from our forefathers. When I became an Orthodox Christian, our Church did not tell us that our religious beliefs and practices were wrong and that we should stop practicing them. As an Orthodox Christian, I fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays and observed some other church regulations. As a follower of *Waq* and *Bozhe*, I continued to observe all the important festivals, rituals and offerings to *Bozhe* and *Waq* together with my villagers. My attachment to the Baleweld Orthodox Church, located about 3 km from our village, was practically non-existent. I only visited the church during the annual Baleweld festival, which was held during *Gena* (Ethiopian Christmas) (20 June, 2022).

Another informant aged 59 reported that “I have been keeping active engagement in frequently appearing at religious rituals and practices to honor *Waq* and *Bozhe* than regularly attending and observing Orthodox Church services.” In addressing the question why he is in such position of strong attachment with indigenous religion and a nominal position with EOTC, he replied “For one reason, *Waq* and *Bozhe* are deeply planted in our heart and we grow up with lived experiences of our own religion than Christianity. Secondly, I considered Christianity as a foreign religion about which we have little knowledge and experience”.

The EOTC's accommodating approach towards indigenous religion in Cheha eventually had serious consequences for the church. The failure to explicitly state its position toward indigenous religion posed a challenge to the church. The status of nominal Orthodox Christianity became a weakness that could be exploited by the newly introduced Protestantism. Both the nominal Orthodox Christians and the followers of the native religion were attracted to Protestantism. On the question of why nominal Orthodox Christians were attracted to Protestantism, a 41 years old woman described her experience as follows:

Initially, I was a follower of *Demamuit*. One day a protestant Pastor told me that the local religious deities like *Waq*, *Bozhe* and *Demamuit* are “demonic” and told me to stop beliefs and practices related with them. He preached me that *Waq*, *Bozhe*, and *Demamuit* are “burdens” and promised relief from them if I accepted Jesus. He preached me by reading some verses from the Holy Bible and boldly told me that I would be saved and have eternal life at the moment of accepting Jesus Christ as my savior. With the hope of peace, eternal life, and relief of burden, I came to embrace Protestantism. At that moment, I was delivered from a demon and I felt great joy and peace. This was something that I never experienced before (23 June, 2022).

Despite the recent spread of Protestantism in Cheha, many adherents of the indigenous religion and nominal Orthodox Christians, especially the youth, have been attracted to the teachings of Protestantism. They have embraced Protestantism for several reasons. First, they associated Protestantism with modernization and indigenous religion with “traditional” and “backward,” burdened with encumbrances. Second, they saw in it a meaning, a promise for everyday and eternal life. A female informant, aged 23, who is a singer in a Protestant church in Yejoka, echoed some of the reasons why young people in her locality convert to Protestantism:

I became a Protestant for many reasons. First and foremost, it promises eternal life and peace to its believers, which I do not find in an indigenous religion or Orthodox Christianity. Second, it demands a simple life, which is more appealing to me. I was bored with the frequent rituals and festivals that my father and mother held in honor of *Waq*, *Bozhe* and *Demamuit*. There are so many tedious activities that I get tired of. Finally, the Protestant leaders encourage believers to read the Holy Bible for themselves. When I accepted Jesus, the Holy Bible was given to me as a gift. Another important point is the love among members. I have been visited frequently by other members. I was closely mentored and guided by my pastors. This familiarity and support from church members and leaders influenced me a lot, which I never experienced when I identified with EOTC and local religion (25 June, 2023).

Protestantism eventually developed into a strong religious force that competed with Orthodox Christianity for dominance in Cheha. This development not only weakened the native religion, but also forced the Orthodox Church in the area to reconsider its liberal approach towards indigenous religion.

6.3. From Accommodation to Deconstruction of Indigenous Religion

Contemporary religious developments forced the local Orthodox Church in Cheha to redefine its position vis-à-vis indigenous religion. The spread of Protestantism forced the Orthodox Church to change its stance towards indigenous religion from liberal to offensive approach. One of the leaders of the Ogepecha St. George Church said of this change, “People often convert to Protestantism. This is a threat to our church. We are losing, especially the youth group that is attracted to Protestantism. And also, the older people are breaking away from *Bozhe* and *Waq* and becoming Protestants. We are looking for a solution to keep our members and prevent the spread of Protestantism” (29 July, 2022). As a result, EOTC came to change its age-old position of accepting nominal Christians. More recently, about 10 years ago, a reformist group emerged at the local level in Yejoka and the surrounding area. They referred to themselves as “pure” (locally called *tsirere*) Orthodox Christians in order to distinguish themselves from those who are returning to indigenous religious practices after conversion to EOTC. Their objective is to halt the expansion of Protestantism and purify EOTC from elements of indigenous religion. Reaffirming this, a woman who has been a member of the reformist group, aged 34, narrates about the origin of the reformist group:

This group originated in the Yejoka Balweld Church. It was initially an informal gathering of committed, supposedly “pure” Orthodox Christians who were very concerned about the spread of Protestantism and the existence of nominal Orthodox Christians still practicing their former religion. This concern gradually attracted many other *Yemariam Dengia* (the children of St. Mary). Gradually, we expanded our vision of Yejoka and its surroundings to the entire Cheha. There are two main goals. One is to stop the spread of Protestantism, and the other is to make our members committed Orthodox Christians (August 2, 2022).

Soon after its emergence, the “pure” Orthodox claimers began to urge their church members to break all forms of ties with indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Now the Orthodox Christians come to take the position assumed early by the Protestants. They began to attack indigenous religious practices as “irrelevant” and denied any association between Orthodox Christianity and indigenous religion. The question here is why the Orthodox Christians take such a radical position after centuries of accommodation?

As stated by reformists, the expansion of Protestantism has been considered a threat by Orthodox Churches in Cheha. A priest in Enata St. Aresma Church said the following about the expansion of Protestantism, “In our *Kebele*, the number of Protestants is greater than Orthodox Christians. They are working to convert the whole people to Protestantism. This is dangerous and we urgently needed to stop this” (August 5, 2022). Though Protestantism was introduced only in the last few decades, it has been winning converts of both nominal Orthodox Christians and indigenous religious believers. Currently, Protestants are the majority in some villages of Cheha *Woreda*. According to the Orthodox Church leaders and the “reformist” assessment, the factor enabling the rapid expansion of Protestantism lies within the Orthodox Church itself. The Orthodox Church did not take clear position concerning indigenous religion for long and many Orthodox Christians livewithout good knowledge about their own religion. The Protestants exploited this weakness and such nominal Orthodox Christians were unable to defend their conversion appeal by Protestants.

To overcome these challenges, the reformist groups developed different strategies. The strategies are concerned with two basic issues. These are deconstructing indigenous religion and containing Protestantism. According to the leaders of the group, the first one is intended to transform the nominal to strong, committed, and “pure” Orthodox Christians. They intended to achieve this through intensive teachings of the doctrines of EOTC. Through the effective teachings of their members, the reformists envisioned the deconstruction of indigenous religious elements. As part of the deconstruction, they urged their members to stop visiting sacred sites and offering sacrifices to *Waq* and other deities. As I heard during church attendance and observation at Ogepecha St. George annual celebration in January 2023, the priest of the church told the members “You belong to St. George, not to *Waq*, your mother is St. Mary, not *Demamuit*. Please avoid attachment with demonic elements of *Bozhe*, *Waq* and *Demamuit*”. According to informants, such radical teaching and creating clear demarcation between

Orthodox Christianity and indigenous religion are recent phenomena in their locality. It is the result of the activities of the reformists who are influencing the religious phenomena of Cheha.

The second strategy is to prevent the further spread of Protestantism. To achieve this, the reformists aggressively work on expansion projects of the Orthodox Church. As an Orthodox Christian, 33 years old, commented, “The expansion of the Orthodox Church in Cheha is assumed to be the best strategy both to stop the spread of Protestantism and to turn the nominal ones into “pure” and strong Orthodox Christians” (15 August, 2022). A church expansion project under the slogan, “One Church for a *Kebele*” was launched to reach out to church members from their immediate neighborhood. According to the reformists, this agenda was shared by all Orthodox Christians in *Sebet-bet* Gurage. Protestantism is considered a rival force of Orthodox Christianity in Cheha compared to other parts of *Sebet-bet* Gurage. The reformists asked for support from all fellow Orthodox Christians to prevent the spread of Protestantism by donating money for the construction of new churches in areas where Orthodox Churches are unavailable and Protestantism is spreading.

The deconstruction and church expansion projects have been coordinated and financially backed by Gurages living in Addis Ababa. A large number of Gurage migrants are living in Addis Ababa and in other urban centers throughout Ethiopia. However, they are highly attached to their homeland and influence their locality in various ways. Through the active support and leadership of the urban-centered migrants, the church expansion project was successful and 20 new churches were built across Cheha *Woreda* between in the years 2018 and 2022. One of the Orthodox Church leaders, 40 years old and who has been coordinating the project of church expansion commented in the following way:

Only a few areas in Cheha are left unaddressed as the project of “One Church for One *Kebele*” is concerned. They are waiting for new actions. We are looking for suitable land for the construction of a church. We have already raised funds from wealthy individuals from *Sebat-bet* Gurage in Addis Ababa. In the last seven years, we have built more than 30 churches. This has enabled us to reach out to our Orthodox fathers and mothers in their respective villages. By overcoming the distance, they have the opportunity to attend services on a regular basis (June 23, 2022).

In addition to the church expansion project, the EOTC in Cheha has made efforts to teach church doctrines, focusing especially on youth groups by priests coming from the Amhara region. Despite such efforts, still some members maintained their commitment to indigenous religion. They continue to visit sacred sites such as Ogepecha and celebrate annual indigenous religious festivals, such as *Chisite*. A 45 years old woman and a member of Ogepecha St. George Church reflected her observation in this regard: “Even after all these efforts, there are some Orthodox Christians who did not stop visiting sacred sites, offering sacrifices, and calling out *Bozhe* and *Waq*.” Ethnographic interviews with elderly and some adult Orthodox Christians confirm this. A man in his early 60s stated that he is an Orthodox Christian but also believes in *Waq*. He expressed his point of view as follows: “Our church leaders told us to deny *Waq* and *Bozhe*. They do not exist and it is wrong to believe in and worship them. They also told us to stop participating in festivals like *Chisite*. Whatever they say and do, I can’t abandon *Waq*, the god and protector of my forefathers” (26 July, 2022).

Thus, the deconstruction of indigenous religion from the local people and the attempt to inculcate the teachings of Orthodox Christianity encountered some challenges. There are still nominal Christians in the Church who are only half-heartedly committed to Orthodox Christianity. This led to other rigorous activities of the reformists.

6.4. Deconstructing Ogepecha and The Resistance

The rigorous activities of the reformist group in the Orthodox Church resulted in tremendous changes in the religious landscape of the study area. It aggravates a conflicting and competitive situation between Orthodox Christians and Protestants. The competitive phenomena have culminated in controlling and deconstructing indigenous sacred sites. Deconstructing the physical sacred sites became the main stage of conflict and competition between the two parties. One of these sites facing threat and transformation in Cheha is Ogepecha. For centuries, the site was an important center of worship for indigenous religious followers. Besides, it has been a rallying point for *Sebet-bet* Gurage, especially *Oget’s* annual festival of *Chisite*. Along with performing religious rituals, the attendants have been discussing socio-cultural, political, and economic issues pertaining to their villages and kinsmen living in different areas. *Chisite* has been celebrated during the beginning of harvest in the month of *Tsere* (January). It marks the beginning of new hope, a new harvest, and a new life.

Orthodox Christians and Protestants have been competing to construct their own churches at these sacred site of Ogepecha. However, the former succeeded in building St. George Church in 2019. Different reasons are given by Orthodox Christians why they wanted to build a church on Ogepecha which they formerly considered as “demonic” and “unholy” ground. One of the leaders of Ogepecha St. George Church, aged 44 and now a coordinator of church construction said:

The control of such an area is very important for our struggle to survive with Orthodox Christianity. Building a church here in Ogepecha has several advantages for our religion. If such sites are replaced by

churches and the temples of the native religion are destroyed, some of our members who still have a connection to *Waq* will have no choice but to break with *Waq*. In this way, we can make such people “pure” and strong Orthodox Christians. For other reasons, it also helps to demoralize the Protestants who had plans to build their own church on this site (25 June, 2022).

Reformist Orthodox Christians assume that indigenous religious adherents will have no choice but to sever ties with the native religion if the holy sites are replaced with churches. They believe that the physical destruction of holy sites will eradicate *Waq* from the hearts of nominal Orthodox Christians and believers of indigenous religion will also convert to Orthodox Christianity. Moreover, building a church over such sites has powerful symbolic meaning in the religious competition between Protestants and Orthodox Christians. The side that succeeds in building churches over such important sites would have psychological and moral advantages. The victorious side will claim that their “God” accomplished this. This will then be used to convince new converts and keep members in their respective churches. It seems that economic reasons also play important roles in aggravating the competition between the two churches. Since most of the sacred sites of indigenous religion are surrounded by dense natural forest, controlling such sites enables the monopolization of these resources. As a 40 years old Orthodox informant reported “When we planned to construct St. George Church here in Ogepecha, we were also looking to control its resources. Our motive was not simply getting a plot of land, but also its dense forest. As you can see the area is endowed with important natural trees. We are now using these trees in building our church” (25 June, 2022).

When the Orthodox Christians started building churches in Ogepecha, they encountered opposition from various groups. According to informants, there was strong opposition not only from rival Protestant groups but also from nominal Orthodox Christians and followers of the indigenous religion who were committed to preserving the sacred sites. They tried their best to prevent the construction of the church in and around Ogepecha. A 48-years-old *Waq* believer, who also professes Orthodox Christianity, had the following to say about this situation:

I was against the plan of the Orthodox to build a church over this *Adebar* (*Sacred*). Some of us who live in Ogepecha and others from the surrounding *kebeles* tried to prevent the land grant and the building of the church. Our fathers taught us that *Waq* protected his people and his land from attack. I continue to believe in *Waq* and have always participated in *Chisite*. Ogepecha is not only our religious center, but also our history, and our identity is embedded in it. Unfortunately, despite our efforts, we could not stop the destruction of Ogepecha because the Orthodox were supported by government officials and the youth group (21 April, 2022).

As other interviews and conversations and the above verbatim quotes reveal, the defenders of sacred sites failed to stop the building of the Church. The Orthodox Christians managed to suppress the opposition as they were well-organized and financially powerful.

Protestants opposed the construction of the Orthodox Church in Ogepecha for two main reasons. First, they were dissatisfied with what they called the ‘unfair treatment’ they received from the local government, which had failed to grant them land for their church. In contrast, the government promptly responded to the requests of the Orthodox Christians. Second, Protestants were concerned about the potential impact of the Orthodox Church's presence on their own community. They feared that it would hinder the conversion of indigenous believers to Protestant Christianity and lead to a stronger commitment to Orthodox Christianity, potentially affecting the growth and activities of Protestantism.

Orthodox Christians built St. George Church in Ogepecha in 2019 with the support of government officials and fellow Orthodox Christians from outside the Gurage Zone. Having secured the construction of a church in parts of Ogepecha, they are now working to overwhelm the entire area. The project envisions controlling all of Ogepecha step by step and systematically transforming the sacred site into a monastery. Originally, only the construction of a church in Ogepecha was planned. To achieve this, the sanctuaries of the native religion in Ogepecha are now under destruction. The reformists burned the temples, as reported by adherents of indigenous religion. In support of this statement, a 40 years-old-man and a follower of indigenous religion reported, “young Orthodox Christians who came from Addis Ababa to participate in the annual celebration of St. George church here in Ogepecha burned the *Yewaq Zeger* (*Waq's Temple*). This happened in February 2019 at night time. They did this with the intention of controlling the entire area and establishing a monastery” (March 3, 2022).

The replacement of the sacred sites in Ogepecha with St. George Church brings about a significant change in the physical space and its meaning, with profound implications for the spiritual, social, and cultural aspects of the community. The expropriation of the sacred sites poses challenges to followers of indigenous religion and nominal Orthodox Christians, who can no longer openly practice their rituals and offerings. As a result, they face uncertainty and the loss of designated spaces for religious activities.



Fig 4: Burnt *Waq Zeger* (temple) in Ogepecha
Source: Fieldwork data, 14 February, 2022

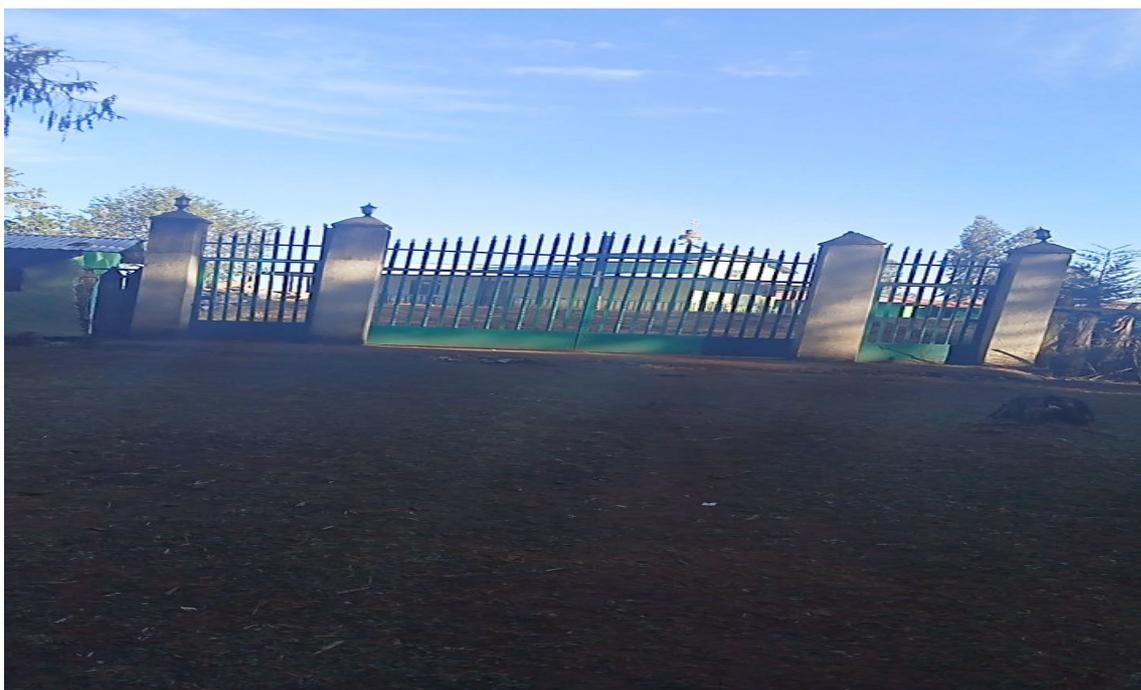


Fig.5: St. George Church at Ogepecha, built in on one side of Ogepecha
Source: Fieldwork data, 10 January, 2022

6.5. New Discourses and Cultural Resilience

The reformist approach of the Orthodox Christians in Cheha has both successes and failures. One success is that they have built many churches and reached out to their members in their immediate neighborhood. As a result, they have succeeded in containing the rapid spread of Protestantism. A failure is that they have not been able to completely dissolve the commitment of nominal Christians to the indigenous religion. Since indigenous religion is intertwined with all aspects of the local population, the project of disengaging native religious converts or continuous return to indigenous religious practices has not become an easy task. Despite all the efforts, the reformists do not overcome the challenge of having nominal Christians. Although the physical deconstruction of the sacred site is successful in some ways, it is not easy to erase the deities from the hearts of the locals.

Complementing this, a 32 years-old adult female Orthodox Christian living in Ogepecha said:

Erasing *Waq*, *Boze*, and *Demuamit* from the hearts of local people is very difficult. Their connection to these deities is so strong that they want to persist with them. They look like Orthodox Christians when they come to our church, but they profess *Waq* and *Boze* when they return to their homes. During the day, they appear as Orthodox Christians, but at night they practice many elements related to *Waq* and *Bozhe*. They claim to be Orthodox Christians, but they are afraid to call *Waq* and *Bozhe* as *Shatan* (demon) (13 May, 2022).

Return to elements of indigenous religion is prevalent among some Protestants too. Though Protestants from the very beginning labeled and declared indigenous religious beliefs and practices as wrong, some indigenous believers converted to Protestantism maintain elements of indigenous religion. A Pastor serving ministering at Kale Hiwot church in Yebederia, around Ogepecha said: "Most of our members are not participating in the rituals and festivals of *Waq* and *Bozhe*. But we identified that there are some women and men who are visiting sacred sites and have some conviction to *Waq* and *Bozhe*. They are afraid to boldly declare that *Waq* and *Bozhe* are *shatan* (demons). There are also some people who still swear in the name of *Waq* and *Bozhe*". Similar results exist in different contexts in southern Ethiopia and other parts of the world (see for example Braukämper, 1992; Akmel and Kishan, 2016; Gemechu, 2013; Charles, 2010; and Wright, 2012).

Data gathered through ethnographic conversations with attendants of the *Chisite* festival in 2022 at Ogepecha reveal similar results of commitment to indigenous religion. One young male who is in his early 30s said: "I believe in *Waq* and *Bozhe*. They are worshiped by our forefathers. Belief in these gods existed for centuries. I do not accept that our forefathers were wrong as followers of Christianity told us." Another informant in his late 40s living in Ogepecha responds to the question why he is participating in *Chisite* festival while being an Orthodox Christian in the following way:

I cannot repudiate *Waq*, my protector, whom I have worshipped all my life. He is the protector and winner of all wars in Cheha. I have decided to continue worshipping *Waq* who descended from our distant ancestors. Protestantism and Orthodox are not native to our area. I know that my father and ancestors worshipped *Waq*. With *Waq* we are told that our ancestors had a greater past, peace, order and respect for each other. I grew up watching and participating in the beautiful festival of *Chisite*. I remember the joy, love, and respect among all the Gurages who gathered for this festival. Such occasions do not exist in modern times. Everything has been distorted by modernization and the arrival of new religions" (13 May, 2022).

As the above quotes show, the indigenous religion in Cheha manifests a silent feature of resilience. There exist Christians who are returning to the practice of indigenous religion. There are Christians who reject that indigenous religion is wrong. They still believe that *Waq* and *Bozhe* exist and influence their daily life.

This became a challenge to EOTC. The reformists wanted to break this persistence. Eventually, they began to formulate new discourses including associating the Orthodox Church with deities of indigenous religion. In search of a sense of indignity, they associated St. George with *Waq* and St. Aresama with *Demamuit*. The emergence of such an association is not random. As the *Waq* is a warrior god, St. George is also considered by Orthodox Christians as a warrior saint. Orthodox Christians argue that such an effort of contextualizing Orthodox Christianity would have been more effective in the earlier stage of its expansion than today. They argued that, if this effort of indigenization had been applied from the very advent of Orthodox Christianity, it would have prevented the conversion of many adherents of indigenous religion and Orthodox Christians to Protestantism. One young female EOTC member commented, "If the church used such a strategy from the beginning, it would have prevented the conversion of many Orthodox Christians to Protestantism. The apostle Paul tried to present *Goita* (God) to the Greeks in a simple way, rather than imposing new ideas about *Goita* (God) on them. It is better to respect and understand the culture of the local people. People are always against what goes against their culture." (15 May, 2022)

The effort to create association and indigenization of Orthodox Christianity is not as successful as expected by the reformists. It rather creates confusion and paradox. The reformists viewed it as the easiest way to break the connection of indigenous religion. Now the local people began to ask a challenging question to these new discourses of the reformist group. A 53 years old farmer who is a follower of indigenous religion, commented the following by resisting the new discourse:

Why do the Orthodox Christians demolish our *Waq* temples if St. George means *Waq*? Why don't they give the name *Waq* to St. George? It is *Waq*, not St. George that is indigenous to our land. St. George was introduced to our area only recently. I have very little knowledge of St. George. But I grew up with the lived experience of *Waq*. I remember times when *Waq* intervened in various disasters. If Orthodox Christianity is indigenous to our region, why don't they preach to us in our native language? Most of the church services are held in Amharic and Geez. Such an association makes no sense but only creates confusion among us. Equating *Waq* with St. George is wrong. *Waq* is superior to St. George. We know the reason why the Orthodox Christians developed such ideas. Simply to convince us to stop worshipping

Waq and to stop calling the name *Waq*. I will never stop believing and calling *Waq* (15 May, 2022).

The new discourses are not successful in the search for the indigenization of Orthodox Christianity in Cheha. It seems too late to achieve their goals. In practice, despite the equation of *Waq* with St. George, no efforts are made to convince the local people. There are people who attend services without clearly understanding what the priests are preaching. Virtually all priests of the Orthodox Churches do not speak Guragegna language and preach in Amharic and Ge'ez (Liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox church). Although most locals are bilingual, speaking Guragegna and Amharic, they are completely unfamiliar with the Ge'ez language. In contrast, prayers, rituals, and ceremonies of indigenous religion are conducted in their mother tongue, i.e., Guragegna. The experts in indigenous religion are found among the local population. This is one of the main reasons for the survival of indigenous religions. A young female (27) Orthodox follower claims that:

We have made little effort from the beginning to contextualize Orthodox Christianity in our locality. I think that there would have been better results if we had translated the Bible into the Guragegna language if we had had preachers from the local population and had held services in Guragegna. One reason for the rapid spread of Protestantism in our region is that they paid attention to these important contexts. They preached in the local language, they have the Guragegna Bible, and services are held in Guragegna. But in our Orthodox Church, it is different. Everything is taken out of the context of the local people. I think we are too late to contextualize our religion. This has made *welaweye* (nominal Christians), who have little understanding of Orthodox Christianity, reluctant to abandon the local religion (23 April, 2022).

Neither deconstruction nor association achieved the expected results. Reformists underestimated and failed to understand that indigenous belief systems are deeply rooted in the hearts of the local people. Committed individuals struggling to ensure the continuity of indigenous religion. A 24-year-old informant said, "Since St. George Church is built in the sacred site of *Waq*, spiritually, the nominal Christians are connected to *Waq* and his spirit than to St. George." This is because they built the church without clearing the forest. Since the local converts believe that the spirit of *Waq* resides in the groves, they feel the presence of *Waq's* spirit more than that of St. George. A 40-year-old informant who lives in Ogepecha said: "Being in Ogepecha evokes a special atmosphere that immediately connects to the past and the spirit. I feel as connected to my ancestors and *Waq*. Whenever I come to this St. George church, I also visit the burned temples of *Waq*. I pray to *Waq* for forgiveness and for help with my life problems. It gives me more confidence to pray to *Waq* than to St. George." (20 June, 2022)

Another 63-year-old informant described his attachment to the sacred sites of Ogepecha as follows: "When I walk through the sacred site of Ogepecha, I remember my ancestors and the glorious past. I still visit this sacred site at least once a week. Being here gives me a sense of identity, takes me back in time, and connects me to my ancestors. It brings me to a state of peace and security".

The resilience of indigenous religion, despite the challenges and changes it has faced over time, is a testament to the enduring strength and importance of these indigenous traditions. The local communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience by practicing their religious beliefs in the face of the replacement of sacred sites with churches. One factor contributing to the resilience of indigenous religion is its deep-rooted connection to the cultural identity and sense of belonging. Indigenous religious beliefs and practices form an integral part of the cultural fabric, shaping the worldview, values, and rituals of the community. They are intertwined with the land, ancestors, and natural world, fostering a profound sense of connection and continuity. The resilience of indigenous religion can be attributed to the efforts of the local communities to adapt their practices within the changing social and religious landscapes. These acts of subtle resistance and adaptation have allowed local communities to continue practicing their religious beliefs while navigating the challenges posed by external influences.

Conclusion

The replacement of sacred sites with churches has symbolic power and signifies the dominance of one religious tradition over the other. This has profound implications for the communities affected, as their spiritual beliefs, cultural practices, and sense of identity are undermined. The expropriation of sacred sites impedes the open practice of indigenous religious rituals and offerings. The deconstruction of indigenous sacred sites and replacement with churches in Ogepecha is externally led and influenced by Gurage migrants. The involvement and influence of Gurage migrants in their places of origin is now highly evident in the religious aspect. It led to a competitive environment and tension between two denominations of Christianity with significant ramification for indigenous religion and its sacred sites. The loss of sacred sites leads to the erosion or loss of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and affects the collective memory and identity of the community. In addition, the exchange process disrupts spiritual connections and can lead to a sense of rootlessness and loss. Despite these challenges, local communities in Ogepecha show resistance, adaptation, and resilience in maintaining their spiritual practices and preserving their cultural heritage, although power dynamics often hinder their efforts.

The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of indigenous religion in Cheha Gurage fit with the perspective of postmodernism theory. Since people link indigenous religion with their ancestral religion which gives them a sense of identity and considers other cultures and religions "external", some of the notions of SIT are

cognizant of this reality. The resilience of indigenous religion is explained in its association with ancestors as people strive searching for identity and meaning.

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