

The Ark of the Covenant

The Tabot, in the Ethiopian Orthodox and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, is a sacred object representing the Ark of the Covenant and signifies God's presence. The term "Tabot" can refer to an inscribed altar tablet, the chest containing this tablet, or both elements together. These tablets, typically square and made from materials such as alabaster, marble, or acacia wood, are inscribed with the names of Jesus and the dedicated saint. Edward Ullendorff, a scholar, noted the Tabot's derivation from Aramaic and Hebrew, highlighting its profound connection with Old Testament worship traditions.

The consecration of a Tabot, rather than the church building, is essential for the liturgical life of the church, underscoring its significance in worship. Kept in the church's Holy of Holies, the Tabot is accessible only to the clergy and is veiled from public view, emphasizing its sanctity. The Eucharist is administered from the Tabot, and during major church festivals like Timket (Epiphany), it is carried in processions, echoing biblical traditions of venerating the Ark of the Covenant.

Notably, historical incidents involving the looting of Tabots by British soldiers during the 1868 Expedition to Abyssinia have left a lasting impact, with the repatriation of these sacred items being a source of national pride and joy in Ethiopia. The return of looted Tabots from abroad, including instances in the early 2000s and discussions for future repatriations, highlights ongoing efforts to reconcile past injustices and restore Ethiopia's cultural heritage.