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## TERRAIN/FIELDWORK: GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LOCAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

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TERRAIN/FIELDWORK

**Gender and Development through Local Epistemologies:**

**Exploring the Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Spousal Abuse Attitudes among Orthodox Tawahədo Christians in Northern Ethiopia and Implications for Changing Attitudes and Norms within Local Worldviews**

**by Romina Istratii**

*Romina Istratii, a current PhD research student at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, presents her recently completed fieldwork among the Orthodox Tawahədo community of Aksum (Northern Tigray) that was supported by a grant from the CFEF in 2017 and by a SYLFF Research Abroad grant by the Tokyo Foundation, Japan.*

*This fieldwork focused on exploring local men's, women's and clergy's perceptions and understandings of spousal abuse in juxtaposition to: a) a theology-informed analysis of Church teachings concerning the metaphysics of gender relations, marriage and spousal abuse, and b) an analysis of culture-specific gender ideals and norms. This research has been motivated by the aim to identify local mechanisms and resources for changing attitudes that sustain spousal abuse and, especially, the relevance and feasibility of theology-informed and clergy-centred solutions. Ms Istratii presents here an overview of the project and fieldwork, contextualising it in the relevant literatures and the rationale for its epistemological and methodological innovations. While early to reach any conclusions, some research findings are delineated in ways that suggest intricate, multifarious realities on the ground and the need for multidimensional approaches to normative change.*

Inside the historical church  
of Mariam Şeyon(ጳጵጵ)in Aksum



## Overview of the project and research question

The northern region of Tigray in Ethiopia is closely associated with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo faith, with more than 95 percent of its population affirming membership. [i] This faith is premised on a theological tradition that propounds apostolic teachings of salvation through acts of love for others and self-humiliation. Tigray, furthermore, is known for serving as the headquarters of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) during the Ethiopian Civil War (1974 and 1991), in which women were empowered to fight along with men, what many consider to have brought important improvements at the gender front.[ii] Tigray then is an interesting place that combines archaic Christian Orthodox heritage with a revolutionary social history. And yet, in this region and across the country spousal abuse continues to be

commonplace, with previous national demographic and health surveys finding high percentages of men and women justifying wife-hitting.[iii] Both the 'normalcy' of spousal abuse and the attitudes of justification are *prima facie* curious when juxtaposed to the apostolic and patristic theology of the Church. Limited qualitative data from Ethiopia and Tigray suggest that cultural beliefs, inflected with vernacular religious and gender discourse, underpin spousal abuse attitudes in complex ways, but no attempt has been made yet to explore this intersection so as to make sense of existing attitudes in their context.[iv]

In response to this lacuna, I have aimed to investigate how Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo laypeople (men and women) and clergy in the cultural context of Aksum, where Orthodox Christianity emerged in the fourth century, think about spousal abuse in relation to the local religious tradition, culture-specific gender understandings and norms and individual experience of faith and gender in order to understand how the attitudes reported in the demographic surveys can be made sense of. My objective for this project has been to start identifying part of the mechanism that sustains and explains such attitudes and to explore what sorts of resources exist locally that could be leveraged in efforts to change pernicious attitudes working within the local cosmology.

It is important to clarify that although the terms 'conjugal/spousal' (*yä tedar/nay hadar*) are used, this research was a broader study of abuse in the intimate relationship. Studies from Ethiopia have pointed to the existence of various forms of intimate cohabitation, many of them temporary, irregular, or even initiated by force,<sup>[v]</sup> which seem to have been considered equivalent to a marriage relationship. Similarly, while a principal concern was to understand the effect of the vernacular religious tradition on married life, I did not limit my investigations to Church marriages alone, as this would be equivalent to assuming that the religious cosmology is influential or embodied by believers within these types of marriages only.

## Project motivations and conceptual directions

This project reflects my experience working in gender and development research and practice and the corollary aim to overcome generic frameworks of analysis and methodologies in cross-cultural gender-related work, prioritising local epistemological and knowledge systems. Previous projects I completed in various communities of African societies made evident to me that non-western/non-secular frameworks of conceiving the world and organising social life have often been disregarded in mainstream gender and development, with preconceived theoretical frameworks being prioritised or favoured. In a recently published article addressing gender and development scholars and practitioners<sup>[vi]</sup> I observed that mainstream gender theories and analytical frameworks have emanated primarily from secular epistemology, as they have been invented and reinvented through a secular logic that prevails in credible academic circles. Most local practitioners are informed by these mainstream theories and analytical frameworks and employ them locally, which often results in western/secular gender metaphysics (paradigm understandings about gender) being superimposed on local realities, biasing or misleading research. Solutions designed on knowledge gathered and analysed through such frameworks may be ultimately irrelevant to local populations or even cause their objections if perceived to be secular/western and foreign to their society. My aspiration has been to contribute toward outlining a new approach to gender analysis in the cross-cultural context that is based on reconstructing and analysing gender realities and subjectivities on the basis of local gender metaphysics that is more empathetic to local people's beliefs and values. I submit that such a cosmology-specific gender science is necessary for understanding subjectivities, relations and norms in their fuller complexity, which may reveal why problems such as spousal abuse exist and continue. Such understanding is essential before any attempt is made to address the problem and should dictate entry points and change strategies.

Closely related to this first motivation is my second objective to contribute to contemporary gender theorisation by refining current understandings of the subject, agency and power. As I submitted earlier, mainstream gender theories have been premised for the most part in an epistemological framework that has not been sensitive to how religious beliefs and conviction in a spiritual dimension of existence influence gender subjectivities, human attitudes and individual behaviours. For the most part gender has been conceived in reference to science (medicine, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology), and (secular) philosophical syllogism, with other metaphysical domains, including religious beliefs and theological hermeneutics, being widely ignored. In addition, conventionally, gender was theorised in relation to sex, resulting in a number of unhelpful dichotomies, such as that of mind/body, culture/nature, or reason/emotion.<sup>[vii]</sup> And while post-structuralist theorisations of gender that have overcome the historical gender/sex dichotomy have been increasingly mainstreamed,<sup>[viii]</sup> this has not necessarily overcome metaphysical

assumptions about the self that emanate from an inherently secular epistemology. In effect, gender theorists have yet to locate gender formation simultaneously within the multidimensionality of human existence, which includes not only the biological, mental/psychical and physical realms, but also the spiritual dimension and experience. This may be especially apposite, if not essential, for understanding gender subjectivities, the enactment of agency and the boundaries of power among individuals who espouse religio-cultural cosmologies.

This project is additionally motivated by the aspiration to better attune domestic violence research to non-secular cosmological frameworks and the multidimensionality of human existence. Existing theories and paradigms offer a variety of tools and ways to think about spousal violence, and contingent to discipline they emphasise to differing degrees psychological and subjective factors, family parameters, systemic forces and situational variables.<sup>[ix]</sup> The field appears to favour primarily family studies and feminist schools of thought, which have been defined for the most part by a controversial relationship. 'Gender violence' theories are popular in development studies, but in effect, they fall under the feminist paradigm, albeit with variable differentiations.<sup>[x]</sup> While I recognise the contribution that each paradigm aims to make in the analysis and understanding of domestic violence, existing theories of domestic violence have not been integrated as effectively as they could be,<sup>[xi]</sup> and that each has been broadly oblivious to religious beliefs and spirituality in their respective theorisations, including the ways in which faith-based understandings and spiritual experience intersect with gender ideals and norms to affect gender subjectivities and individual attitudes and behaviours within intimate relationships.<sup>[xii]</sup> It is also a notable limitation that within both leading approaches scholars have tended to use as analytical lens preconceived definitions, typologies and aetiologies of domestic violence, focusing exclusively on the categories of 'perpetrators' and 'victims.' Studies taking an ethnographic approach to the investigation of spousal abuse among men and women relationally in reference to wider cosmological frameworks have been rare.<sup>[xiii]</sup> In this project, therefore, I took an exploratory approach and investigated how the local population conceived and articulated abuse in the couple, what acts and which gender they associated abusive behaviour with and how they explained/rationalised it, in addition to investigating individual attitudes and behaviours in married life informed by local and religio-cultural gender norms.

Finally, this project aims to solidify a more empathetic approach to the analysis of foreign religio-cultural cosmologies within the field of gender and religion and a theology-informed analytical approach within religious studies. Many gender and religion(s) scholars, influenced by some type of feminist theory, tend to preconceive the religious traditions they describe (especially those of a Christian theology) as patriarchal, thus often treating them acontextually and ahistorically.<sup>[xiv]</sup> As an Eastern Orthodox believer socialised in an Eastern religio-cultural cosmology not native to the West, I have argued that each theological tradition evolved, manifested and perpetuated differently in its distinct context and that the sexism that is often associated with western forms of Christianity should not be transposed cross-culturally. Feminist theory cannot reveal how non-western traditions have shaped and affected (or been affected by) gender subjectivities and norms, which can be achieved only with context-specific, history- and cosmology-informed empirical research located in the articulations of local religious teachers and representatives and resident believers. Echoing a number of other scholars,<sup>[xv]</sup> in this project I have been conscious to separate gender-sensitive analysis from feminist politics so as to achieve the outmost exploratory degree in the study of spousal abuse in this indigenous Christian cosmology. My priority has been to explore the local tradition holistically suspending assumptions and relying on the insiders' explanations and embodiment of the tradition, clergy and laypeople alike. I also placed primary importance in understanding the theology of the Church through a close investigation of Canonical books, other texts and also oral explanations of theologians and clergy. This decision reflected the very nature of Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo faith, which aims to guide and redefine by its teachings human conduct and human relations, suggesting the need to consider religious standards of morality as a reference point for analysing individual understandings and expectations, attitudes and behaviours on the ground, including the intimate relationship.

## Methodology and research methods

Toward contextualising spousal abuse attitudes within the local religio-cultural and gender cosmology I proposed four sub-questions to guide my investigations, expressed as follows:

1. What are the official positions and pronouncements of the Church on relations, conjugal relations and spousal abuse and how may they intersect with cultural/vernacular understandings and normative practices about the same?
2. What are socio-cultural ideals and expectations in regards to conjugal relations and spousal abuse and how may these be gendered?
3. How do local priests and other clergy speak about spousal abuse and what pastoral advice do they offer to believers about married life, and how do these relate to the Church's nominal teachings and culture-specific gender understandings and norms?
4. How do ordinary men and women understand and think about married life and spousal abuse, and how do religious and gender norms and spiritual experience reflect on their attitudes?

Questions a) and c) aimed to clarify the nominal Church teachings concerning married life and spousal abuse and the discourses and practices of clergy about the same, and to identify their relationship to wider culture-specific gender and marriage understandings and norms. Question b) aimed to establish the beliefs and standards in the local society underpinning marriage, the spousal relationship and abusive behaviour, so as to ultimately identify their gender implications and linkages with religious cosmology, defined at the level of both theology and lived faith. Question d) aimed to flesh out pragmatic conceptualizations and interpretations of married life and spousal abuse as expressed by ordinary men and women in order to establish how religious and gender parameters in their socialisation and faith experience influence individual mentalities.

A question that guided the choice of a methodology was: how can a suspension of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions and theoretical frameworks be achieved by a researcher who has been conditioned at least to some extent by a specific religio-cultural socialisation and is thus entrenched within a certain epistemological framework (likely different than that of the research community), but who is also enmeshed in knowledge-making processes that place more authority in the hands of the researcher than in the hands of research participants? As multidimensional human entities we are driven by personal convictions, memories, intuitions and emotions. We are therefore biased by default of living in our bodies. My proposition was that as a counterpoise it would be necessary to remain as much as possible attuned to the research participants' articulations at all stages of research, especially at the level of defining concepts and language to describe participants' worldviews and life situations in relation to the researched themes. This pointed to the need for employing ethnography as the main methodological approach of this project.

When conducting ethnographic research, subjectivities cannot be overcome, however, more epistemological power can be given to the participants so that the final representations reflect local worldviews more faithfully, while making evident what twists and turns the researcher made in the weaving of the fabric. As this was a gender and development-oriented project, it felt apposite to combine development methodologies that emerged as a result of efforts within development to limit practitioner power and circumvent conventional patronising attitudes, this time in order to reduce the epistemological authority of the researcher and to enable research participants to define their cosmologies and social conditions in their own terminology. In particular, I employed dialogical workshops, which was an innovative method that I developed as an MA Gender and Development student at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, to conduct a religio-sensitive analysis of gender realities in a Muslim community in Senegal.[xvi]

Participating in and observing local life (living with local families, engaging in religious activities, holding casual conversations, taking descriptive and contemplative notes, etc.), conducting interviews (impromptu individual or group interviews, formal and recorded life-based interviews) and holding dialogical workshops with different segments of society provided the main methods for this study. Participating and observing familiarised me with the local language, gender norms and the religio-cultural cosmology as everyday practices and widespread beliefs. The interviews offered the platform for more personal and reflective discussions with men, women and clergy that were essential for exploring conceptualisations and interpretations of spousal abuse in conjunction to their understandings, socialisation and embodied faith. The dialogical workshops were used to tease out nominal ideas about the genders, conjugal life and problems affecting the intimate relationships (including abuse) in a more interactive manner with different people in a variety of social configurations, and provided also a platform for group analysis at a later research stage. The workshops were held with diverse groups and in diverse contexts also in order to explore how internal power dynamics and social context influenced people's articulations and descriptions/understanding of societal norms and rules. Juxtaposing the workshop findings to the insights obtained through life-based interviews was expected to offer a better understanding of the informal norms that governed the local society and human behaviour in regards to the areas of research, how people privately thought about these norms and responded to them and how, in fact, they lived within the private realm, especially in embodying religious beliefs. An effort was made to embed the workshops in the cultural practice of the coffee ceremony.

In general, my aim in employing all methods was to capture as much diversity and depth of thought as possible to discover both areas of agreement and coherence and points of tension and differentiation related to the research themes. My primary criterion for knowing when I reached saturation was whether I felt that I had captured multiple articulations, views and perspectives that resulted in a complex picture of the researched topics within each segment of society and the Church.

## **Research trajectory and fieldwork**

A provisional analysis of the local theological tradition grounded in main Canonical books, publications by the Ethiopian Tāwahədo Church and individual works of local theologians and religious historians was completed during a year of desk review at SOAS. This was accompanied by extensive literature reviews on: a) spousal abuse studies in Ethiopia and Tigray, b) domestic violence theories and empirical studies from Ethiopia and Africa, c) gender and religion studies from Ethiopia and internationally, and d) gender theoretical literature. The desk review was followed by 13 months of fieldwork, at first stage, with the same faith community in London, and the rest of the time, in Ethiopia's historical area of Aksum. Fieldwork research was planned to extend over a year in Tigray, however, the critical political situation in Ethiopia in September 2016 made it impossible to obtain a research visa from the Ethiopian government and adjustments were made to start the research with the Ethiopian diaspora community in London. For the three months that were needed to secure entry permission, I interacted with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo diaspora in different London churches to explore their views on gender, marriage and spousal abuse and to become exposed to the vernacular religious tradition. While this work deviated from my primary concern to understand attitudes of spousal violence in the traditional society, it added important insights because most interviewees had been socialised in Ethiopia, with many coming from rural areas, and could therefore articulate better local attitudes and norms using comparative language from their new socio-cultural locus in London.

On 4 December 2016 I finally arrived to Ethiopia. I spent the first two months in Addis Ababa to explore in more detail the local theological tradition through conversations with deans and teachers at the modern theological colleges and the situation of domestic violence in the country in consultation with gender violence experts and organisations doing gender-related work in the country, before moving to Meqele to interview more theologians and then again to Aksum to start my long-term investigations. The total amount of time spent in Ethiopia was 10 months, with six months spent in Aksum. The substantive amount of fieldwork took place in two village communities in the countryside of Aksum. These two communities were selected after consulting about the situation of domestic violence with local administrators, priests, health workers and

women's associations' secretaries at the nearest rural communities around the city of Aksum. About two months were also spent in the city to obtain a better insight into patterns of change in relation to my research topics, which were made evident in the rural context, but were more discernible and easy to articulate in the urban context. This provided me with ample opportunities to directly observe individual behaviours and lifestyles in multiple contexts and to discuss my research findings from the countryside with urban populations and vice versa.

During most of my fieldwork, I lived in the first of the two villages, visiting regularly the other to hold interviews with clergy, men and women or to organise workshops. I was fortunate to have rented a room in the compound of a well-connected woman who worked at the local seed house and whose husband had left to work in another city. On non-work days, this woman braided hair and this meant that she had regular visits from female clients from all over the village. This provided me with ample opportunities to talk to women with diverse social, education and marital backgrounds and to explore my research questions in a comfortable, gender-exclusive context. I found the coffee ceremony to be an invaluable tool for creating time for personal conversations and I made it a priority to master it and to boil coffee for my visitors and many other visitors who arrived to the house of my landlady and whom I met for the first time. I recollect days when I boiled coffee two or three times, which means that about six hours of my day were dedicated to drinking coffee and chatting with different individuals. I also gradually started to build relations with neighbours, steadily moving into interviews with men. In parallel, participation in local religious gatherings (*mahbärs*), Sunday liturgies, as well as regular visits to local churches and monasteries and the Church administrative office in Aksum offered the opportunity to meet and talk to clergy, monks and teachers of the faith. There is no room for elaboration here, but it should be clear that recruitment was pursued in multiple ways according to the research context, the method of research and the gender of research participants in view of ethical and safety concerns that arise in cross-cultural anthropological and domestic violence research.

While it is not possible to give concrete numbers of personal interviews held in the field in the 13 months, it should be mentioned that I managed to hold more interviews with women than with men, although the latter were substantive and diverse in terms of interviewees' social status, employment type, marital status, educational level, exposure to foreign gender ideals, income level, personal character and temperament and other differentials. I also could not interview as many priests as I wanted because they could not always be found in the church premises. Six workshops were held in total with men and women separately, one in each village, and female and male members of the Sunday School Department of the Church, the *Mahäbärä Qädusan*, in Aksum city.



The coffee ceremony  
as invaluable communication tool



The researcher in conversation with one monk  
at a monastery in the countryside of Aksum (*consent granted*)

### A broad delineation of findings

The analysis of collected data, observations and interviews is currently on-going and will be completed over the next year at SOAS. Perhaps a few rough directions can be delineated in terms of the four research questions that guided the investigations on the ground.

The first question concerned the content of Church theology in regards to gender relations, marriage and spousal abuse and the relationship to culture-specific understandings and norms about the same. It is not possible to do justice to the complex picture that emerged from the historical, theological and ethnographic analysis, but it can be stated that theological teachings concerning the metaphysics of gender, marriage and the spousal relationship have been generally positive and have been known by the most learned segments of the Church. However, as a result of the religious tradition having emerged and evolved in a strong Hebraic cultural context and having developed interactively with multiple socio-historical fermentations that disturbed and weakened the Church, the latter absorbed variegated elements that cannot be associated with a

standardised and centralised theology, which means that some of its positions have been less evident or even ambiguous. This may have created the room for clergy practices that are not in line with Church Canon and regulations, especially concerning marriage (see below).

The second question aimed to clarify societal norms around marriage, married life and spousal abuse, their gendered underpinnings and their relationship to religious cosmology. Again, it is impossible to describe here the subtle picture that emerged from the fieldwork, however, it became clear that expectations concerning spousal behaviour and responsibilities were gendered, reflecting a deeply gender-segregated society and culture. This normative gender framework determined largely the forms of spousal abuse in the local society, underpinned individual rationalisations of spousal abuse and shaped traditional approaches to dealing with spousal abuse when this occurred. While in their *articulations* both clergy and laypeople recognised clear differences between traditional/cultural gender norms and nominal gender theology (which was presented as egalitarian), in their *attitudes* and *practices* both segments of society blurred such differentiations. In effect, traditional gender ideals and norms seemed to co-exist at a complex feedback relationship with the religious vernacular tradition.

The third question that guided this research aimed to shed light on clergy's articulations and attitudes concerning gender, marriage and spousal abuse and their pastoral activities. The field research revealed that conventionally rural priests, the segment of the clergy that communicated most directly with laypeople and performed sacraments, were unlikely to have training in theological matters for a number of historical, systemic and more personal reasons. While a priest could achieve higher levels of qualification, the majority I encountered were cases of people who had trained and served as deacons for some years, had then married in the Church, before becoming ordained to serve as priests (discontinuing their education). This had implications for how priests practised matrimony, taught about marriage and, ultimately, how they provided pastoral advice in cases of spousal abuse. The teachings of the priests, especially as spiritual fathers, emerged to be standard but positive: they taught love and peace in marriage, the oneness of the couple as one body and the mutual 'tiredness' for the spouses (sharing the work), and condemned spousal abuse as sin. Nonetheless, many factors reduced the impact of such teachings, not least because of most clergy having internalised cultural norms. Some segments were associated with bad practices and some reportedly faced their own married life problems. In addition, while priests devotedly taught against spousal abuse, they asserted to have little effect on abusive individuals, especially men, which could reflect the judgemental language and punitive measures some employed. This seemed to speak of possible weaknesses in pastoral skills, including limited understanding on how to communicate and advise perpetrators and victims in view of environmental, characterological, psychological and social parameters affecting their behaviour. Nonetheless, it is important to note that despite being aware of some priests' shortfalls, the majority of laypeople showed respect for their local religious leaders.

The fourth question aimed to explore marriage practices and attitudes of laypeople concerning gender relations, conjugal life and spousal abuse. As it was expected, laypeople expressed variable definitions and aetiologies of spousal abuse. However, both men and women agreed that most spousal abuse was of a behavioural/psychological and economic nature associated primarily with "naturally" problematic men, the local culture of drinking and materialistic/selfish mentalities. It was also generally agreed that physical violence had decreased significantly in recent years, but some cases did exist occasionally. No man or woman I talked to considered spousal abuse in any form to be acceptable and most asserted that neither "culture" nor "religion" justified spousal abuse. Laypeople were especially conscious of religious teachings that taught against abuse in the couple. Despite these articulations (which were likely influenced by people's consideration of my identity as foreign researcher), observing actual behaviours revealed that gender-specific socialisation and vernacular religious practices combined with more recent environmental changes and personal psychology to sustain gender biases and abusive behaviours in married life. Clergy and laypeople observed alike a weakening of spiritual life and a pursuit of material concerns and desires among all segments of society. Such trends had implications for married life and spousal abuse because they affected how wives and husbands thought about and treated each other and how willing they were to solve their problems when these emerged (especially of an economic nature), instead of opting for the un-Orthodox solution of divorce.

The fieldwork established intricate relationships between nominal theology, clergy teachings and practices and individual attitudes concerning spousal abuse, which will require time to be analysed and described in ways that coherently convey the local intricacies and tensions. This underscores sufficiently how inappropriate and unhelpful mainstream generic gender and development frameworks of analysis would be in this case. While it could be argued at this time that proper training of priests on Church Canon on matrimonial practices and some theological teachings on married life could reverse certain traditional practices and norms perpetuating indirectly contexts in which abusive behaviours thrive, this statement would not be taking into account the diverse factors that mediated the triptych relationship: theology-clergy discourses and practices-laypeople attitudes and behaviours. Among a segment of society that admitted problems in the system and were willing to turn the teachings of the Church into embodied practice, this could have some effect. It emerged, however, that for the majority who postulated strong religious convictions and an egalitarian Church theology on marriage, subtle factors and tensions (cultural, psychological, economic, political, etc.) interfered and stifled their desire for embodied change. In addition, while most priests differentiated between egalitarian gender theology from gender-biased cultural norms, most also seemed to lack the pastoral skills to convey this difference to believers. The broad picture that emerged is one of complexity, which this project can only start to describe, but it is evident that any approaches to motivating positive changes would need to be multidimensional.

[i] FDRE (2008, 111).

[ii] Hammond (1989), Berhane-Selassie (1991), Adugna (2001), Mjaaland (2004), Berhe (2004), Burgess (2013). See also *Civil Code 1960* and Krzeczunowicz (1967).

[iii] See, for example, *EDHS 2005*, *EDHS 2011* and *EDHS 2016*.

[iv] Existing studies of domestic violence from Ethiopia that have included or referred specifically to the region of Tigray include: *EDHS 2005*; *EDHS 2011*; and *EDHS 2016*, Gessesew and Mesfin (2004), Berhane (2005), Kedir and Admasachew (2010), Tsedey (2011), Allen and Raghallaigh (2012; 2013), Malaju and Alene (2013), MoWCYA (2013), Semahegn and Mengistie (2015) and Erulkar (2015). Other studies that were reviewed in the context of this research from other regions in Ethiopia, more theoretical works or reports on gender violence and spousal abuse include: Terefe (1993), Panos Ethiopia and HBF (2002), Jemberu (2003; 2008), IRBC (2011) and Abate et al. (2016). Most of the listed works have been clinical or population studies, or micro-studies with a biomedical or health focus. Only a few have employed qualitative approaches, and the majority have focused almost exclusively on women's experiences of violence (one exception is Jemberu, 2008 which included focus groups with men). What is more problematic is that almost all scholars have tended to presume a feminist or cultural explanation of domestic violence blaming culture or religion, without however demonstrating ethnographically how religio-cultural norms have related to gender norms and then abusive behaviours (e.g. Megeressa, 2002 and Jemberu, 2008, 15-17). While some qualitative studies of domestic violence or gender relations from the region of Tigray suggest a relationship between religious beliefs, cultural gender norms and spousal abuse (e.g. Allen and Raghallaigh, 2012; 2013 and Mjaaland, 2004), no study to my knowledge has been produced that has aimed to locate the experience of conjugal abuse in larger cosmological and cultural frameworks, and especially without assuming *a priori* a definition and theory of domestic violence.

[v] See, for example, Lule (1991) and Pankhurst (1992) who mention the different types of 'marriages' performed in Orthodox Täwahädo societies of Ethiopia. The existence of irregular unions across the country was confirmed in consultations with representatives from the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Associations (EWLA) and domestic violence experts in Addis Ababa. Concerning Tigray specifically, see Buxton (1970, 71). While in fieldwork people did not refer to marriage arrangements with the categories mentioned by Buxton, Lule or Pankhurst, they all asserted that there existed three forms of marriage: civil, cultural/traditional and religious.

[vi] See Istratii (2017).

[vii] See for example, Istratii (2017) and Prokhnovik (2012).

[viii] Such as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity which reconceives 'sex' as a norm perpetuated in normative, oppressive (heteronormative) gender discourses. See Butler (1990; 1993).

[ix] For an overview, see Lawson (2013, 17). While family and feminist paradigms of domestic violence are often blurred, a rough, although arbitrary, typology may be suggested. For the former I would cite: Straus et al. (1980), Dutton (2006), Tolman and Bennett (1990), Holtzworth-Munroe (1997), Gilligan (2004), Mills (2006; 2008) and Askeland and Heir (2014). For the latter I would cite: Dobash et al. (1992), Jukes (1993; 1999), Anderson (2005), Dutton and Nicholls (2005), Dutton and Goodman (2005), García-Moreno et al. (2005), DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz (2007), Jukes (2010), DeKeseredy (2011) and Jakobsen (2014).

[x] See for example, Centre for Women's Global Leadership (1994), Green (1999), Sokoloff and Pratt (2005), Terry and Hoare (2007), Merry (2009), UNFPA (2016) and WHO (2016).

[xi] Exceptions include Anderson (1997) and Heise (1998).

[xii] While frameworks and paradigms have shown this tendency, some exceptional studies that have explored the relationship between gender, religion and domestic violence exist and include Shaikh (2007) and Mardsen (2014).

[xiii] Notable exceptions include Levinson (1989) and McClusky (2001).

[xiv] It is rarely entertained that theological traditions can be in favour of egalitarian gender ideals and norms, or that they are empowering and beneficial in the lives of men and women alike, and even that they can contribute to contain gender inequalities and pernicious attitudes and behaviours among believers. See, for example, Børresen (2009) who speaks of Christian theology as if it were a uniform tradition. Within Ethiopian scholarship a similar tendency is found in Mergassa (2002). See also the comments made by Beattie (2004, 66, 68) which confirm such a tendency. It is also not unusual for writers to rely on feminist critiques of western theological traditions to criticise their own non-western traditions, without considering that the theological traditions of the West evolved in very different political and social conditions than those of their own societies. For this trend I would cite Seneviratne and Currie (2001) and other instances in Juschka (2001).

[xv] See Young (2002), Gross (2004), Beattie (2004) and Mahmood (2005).

[xvi] See Istratii (2015) for a description of this project.

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