

Religious beliefs, human psychology and domestic violence: Some ethnographic insights

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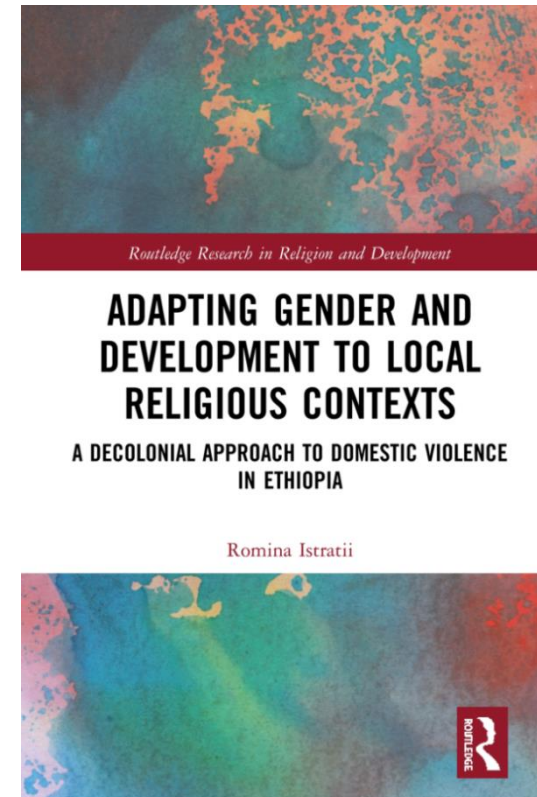
Agenda

- My background
- Motivations / Shortfalls in domestic violence research
 - A skimming of the relevant literatures
- Accounting better for religious systems, faithfulness and the interface with human behaviour/psychology
 - Key insights from existing research
- The ethnographic study in Ethiopia
 - Study background
 - Religio-cultural parameters, clergy and faithfulness in domestic violence
 - Links with psychological studies of domestic violence

Background

Critical international development researcher and practitioner with decade-long experience in sub-Saharan Africa working to:

- Address issues with gender dimensions in locally-grounded, religio-culturally sensitive ways
- Decolonise gender-sensitive research in domestic violence in the context of Africa, pointing to the need for grounding the analysis in the belief systems, conceptual repertoires and languages of local communities



- Within global health and development practice the GBV aetiology of domestic violence have been transposed through a sociological methodology. Comprehensive ethnographic studies to demonstrate how gender beliefs, social norms and human behaviour relate causally to each other missing (in the lines of Kalu 1993; McClusky 2001; Manji 2018).
- Most GBV research historically focused on women only, fostering a marginalisation of men in IPV research. The trend has started to change only recently and in limited ways, with men being integrated in interventions that problematically presume the motivations of perpetrators using preconceived theoretical frameworks.
- The GBV aetiology has fostered tendencies to universalise gender hierarchies and to appraise cultural or institutional parameters as *loci* of female subordination contributing to women's abuse. Subsequently, the resourcefulness of religious beliefs and spiritual living is not appreciated at all or sufficiently.

A double standard grounded in coloniality?

- These fields have consistently neglected ontogenetic (related to biological growth), psychological and relational factors, despite nominally ascribing to an ecological model of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence studies originating in industrialised societies have been more willing to affirm the psychological, intergenerational, situational and often mutual nature of intimate partner violence (e.g. family studies approach).
- **BUT** much domestic violence scholarship produced in low- and middle-income countries (often by western researchers or members of the local elite classes) emphasising ‘cultural’ or sociological aetiologies (excepting locally-grounded anthropological works taking exploratory approaches).
- Can this stubborn emphasis on cultural or sociological explanations in IPV studies reflect the continuation of historical racist beliefs in Anglo-American thinking about less ‘civilised’ cultures? (e.g. Narayan 1977; Vlopp 2005).

Accounting better for religious systems, faithfulness and the interface with human behaviour/psychology

- Established field of spiritual psychotherapy and counselling in North America, including studies on marital conflict and intimate partner violence
- Mental health and spirituality, including domestic violence trauma (e.g. UK)
- Studies that link religious beliefs to attachment models, personality disorders and domestic violence (North America and Western Europe)
- Studies that look at the role of religious values (e.g. forgiveness) or Church attendance specifically for the marital or intimate relationship (North America)
- Anthropological and qualitative studies that examine domestic violence in different religio-cultural contexts

- Some abusive men may have distorted understandings of religious teachings, not unrelated to the family environment they grew up in, which they could use to justify their abusiveness (Shaikh 2007; Johnson 2015; Nason-Clark et al. 2018, chapter 3).
- Religious women who experience husband abuse might tend to endure and to forgive it, often as a direct result of how they understand and embody religious teachings or vernacular religious traditions (Shaikh 2007; Merry 2009, 68; Mardsen 2014; Nason-Clark et al., chapter 2).
- Some female victims may resort to religious beliefs to condemn the abuse and through their ordeals may acquire a more justice-oriented understanding of their faith, helping them to address the harmful situation (Shaikh 2007, Johnson 2015).
- In societies where dominant religious traditions were preceded by folklore belief systems, religious influences often co-exist with other beliefs about the spiritual world, which can deter or incite violent behaviour with one's intimate partner in intricate ways (McClusky 2001).

- These trends have been reported in works from Catholic, Protestant or Evangelical Christian communities and some Muslim societies, but with distinct variations (each tradition enables different kinds of discourses, providing weaker or stronger possibilities for using religious idiom to justify folklore norms and practices).
- Within Eastern or so-called ‘Oriental’ Orthodox Christian societies, albeit cross-cultural variations, theology has been generally understood as being co-substantial with praxis. However, due to historical and political developments, and the accommodating nature of this faith vis-à-vis pre-existing belief systems, the routine embodiments of the faithful should not be equated to theological teachings.
- Some pernicious attitudes could reflect a lack of theological literacy in the community of adherents, or emphasis on values that appear also to be prioritised within the faith (such as the family, marriage or female virginity).
- Need to understand religious traditions in reference to their distinct theological and exegetical premises as experienced historically.

- Victimised women in religious communities tend to share their ordeals with clergy, although they may minimize the seriousness of the situation because of shame, guilt or other reasons (Hamid and Jayakar 2015; Nason-Clark et al. 2018, 36).
- Clergy responses may be inappropriate and could contribute to a perpetuation of the harmful situation (Shaikh 2007; Nason-Clark et al. 2018, 39-40) due to clergy's limited exposure to IPV and how best to respond, insufficient seminary training, own attitudes that might lead to the minimisation of the problem, heightened sense of responsibility to preserve marriage, or inability to apply religious teachings to advise the victimised party or counsel the abuser (Johnson 2015).
- On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that faith leaders and clergy can be positively influential and that the majority do try to support victimised parties, albeit often acting in ways that can be counterproductive (Nason-Clark et al. 2018).
- Theological support could help both victims and offenders of domestic abuse address emotional and psychological disturbances (Davies and Dryer 2014) .

- Scholarship that focuses on the role of faith-based values (e.g. forgiveness, conflict resolution skills, empathic responses) and religious practice/involvement with behaviour and attitudes in romantic relationships and family relations.
- A study with adults in the US found that regular religious attendance is inversely associated with the perpetration of domestic violence. Among men, this protective effect is evident only among weekly attenders, whereas among women, the protective effect also surfaces among monthly attenders (Ellison and Anderson 2001).
- In another study, religious beliefs and practices among American Catholic and Orthodox Christian families (such as prayer and attending worship services) were related to seeking forgiveness and to resolving conflict in order to build and maintain unified and harmonious family relationships (White et al. 2018).

- Studies have suggested that individual reliance on and appraisal of God as an attachment figure is not unrelated to attachment models that individuals develop through relationships with other humans in their life.
- Scholarly opinions have varied on whether the relationship is one of correspondence (attachment patterns with humans correspond to attachment patterns in individuals' experiences of God) or compensation (attachment patterns with humans and God do not correspond because God functions as a substitute attachment figure).
 - **Birgegard and Granqvist** (2004) found that individuals who have developed secure parent-internal working models will tend to display more secure relationships to God.
 - **Hall et al.** (2009) argued that correspondence operates at implicit levels of spiritual experience, finding that human attachment patterns are not associated with explicit spiritual functioning.
 - **Pollard, Riggs and Hook** (2014) found that that attachment avoidance is most strongly linked to the lack of a secure, positive relationship to God, but attachment avoidance can be less detrimental to marital functioning when the individual use more positive religious coping strategies.

Significant connections

- Research has associated avoidant attachment, mediated by some personality disorder, with psychological and physical violence, and has found a direct relationship between anxious attachment and psychological violence (Mauricio, Tein and Lopez 2007).
- If higher attachment insecurity may be related to psychological and physical violence and attachment models with humans relate to attachment models to God, one's relationship with God could potentially mediate marital adjustments and, by inference, the likelihood of one resorting to violence (depending on whether the relationship is one of correspondence/compensation).

The ethnographic study in Aksum







- In 2016-2017 I conducted a historiographical, theological, ethnographic and participatory study of conjugal abuse realities and attitudes in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo community of Aksum, the historical centre of indigenous Christianity in the country.
- In the three last Demographic and Health surveys significant numbers of men and women across the country were reported to ‘justify’ wife-hitting in certain situations, although percentages have declined over time.
- The majority of available studies of domestic violence from Ethiopia have assumed aetiologies that consider violence to be the outcome of an oppressive culture amplified by material constraints faced by women.
- For the most part the scholarship lacks the empirical evidence to demonstrate the causal connection between violence and socio-cultural norms or what ‘culture’ might represent locally to people and either entirely neglects or misconstrues local religious traditions and their interface with gender normative frameworks.
- Much scholarship on IPV also ignores Ethiopia’s variegated gender relations and the shifts that have occurred toward an improved status for women in recent decades.



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DEUTSCHER FUßBALL BUND
Logo of the German Football Federation, featuring a black eagle with spread wings on a white circular background.



Key conceptualisations of conjugal abuse and explanations

- Conjugal conflict, arguments or disagreement due to men getting drunk, going to other women, or refusing to provide as breadwinners. This could escalate in physical assault by husbands against wives. Women could be held partially responsible if they did not uphold a non-confrontational attitude.
- A few women described as ‘difficult’ women (e.g. overly controlling of husbands). Some women’s abusiveness towards husbands associated with ‘modernity.’
- Gender asymmetries, such as an unfair division of labour between wives and husbands and the persistence of early marriage for girls.
- Abandonment of wives by husbands, especially when this was accompanied by men’s failure to provide child support in the aftermath.
- Sexual coercion in marriage not generally talked about since the expectation was for the wife to sleep with her husband at all reasonable times (excepting when she was ill/after child birth/in her menses, fasting periods, etc.).
- Depending on the type of abuse, these were attributed to characterological defects, relationship issues, and a ‘past’/‘old’ unegalitarian mentality persisting among some.

A complex landscape

- Normative arrangements and expectations around marriage and the conjugal relationship, such as the norm for the husband to act as breadwinner and for the wife to respond to her husband's sexual needs at all reasonable times, the expectation that the wife should always be 'timid'/non-confrontational and tensions arising with new relationship norms associated with 'modernity.'
- Strong religio-cultural standards of morality and values in the local society that condemned conflict/violence in the relationship, emphasised mutual help (a non segregated division of labour), respect and righteousness, neighbourly interference to stop conflict and abuse and societal/church-related sanctions for perpetrators in the form of general criticism and shaming.
- An underlying 'tolerance' (for lack of a better word) of the problem seen in the ineffectiveness of local institutions to deal properly with women's reports of conjugal violence (police unit, social court, women's associations) and in most women's endurance and secretiveness when they dealt with an abusive partner.

The role of the clergy in mediating conflict and responding to victims/perpetrators

- All the research participants affirmed the central role of the clergy, who typically served as mediators of conjugal problems and acted as the main point of reference for religious matters among the laity.
- Most rural priests opposed pernicious culture-condoned practices. Simultaneously, some could be enforcing socio-cultural gender norms unwittingly by stressing Judaic/Old Testament elements of the religious tradition (neglecting New Testament theology), because this was favoured in folklore culture.
- Many priests proactively asked the woman if she was experiencing abuse and tried to stop the pernicious behaviour and to correct the situation whenever they were called to mediate, but they did not insist if a perpetrator did not want to reform their behaviour due to a theology respecting human free will.
- While priests emphasised the preservation of life-long marriage, they also taught that marriage had to be a peaceful affair and did not generally oppose divorce when the situation was irreversible and harmful to the woman.

- Marriages in which both spouses were considered spiritual and were committed to religious commandments were considered healthier and more successful.
- Female research participants invariably affirmed that going to church and observing the sacraments made their husbands calmer and more considerate towards them.
- Faith for women translated mostly as a coping mechanism and not as a source for justifying intimate partner abuse, which the faith teaches against. However, many women stayed because they loved the husbands or believed he could be reformed or to avoid divorce (which could expose them to poverty and the village gossip of being a ‘bad’ wife).
- Men were considered generally less spiritual, but male testimonies suggested that some men’s faith-based conscience could serve as a buffer against pernicious behaviour, such as committing adultery or abandoning their wives. Such men seemed to act under the influence of widely upheld standards of morality enforced through the clergy’s public discourse condemning ‘sin’ and praising ‘righteousness.’



- Tendency among local people to rationalise certain forms of abusiveness by invoking the individual personality (*bahri*) and other personal parameters, and not indicting wider socio-cultural norms or standards. This could suggest a more implicit kind of ‘tolerance’ despite everyone affirming that abuse of any kind is condemned within both the faith (*haymanot*) and the culture (*bahäl*).
- These individual parameters were understood in reference to the religious worldview of the local residents, which spoke of a sin-prone and fickle human being. Extreme acts of violence were considered ‘senseless’, usually accidental and committed under the influence of satanic spiritual influence.
- Gender standards that expected women/wives to be non-confrontational in combination with many women’s perception that men were generally less spiritual (and, hence, more susceptible to evil social or spiritual influences) could be enforcing endurance on behalf of women and some acceptance of men’s misbehaviour at the level of the wider society.

- The proximity of the partners made them dependent on each other and particularly susceptible to each other's responses. When an imbalance emerged because one party did not deliver, this begot stress and frustration in the other party, whose complaints and accusations amplified in turn the former's dissatisfaction. This seemed to plunge the relationship in a cycle of dissatisfaction and argument ("negative reciprocity", Clements and Schumacher 2010).
- The results could be worse in relationships lacking intimate communication and understanding, such as in some cases of arranged marriages or due to large age difference between spouses.
- Many of my female interlocutors complained that their boyfriends or husbands could not understand their feelings or their love. Others spoke about local men's lack of ability to externalise their emotions and a lack of interest or ability to develop intimate communication with their female partners. Such observations could be capturing more profound problems of attachment and empathy among a segment of the male population that was particularly problematic or abusive in intimate partnerships.

The relevance of psychological parameters (cont.)

- The narratives of wife abandonment invariably described a husband's sudden change of heart and spoke of lack of intimacy and connection to his wife.
- Changes in people's feelings do happen in all romantic relationships and marriages but alienation generally develops over time, which the other partner senses (Overall and Lemay 2015). My interlocutors repeatedly affirmed that they had not quarrelled with husbands, that the marriage had been quite good and balanced and that husband suddenly changed.
- Some men's impassionate abandonment of wives could be underpinned by some personality issue or attachment insecurity. Insecurely attached people of an avoidant type tend to keep an emotional distance from the intimate partners and consider that they can be self-sufficient without them (Li and Chan 2012).
- Some men's subsequent failure to provide for child maintenance may reflect economic scarcity and relationship dynamics, but could suggest also lower levels of empathy, associated with anti-social personality disorder, which has been suggested in turn to correlate with avoidant attachment (Mauricio, Tein and Lopez 2012).

- A recurrent parenting style, mostly affecting female-led households (husband was deceased, had left or had temporarily moved to another place for seasonal work), that could be described as detached and which became at times abusive.
- Girls were usually slapped if they misbehaved, but boys would be beaten harshly. The practice of corporal punishment was affirmed to be against the faith, but also having amplified in recent years.
- Mothers' detached, judgemental and unstable parenting styles could become conducive to boys developing attachment insecurities of an avoidant type or a weaker empathic capacity in adult life. Such impacts could be compounded by a father's departure or a step-father's abusive behaviour with the child, which local women reported to be a frequent cause of second divorces.
- This generational aspect of violence may be through child physical or psychological abuse (Mills 2006), but also through mother abuse by husbands (Holt, Buckley and Whelan 2008). Some women's own anxiety and emotional agony in their married lives seemed to coincide with the use of battery with their boy children.

What does the study tell us?

- Any strategies to address domestic violence would be mediated by local people's more fundamental beliefs about the cause and reversibility of human abusiveness, societal pressures, material concerns and psychological reasons that need to be addressed simultaneously using a combination approaches.
- Need for integrated approaches: developing counter-discourses to ideas of human fickleness or sinfulness drawing from Orthodox theology; employing psycho-social tools to help perpetrators address psychological factors of abusiveness; supporting couples in developing conflict resolution skills and communication; strengthening local state-led institutions (police, social courts, etc.).
- Local priests need to be equipped theologically to avoid enforcing folklore practice framed in religious idiom. They also need to be trained in the psychology of domestic violence and safeguarding to be able to mediate cases of conjugal abuse in more sensitive and effective ways in view of the risks identified.

- “Religion, conscience and abusive behaviour: Understanding the role of faith and spirituality in the deterrence of intimate partner violence in rural Ethiopia”

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- “Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK”

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