

# **MOVING BEYOND ASSUMPTIONS: THE COMPLEX ROLE OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION THE EXPERIENCE OF CONJUGAL ABUSE IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA**

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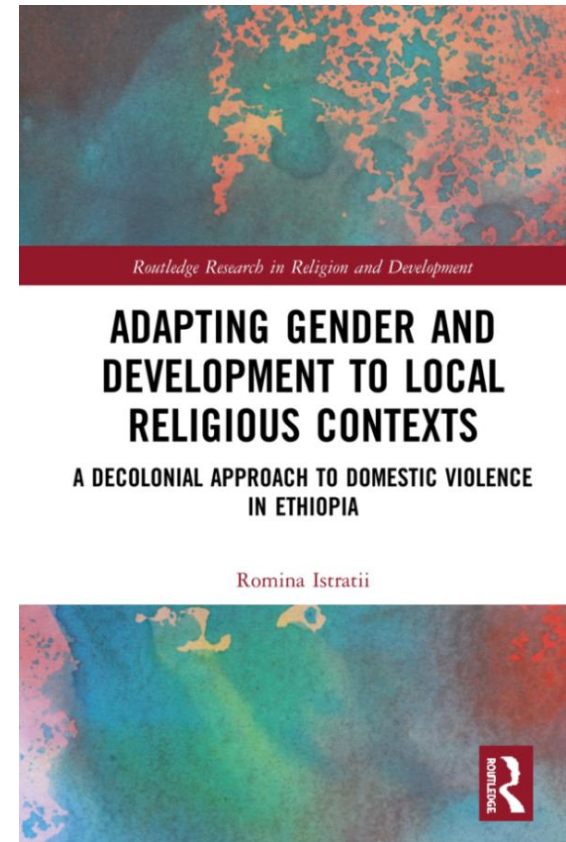
# Agenda

- My background
- Motivations / Shortfalls in domestic violence research
- The role of religious beliefs and faith in intimate relationships and domestic violence: A brief overview
- The ethnographic study in Ethiopia
- The role of religious tradition, the clergy and faithfulness in marriage and domestic violence in Aksum
- The complex role of religious discourse and its potential resourcefulness

## 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 ways that pay due attention to people's own worldviews
- Decolonise gender and religious studies from western metaphysics of 'gender' and 'religion' and promote approaches that pay due attention to local religious systems and intersections with gender norms as experienced vernacularly.



- Within global health and development practice the Gender-based Violence aetiology of domestic violence has been transposed widely through a sociological methodology. Comprehensive ethnographic studies to demonstrate how religio-cultural gender norms and human behaviour relate causally to each other have been missing (in the lines of Kalu 1993; McClusky 2001; Manji 2018).
- Most GBV research has been historically focused on women only, fostering a marginalisation of men in domestic violence 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.

- The mainstream epistemology of ‘religion’ – the product of western societies’ distinct experience with western Christianity, capitalism and secularism – made it necessary to reconceptualise religious studies in non-western contexts, but especially the field’s relationship to theology.
- While some religious scholars and anthropologists have now recognised that a substantive engagement with religious communities cannot neglect interacting closely with theological and exegetical traditions, there is no common understanding as to how such an integration might be achieved in a fruitful manner.
- Employing a west-centric gender theory and a feminist ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, prominent feminist scholars in gender and theology/religion(s) studies have displayed essentialising tendencies that present all ‘Christian theology’ as ‘patriarchal’ or ‘sexist’, showing limited reflexivity of historical and exegetical differences across traditions and geographies.

# **The role of religious beliefs and faith in intimate relationships and domestic violence: a state of the literature**



- 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).

- 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) .



- These trends have been reported in works from Catholic, Protestant or Evangelical Christian communities and some Muslim societies, but with distinct variations.
- Less research has occurred in Eastern or so-called ‘Oriental’ Orthodox traditions (the five Miaphysite sister Churches) and communities to allow us to understand how their distinct theological premises have been experienced locally and have interfaced with gender and marriage norms.
- There is a need to understand religious traditions in reference to their distinct theological and exegetical premises as these developed and were articulated historically in specific contexts.
- Each tradition enables different kinds of discourses, providing weaker or stronger possibilities for using religious idiom to rationalise or to justify folklore norms and practices.

- Orthodox traditions trace to apostolic didascalia, preserved in the Holy Scriptures. However, these have been understood through the lens of ecclesiastical traditions informed by the lives and exegesis of saintly men and women.
- Laities are not deeply or always versed in the embodied theology of the saints, but they are usually familiar with the key standards of the faith. Historical and political development in Orthodox societies (Ottoman occupation/Muslim invasions, communist expansionism, etc.), and the accommodating nature of this faith vis-à-vis pre-existing belief systems have meant that the routine embodiments of the faithful may depart from theological teachings.
- Due to the emphasis placed on authentic and immutable truth/belief, combined with a long history of theological controversies, adherents in these traditions may be especially cautious of any deviation from traditional knowledge and practice.
- Some pernicious attitudes could reflect a lack of theological literacy in the community of adherents, or exaggerated emphasis on values that appear also to be prioritised within the faith (such as the family, marriage or female virginity).

# The ethnographic study in Aksum









Handwritten text on a green and black checkered cloth hanging from a tree trunk.

DEUTSCHER FUßBALL BUND  
Logo of the German Football Federation, featuring a black eagle with its wings spread, perched on a shield with a red and white pattern. The text 'DEUTSCHER FUßBALL BUND' is written in a circular border around the eagle.



- The study took place in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* community of Aksum, the historical centre of indigenous Christianity in the country.
- Instigated by reports significant numbers of men and women across the country were reported to ‘justify’ wife-hitting in certain situations, although percentages have declined over time and the lack of studies to contextualise such reports into people’s lived realities (CSAE & ORC Macro 2006; CSAE & ICF 2012, 2017)
- General neglect or misconstruing of local religious traditions and their interface with gender normative frameworks and limited consideration of Ethiopia’s variegated gender relations and women’s improved status in recent decades.
- I employed a gender-sensitive approach that suspended pre-conceiving gender, religion or domestic violence and assuming demarcations, definitions or ontologies, relying rather on the discourses and conceptual repertoires of the communities.
- A theology-informed analysis of the local religious tradition that approached the local religious belief system in reference to its historical development and exegetical premises and simultaneously the lived experience of clergy and laity.











# 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 (except 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

- Within Church theology, man and woman understood as created alike and with equal authority over the creation. The arrangement of male headship in marriage seen as a post-fall pragmatic arrangement, but the husband-wife relationship should ideally follow the Christ-Church prototype. One could describe the faith as being centred on human betterment with a pragmatic grasp of human ‘passions’ and a flexibility for addressing those.
- Strong religio-cultural standards of morality and values in the local society that condemned conflict/violence in the relationship, emphasised mutual help, 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.
- Normative arrangements and expectations around 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 and the expectation that the wife should always be ‘timid’/non-confrontational. An institutionalised ‘tolerance’ (for lack of a better word) of the problem and women’s widespread endurance and secretiveness when they dealt with an abusive partner.

# **The role of religious tradition, the clergy and faith in marriage and domestic violence in Aksum**

- Laypeople were vigilant about the shortfalls of some priests in their own married lives, but they valued the clergy's discourses and considered that they taught the Word of God.
- The clergy typically served as mediators of conjugal problems and acted as the main point of reference for religious matters among the laity.
- Priests and teachers gathered after Sunday liturgy in the local church yard and discussed local church matters, fundraised to cover church bills, taught and resolved conflicts that arose in the community.
- The clergy generally participated in marriage ceremonies, other life-cycle events and the religious gatherings. Many used these opportunities to teach and ask on the progress of their spiritual children, including conjugal cohabitation.

# The resourcefulness of clergy/faith in married life, results from four workshops in two villages of Aksum

<p><b>Male workshop participants at V1, 30 April 2017</b></p>	<p>1 <i>Haymanot</i> 2 Social court 3 Health unit/doctor or social court 4 Elders 6 Secular school/teachers</p>
<p><b>Female workshop participants at V1, 26 February 2017</b></p>	<p>1 If there is a problem, the solution would be the court 2 By the advice of the spiritual father 3 By speaking out and communicating the problem in the <i>ədər</i></p>
<p><b>Male workshop participants at V2, 23 April 2017</b></p>	<p>1 <i>Haymanot</i> 2 Elders 3 Secular school 4 Health unit 5 Police 6 Social court</p>
<p><b>Female workshop participants at V2, 21 February 2017</b></p>	<p>1 <i>Haymanot</i> 2 Secular school 3 Health unit/hospital 4 Local social court 5 Borrowing association (<i>ədər</i>) 6 Elders</p>

- Clergy pronouncements differed according to individual level of understanding, theological training and personal attitudes. The majority of interviewed priests had not reached the *Maṣḥaf Bet* and had no formal training in the interpretation of the Gospels.
- 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.
  - Linkages between persistent ecclesiastical discourse on virginity before marriage (albeit for both genders) and the historical practice of early marriage among the laity outside of the church.
  - Linkages between the gendered division of labour standardised in folklore practice, it does uphold an unquestionable understanding of gender duality premised on the story of Genesis.



One church teacher, echoing the official teaching of the Church, commented: *“The Bible says [that] man and woman are equal, it is culture (bahəl) that does otherwise. When they get married, they become one body, one in the ‘likeness’ (’amsal; አምሳሌ) of God, the money belongs to both equally. They share one attitude, they share the work.”*

An ordained, older priest with very poor background in exegetical training cited biblical passages more literally: *“The Bible says for the wife to do as her husband says, to submit to him, whether she likes it or not. But nowadays, it is changing (women do not submit).”*

Another trained priest said: *“A husband is a male, with his father Adam's race. A wife is a female, her mother Eve's race [...] Because a man cannot live on his own, if he wants to marry or if he wants to live with another person, he has to bring a female who is from Eve's race. This female works on keeping the household while the male works outside of the house. They marry and then have children, reproduce, create a child who is like them.”*

- In mediating marital problems, 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.
- However, the emphasis that priests placed on peace in marriage and their advice to women to endure problematic (but not physically abusive) husbands, could add to the socio-cultural and material pressures that women felt to stay within their marriage.







- 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.’

## The complex role of religious tradition in the continuation of social norms and attitudes

- The clergy's discourses and mediation practices in the conjugal relationship, and the laity's marital and faith experiences suggest that in many cases religious practice and theology can and do strengthen egalitarian gender relations and healthy marriages.
- However, by remaining grounded in a rigidly upheld folklore 'culture' often legitimised in reference to what the laity perceive as their inherited religious tradition, clergy and laity alike may contribute to the preservation of norms with potentially pernicious implications for women.

## Spectrum representing local attitudes about faith (*haymanot*) and culture (*bahəḷ*) vis-à-vis social norms

- faith as cultural heritage, moral values
- Social norms and faith align
- 'culture' is good
- modernity more threatening

- faith as conscientious practice
- vernacular tradition as habit
- 'culture' takes more negative undertones

- faith as spiritual experience
- faith different from social norms and culture
- acculturation more threatening

- faith as spiritual experience
- faith different from social norms and culture
- need to redefine the vernacular religious tradition



- Individuals who wished to distance themselves from what they understood to be pernicious or superficial vernacular practices risked the likelihood of being considered “heretical” (a ‘*Pente*’), which could result in their social marginalisation.
- A young man said: “*Any deviation begets suspicion in this society. In our society, any revolution is unacceptable, in every aspect: private, religious, cultural, political, or economic.*”
- Clergy understood this, but seemed to act under the pressures of the wider society most of the times. Members of the clergy with a strong theological acumen subtly abstained from pernicious practices but could not criticise the practice openly as this would offend the larger society.
- Generally speaking, it was not the clergy who deployed the discourse of heresy to coerce people to abide by vernacular norms, but other members of the laity who filtered their understanding of the religious tradition through a ‘strictly observant’ cultural lens.

- Such a discourse was deployed to justify alcohol consumption at the regular religious gatherings that are convened for the veneration of saints or other religious feasts.
- The norm was for everyone, including priests, to drink traditional beer (*səwa*) albeit some clergy reporting that this was an innovation and that previously people consumed milk.
- Rural residents spoke of the problem of excessive drinking, which could even result in some men becoming violent with other men or their wives and children.
- In these discourses, the individual was held responsible for excessive alcohol consumption, but drinking with measure was acceptable within the faith.
- While some members of both the laity and clergy criticised the religious gatherings for having lost their spiritual character and serving primarily social functions, they still perpetuated those as per convention, with no explicit or organised efforts being made to alter their format and protect against excessive drinking.

- Tendency among local people to rationalise 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 their ‘faith’ and ‘culture.’
- These individual parameters were understood in reference to the religious worldview of the local residents, which spoke of a sin-prone nature, suggesting a degree of inevitable fickleness/unpredictability in the 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.



- Local people's justifications of folklore practices and norms were couched in an authoritative religious discourse, but many of these deviated from the complete theology of the Church/were innovations introduced over-time. More awareness around this and an improved theological acumen among the clergy/laity could create the space for re-considering pernicious or unhelpful practices.
- An Orthodox Apostolic theology of marriage (e.g. informed by John Chrysostom's homilies) articulated with sensitivity to culture-specific gender expectations could counteract 'traditional' mentalities associated with the continuation of a gender-based division of labour and expectations facilitating sexual coerciveness.
- More critical embodiments of religious norms seemed to align with a better understanding of New Testament theology. Such individuals, who included learned clergy and members of the laity, could act as examples to others.
- Fundamental conceptualisations of the abusive personality informed by the people's religio-cultural worldview suggest that employing religious discourses to cultivate counter-discourses about the possibility of improving oneself/overcoming sin might be resourceful and appropriate.

- Such approaches would need to be combined with more systematic efforts by the Church to improve New Testament literacy among the clergy and the laity and to help the clergy understand the effects of their discourses on the laity.
- It is important to consider that the clergy might hesitate to innovate in ways that could appear ‘heretical’, providing them with the appropriate incentives and tools to encourage their integration in alleviation efforts.
- More concrete but concise and easily comprehensible guidance written in the local languages could offer much-needed resource for priests to use routinely (currently priests limited to *Mäṣḥaf Täklil* and *Fətha Nägäšt*). A participatory format might offer a more effective approach to encourage reflective learning.
- Given that people related to the faith in different ways, the clergy will need to be more prepared to counsel individuals who might not exactly fit the religious ideals, such as couples in irregular unions who were also affected by conjugal abuse but were oftentimes without a spiritual father.



It is a sin to believe that  
every woman is not equal to man.



# Types of Church-related materials examined

<p><b>Canonical/liturgical books and relevant 'andəmta commentary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Fətha Nəgəšt</i>, translated and edited by Paulos Tzadua and P. L. Strauss, English, 1968 (Paulos Tzadua &amp; Strauss, 1968).</li> <li>- <i>Ethiopic Didascalia</i>, translated by J. H. Mason, English, 1920 (Mason, 1920).</li> <li>- <i>The Bible, the Old and New Testament Books</i>, Amharic, 2000 E.C. (Anonymous, 2000 E.C.).</li> <li>- <i>The Book of the Old Testament, Genesis and Exodus: Commentary and Interpretation</i>, Amharic, 1999 E.C. (Anonymous, 1999 E.C.).</li> <li>- <i>The Book of Baptism, Holy Matrimony and Uction</i>, Amharic, 2008 E.C. (Anonymous, 2008 E.C.).</li> <li>- <i>The Book of St Paul, Reading and Interpretation</i>, Ge'ez and Amharic, 2007 E.C. (Anonymous, 2007 E.C.).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Relevant books found in the Ethiopian market</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>The Spiritual and Social Life of Christian Women</i>, by Kessis Kefyalew Merahi, English, 1998 (Kessis Kefyalew Merahi, 1998).</li> <li>- <i>The Order of Marriage and Social Ethics</i>, by Kessis Kefyalew Merahi, English, 1990 (Kessis Kefyalew Merahi, 1990).</li> <li>- <i>Married Life and its Living</i>, by Qomos Samuel, Amharic, 2008 E.C. (Qomos Samuel, 2008 E.C.).</li> <li>- <i>On Women and Donkey: Gender and Christian Perspective</i>, by Heregewoin Cherinet, Amharic, 2005 E.C.; English, 2015 (Heregewoin Cherinet, 2005 E.C., 2015).</li> <li>- <i>The Commentaries on Married Life: As Taught by Saint John Chrysostom</i>, by Māmḥər Shimelis Mergiya, Amharic, date not specified, probably 2004 E.C. (Shimelis Mergiya, 2004 E.C.).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theological works</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Order and Canon Law of Marriage of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church</i>, by Abba L. Mandefro, English, 1976 (Abba L. Mandefro, 1976).</li> <li>- <i>Notes on the Teachings of the Abyssinian Church: As Set forth by the Doctors of the Same</i>, translated by A. F. Matthew, English, 1936 (Matthew, 1936).</li> <li>- <i>The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations</i>, by Mekarios and collaborators, English, 1996 (Mekarios et al., 1976).</li> </ul>	<p><b>John Chrysostom's commentaries</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chrysostom's commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews (In epistulam ad hebraeos), in Greek (Chrysostom, s.d.).</li> <li>- Chrysostomic contributions to the 'andəmta on the Epistle to the Hebrews, translated by W. R. Cowley, English, 1988 (Cowley, 1988).</li> <li>- The traditional compilations of Chrysostom's commentaries by Ethiopian scholars:</li> </ul>
<p><b>EOTC web materials/pages</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Doctrine of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church</i>, English (Anonymous, s.d.).</li> <li>- <i>The Sacrament of Matrimony</i>, English, 2003 (EOTC, 2003a).</li> <li>- <i>Christian Doctrine and Living: Introduction to Christianity</i> by Abba A. Bekele, English (Abba A. Bekele, s.d.).</li> <li>- <i>Divine Plan and Gender Equality</i> by Gebre Egziabher (Jr.), English, 2015 (Gebre Egziabher, 2015).</li> <li>- <i>Sacrament of Holy Matrimony</i>, English (Anonymous, s.d.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>The Homilies of St John Chrysostom (Dərsan)</i>, Amharic, 1987 E.C. (Anonymous, 1987 E.C. a);</li> <li>* <i>The Admonitions of St John Chrysostom (Tägşaş)</i>, Amharic, 1987 E.C. (Anonymous, 1987 E.C. b).</li> </ul>

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