



Building Bridges of Faith Against Domestic Violence





**DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES OF ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX
TÄWAHƏDO CLERGY REGARDING FAITH, MARRIAGE AND SPOUSAL
ABUSE: THE CASE OF AKSUM IN TIGRAY REGION**

Authored by: Dr Romina Istratii

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This working paper series is published as part of project d/d/d/ድልድል, which is dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive domestic violence alleviation systems in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK. The project is hosted at SOAS University of London, and is funded initially for four years by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the Future Leaders Fellowship “Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK” (Grant Ref: MR/T043350/1), and supported with a research grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation awarded in 2019 under the proposal “Religion, conscience and abusive behaviour: Understanding the role of faith and spirituality in the deterrence of intimate partner violence in rural Ethiopia.”

The project seeks to promote a decolonial approach to addressing domestic violence by engaging substantively with the religio-cultural belief systems of domestic violence victims/survivors and perpetrators, and understanding how these interface with gender, material and psychological parameters to facilitate or deter domestic violence. It aims to generate new research and intervention approaches working with Ethiopian and Eritrean collaborators, and rural and urban communities, and to apply knowledge from the respective countries in order to inform approaches for integrating and better supporting ethnic minority and migrant populations affected by domestic violence in the UK. The project employs research, sensitisation, knowledge exchange and public engagement activities, working collaboratively with partners, stakeholders and communities in the three countries with the aims to:

- a) improve preparedness among clergy and seminarians to respond to victims/survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence in their communities;
- b) increase religio-cultural sensitivity in non-governmental and state-led domestic violence sectors in the project countries;
- c) develop integrated domestic violence support systems that can be sensitive and responsive to religio-culturally diverse populations; and
- d) promote reciprocal research partnerships and development for all team members, project partners and collaborators.

The project is informed by previous ethnographic investigations of conjugal abuse in the Ethiopian Orthodox community in Tigray region in northern Ethiopia. The research evidenced the importance of religious beliefs and experience in understanding the life of the laity, intersections with gender parameters and norms, and complex associations with the continuation and deterrence of conjugal abuse in this religious society. The study revealed important tensions between theological and folklore understandings, with ‘faith’ being juxtaposed in complex ways to ‘culture’ to preserve or discontinue pernicious behaviour and norms associated with conjugal abuse. The current working paper aims to disseminate key findings of the completed research to a wider audience, in an effort to improve understanding among Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* Church clergy and theologians, state agents, and non-governmental domestic violence stakeholders about the complex role of religious beliefs and experience in the married lives of the laity, about the clergy's approaches to



mediation in marital conflict, and to suggest how theology and pastoral interventions may be appropriately engaged in alleviating the problem.

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Background

Studies of gender relations and domestic violence in Ethiopian Orthodox societies suggest that religious institutions and the clergy have an influential role to play in laypeople's married life. Many accept that priestly advice could reinforce gender norms, and thus may contribute to women's oppression, and also indirectly to their abuse. However, little evidence exists to provide an ethnographic examination of clergy discourses on gender relations, marriage and conjugal abuse, of their own lived religious life and intersections with gender norms in folklore life, or of the modes of their pastoral interventions.¹

This working paper relies on the author's completed year-long ethnographic, gender-sensitive research in northern Ethiopia, which investigated attitudes and realities of conjugal abuse in relation to the surrounding religio-cultural framework and church theology. The research entailed interviews with scholars of the faith in traditional church-education schools, monasteries and churches, and in modern theological colleges in Addis Ababa, Mekelle and Aksum in order to ascertain the fundamental dogmatics of the local religious tradition, and to achieve a more contextualised understanding of the historical development of local ecclesiastical discourses. In parallel, interviews were held with clergy and laity in the countryside surrounding Aksum, and fewer in the city of Aksum, in order to obtain a better understanding of local vernacular practices around marriage and faith, clergy attitudes towards both conjugal abuse and their mediation strategies in cases of conjugal abuse. The study involved a total of 244 participants, which included individual interviews with 11 theologians in Addis Ababa and Mekelle, 23 clergy and monks in Aksum, 12 church teachers in Aksum and 122 lay women and men in Aksum. In addition, workshops were held with 56 lay women and men in Aksum.

The current paper is a detailed presentation of clergy discourses around these issues and builds on and extends the analysis provided in the original study.² The aim is to share the findings in a more accessible format to clergy, other religious stakeholders and secular providers in Ethiopia and in Ethiopian diaspora communities who are interested in understanding the intricate relationship between faith and conjugal abuse and how the clergy can be engaged in efforts to address domestic violence in their communities, as well as to open the study to wider critical engagement so that its insights may be refined and improved. An English version is made available alongside the Amharic version in an effort to inform international debates and approaches to addressing domestic violence in religious communities.

A note needs to be made about anonymisation and use of language in this paper. All quotes from interviews and discussions with local specialists, clergy and laity were anonymised in the original

¹ For a full discussion of the literature see the peer-reviewed journal article R. Istratii, "An ethnographic look into conjugal abuse in Ethiopia: A study from the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* community of Aksum through the local religio-cultural framework," *Annales d'Éthiopie*, no. 33 (2020–2021): 253–301.

² See the original PhD study R. Istratii, "Gender and development through local epistemologies: Understanding conjugal violence among Orthodox *Tāwahədo* Christians in northern Ethiopia and implications for changing attitudes and norms within local worldviews." PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2019, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25501/SOAS.00030986>. See also the monograph R. Istratii, *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia* (London: Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003006992>.



study. The names of villages where interviews took place in Aksum were also anonymised to minimise the risk of disclosure and the identification of participants. Transliteration in Amharic and Tigrigna follows the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, Transcription/Transliteration System, <https://archive.is/bBWaz#selection-39.4-39.28>. The original *fidäl* script was omitted from this paper as an Amharic version of this paper is available through the same platform. For names of historical figures and locations of cities an arbitrary spelling has been selected among those widely used.



The traditional religious education and its challenges

Until Haile Selassie introduced the state-led education system, education in Orthodox Ethiopia was in the hands of the church. Theologically speaking, both girls and boys could attend religious education, but girls were generally impeded from doing so by numerous normative and practical factors, including gender-specific norms upheld in the lay society that reserved women for the exclusive role of housewives, and the fact of women's limited prospects for paid work in the church.³ On the other hand, the *Nəbab Bet*, which girls were more likely to attend in order to learn basic reading and writing skills in Ge'ez, does not include philological or exegetical training. Therefore, while some girls may be familiar with Ge'ez prayers sung in church, they may lack both a full understanding of their meaning and the capacity to interpret them theologically. During fieldwork one woman asserted that religious education "was only for boys" and girls could learn about their faith primarily "at the *mäsāmarat*, the practice of *māzmur* (psalms) at the choir, and the women's *gādam* (monastery)."⁴

Notwithstanding these attitudes and restrictions, female teachers of the faith have existed and worked actively in this tradition. In fact, since women cannot become deacons or priests in church, it is likely that they will progress into the school of interpretation instead to secure a role as church teachers and theologians. In the context of the author's research, two female teachers were in fact interviewed at the St Yared Theological School in Aksum, both of whom had knowledge of the interpretation of the Gospels.

The general structure of the traditional church education⁵ was best described by a male teacher in Aksum as follows:

It begins with learning the letters and reading which is called *Nəbab Bet* then [proceeds] on to *Zema*, then to 'Aqwaq'wam, which are in the same house. While *Zema* is done only by chanting, 'Aqwaq'wam is done by standing and with the help of sistrums (sistra) and drums. Then it progresses to *Tərg'wame Bet* or commentary house, in which first, the literal reading (in the Ge'ez original) will be studied, then the meaning will be studied through different interpretations. In this house a person can begin by studying the New or the Old Testament as his choice may be. And also under *Zena 'Abbāw* one can learn about the fathers/patriarchs like Abraham, Jacob, Isaac and the rest. On the other hand, Church Fathers like, Cyril, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom and the like are studied under scholars of the church.⁶

³ L. Melaku, *History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: From the Reign of Emperor Caleb to the End of Zagwe Dynasty and from the Classical (Golden) Age of the Present. Part Two and Three* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2010), 73; Interview with teacher at St Paul's Theological College, Addis Ababa, 17 January 2017.

⁴ Interview with female participant in London, 21 October 2016.

⁵ Studies on the traditional Church education system have been extensive. This section is not a comprehensive assessment of these studies, but only aims to provide sufficient context for the reader to be able to understand better the challenges of the clergy as presented below. It relies primarily on how the educational system was described by the participants of this study.

⁶ Interview with theology teacher in Aksum city, 27 April 2017.



A church historian traced the beginnings of the religious education system to the work of St Yared⁷ on the basis that one of the foundational teaching materials is the *Dəggua*, attributed without doubt to St Yared. Even the melody of the liturgical *Wədasse Mariam* (which is believed to have been compiled by St Ephrem the Syriac), was introduced reportedly by St Yared. Therefore, the *Zema Bet*, where students are taught these materials, can be traced to the systematic work of St Yared. The same church historian mentioned to the author that it is believed that St Yared himself started to teach at Zuramba in Gondar. St Yared's disciples then went ahead and taught in Adwa, Aksum and Eritrea. The church historian traced even the *Qəne Bet*, the school of poetry, to the work of St Yared on the rationale that within the *Dəggua* St Yared included poems like *Qəne*. He explained that this type of poetry was especially strengthened in the 14th and 15th centuries, with most sophisticated poems having been composed in Wello, Godjam in the 15th century.

The standard roles within the Ethiopian Orthodox *Təwahədo* Church (EOTC) include the *diakon* (deacon), the *qes* (priest), the *däbtära* (cantor) or *mərəgeta*, and the *mämhər* (teacher). Monks and nuns are also prominent in this tradition but they are not part of the clergy. *The mərəgeta* was defined as a scholar of the *Dəggua*, St Yared's book which is taught in *Zema Bet*. The *mämhər* was described as a learned teacher preaching and teaching theological interpretation in local churches. Of all the roles, that of the *däbtära* is the most ambiguous and appears to be unique to this ecclesiastical tradition. The theologians I consulted with explained that those holding the title of *däbtära* are primarily cantors today. The dean of the Holy Trinity Theological College in 2016 explained that *däbtära* means 'writer', with the word originating most likely in the Greek 'δευτέρι' which means 'notebook', preserved also in Amharic today as 'däbtär'.⁸ He confirmed that the *däbtäroçç* (plural) are usually, but not always, scholars who know mystical commentaries. However, some may have training only in liturgical matters. It is therefore difficult to generalise about their level of training.

Within the traditional religious education, becoming a deacon requires a few years of study; achieving a higher status position requires much longer, and acquiring exegetical knowledge in most holy texts can take a few decades. A member of the Council of Scholars described the traditional religious education as follows:

In the traditional religious education, students first have to learn orally. They must memorise until they master the content of what they are taught. Then when they master their learning, they can start to write what they learned in their personal book. They need the finished book in order to graduate. Usually students share notes with more advanced students and see their books. At the graduation time, the books must be completed, and the new graduate student will use this book as a teacher to teach others. Many students will leave to go to other schools and religious centres where they will have the opportunity to compare the content of their book with the teachings of those places. Then they will compare notes or enhance their notes and include comparative insights. The resulting collection, known as *mä'älä'ad* will represent the expertise of each graduate student, equipping them to teach.⁹

⁷ Interview with teacher of history in Addis Ababa, 16 December 2016.

⁸ Interview with a dean at the Holy Trinity Theological College, Addis Ababa, 8 December 2016.

⁹ Interview with member of the Council of Scholars, Addis Ababa, 21 January 2017.



Both theologians and clergy seemed to agree that the level of training of each member of the clergy depended on their own skills and talents, commitment and possibilities. While there were exceptions, on average it was agreed that rural priests were unlikely to have training in theological matters because of the existence of numerous impediments and historical reasons.¹⁰ The clergy that the author encountered in Aksum were typically priests who had trained and served as deacons for some years, and had then entered into Holy Matrimony before becoming ordained to serve as priests. As would be expected, they knew well the liturgical aspects of the *Qeddase*, including the *Wəddase Mariam* and *Säatat*. The majority had not reached the School of Books (*Maş'haf Bet*) and had no formal training in the interpretation of the Gospels and the 14 Pauline Letters. A few admitted that they had studied some of the '*andəmta* on the Gospels on their own initiative and in their own time, and when asked about marriage teachings could cite appropriate passages in the Gospels. In addition, despite having learnt Ge'ez in the early stages of their traditional religious education, not all of them seemed to have a strong grasp of the language, even though they knew the Ge'ez prayers by memory. Most admitted that they had little exegetical training. Exceptions included church teachers holding the title of *māmhər* who sometimes worked in local churches; however, not all churches had such a teacher available and this training was usually limited, to between two and four years (see Table 1 for detailed examples of clergy training history).

Table 1: Training background of select members of the clergy

Priest in M.H. tabiya, 14 March 2017	Studied <i>Zema</i> , <i>Qəne</i> , ' <i>Aqwaqʷam</i> and <i>Maş'hafət Bet</i> , which took about six years in total. He studied the <i>Haymanotä 'Abbäw</i> and also the commentaries on the four Gospels and the 14 letters of St Paul and the 'The Mysteries of the Holy Trinity' (<i>Məşṭirä Šelase</i>).
Priest/Teacher in L. tabiya, 19 March 2017	Completed the ' <i>Aqwaqʷam</i> in Gondar and the commentary of the New and the Old Testament in Aksum. Studied some of the teachings of St John Chrysostom.
Priest in L. tabiya, 19 March 2017	Completed training in the 14 Anaphoras for liturgy. First, he studied for five years to be a deacon before going to Debre Abay Monastery to train with teacher Aron GebreKidān and studied the <i>Zema</i> for all the Anaphoras of the liturgy, the <i>Säatat</i> , <i>Kidan</i> and <i>Liṭon</i> . He studied all these in Ge`ez and has been a priest for three years.
Priest in M. tabiya, 8 February 2017	Studied for about five years, starting with the Ge'ez <i>fidäl</i> and moving to learn the liturgical prayers and components (<i>Säatat</i> , <i>Qeddase</i>), and then doing some interpretation. It was not clear if

¹⁰ Interview with teacher of history, Addis Ababa, 16 December 2016; Interview with a dean at the Holy Trinity Theological College, Addis Ababa, 8 December 2016.



	he read the New and Old Testament on his own, or if he went to the <i>Mäṣ'haf Bet</i> . He has been in this church for 57 years.
Deacon in I.Y. tabiya, 14 March 2017	He has been a deacon for about four years and he will soon become a priest.
Priest in D. tabiya, 12 February 2017	He studied for four years at Debre Libanos Monastery. He studied interpretation (<i>tärgum</i>) for two years: the Old Testament (<i>Bəlu Kidan</i>), the New Testament (<i>'Addis Kidan</i>), and the four Gospels' interpretation (<i>'Arat Wängel 'andəmta</i>). He was taught in Ge'ez.
Priest in H. tabiya, 6 February 2017	He studied in Tigray in the traditional education system. He started by learning the Ge'ez <i>fidäl</i> and then all the prayers taught to the <i>diakon</i> . He was taught the works of St Yared, such as the <i>Dəggua</i> . He then studied <i>Zema</i> , and specifically the <i>'Aq'wäq'wam</i> . He did not reach the <i>Mäṣ'haf Bet</i> , so he was not taught interpretation. However, he read the New and Old Testament on his own, including some works of Church Fathers. He studied for about 10 years and he taught for 21 years in Gondar.
Teacher in D.Z. tabiya, 26 April 2017	He studied in Amhara, Godjam and Gondar. His studies might have lasted around 15 years. He did not study much interpretation, but became exposed to interpretation on his own initiative.

When the author asked local clergy and theologians why many priests were unable to interpret canonical books, they admitted the existence of the problem and associated it with the historically weak education of religious students. They spoke about the length of required studies in combination with the students' lack of livelihood with which to support themselves during their studies.¹¹ It was explained many times that most students of the church cannot afford to commit as many years to their education as would be ideal since they do not receive financial support from the church and must rely on public almsgiving to cater to their needs. It is, thus, likely that historically a large proportion of students have had little or no means with which to progress with their training up to the highest level of religious education provided in the *Maṣ'haf Bet*. In the resource-scarce environment described, most students would strive to complete the minimum education necessary in order to enter the service and to access a salary. Moreover, my interlocutors believed that not all students were the same and while some studied hard, others were less motivated.¹²

The commentaries of the Church Fathers in particular are likely to be known to few members of the clergy; there are multiple reasons for this, as captured in a comment by one theologian:

¹¹ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum city, 19 July 2017.

¹² Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 12 February 2017.



The study of the commentaries of the Scholars or the Church Fathers from Alexandria, Syria, Antioch, Rome and the Cappadocia – to cover all these it takes a lot of time and there is also a shortage of schools which give [instruction on] them so one has to travel to these places. And the people who are willing to teach it are very few. The rest only study *Zema*, *Nəbab* and *Qəddase* which will be needed for the service alone. This is very similar to the sons of Aaron who got their priesthood only through lineage.¹³

In his history of the church Lule Melaku supports some of this information, when he states that “[t]raditionally, a boy can receive only the *Nəbab Bet* instruction at his village. In most rural areas, a school, which offers higher education, does not exist.”¹⁴

Within the EOTC priests must be married (otherwise they follow the life of an ascetic) and this precondition was associated with additional challenges to the clergy’s education. Married priests will often not have the time to continue their studies because they must support their families, in addition to serving in the church.¹⁵ Responsibilities at home, such as the need to plough one’s farms, will curtail the time that a priest can dedicate to providing pastoral support for the laity.¹⁶ During fieldwork, the author visited local churches recurrently, and on the majority of days other than Sunday mornings churches were either closed or a priest could not be found on the premises. Neighbours would usually report that the priest had either gone out to plough or had left to bless some event, participate in a religious gathering (*mahbär*), or attend a meeting at the church offices in the city. This was confirmed by the clergy themselves, with one noting: “I tell the people to come to church, to come learn. I say that and go back to my work. I can’t survive without my work, I have to eat. You take your animal herd to eat, to water, to drink.”¹⁷

Theologians and church scholars also invoked historical events that they believed had weakened the church. Judith’s war against Christian Ethiopia in the 10th century and Muhammed Grang’s destructions in the 16th century were most salient in these conversations.¹⁸ Some also believed that the weak level of training in interpretation might have been fostered by a loose enforcement of canonical regulations around ordination.¹⁹ Lule Melaku suggested this in his history of the church during the time of the Muslim wars in Ethiopia.²⁰ Arnold Hugh Martin Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, referring to the same era, provided in their book a description of an ordination process that demonstrated these problems.²¹ The authors cited from the accounts of Francisco Alvarez, who had headed the Portuguese embassy sent to Abyssinia in 1520. As Alvarez described, in this typical ordination process hundreds of men sought to be ordained by the bishop (Abuna). Apparently, the only requirement that excluded people from being ordained was their previous

¹³ Interview with teacher at St Frumentius Theological College, Mekelle, 30 January 2017.

¹⁴ Melaku, *History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, 74.

¹⁵ Interview with teacher at St Frumentius Theological College, Mekelle, 30 January 2017.

¹⁶ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 20 May 2016; Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June 2017.

¹⁷ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.

¹⁸ Melaku, *History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, 107; Interview with member of the Council of Scholars, Addis Ababa, 21 January 2017.

¹⁹ Interview with teacher at St Yared Theological School, Aksum, 26 May 2017.

²⁰ Melaku, *History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, 99.

²¹ A. H. M. Jones and E. Monroe, *The History of Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 75–76.



involvement with a woman. In contradiction to canon, disabled men could also be ordained. Young boys and even infants were also ordained because, as it was reasoned, it was not known when the Coptic Church would send another bishop. Weak standards of ordination were also mentioned by some local priests, including in the following account:

I'm the *wäräda* church leader. We make sure they (people) are living according to the law. If not, he (the priest) will be asked by the Bible, punished and dismissed from being a member of the clergy [...] That's how we do things around here... Nowadays, this method (the method of ordaining priests properly) is spreading, but, as you said, there had been defects before. There used to be no ordination of clergy. It's a tradition nowadays [to ordain clergy].²²

These problems and historical deficiencies were invoked mostly by theologians to explain the limited ability of many members of the clergy to teach people in a theologically informed manner. A church teacher at the church of Mariam TSION in Aksum considered this plausible after the author explained how others thought:

I think that you are right; because most teachers and those who serve in the church do not enter or finish the *Maṣ'haf Bet* they are not able to teach or improve the understanding of the people. Those who serve in the church by singing hymns do a good job for the worship and other services of the church but because people do not understand the meaning and the message of the hymns there is a lack of knowledge and understanding among the people.²³

Some reasoned that members of the clergy will tend towards acculturated understandings of religious teachings, perpetuating folklore or vernacular faith, as opposed to theologically justified understandings. The same church teacher distinguished faith from culture or tradition and argued that many undertrained clergy may be unable to separate one from the other:

The teachings of the faith are different than tradition, which is a practice handed down from one generation to the other. But faith is not like that. For example, clothing style differs from one place to the other. Christianity is not like that, since anyone and everyone who believes in the one Christ will be called a Christian. It is one faith, one baptism and one church. This is the teaching of our faith, but tradition is countless even in a particular ethnicity and varies from place to place. I think there is a problem in separating the tradition from the faith.²⁴

Most theologians and clergy who were consulted admitted that culture was not the same as faith and affirmed that the continuation of cultural practices without religious awareness by many members of the clergy "hurt the church greatly". It was mentioned also that systematic efforts were being made by the church to address such historical shortfalls:

The church is now working hard to remedy this problem by opening training centres for priests, assigning trained teachers and opening theological colleges, so those who are

²² Interview with a priest and a church teacher in tabiya 1, 2 April 2017.

²³ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.

²⁴ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.



trained would go to their parishes and teach the faith and separate it from the tradition. We are also setting up short courses by theology graduates and preachers of the Gospel because they know the difference between the two and will teach the right teachings of the church on marriage, on the faith, the Holy Bible...etc. Through these processes the church aims to improve, and correct bad traditional practices, like female circumcision, which have no relationship with the teachings of the faith.²⁵

Another theologian confirmed these efforts, mentioning the incorporation of interpretation at the early stages of training in modern seminaries, in contrast to the curriculum of the traditional church-education schools.²⁶ Clergy are also being trained in preaching and providing pastoral advice. A local church teacher referred to the efforts made in recent years by the Association of Theology graduates in Ethiopia:

But we are trying to improve it by training priests and hymn singers the skill of preaching what they have learned and sing about and also we are assigning commentary teachers to parishes. Although they usually teach in the cities, we are encouraging them to teach in rural areas also. And we are also planning to train about 80 priests from two cities by theological graduate teachers. There is an Association of Theology graduates here in Ethiopia and abroad which helps us out by sending money for books and other materials. Every graduate member of the association pledges money for the association from their salary. And the sum of the money they collect will be used to buy books, bibles and other materials to train priests. Their main office is in Addis Ababa and a branch in Mekelle. They do a lot here: for example, they have trained priests in eight rounds from fifteen to eight days; the training covers dogma, homiletics, basic Bible study and canon.²⁷

It was postulated that in these training sessions the topic of marriage was also covered, albeit in ways that may place more emphasis on canonical teachings and less on how these relate to marriage issues in current times:

Yes, it is included in the teachings of the sacraments of the church and one of the sacraments of the church is Holy Matrimony. So in that portion of the course they will cover topics like what marriage is, how it should be, helping one another, protecting one another and equality in marriage. Those who take the training then go to their churches and teach other priests. Through this process slowly but surely change is coming to the church.²⁸

Some results are visible in the urban context, where most clergy are graduates of theological colleges and have achieved formal training. However, in the rural context training may have been less effective. As one member of the clergy in the city of Aksum noted, priests may attend and listen during trainings offered to them, but they may not fully understand because they lack the

²⁵ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.

²⁶ Interview with teacher at St Frumentius Theological College, Mekelle, 30 January 2017.

²⁷ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.

²⁸ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.



interpretative foundation. Some will return to their churches with little or incorrect understanding due to there being limited time in which to assimilate the new information.²⁹

In addition, even if religious students and clergy do achieve higher levels of training, they may choose not to return to the rural areas to serve as priests, but rather to move to the city and become religious teachers. Students may be entirely driven away from the traditional religious schools in order to pursue better alternatives, such as by attending secular schools and modern theological seminaries. It should be mentioned here that attending state school was not initially allowed for clergy because it was considered a sin.³⁰ It was reported numerous times by different interlocutors that no official decision had ever been issued by the Holy Synod in Ethiopia on this issue, the prohibition being a more intuitive response of the clergy on the ground.³¹ Some were convinced that the initial rejection of state education among the clergy contributed to the preservation of low literacy levels among church personnel.³²

Today, while members of the clergy may continue to hold that the state school is dangerous because it can lead to a departure from God and faith, they would agree that education, if used properly, can be beneficial, and they would not hinder people from pursuing it, whether clergy or laity. However, this has meant that the number of students who attend the traditional religious school has been falling, with fewer clergy emerging from these schools.³³ A theologian expressed the following concerns regarding the situation:

The problem is that nowadays those who go to the worldly modern school earn relatively good money after graduation and lead a better life. But those who go to the traditional religious school the church doesn't pay enough. For this reason, people prefer to go to the worldly modern schools and the number of students in the religious schools has greatly declined.³⁴

In sum, while increasingly greater efforts are being made by the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* Church to train its clergy and to address what is perceived to be a lack of ability among some clergy to differentiate between faith and culture, the existence of modernising influences, the expansion of state education and the historically weak foundation of rural priests in the skills of interpretation were believed to be curtailing the effectiveness of such initiatives.

In contrast to the justifications of the theologians and other learned members of the Church who were interviewed for this study, the shortcomings of the clergy working on the ground may not reflect solely the challenges of traditional Church education, but more complex processes on the ground. As will become evident in this report, the lack of preparedness among rural clergy to teach with the appropriate level of exegetical contextualisation on issues of marriage and the family and to speak against practices that have pernicious implications for gender relations and spousal life

²⁹ Informal discussion with member of the clergy, Aksum, 28 July 2017.

³⁰ Informal discussion with priest in tabiya 2, 14 March 2017.

³¹ Informal discussion with layman whose father was a priest in Aksum city, 24 April 2017.

³² Informal discussion with member of the clergy, Aksum, 28 July 2017.

³³ Informal discussion with priest in tabiya 2, 14 March 2017.

³⁴ Interview with teacher at St Yared Theological School, Aksum, 26 May 2017.



is not disconnected from pressures experienced in their interactions with the laity and their inculturated vernacular realities

The discourses of the clergy about the faith (*haymanot*)

When clergy described their faith (*haymanot*), they tended to speak in terms of laws for living and coexisting with others. For most of those who discussed it, *təkəkəl Ortodoks haymanot* was defined on the basis of its historical indigeneity. A church teacher explained that the mainstream Christian tradition is Orthodox because it entered Ethiopia in the 4th century at the time of Constantine the Great. He explained that St Frumentius had introduced it, and it had been preserved ever since. He distinguished the indigenous faith from the movements of *Tāhadiso* (which literally means 'renewed') and Pentecostalism growing in Ethiopia, which he considered incorrect and inaccurate because they contained departures from the teachings of the Apostles and the Holy Fathers.³⁵

When they were asked what they taught the laity about the faith, many members of the clergy answered that believers were instructed to live in peace with their relatives and neighbours, not to steal or take advantage of other people's money, to stay faithful to their first spouse, and to live a life free of sin inside the church by participating regularly in the sacraments. Numerous priests emphasised fasting and taking communion as essential conditions for a strong faith. Those with more experience and training were conscious of the fact that as priests they needed to fulfil the same expectations in their own personal lives in order to give a good example to the laity. A priest with 40 years' experience of service had the following to say:

The teachers teach day and night for people to live in peace with strangers, with their spouse and with their neighbours, not to transgress against others or to seek what is not theirs. It is true that faith is empty without love and repentance. I, having put this crucifix on my neck, cannot go around robbing people, giving false witness, marrying another on top of the one I have, gossiping about others and plotting against them. How can I escape the judgment?³⁶

Others emphasised the soteriological tenets of the faith tradition, speaking about the importance of personal choice and action. A priest, for example, remarked:

God does not see difference or refuse people due to their wealth, height and weight, or skin colour. The only reason for which God refuses a person is that person's deed. It is the bad deed of the person which condemns him to hell. God does not say "because you are poor come near me". What brings a person near to God is their deed. God refuses or accepts a person due to their deed. Our Holy Book tells us that there are two choices in front of us: fire and water, and we can choose to walk in either of the two, the fire or the water. The fire is the representation of hell and the water [is the

³⁵ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June 2017.

³⁶ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.



representation] of heaven, and the power to choose between either of those lies with the person.³⁷

The tendency was to think of everyone as being sinful, which led many interlocutors to stress the importance of self-awareness and repentance. Without honest repentance one cannot gain the Kingdom of Heaven, even if one has performed good acts in their life's journey. The aforementioned priest also explained:

What God gave us and charged us with is doing good works, for love and for peace. He did not allow us to quarrel with each other, gossip about one another, to seek that which is not our own, to bear false witness and to lust after another man's wife; these are not the acts which our God allowed us to do. So when a person who has committed one of these and other sins does not repent, this is wrong. Not even if he gives a house full of gold to the church and feeds the poor. One has to be repentant of his sins and confess.³⁸

Not all priests emphasised repentance, with most noticeable examples being from teachers trained in theology and more spiritually attuned priests, even if they lacked training. The majority of interlocutors emphasised the need to live by the laws of the church, but without contextualising these commandments in a more profound or comprehensive understanding of Orthodox soteriology. Most clergy nodded in agreement when the author asked them to confirm that the aim of the faith was to help believers to achieve the Kingdom of Heaven, but almost no one spoke in terms of achieving likeness with God. During the period of fieldwork in Ethiopia, only a few church teachers and a monk stressed the objective of living a saintly life. A church teacher in one of the villages discussed the importance of living in penitence so that the Holy Spirit may be able to act within the individual, strengthening the latter against worldly temptations.³⁹

The discourses of the clergy on gender relations, marriage and spousal abuse

Gender relations

The clergy who were interviewed in Aksum more or less upheld the official teachings of the church, but they articulated them differently according to their level of understanding, training and personal attitudes. A church teacher commented: "The Bible says [that] man and woman are equal, it is culture (*bahäl*) that does otherwise. When they get married, they become one body, one in the likeness of God (*'amsal*), the money belongs to both equally. They share one attitude, they share the work."⁴⁰ The very learned clergy I spoke to agreed that within the faith man and woman are equal, citing the story of Genesis.

³⁷ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

³⁸ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

³⁹ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 20 May 2017.

⁴⁰ Interview with a priest and a teacher in tabiya 1, 2 April 2017.



There were other members of the clergy who cited Biblical passages more literally, as in this case: “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).”⁴¹ The speaker was an ordained elderly priest with a very poor theological background.⁴² Interestingly and surprisingly, his statement was also condoned by a trained church teacher who happened to be present during the interview. These articulations appear to perpetuate folklore ideals of the subordination of wives, which were reported by numerous interlocutors to still dominate in the minds of some members of the society.

In addition, certain practices that were followed by the clergy seemed to perpetuate cultural norms that are restrictive to women. These norms were perpetuated by the female adherents themselves, but the clergy did not seem to discourage them through appropriate teaching. For example, women in the villages under research did not generally enter the church during their menses, staying outside the church gate during Sunday liturgy. Most theologians would consider that this norm does not entail a gender bias, but rather reflects a canonical rule that neither men nor women should enter the church when there is any type of blood flow, following the ecclesiastical understanding that the blood of Christ (Holy Eucharist) should be the only blood being offered. Despite this gender-neutral rule, the canonical book of the church, *Fetha Nägäst*, placed special emphasis on keeping menstruating women out of church, with priests being threatened with deposition should they allow women in their menses to enter.⁴³ Gender-sensitive theologian Heregewoin Cherinet has previously proposed that this prohibition has been amplified in the discursive perpetuation of ‘folklore attitudes’ and is not theologically justified.⁴⁴ She traced these practices to the Old Testament heritage of the tradition and explained that all these prohibitions had been undone in the New Testament, citing a widely venerated Church Father: “The Church teaches us that the great Church Father John Chrysostom strongly opposed the people who were prepared to stone a woman who had entered the Church during menstruation.”⁴⁵

It may be said that while the EOTC has adhered theologically to a position of equality between man and woman as taught in the Gospels, it has also preserved certain Judaism-inspired practices as part of its inherited Old Testament tradition. While some gender-related and marriage-related practices were loosen or redefined within apostolic teachings, these seem to have acquired an immutability of sorts in the folklore experience of the church, most likely enforced in the discursive perpetuation of the same practices among the laity, as evidenced in the research with the communities in Aksum.

⁴¹ Interview with a priest and a teacher in tabiya 1, 2 April 2017.

⁴² Interview with a priest and a teacher in tabiya 1, 2 April 2017.

⁴³ The first instance states: “If a priest or a deacon fails in his duties by allowing a woman who is menstruating to enter into the church, or gives her the Eucharist during the days of her menstruation, he shall be deposed even if the woman is from the royal family.” The second repeats that, “[a] woman in menstruation shall not enter the church nor shall she receive the Eucharist until the days of her menstruation are over, even if she is the wife of the king.” The specific injunction is attributed by the translation to the Melchite version of the second part of the canonical book written after the Council of Nicaea. See P. Tzadua and L.P. Strauss (trans. and ed.), *The Fetha Nägäst (Laws of the Kings)* (Addis Ababa: Central Printing Press, 1968), 46.

⁴⁴ H. Cherinet, *Women and Donkeys in Ethiopia: Gender and Christian Perspective* (Addis Ababa: Graphic Printers, 2015), 272–273.

⁴⁵ Cherinet, *Women and Donkeys in Ethiopia*, 273.



Gender roles

The gender-segregated division of labour was found to be predominant in the local society, and was associated with some cases of women's abuse through over-exhaustion and conjugal conflict. Invariably, the laity attributed this division of labour to culture and affirmed that the clergy did not teach this. For instance, two rural men with different educational backgrounds affirmed that it was cultural to segregate labour in rigidly gender-based ways and were adamant of the fact that their faith did not teach such a division.⁴⁶ A male resident remarked: "It is not by faith. It is our habit. Based on lasting tradition woman works her own work and man works his own work. They work their due work. Until now this old habit has not changed."⁴⁷ A primary school teacher, also a resident of a village, observed that "the church has always preached equality. Inequality as seen in current gender-segregated lifestyles and distribution of authority in the family is the result of cultural practice."⁴⁸ At the same time, a man in the village affirmed that "faith defines man to care for outside work and the wife in the house."⁴⁹

The clergy who were interviewed also generally affirmed that the local gender-segregated lifestyle and the traditional division of labour had been a customary norm that had, in fact, contradicted religious teachings. A church teacher tried to explain why laypeople insisted on maintaining this order: "But, because the woman is physically weaker compared to a man and a man is less capable than a woman, they (the people) say: 'This is your work, this is my work.' The clergy do not teach like that."⁵⁰ Another priest condemned the gender-based segregation of marriage on the following premises:

For example, if she (wife) asks him for money, he will not give her without hesitation. If she said: "I am tired fetch water for me" or asked him to watch the kettle while she was doing something else, he would say to her: "This is your job", then he would think to himself: "What kind of wife have I married, am I a woman that she would ask me to fetch water and watch the kettle?" But this is not a response of an Orthodox or a spiritual person, especially to his own wife. If he saw another woman in distress and in need of help he would have to help; that is what our Holy Book commands us to do in this case. If there is a widow raising kids by herself, it is a duty for everyone who can to support her.⁵¹

A closer look at clergy discourses, however, demonstrated differences in how gender roles were articulated by different members of the clergy, which depended on their level of training, but also, and perhaps more so, on their theological acumen and own spiritual life. In some discourses, apostolic teachings became secondary to the emphasis placed on Old Testament standards, overlapping with socio-cultural norms, as highlighted in the following comment by a rural priest:

A husband is a male, with his father Adam's race. A wife is a female, her mother Eve's race. And because God has instructed them to live together, based on that, we still

⁴⁶ Interview with layman, 13 April 2017; Interview with *Maḥəbārā Qədusan* attendant, 5 July 2017.

⁴⁷ Interview with layman, 13 April 2017.

⁴⁸ Interview with *Maḥəbārā Qədusan* attendant, 5 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.

⁵⁰ Interview with a priest and a church teacher in *tabiya* 1, 2 April 2017.

⁵¹ Interview with priest in *tabiya* 1, 6 April 2017.



follow that rule. [...] 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.⁵²

His description does not necessarily depart from the official church teachings, but it describes gender roles in such a manner that a gender-based division of labour is implicitly reinforced. The laity in the countryside, who generally relied solely on clergy discourses to learn about the faith, would be challenged to grasp the subtle difference between a divinely-instituted gender binary and marital bond, which this priest invoked, and the rigidly gender-segregated division of works that was conventionally upheld in the folklore culture. And since the gender-based organisation of life reinforced local ideals of wifeness predicated on a woman's ability to take charge of her household, give birth and rear many children, and other such expectations, these discourses could be indirectly sustaining ideals of womanhood/wifeness that governed the local society, with potentially problematic implications for the perpetuation of some forms of conjugal abuse.

Marriage

Within church theology, women and men have been considered spiritual equals with the same potential to achieve likeness to God and sainthood. This fundamental equality was applied to the marital relationship as well by most learned teachers in the field, although a difference between male and female authority within marriage was understood to reflect the Providence of God to preserve harmony in the family.

Many of the clergy I spoke to explained that marriage had its origins in heaven with the first couple, Adam and Eve. They considered that a man's first wife and a woman's first husband is the rightful spouse and remains so in the eyes of God. One priest, for example, affirmed that if a man marries a woman and then divorces, and then marries a second woman, and then a third, the first woman is considered his rightful spouse.⁵³ It was considered to be against the faith to have multiple relationships one after the other because this did not follow the prototypes of Adam and Eve and also Abraham and Sara. Numerous priests spoke of Abraham and Sara as the ideal married couple, to suggest that they had lived with mutual respect and understanding, and remained married to each other until the end of their lives.

The aim of marriage was still identified primarily with procreation, which reflected the church's adherence to an Old Testament understanding and its limited integration of New Testament theology and Pauline teachings; this was an issue that was thoroughly discussed in the original study discussing church references to St Paul. This Old Testament influence on marriage theology becomes evident, for example, in the following comment made by a priest:

In heaven, they were one, so they had to become husband and wife to reproduce and fill this earth. They were instructed by God. Based on this, we, because we are Adam's

⁵² Interview with priest, 12 February 2017.

⁵³ Informal discussion with priest in car to tabiya 1, 30 March 2017.



children, we too are asked to reproduce and to create relations, but before that to get married. Because of this, following the rule of our creator, Christ, we get married.⁵⁴

Some seemed to have more theologically grounded understandings of marriage as related to the soteriological message of the faith. A monk at a local monastery explained that marriage is one of the two ways (the other being ascetic life) for people to return to the original heavenly state. In married life, the spouses learn to love each other and to practise patience. He explained that when people enter into Holy Matrimony their previous sins are forgiven and they are cleansed by the sacrament. In the new life they have to live by the commandments that Paul gave for marriage – as one body. A monk emphasised that God permits only one man to one woman and that polygamy or concubinage is not allowed. This reflects God’s Creation of humanity, whereby God created Adam and Eve as the first couple. Marriage, in other words, was established in heaven, although the two spouses did not ‘know’ each other (did not desire each other to engage in sexual intercourse) until the fall from heaven. In married life the husband is expected to love his wife and the wife to honour her husband. Both of them must live in peace.⁵⁵

Some local priests expressed equally profound understandings even if they lacked a highly refined exegetical language. A rural priest with 40 years' experience in supporting couples remarked:

When it comes to marriage, the focus of the teaching is for the man and the woman to see and treat each other like brother and sister, for her to call him her brother and for him to call her his sister, and for him to be attentive with her and ask with what he can help her. When she is sick and tired he is asked to help her, and likewise when he is sick and tired she is asked to help him. This is what God loves. The purpose of marriage is not to sleep together in the same bed or to have children, no, it is to love one another. For example, I have a wife and I know of no one else but her. But it is not enough for me to say just that; I have to love and to respect her.⁵⁶

Here he was, essentially, responding to what he considered to be ‘worldlier’ understandings of marriage, which echoed the laity’s overwhelming understanding of marriage as a social contract for spouses by which to live together, procreate and share the day-to-day work. This was best expressed by another priest in the following comment:

In marriage, man and wife live together, have children and if their livelihood is farming, on their farming land, if their livelihood is business, doing business, if their livelihood is public service, working in public service. Living together, this is called marriage.⁵⁷

In discussing the essential preconditions for marriage, the clergy echoed the canonical standards for marriage as outlined in *Fäthä Nägäst*. They explained that marriage must be premised on the mutual consent of the bride and groom and that it must have the blessing of their parents.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 12 February 2017.

⁵⁵ Informal discussion with monk in tabiya 1, 9 February 2017.

⁵⁶ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

⁵⁷ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 12 February 2017.

⁵⁸ Informal discussion with priest in car from Shire to Aksum, 3 June 2017.



All priests spoke of the importance of marrying in the church prior to sexual intercourse. Emphasis was undoubtedly put on the virginity of the body, and when priests were asked to explain how the virginity of the spirit was accounted for in their teachings they seemed unable to talk about this. Priests generally encouraged everyone to remain a virgin and to marry in the church. At the same time they rarely spoke against cultural marriages, accepting that many people failed to keep their virginity and would have no alternative but to marry by the cultural *qal kidan* ceremony performed traditionally in the villages. Church marriage for non-virgins, which is canonically stipulated, was not generally practised historically, with some priests explicitly admitting that they sent non-virgin couples away to marry by the cultural ceremony.

Traditionally the church conducted Holy Matrimony by the *täklil* ceremony for the virgin bride and groom involving crowning. In practice, this meant that the Holy Matrimony sacrament was almost exclusively reserved for deacons and their virgin wives, as clergy and laity widely affirmed.⁵⁹ The Holy Matrimony was undoubtedly understood as a lifelong union that only virginal couples should be 'rewarded' with. A priest described it as follows:

Religious marriage means in the Orthodox *Tāwahədo* faith, the people who want to get married come with their parents to the church, and enter into a covenant. (They say): "We were two before this, but after this we are one, we are the same, our support to each other is one, our work is one, our heart is one, our conscience is one." They promise in front of their spiritual father. (They say): "From this moment on, I am with you, until my last days I am with you. To not hate you if you cannot walk anymore, if you cannot see, if you get sick." Also the same for the man, he says: "To not hate you if you cannot walk anymore, if you cannot see, if you get sick, to be with you until the day I die, until God calls for me, I am with you." There is a *täklil* ceremony and a book of *täklil* they read from, they read it out to each other. *Täklil* is for people who are virgins.⁶⁰

It was reported by numerous members of the clergy that eventually the Holy Synod extended the *täklil* ceremony to all virgin couples in the laity. A theologian explained:

Before, the *täklil* used to be for the deacons only but after the decision of the Holy Synod it became for everyone who is a virgin, especially since the fifth patriarch of Ethiopia Abuna Paulos. Before that, marriage used to be done traditionally with elders taking the promise of the married couples. Now even the ring ceremony which used to be outside the church is done in the church with the proper blessing. So there is the *täklil*, the ring, the Holy Communion and Holy *Meror*: on that day three sacraments are done. After this decision of the Holy Synod, if a priest officiates a marriage outside of the church, he will be punished. Now things are going better and the rule for marriage is the same in rural areas as it is in the cities.⁶¹

Steps to make the sacrament more accessible had been taken in more recent years. The aforementioned deacon confirmed that the church allowed everyone to marry in church by the ring

⁵⁹ For example, interview with priest in tabiya 3, 8 February 2017.

⁶⁰ Interview with a priest in tabiya 1, 12 February.

⁶¹ Interview with a member of the clergy, Aksum, 19 April 2017.



ceremony, which should conclude with the couple taking Holy Communion together after undergoing proper penance if they are not virgins.⁶² Another priest mentioned that couples who have not preserved their virginity “will only have the prayer of *Fəṭḥa Zāwāld* and be sprinkled with holy water.”⁶³ A few priests traced the re-establishment of the marriage by *Qurban* for non-virgins to an encyclical that they reported had been issued by the church some 15–25 years ago (however, reports about the date were inconsistent). This had informed local clergy that they could perform the church marriage with variations based on whether either or both of the bride and groom had abstained from premarital relations or not. A priest explained that people who came into church to marry were not all the same, some were “clean” and some “with sins”, and that a different approach had to be taken with each group of people.⁶⁴ The priest placed responsibility on the individual member of the clergy for refusing to perform church marriages for people who did not meet the precondition of physical virginity, and related this to the perpetuation of cultural marriages:

With two types (of ceremony in church) the situation is better now. People before were afraid to marry. They did not come because the priests did not want to marry them. So people married in the culture, the cultural way. Nevertheless, the people still came into the church to get the blessings of the priest. The spiritual father (*nāfs abat*) brought the couple to the church when the couple expressed their desire to marry. In the church they received the blessing and then they returned to the home to do the marriage by the cultural ring ceremony. Fifty years ago the people married in the home. The people gave rings and vows to each other. The priests blessed the marriages by going to the homes of the people.⁶⁵

Traditionally, before their marriage all couples would communicate with their spiritual father for confession, and if they admitted to having lost their virginity, they would typically marry by the cultural way, among elders, by making a promise to each other (what was locally termed the *qal kidan* ceremony). In such cases, clergy would encourage their spiritual children to marry by the cultural way. In the words of a priest:

If they are not virgins, then he tells them it is not allowed for them to do the *tāklil*, that the book doesn't allow it. He tells them to carry out the traditional marriage only. He doesn't take them to carry out the *tāklil* ceremony, he forbids them.⁶⁶

If one of the two was a virgin and the other was not, the former could be crowned, while the other could not. As one priest explained, they would stand in different places and be told different prayers.⁶⁷

These practices suggest that the rural clergy have historically placed emphasis on physical virginity and have employed this as a strict precondition for church marriage. Some priests reasoned that many of those who had sins and were not virgins had been divorced people, and since second

⁶² FIELDNOTES, 14 March 2017.

⁶³ Interview with church administrator, Aksum city, 10 March 2017.

⁶⁴ Interview with priest, 8 February 2017.

⁶⁵ Interview with priest in tabiya 3, 8 February 2017.

⁶⁶ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 12 February.

⁶⁷ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 12 February.



marriages were discouraged in the church, these couples would be sent away. The categories of non-virgins who had not been previously married and divorced people seemed not to have been relevant to the conservative society. However, with the advent of 'modern times', with more and more people being involved in premarital relations (thus failing to meet the standard of physical virginity at the time of their marriage), it had become appropriate to make marriages for penitent non-virgin couples more accessible.

Despite the increasing awareness of such canonical adjustments and re-articulations in regard to Holy Matrimony, clergy affirmed that marriages for non-virgins were infrequently performed in the rural areas.⁶⁸ Some deacons and priests adamantly stated that they would not perform Holy Matrimony for non-virgin couples.⁶⁹ One deacon who had been exposed to the matrimonial practices of the Coptic Church (which he explained performs marriages for non-virgin couples in the church) spoke condescendingly of these practices since, by his logic, those who are not virgins cannot marry by *Qurban* in the church.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, laypeople's and clergy's testimonies suggested that what some clergy performed was a ceremony that involved some form of crowning (the '*aklil*' ceremony) but which omitted the Holy Communion.⁷¹ A couple of priests affirmed that marriage for non-virgin couples could now be performed by '*aklil*', but that *Qurban* was prohibited for non-virginal couples. Couples could take *Qurban* only when they underwent confession (*nəsəha*), and this would typically happen on a different day. This was confirmed by a third priest, who explained:

The spiritual father first asks: "Are you virgins?" Sometimes the woman says she is, but the man says he is not. This is a problem. These two cannot marry. But they can fast, pray, pay a price and then be together afterwards. So after that, they can do the *tāklil* ceremony. They cannot do the Holy Communion. He is not a virgin, she is a virgin. If both of them were virgins, the spiritual father would let them do the Holy Communion. If they're not, they cannot do it. But after they fast, pray and pay a price, they can come to the church for the Holy Communion.⁷²

Such descriptions seem to be at odds with explanations given by theologians and learned members of the clergy, according to which the crowns (*'aklil*) should be worn only by virginal couples during the Holy Matrimony as a 'reward' for having kept their virginity until marriage. Under this understanding, non-virgins should not be married by crowning. In addition, given the theological teaching that it is the *Qurban* that unites two in one flesh, as was explained by learned theologians, a marriage without *Qurban* would not be a complete form of marriage. Such misconceived practices could originate in the problems the church faced historically in addressing out-of-wedlock sexual relationships and in deterring 'impure' individuals from taking Holy Communion. In the past, priests had reportedly discouraged people from taking Communion because of a suspicion that they lacked bodily virginity. It is likely that this mentality and objective carried over into the sacrament of the Holy Matrimony. Instead of conducting confession, fasting,

⁶⁸ For example, informal discussion with priests in tabiya 2, 9 July 2017.

⁶⁹ For example, interview with deacon in tabiya 2, 14 March 2017.

⁷⁰ Informal discussion with priest in tabiya 2, 14 March 2017.

⁷¹ Interview with layman, 16 May 2017.

⁷² Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.



and lastly performing the Holy Communion for non-virgins, conservative rural priests may have intuitively replaced the Holy Communion with crowning, considering it inappropriate for non-virgins to take *Qurban*.

While in the urban context more and more people had started to marry in the church, including couples who had premarital relations and had not been virgins at the time of marriage, as some confided in the author, this was not the case in rural areas. This could reflect the fact that in rural areas premarital relations have not been as open as in the urban context, or have been kept a secret for the sake of preventing gossip, which is endemic to the life in the countryside. Therefore the category of non-virgins would not be as salient in the rural context.

As was mentioned earlier, historically rural clergy attended cultural marriages, a practice which continued in present times.⁷³ One theologian insisted that this did not violate the canonical stipulations discussed above and that priests attended only in the role of friends or relatives:

You have asked why priests go to these weddings and the reason is because priests are connected through families with people so they go to be with them. The culture here is to be together with people through the good and the bad. So priests go to weddings outside the church to be friends and family but not in an official capacity to minister the wedding. And there is a penalty for any priest who does that outside of the church.⁷⁴

However, this study suggested that priests played a more central, albeit perhaps symbolic, role in these ceremonies. Attendance at wedding ceremonies in the villages of study suggested that the couple and their families associated the presence of a priest at the wedding with having the blessing of God.

Early marriage and bodily virginity

While the clergy and laity alike were aware that the government considered the conventional marriage age of 15 for girls to be illegal, no priest openly opposed under-age marriages when these occurred; in fact, the presence of priests at local wedding ceremonies involving under-age girls was a norm. While it cannot be argued that ecclesiastical rules caused early marriages perpetuated historically in folklore life, it is possible to demonstrate that clergy discourses provided some grounds for the continuation of the norm in more recent times.

As it was explained, the clergy's leniency on marriage practices coexisted with a traditional emphasis on bodily virginity as the main precondition for the Holy Matrimony. One priest commented: "People before were afraid to marry [in church]. They did not come because the priests did not want to wed them. Thus, people married in the culture, the cultural way."⁷⁵ A local deacon stated more explicitly that people who are not virgins cannot marry by *Q^Warban* in church.⁷⁶ He confirmed that such couples traditionally married by *qal kidan* in their homes in the presence

⁷³ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June 2017.

⁷⁴ Interview with member of the clergy, Aksum, 1 April 2017.

⁷⁵ Interview with priest, 8 February 2017.

⁷⁶ FIELDNOTES, 14 March 2017.



of elders and the spiritual father. Similarly, a priest and church teacher observed that “the law forbids people who lost their virginity to get married in the church; they can go to confession and get married outside the church by *qal kidan* and have a good marriage.”⁷⁷

This preoccupation with bodily virginity in association with marriage was illustrated best in a discussion with a rural church teacher who had been trained in Gondar. The author asked the teacher why the tradition had stipulated the requirement of bodily virginity, if one considered the discouraging effect this reportedly had on the laity and in view of the objective of the faith to serve as a medium of spiritual healing for all. He replied by explaining that both spiritual and physical virginity were important in the local tradition.⁷⁸ Where Holy Matrimony was concerned, however, he suggested that the former was predicated on the latter. This was implied in his rhetorical question to the author: “For example, a person who kept their bodily virginity, he or she will be said to have virginity of the spirit, but if they lost the virginity of their body, how could they be said to have virginity of the spirit?”⁷⁹ While he agreed that deciding who qualifies for a sacrament on the basis of an aspect of their bodily condition largely ignored the spiritual aspect, he seemed to remain convinced that physical purity was the underlayer of spiritual purity and should be rewarded with the *täklil*.

Other priests recognised that the emphasis on bodily virginity was problematic because it could incentivise some people to preserve their virginity for ‘worldly’ reasons or to lie about it, not serving the spiritual aims of marriage. Ecclesiastically speaking, when couples told priests that they were virgins and wanted to have a church marriage, priests were expected to accept the people’s word.⁸⁰ However, in view of the pressure that individuals felt to appear honourable to others, and to meet local standards of chastity and purity, arguably some applicants might hesitate to admit their actual situations. A priest highlighted exactly this possibility when he said that “some would conceal the fact that they are not virgins and will get married by the *täklil*, which is against the law and the teachings of the church.”⁸¹ This was asserted also by a male interlocutor who remarked: “Others who are not consistent, they go everywhere, doing what God dislikes and claim to be a virgin. They are on and off with the church and they confuse the church.”⁸²

While the emphasis on bodily virginity as a precondition for the Holy Matrimony ceremony derives from the church’s traditional canons, the tradition has also spoken in the same breath about spiritual virginity, such as when praising the physical, spiritual and mental cleanliness of St Mary.⁸³ The emphasis placed by clergy primarily or almost exclusively on bodily virginity in the context of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony could, thus, be an indication of the church adapting to or internalising a societal prioritisation of bodily virginity. It was reported by members of the laity in the countryside that the established socio-cultural practice had been for older women to check

⁷⁷ Interview with priest/teacher, 19 March 2017.

⁷⁸ Interview with priest/teacher, 19 March 2017.

⁷⁹ Interview with priest/teacher, 19 March 2017.

⁸⁰ Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.

⁸¹ Interview with priest/*māriḡeta*, 14 March 2017.

⁸² Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.

⁸³ As in the *Dərsan Şeyon*.



females for virginity at the time of their marriage.⁸⁴ Attitudes that prioritised bodily virginity were discernable among segments of the laity who resisted the opening up of the Holy Matrimony to more people. Especially illustrative was the case of a woman at an Ethiopian church (attended by the author in London), who expressed polemical criticisms of the church's offering of Holy Matrimony to non-virgins.⁸⁵

Regardless of what nurtured the clergy's stance on physical purity, it is important to acknowledge a possible link between this persistent ecclesiastical discourse and the continuation of early marriages among the laity, potentially mediated by a desire to secure the girl's virginity. While it may be true that the local clergy did not discriminate in their teachings regarding bodily virginity, emphasising that both bride and groom should meet the same expectation, it is plausible that this message was received in a gendered manner by a society that already prioritised female virginity. In other words, even though they were intended to be gender neutral, clergy discourses could have had gender-specific effects. In addition, the existence of the rigid precondition of bodily virginity together with the priests' general leniency around the age of marriage, combined with the evidence of previous studies from Ethiopia that have reported deacons seeking to marry very young girls, presumably to ensure their virginity,⁸⁶ offers grounds for thinking that some members of the clergy themselves did not eschew the influence of folklore standards.

The conjugal relationship

All members of the clergy emphasised the lifelong covenant of marriage, and many invoked Abraham and Sara as the ideal married couple.⁸⁷ Clergy taught that one man should stay with one woman until the end of their lifetime and that divorce is sinful. One priest explained that if a man married a woman and then divorced and then married a second woman and then a third, the first woman would be considered his rightful spouse.⁸⁸ Some exceptional cases were cited, in which divorce could be justified theologically: adultery by one or both partners, physical spousal abuse that threatens the life of one of the partners (usually the wife), or one party's decision to break the bond (such as wife abandonment). To justify these exceptions, a priest referred to the teachings of Christ on the issue of divorce when he was interrogated about the same by the Pharisees:

The Hebrews asked Christ that. Moses said if a man so chooses to divorce his wife he should write a letter containing her sin and divorce her. "What is your judgment?" they said to Christ and he answered by saying: "What God has joined no man can put asunder. But when Moses gave you this law it was in response to your stubborn heart." So divorce under tolerable circumstances is not allowed but if a married couple who are living by receiving the Holy Eucharist together and if he chooses not to receive the Holy Eucharist and break their union, she can divorce him. And if she fears for her life, she

⁸⁴ Interview with elderly laywoman, 23 May 2017.

⁸⁵ FIELDNOTES, 22 October 2016.

⁸⁶ N. Jones, T. Bekele, J. Stephenson, T. Gupta and P. Perezniето with G. Emire, B. Gebre and K. Gezhegne, "Early Marriage and Education: The Complex Role of Social Norms in Shaping Ethiopian Adolescent Girls' Lives," Country Report, Overseas Development Institute, 2014, 37 ; FIELDNOTES, 22 October 2016.

⁸⁷ Interview with priest, 10 June 2017.

⁸⁸ Informal discussion with priest in car, 30 March 2017.



can divorce him because what God loves is for us to live longer so that we can repent and confess in order to return to him. How can a wife who is killed by her husband enter in confession after she is dead? If my wife marries another on top of me and I know this for a fact not by gossip or through suspicion, I can divorce her. And in turn, if I marry another on top of my wife and it proves that priest [his name] is married to another woman, my wife can divorce me. But apart from these exceptions, we cannot get divorced. We are one body and one bone and we will remain that when we are dead.⁸⁹

Major emphasis was also placed on the spouses' peaceful cohabitation. A priest affirmed that the clergy generally advised people to live in peace and husbands to love their wives, as it was asked in the Bible.⁹⁰ Concomitantly with peace, clergy asked the faithful to avoid fighting in their marriages, as highlighted in a priest's comment: "Another thing he teaches is not to fight in marriage. What's holy about fighting? There's no good in fighting. If you fight, it is a sin, it is trouble. It does not lead you to God."⁹¹ Another priest affirmed that clergy always warned people that if they fight, God is not with them; in addition, that fighting will result in a bad reputation for the wife or husband and also in further fighting between the families of the two, creating 'bad blood'.⁹²

These teachings generally echo the understanding among theologians and clergy alike that marriage is the fundamental base of society and that its integrity must be protected. It also reflects the church teaching that peaceful co-existence with others is a means to achieving the faith's soteriological aims. When it is considered that much abusive behaviour in the local society is associated with conjugal argument and fighting, it can be understood how such teachings could serve to discourage conjugal abuse. However, unqualified statements pronouncing the importance of marriage as a lifelong covenant, when combined with the emphasis placed by clergy on the preservation of peace in marriage, could produce undesirable effects in a socio-cultural matrix that already expects women to be non-confrontational with their husbands and to preserve their marriages as 'good' wives.

Spousal abuse

All the members of the clergy condemned conjugal violence and taught indiscriminately that a marriage cannot be called a marriage if it is not premised on peaceful cohabitation between the spouses. However, clergy were not heard to teach openly in ways that would condemn conjugal abuse. In relation to sexual coercion within marriage, some members of the clergy even espoused the prevalent folklore attitude that expected wives to cater to their husbands' sexual needs. This was the case in the example of a priest who expressed disbelief that a wife could even think of refusing sexual intercourse with her husband.⁹³ Being one flesh, he seemed to believe, meant that wife and husband should not separate anything, including their bodies. Theologically speaking, this view does not contradict church theology; however, it does not fully articulate it either. The

⁸⁹ Interview with priest and a layman present, 6 April 2017.

⁹⁰ Interview with priest, 6 February 2017.

⁹¹ Interview with priest, 10 June 2017.

⁹² Interview with priest, 6 February 2017.

⁹³ FIELDNOTES, 14 May 2017.



apostolic teaching that in marriage husbands should consider themselves the servants of their wives has been equally upheld. This counterbalances any male authority granted through headship, and establishes that coerced sex cannot be accepted as Christian conjugal behaviour. Where clergy fail to present marriage as a mutual act of altruistic giving, but emphasise wife and husband being 'one body' in a community that already grants males authority, they may unwittingly feed into folklore attitudes regarding marital sex, as opposing to countering them.

Table 2: Teachings attributed to priests by both clergy and laypeople

That marriage originated in heaven in the prototypical couple of Adam and Eve
That people should not marry relatives
That marriage must be premised on mutual consent
That people should obtain the permission of their father/parents before they get married
That people should preserve their virginity and marry in the church
That marriage is a promise and it is important to keep it
That man and woman are one body and must live in peace and agreement
That fighting distances people from God
That fasting is essential in married life
That polygamy, concubinage and divorce are prohibited

The pastoral mediations of priests in married life

While opinions varied about the effectiveness of the police, courts and the women's associations in the countryside to support women in troubled or abusive marriages, the clergy were almost invariably considered resourceful, and the majority of laypeople spoke about the benefits of involving the clergy in the resolution of their marital problems. This was established in the exercises and discussions held as part of the participatory workshops employed in this research. One exercise invited participants to identify the institutions that were most prevalent in their society and which they first resorted to when they faced problems in their marriages. Table 3 describes the results from four different workshops held with male and female rural residents. Most workshop participants were young and middle-aged individuals, with the highest average age being 38.45 years old.



Table 3: Institutions laypeople resorted to the most when facing conjugal problems

Male workshop participants at D tabiya, 30 April 2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>Haymanot</i>/priests 2 Social court 3 Health unit/doctor or social court 4 Elders 5 Secular school/teachers
Female workshop participants at D tabiya, 26 February 2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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>
Male workshop participants at L tabiya, 23 April 2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>Haymanot</i>/priests 2 Elders 3 Secular school 4 Health unit 5 Police 6 Social court
Female workshop participants at L tabiya, 21 February 2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>Haymanot</i>/priests 2 Secular school 3 Health unit/hospital 4 Local social court 5 Borrowing association (<i>'ədər</i>) 6 Elders

As the table shows, workshop participants generally agreed that the priests or spiritual fathers were their first resort when marriage problems emerged. The qualitative interviews confirmed that the clergy were considered indispensable in marriage, as highlighted in this man's remark: "In the Orthodox Church one can't do without a priest. It is impossible to be in wedlock without a spiritual father."⁹⁴ Another man stated: "[Y]ou will have your spiritual father who is on call on emergency. The spiritual father is like God. One can't be allowed to do wrong. One has to confess to the priest."⁹⁵ Research participants generally thought that the guidance they received from their spiritual fathers was useful and beneficial, as highlighted in the following comment: "Yes, we think

⁹⁴ Interview with laywoman, 17 April 2017.

⁹⁵ Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.



that it is useful. These priests, our fathers, come and they say: 'This is good, this is how you should be.' If they tell us, we take it as useful."⁹⁶ Another male interlocutor opined: "It is good for priests to teach the people at church; and people ask the advice of the priests in order to improve themselves."⁹⁷ The results from the workshops and such testimonies left no doubt that the clergy were respected and sought after by the laity.

Such statements would have many nodding in agreement, but their understanding needs to be nuanced, since it emerged that rural residents were not unaware of shortfalls in the priests' own lives and marriages. Generally speaking, both laity and clergy considered that priests taught "the Word of God", but they also recognised that some of the priests did not embody these teachings in their own personal lives, thereby setting a bad example for the laity.⁹⁸ This will be discussed in the final section of the working paper, after considering the priests' pastoral advice and support to the community, as described by both clergy and the laity.

Clergy advising on marriage-related issues

How priests advised and responded to marital problems depended on the extent to which they recognised and understood local marriage issues, and their years of experience providing pastoral support. Most priests agreed that there were extensive marital problems and divorces in their communities. A few insisted that spousal abuse in the form of physical violence had almost disappeared from their communities; however, some believed that physical abuse might still exist but was not being communicated because women, who were usually the victimised parties in the situations described⁹⁹, would tend to stay quiet and would not report the abuse to local courts or the police. The earlier cited priest with 40 years' experience in service of the community illustrated this through an analogy: "Many women keep the domestic abuses and problems within them in the way they carried their children inside them when they were pregnant. They too will carry these problems inside them and will not share with anybody else."¹⁰⁰

The members of the clergy who were interviewed produced different reasons for the existence of marital problems in the local society. Poverty, the bad behaviour of the husband, and lack of agreement between the spouses were some of the reasons listed most often. Some thought that marriage was increasingly premised on materialistic concerns, which made conjugal conflict and divorce more likely.¹⁰¹ Many priests associated problems within marriages with 'modernity', materialism and, increasingly, with the existence of money-oriented mentalities driving the choice of spouses. Enquiries around the clergy's aetiologies for the extensive divorces in the local society

⁹⁶ Interview with layman, 13 April 2017.

⁹⁷ Interview with layman, 6 May 2017.

⁹⁸ For example, informal discussion with priest in car from Shire to Aksum city, 3 June 2017.

⁹⁹ The study in Aksum explored thoroughly lay people's definitions of conjugal abuse and the types they identified in their village communities, which are presented in the original studies. While these evidenced that abuse was not limited to any one gender, the majority of conjugal conflict and physical abuse cases involved a female victim and a male perpetrator, despite significant exceptions in the form of life-threatening intimate partner aggression involving female perpetrators.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with a priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

¹⁰¹ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June 2017.



evidenced a general bafflement among the clergy and a lack of a shared aetiology. A local monk who became a close confidant of the author reported that soon after the author started investigating these matters in Aksum, a meeting was held by the clergy during which this topic was raised. According to what the monk reported, the attendants could not think of a satisfactory explanation for the high levels of divorce among Orthodox adherents and no agreement was reached at that meeting.¹⁰²

Priests were generally said to advise against divorce and separation. According to one priest, the local clergy would typically advise people to be satisfied with what they have and to live happily, and those who do not have what they need, to pray that God will provide for them.¹⁰³ They would also advise the people to live in peace with each other, and encourage husbands to love their wives. They would warn the faithful that if they fight, God is not with them; so they must not fight. According to their teachings, fighting will result in a bad reputation for the wife or husband, and in further fighting between the families of the two, creating 'bad blood'. A teacher at a local church reported that the church teaches everyone that love is the essential ingredient for a peaceful married life and that in marriage there is no room for selfishness, which means that husband and wife should share the tiredness (*dəḳam*) of the married life.¹⁰⁴ All priests mentioned the need for the couple to fast regularly in order to achieve a peaceful cohabitation and to secure the blessings of God in their marriage. These teachings were best summarised in the following comment:

At the church, we do the general teachings. To teach about marriage, the priest goes to individual homes. If you want to enter heaven, you become man and wife, follow the rules of Abraham, follow the rules of Sarah, become monogamous, fast and respect holidays. He speaks of God's law, it is not something you do carelessly, and you have to follow Abraham's rules. If you follow Abraham's rules, you are following God's way. Another thing he teaches is not to fight in marriage. What's holy about fighting? There's no good in fighting. If you fight, it is a sin, it is trouble. It does not lead you to God.¹⁰⁵

While it was postulated that priests taught about marriage during Sunday liturgy, attendance of numerous liturgies by the author over six months in the countryside revealed few occasions on which priests directly referred to marriage and married life in public. Most priests would teach when visiting individual homes in their capacity as spiritual fathers, but not all churches employed priests who visited surrounding houses.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, many of the churches were located on hilltops or were locked in by mountains and unfriendly terrain, which required considerable time to cross. This made it less likely that the laity would visit regularly, or that the priest could travel easily to surrounding houses, scattered as they were at large distances. It should be noted again that rural priests had to work on their farms or to attend various events and trainings in the city of Aksum; this further reduced the time they could devote to visiting their spiritual children and to providing pastoral support.

¹⁰² Informal discussion with monk in tabiya 1, 7 March 2017.

¹⁰³ Interview with priest in tabiya 4, 6 February 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.



Mediating difficult and abusive marriages

When marriage problems emerged between couples, priests acting as spiritual fathers generally did their best to advise in line with the church's teachings, with some proactively considering the norm of women being quiet about their marital ordeals. This was illustrated in the answer given by the following priest when this norm was discussed:

Yes, she doesn't go to the police station or the local court, she goes to the priest first. For example, in the previous years, such problems existed but they (the women) did not do anything about it, until now. Now, when she goes to her spiritual father, she will tell him what happened to her. And the spiritual father will go to her home to speak with her husband, asking him what she did wrong and why he said he will divorce her! He will also ask if her husband was beating her and all the things she's been keeping to herself. He will then analyse the situation. If the wife did wrong, he will tell her that it was her fault and to not repeat the same mistake again. And if the husband did wrong, he will tell him it was his fault and not hers. This is how a priest resolves the marriage problem. But, if the conflict continues day and night, he then concludes that they should go to the local court and settle things once and for all.¹⁰⁷

This comment describes not only the typical mediation approaches followed by rural priests in cases of marital problems, but also evidences that members of the clergy considered wife-battering to be a possible occurrence, to the extent that some priests interrogated women proactively if they were being abused by their husbands.

In such situations, the priest will typically advise the abusive partner against the abusive behaviour by teaching about the expectations of marriage: that husband and wife must live peacefully with each other; that they are one body and that the husband (as the usual perpetrator) must not hurt the wife and that divorce is not allowed. In cases where a husband abuses his wife, the priest will attempt to speak to the perpetrator directly and will advise him against this practice on the grounds of its being un-Christian. While no priest would advise a couple to divorce, where constant argument made peace impossible priests would have no option but to send people to the elders or the local courts, who would then proceed to divorce the parties. The elders will usually meet at the centre of the village, and will try to reconcile the parties; if the two are not reconciled, they will agree on the steps that need to be followed for divorce to be formalised and for the shared property to be distributed between the former partners. This is illustrated in the following articulation:

I don't tell them to get a divorce. I tell them I am just trying to save their marriage, but that I won't advise them to get a divorce. The law does not allow it, you should stay true to your covenant, the book says this and this, "be patient with each other, don't be drunkards, got to church," I tell them. But the husband doesn't listen. She says he will kill her, break her. Then I tell them to go to the elders, "do what you will." The elders then say: "They should get a divorce before he kills her" and separate them. But in the eyes of God it is not the right thing. No spiritual father in the church will tell them to

¹⁰⁷ Interview with a priest and a church teacher, 2 April 2017.



divorce. There is no such rule in the Book. He will bring the Book and tell them what it says, tell them the rules and teach them the Word of the Bible. He tells them they have entered into a covenant and that they should honour it. But he can't tie them down and force them.¹⁰⁸

The process of mediation was described by another priest in considerably more detail, revealing a thorough process, notwithstanding the safety risks it may be raising for victims:

If the priest is a good and true priest who teaches his spiritual children truly and takes their confession and advises them diligently, he will go to their house or will send a given date and time for the husband and her to wait for him at their house. Then, he will go at the said date and time. And he will ask the husband why he is doing the things he is doing to his wife since what he had taught them was to repent and receive the Holy Eucharist and if they did indeed receive it, that he, the husband, should not act like a dog and should return to what he has left or repent for. But if they did not receive the Holy Eucharist not even once and if the husband admitted his guilt and said: "forgive me father I did indeed do these wrongs," then the priest will take his confession. But if he denies any wrongdoing in the matter and is rebellious, the priest will say: "I will give you until such time to repent of your sin and admit your guilt." It could be weeks. Then he will speak to him again. If he accepts his guilt in the matter, then they will proceed. But if he is still unrepentant, the priest will bring three witnesses and tell them that he advised him to be repentant of his guilt and to receive Holy Eucharist, but that he would not listen. In that meeting if that person admits his guilt and vows to change his ways to good [that is okay]. If not, on the next Sunday after the liturgy is done and in front of all the clergy and the laity the priest will say: "A person named such and such has done these wrongs and I have been advising him to change his ways and become penitent, but he would not listen. So from this day onward I will give him to the heavens and the church and that is final."¹⁰⁹

If the perpetrator refused to change his harmful behaviour, the priest could also advise the parents to talk to the man and to apply pressure on him to change.¹¹⁰ Other testimonies suggested that priests could take more drastic steps in order to reform the perpetrator's behaviour. One priest affirmed that a person who refused to listen to the spiritual father's advice and persisted in their harmful ways could be excluded from church life until they publicly repented.¹¹¹ In cases where the party at fault still refused to change their ways, the spiritual father could threaten to leave them. A male interlocutor expressed the thought that such measures were effective because, as he reasoned, it was unimaginable in the local society for someone to be without a priest:

If the man does not straighten up, the priest will try more; but if the man persists in doing wrong (wronging his wife), the priest will find a moment when most villagers congregate at a festival or some other event and the priest will declare in public that he has withdrawn his services from that man. As you know, in our faith one can't even

¹⁰⁸ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

¹¹⁰ Interview with a priest and a church teacher, 2 April 2017.

¹¹¹ Interview with a priest, 6 April 2017.



stay one night without having a confessor. It is taboo (unheard of). After being dismissed, the man will beg another priest saying, 'please host me for a night.' ('*aḥədrun*). It is difficult to get one unless one promises genuinely [to change].¹¹²

However, it may be noted that even though spiritual fathers abandoned adherents unreceptive to their advice, numerous testimonies suggested that people soon found a new priest, often by moving to another place or when they remarried. In addition, priests themselves did not appear to insist if someone chose to follow their own will rather than the rules of the church. A member of the clergy observed the following: "The church tells the priest that if they (the people) don't listen, he should let them go."¹¹³ A woman's narrative about her own experience with the clergy mediating her marital problems highlights this very well:

But the spiritual father said, "don't divorce, reconcile with each other, and make your marriage work", but he (her husband) said [to the priest]: "I am not going to do what you said." Then, the spiritual father said: "If you are going to do differently than what I told you to do, then you can do as you think best." Then they gave their consent.¹¹⁴

These statements expose the fundamental theological tenet of this tradition: that one should freely choose to follow the laws of God guided by one's conscience, which priests could not coerce anyone into doing; this is highlighted in a rural layman's explanation:

But our faith teaches us: "If you do not want to listen to God, it is up to you." ('*nrə'əskə 'aytbəl*'). So the priests accept what people tell them and they are not judgemental because this is what the Bible says ("take what is said to you"). For example, I can cheat them (priests) unless I have enough conscience to scrutinise myself. If I do not have a conscience, I can cheat them.¹¹⁵

This comment is relevant also to the earlier discussion around Holy Matrimony, where it was noted that priests generally accepted the word of couples who declared their virginity as true. These narratives establish that while priests could take public or private measures to apply pressure on spiritual children to change, they have had limited theological grounds for insisting on adherence, because the faith upholds that individuals must choose independently to follow God's ways and are responsible for their own actions.

Regarding the victimised or wronged party, the case-study at the beginning of this chapter suggested that a priest could advise women facing physical abuse to be patient, and that this could be associated with the widely postulated norm of women enduring spousal abuse. Other testimonies, however, suggested that priests did not insist indiscriminately that women show forbearance in their marriages. One priest explained, for example, that when there was a problem in the marriage caused by the husband, the woman was neither blamed or made to feel guilty, nor advised to stay in her marriage. His comment was as follows:

¹¹² Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.

¹¹³ Interview with priest, 10 June 2017.

¹¹⁴ Interview with laywoman, 12 March 2017.

¹¹⁵ Interview with layman, 11 June 2017.



Yes, it (divorce) is not allowed. If the husband is at fault, the wife has nothing to do with it. She is not the one who caused the problem. But the culture hasn't changed yet. The husband can do and live as he wishes, but the wife can't. [...] It needs effort to change the attitude. Yes, it will add another sin for her, it won't be right. So we tell the husband he's the one at fault, he's the one who is behaving in a bad way and that he's causing all the problems. And we advise him to change his ways.¹¹⁶

This testimony concerned a marriage where the husband had left his lawful wife, a matter which the priest had tried to address by involving the family of the man, by speaking to him directly and by reminding him of the sinfulness of his action. The priest explained that in this case the wife was not held responsible, nor was she asked to tolerate the behaviour of her husband. Other testimonies demonstrated that spiritual fathers even offered material support to help women and children in distress, without placing too much emphasis on forbearance. One laywoman narrated the following:

Yes, we had one (spiritual father). But the husband left. He (spiritual father) told him to return. But, he did not listen. So, the spiritual father could not do anything. Because nobody holds a person against their will, he (the spiritual father) said to me: "Don't worry, I am here for you, you're going to stay with me." And I'm staying with them (the spiritual father and his family).¹¹⁷

This needs to be appraised in conjunction with the understanding that most women have been traditionally dependent on their husbands for their and their children's sustenance. A husband's departure, which could be combined with his refusal to pay child maintenance, would place the wife and their children in material insecurity. This could be exacerbated if the woman had no living relatives to return to for support and had no schooling with which to find some sort of paid work. Without a salary she would not be able to pay the rent of her village residence and would soon be evicted. Such was probably the situation in which the woman in the previous narrative had found herself when her husband left – with six children to care for and no sustainable livelihood. The priest responded by inviting her to stay with his family.

These narratives diversify the landscape and suggest that although some clergy did advise the preservation of marriage, and abused women could be affected by this counsel, clergy were not always preoccupied with the preservation of marriage; in recognition of the fact that women were often rendered helpless by the harmful behaviour of the men, some clergy prioritised the women's well-being.

Women themselves did not necessarily appear to act solely or uncritically on the basis of the clergy's advice, albeit they valued the faith-based counsel.¹¹⁸ However, the clergy's emphasis on marriage, which ideally needed to be experienced as a lifelong and peaceful affair, could be seen as putting additional pressure on women. Values in the local society perpetuate the expectation that it is a wife's duty to be non-confrontational with her husband and to avoid conflict in marriage

¹¹⁶ Interview with a priest and a church teacher, 2 April 2017.

¹¹⁷ Interview with laywoman, 12 March 2017.

¹¹⁸ Interview with laywoman, 26 March 2017.



at all times in order to make this successful. In such a context, a wife who was advised to show patience in her imperfect marriage could be more hesitant to act to redress her situation. If such advice were provided without the proper qualification that marriage had to be premised on mutual love and respect, it could nurture the harmful attitude of inactivity among women. Most of the situations described here involved problematic but not violent husbands; however, there is no reason to think that the same patterns would not apply in physically abusive situations.

Limitations of pastoral interventions in difficult or abusive marriages

While it was generally postulated by both laypeople and clergy that priests have traditionally intervened in cases of spousal abuse to advise against it, certain factors seemed to reduce the effectiveness of their pastoral mediation and to create risks that were seemingly not considered.

First and foremost, while all priests were willing to mediate marital issues when they were invited to do so, not all were able to discern where conjugal abuse occurred, since in most cases this was not reported directly by the victimised party. The research revealed that some priests interrogated women proactively if they faced any physical violence from their husbands, in recognition of the problem and of women's extensive secretiveness around it; however, there were also a couple of priests who were convinced that spousal abuse did not exist in their communities. As numerous studies have indicated, clergy are often ill-equipped to recognise the signs and symptoms of conjugal abuse¹¹⁹ and may be misled by abusers' tendencies to minimise the abuse or to blame it partially on the victimised party, or by their expression of remorse and seeking of forgiveness.¹²⁰

Moreover, the narratives described by both clergy and laity suggested that priests may have limited skills in communicating effectively and sensitively with victims and perpetrators, which could place victims/survivors in difficult or unsafe situations. While many of the local priests interviewed considered the risks for women in cases of husbands' physical abuse, and advised them to seek support from the police or the social courts, when there was marital conflict priests tended to intervene directly and tried to reform the 'difficult' spouses. That this mediation could put victims at risk of further violence was never acknowledged and it is not clear if priests thought of this possibility. The literature on domestic violence from religious communities holds that clergy should not try to work with the victim or the perpetrator alone, but coordinate with specialised service providers and referral services to avoid creating new safety risks for victims.¹²¹ Priests should try to assess the urgency of the situation, acknowledge the ordeal of the victim and provide spiritual support, while referring the victim to specialised domestic violence services. Regarding perpetrators, they should confine themselves to providing spiritual guidance, without intervening thoughtlessly in ways that could anger the perpetrator or lead them to become angry, which could lead them to retaliate against their spouse. Given the central role of the clergy in the local society,

¹¹⁹ A. J. Johnson, ed. *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women* (Springer: New York, 2015), 5.

¹²⁰ C. Kilmartin, "Men's Violence Against Women: An Overview," in *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women*, ed. A. J. Johnson (Springer: New York, 2015), 17; N. Nason-Clark, B. Fisher-Townsend, C. Holtmann and S. McMullin, *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 67.

¹²¹ Johnson, *Religion and Men's Violence Against Women*, 5; Nason-Clark et. al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 17, 82.



however, it was difficult for priests not to intervene, especially in view of rural residents lacking access to organised domestic violence referral systems. This suggests an urgency to improve the clergy's understanding of victim and perpetrator psychology and the possible safety risks involved when mediating such situations, to enable them to respond more appropriately.

Akin to this, while priests were aware of the reasons that often caused marital problems, such as poverty and financial distress, and even recognised that some problems could have psychological underpinnings, they still tried to reform perpetrators in ways that did not consider this complexity. If difficult or abusive individuals refused to change, the tendency was to attribute this to their 'bad' behaviour or attitude. A priest, for example, remarked: "You give them punishment. There is punishment in the house of God. They get punished, but they do it again. It becomes a habit."¹²² In most cases priests scolded and imposed punitive spiritual measures on abusive husbands for their behaviour, warning them of the consequences of their sinful acts. Such punitive spiritual measures included fasting for a long period of time, undergoing some self-imposed hardship, or almsgiving. Another measure is illustrated in one priest's answer:

For example, if a man marries another man's wife, when he repents he will sleep on the floor for a year without a mattress and when it comes to food he who is carrying out his canon will fast all the major holidays and feast days, including Wednesday and Friday, except Easter Sunday.¹²³

These measures were not always effective in bringing about behavioural change, which some interlocutors attributed to the priests' use of judgemental language. One priest remarked: "The spiritual father always says to do this and that. He says not to create chaos in their marriage, teaches about the Word of the Bible. But people don't like it when you scold them."¹²⁴ He considered that the judgemental or punitive measures that priests imposed could be counterproductive in motivating individuals, but especially men, to change their behaviour. His remark pointed to the need for priests to employ alternative discourses that would be less judgemental, but would simultaneously help to develop a sense of accountability in the people who abused their partners in any form.

Another important reality that the clergy seemed to overlook was that men and women generally related differently to the faith. Religious experience was gendered and was largely defined by the socio-cultural context and the material conditions that men and women were typically faced with in the local society, with implications also for married life. Thus, while for many women in troublesome marriages faith served as a sort of buffer against uncertainty and disappointments, for some men who were interviewed faith served to deter them from committing what were perceived to be immoral or very sinful acts, such as adultery or abandoning one's wife. The language of being righteous in marriage seemed to have particular impact on men when priests used it. Thus, speaking of conjugal abusiveness as an unjust and unrighteous act and motivating men to be righteous as good examples for others might be a more appropriate way to foster positive behavioural change in this group.

¹²² Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.

¹²³ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 6 April 2017.

¹²⁴ Interview with priest in tabiya 1, 10 June 2017.



Lastly, it needs to be noted that not everyone in the local society was equally responsive to the teachings of the clergy or embodied these teachings in their everyday life to the same degree. Numerous priests affirmed that the laity increasingly failed to listen to the clergy's teachings and to change what they described as harmful or un-Christian ways. In appraising the effect of the involvement of the clergy in mediating marital issues, it is important to remember that the outcome of the clergy's discourses was always determined in part by every individual's ability and interest in receiving whatever messages were imparted to them by the clergy, and in applying these teachings to their married lives.

The spiritual life of the clergy and the issue of inculturation

It is also likely that some priests' own deficiencies and their failure to live peacefully with their own wives further reduced the effectiveness of their pastoral work; this leads to the important topic of the clergy's spiritual living and its effects on the laity.

Theologians, monks and clergy often admitted that while the clergy taught the right Word of God, they often failed to embody it in their daily conduct. A teacher at the St Paul Theological College observed that although priests were influential members of society, they had not always lived the faith in the right way.¹²⁵ He thought that some priests were materialistic or corrupt, and would try to justify their own behaviour. A monk at one of the local communities of fieldwork, on the other hand, opined that priests had had little training in interpretation ("*tärgum tēmhart*") and had not been teaching people sufficiently well. He said that some clergy engaged in sinful behaviour, citing the example of certain priests drinking beer at a local church that he had recently visited. He was also of the opinion that such priests had served as a negative example to the rest of society.¹²⁶ Another priest opined that although most clergy knew the rules, they still indulged in 'bad' behaviour:

Anyone with a conscience would not diverge from the rules of the faith, but there are differences. Some (clergy) take money, not everyone is a good person/member of the clergy. It's not everyone, but there are definitely some who are bad. [...]. They will say: "I know best, I know sorcery, this is medicine." They don't want to do the teachings, they do a lot of ungodly things even when they are leaders of the church. You can't say this does not exist.¹²⁷

The association of church members with sorcery was especially salient in the articulations of laypeople. Those holding the title of *däbtära*, in particular, were considered almost indiscriminately to be "bad people" who did magic for money, and were sincerely feared by men and women alike. Some clergy also admitted knowing such religious servants who performed bad things.¹²⁸ One teacher at St Paul's Theological College quoted an anecdotal story concerning a certain *däbtära* he knew. He once asked this *däbtära* why he focused so much on collecting money from the community, while he himself gave nothing of his own to the church and the needy. The answer of

¹²⁵ Interview with teacher at St Paul's Theological College, Addis Ababa, 17 January 2017.

¹²⁶ Informal discussion with monk in *tabiya* 1, 7 March 2017.

¹²⁷ Interview with priest in *tabiya* 1, 10 June 2017.

¹²⁸ For example, informal discussion with church teacher in *tabiya* 1, 11 June 2017.



this *däbtära* was reportedly: “Let me get first, and then I will give [alms]”. The teacher then asked rhetorically: “We do this way in Ethiopia. We teach the right way (in words), but we do the opposite (in actions). Why do we do that?”¹²⁹ Another priest had the following to say:

Yes, there are those who do one thing in the church and another outside of it, but these people labour in vain. For example, if I went out to the desert and collected dry firewood bits without having a strong rope to tie them all up sooner or later they will crumble on top of me and kill me. So what is a strong rope? It is truth, it is true prayer and the Holy Eucharist. These are the strong ropes which will hold us together to humble ourselves even when we are insulted, to hate money and to speak the truth. Without these, regardless of whether one knows the best *qəne* or [can] sing St Yared’s hymns in four languages, it is in vain. He who cannot buy his life back and guide his wife and children with peace cannot be a teacher. Our faith and the Holy Bible prohibit us from letting that kind of person become a teacher in the church. If I lead my life, wife and children rightly then I can choose or be chosen to teach. But how could I possibly teach others to love and to live in peace with one another, when I myself do not know how to do it? If I am that kind of person the only thing I would know how to do is to quarrel with others.¹³⁰

There were also reported cases of priests who faced problems in their own lives and marriages due to their bad behaviour. A female rural resident shared the following story:

There was one priest who separated from his wife. He was in the church and performed the sacraments. But afterwards, they were advised by the elders and now they are back together. But, a priest is not allowed to divorce. However, because this particular priest and his wife had (serious) problems in their house, it was allowed for them to get divorced. But [this was] not because it is allowed [for priests] to get divorced. If the priest tries to teach in church about not getting divorced, the people will accuse him of the same thing. They will say, “You didn’t do the right thing, you did not keep your marriage, instead you got divorced, so how can you teach me to not get divorced when you couldn’t even do it yourself!” There are people who told him this and who did not listen to his teachings.¹³¹

This account may have been exaggerated or distorted due to the nature of oral transmission, but it evidences a perception among laypeople that not all priests were exemplary in their married lives. It also evidenced that priests who were not seen to embody the church messages risked losing their credibility. It is also notable that this female interlocutor knew of the canonical rule that priests were not allowed to divorce and that they could be stripped of their ecclesiastical role should they divorce, which apparently had not occurred in the case of this priest, who continued working at the same church.

If the woman’s depiction reflected a wider reality, the incident she described demonstrated that the faithful have become more confident in rejecting a priest or a priest’s ways when these were

¹²⁹ Interview with teacher at St Paul’s Theological College, Addis Ababa, 17 January 2017.

¹³⁰ Interview with priest in *tabiya* 1, 6 April 2017.

¹³¹ Interview with laywoman, 16 March 2017.



incompatible with church teachings, as suggested also in one layman's comment: "[T]here are priests who are bad. We ask ourselves how can they help the people to improve when they are like this? However, there are some very good priests."¹³² However, as explained by the laity's comments, regardless of how willing people were to confront the priests about their personal deficiencies, the conviction remained strong that what the priests taught approximately reflected the teachings of the church. This was established best in the remark of one laywoman, who said: "Who knows what they have inside their marriages. But because what they teach is the Word of God it is right; they have to teach it."¹³³

Beyond these explicitly 'bad' examples, some members of the clergy were accused of being preoccupied with 'worldly' matters and of having lost sight of what truly mattered. An instructor at the St Yared theological school illustrated this with an example, explaining that when a woman did not respect the dress conventions, priests or other church personnel would discuss this with her and advise her. While he supported such a view on the basis of Pauline teachings, he concluded that in the local culture people and clergy "care more about formalities than substance."¹³⁴

A new level of understanding of the clergy's embodiment of religious teachings and spiritual life was achieved by the author's regular attendance at the local religious gatherings (sing. *mahbär*). In the countryside of Aksum, the norm has been for laypeople to serve local beer and bread for blessing during these gatherings. Attending over 20 of these events over the course of many months, the author observed a clear habit of drinking among the clergy too, which she subsequently investigated. On one occasion, she found herself riding in a car next to an inebriated priest when returning from the city to the village.¹³⁵ During a friendly conversation that followed, the author asked the priest if he had consumed alcohol. The priest did not mind the question; he explained that he was returning from a *mahbär* and admitted that he had drunk *swa*. The author next asked him if he thought that this habit had a pernicious effect on his pastoral work. In response to this, he first proceeded to justify his light-headedness by saying that he ate little and was small in stature, stressing that he had low alcohol tolerance and was quickly affected by the smallest quantity. He then openly regretted that there were always religious gatherings and celebrations in the church where beer was served, lamenting that this made it difficult for him to reverse the practice.

On a different day, while riding the public car to the village, the author came across two priests who were also visibly inebriated.¹³⁶ During the car ride, they were very loud and playful and when the time came for them to alight, one of them childishly refused to leave the car. At this point the driver discreetly confirmed that the passengers were priests who were obviously drunk, and he looked deeply embarrassed about the situation. On a different occasion, the author mentioned the problem of drinking among the clergy to the officers at the church administrative office (*bietä kəhənet*) in Aksum, in order to examine what they thought about it, and they only smiled awkwardly. In discussions with believers in the city, many also admitted that priests were often drunk. Most

¹³² Interview with laywoman, 16 March 2017.

¹³³ Interview with laywoman, 28 March 2017.

¹³⁴ Informal discussion with teacher at St Yared religious school, Aksum, 23 July 2017.

¹³⁵ Informal discussion with priest in car to tabiya 1, 14 May 2017.

¹³⁶ FIELDNOTES, 14 May 2017.



people in the community were not judgemental and simply admitted the problem, hoping that it would be overcome. The majority would not say anything directly to a priest out of deference.

On another occasion, the author attended a gathering of over 15 priests in the back room at a local church after Sunday liturgy.¹³⁷ As per habit, *swa* and *ənjera* were served and the author was invited to join in. Her polite refusal to drink, however, raised questions, which created the opportunity to ask the priests openly about their practice of drinking in their pastoral role. They all confirmed that they consumed traditional beer and said that it was mostly a habit (*lämdi*).¹³⁸ While they sensed that this habit was not consonant with theological ideals, they could not explain why this was the case, and they invited their guest to share her thoughts. The author then proposed that as clergy their aim would be to live by the spiritual condition first, reducing the influences of fleshly needs and passions. In this way, they would be able to live 'in Christ' and to perform the mysteries with the utmost benefit for the members of the church. Moreover, she explained that if their spiritual children came to see them for advice while they happened to have been drinking, they would be unable to advise them properly. The priests seemed convinced by this rationale, falling into silence and pondering, but it was clear that they were discussing this openly for the first time. Even as they listened with self-awareness and what could be some regret, they soon returned to drinking. This demonstrated without doubt the influence of habit and the difficulty of liberating oneself from a norm that was widely accepted and practised in the local society by both laity and clergy.

The theologians interviewed in the cities related most of the clergy's weaknesses to a lack of proper training and/or the absence of a complete understanding of the faith. This opinion was shared by a school teacher working at one of the local churches of the village community. He opined that the reason was lack of proper training for the clergy and a weak religious conscience among some.¹³⁹ He explained that many did not have training in interpretation, and therefore could not teach the rest of the society by their example. A theologian spoke of the inability of some priests to distinguish between culture and faith:

Because we haven't taught them well because tradition should have [been] under the teaching of the faith and the only way tradition and bad practices like female circumcision will be eradicated is through teaching. And the first thing toward this is teaching the priests on social issues like marriage and other issues. Indeed there are some improvements now than what used to be before.¹⁴⁰

Others opined that these problems were the result of an increasing differentiation of culture from faith due to 'worldly' influences. One church teacher remarked the following:

Faith and culture in society are in practice two things. But they are the same according to books and teachers. Our culture is religious and our faith is our culture. But now what we call culture is different from faith. For example, as we discussed briefly before,

¹³⁷ FIELDNOTES, 9 July 2017.

¹³⁸ Informal discussion with priests in tabiya 2, 9 July 2017.

¹³⁹ Informal discussion with church teacher in tabiya 1, 11 June.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with teacher at St Frumentius Theological College, Mekelle, 30 January 2017.



faith says not to have another woman other than your own wife, and vice versa. Anything different than that is not faith.¹⁴¹

While this explanation was shared by many, the investigations in Aksum showed a more complex picture. Juxtaposing clergy discourses with surrounding socio-cultural norms, as highlighted in the discussion of marriage discourses and practices, helped to evidence that the problem might not have been solely one of acculturation or lack of theological training, as many learned scholars and theologians in Addis Ababa and Mekelle believed. The clergy discourses that were described did not generally differ from the formal positions of the church, but they seemed to lack at times the appropriate contextualisation and nuance to ensure that they did not unwittingly condone and nurture folklore understandings and attitudes that had pernicious implications. Additionally, some of the local clergy who espoused rigid understandings around marriage-related topics were highly trained in theological matters. This rather directs attention to the nature of exegetical training in this church and its emphasis on Old Testament pronouncements that could be enforcing folklore practices, with New Testament marriage theology being mostly neglected.

Moreover, priests should be viewed not only as members of the clergy aspiring to a religious ideal, but also as men brought up with culture-specific norms. As such, they did not fully eschew the gendered socialisation of boys in the local society, even if they were more conscious about the need to differentiate themselves from the lay community to embody the 'Word of God.' As was reported, in cases of marital conflict spiritual fathers would typically consult with both spouses to reach a verdict of who was at fault. However, there was no discussion about what happened when the stories contradicted each other. In view of the acculturated understanding of marriage held by many priests, together with the fact that priests themselves were also husbands and faced challenges in their own marriages, it is likely that some priests could sympathise more strongly with men.

Nor could priests entirely eschew the pressure to live by certain standards that in the eyes of the laity had credibility and were identified with the local religious tradition. This was best illustrated in the author's encounter with the priest who could not understand why a wife could refuse her husband sex. His insistence that wife and husband were one body could be inspired by teachings that the wife has no right on her body and her husband has no right on his body, but each give their right to the other, becoming each other's servant, becoming one. The subtle message that such giving must be conditioned on mutual love, altruism and selflessness was missed by him, however. If a husband truly loves his wife, selflessly, as St Paul stipulated, he will put her well-being and wish above his sexual need or urge because he wants to please her in all things and see her happy. Such thinking seemed inconceivable in the local androcentric mentality, salient also in the mind of this priest.

One theologian pointed precisely to this reality when the author invited his thoughts on gender issues in the local society, using considerably stronger language:

The pastoral model has to be defined for the EOTC. This is a male chauvinistic society. The priests have been enforcing this, using teachings to justify it. Most priests do not have theological training. But even if they had it, their attitudes would not change

¹⁴¹ Interview with a priest and a church teacher in tabiya 1, 2 April 2017.



radically primarily because any change can make them look heretical and associate them with the *Tāhadiso* movement. [...] Priests who accept gender equality may not oppose the norms because they fear that they can pass as *Tāhadiso*. There is much mistrust and suspicion in the church. This reflects the history of the church, which is also the political history of the country.¹⁴²

To this attitude could be added the existence of a degree of dependence that the clergy were said to have on the laity, who tended to offer some monetary reimbursement for the services of the clergy. These observations suggest that engaging the clergy in any intervention would need to be combined with a realistic understanding of the conditions of their existence and what incentives might need to be put in place to encourage their cooperation. These incentives would have to counterbalance any fear of being under suspicion for departure from tradition, by deploying discourses that remain attuned to local hermeneutics and the teachings of venerated saints known to the public, however, placing more emphasis and gravity on New Testament theology of marriage.

Informed interlocutors were also asked why the clergy seemed to have little understanding of marriage and of the ability to properly advise based on the teachings of the church. A teacher at the St Paul's Theological College thought that because most teachers of the faith had been monks, who usually did not advise on marriage, or because the spiritual father (*nāfs abat*) was often a monk, he would not be expected to advise and teach married couples properly.¹⁴³ He thought that if the spiritual father were to be a married priest the situation would be different. He also mentioned that Synodical meetings are typically only attended by bishops, who are unmarried, a fact that would make it highly unlikely that marriage-related issues would be discussed or prioritised in these meetings.

In conjunction with this point, it needs to be recognised that currently rural clergy have limited resources with which to inform themselves about church teachings on marriage, as highlighted in the comment by one *māriḡeta*: “[I] they (priests) are teaching about marriage they will go to the Old and the New Testament and will quote verses and elaborate on them a bit further and that is all.”¹⁴⁴ The interviews with members of the clergy confirmed that beyond the Bible and the *Māṣhaf Tāklil* ordained priests used no other resources.¹⁴⁵ While further commentary is provided in the *Fəṭḥa Nāḡāšt*, this was typically studied at the higher levels of church education, which most priests would not have achieved. In addition, the provisions on marriage in *Fəṭḥa Nāḡāšt* are also fairly basic and are not fully attuned to the needs of current times.

More concrete but concise and easily comprehensible guidance written in the local language would offer a permanent resource for priests to use at any time. In view of the undisputed status of John Chrysostom as a local authority on theological matters and his pertinent commentaries on apostolic teachings on marriage that reverse some Old Testament understandings, his explanations could provide the basis for such a manual. However, as opposed to the top-down training delivered by the church, a more participatory format, along the lines of the workshops employed in this study,

¹⁴² Interview with theologian at Holy Trinity Theological Seminary, Addis Ababa, 16 December 2016.

¹⁴³ Interview with teacher at St Paul's Theological College, Addis Ababa, 17 January 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with priest/*māriḡeta*, 14 March 2017

¹⁴⁵ Interview with a priest and a church teacher, 2 April 2017.



offers a more appropriate and effective way to engage the clergy in reflective conversation, and to help them to assimilate gradually and critically apostolic messages regarding marriage, the conjugal relationship and spiritual growth.



