

## Religio-cultural Practices and Human Capital Formation in Ethiopia: A Critical Review

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**Abstract:** Human capital formation is critical for the economic and the political development of a country. It is primarily concerned with enabling people to actively involve as a creative and productive resource and increasing the number of people with skills, education and experience. Human capital formation therefore, is a people centered strategy that enhances the skills, knowledge, productivity and creativeness of people. This necessitates physical and mental fitness, proper diet and the stamina to work long hours productively. In this regard, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity's traditional pious practices become a hindrance to human capital formation. The Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is very traditional and it requires the followers to strictly follow austere practices round the year. These religio-cultural practices, mainly rigorous fasting and penance affect the people physically, psychologically, socially and economically. The religious practices also limit the regular needs of the people which in turn hinder the human capacity to work. This conceptual paper elaborates how the various religious practices of the orthodox Christian community affects the total economy of the country.

**Keywords:** Human capital formation, Ethiopian Christianity, Fasting and penance in Ethiopia, Ethiopian religio-cultural practices, Human resource management in Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is a landlocked country located in the Horn of Africa which shares its borders with Eritrea to the north and northeast, Djibouti and Somalia to the east, Sudan to the west, and Kenya to the south. With over 102 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is the second-most populous country in the African continent. With its capital in Addis Ababa, it occupies a total area of 1,100,000 square kilometers. The country is rich in minerals and other natural resources and the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME) has discovered resources like gold, tantalum, phosphorus, iron, salt, potash, soda ash, gemstones, coal, geothermal and natural gas, platinum, niobium, copper, nickel, manganese and molybdenum apart from many industrial and construction materials [1, 2]. Despite its notable natural treasures, Ethiopia still faces challenges of poverty and struggles to compete with the developing countries, and also to come up as a powerful nation in the African continent. When talking about socio-economic issues, the traditional socio, religio-cultural practices and the related worldview need to be addressed, in order to capitalize its own rich human capital base. This paper focuses on the various religio-cultural factors, mainly the fasting practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity which comprises of more than 90% of the

population in some areas and over all half of the total Ethiopian population.

### Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

The uniqueness of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity spreads its roots to the time of King Solomon with a unique liturgical language Geez [3]. Christianity was declared the State Religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by the Aksum King Ezana. Monks from Syria and Egypt arrived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century that initiated a Christian monasticism which remains the cornerstone of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity [4]. The village churches are generally round or octagonal shaped; there are also older and modern basilica styled churches with grand circular dome. *Tabot* (the ark) is the centre of attention in the church and it is carried in procession during major festivals. This is one of the many Jewish traditions followed in the Ethiopian Church even today [5]. There are numerous traditional religio-magical healing practices, often associated with Christian, Muslim and other primitive shamanic rituals followed by more than 80% of the population [6]. The national average physician to population ratio is 1: 33,500 and in the remote villages 1:5,10,425 whereas the orthodox priests ratio is 1:1,006 [7]. The traditional religio-magical healings arises from the fact that the modern medicines (western medicine) and health care facilities

are limited to the cities and towns. The traditional religious healings are available in every village or nearby, easily accessible-socially, economically and geographically.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity's religious practices are primarily centered on prayer, fasting and penance. The local Church recommends that the Christians fast for 250 days each year, of which about 180 are obligatory for all, and the rest are for special groups in the church, priests, monks, and nuns [8]. The annual liturgical calendar has feasts almost every day and they are preceded by a day of fasting. A total abstinence from meat, fatty food, eggs and dairy products are recommended on these days. Typically, the orthodox religious calendar indicates that all Wednesdays and Fridays are fasting days, and a month long fasting before Christmas and Easter festivals. Children of 13 years of age and above need to fast and the breastfeeding mothers, and children below seven years of age are exempted [9]. Sick people are also exempted from the regular fasting, however, many people with diabetes, person with HIV/AIDS, terminally ill and other serious illness try to fulfill the religious obligations due to the religious passion and the desire to get cured.

There are 7 official fasting periods ordained in the *Fetha Negast*, which is a legal religious code compiled around the 11<sup>th</sup> Century by the Coptic Egyptian Christians and was later adopted by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with numerous local laws [10].

- Great Lenten Fasting, 55 days (*Abye Tsome*)
- All Wednesday in commemoration of Christ's betrayal by Judas Iscariot, and every Friday in commemoration of his crucifixion, except the 55 days after Easter, and also if the Feasts of Christmas and Epiphany falls on these days
- Advent Fasting, 43 days before Christmas (*TsomeNeviyat*)
- Epiphany, the *Gahad*, one day
- Jonah's fasting of 3 days (*Ninevah /Nenawe*) Mon, Tues, and Wednesday in the third week before Lent, in commemoration of the preaching of Jonah.
- Apostles Fast of 30 days (*Tsome Hawariat*) Monday after Pentecost
- Assumption of the Virgin Mariam, 16 days (*Tsome Filseta*) generally in the month of August

### Fasting and health

Fasting as a treatment modality is the absolute abstinence from taking any food for a specific period of time. It is meant to give rest to different internal organs of the body. Medical fasting is sometimes recommended to destroy the old and damaged cells. Contrary to the popular Ethiopian Orthodox Christian beliefs, Christian fasting, unlike the medical fasting, has numerous adverse effects. The following physical and

mental health hazards are noticed among people who practice unsupervised fasting and irregular food habits:

- *Physiological hazards:* UK's National Health Service (NHS) states that there are numerous health related risks associated with sporadic fasting. People who fast without medical supervision generally experience dehydration, largely because their body is not getting any fluid from food. Fasting can also cause heartburn; lack of food leads to a reduction in stomach acid which digests food and destroys bacteria. However, the smell of food or even thinking about food during fasting time can trigger the brain to activate the autonomous nervous system that in turn can produce more acids and other digestive fluids in the stomach, leading to heartburn. Middle-aged or more elderly persons are usually more prone to the effects of dehydration [11].
- *Migraines:* It's obvious to see people suffer from migraine attacks during the fasting days as compared to ordinary days without the fasting [12].
- *Circadian Patterns and Sleep Disorders:* Fasting negatively affects an individual's circadian rhythm. The change of meal schedule is accompanied with changes in sleep habits, such as delayed and shortened sleep periods, which may affect endocrine and neuroendocrine circadian patterns [13].
- *Daytime drowsiness, alertness and cognition:* The physical fatigue associated with fasting results in impairment of cognitive function, lack of concentration, feeling sleepy at work place or anywhere and reduction in the effectiveness and efficiency under any circumstances [14].
- *Fasting and educational achievement:* Ethiopia has a literacy rate of 39% which is way below the world average [15]. Due to the strict fasting tradition of the Church, the students become tired and sleepy in the classrooms. Beside this, the teachers who practice fasting feel dehydrated, experience hunger and lack the motivation to manage the classroom and to teach. Fundamental orthodox Christian families give priority to the religious practices and force their children to follow all the pious practices. In such a scenario, the children are expected to go to church and observe religious ceremonies after the school hours, which reduce their time for revising the lessons and also learn new lessons.

### Religious holydays and manpower loss

Beside these rigorous fasting practices, the church followers are also expected to observe 125 religious holydays (abstinence from work). They are: a) 18 holydays for worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ; b) 33 holydays of St. Mary; c) saints days every now and then, and, d) martyrs days round the year. Almost all believers of the church are requested not to do any agricultural or manual labor during these days. Breaking these rules will incur the wrath of the

community as well as the harshness of the religious leaders. 80% of the Ethiopian population live in rural areas and depend on traditional agricultural activities and they freeze from their work due to these religious observance.

### **Implication on human capital formation and economic development**

Development is a broad concept which encompasses many aspects. Economic development means an increase in the production of goods and services within a specific period of time. Many economists clearly articulate that economic development is a long-term process in the productive potential of the economy to satisfy the wants of individuals in the society and it should be sustainable to have positive impact on the income and employment that leads to higher living standards among people [16]. This also further enables the governments to earn extra income for the future development of their country. Some major factors that contribute to the economic growth of a country are: 1) Labor Force & Human Resource, 2) Natural Resources, 3) Capital Formation, 4) Infrastructure & Technological Development, 5) Social and Political Factors. Of all the above factors, labor and human resource management is the vital factor that influences almost all other factors.

Since majority of the Christian workers adhere to the fasting obligation, companies are facing the effects of stagnation leading to very low productivity. When a majority population in a country observe fasting during a specific time when they are at work, it is inevitable that there is a significant loss in the primary productivity. It's obviously noted that during the days of fasting, workers violate the working hours and job performance in the companies, institutions and government departments, constant reported absenteeism and all these lead to poor productivity and outcome. Industries, small scale manufacturing companies, government agencies and social sectors face a huge manpower loss due to the prolonged fasting time. In Industries, employees who are involved with machineries and heavy work undoubtedly will have poor performance and human error due to the hunger, thirst, physical fatigue, and poor motor coordination to perform specific tasks. Since it is a socio-religious-cultural practice, the managers and other supervisors are also victims of such fasting, they fail to confront such issues and lenient not to take administrative disciplinary measures on workers. During the 56 days of lent fasting and the 43 days Christmas fasting, Christian butcher shops are closed and restaurants owned by pious Christians will not serve meat. In addition to human capital loss, market for egg, dairy products, brewages, all decline which again lead to lesser need leading to low productivity.

Poor health and low levels of education are also the other major factors that limit the economic

growth of the country. In a country like Ethiopia, where industrialization is very minimal, the major population depends upon agriculture, which is done in a traditional way without modern equipments. This basic activity of farming itself requires strong physical power. However, the majority of the population spends more time on fasting and prayer and the obligatory religious rituals that becomes a major hindrance to human capital management. The Ethiopian economy that is in its infantile stage is in need of skilled and talented labor force. However, Ethiopia is still kneeling in front of western and European powers, trying to stand on the clutches of UN Funding for education, infrastructure development, food supply and medical facilities. The universities are depending on qualified teachers from foreign countries, the hospitals and clinics need physicians and other medical staff from Europe, the country's textile and leather industry is waiting for foreign investment. The manufacturing and agro industries are already taken up by Chinese and Indian investors.

Many scholars and thinkers are concerned and started to worry that the rigid and inflexible archaic religious practices of the Orthodox Christianity are a major hindrance to the economic development of the country. The church's rigid pious practices like fasting and feasting directly and indirectly knock down the country's human capital as well as the total economy, leading to acute poverty and economic stagnation. The pious Orthodox Christian practices those were very meaningful in the medieval ages need a revival today so that it will be meaningful to the current life-situation of the people and also to face the challenges of global economic development. As the Catholic Church's reform in the 1960 in the form of Second Vatican Council, which opened new vistas in understanding Christian doctrines in the modern world [17], the Ethiopian Orthodox Church too need to revive and interpret its dogmas and doctrines to the modern society in a war footing.

We do not need a statistical verification of Orthodox Christian fasting and the loss of human potential, which will give an unimaginable picture of negative correlation. Any simple reasoning will draw the lines between the religious practices and the adverse effects on human capital and productivity. To move from an agrarian to a modern economy, from poverty to decent living standards, Ethiopia requires its citizens to have more education, who can really break up the traditional hurdles and create a new generation that is free of primitive thinking, capable of utilizing potential to improve living conditions, work freely with no outdated socio-religious restrictions and mobilize all citizens to contribute on the poverty alleviation and building new Ethiopia. It is the right time for intellectuals, scientists, economists, policy makers and religious leaders, to sit and decide for a socio-political

reform that will change the fate of the country in the international arena.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethiopia as a developing country needs healthy citizens who can actively participate in the overall economic, social, political development. Intermittent and prolonged fasting is generally not a part of healthy lifestyle. Depriving the body of water and essential nutrients causes a host of health, performance and mood disorders. Aiming at sustainable development is not possible as long as the country's major religion adopts modern interpretations of its doctrines and updates its traditional religious practices understanding the need of the day. In order to improve living condition of the people and alleviate poverty, the government as well as religious institutions, along with educated men and women must work on modernizing the religious thinking in such a way that will help the human capital formation for sustainable development of the country. Holding on to medieval pious practices of more than 180 days of fasting and nearly 125 days of holydays directly affect the basic survival of the people in the agricultural sector and other business activities leading to acute poverty, high illiteracy, short life expectancy and poor human capital utilization.

The following suggestions are given in order to build a healthy Human Capital in Ethiopia:

- The religious leaders need to update the traditional pious practices to modern day practical requirements and act according to the changing time and need. It will help people to prioritize their needs wisely rather than succumb to medieval religious practices that affect human capital formation.
- Intellectuals, thinkers and other social scientists should organize regular dialogue with religious leaders to enlighten them the need for revival in the Church for the development of the country and also wellbeing of its citizens.
- Political policy makers must design interventions to reduce religious fundamentalism so that religious practices may not hinder the economic development and the poverty alleviation program of the country.
- Government should come forward with strong measures to identify harmful traditional religious practices that affect the whole economy of the country.
- Government and religious bodies must find solutions to reduce the holydays or to redefine the nature of religious holydays so that it will not have negative impact on the economic development and human capital formation of the country.

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