

**Know Thy Self:  
Viability of Early Childhood Education Delivery through  
Traditional Priest Schools**

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**Abstract:** This paper examined the viability of revitalizing priest school education to contribute for creating children's school readiness particularly for low income families. Intellectual analysis of a philosophical research type was conducted to reflect on related experiences, findings, views, attitudes, and data. It was hypothesized that priest schools retain objectives, approaches, and methods that would enable creating school readiness. Its outcomes were also hypothesized to be much wider than building mere basic literacy skills as it was commonly held. The analysis conducted unveiled that expansion of modern preschools has marginalized priest schools along with its inherent treasures. Government instruments (ECCE Policy, curriculum, standards, and guides) were believed to play a major role in this marginalization process as they have entirely excluded any mention about these community-based schools. Research reports that indirectly address priest school education underscored its inappropriateness as well as negative attitudes from community members. There are, in fact, some limited ECCE personnel and researchers who have been in favor of the use of priest schools in ECCE delivery. This study assumed that the objections to the use of priest schools were based on a wrong implicit assumption that early years education should be of the "standard ECCE type" (obviously of a Western origin). Lack of knowledge about and familiarity with the real nature of these schools were also believed to preempt uncritical and negative views about them. However, the analysis has made it clear that, above and beyond their being cost-effective and culturally rooted, these schools retain objectives, follow approaches and methods, and create profiles that would make transitioning to and learning in formal education successful. How these schools are to be revitalized was also highlighted.

**Key terms:** priest school, preschool in Ethiopia, ECCE in Ethiopia, community-based education, church education, *asqala*.

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## Introduction

One person's treasure is another person's trash. Aristotle's 'Know Thy Self' protects not to trash one's treasure and not to treasure another's trash. No doubt that self-knowledge also helps not to treasure one's trash and not to trash another's treasure. The former may lead to an inward orientation and the latter preempts an external orientation. Although both are healthy pursuits of development, taking extreme position is inappropriate as it inhibits either learning from others or from oneself because of excessive feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and self-rejection that uploads others into the portfolio of the 'self' to fill in the hiatus. Critical self-examination is of tremendous help safeguarding the 'self' from such inappropriate orientations. However, we are of a strong opinion that some of the Ethiopian golden traditions have faded away because of absence of such critical assessments that could possibly bring their treasures to light; and keeps away saturations from mumbo-jumbos of others. The role of early year's traditional education could be one such example. Although it flourished back in history, it is almost invisible these days. What is worrisome is not that it is becoming peripheral, but it could be pushed aside with its treasures unexamined and making the education enterprise of the level vulnerable to premature importations.

This early years' education was started with the introduction of Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup>c (Bowen and Horn, 1976; Pankhurst, 1955) that gave rise to the opening of priest schools that taught early reading and writing to young children (Wagaw, 1979). This being the practice, modern preschools were, however, introduced much latter firstly for foreign nationals (Demeke, 2003) in 1898, and then nearly a century later for the general public service of educating Ethiopian children in 1963 with pilot projects run by foreign nationals in different urban

Community Centers (MNCDSA, 1972); thus, modern preschools being introduced externally, from a new and foreign perspective.

Once this modern early years' education (also called 'preschools' or recently Early Childhood Care and Education or 'ECCE') was introduced into the system, different measures were taken across time to make it serviceable. Government engagements in the last couple of decades alone include, among others, establishment of the ground rules (legal, administrative and academic) for ECCE to take off. The legislative ground rules include the Constitution giving recognition to children's rights for education in its Article 36 (FDRE, 1995), the National Education and Training Policy (MoE, 1994) that stated that preschool education would focus on all rounded development of the child in preparation for formal schooling (p.14)<sup>1</sup>, the ESDP IV (2010) document that presented a package of intentions, strategies, and programs for improving delivery, and the National ECCE Policy Framework (MoE, MoWA and MoH, 2010).

Unlike the ECCE legislative framework (policy, programs, and strategies) that may be taken as an encounter of more recent times, the educational and administrative guides in fact made their prior presence and went through successive revisions: the curriculum in 1981 (MoE, 1973 E.C), the standard for supervision a year later (NCC, 1974 E.C) and the teachers' guide in about the same year (NCC, 1974 E.C). The curriculum guide was then successively improved in 1999 (MoE, 1999), 2006 (MoE, 1998 E.C.), and 2009 (MoE, Ginbot 2001

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<sup>1</sup>According to this policy, kindergarten will focus on all round development of the child in preparation for formal schooling and that this education has a significant role in introducing children to basic learning skills that are needed in primary schools and enhance their chances of success in the education system. The Education and Training Policy of the government contains provisions concerning the kindergarten structure, curriculum development and teacher training programs to meet the educational needs of children. However, only limited number of teachers are trained.

E.C.) increasingly becoming *developmentally organized, thematically integrated, competence-based, and participatory* (MoE, Ginbot 2001 E.C); while the standard was improved only once in 1995 after the Socialist regime was removed (MoE, 1995).

In terms of implementation, efforts were made, among many other measures, to establish ECCE focal persons at different levels of education offices beginning from the Federal Ministry of Educations down the road to the lowest government cells (i.e. Kebeles). The Government has also taken measures to mitigate the most serious shortcoming of ECCE provision in the country (i.e. access) introducing two new school readiness programs (Zero-Grade and child-to-child initiatives). In fact, these modalities have improved access from 3.9% in 2010/11 (EMIS, 2010/2011) to 49.5% in 2015/16 (EMIS, 2015/16). Yet, coverage is quite small compared to millions of underserved children particularly among the urban poor and in the rural areas (UNESCO, 2006; Tirussew et al., 2009; Young Lives, 2012). About 50% of the children are yet to be served and, hence, the need to look for a more cost-effective delivery mechanism that would make services accessible to this greater majority is a priority list. The majority, or about two third, of the children accessing preprimary education are those enrolled in O-class (Belay and Belay, 2015) and yet they receive poor quality ECCE services (Teka et al, 2016).

The modern early childhood education service is not only expensive and, therefore, suffers from accessibility in Ethiopia. Evidences still indicate that, with all the above support from the government and other related stakeholders, it retains many other problems as well: use of foreign language (mainly English) as a medium of instruction (Alem, 2007; Demeke, 2007), problem of social and cultural relevance of the curriculum and its developmental appropriateness (Tirussew et al.,

2009; Demeke, 2007) as most private preschools use curriculum borrowed from other countries and none of the elements reflect the Ethiopian culture and tradition (Demeke, 2007), the classroom being removed from modern pedagogy because practices are too often focused on teaching the children formal/ academic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic exercises, and not structured and managed to addressing the rights of the child to holistic development; psychosocial aspects of care, health and nutrition and related other needs are not taken care of (Habtamu, 1996; Tirussew, 1979; Tirussew, 1998), and a number of feasibility concerns of ECCE implementation (Britto et al. 2012) as well as recommendations were made earmarking that more work is needed to assess non-formal and community-based ECCE strategies (Britto et al. 2012), and the need to look for alternative structures for ECCE that rely less on primary schools, such as community-based schools not attached to pre-schools, or Rapid School Readiness Programs (Young Lives, 2012).

One would convincingly note the seriousness of concerns of ECCE in Ethiopia particularly looking into its impacts and contributions on children and learning outcomes. Evidences indicate that primary school children are staggering to read and write at the end of first cycle primary education after “learning basic education” in native language, for four years, plus about three years of preschool education (MoE, 2008; RTI International, 2010; Seid, 2015). In Ethiopia, the national learning assessment (2000-2007) has indicated that the reading proficiency level acquired in Grade 4 was low; for example, in the NLA for 2007, 51% scored below average; either unable or slow to read (MoE, 2008). In all the regions, out of children completing Grades 2 and 3, 80% didn’t reach the basic reading competence level (RTI International 2010). Among first cycle primary school children learning in their vernacular languages, 94% had reading competence level that

was below the bench mark for developing countries (RTI International 2010). In a more recent doctoral study of the reading proficiency, comprehension, and associated literacy acquisition environmental factors of the native Amharic speaking fourth grade pupils in North Wello Zone, many children were noted falling short of developing the level of reading skills required to pursue Grade 5. Proportion of those who were unable to read were 34.4% for regular words (ተዘውቅታሪ ቃላት), 38.9% for decoding (ፍጥር ቃላት), 28.3% for oral reading (ድምፃዊ ንባብ), and 69.2% for reading comprehension; only 30.8% were successfully transitioning from learning to read Amharic to using reading Amharic to learn other subjects (Seid, 2015).

One would say that the major reason for these failures, and subsequently the solution as well, is poor literacy background from ECCE centers. In support of this view, Seid (2015) found out that there was no significant difference among children attending ECCE and not attending it in reading proficiency scores in general. Although there can be a number of explanations to be given for this failure (from policy design to implementation problems), this would actually invalidate the role of ECCE stipulated in the ECCE policy, “With this framework the Government of Ethiopia expects to give all the country’s children the best start ... in life; enhance the quality, accessibility and equitable distribution of services for young children...” (p. 15). If these immediate goals are put to test, then how far the envisaged long-term benefits of ECCE stated in the ECCE policy (e.g. economic returns to the society, cost savings for both the families and the nation, reduction of poverty...” (p.16) are to be realized?

In the light of all these ECCE problems (access, quality, relevance...), we may need to assess the viability of traditional early education centers (mainly priest schools) in delivering educational services to young children. In fact, this could be a delayed exercise (was supposed to be done in the 1960s when modern preschool education was introduced for public service) but better late than never. In fact, the ECCE policy also encourages at least the need to look for other settings where ECCE can be delivered, “where there are no pre-schools, any available suitable community building can be used, including community centers, churches or mosques, ABE centers and primary school compounds. In some cases, primary schools’ classrooms could be used. Some communities may take the initiative to establish a non-formal pre-school attached to ABE center or any community center or primary school. Whatever the case, the ECCE Policy Framework supports making use of existing infrastructure wherever possible... (p. 21). But, the question is would ECCE delivery be to the desired quality and standard if delivered in these kinds of settings? Leaving aside this question for a different investigation, our present research rather attempts to explore the viability of (traditional) priest schools for preparing young children to formal schooling in terms of its objectives, approaches and methods, and expected outcomes.

### **Conception, Approaches, and Methods**

Every community is endowed with the potential for self-dynamism and, hence, changes sought in community systems can be brought up not only through unidirectional means that is imposed from externally but in a multilateral interaction that ultimately fuels change from within (Messay, 1999; Nsamenang, 2009; Africa ECD Voice, 2014). The practice so far has been, at least for ECCE adaptation, to try to customize external programs fit traditions, if at all stakeholders (policy

makers, practitioners and academics) develop concern about relevance in the first place. Many critiques that hold ECCE programming is culturally irrelevant propose the need to customize it to fit the reality and rarely hold the other more sustainable view of change resonating Messay's theory of modernization from within (Messay, 1999), Nsamenang's view of endogenous ECCDE development (Nsamenang, 2009), or Africa ECD Voice's of 'building on local strengths' (2014). Messay (1999) holds the view that puts Ethiopia's future neither in the hand of sustenance nor rejection of tradition but rather in modernizing it without necessarily importing modernization from elsewhere because it has the capacity for self-enhancement. We would, in this connection, say that although evidences are yet to come, we can't rule out at least the possibilities in priest schools of retaining the precursors of the same modern pedagogy (peer learning, child-centered pedagogy, participatory pedagogy...) that are inherent in modern ECCEs. Accordingly, rather than seeking to promote 'homogenization of the world around the current Eurocentric /Western conceptualization and implementation of ECCE appears to ignore the African society's cultural framework on early childhood care and education (Awopegba, Oduolowu and Nsamenang, 2013). Euro-American developmental milestones and educational models (Marfo, 2011) by trying to fit them African realities, priority needs to be given in ECCE curriculum development and practitioner education to African traditional practices and mechanisms that would stimulate cognitive, social and emotional development, promote cooperative learning between children of different ages, and contribute for building pride in cultural heritage and for demonstrating to skeptical parents that the ECCE agenda need not alienate young African children from their cultural roots (Africa ECD Voice, 2014). Hence, quality ECCE programs are rooted in the communities themselves rather than standard ECCEs of a Western origin. There is much strength in the communities that would give



essence to quality. A preschool that is embedded within the community set up would entail a less westernized preschool profile and resources, an ECCE that is less costly in terms of design and conduct, more accessible to the greater majority, more relevant and useful to the children and to the nation, more able to mobilize community resources, promotes community ownership and ensure its sustainability in the long run (Serpell, 1999).

In the light of the forgoing conceptions, it is hypothesized in this paper that revitalizing priest schools, as one of the indigenous approaches to early learning, would help provide relevant, cost-effective, and quality early years' education for children; its objectives, approaches and methods, and learning outcomes would ensure basic literacy and school readiness to commence on primary school education. The focus of this study is on preschool education through priest school rather than on all forms of traditional approaches. In order to throw light on these issues, attempts are made to conduct an intellectual analysis of ideas, research findings, and data drawn from secondary and primary sources in order to clarify objectives, reflect on approaches and methods, synthesize bigger knowledge or make a value judgment concerning priest school practices. Such a method is a variant of qualitative approach and technically called philosophical approach (Belay and Abdinasir, 2015) and was previously employed in Messay's (1999) philosophical discourse of the roots of Ethiopia's inability to modernize with implications for delineating the way forward. Combining sociological, historical, and political analyses with philosophical inquiries, Messay explains how Ethiopia was driven into a wrong track through various historical detours, delays, indecisions, and up-rootedness (p.102-3).

In a similar vein, attempts are made in this study to capitalize on findings and data secured from prior research reports, commentaries, views, and some data about priest schools in more recent years. Some of these reports include equity and quality challenges for early childhood and primary education in Ethiopia (Woodhead et al., 2009), early childhood development pilot project assessment (SCN, 2010), early childhood care and education in Ethiopia (Teka and Belay, 2015), and such government documents as the National Policy Framework for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ethiopia (MoE, MoWCYA, and MoH, 2010) and the preprimary education Standard (MoE, 2001 E.C). Views, ideas, findings and data (of parents, communities, ECCE personnel and researchers) regarding the practices, challenges, and opportunities of the priest school education are synoptically presented from these sources and then subjected to a critical intellectual analysis.

The procedure of analysis is that the ECCE Policy and Standard were first examined to check views and implications about priest school education. Then, views and data were summarized from previous research regarding the practices, challenges and strengths. This is followed by a critical reflection on these summarized views and data and clears the ground for delineating the way forward. This reflection is organized into objectives, approaches and methods, and outcomes of priest school education. Finally, attempts are made to set out the foundation for a revitalized priest school education in Ethiopia.

### **Status: Reports, Views, Attitudes**

*Space for priest schools in Government documents (policies, standard, curriculum):* While the expansion of modern preschools has been encouraging, it, however, appears that this is at the expense of the

priest schools; that are increasingly becoming invisible and almost pushed out of towns. In fact, official ECCE documents (ECCE Policy, ECCE standards, and curriculum) do not make any mention of traditional centers despite the claims in the mission statement that ECCE in Ethiopia shall attempt to provide, among others, culturally responsive service for the holistic development of all children. The minimum requirements an educational establishment needs to fulfill to be considered as preschool proper would conspicuously inform that priest schools are not kept in view (NCC, 1974 E.C; MoE, 1995). The ECCE standard used to gauge the implementation of EEC policy and curriculum reflect the requirements of preschools in advanced countries and hence only few preschools meet the expectations (Habtamu, 1996; UNESCO Cluster Office Addis Ababa, 2006, P. 11). Obviously, the standard does not give recognition to traditional schools. It is also our concern that the standard rather marginalizes indigenous resources because quality is defined in terms of external standards.

*Priest Schools through the Lens of Research in The Field:* Although in a gradual decline, priest schools are still functional in different parts of the country. There has never been statistics about the number of these centers, students and teachers involved. Neither has there been any systematic assessment of the roles of these traditional schools so far. Existing views about traditional priest schools appear to base themselves on informal evaluations that employ, at least implicitly, the urban, expensive, and private schools as a template. Such views, for example, hold that traditional schools are linguistically irrelevant, limited only to literacy (SCN, 2011), recall-based (cited in Demeke, 2007), unsystematic (Woodhead et al., 2009), religion focused (SCN, 2011; Woodhead et al., 2009), gender-biased (SCN, 2011), age-inappropriate (SCN, 2011), less beneficial (SCN, 2011), and hence

require modification of objectives, programs, approaches, and management (SCN, 2011). Below are some of these critiques in detail:

- Priest schools are not intended to prepare young children for formal schooling. Instead, these schools aim to prepare pupils, mainly boys, who are ready to continue their religious education and become priests in the future. Girls can, in principle, attend church schools to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, and get basic religious education; however, the teacher in Tach-Meret had never had girls among his pupils. In fact, all of his current 30 students are boys and most of them come from rather distant communities (Woodhead et al., 2009).
- A religious school is [more] useful for boys than girls. If she joins it for the sake of learning Amharic alphabets, she can join it. But, it is more significant for boys than girls because when boys grow up, they can join the church and serve as priests, and can continue their job, but that is not possible for girls (Woodhead et al., 2009).
- Priest schools are not equitable and do not provide adequate service for both boys and girls. They are typically meant to produce literate men who can serve the Orthodox Church and a man who can read and live according to the clergy standards, rather than educational objectives of the children. Parents send boys to become priests, especially if the father is a priest or serving in church; make him able to read and write before school; retain the religion and tradition being educated in the orthodox church line; make their son lead a happy and respectful family; make children more disciplined and read the bible (SCN, 2011).
- The priest school is far from home so a girl might get a problem on the road, like being beaten by others. It might be impossible for her to return from school. So, she would prefer to join formal school and we have a plan to send her to government school. The religious school is

not important for her future life although it is useful to learn the alphabets (Woodhead et al., 2009).

- A priest school does not follow a systematic approach to teaching (Woodhead et al., 2009)
- Classes are taught by a single teacher who hosts children in his own home, because there is no specific school building. Sometimes the teacher holds classes outside in the open field (Woodhead et al., 2009).
- The teachers have no permanent salaries; so they spend much of their time working on their own farms and would allocate only a limited time to the teaching (Woodhead et al., 2009).
- A priest school provides skills only related to literacy, but not to the child's holistic development like that designed in the ECD approach (SCN, 2011);
- Experiences indicate that very few of the children attend priest schools and learn reading skills. In other areas, there is no priest school at all or any readiness class arranged for the children (SCN, 2011)
- The study showed that the children who come through traditional readiness or preparation school/programs like priest schools are relatively over aged (SCN, 2011).
- There is a need to reinforce the traditional pre-school services like priest schools. They are best readiness schools that can be accessed at local villages. Hence, there is a need to modify their objectives and programs for children in line with the standard ECD services. It is also essential to establish community led or based center management committees for improved management of the traditional preschools (SCN, 2011).

*Some Community Views:* Many of the negative views and attitudes noted above were problems not in themselves but they were factors

that negatively affected community, parental, and children's attitudes eventually draining priest schools from students, gradually fading away from the scene, and then finally being closed in many different places. Consider the following views as examples:

- Various community representatives interviewed (such as elders, service providers and kebele officials) agreed that the traditional church education was not beneficial for the children of the community, especially in supporting their promotion to primary school (Woodhead et al., 2009).
- The respondents of questionnaire for school principals and teachers and FGD with PTAs and children confirmed that communities do not send girls to priest or to distant schools (SCN, 2011). The reason was, according to some participants, girls are not allowed to be priests. Therefore, parents thought that teaching a girl in priest school is a wastage of time.

It is, of course, believed that church schools do have merits. For example, the national ECCE survey that served as a base for ECCE policy formulation (Tirussew et al., 2007) has made a recommendation that traditional church schools and Koranic establishments should be reactivated through upgrading and improvement of their conditions through training and provision of necessary materials. The personnel working on ECCE in Northern Gondar were once found to be aware of the importance of church schools. Asked if they encourage traditional early year's education (church and koranic) schools, they interestingly believe that they were supposed to do this but did not do it (cited in Teka and Belay, 2015):

*I believe that priest schools are crucial and should be encouraged to play their roles in early childcare and education. They are*

*important because children are compliant to the instructions or directions these centers help them identify. I would say that these traditional centers are our allies in early childcare and education (Director, 35 years old, female, Selam Fire School).*

*Furthermore, with reference to the issue of encouraging use of such traditional learning centers as the Koran or the priest school, I can say that we haven't done much along this line. But we generally feel that we have made great efforts to talk to the priestly so that children could pursue their religious education side by side with such ECCE subjects as science, and math. We also did the same with the Koran school by meeting the clergy and telling them of integrating both the religious and the secular subjects in ECCE (Selam Fire "gudgnt" Supervisor).*

*We honestly haven't worked much to communicate with the priest or Koran schools and discuss issues of ECCE. I feel that this is an opportunity that we haven't worked out so far. Evidently, we note that a student of early priest or Koran education performs better in the formal school. But we regret that we haven't had any relations with these traditional schools, either by way of helping or encouraging their activities (Supervisor of the 10 child centers, SCN).*

## **Reflections on Priest Schools**

### *Clarifications of purpose, approaches and methods, and outcome*

Some authors are extremely concerned about the existing unwelcoming attitudes towards priest schools. For example, Demeke says,

It is with great dismay that I agree to disagree with those writers who indiscriminately emphasize on the negative evaluation of the traditional system of education and their recommendation of sidelining of traditional schools and even to the extent of throwing away this system of education in favor of a so-called 'modern approach' which was put in place for a century and detached Ethiopians from their precious legacies and value systems (2007; p.191).

We need to reflect on the critiques above organizing our views around issues of purpose, approaches and methods, language, outcomes, and suggestions.

*Purpose:* Although linked with religion and the main subjects of traditional system of education are religious beliefs, values and practices, the purpose of priest school education is by no means limited to religious education. There were also secular components which include the study of Ethiopian history and sociopolitical organizations. Reading and writing in Geeze and Amharic, simple arithmetic, music, poetry and philosophy were, among others, the contents which are the typical characteristic of Ethiopian culture and value system (Demeke, 2007). In fact, in the lower levels, there isn't any religious teaching except for the literary materials prepared for children to practice reading. Religious teachings would follow later at advanced stages once students decide to stay in the program and move forward. Yet, such decision to pursue priesthood is not automatic. There has to be recommendation of the priest, demonstrated interest on the part of the student, and approval by parents. Otherwise, the lower levels are in most cases meant for preparing children for 'asquala' (Italian word meaning modern school). In places where priest schools were known to exist, primary schools



used to normally expect children to pass through them and master basic reading, writing and numeracy before enrolling into Grade One so that this grade can be salvaged for more substantive teaching. Materials used for reading were not also limited to scriptural materials but children were also allowed to bring in their own story books and practice reading to augment their skills.

Let us, however, entertain the above view that priest schools are centers of religious education. There are a number of questions to be raised for reflection here. In a society like Ethiopia where over 99% of the population subscribes to one form of religion or another (Assefa and Dilnesaw, 1996), one wouldn't be expecting educational enterprises to be 'religion-free' deprive communities from what they envision to get most from schools and also divorce schools from communities and make them to be less efficacious in preparing children for life in their respective communities. For example, for a question that attempted to understand the reasons why parents send their sons to priest schools, PTAs have expressed that this would allow them to continue as a society; their motives were to make their children replace them as priests. The families especially the fathers also wanted their children grow ethically in reading and abiding the commands of God and church doctrines. They underlined that *if everybody is illiterate, nobody can read and praise and lead others in prayer to God. And, their religion and culture will vanish* (SCN, 2011).

Furthermore, aren't religious teachings also providing knowledge, attitude, and skills satisfactory enough for life? Aren't many of the virtues in Ethiopian cultures (sharing resources, cooperation, interdependence, respecting elders, selflessness) practices that informal religious teachings promote? What if Ethiopia's resilience over the turn of centuries from the recurrent tragedies of famine and poverty

be the working of sharing and interdependent life style that the various religious teachings evoked in people and made them ingrained in the cultural portfolio of the country instead of the charities of wheat from donors from foreign countries? Wouldn't this sense of responsibility for life other than the self naturally urge people share whatever meager resources they have and allow many lives continue; lest, how would the greater number of dependents around one self-sufficient person in many households, and so many poverty-stricken persons living in streets begging cope with the grave consequences of deprivation without any social security system from the government? Is the problem then that educational establishments embody a religious component or that they do not have it at all or do not do it right? Hasn't history given lessons that the modernization of the West was steered up and the momentum has been kept alive through inculcation of and adherence to the Christian work ethics until such time that moral decadence started taking hold as most people turned their eyes to secularism as a philosophy of life? Hence, would the salvation of the world and its betterment lie so much in technological advancements and human strivings for self-fulfillment over endless needs or promotion of a selfless society which is always primed to building personhood imbued with ethic of care, cooperation, love, respect for humanity, and fear of God? It is not up to the present authors to answer these and many other related questions; but they would not decline from earmarking the fact that the precursors of many of these virtues are inherent in priest schools. Given these virtues, would it be then fair to push priest schools towards so called standard ECCEs or do we need to tame standard ECCEs all along the orientations of priest schools so that they would, in the final analysis, acquire souls and hearts in addition to whatever "*animal*" they purport to develop?

*Approaches, Methods:* Another critique of priest schools, possibly due in part to absence of grasp of the essence of these centers, is about their methods; that they are unsystematic, recall-based, and exclusionary. On the contrary, the present authors are of the belief that teaching and learning are rather highly organized, systematic, integrational, inclusive, cost-effective and reflective of many of the principles of modern pedagogy despite that priest schools are customarily considered *traditional* or *non-modern*.

Learning to read is systematically organized into series of steps that require studying alphabets in different arrangements so that they may not be superficially kept through memorizing sequences. Letter recognition passes through four steps organized in an increasing level of difficulty: 'ha hu', (repeat each basic alphabet along with its variants horizontally), 'hagis hukayib' (repeat step one but adding some voices that give flavor to the reading as well as indicating the rank of the alphabet being pronounced), 'hagis legis' (repeating alphabets downwards with their own special voices of order to facilitate letter recognition without recalling its learned sequence), and 'abugeda' (a more advanced level of alphabetic presentation in which basic alphabets and their branches are juggled and presented in an entirely new sequence so that children can learn to discern the peculiar feature of each alphabet correctly). Once alphabets are learned, then the child is again guided through series of steps of reading a text called, 'Mele'ikte Yohannes'. 'Mele'ikte' represents both the stage the child finds oneself in the learning process as well as the text s/he is using to study reading. As in alphabet recognition, studying in 'Mele'ikte' follows certain steps. Step one is practicing reading by counting each alphabet of words of the 'Mele'ikte' text. Then follows practicing reading sentences of the text by counting words. And, then finally, goes reading plain sentences. After completing the 'Mele'ikte' text, then follows

studying “Mistiré Selassie” that contains a more extended text for reading. And the last one for children who prepare to go to *asqala* or primary school is to start “Dawit Medegem” or start reading Psalms which by then children are said to have a good proficiency of reading Amharic texts, or rather Geez texts. Children are commonly considered to be ready for transitioning to primary school once they start reading psalms - “Dawit Medigem”.

Note here also that the process of learning to read involves different styles and melodies of reading whose utterances are rewarding in themselves; singing being inherently integrated into the act of reading itself. The assessment process is again very interesting and with strong ecological validity. For a child to proceed from one step to another, he/she has to practically demonstrate mastery of all the tasks of the step he/ she finds oneself in before a set of audience of learner mates and the priest.

The process of teaching and learning is a sort of self-contained practice in which a single priest is going to handle all the children, all the time, and for all purposes. This allows him to closely keep track of the development of each child because of adequate familiarity with each and every child. The actual teaching is an excellent example of peer learning, individualized instruction, and hierarchical organization that modern pedagogy is highly preaching about. Children in the upper levels are to teach those at the lower levels and then the priest is to deal only with the few ones at the top for whom child mentors are no more there to guide. The only time a child appears to the priest is to prove mastery of a level and then get approval to proceed onto the next one. In fact, the priest facilitates conditions for effective mentoring to take place, observes across the groups to check if the mentoring is going on smoothly, and provides extra support when needed. Each

child is then to study alone with the help of a child mentor who demonstrates reading and writing to be followed by the learner over and over again. In doing so, each child is to learn literacy with one's own pace of learning and all the children of the center can possibly belong to different levels of reading being in one class.

We may not say that priest schools are inherently exclusionary because in some parts of the country girls were seen attending although they were few in number. For example, one of the authors of this article very well remembers both Christian (e.g. Kuribatchew, Bizunesh) and Muslim (Sofia) girls alike studied in priest schools with him in a place now called Eastern Wollega Zone. Hence, in principle, girls are not discouraged from attending priest schools (Woodhead et al., 2009). But, the general socio-cultural gender-biased practice seemed to limit girls to activities tied to households and boys to those outside home including going out to attend the priest schools. In fact, although girls may not go to priest schools, some of them tended in fact to develop the appetite for education and continued learning at home by watching siblings attending priest schools; spillover effect of priest schools? It was noted in one research, for example, that in some areas girls from well to do families learnt how to read and pray. Participants indicated that some girls learned in at home since they were not allowed to go to the priest school (SCN, 2011). In fact, children with special needs were even more visible because it was preferred to keep them in priest schools as they contributed little in the farm. That is why we observe priests with different kinds of impairments including visual problems (Demeke, 2007).

Most important of all and possibly taking the greatest share explaining the sustainability of these traditional schools is their cost-effectiveness. Although negatively critiqued by others, we would say that neither the

school nor the priest is a burden to the communities. The priest conducts classes in addition to his own work and, therefore, not as such financially demanding for rural communities which are known for precarious income. The schools are held in open fields, under the shed of a tree or near the house of the priest. Children may sit on a log perfectly grooved into a seat or in many cases on the grasses. Children are granted free space that promotes free play. Noise and dirt are rare encounters. Classes are conducted in the longer Ethiopian dry (Bega) season and, hence, rain, cold weather and other discomforts are not observed. Children are not supposed to carry lunch boxes as the schools are usually nearer. Teaching doesn't even require expenses for chalk and board because children are required to learn writing directly by imitating written alphabets; allowing them not to learn to write like somebody (with bad handwriting, for example) but to imitate standard Amharic writing.

*Language:* The language of learning in priest schools is Amharic so far; though possibilities are there to use other languages commensurate with the language of the church. In fact, Geeze is likely to come in if students decide to pursue further education beyond preparation for primary school. This puts priest schools at an advantage particularly compared to urban ECCEs that give much credit and preference to English. Research indicates that the indigenous languages are rich in resources for the promotion of language, moral and intellectual development of young children such as stories, songs and riddles. Using these resources rather than those of a European language serves to connect the school learning environment with the home, and the community in ways that afford the construction of bridges of cross-cultural compatibility (African ECDCE Voice, 2014).

It is therefore recommended that early childhood intervention programs for rural African communities should be conceptualized as far as possible in the local indigenous languages (African ECDCE Voice, 2014). This is mainly because unlike the popular belief among many parents and teachers in Africa that an early start on learning the language of higher education will be beneficial for children of the current ECCE generation, research has repeatedly demonstrated that academic competence is generally more readily acquired by children who have first mastered basic literacy in the language of their home (Heugh et al, 2007). Particularly for Amharic, it appears that mastering alphabets needs to take place much earlier because it takes a hell lot of practice mastering alphabets. Once the alphabets are properly learned, it is as if that reading goes without saying; it is not like learning reading all over again as the case is, for example, in English and French where one writes one thing and reads another thing.

*Outcomes:* Some evidences indicate that priest school children are better at reading in primary schools compared to those without this background. About 81% of parents whose children came directly from home having no preparation are dissatisfied with the test scores of their children. They confirmed that the children performed poorly than those who came through priest or other readiness centers. On the other hand, those who come through the traditional readiness classes perform better writing and reading at entry (SCN, 2011).

In fact, it has been indicated that children from priest school are a bit older. But, this is not because priest school education is taking longer time; experience shows that about one year regular attendance is quite enough to master basic literacy. There could be other reasons for the delay, if any. For example, parents may not send children early because it is commonly believed in rural areas that children cannot

learn in the early years; in the contrary, they can be engaged in different kinds of work. Second, attendance may be irregular because of child labor; thus, taxing children more time to stay in priest schools. Third, distance can be a barrier for early entrance as well as for girls. Parents sent only the grown-up boys to the priest schools when there was no formal school.

One would ask if the whole learning process boils down only to mastery of basic literacy; to which one would arguably say no. Learning to stay in a place called 'school', getting the opportunity for peer interaction and time for free play (than trapped in child labour work), to say the least, are some of the added benefits for children. In a research partly quoted earlier, it was noted that about 92% of teachers agree that at grades 1 and 2 children lack peaceful interaction with their peers, if no work is done for them at the preschool age. The study shows on the contrary that those who come through traditional or modern readiness programs have better interaction, play and entertainment skills, socialization with peers and familiarization of themselves with the outside environment compared to those who came directly from home who lack basic playing skills, have very little interest to entertain themselves with their friends, have little skills of penetration and rules of play with others, are reluctant to abide by rules of plays, keeping turns, giving chance to others and proper handling of play materials (SCN, 2011)

What remains is then if there are possibilities for guided play in priest schools. International agencies (e.g. International Child Development Steering Group or ICDSG) and the popular western child development theories that are the basis for international policy making like the CRC imply, among others, that structured interactive play with a nurturing adult parent or teacher is a uniquely effective way of promoting a



child's early cognitive development. However, this generalization has been challenged through systematic research evidences suggesting not only that the importance of play for children's development as proposed in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky does not depend on adults guiding such play but also that the middle-class Western patterns of mother-infant play and of speech addressed to infants are perceived by many parents in other cultural contexts as socially inappropriate (Africa ECD Voice, 2014). Hence, child-to-child interaction that is less structured, more spontaneous, natural, and more freely accessible is rather more enriching, stimulating, educative, and influential for change.

In connection with this, it was learned from interviews with children that experiences with age mates and friends in the center and neighborhood are a source of play and learning from each other, sharing materials, supporting one another, and studying lessons together (cited in Teka and Belay, 2015):

I also play such games as... My age mates taught me these games. I also have such play materials as a toy car, and toy airplane, etc., some are made by me, and others are offered by a female child of my neighborhood. I play different games with my brother (6 years old boy child, Living with both parents, Klinto Center).

Alongside the story time, I also enjoy playing ball, car, and chasing around". I learned the games from my neighboring age mates (5 years old boy child, Living with Mother, Klinto Center). I spend my time learning the alphabet with my friends (5 years old boy child, Living with Mother, Klinto Center).

I also play with my friends. We help one another. I love my friends because they give me money, they play with me and they also help me with my learning of the Amharic alphabet 'ha

hu' (6 years old, boy child, Lives with both parents, Chig Wuha Center).

I play with my friends and with children of the neighborhood. We play Eka-ka. I love my friends when they play Eka-ka with me. They all are younger than me. I am the one taking the lead/ the teaching role during our play (7 years old, girl child, Lives with grandparents, Chig Wuha Center).

I enjoy such games, as kolkele; denbush, who saw my handkerchief, slides, hide-and-peek. I was taught all these by my facilitator and age mates (7 years old, girl child, Lives with grandparents, Chig Wuha Center).

Apparently, in the process of the child mentor-mentee relationship, both children learn cooperation rather than competition. The mentee also learns to respect the mentor, and in due course hierarchy is maintained. Children learn to respect one another and discipline is not a problem. Bullying, violence, and misbehavior seldom occur because children submit to the authority of the mentor as he/she bears the responsibility of shaping the mentee being very close and friendly to him/her. This makes priest schools culturally relevant in building character valued by parents who, being asked about the qualities of a good child (cited in Teka and Belay, 2015), expressed values including respect and fear for father (a 45 years old Father, Klinto Center), respecting older persons, standing up when receiving guests, taking off a hat/cape when greeting people (a 48 years old Grandfather, Klinto Center), maintaining good social relationship with people (a 50 years old Grandmother, Klinto Center), value of living in peace with others...(45 years old, grandmother, Selam Fire), avoid picking up fights and be in love with people (36 years old, Father, Selam Fire), cooking skills, and good manners (35 years old, mother, Chigwuha), dependability, obedience, sense of accomplishing duties, and showing good manners(49 years old, grandmother, Chig wuha), modesty/

sincerity, and patience (27 years old, mother, Selam Fire), good character like no to stealing, rowdiness, and quarrel...(58 years old, Grandfather, Chig wuha).

### **Way Forward: So What?**

The development of ECCE in Ethiopia seems to show a sort of discontinuity rather continuity of experiences. Modern education in general and ECCE in particular were introduced in Ethiopia externally at the expense of traditional education - rather than improving the existing practices. It was introduced as is in the first early years' education in the country without giving recognition to, learning from the experiences of, and cooperating with the traditional education. It gave little concern to whatsoever for what was on the ground and literally started everything afresh; the notion of 'building on strengths' was not considered. Relevance was taken for granted; strengths of traditional centers were foreclosed; and what was different in traditional centers was eventually treated as a weakness to overcome. Such orientation led to valuing the external (language, commodities, culture, education) and what was local was taken as traditional, less useful; it is implied that what is imported is modern (more useful) and to modernize one needs to detach from tradition. Whatever is in tradition was critiqued and suggested to change to fit into modern education. There has been considerable critique over traditional schools using modern schools as a template. Attempts at appropriating traditional education to meet the demands of the day have never been attempted. Hence, there appears a historic lack of continuity, complementarity, and interdependence between the two. Rather, the two remained divorced and turned out to be mutually exclusive. In fact, they have been in contradiction; the former appearing to replace the latter.

Should we then opt for changing priest schools to standard ECCE centers as recommended by the critiques presented earlier? As part of this change process, do we have to change the priest school management system as well? First and foremost, the important issue is if there has to be a change in the first place. Priest schools are almost buried alive and we rather need to activate and allow them to function to their fullest capacities. If at all change is envisaged, then the second most important issue is not *what to change* but *whom to change*. Should we change priest schools to a standard ECCE or should we change standard ECCE to a priest school? Unlike experiences so far of instituting imported practices at best with modifications and at worst without, we rather suggest a bidirectional change. Given that standardization does not occur in a vacuum and practices so far are suggestive of the fact that this vacuum is filled in with Western values and measures, we also suggest that the so called standard ECCEs implemented in urban areas be informed with the reality on the ground, take serious lessons from priest schools, and become more serviceable to the greater majority of Ethiopian children. Most importantly for priest schools, a within theory of change is suggested in which tradition itself is to serve as a sieve to filter in and out some relevant elements from the standard ECCE and implement them in a manner that they would eventually be integrated. Third, if a within developmental trajectory is fuelled from lived experiences, internal dialogues and communication, the goal of change for priest schools will not be trying to resemble any other stuff including 'standard ECCE' but a move towards self-betterment, empowerment and functioning. Fourth, if priest schools change their objectives and entertain those of the standard ECCEs, then they will totally lose their essence and identity. All the virtues and potentials will obviously cease to exist. Fifth, changing the administrative set up into a community-led management may in the same way be counterproductive for two

reasons. Firstly, the special quality and flavor of the priest school is the authority given to the priest and his credibility of influence in the community by virtue of his religious leadership. In the same way, the reverence he cherishes from the community also evokes better sense of responsibility for the education of children seated beneath his feet to learn from him. Second, lessons from related experiences would discourage such a recommendation. For example, following the eruption of the socialist revolution, the Ethiopian Workers' Party and the Socialist Government gave due attention to ECCE and as a result there had been a tremendous rise in the number of KGs as well as enrollment of children. Major actors in this regard were public organizations (city dwellers' associations, peasant associations, women's associations...) who were able to open many KGs and administer them; pay salaries of teachers; fulfill indoor and outdoor preschool facilities, raise funds to cover preschool expenses. Moreover, as per the regulation issued by National Children's Commission of the day, KGs run by public organization were supposed to be administered by committees elected from these organizations. However, the major problem was that the management committee members in the *kebeles* were busy with their own work and showed less commitment (MoLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C). One can easily imagine how this problem can even be more severe for a rural farmer who toils day in and out in the field without weekends and holidays.

With these issues in mind, it is believed that revitalizing priest schools is a viable strategy for improving access and quality of school readiness. The following suggestions are given to assist in this revitalization process:

- Challenge existing views by opening debates among intellectuals;

- Work on attitude change of the stakeholder beginning from policy makers, ECCE experts, ECCE focal persons, communities, and priests;
- Conduct strategy analysis governing implementations of priest school education;
- Reactivate them with existing structure, administrative lay out, resources (physical and material like church buildings, finance, and human) and then continue building on strengths;
- Establish model priest school centers that would serve instituting a within developmental change;
- Involve civic societies (mainly NGOs) in building these model schools in different areas and eventually scale them up;
- Encourage communities not familiarize with it to employ priest schools;
- Rethink of priest schools in other local languages using Amharic alphabets as well, and
- Encourage other religious centers (Catholics and Protestants) to conduct priest schools of their own.

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