
The Theological Interpretation of Tezkar and its Economic Impact in East Gojjam

**By
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Abstract

East Gojjam is one of the densely populated zones of Ethiopia where surplus crop production is registered. However, it is also one of the zones where people live below poverty. Many economic and non-economic factors can be mentioned for its poverty and backwardness. In this paper religio-cultural practices that trigger extravagant expenses, especially tezkar is discussed in relation to human development. The paper is aimed to investigate the theological interpretation of tezkar under the EOTC and its economic impact on the people of East Gojjam. Adequate and reliable data were collected using qualitative methods (in-depth interview, Focused Group Discussion (FGD), observation and document analysis) and analyzed qualitatively. Therefore, the study has approved though tezkar is allowed as to the tradition of the Church, its actual practice is not supported by both the intellectuals of the Church and the ecclesiastical accounts. The real practice of tezkar, which is accompanied by extravagant expense, has been found as a major cause of economic crisis. Tezkar unequivocally hampers the economic development of the people of East Gojjam. Accordingly, awareness creation by both the government and the Church, institutional response and producing legal framework were recommended to be taken by concerned stakeholders of tezkar.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

East Gojjam is one of the zonal administrations of Amhara region in North-Western Ethiopia. It has sixteen Weredas (districts) and two administrative cities. East Gojjam covers 14,007.47 square kilometer of which the 650,898 hectare land is arable. East Gojjam is one of the fertile areas where various crops are produced. According to the survey of Gojjam Economic and Social Development Directory, the majority national stock of teff, the Ethiopian endemic cereal crop, is harvested in East Gojjam (1985: 3).

According to the 2007 census of Central Statistics Authority, Amharic is spoken by 99.81% as mother tongue and 99.82% is also Amhara by ethnicity. As indicated in the similar source, while 97.42% of the total population is affiliated to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 2.49% belongs to Islam.

The work culture of the people of East Gojjam is also constructive. All members of the society usually engage in different activities as to their ability and age. A piece of time is not spent without duty both on working days and weekend. Every member of the family is given some kind of task or responsibility to discharge as per his/her capacity. Thus, everyone contributes his/her share for the general household economic development.

The family in particular and the zonal people in general is contributing its share to maximize production and productivity. Different governmental sectors, such as department of agriculture, micro-finance, micro and small enterprises, and some non-government organizations are trying to put their effort to bring sustainable development in the zone.

Though the area is endowed with convenient natural resource, like suitable arable land and hardworking people, poverty and backwardness could not be alleviated. What is the fundamental reason for the zone to be poor if the people are surplus producer? What are the factors that affect the lives of the people not to be rich as per their production and productivity? In this study religio-cultural practices such as *təzkar* are hypothesized that hamper development of the society.

1.1. The concept of *tezkar*

According to Kidanewold (1948; 420), *təzkar* is a noun derived from the verb *zəkkərə* means ‘remember, cast one’s mind back to’ so that it can literally defined as ‘commemoration to a dead’.

təzkar is a Ge’ez word for ‘commemoration, remembrance, memory’ also called *arba* lit. ‘forty’ or *q^wirban* lit. ‘communion’. It is a major commemorative feast for a dead person (Mersha 2014:881). Technically, *təzkar* is a religious rite performed in order to pray for the soul of the deceased in the fortieth day of his/her demise. Since the spiritual rite is accompanied by the Holy Communion in the Church, people usually refer to *q^wirban* and they have become synonymous through long usage (Debebew 2002:212) though they are literally different.

According to the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, commemoration of a dead is allowed and practiced at the 3rd, 7th, 12th, 30th, 40th, 80th, 180th, and 360th days from the burial of the adult man. These days are observed by prayers of the priests, clergymen, and Church teachers mainly for the purpose of salvation of the soul of the dead. As to the teaching of the Church, the prayer and liturgy shall be accompanied by giving alms to the poor. However, the alms giving trend is gradually grown and changed from pure allowed way to salvation of the dead to unwanted path to poverty for the existents.

Among costly extravagant practices undertaken in those days after the burial of the dead, *təzkar* is the dominant one. When a member of a family dies, the family will be urged to prepare a festivity which requires big human and material resource. Though the magnitude of the festivity varies from one to another as to the economic capacity of party organizers, every family of the deceased prepares *təzkar* about from eight to forty *lemat* or *aqolquay*² which costs from 21,720.00 to 108,600.00 ETB. The average amount of expense usually seen in *tezkar* celebrations is 18 *lemat* plus an ox which costs about 58,870.00.

² The term *lemat* or *aqolquay* is a cultural instrument to measure eating and drinking materials in a feast and festivity.

The death of an adult family member in East Gojjam is not a one man lose rather it causes multidimensional effect on the family of the dead. Thus, in this paper the researcher wants to elucidate the relationship between the tenet of the Church on tezkar and its actual practice, and to what extent tezkar affects the economic life of the family of the dead in particular and the society of East Gojjam in general.

2. Conceptual frameworks and related literatures

Whether there is a relationship between culture and development has long been contested. As far back as 1904, Max Weber argued that the Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on "intra-worldly asceticism" manifested in thrift, diligence and discipline, was particularly favourable to growth (Weber 1958; Ajayi and Oluwafemi 2014). Even today, there are many authors who believe that culture is one of the main barriers to economic development in Africa (Seebens 2014). In contrast, others strongly deny that there is no any relationship between culture and economic development (Ogbonnaya ND:1).

Religio-cultural practices have important implications for human development though they are given less emphasis. Some scholars demonstrated the relationship between culture and economic developments (Aldashev & Platteau 2014; Yabo 2015) while others between religion and economic development (Mersland, D'espallier & Supphelle 2013; Platteau 2009; Seguino 2011). Both group of scholars focus on economic development. Moreover, they didn't bring culture and religion to see their effect on development. Thus, the tripartite relationship among culture, religion and development is not yet well studied even in devolved countries let alone in developing countries like ours. Scholars devoted to the issue concluded that empirical research regarding the influence of culture and religion on development is fragmented and still in its infancy (Mersland, D'espallier & Supphelle 2013). This entails a comprehensive research that helps to understand the nexus between culture, religion and development are needed.

Ethiopia is one of the homelands of indigenous culture and ancient civilization with various forms of cultural practices. Most of the cultural practices are derived from religious bases; either from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church or Islam. Especially, the EOTC has played a dominant role in the formation of one national culture among diverse ethnolinguistic communities. This is true because Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia during the first century (34 A.D.)³ through an Ethiopian eunuch-treasurer of Candace Queen of Ethiopia, who was baptized by Saint Philip, the Apostle (Acts 8:27-38). Ethiopia and Ethiopians had also believed in One God before Christianity was introduced by the eunuch (Yesehaq 1997:13). His journey also reveals the common practice of the country, which was usually carried out by Ethiopia people from ordinary people to the Kings. Queen Shaba also did the rally with this spiritual sentiment (Yohannes 2007).

The moral, historical, social, psychological and economic contributions played by the Church have been explored by different researchers from inside and outside (Bahiru 1995; Taddese 1972; Kefyalew 2004; Levine 1974; Chaillot 2002). The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church had been providing various developmental endeavors through both its intellectuals and the Development and Christian Aid Commission (Sirgiw 2007).

In contrary, the Church is repeatedly mentioned as an obstacle of the development of the country due to its negative culture towards work ethics and extravagant expenses. According to some research reports, most of the Orthodox Christians abstain from working on the observances because of the traditions inherited from Old Testament (Feleke 2004). In addition, most of the Christian people of Northern Ethiopia are exercising various religio-cultural practices which impede their development (Mersha 2014). This implies the Church plays a negative role in the national development process.

³ Actually historians believe that Christianity is introduced in Ethiopia at fourth century around 340 A.D. However, according to Church historians, fourth century is a period when Christianity gained official status and popular expansion.

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On the other hand, churches indeed play a significant role in development. “They motivate voluntary action and advocacy. They provide vital services to the most marginalized and needy. They give people hope. And yet, churches themselves are ‘in development’. Like societies and individuals, churches are in a constant and necessary process of change” (James 2009:3). This shows that churches have special goals originated from their spiritual identity. They teach people love and help each other not to get worldly benefit but for the utmost heavenly advantage before God. This social responsibility could be filled by Churches since governments do not reach all needs everywhere.

The link between religion and development has been studied by social science researchers in many countries of the world. Ogbonnaya (ND) discusses the role of religion for sustainable development in Nigeria. According to the study, although ninety percent of Nigerians are religious, the religiousness can be harnessed for the development of the country. Ideally, instead of impeding sustainable development, religion ought to promote development. Ellis and Haar (2004) also discussed how religion can play a significant role in African development by carrying out various development strategies; such as measures to stimulate economic growth, management of natural resources, conflict prevention and peace-building, health and education, and governance.

As far as the exploration of the current researcher is concerned, no one has carried out an academic research specifically on commemoration of the dead [tezkar]. Some of the writings, which are directly or indirectly related to tezkar, discuss merely the definition and interpretation of tezkar not its all-round impact and role in a certain society. Of course, the issue has been obtaining special attention by politicians in relation to harmful traditional practices. Especially, Emperor Haileselassie was aware of the tremendous impact of the preparation of commemoration [tezkar] and tried to convince the clergymen of the Church not to practice it (Mahitemeselassie 1962:596-97). Majesty had tried to replace almsgiving and offerings to the priests who conduct liturgy on the day and for needy people instead of preparing extra stock of food and drinking.

Similarly, in the Derg regime *tezkar* and other religio-cultural practices were condemned by Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, most of the anti-religion measures taken by the military government were not that much accepted in East Gojjam and other regions as well. Hence, preparing *tezkar* festivity or big banquet on behalf of a departed family member has continued. The people of East Gojjam are one of the most culture-rigid societies in Ethiopia⁴ so that several Old Testament traditions are still vibrant. For example, most of the Orthodox Christians do not work any kind of job on the observances because of the traditions inherited from Old Testament in East Gojjam (Felleke 2004:148). For instance, one cannot fetch water from outside the house to drink on the weekend days. East Gojjam could be a good living example how Ethiopia houses and maintains ancient traditional practices for a long period of time.

Among these maintained and transferred traditional practices some are not supported by New Testament or Christian books but merely cultural antiquities (Kahisay 2008 (E.C):16-18). The huge feast of commemoration of the dead [*tezkar*] is one of these events traced from remote time. Mersha (2014:881) indicates “apart from its religious objective, *tezkar* could become a heavy burden for the family of the deceased”. According to the trend of the area under study, the father confessor of the family comes and discusses the way the commemoration [*tezkar*] shall be celebrated with the family members of the dead (Debebew 2002:212).

However, the Church intellectuals contend such approach of father confessors. The principal duty of the father confessor should be facilitating the ceremony of the *fitihat* ‘prayer on behalf of the dead to God’ with the clergymen of the Church. He should not be worried about fleshy needs like food and drinking materials. Yaregal (2007 (E.C):465) states that the Church is not accountable if someone prepares *tezkar* in a huge amount of expense that may cause unexpected economic crisis. He argues that, the

⁴ Though this assumption is usually informally described, His Grace Abune Markos, the Bishop of East Gojjam Diocese, has also conformed during our discussion in my fieldwork stay.

Church as an institution never orders her faithful to prepare feasts beyond their capacity.

3. Methodology

The study basically employs qualitative method except some numeral figures for illustrative purpose. Regarding area sampling, East Gojjam is purposively selected since the specific culture understudy, tezkar, prevails in the area among all zones in Amhara region⁵. East Gojjam has 16 Weredas and 2 city administrations. Among these three districts (Woredas); such as Gozamin, Basoliben and Aneded were purposively selected based on the prevalence and magnitude of the event. Two kebeles were randomly selected from three Weredas each therefore the study used six kebeles for this research. Generally 96 key individuals participated in FGD and additional data were collected from 13 selected interviewees. In addition to this, the data were strengthened through observation and document analysis.

4. Results

4.1 The Doctrine of EOTC on Tezkar

As mentioned earlier, *tezkar* is a commemorative feast on behalf of the dead on the 40th day of his/her demise. It is basically celebrated to beg the compassion of God to save the soul of the dead. According to the respondents, it is supported by biblical accounts and other church scriptures. As to the Department Head of Education and Training of East Gojjam diocese,⁶

Let you cry to the man who has died, conduct his Tezkar as per the custom of his/her country; the man who died has got rest but prepare his/her tezkar for the salvation of his/her soul; then, stop crying for him (Sirak 38, 16). Furthermore,

⁵ The Head of Harmful Traditional Practices Core Process under Amhara Region Culture and Tourism Bureau has ranked the zones against the prevalence of religio-cultural practices so that East Gojjam is the first one.

⁶ A data collected from Re'ese Maemiran Yohannes Tamiru on 7 May, 2017 at Debre Markos

King Solomon has said 'the remembrance of righteous person is good for grace'; this implies that preparing tezkar for a righteous person has an imminent benefit to the people who are conducting it (Proverb 10, 7).

According to the teaching of the EOTC, tezkar is basically prepared for people who were active adherents of the religion but not for all people who were engaged in worldly activities during his/her life. In the strict sense of the doctrine, individuals who had been enjoying with visible sin and crime such as, adultery, theft, blasphemy, jealousy, false testimony, and other fleshly deeds are not eligible for commemoration [tezkar]. As declared in the introduction part of *Metsihafe Ginzet* (1979) 'the book of prayer for the dead',

"We are saying this for the ministers of the almighty God; for wicked people even if much prayer and offerings are practiced, it does not give benefit for them. The wicked ones were enemies to God when they were alive. They do not deserve mercy after their death too. There is no biasness before God so as He gives the right price for all as his/her hand⁷" (Beaman 2008 (E.C): 118).

However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church prays for all members of the Church except for those who have exiled from the Church, magicians (sorcerers) and those who have committed suicide. In response to the prayer, the family of the deceased prepares tezkar. Since no human being is mandated to know the righteousness and sin of persons, the EOTC performs the prayer for every adherent of the Church.

Various Church literatures testify that preparing *tezkar* is necessary for the dead ones. One of the known Church forefathers, John Chrysostom, has explained the justification of preparing tezkar as follows:

⁷ Translation is mine

But grant that he departed with sin upon him, even on this account on ought to rejoice, that he was stopped short in his sins and added not to his iniquity; and help him as far as possible, not by tears, but by prayers and supplications alms and offerings. For not unmeaningly have these things been devised, nor do we in vain make mention of the departed in the course of the divine mysteries, and approach God in their behalf, beseeching the Lamb Who is before us, Who taketh away the sin of the world – not in vain, but that some refreshment may thereby ensue to them (Philip and Henry 2012 in Yaregal 2007(E.C), 472).

The text explains how much preparing *tezkar* can benefit one who has departed. Even if the departed one was not comfortable to God during his life, our sole responsibility is reminding God for his/her sake in prayers, offerings and supplications. We have to worry for the soul of the dead and help him to the maximum limit of our capacity. The prayer, offerings and supplications are not just for funny or meaningless pleasure but requesting God for the salvation of the departed soul.

Not in vain doth he that standeth by the altar cry out when the tremendous mysteries are celebrated, “For all that have fallen asleep in Christ, for those who perform commemorations in their behalf”. For if there were no commemorations for them, these things would not have been spoken: since our service is not a mere stage show, God forbid! Yea, it is by the ordinance of the Spirit that these things are done. Let us then give them aid and perform commemoration for them. For if the children of Job were purged by the sacrifice of their father, why dost thou doubt that when we too offer for the departed, some consolation arises to them? Since God is wont to grant the petitions of those who ask for others (Philip and Henry 2012 in Yaregal 2007(E.C), 473).

The paragraph shows that the union of the soul of the departed, the existent prayers and God are fulfilled on the celebration of *tezkar*. The prayers request God to forbid the sin of the departed by delivering ritual ceremonies.

The writer argues that God is not as such rude to ignore His children's prayer and offering. The prayer is allowed and executed by the will and help of the Holy Spirit. The Church, therefore, undertakes *tezkar* as an institutional order to be enacted.

Let us not then be weary in giving aid to the departed, both by offering on their behalf and obtaining prayers for them: for the common expiation of the world is even before us. Therefore with boldness do we do we then entreat for the whole world, and name their names with those of martyrs; of confessors, of priests. For in truth one body are we all, though some members are more glorious than others; and it is possible from every source to gather pardon for them, from our prayers, from our gifts in their behalf, from those whose names are named with theirs. Why therefore dost thou grieve? Why mourn, when it is in thy power to gather so much pardon for the departed? (Philip and Henry 2012 in Yaregal 2007(E.C), 473)

The quotation extracted above delineates that caring out a commemoration is an established tenet in the early fathers of the Church. John Chrysostom strongly argues that one has to put his/her effort to contribute something for the salivation of the dead through various ways. It is only God who has the right to accept or reject the prayers of the alive on behalf of the dead. The main responsibility of the faithful is just to prepare the event and ask the priests for prayer. The task of the priests is also praying to God in order to get mercy for the departed one. John Chrysostom calls for the faithful to deliver and implement *tezkar* to support the departed ones in order to get eternal life.

Based on such and such ecclesiastical accounts, the EOTC accepts prayers of *Tezkar* and applies to the dead Christians at different times from the date of the deceased. Indeed, it is logically accepted that the clergymen and priests who were serving with various ritual activities shall be served with some food and drinking for their daily bread demand. According to the informants of the study, priests and clergymen who participate in the ritual activities consider the feast as their wage since they serve with almost non-

existent salary. In addition to the priests, those who are in need of their daily food shall be invited on behalf of the departed one.

One of the participants of the research explicates the benefit of *tezkar* from another perspective. He argues that one of the reasons of preparing *tezkar* is to discuss and decide on the future fate of the family of the dead person. If the father of the family dies and the mother may face difficulty in treating and carrying children, relatives and friends will make a kind of panel discussion to overcome the expected life challenges of the remained family. Hence, the lunch or dinner prepared for these discussants has become grown to the extravagant festivity which is not totally accepted by the Church. Therefore, *tezkar* is prepared not only for the spiritual benefit of the departed one but to forecast and plan how the family should continue their life with minimum cost.

However, the real practice of *tezkar* in East Gojjam causes disastrous effect economically, socially and psychologically. The impact of *tezkar* in these life aspects is discussed below.

4.2 The economic impact of *tezkar* in East Gojjam

Tezkar in East Gojjam is carried out with huge resource investment. The family of the deceased is obliged to prepare a big feast for the priests, clergymen, deacons, farmers, and the whole community. Every person, except youth, men and women of the kebele and the priests and traditional teachers of the surrounding parishes of Churches are invited. In particular, at the 40th day of the demise of the person, a devastating festivity is celebrated. At minimum, an ox is slaughtered; a number of eating and drinking materials are prepared.

According to the tradition of East Gojjam, the invitation program shall be divided into chunks of grouping called *lemat* or *aqolquay*. One *lemat* or *aqolquay* is expected to feed or serve from 25 to 35 persons. A single *lemat*

(amount of food and liquor) budgeted for a chunk or group of people (what is called *lemat*) is financially estimated as follows⁸ in the next page:

No	Type of expense			Amount of expense	price	Labor price
1	Local beer	1.1.	malt	8 kilo wheat	50 birr	2 days (200 br)
		1.2.	buckthorn	3 kilo (grinded)	120 birr	2 days (200 br)
		1.3.	Roasted cereal (<i>derekot</i>)	23 kilo of maize	150 birr	2 days (200br)
		1.4.	bread	23 kilo of wheat	150 birr	2 days (200 birr)
				distillation		1 day (100 birr)
2	120 injera			1 injera 5 birr	600 birr	1 day (100 birr)
3	souse 'wet'	3.1.	grinded bean	8 kilo pea	100 birr	2 days (200 birr)
		3.2.	pepper	half a kilo	50 birr	
		3.3.	oil	1 litre	75 birr	
		3.4.	onion	2 kilo	20 birr	
4	firewood			4 bunch	200	
	sum				1515	1200
5	Sum total of a <i>lemat</i> expense				2715 birr	

The item and price estimation was calculated with members of the FGD in six kebeles of three Woredas. Even though there are some minor differences between the districts (Woredas), the minimum average amount was taken for this study.

Therefore, according to the data providers, the cost estimation invested for one *lemat* is about two thousand seven hundred fifteen (2715.00) birr if

⁸ The cost estimation is calculated on May 2017.

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every item is properly calculated. An average tezkar festivity requires about 18 lemat during the 40th day of the departed one. If we multiply 18 by 2715 it will be about forty eight thousand eight hundred seventy (48,870.00) birr. This is only an expense of just for a single day and a minimum average. Sometimes as the economic capacity of individuals, one can prepare up to 80 lemat. The researcher remembers that 37 lemat were invested for his father tezkar four years ago.

If we add all the expenses of the banquets of each prayer days – days of *fitihat* the amount of economic loses is very devastating. The following estimation shows how much resource is spent on each feast of prayer days:

- At the third day of the demise of the person half a lemat (1357.5 birr)
- On the seventh day half a lemat (1357.5 birr)
- On the 12th day one lemat (2715 birr)
- For the eve of the 30th day⁹ half a lemat (1357.5 birr); on the actual day 2 lemat (5430 birr)
- On the eve of the 40th one lemat (2715 birr); for elders 3 lemat (3x2715 = 8145), on the actual day 18 lemat and at least one ox (48,870 + 10000 = 58,870 birr) and for the second day of the tezkar one lemat (2715 birr), for the servers 3 lemat (3x2715 = 8145 birr)
- On the 80th day half a lemat (1357.5 birr)
- On the 180th day half a lemat (1357.5 birr)
- For the first year of the deceased 8 lemat with an ox or at least one big sheep (21720 + 10000/2000 = 31720/23720 birr)

If we calculate the expenses of all these days, the amount of resource spent in terms of money is estimated about 122,457.00 birr in a year. This does not include the expenses involved during the burial date and on the weekly Sabbath days for mourning purpose which is about 53,440.00 birr.

⁹ In many places, eve for thirty is not celebrated but for forty.

Let us calculate the expense on the total zone. East Gojjam consists of 437 Kebeles. One kebele usually contains a minimum of three or four and up to eight parishes of Churches. If 10 adult persons die within a year in a kebele, we will have 4370 dying persons in the whole zone¹⁰. Then, if we multiply the number of people dying per year (4370) by the amount cost estimation within a year 122,457.00 yields about five hundred thirty five million one hundred thirty seven thousand ninety (**535,137,090.00**) birr annually. It seems of course absurd for uninformed individuals. Actually, the participants of this research themselves were surprised when we came to estimate the amount of expense in cash form. Nevertheless, this is really the minimum expenditure expected from any family of a dead to contribute.

This amount of money could be invested on big development programs which benefits the society under study if these theologically unsupported feasts are properly managed. If one can feed the needy people and only the clergymen participated on the actual day of tezkara and try to budget the rest one to other well planned development strategies, many schools, health care stations and social welfares could be established.

According to the informants from the Church in East Gojjam diocese, such distressing expense is not totally accepted by any ecclesiastical scripture. What was allowed and promoted is the prayers of the clergymen on behalf of the departed person not the extravagant expense. The feast does not have any importance at any level except the needy ones may get daily food. Such huge amount of feast rather leads the invited guests (including the priests themselves) to the unwanted misbehaviors. The people who were purposely invited to praise God and ask His mercy for the soul of the dead is usually changed into extra meal and drinking and get intoxicated. This phenomenon causes to another upsetting situation for God and for the families of the departed one.

¹⁰ Actually, the number of people dying in a kebele within a year was reported from 43 to 135 by the kebele offices. However, to be confident, I took 10 people may die per year.

Having these in mind, Emperor Haile Sellasie I has declared a statement which prohibits the feast of tezkar. He proposed that the prayers shall be conjoined by almsgiving and offerings not by feast (extra meal and drinking). He has tried to be exemplary by not preparing feast for the tezkar of his daughter called Zenebework but gave alms for poor and needy people (Mahiteme Sellasie 1962, 596-97). His Majesty stated his view for the people of Ethiopia in general and for priests in particular as follow:

ይህንም ሁሉ ማለታችን ለማሳሰብ ያኸል ነው እንጂ በተዘካር ጠላና ጠጅ ዐረቄ እየደገሱ ለካህናት ማጠጣትና ማስከር ጥቅም የሌለው መሆኑን እናንተም ካህናቱ [እንደምታውቁት] አያጠራጥርም። ነገር ግን ለማናቸውም ነገር ዝማሪና መሪ ያስፈልጋልና ጥቅሙንና ጉዳቱን አመዛዝኜ ከጥቅሙ ጉዳቱ በዝቶ ስለታየኝ ዝማሪና መሪ እንደሆን በማለት የተዘካርን ነገር እኔው ራሴ ዝምሬ ለማሳየት ስል የዘነበ ወርቅን ተዘካር በገንዘብ ምጽዋት ካህናቱንና ኑዳዎችን መጥቀም ይሻላል ብዬ አድርጌዋለሁና በዚህ አዕርፍ ነፍሳ ብላችሁ እንድትጸልዩላት እለምናችኋለሁ።

It is unsuspecting that you know preparing tezkar and invite clergies with ale, mead and alcohol and get them drunk is meaningless. We are saying this simply in order to remind you that this practice does not give any importance. However, since there must be a role model for everything I have already started being a role model and prepared the tezkar of my daughter Zenebe Work in the form of almsgiving and offerings for clergies and needy ones evaluating the merit and demerit of tezkar. Therefore, I plead you to pray to God to give her rest (Mahiteme Sellasie 1962:597).

We may understand from the statement that Emperor Haile Sellasie had significantly understood the impact of tezkar. However, as the quotation implies tezkar was prepared for clergies and the needy ones at that time. Nevertheless, nowadays tezkar in East Gojjam is predominantly prepared for the general public who do not contribute anything neither for the departed one nor the family. The king was disappointed by the invitation done for clergies. Currently, the people of the research area are suffering from the magnitude of the tezkar prepared for the whole community. Having said this, Haile Sellasie had also added the following four proclamations for the clergies to be effective as of then.

1. *If one of your family members dies, you shall make his/her tezkar in the form of money and be role model for the general public.*
2. *If one prepares tezkar for a poor person who has no relatives and gives a solid birr, let you count that small gift as big and pray for him.*
3. *If one dies who had no a piece of money even for his daily food, let you pray for him freely since he is your brother.*
4. *You church scholars and teachers while teaching and you priests while confessing, should advise the people and nobilities that preparing tezkar in the form of almsgiving is far better than through drinking (Ibid 598).*

Even though such proclamations were declared by the King, it could not be applicable specifically in East Gojjam and in the North-western and Northern parts of Ethiopia at large.

A traditional teacher [mergeta], who is currently serving his Parish of Church at Endimata Eyesus – just a kilometer distant from Debre Markos city, has narrated the following amazing experience.

I was living in Menkiro Mariam at Giraram Kebele of Gozamin Woreda in East Gojjam Zone. In 2001 E.C., the area had seen a very marvelous harvest. Unfortunately, there comes unexpected snowfall that devastated the crop before it was collected. It was a heartbreaking event for everyone whose life is entirely depends on it. We stayed for some days and organized a social meeting to do something. We sent our delegates to the government office to apply the accidental hazard we faced. Then, experts from the district office came and advised us to sweep the crops fell on the floor of the harvesting field. Then, we went to the field and tried to collect the cereals and grains steering from the soil. Most of us collected 1/4th of the expected amount of crop product. After a week, we were gathered and discuss how to overcome the problem we faced. Then, priests and elders agreed that no one should prepare any kind of feast for tezkar or socio-cultural ceremony for that year. Everybody gave up preparing banquet and using the collected crop just only for

daily food. Amusingly, that small amount of swept and collected crop from the soil was sufficed to feed us and for seed on June. Some of the villagers ate the collected crop until February and March 2002. We never thought that it could be adequate but we brought the idea just a mechanism for survival until any interested organization will come to aid us¹¹.

We can learn a big lesson from the narration about how the people of the area use its resource. The text implies that 3/4th of commonly collected harvest is employed for unnecessary banquets and festivities. Actually, the text concerns the ban of all expenses related to religio and socio-cultural practices not limited to tezkar. Nonetheless, the biggest expense is also feasts related to death. The extravagant feast prepared for tezkar leads people to economic poverty which in turn will be a cause for social disorder.

5. Pushing factors for tezkar preparation

According to the data obtained from research participants, people are urged to prepare extravagant tezkar festivities due to several reasons. Some of the major ones are mentioned below:

5.1. Superfluous competition

Members of the society usually compete for each other by their wealth. The best way of manifesting their prosperity is preparing a huge banquet for occasions such as tezkar. This has been become an established norm in the area under study. One can boast as if he/she is a rich man by arranging a broad feast of tezkar on behalf of the departed family. This may not necessarily be triggered by his economic capacity but the traditional tie he has with. This traditional tie is called *keman anishe* literally mean 'whom I am inferior to' which is more psychological than economical. The life of the society is fully under unnecessary bashfulness which causes them to do things without their belief.

¹¹ This data was collected from a traditional teacher called Mergeta Yirga Adigeh on April 22, 2017.

Many respondents reply for the question “why do people prepare big tezkara beyond their economic capacity?” as *keman anishe newa* technically means ‘whom I am inferior to not to prepare as such!’ Even if they are not economically capable, they suppress themselves and prepare big tezkara festivity just in order to satisfy their psychological need. It is only to equalize oneself to the expected social status. Therefore, every member of the society is obliged to fulfill the norm of the area sacrificing everything he/she has.

A father of six children living in a village called Yenebirna Michael has lost his father five years ago. He was basically poor enough even to help his family. He had only one ox with which he was ploughing cooperating with a partner. Furthermore, he was forced to prepare his father’s tezkara as per the custom of the area. Thus, he slaughtered his ox and prepared his father’s tezkara just for bashfulness. Then, he suffered from a lot of economic, social and psychological problems.

5.2. Means of socialization

People discharge social obligations in order to gain social cohesion and acceptability. In East Gojjam *tezkara* is one of the social practices used to either to bind or alienate one from a society. A member of a society is urged to prepare *tezkara* to consolidate his/her membership to which he/she belongs. If he/she does not shape himself or herself to comply with the custom of the society, social sanctions will follow.

Two intimate friends, Getinet Wubete and Alamine Muluken, were living in Menkiro Mariyam of Giraram Kebele, Gozamin Woreda. They refused to prepare tezkara for their parents. However, the community passed social sanctions over them. They were forced to exile from social constructions called edir, equib and informal cooperation mechanisms. Their cattle were separated and they were totally alienated from the social bondage. The community declared that no one should cooperate with them unless they ask for excuse. Though they struggled for a long time, they could not have won the war launched on them. Finally they admitted their mistake and get punished as per the rule of the society.

5.3. The intervention of father confessor

According to the doctrine of the Church, each member of the EOTC ought to have a father confessor. The principal responsibility of a father confessor is to counsel his confessed son/daughter to help them to go in the path of Christianity and spirituality. His duty is to advise and take care of the faithful and give repentance whenever they commit sin willingly and unwillingly.

However, priests in the rural area engage in social endeavors like forcing people to prepare huge tezkar in the name of father confessor. As Debebew (2002:212) pointed father confessor of the departed family intervenes to the modality of tezkar preparation. He sometimes urges the departed family to prepare tezkar in a maximum amount beyond their economic and social capacity.

The Head of Gospel Education and Apostolic Mission, Liqe liqawunt Dawit Solomon, remembers an incidence that was told on a meeting from a poor lady.

There was an awareness creation gathering in Dejen district on October, 2007 E.C. The bishop of East Gojam diocese, His Grace Abune Markos was attending the training on harmful traditional practices particularly regarding extravagant expenses. A woman stood up and appealed as follows: 'Your Grace, my husband has died last year. The father confessor of the family came and ordered me to prepare a big feast for his tezkar including slaughtering of an ox. I refused to do so in order to keep the economic safety of my family. I asked them to celebrate his commemoration through paying cash (birr) instead of arranging a huge meal and drinking. They did not accept my proposal so that I prepared an extravagant festivity that includes the slaughtering of my ox. As the result, I couldn't have resisted to cultivate my children and myself. Now, my two boys have dropped out from their school and are employed as servant for rich persons. Two of baby girls have gone to relatives in Addis Ababa and they are also facing the same chance to

their brothers. I am also leading my life baking injera in various homes. This family collapse and disintegration is clearly the result of extravagant feast for my husband's tezkar'.

The experience of this poor lady is just an ideal and practical example that everyone encounters in his/her daily life. Many research participants express that most of the unemployed youths in neighboring cities and Addis Ababa are migrated due to poverty which is directly or indirectly associated with *tezkar* and other extravagant expenses. The increment of drop out children, family break, the resurgence of street boys/girls and gangsters are in some way yielded from poverty which in turn is caused by *tezkar* and similar theologically unsupported feasts.

His Grace admits that there are unskilled priests in rural area who insist the family of the dead to prepare big feasts for *tezkar* and other prayer days that might cause psychological problems. Even though the Church is now teaching the people not to invest big expense for *tezkar* the society of the area could not have brought adequate attitudinal change. Since the custom of *tezkar* preparation has lasted for centuries from generation to generation, it cannot be simple to uninstall within few period of time.

5.4. Lack of formal law

People do not have legal support if they dare to ignore preparing *tezkar*. The experts of culture and tourism department give training for the people to minimize their expenses during *tezkar* preparation. Most of the time, the attendants of the training agree and admit the disadvantage of *tezkar*. Following the public forum, they set a social law that controls the people from doing unwanted extravagant action. However, there is no legal framework that gives guarantee to exercise as per the decision of the community. The following example shows how the absence of legal framework affects the work of alleviating *tezkar* preparation in East Gojjam. The expert of culture under the department of East Gojjam Culture and tourism explains his experience as follows.

Ato Ayalew Fenta is dwelling in Lumame town, a capital of Awabal Woreda. His father has passed away on April 2007 E.C. He wants to celebrate a huge tezkar ceremony. Some months earlier, the community had already decided that thereafter preparing tezkar with big investment shall be condemned. However, Ato Ayalew consulted his cousin, a lawyer residing at Debre Markos, about legality of the sanction of tezkar preparation. The lawyer advised Ato Ayalew that no legal ground that prevents him from preparing tezkar if he wants to do so. Then, Ato Ayalew prepared a huge tezkar ceremony yet the soldiers came and red-handed him. He was taken to Debre Markos court and charged by police. However the judges did not punish Ato Ayalew due to absence of legal proclamations or procedures that deal with tezkar. Therefore, Ato Ayalew was released freely¹².

The description mentioned above hampers the attempts of works and activities done to solve the problem under study. It affects the effort of experts working with culture and tourism department, members of the committee working with harmful traditional practices and NGOs dealing with tezkar and other unnecessary expenses.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Tezkar is one of the colorful festivities prepared on behalf of a dead according to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. The theological objective is to plead the almighty God to give salvation to the dead. The rite is accompanied by prayer of liturgy, reading of Psalms and offerings to the clergymen and the needy ones on the 3rd, 7th, 12th, 30th, 40th, 180th, and 360th dates of the burial of the dead. The term tezkar is literally ‘commemoration’ so that all these days can be called tezkar but technically tezkar refers to the 40th day festivity which requires big human and financial investment. The real practice of tezkar in East Gojjam does not coincide with the real theology of the Church. It forces the family of the departed to prepare a

¹² Interview conducted with Ato Belsti Wube, an expert of culture May 2017.

huge banquet for a multitude on behalf of the dead. This big feast leads the family to poverty and subsequent psycho-social crises.

6.2 Recommendations

According to the findings of the research the following remedial measures shall be taken by the stakeholders of the issue.

1. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church shall teach and aware her followers about the difference between the real tenet of the Church about tezkar and the actual practice of the people. The Church should maximize the power of consciousness of the people [both the priests and the faithful] on the merit and demerit of the religio-cultural festivities. Awareness creation programs should be devised and implemented with target based schedules.
2. The Culture and Tourism Office of East Gojjam zone shall aggressively work on religio-cultural practices that hamper development. Currently, the department of Culture and Tourism of the zone has categorized tezkar and other festivities labeling as *yetenzaza diggis* ‘extravagant banquet’ as one of the harmful traditional practices. This is by itself a good progress and the office should exert its physical and mental energy to minimize the expenses caused by tezkar. However, the office cannot bring change in exclusion of stakeholders so that other sectors have to assist the office in any way they can.
3. Institutional response: There is no any sector which works on wise resource utilization of the people. The Office of Agriculture is assisting the farmers how to farm, sow, cultivate, collect, how to use fertilizers and anti-seeds and anti-weeds and maximize production and productivity. It works how the area could be surplus producer by the best use of modern way of agriculture and agricultural inputs but it does not care how they should use what they produced. There is no any responsible office that teaches them the way they use what they obtain. Thus, the government shall establish an independent office that may work on wise use of resource and saving culture.

4. Legal framework: The office of Culture and Tourism has attempted to tackle the extravagant festivities within its capacity. According to the informants of the office at different districts (Woredas), the attempt did not bring effective outcome due to lack of legal framework either to reward or to punish. The experts of the office in collaboration with police try to teach, aware and arrest the ones who violate the social rules but the court does not accept in the absence of legal ground. Therefore, the zone in particular and the region at large should formulate a legal document to be used both to reward and to punish.

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