

The Oromo Language Use in Wellega Dioceses: Opportunities and Challenges

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የዚህ ወረቀት ዋና ዓላማ የኦሮምኛ ቋንቋ በኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ውስጥ እንዴት እያገለገለ እንደሆነ መፈተሽ ነው። ቤተ ክርስቲያን በአጠቃላይ በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ በተለይ ደግሞ በኦሮምኛ አጠቃቀም ላይ ያላትን ግንዛቤ ወይም ፍልስፍና፣ የኦሮምኛ ቋንቋን ለቤተ ክርስቲያን አገልግሎት መጠቀም የሚኖረውን ፋይዳ፣ ከዚህ በፊት ቤተ ክርስቲያን የኦሮምኛ ቋንቋን ለመጠቀም ያደረገችውን ሙከራና በዚህ ሙከራ ውስጥም የገጠማትን ተግዳሮት መተንተን ደግሞ የጥናቱ ዝርዝር ዓላማዎች ናቸው።

ይኸን ጥናት በአግባቡ ለማከናወን ጥልቀት ያላቸው ቃለ መጠይቆች፣ ቡድን ተኮር ውይይቶችና አሳታፊ ምልክታዎች በዓላማ ንሞና ከተመረጡ አካላት ጋር ተካሂዷል። በተጨማሪም ከጉዳዩ ጋር የተገናኙ የታተሙም ይኸን ያልታተሙ የጽሑፍ መረጃዎች ለምሳሌ ደብዳቤዎች፣ የትርጉም ሥራዎችና የውይይት ውሳኔዎች (ቃለ ጉባኤዎች) ተፈትሸዋል። በመቀጠልም አጥኚው የተገኙትን መረጃዎች እንደ የጭብጣቸው በመመደብ ከዝርዝር ዓላማዎች አንጻር ወቅታዊ ንድፈ ሐሳቦችን (ትወራዎችን) ተጠቅሞ ለመተንተን ሞክሯል።

በመኾኑም ጥናቱ የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን እንደ ተቋም በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ በተለይም በኦሮምኛ ቋንቋ አጠቃቀም ላይ አዎንታዊ አመለካከት እንዳላት ጥናቱ ለማረጋገጥ ሞክሯል።

ጥናቱ የኦሮምኛ ቋንቋ ለቤተ ክርስቲያን አገልግሎት ቢውል ሥነ ትምህርታዊ፣ ሥነ ልቦናዊና ምጣኔ ሀብታዊ ጠቀሜታ እንዳለው በመታመን፣ በአጠቃላይ ቤተ ክርስቲያኒቱ በተለይም ማኅበረ ቅዱሳን በተለይ ኦሮምኛን ለተለያዩ የቤተ ክርስቲያን አገልግሎት አየተጠቀሙበት እንደሆነ በጥናቱ ተረጋግጧል። ይኸውም ኦሮምኛ በምሥራቅና ምዕራብ ወለጋ አህጉረ ስብከት ለስብከተ ወንጌል፣ ለጸሎት፣ ለወረቀትና ኤሌክትሮኒክ ኅትመቶች፣ ለስብሰባ፣ ለአስተዳደራዊ ግንኙነቶችና እንዲያውም በምዕራብ ወለጋ ለቅዳሴም ጭምር አገልግሎት እየሰጠ ይገኛል። ከዚህም በተጨማሪ በኦሮሚያ አህጉረ ስብከት ለሥራ አስኪያጅነትና ለጳጳስነት ሹመት የቋንቋው ዕውቀት እንደ መሥፈርት እያገለገለም ይገኛል።

የቤተ ክርስቲያንን ይትባህል የሚገልጹ የኦሮምኛ ቃላት እጥረት፣ የሃገራዊ አንድነት መናጋት ሥጋት፣ የአኅጉረ ስብከቶቹ ሐላፊዎች ለአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ትምህርት ያላቸው የተዛባ አመለካከት፣ የገንዘብና የተማሪ የሰው ኅይል እጥረት፣ ግልጽ የኾነ የቤተ ክርስቲያን የቋንቋ መመሪያ አለመኖር የመሳሰሉት እንደ ተግዳሮት የሚታዩ ናቸው። ተግዳሮቶቹን ተመቋቋም ተከታታይነት ያለው ሰፊ የግንዛቤ ማስጨበጫ ሥልጠናዎችን መስጠት፣ ምዕመኑ የገንዘብ አስተዋጽኦ እንዲያደርግና የቋንቋ ልማት ሥራዎች (የስያሜ ቃላት ፈጠራ፣ የመዝገብ ቃላትና የቋንቋ መመሪያዎች) እንዲከናወኑ ማድረግ በዚህ ጥናት የተሠነዘሩ የመፍትሔ አቅጣጫዎች ናቸው።

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Problem

Language of Religion

It is possible to find examples of “‘sacred’ language for special religious activities and of ‘secret’ language not allowed and often incomprehensible to non-members of a particular group of people who adhere to special cults of worship or belong to secret societies in Africa.”¹

Some countries, which have national religion, have specific languages of religion. For example, the Vatican Catholic Church uses Classical Latin for different functions of spiritual ministry. The Arabic language is the main symbol of cultural and religious unity among peoples living in Arabian countries.² Consequently, language and religion are inseparable in the Qur’an, the sacred scripture of Islam. Sanskrit, the classical sacred and literary language of the Hindus of India is used only for religious purposes.

In the Ethiopian context, Geez is the foremost example of a language of religion. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church has used it for liturgical practices for nearly two millennia. Before coming to be restricted to the sphere of religion, Ge’ez served for all administrative, literary, as well as for wider and interpersonal communication.

Europeans used African local languages for their religious missions during the colonial period. The nature of their fundamental interests in evangelizing Africans may be questioned; yet the wisdom of using indigenous African languages to capture the ear of Africans is undeniable.

In Ethiopia, during the reign of the Emperor Susinoyos, Jesuit missionaries tried to use vernacular languages including Amharic, for missionary purposes. It was in response to the measures of the missionaries that the EOTC first attempted to use Amharic for religious education.³ It was primarily in order to prevent her faithful from being influenced by foreign missionaries that Church authorities began to translate religious texts from Geez into Amharic.

Secondly, during the Italian occupation the invaders were able to use local languages for religious as well as secular education. It is reported that the Italian Roman Catholic missionaries translated the Gospel into minority languages like Kunama, Bilen etc.⁴ The Catholic Church has translated the Bible into other Southern Ethiopia languages like Kafa, Bench, Wolayta, Sidama, Gamo and others.

¹ Wolff, E.H. The Language factor in Discourse on Development and Education in Africa. . In Kembo-Sure and others (ed.) *Language Planning for Development in Africa*. (Nairobi: Moi University Press. 2006).Pp1-22.

² Paden, W. *The Comparative Study of Religion and Interpreting the sacred: ways of Viewing Religion*. (University of Vermont. 2003)

³ Amsalu Aklilu, Survey of Ethiopian Literature, (Unpublished handout) (Addis Ababa University, 1976).

⁴ Wolde-Michael, H. The Failure of the League of Nations to avert Itlalo-Ethiopian war (1935-1936). Unpublished Thesis. (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1964); Adane, T. *A Historical Survey of State Education in Eritrea*. (Addis Ababa: Educational Materials Production and Distribution Agency, 1992)..

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Basically Mother Tongue Education (MTE)⁵ is not something which others can give or prevent based on their good will. It is a fundamental human right. There has been a lot of pressure from the international organizations and academics in several countries in favor of indigenous languages especially for children's education. Calls made to all countries concerned, include *the 1953 UNESCO Report on The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education, the OAU Plan of Action for Africa, the 1994 UNESCO-OAU commissioned study on "the definition of strategies for the promotion of African languages in a multilingual environment", Article 5 of the United Nations' Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Asmara Declaration, and so on*⁶ Tremendous research findings have been presented by academics (universities and research institutions) promoting the importance of MTE.

A bird's eye view of the history of Ethiopian language policy reveals that different governments have followed different approaches based on their respective political ideologies. However, there has been a lot of critique of the EOTC due to her reluctance to make any significant change in the course of all these successive regimes. Numerous observers have noted that the Orthodox Tewahido Church has consistently used Geez for almost all spiritual services given in churches, while Amharic and Tigrinya were used for public communication.

It seems that most churches nowadays have become aware of the issue of indigenous languages and ethnic nationalism around the world and this also applies to Ethiopia. In response to this, the church in general, and specific bodies such as Mahibere Kidusan (and others) have recently started to use vernacular languages for certain religious practices. One of the major languages which have started being used is the Oromo language, and its use has become a sensitive issue. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the basic philosophy of the Church on MTE, the advantages of using the Oromo language in the religious sphere, attempts that have been made so far, the challenges faced and the possible solutions to current problems.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this paper is to assess the challenges and opportunities of using the Oromo language for EOTC religious education. Specifically it aims to:

- investigate the philosophy of the church about mother tongue education;
- identify the tangible benefits of using the Oromo language for religious education;
- assess the extent to which the EOTC has attempted to use the Oromo language, and investigate the current challenges concerning this attempt.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Language policy makers, theological institutions, curriculum designers, teaching-learning material producers, governmental and non-governmental organizations which work with the church and researchers could all benefit from the findings and use them for their respective needs.

⁵ In this paper 'mother tongue education' means using one's first language or a language which is well understood by the interlocutors for formal communication system.

⁶ Bobda A. S. "Facing some challenges in language planning for Cameroon". In Kembo-Sure, Sera Mwangi, N. O. Ogechi (eds.). *Language Planning for Development in Africa*. (Moi University press, Kenya, 2006).

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Research Design

In-depth interview and focus-group discussion methods were employed to assess the philosophy of the EOTC about MTE, including the opportunity, the attempt, and observed challenges of using the Oromo language for spiritual services in Oromiya dioceses. This method was chosen because it was appropriate for collecting relevant data from the heterogeneous population under investigation. The researcher selected the Wellega dioceses, the Patriarchate Head Office and the Head Office of Mahibere Kidusan using purposive sampling to gain relevant data for the study.

1.5.2 Area Selection

The researcher selected East and West Wellega Dioceses purposively because the researcher had been repeatedly informed that there was strong and continual request of linguistic right; i.e. Oromo Orthodox Christians are asking for the use of the Oromo language in the EOTC in order to ward off the critiques of skeptics. Most of the data were collected from West Wellega due to the sensitivity and complexity of the issue. Then, Gimbi, Nejo, Kiltukara and Gori were selected with purposive sampling to get relevant data on the issue under investigation. From East Wellega, only Nekemte town was taken for comparative purpose.

1.5.3 Informant Selection

From the selected areas mentioned above, the General Manager, the Head of the Sunday Schools Department, and the Head of the Gospel Education Department of both Dioceses were selected with purposive sampling; and in-depth interviews were conducted with them. In addition, the Chairperson, the Vice-Chairperson, the Chief Secretary and heads of different departments of Mahiber Kidusan Gimbi and Nekemt centres were purposively selected and Focused Group Discussions (FGD) were held with them. On top of that, some individuals like the Arch Bishops of East and West Wellega, the Head of Gospel Education and Apostolic Service from the Patriarchate Head Office, and the Chairman, the Chief Secretary, and the Head of Education and Apostolic Service from the Head Office of Mahibere Kidusan were purposively selected and in-depth interviews were conducted with them.

1.5.4 Data Collection

The researcher used in-depth interview and Focused Group Discussion (FGD) to collect data from the selected respondents. Document analysis was also employed to collect data from the selected dioceses like the translated anaphora, the commentaries, apocrypha (diotricanonical), official letters, published and unpublished, printing and electronic materials. The data was collected by the researcher himself. While collecting the data, Digital Voice Editor 3 recorder, Digital Video Camera, Photo Camera and note-books were used.

1.5.5 Method of Data Analysis

First the data collected from the participants were organized and grouped according to their theme. Then, it was analyzed and interpreted against the basic research questions or specific objectives and contemporary theories using descriptive type.

2. Result and Discussion

This section presents the result of the analysis of the data collected from the respondents through interviews, focused group discussion and document analysis under the basic questions. These are the philosophy of the EOTC on MTE; the advantages of using the Oromo language for the church; the church's attempt to implement the Oromo language for religious education and the revealed challenges during implementation.

2.1. The Philosophy of the EOTC on MTE

The issue, how the church views multilingualism in general and the use of mother tongues for religious education in particular was raised with some 15 of the informants. This issue was asked because there are many believers who perceive using different languages in the church is not advisable. They argue citing a biblical account of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech....And they said one another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. ... And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech '(Genesis 11:1-7)

Based on this biblical reference, some members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church have negative attitudes towards multilingualism in general and MTE in particular. Having this view in mind, they refuse advocating the use of many languages in the church. They consider multilingual education as harvesting the fruit of the primordial sin planted by the Babylonians. Surprisingly there are some individuals including priests who criticize the use of vernacular languages for prayer, liturgy, hymn and other spiritual ministry as if God would not listen to and accept it⁸

However, according to the research participants, there is no sacred injunction which prohibits using one's mother tongue for religious practices in the church. The church leaders expressed that everybody has the right to learn, teach and communicate through a language which he/she understands well. Among them, one of the interviewees, the Head of Evangelical and Missionary Activities Department, under the Patriarchate Head Office, explained that using any language which an individual prefers is not a sin or crime; rather it is the gift of nature from the very outset. God confounded the languages of the Babel because of the sin which the people committed, trying to glorify themselves by building a tower. This evil thinking, not their language, was the reason which brought destruction on their building and condemnation on their life.

Another interviewee, the Deputy Secretary of Mahibere Kidusan, stated that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church has no objection to using one's language for religious missions because language is a gracious gift. As the Holy Bible says, the apostles were given more than seventy different languages to use for serving God and His people. This is stated in the following way:

⁷ The Holy Bible. *The Old and New Testament* (King James Version). (Grand Rapids: World Publishing, 1989)..

⁸ Yohannes Adigeh. *Attitude of Oromo Christians towards the Use of Amharic: The Case of EOTC* (Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2007).

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And... the multitude ...was confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language' (Acts 2:1-6)⁹.

Therefore, the church believes that multilingualism is not a result of sin. If it were, God would not have given many languages to His disciples. Those diversified languages were given to the disciples to expand the teaching of God to the whole world.

The results of the interview show that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church has not any document or scripture or tradition which prevents using mother tongues for religious practices; rather all the scriptures of the church including the Holy Bible support the use of different languages for spiritual ministry. Consequently, we can conclude that multilingualism is a natural phenomenon, a gift of God and a beauty of a nation.

2.2. Advantages of Mother Tongue Education

The issue of what they think about the benefits of mother tongue education was discussed with the informants in order to assess the understanding or the awareness of church officials about the advantages of teaching religious educations in vernacular languages. The respondents were of the view that it has many advantages. The major ones they mentioned are the following.

2.2.1. Efficiency

Informants reported that there is a huge number of Orthodox Christians who are proficient neither in Amharic nor in Ge'ez in various Ethiopian ethno-linguistic communities. Similarly, the younger generations in Oromiya region are not familiar with Amharic and Ge'ez, the languages in which EOTC spiritual services are conducted. Thus, they argued, the church cannot be effective in areas with a prevalence of poor Amharic skill. In order to transmit the intended message effectively, the church should use a language which the Oromo people understands well i.e., the Oromo language.

One of the interviewees, the head of the Sunday Schools Department of West Wellega diocese, explained the advantage of using one's first language in spiritual ministry quoting the text of the Apostle St. Paul from the New Testament as follows.

Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongue which you not understand, what shall I profit to you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped. So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand or translate what you speak into languages well known, who does understand what is spoken? So it is considered as you will be speaking into the air. There are various types of languages in the world of which no one is meaningless. Unless I know the meaning of the language through which one talks me, I will be strange to him and he too will be strange to me. ... Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my body prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion is then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.¹⁰

⁹ The Holy Bible, King James version, (1989, 85)

¹⁰ *bid*, 1Cor.14, 6-19

The text cited above in length states that one cannot teach and learn in a language which one does not know well. Even to pray to God, who understands all the languages of the world, using a language which is familiar to those praying is preferable.

There is a statement in one of the hagiographical texts of the church *Gedle Teklehaimanot* 'Vita of St. Teklehaimanot' which says "he who prays shall pray in a language he/she knows well".¹¹ The statement shows that an individual should use his/her own language to communicate with God. When a person prays in deep concentration, he contemplates his idea in a language he knows well because of the strong relationship between language and thought.

Other traditional texts give remarkable insights concerning the use of mother tongues to facilitate greater efficiency in communication. The following text is from the 'the Readings and Commentary of the Liturgy of the Virgin Mary'

*Baslios sent his messengers to call Ephraim of Syria saying "you will get him when he is praying standing up on one of the corners of the church". ... Since he could not be satisfied while they were talking to each other helped by a translator, Baslios said to Ephraim "oh my father Ephraim, please pray and let your language be revealed to me". Then, Ephraim prayed and the language of Ephraim – Surst (Syrian language) was revealed to Baslios and the language of Baslios – Tsiri (Greek) was revealed to Ephraim. Then, they passed the whole night discussing through their respective languages with pure understanding.*¹² (Author's translation)

This text makes it clear that using a language understood by all the interlocutors is naturally appropriate. This marvelous story suggests that using one's own language for spiritual ministry has inherent benefits.

The Secretary General of Mahibere Kidusan explained the benefits of mother tongue to increase communication efficiency as follows;

*"If we do not use the language that the audience understands, how can we tell him his sin and save his life from condemnation? How can we turn the wicked from his transgression unless we speak to him in his own language?"*¹³ *Thus, to be effective in transmitting the essential message, using a language which the audience can understand is naturally appropriate. The Bible says "how then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"*¹⁴

2.2.2. Feeling of Solidarity

According to the research participants, using one's own language in education or in any formal communication system encourages the speakers to feel secure. Using their own language in formal contexts means recognizing the speakers and their identity as part of the society to which they belong. Consequently, the respondents defined the function of the Oromo language and the benefits of incorporating it into the official communications systems of the church by decree, as follows:

¹¹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. *Hagiography of St. Teklehaimanot*. (Addis Ababa, Tinsae Zegubae Printing Press, 1992)

¹² The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. *Liturgy and Eulogy of St. Mary and its Interpretation*. (Addis Ababa: Tinsae Zegubae Printing Press, 1990) (አባ ኢፍሬምና አባ ሀርያቅስ ውዳሴ ማርያምና ቅዳሴ ማርያም አንድምታ። አዲስ አበባ፣ ትንሳኤ ዘገባኤ ማተሚያ ድርጅት፣ 1983።)

¹³ Interview conducted on 03/10/04 E.C.

¹⁴ The Holy Bible, Rome, 10:14

- A. If Oromo Orthodox Tewahedo Christians use the Oromo language for EOTC spiritual services, they will avoid the existing criticism of non-Orthodox members from their ethnic group. Non-Orthodox Oromos would not see the Orthodox Tewahedo Oromo Christians as those who betray their ethnic identity; rather followers of the Orthodox Church would be seen as loyal to their language and their ethnic group.
- B. If Oromo Orthodox Tewahedo Christians use the Oromo language for the EOTC ministry, they would have a sense of belongingness to the religion and a greater sense of owning it in a personal way. This would increase the internal solidarity among the adherents of the religious tradition. Using mother tongues contributes a lot to the true unification and strong attachment between individuals and societies at large¹⁵

In general, using the Oromo language in religious practices of the EOTC fosters the spiritual unity among the faithful of the church. The Head of the EOTC Parish Council said, “the church belongs to all human races. As an international institution, the church is expected to teach and spread the Gospel of Christ to the whole world using all human languages including the Oromo language”.¹⁶

It is only when the church uses the languages of the faithful that he/she considers him as part of the church’s community. Much literature testifies that there is a strong relationship between language and identity as language is one of the dominant means of identity construction and manifestation.¹⁷ In this regard, a wonderful practical experience is inscribed in the Bible¹⁸ (Judges 12, 5-6).

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, are you an Ephraimite? If he said, no; then he was asked to say ‘Shiboleth’; those who pronounced the first consonant as /f/ were friends, those who pronounced it as /s/ were enemies and therefore killed at once and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty two thousand.

This biblical account clearly indicates that even a single phonemic sound is enough to exclude from or mingle members of societies which speak similar languages. In this case words, phrases, clauses, and sentences have a clear symbolic function. Consequently, language identity tests should not be regarded as a new fashion rather they are a convention from remote times which have been in use thousands of years.

Deacon Daniel Kaba, who firstly translated the EOTC liturgy into the Oromo language, passionately narrates how language and identity are deeply intermingled by referring to the situation in the recent past:¹⁹

¹⁵Tabouret-Keller, A. *Language and Identity*. In Coulmas F.(ed), *The Handbook of SocioLinguistics*, 315_326. (Berlin, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002).

¹⁶An interview conducted with the head of education and apostolic service, Head of Patriarchate, June, 24, 2004 E.C.

¹⁷ Laforge, L. Presentation. In J. Poth (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Language Planning*, Ottawa, 25 – 29 May 1986. Quebec: (International Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Presses de l’Universite Laval. 1987); Teshome, Neketibeb. *The Impact of Learning with the Mother Tongue on Academic Achievement: A Case Study of Grade 8 students in Ethiopia*. In Coleman Hywel. (ed). *Language and Development: Africa and Beyond: Proceedings of the 7th International Language and Development Conference*. (Addis Ababa, 2007); Abraham, D. *Language Identity and Peace in Ethiopia*. In *Proceedings 4th International Conference on the Horn of Africa Conditions for the Possibility of Peace in the Horn of Africa*. 26-28 May, (New York: Centre for the Study of the Horn, 1989), Pp 69-75.

¹⁸ Tabouret-Keller, A. *Language and Identity*. In Coulmas F.(ed), *The Handbook of SocioLinguistics*, (Berlin, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002), pp 315_326.

¹⁹Taken from the interview conducted on Sene, 2004 E.C.

The time was so hard. Language related problems had reached their highest point. No one was allowed to speak Amharic in all formal and informal settings. During those times, the EOTC was severely condemned being perceived as an oppressor or an agent of successive oppressor regimes. Thus, preaching Orthodox Tewahido Christianity using Amharic was unthinkable especially in West Wellega. One day, some 12 members of our church came and asked me why the church did not use the Oromo language for liturgy and other religious activity. I was worried and thought the matter deeply. Then, I decided to translate the liturgy to the Oromo language. Next, I translated, edited and gave it to the clergies to practice it. One Sunday morning, we delivered the liturgy in our language, Oromo, in Gori Debre Birihan St Trinity Church. I remember, many villagers, including followers of other religions were attending the mass with amazement. After the mass was completed, many Oromo Orthodox Christians asked us questions like “is it the liturgy that we were hearing in Ge’ez or which you invented today?”; “really is that the meaning in Ge’ez?”. We told them that this is the original message transmitted in Ge’ez liturgy for centuries. Having this in mind, many people have started to come back to their mother church from different protestant sects.

This episode indicates to what extent language is a vital tool to attract, mobilize and harmonize the indigenous speakers towards an intended goal.

2.2.3. Means of Innovation

Previously multilingualism was seen as undesirable since it was linked with division and national disintegration, due to the activities of language-based separatist ethnic movements. However, the new paradigm presents languages as resources for social, political, and economic development. The question is no longer what linguists specializing in African languages can do for these languages, but what these languages can do for their speakers and how linguists can assist in the process of the speakers’ tapping into the resourcefulness of indigenous and foreign languages in order to promote socio-economic development, democracy, and eradication of poverty.²⁰

The languages of a nation are its natural resources on the same level as its petroleum, minerals and other natural resources. These languages can therefore be harnesses and developed, if carefully planned, for the overall interest of the nation. However, if care is not taken and appropriate planning undertaken, multilingualism, like its twin-sister, multi-ethnicism, can be a source of disunity and strife in the body politic of the nation. Language planning is consequently as important as any other aspect of economic planning and the place of language planning is therefore the “National Development Plan”, as a concomitant of all the other aspects of economic planning for national development.²¹

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church is exceedingly rich in various kinds of spiritual texts. This wealth of sacred literature offers opportunities for employment. It is an ideally rich area for translators, terminologists, lexicographers, publishers, distributors, and retailers.

²⁰ Wolff (2006, 11)

²¹ Chumbow. *Towards a language planning model for Africa*. Journal of West African languages XVII/1, (1987), pp 15-22.

Indeed, if handled properly, languages, like other resources, have a job-creating potential. In some countries, notably Australia, Canada, Belgium, Sweden, a language industry has been set up which caters for domestic as well as international linguistic needs. Thus, for instance, hundreds – and even thousands- of interpreters, translators, terminologists, lexicographers, and other language practitioners and professionals have to be trained and employed in order to make the multilinguality work smoothly.²²

Consequently, the EOTC can play a significant role in stimulating the activities of philologists, linguists, anthropologists, historians, folklorists and sociocultural researchers, since the church is rich in various types of texts. The church is the owner of many books like commentaries, hagiographies, liturgies, eulogies, theological arguments, image praise texts, reflections, books of prayers, supplications, astronomical, medical, and magical treatises and so forth. Furthermore, some scholars believe that more than 90% of the total cultural, social and historical identity of the country is described and stored in Ge'ez.²³ Thus, the Church can fill the gap of activities in this field, by involving many individuals in such activities.

If the Oromo language speakers of the country are familiar with these books through their religious practices, numerous Oromo Orthodox Tewahido Christians could be attracted and engaged in the task of translating, editing, publishing, retailing, distributing, selling, teaching and reading such books. This in turn would contribute to the economic and cultural empowerment of society and the nation as a whole.

2.3 Attempts to use the Oromo Language in the EOTC

The issue if informants have ever made attempts to use the Oromo language for religious education in their respective parish churches was also raised and discussed. The main goal of raising this question was to assess whether the EOTC as an institution has implemented mother tongue education in the church.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church has in recent times made some efforts to use the Oromo language for spiritual ministry in some areas. Informants reported that the following activities have been done.

1. **Evangelization:** The EOTC has been trying to preach the Word of God using the Oromo language since the beginning of the 20th century. However, the then linguistic philosophy of the government and the strong attachment of the church and state didn't allow the church to promote linguistic pluralism. Subsequently, after the fall of the Derg regime, the Church tried to spread the Gospel of Christ to Ormoiya region using the Oromo language. In particular, some youth associations tried to employ the Oromo language in religious rallies, Sunday school programs, and public congregations. Especially, Mahibere Kidusan has exerted more efforts than others to use the Oromo language in its spiritual activities. However, all participants of this research agreed that Church use of the Oromo language was insufficient.
2. **Training:** The Church has opened some clergy training institutes and boarding schools in Ormoiya region where native speakers are trained in and learn the basic teachings of the church. Thus, Oromo youths with potential have been selected from different parts of the region and given substantial training.

²² Alexander, N. The African Renaissance, African Languages and African Education with Special Reference to South Africa. In H.E. Wolff (ed.) *Tied Tongues*, (Munster: LIT (2003), Pp 21-37.

²³Marassini, P. Hammer (Amharic Spiritual Magazine) 14th year, No.4, (Addis Ababa: Mega Printing Press, 2006).

According to the Head of Education and Apostolic Missionary Department, Mahibere Kidusan has delivered 25 rounds of training in which more than 300 Oromo Orthodox Tewahedo followers participated. In this regard, capacity building programs, the basic teachings of the church and homiletic methodology (methods of preaching) have been taught, and the proficiency of the students has been certified by Church leaders. Nevertheless, all research respondents agreed that both the church and the associations didn't work to their maximum capacity in using the Oromo language in training programs.

- 3. Publications:** The EOTC is the richest of all religious institutions in the amount of religious texts in the country. It is estimated that 90% of existent spiritual texts are written in Ge'ez. No research participant indicated knowledge of Church institutions writing or publishing spiritual books in the Oromo language. However, Mahibere Kidusan has tried to publish some original and translated books in the Oromo language since 1994. On top of this, Mahibere Kidusan has established the Oromo language desk with the objective of preparing and publishing original and translated Orthodox books in that language. In addition to this, the Head of Public Relation Department reported that the association is preparing and publishing brochures, leaflets and tracts in the Oromo language for distribution at annually observed religious festivals; like the Finding of the True Cross (*Meskel* Celebration), Ethiopian Epiphany (*Timket*) and other holidays. Moreover, the association is trying to produce cassettes/CD's VCDs, and DVDs of hymns, sermons, preaching, and documentaries, in the Oromo language.

Despite such efforts, research participants agreed that the Church has not adequately discharged her responsibility for maximum benefit in this regard.

- 4. Websites:** Nowadays, Information Communication Technology (ICT) is playing a leading role in knowledge production and dissemination. Information is easily transferred between places and people in minutes or seconds in our globalized world of electronic communication. Individuals, groups, agencies and institutions use ICT to promote their products, build their image and achieve their objectives. ICT could therefore be, an important tool to teach, for sermons, preaching the Gospel of Christ, to spread the mission of the Church. Nevertheless, the Church has not given sufficient attention to the use of technology for her purposes. For example, there is a total absence of any website for Oromo Christians in the Oromo language.

According to the informants, Mahibere Kidusan is trying to expand Gospel of Christ using ICT in Amharic and English. No respondent has indicated that the Oromo language is applied for addressing the EOTC issues through website.

- 5. Appointment of Officials:** The main thing that the EOTC has attempted to answer linguistic request is regarding the appointment of officials. The Church has taken language proficiency as one of the basic criteria in appointing archbishops, bishops and managers and even at lower levels like deacons and priests in Oromiya region. According to the research participants, many hierarchical positions are filled by the right person from the point of linguistic demand. However, still the Church has to work on human resource development to successfully achieve her objective.

2.4. Challenges of Mother Tongue Education in EOTC

The issue, whether informants have ever faced or think will face any challenge while applying the Oromo language in Oromiya Dioceses was also raised and discussed. In this respect, informants raised many issues concerning difficulties in the implementation of the Oromo language programs. Their basic arguments and debated issues are presented as follows.

2.5.1. Lack of Appropriate Terminology: It was reported that some members of the EOTC think that currently the Oromo language does not possess appropriate terminology to correctly express some of the concepts and teachings of the Orthodox Church. The basic teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church are exceedingly ancient, foreign-based and highly mysterious in nature. The theological notions are abstract and the teaching curriculum of the EOTC is Ge'ez-oriented.

The participants explained that Oromo preachers face difficulties in expressing dogmatic, sacramental, doctrinal and traditional concepts in the Oromo language and other indigenous Ethiopian languages. According to the interviewees reported, certain preachers felt challenged in finding equivalent Oromo terms for notions like *gedam* 'monastery', *meleket* 'divine', *melaikt* 'angels', *seratsi*, 'driven', *ariyam*, 'sky', even *kiristiyan* 'Christian' etc.

The study informants reported in particular, difficulties in appropriately rendering of *zema* (melody), when vernacular Ethiopian languages such as Amharic or the Oromo languages are used.

Such ideas reflect the argument that African languages in general are incapable of expressing modern scientific and technological concepts. There are many people who feel that African languages are not sufficiently developed to convey the essence and notions of modern thinking. Thus, mother tongue education should not be implemented for those students learning science and technology. They argue that indigenous languages are lexically poor, grammatically ill-formed, textually unstudied and traditional so that they cannot concisely convey modern concepts.²⁴

However, many sociolinguists argue that this is the result of negative thinking of the post-colonial period. Every language is complete in expressing its own culture. The problem of the deficiency of vernacular languages to express 'modern' notions is not the defect of the languages. It is the incongruity of the culture to the languages by which we need to describe. Even the most modern and international language, English is not able to express the culture of Afar or Gurage. Whereas, any culture can be expressed using any language with some sort of modification like borrowing, loan translation and coinage of words. Therefore, we should not assume that any concept needs to remain obscure whatever the language in which it is conveyed.

For instance, Leopard Signor reported concerning his practical experience, that the Senegalese lingua-franca Wolof, could explain Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Languages only grow when they are used for formal communication systems. Languages, in contrast to other economic resources, grow when they are excessively used. As scholars, "African languages, in particular, are more disadvantaged because they are not assigned any prestigious public functions and unless that is done they are not likely to grow".²⁵ Some researchers argue that "a language grows by being used. Using a language for education, business, socio-cultural activities, administration, etc. exposes it to challenges. Like human beings, language also adapts, invents, and innovates to meet new challenges".²⁶

²⁴ Brock-Utne B. *The Continued Battle over Kiswahili as the Language of Instruction in Tanzania*. In B. Brock-Utne and R. K Hopson (eds) *Languages of Instruction for African Emancipation*. (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Mkuki Nyota publishers., 2005).

²⁵ Kembo-Sure & Ogechi (2006, 46)

²⁶ Mateene, K. *Failure in the obligatory use of European languages in Africa and the advantages of a policy of linguistic independence*. In *Reconsideration of African Linguistic Policies*, 11-41. (Publication 3) Kampala: Edition OAU Bureau of Languages. (1980), p. 26. ; Obanya (1999:484)

The poverty or underdevelopment of African languages is quite voluntary. These languages are poor because we do not want to enrich them, by not wanting to use them in certain fields, such as education, translation, which are all factors of language enrichment and development. ... Out of a total of about 40,000 books translated every year, almost none is translated into African language. On the other hand, German, Spanish, Japanese, English, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, Hebrew and the USSR language come on top of the list of languages used in translation of books which have appeared in other languages.²⁷

Similarly, Amharic lacks the terminology to express certain religious concepts unless use is made of Ge'ez lexical elements. This is due to the fact that Orthodoxy was adopted at a time when Ge'ez was the principal language, and other languages do not always have terms which adequately express the basic teachings of the Orthodox religious tradition.

Consequently, most of the religious words found in Amharic oral or written religious texts are Ge'ez lexemes. Amharic, either with or without modification, still uses these Ge'ez lexical elements to convey the intended meaning of the teachings of the church.

In view of this, participants in the research project indicated that the Oromo language could only express EOTC teachings if appropriate words or expressions are assigned for this purpose. We must give the language room to expand and grow, if it is deprived of prestige, it declines.

2.4.2. The Threat of National Disintegration

There is a view that multilingualism impacts negatively on national unification. If a country possesses a variety of ethnic groups who have many languages, it is hard to maintain cohesion, harmony and a positive inter-relation among them. This view sees different languages as a divisive influence concerning peoples' integration. On the other hand, a country which uses only one language provides an opportunity for easy communication systems and interactions between ethno-linguistic communities within the nation. It also fosters social relationships, facilitates economic development, and sustains political stability and pledges peace and security of the nation.²⁸

Bearing this in mind, many African governments have made colonial languages play the role of official or national languages in the post colonial period, they include: Ghana, Uganda and Zambia²⁹.

Nyeree's Kiswahili was developed and used as a national language for Tanzania. The logic behind this was "Kiswahili appeared to be 'nobody's language';³⁰ it could have become anybody's language". For the egalitarianism process of Nyerere's political ideology what he termed *Ujamaa (familyhood)* Kiswahili's neutrality was deliberately emphasized. Ujamaa, in the mind of Nyerere, was an ideal social construction made up of a group of people characterized by deep-rooted familiarity, free from any specific socio-economic indications, and inter-ethnic identities.

²⁷ Bobda A. S. *Facing some challenges in language planning for Cameroon*. In Kembo-Sure, Sera Mwangi, N. O. Ogechi (eds.). *Language Planning for Development in Africa*. (Kenya, Moi University press, 2006)..

²⁸ Kelman, H.C. *Language as Aid and as Barrier to Involvement in the National System*. In Fishman, J. A. (Ed) *Advances in the Sociology of Language*. (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1976).

²⁹ Kembo-Sure & Ogechi, 2006.

³⁰ Blommaert J. *Ujamaa and the Creation of the New Waswahili*. University of Ghent (Unpublished, ND).

For the societal detribalizing process, Kiswahili received a decisive responsibility to facilitate a radical revolution. According to the political philosophy of Nyerere, “Kiswahili was assumed to be the natural container of the new national culture”,³¹ capable of holding and expressing every tribal, ethnic, religious, and diversified socio-economic group’s culture.

*The Tanzanian culture therefore is the sum total of all the good customs and traditions of the different language groups in Tanzania. All these regional cultures using local languages, or dialects, are now being transferred into a national culture using Kiswahili.*³²

It was in following such political philosophies that post Ethiopian governments promoted ‘Amharic-Only’ language policies.

However, participants in this research project do not consider such political philosophies to be relevant in the Church’s context. The primary objective of the Church is spreading the Gospel of Christ to the whole universe, regardless of ethnic, political and linguistic identity. Thus, according to the respondents, the unity of humankind is maintained through the spiritual similarity i.e. having Christ. In short, the religion we preach unifies the people of the world more cohesively than a language does.

A lot of sociolinguists also strongly oppose the view that multilingualism or language diversity is necessarily a threat or cause of national disintegration. On the contrary it can be a source of prosperity, a color of beauty and a sign of neutrality. To support their arguments, they cite the unsuccessful attempts of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Srilanka and Myanmar to unify their people through monolingual language policies, which reversely caused the disintegration of their respective countries. They further strengthen their arguments citing the example of more or less monolingual countries like Somalia, Rwanda, and Burundi who do not have exemplary peace and security, national unity and political stability.³³ This shows that language unity does not necessarily promote political or social unity. This brings us to the conclusion that multilingualism should not necessarily be regarded as a threat, which inevitably incites national disintegration.

It is post-colonial thinking which sees multilingualism as a divisive power, and prefers to enslave the mentality of African governments to force them to use the languages of the colonizers.³⁴

2.4.3. The Negative Attitude of Church Higher Officials

Reports indicate that many Oromo Christians are extremely pleased to hear their language being used for spiritual services, especially for the Divine Liturgy. Eyewitness exposure of the researcher himself confirms the strong emotional impact, pleasure and satisfaction of congregations when the EOTC spiritual services are performed in the Oromo language at Gori Debre Birihan St. Trinity Church, West Wellega.

³¹ Abdulaziz M. H. *The Ecology of Tanzanian National Language Policy*. In E.C. Polome and C.P. Hill (eds) *Language in Tanzania*. (Oxford University Press, Great Britain, 1980).

³² Ibid

³³ Ouane, A. (ed). *Towards a Multilingual Culture of Education*. (Hamburg: UNESCO, 2003)

³⁴ Benson, C. *The Importance of Mother Tongue – Based Schooling for the Bilingual Education Programs for Language-minority Children Washington DC Bilingualism*; (Stockholm University, 2004 c).

However, most Church higher officials in the different dioceses are not interested in the attempts at mother tongue education. Research participants report that in West Wellega in particular higher church officials do not have a positive attitude to the use of Oromo language for spiritual services. The data obtained from interviews and FGD's, indicate various reasons for maintaining negative attitudes towards the introduction of the Oromo language in different spiritual ministries. Some Church officials who do not speak Oromo language fear that they will lose their jobs if the the Oromo language is fully used for all religious affairs. Some deliberately oppose the use of the Oromo language out of prejudice and short-sightedness. Some do not want to use the Oromo language since the gap in communication creates a smokescreen behind which they can hide their poor knowledge, and misdeeds.

The best practical example for this is the experience of Abune Gebre Menfes Kidus Church of East Wellega diocese, Nekemt. As the members of the parish, there was a serious conflict between the faithful and church administrators, particularly the managers in the diocese. The committee of the church accuses the diocese as it is an obstacle for the Oromo language not to serve for liturgy as West Wellega does.³⁵ On the opposite, the leaders of East Wellega including the Bishop, His Grace Abune Simion, want that the liturgy and other sacred books of the church should be translated with the standard Oromo language by recognized professionals. Hence, as to the staff members of the diocese, the committee must wait for the coming of the translated, edited, standardized and approved liturgy. The diocese wants to maintain the bureaucracy but the committee requests linguistic democracy.

2.4.4. Financial Constraint

Ethiopia is a multilingual country in which more than 85 languages are spoken.³⁶ Thus, according to some faithful of the EOTC, if the Church starts mother tongue education, she will experience numerous challenges including financial problems. Formal education requires the presence of trained teachers, with knowledge of the language, syllabuses, teaching texts and reference materials for the courses. It would be difficult to prepare all these things with the very limited resources of the Church. Therefore, the Church is obliged to choose and provide teaching in one of the dominant languages, rather than rushing into using all languages simultaneously which might be beyond her capacity.

However, according to the research informants, although the task requires its own capital, it is not unfeasible. If the Church is led by good governance, she can mobilize all the faithful for financial contributions. If the Church first builds good management systems, her followers are the best source of financial support. Furthermore, the increased satisfaction of the faithful would encourage them to give more generously. Thus, any financial constraints would not be beyond the capacity of the faithful.

2.4.5. Lack of Skilled Human Power

One of the major factors constraining mother tongue education is finding Orthodox Tewahedo Christians who are native speakers of the languages. The present researcher did an interview with the managers of one of the church dioceses regarding this issue three years ago. And it was reported that the diocese was not successful in finding native speakers in the area to train in the teachings of the Church and to ordain.³⁷

³⁵A data obtained from FGD conducted with the Committee of St. Michael Parish of Church, Nekemte town. Sene, 15, 2004 E.C.

³⁶Girma A. Demeke. *The Origin of Amharic*. (Centre Francais d'E'tudes E'thiopiennes Etudes Ethiopiennes 5, Addis Ababa, 2009)

³⁷Yohannes A. (2007).

This issue was not seen as so problematic by the informants in this research project. They said that if the Church allocates an adequate budget for the project, there are many individuals who have the capacity to learn, and pass through the different levels of Church Education leading to ordination. What is required in the Oromiya region is to build a positive attitude toward the use of the Oromo language and train Oromo Orthodox Tewahido Christians in their language to serve as deacons, priests, traditional teachers 'mergeta', bishops, arch bishops, and perhaps even Patriarch.

2.4.6. The Lack of Church Language Policy

It was reported that the church has no language policy. The EOTC did not study and apply an unambiguous policy to the issue of language use within the Country. The research participants described the absence of clearly stated language policy is affecting the Church's missionary activity. There is no legal document stating the role of Amharic, Oromo and Ge'ez languages in the operation of the Church. This gap undermines the confidence of ministers, and does not encourage individuals to serve the public in any efficient form of communication system.

3. Summary and Recommendations

This part comprises the general framework of the paper in brief. The objective, methodology, the analysis and the findings are summarized as follow.

3.1. Summary

This paper deals with the function of the Oromo language in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. Specifically, it was intended to investigate the Church's outlook towards mother tongue education in general and the Oromo language in particular, mentioning the advantages, attempts and challenges in using the Oromo language for spiritual services. The data was collected from respondents who were selected with purposive sampling. The instruments of data collection were in depth interview, FGD and document analysis. Then, the data was grouped thematically and analyzed according to basic questions using grounded theory. Thereby, the following findings were obtained:

1. Although an important segment of the faithful insist on Ge'ez being the language of prayer, eulogy, liturgy and all religious practices, the Church as an institution has a positive attitude towards mother tongue education in general and the Oromo language in particular.
2. The paper indicates that using the Oromo language in Oromiya dioceses would have pedagogical, psychological, and economical advantages. The paper elucidates the benefits of effectively and efficiently conveying intended messages through a familiar language. MTE also contributes to fostering genuine solidarity among people (believers) sharing social or cultural values. It could also produce immense benefit in terms of innovation.
4. The EOTC in general and Mahibere Kidusan in particular have made attempts to teach the Church's basic education in the Oromo language. Hence, the Church has opened some (traditional) boarding schools and clergy training centers in Oromiya region to train Oromo youths in their language.
5. Finally, lack of terminology, the threat of national disintegration, the impact of globalization, the negative attitude of High church officials hampering implementation, financial constraints, lack of skilled human power, and lack of Church language policy could be considered as challenges to the implementation of the introduction of the Oromo language for EOTC spiritual services.

3.2 Recommendations

According to the research findings, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church should take the following measures for better efficiency:

The Church should organize awareness raising programs concerning multilingualism and mother tongue education for her followers.

1. The researcher strongly advises the Church Leadership to discuss the language use of the Church and clearly state the functional allocation of languages. This means the Church leadership should designate a clear language policy and officially declare the role of different languages at different levels, including the role of Amharic, Oromo, Ge'ez and other languages.
2. The Church should recruit, teach, and train believers from Oromiya region and ordain them to serve their people as deacons, priests, preachers, singers, managers and bishops using the Oromo language.
3. The Church shall work on language planning and development activities through which she can prepare technical terms, syllabus, and texts in collaboration with various national organizations such as universities, academies, teaching and research institutions.
4. The Church should upgrade her employees through training programs, workshops and panel discussions to improve their managerial skill in order to enable them to meet contemporary challenges.
5. The Church should encourage in depth studies of existing Church language use and related fields like translations, terminology and sociolinguistics, concerning aspects of languages used in church context.

Notes to Contributors

- *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies* (JECS) publishes reviewed and periodical scholarly articles that are related to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church.
- *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies* (JECS) publishes original research papers, research reports and book reviews.
- Articles should be submitted to JECS written only in Amharic and English language.
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