

# Studying Traditional Schools of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Quest for Fresh Methodology

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## 1. Description of the Research Project

This research project was conceived two years ago and the proposal was presented to the College of the Social Sciences at the beginning of 2003 following the SIDA-SAREC research competition that the College announced.<sup>2</sup> The project, which was entitled “Church Education in Ethiopia: A Philosophical Inquiry into Its Aims and Objectives,” was started because much of the literature<sup>3</sup> and a good measure of popular discourse have always been very tendentious and, at worst, negative and nihilistic.

This study was, therefore, launched with the spirit of getting firsthand information on the contents of the educational system of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whereas, as I will show below, the accounts of a great majority of researchers seem to depend, largely on secondary sources. Firsthand observations in the area of church education would serve not only as a corrective step for past distortions and fill the gap in what is lacking, but are also essential for the formulation of a critical methodology.

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<sup>2</sup>This research project is supported by SIDA-SAREC funds. I would therefore like to express my sincere gratitude for this support. I would also like to thank the Research Programmes Office of Addis Ababa University for facilitating the funding. Last but not least, I would like to extend my gratitude and sincere appreciation to the offices of the Dean and the Associate Dean for Research of the College of the Social Sciences for creating and opening such opportunities for the faculty.

<sup>3</sup>Earlier, I myself was very much biased in dealing with the subject. Back in June 2001, I presented a paper titled “Educational Systems in Ethiopia: Philosophical Inquiry into its Aims and Objectives” at an international conference on African Philosophy held in Addis Ababa. In this paper, I depicted church education negatively on the basis of the literature I will be discussing below. After I presented the paper to the conference, Dr. Birhanu Gizaw, who was one of the participants of the conference, advised me to re-examine my position by talking to church authorities and by gathering firsthand information from the field. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Birhanu for his generous and unreserved comments – a gesture which became the first impulse to develop and launch my project.

## 2. The Fieldwork

### 2.1 The Data Collection

The data was collected between mid-January to end of April 2004. The areas selected for the study were schools in central and northern Ethiopia, mainly in Gojjam and Gondar. The schools visited specialized in the following areas: *Qenie*, *Qedassie*, *Zema*, *Zemarie*, *Aquaquam*, and *Ye-Metsehaft Tereguamie*. *Qenie* is usually described as church poetry although this expression may not be a fully correct interpretation of what the genre *Qenie* represents. *Qenie* lessons are divided into twelve levels that include instruction in the recitation and composition of *Qenie* verses in *Ge'ez*. Students are supposed not only to recite what has been composed by their teachers or other distinguished scholars, but also compose their own lines.<sup>4</sup> *Qedassie*, *Zema*, *Zemarie* and *Aquauam* could be taken as lessons on church hymns of differing complexity. *Ye-Metsehaft Tereguamie*, which literally means interpretation of books, refers to lessons in reading and interpreting major books of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The curriculum of this school is divided into four major streams: (1) Exegesis of Old Testament books; (2) Exegesis of New Testament books; (3) Exegesis of *Metsehafte Liqawnt*, i.e. Book of Scholars; and (4) Exegesis of *Metsehafte-Menekosat*, i.e. Book of Monks.

I used interviews to collect data. Diverse interviewing methods were applied. The category of people interviewed includes teachers of various church schools, students and distinguished clerics serving churches at the places mentioned above. The methodology applied was one of direct observation of a series of lessons in a few selected schools. I also consulted Church manuscripts and textbooks.

The other important observations stem from the attendance of lessons of different schools. I have especially been able to attend a few sessions of lessons in *Qenie*, *Aquaquam* and exegesis schools. Finally, manuscripts and annotations of church authorities were consulted. (Access to most of the books consulted was secured through the advice of informants.)

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<sup>4</sup>In fact, unless and otherwise they are asked to recite and interpret the verses of their teacher or any other master, they are supposed to use, create or compose their own verses; an attempt to recite somebody else's verses without acknowledgement or trying to contrive or plagiarize couplets from others is regarded as a serious offence against scholarship.

## 2.2 First Phase of the Fieldtrip: Observations

The first phase of the fieldwork started at the beginning of January 2004. The first site visited was in Bahir-Dar, the administrative capital of the Amhara Regional State since 1992. Bahir-Dar, like many towns in northern and central Ethiopia, has many churches and it is a gateway to the Lake Tana islands where many age-old monasteries are located. Bahir-Dar also serves as a point of departure to a great many renowned church schools in Gojjam – an area that is traditionally known as the centre of *Qenie* in northern Ethiopia.

When I first planned to go to Bahir-Dar, it was with the intention of identifying monasteries in the environs of the town, particularly on the islands of Lake Tana. This was for two main reasons: Firstly, the supposition was that churches in Bahir-Dar might not be housing the traditional schools. What I had in my mind was that church schools would not be found in big urban centres like Bahir-Dar because in the past many of them were to be found in rural areas. My second reason was that the prestigious schools would be found in monasteries since some of the works I consulted refer to them as ‘monastic schools’, and monasteries are normally known to be located in places that are, to a significant degree, removed from urban centres.

However, as I came to conclude later, these suppositions were not correct. Contrary to my expectations, I found that Bahir-Dar and many other urban centres house churches, which have one or more major schools.

The first school I visited was the *Qenie* house attached to St. Michael’s Church of Bahir-Dar. The person who established this school more than twenty years ago, Memhir Mengistu Zelalem, still runs it very actively. *Memhir* Mingistu, now in his early seventy’s, is at present one of the renowned *Qenie* teachers in Gojjam.

Despite the negative expectations that I have had, that is, that I would encounter many problems before I could gain access to any of the schools, *Memhir* Mengistu as well as his students received me with openness and a great measure of hospitality. Similarly, visiting many of the schools in and around Bahir-Dar was not difficult.

After a few weeks stay in Bahir-Dar and the surrounding areas, I had to go to Gondar town, which was the regional capital in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, and known for its castles and churches. Many of the churches in Gondar house a school of one kind or the other. Almost all the varieties of teaching I mentioned above exist. Nonetheless, Gondar is most famous for its Aquaquam (instruction in church hymns) and Tereguame (interpretation) lessons. The Ba’ata Church is the centre of

excellence in Aquaquam, whereas Medhane-Alem Church is the centre of Tereguame.

However, unlike the situation in Bahir-Dar, the churches of Gondar were very difficult to access. I encountered many knotty bureaucratic blockades. More specifically, I have had to try several times to convince *Liqe-Liqawnt* Ezra of Medhane-Alem Church of Gondar that the research project was purely academic and did not have any subversive quality. Despite these initial frustrations, there were some helpful individuals. Most importantly, I successfully collected several written documents in relation to the history of church education and certain biographical notes of various church leaders and teachers.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 Second Phase of the Fieldtrip: Observations

The second fieldtrip took place from the beginning of March until mid April 2004. The first news I heard when I arrived in Gondar was really very sad: The *Qenie* teacher of Debre-Birhan Selassie monastery had been killed by an unknown person. This happened just before the day I arrived in Gondar.

This second visit facilitated the initiation of contact with *Memhir* Tiumelisan Mekonnen, who is a *Qenie* scholar and who also happened to be a retired elementary school teacher. In addition to many collections of *Qenie* poetry that he had written and compiled, *Memhir* Tiumelisan had also collected books that are related to church history and scholarship. He was generous enough to open his collection; he also kindly allowed me to photocopy some of his materials.

After a short stay in Gondar and its surroundings, I went back to Bahir-Dar and revisited the church schools I had seen during my first trip. The number of students in St. Michael's Church increased significantly because the second visit coincided with the major season for *Qenie* instruction.

## 3. Findings of Major Methodological Significance

### 3.1 The Need for a Critical Examination of Existing Literature

As it can be witnessed from the scanty amount of literature available on the subject, this traditional educational system does not seem to attract much attention

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<sup>5</sup>I would like to thank *Deacon* Melaku Ezezew for his great enthusiasm to help me do my research. Most of the documents I collected in Gondar and elsewhere was due to his personal help, since a few of them I got them from his personal collections, and his recommendations. *Deacon* Melaku, who is a young electrical engineer, serves the church with dedication in addition to running his own business.

from academia. When it comes to those works, that superficially attempt to examine the field, most of the literature seems to be preoccupied with the explication of the drawbacks of the system. The majority of the writers, for example, assume that church education is not able to inspire the imagination of students because its teaching methodology allegedly encourages rote learning instead of reflective thought (Teshome 1979). Though this critique may reflect some aspect of early church education, this position has been adopted in a fashion that is rather uncritical, by important personages and educated people whose pedagogic orientation is Western or "modern".

An apparently more profound critique focuses on the scope of the educational system. In commenting on the contents of the lessons of the Music School, for example, Tadesse Tamrat (1970) notes that these lessons are confined to or based on the songs and hymns of the Bible. As a result, the instructions in music have become so dogmatic and conservative that there is little or no space for innovation or creativity since the curriculum is encompassed by an atmosphere "which was strictly Biblical" (Tadesse 1970: 7).

A closely related critique contends that Ethiopian traditional education lacks in dynamism. The static nature of the educational system is mainly attributed to the isolation of the Church from the rest of the Christian world (Tadesse 1970: 9). Teshome Wagaw (1979). The alleged lack of dynamism has been conceived as a function of the methods of instruction that the church schools use. It is also presumed that traditional education is overly rigid and dogmatic, because it is mainly aimed at cultivating the moral character instead of the intellect. According to Teshome's characterization, the ideal student for the church schools is a student who is "quite, polite, shy, unquestioningly obedient and uncomplaining, and respectful toward the church, government officials and his elders" (1979: 21).

In studying the secular Western education system in Ethiopia, some writers related that some of the drawbacks of the secular schools were a function of the problems of the church schools. Things like rote learning, and the tendency to absorb lessons unreflectively were considered as approaches that came from the traditional school system. Although there are still writers who argue that this is the case because there is a gap between the curriculum and the objective situation of the country (see Tickaher 1970, Tekeste 1990), some of them have tried to explain the matter in terms of the supposed inertia of the traditional education system. Hailu Fulas, for example, asserts that the modern Ethiopian student likes to be spoon-fed by virtue of "his implicit belief that he is merely a passive receptacle" (Hailu 1974: 23). For Hailu, the student of the modern Ethiopian school is adept at receiving 'spoon-feeding' because of the very nature of the philosophy of education Ethiopians have adopted. He writes: "In Ethiopia, since knowledge is

considered a gift from heaven, those who claim to possess it have always guarded it jealously. They [Ethiopians] are afraid of criticism and of views conflicting from their own" (Hailu 1974: 21). In Hailu's view, church education has therefore been a force, which has gone to the extent of affecting the new educational system negatively.

One of the findings of this study is that most previous studies have distorted, neglected or overlooked certain elements of the educational system of the church. As I have repeatedly pointed out, Western writers and Western educated Ethiopians have failed to see the form and content as well as the spirit and elements of scholarship in traditional Ethiopian education. In the view of most writers, traditional church education has little, or no, place for philosophically informed inquiry. For some of the writers, the traditional school system is to blame for some of the flaws from which its modern counterpart has been suffering. However, this attempt to find the roots of the flaws of the modern education system in the educational system of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not supported by history or logic. Historically speaking, it must be clear that when modern western education was introduced about a century ago, there was little, or no effort to connect it to the traditional system. The break between the two educational systems was rather sharp.

### **3.2 Expressions of Scholarship**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and more particularly, its schools have great traditions of scholarship. The expressions of this tradition of scholarship are to be found in many forms. One of the primary objects of examination and analysis should be the contents of the curriculum and the actual teaching-learning processes in the schools. Added to this are other contexts in which the traditions of scholarship are expressed. The very life of the students and their teachers, the attitude of the students towards their teachers, towards each other, towards books and generally towards the intellectual atmosphere that surrounds the school are manners in which this tradition is revealed. Since the teachers and students have received little or no attention from the writers cited above, more emphasis will be made on them in this report.

#### **3.2.1 Life of students**

As may be gathered from the available literature, almost all writers on the subject did not seem to give attention to the way of life of the teachers and students of the church schools. The fact that this aspect of the schools is given little or no

consideration has led many of the researchers astray and culminated in a fundamental neglect of the degree of commitment and devotion that students display when they pursue their education.

In order to have a fuller appreciation and comprehensive understanding of the extent to which students as well as their teachers are committed to their educational endeavour, it is crucial that student lifestyles and more particularly the nature and source of their sustenance is explored.

In the first place, most students attending church schools come from very distant places, encountering various kinds of hardships on their way. In fact, the first trial that they must face is often that of covering a very long distance in order to reach a certain school. This is primarily motivated by the quality of education they expect to obtain and the kind of longing they nourish to be taught by a renowned teacher. The type and extent of the hardships that students have to deal with in order to reach their destination represent in and of themselves a sort of trial of devotion to scholarship. And the readiness with which they meet them should also be a topic of focus if we are to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the traditions of scholarship in Ethiopia.

A great majority of the students attending the Bahir-Dar *Qenie* School had to walk very long distances. Some students walk on foot for the entire distance. Moreover, this they do regardless of age differences and differences of physical strength. It is a common occurrence to fall ill while one is on one's way to a school. Students do not have any other choice than to beg for food while they are on their way. In this regard, one can imagine the degree of starvation they have to face whenever they have to cross places where there is no one to give them food.

Lodging presents less of a difficulty for students because, by tradition, students or would-be students of any one church school do have the privilege of asking for and receiving accommodation in any place where there is a church school. Not only do students receive a place to lie down, but also they are rewarded with a hospitable environment. Indeed, traditionally, host students wash the feet of the guest students and share their food during the first night of their stay.

Otherwise, a student might encounter endless hardships in moving from home to school and from school to school. In addition to walking very long distances on foot, students would be forced to cross very large rivers and travel in very harsh environmental conditions. Moreover, sometimes students stumble upon areas, which are notorious for serving as havens for robbers. Because of this, students might lose books that they have acquired dearly and the small amount of money that they have secured from diverse sources. In some cases, they are even robbed of their tattered clothes.

Students are also, though very rarely, victims of physical abuses. According to my informants, whenever robbers do not find anything they can take, they become very apprehensive and assume that the student has used some kind of machination or magic to hide materials beyond an ordinary search. Uneducated people who are not conversant with the methods of church schools believe that students of church schools are equipped with certain maliciously construed magical formulae in order to put things out of sight, or for that matter inflict injuries magically on people who have harmed them. Robbers are capable of flogging innocent, poor students and sometimes inflict severe injuries. In some rare cases, they may go to the extent of killing a student if he is travelling alone, lest he use his magical charm by way of retaliation. There are in fact reported incidences of this happening.

Even though a robber may be sure that a given student does not have anything of value, the aggressive behaviour of the robbers alone is often a source of frustration and danger for students. Imagine what might become of boys – boys who have never before left their parents – in the face of outlaws or bandits in the middle of a valley or deep woods.

But most of the problems that students face are not unexpected ones. New students receive orientation from older students as to the obstacles they should expect and overcome in order to reach their final destination. In this regard, the hardships they encounter on their way to a school and the afflictions they suffer thereof are overshadowed by their sweltering passion to meet the teacher they have for so long been longing to meet.

Most students that I met in church schools in and around Bahir-Dar and Gondar have as many stories of the difficulties that they have come across as they have impressive stories about teachers that they have never seen before. In fact, most do not talk about their trials, if they are not asked.

Nonetheless, the fact that students reach the school that they have longed to see does not mean that they have reached the end of their hardship. In fact, the difficulties that they may encounter are very complex and for the great majority, they are worse off than when they were with their parents. Once they join the school, the kind of life that they lead is very destitute in many respects. In terms of food, shelter and clothing, the schools are quite deprived.

Many church schools build very small huts that are used as shelter for students. The quality and the nature of the houses, however, may differ from place to place. In some schools it is possible to find well-constructed houses. In some areas, especially, if the school is old, one can find huts with thatched roofs and mud plastered walls whereas in other places there could be only poorly constructed and sometimes, even rather dishevelled huts that hardly protect the residents from rain, wind and harsh climatic conditions.



It is the tradition of church schools to construct miniature huts. Because the huts are very small, the students are forced to live under very congested conditions. Each hut in the Bahir-Dar Qenie school is a residence for three to five students. Given that students do not have the time nor the facilities to accommodate their hygienic needs, and also given that the area is humid and very hot during certain months in the year, the huts become suitable nests for insects such as bedbugs, lice, and fleas. As a result, the students are often infected with contagious diseases. Whenever the situation becomes intolerable – intolerable from the perspective of the students – they are forced to use certain recuperating measures such as tincturing the walls and floor of a hut with fresh cattle dung, and, on occasion, spraying with insecticides. Spending the night outside of the huts is sometimes an option that they choose.

The very nature of the site where a given church school is located is another important factor for the well being of the students. As repeatedly mentioned above, students choose to join a given school on the basis of the reputation of the teachers, often despite the unsuitable nature of the environment where the school is located. This does not, however, mean that they do not consider the environment of the school at all. Whenever they hear of the fame that a given teacher has, they sometimes ask about the climate, the disposition and the behaviour of the people that reside in the vicinity. In fact, gaining information about the residents is usually an important factor, because the livelihood of students depends on them. “Are the people generous enough to give students food?” This could be one of the questions that a given student needs to ask when he intends to go to a new place and join school.

However, the climactic conditions are not as important as the reputation of a teacher. The location of St. Michael’s school in Bahir-Dar is, for example, only a few meters away from Lake Tana. During the rainy season, on occasions when the lake overflows, it endangers the entire compound of the school. Therefore, from September, when the rain stops and the air starts to warm, the water retreats leaving big pockets of swamps, which in turn are perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Bahir-Dar as a whole has become, especially over the past few years, one of the highly malaria-prone centres in Ethiopia. For this reason, quite a number of students of the *Qenie* school of St. Michael’s church have been infected with malaria at some time. Furthermore, most students in and around Bahir-Dar are expected to have suffered from malaria at some time in their educational careers there.

As noted elsewhere, the livelihood of students depends on begging. Almost everyday, students go out and collect food from homesteads near their school. There has been a strong relationship between church schools and surrounding

communities. Due to the immense influence that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in central and northern parts of the country, people feel obliged and responsible for the church schools. On their part, students as well as their teachers rely on communities around schools for their food. In this regard, there is a traditional arrangement that church schools create with households: a certain village or quarter that neighbours a school will be divided between students. In other words, a given student is assigned to a group of households for his sustenance. A student, for example, may have about eight households that care for him. Ideally, these households promise or pledge that they will treat the assignee as their son and provide him or share with him what they can afford. As I have gathered from my fieldwork, and from what I have learned from my own personal observations before this fieldwork, homesteads are expected to provide a student with a piece of bread or *injera* and leftovers from extensive meals prepared due to holidays or any other occasion.

Nonetheless, in practice, students encounter many problems even though they go to houses with which they have a special relationship. In the first place, homesteads may not have anything to give when a student visits them. Many students in Bahir-Dar and Gondar have told me that there are times when they have to come back to their hut empty-handed. If they don't have a "saving", they fall into the embarrassing condition of sharing food that their colleagues collected from their respective patrons.

Furthermore, not all schools or students have homesteads that supply them with food. In order to establish a network, a school as well as a student must have a well-established status. Some of the schools in Bahir-Dar do not have any community with which they have entered into a pact. For any one school to have such a tie, it must have existed for a sufficient number of years. A longstanding history enables schools to forge good relationships with neighbouring communities. Analogously, students must reside in a school for about a year or so and win the respect and love of their teachers, in order to get assigned to a group of households that serve as providers. Even if a student joins a well-established school that has already a good relationship with the surrounding residents, he might not be able to get regular providers of food for sometime to come.

However, though students may have to stay unassigned for a considerable period of time, it is generally assumed that it is the communities that surround the church schools that are expected to supply the food to students. They have the moral and religious obligation to do so.

The question that naturally arises is: What motivates these young people to face these adverse conditions and privations? What makes them endure these hardships? As demonstrated below, it is the quest for knowledge. It is the value that

they attach to education and to scholarship that leads them to sustain themselves on a bare minimum that many readers of this report could hardly imagine. Students usually attempt to keep aside a certain stock by drying food, including assortments of leftovers that they collect from homesteads and sometimes from small hotels in town, in order to use them in times of extreme scarcity. They are used to living a very frugal life. They are accustomed to not eating all day long at times. Even when they eat, in addition to the necessity of eating very little, they may pass an entire week without eating anything fresh. In other words, they may be forced into eating – or rather grinding – dried and tasteless food for days. One is not referring here to the habits of old men and women hermits (buoyed by the spirit of otherworldliness) who have become accustomed to abstaining from food. Most of these boys are in their teens, and some are very small boys who have never been without the loving care of their parents.

The matters discussed above are given little, if any consideration in the available literature. Above all, the fact that students are pursuing an education under these extremely severe conditions is not taken as a function of the dedication and commitment that the students have to their education. I presume that many writers neglect or overlook this set of factors when they are discussing church schools due to methodological flaws from which their research suffers. Certainly, the strength of a given education system should not be measured merely by the subject matters it teaches, but also by the social and economic settings within which it is practiced.

### **3.2.2 Value of Books**

Considering the severe conditions under which students enrol in school and receive their lessons, *their attitude toward their education is astonishing*. As I have shown above, the commitment and dedication with which students pursue knowledge is also expressed by the value they give to certain conditions of their education despite the negative aspects under discussion so far. Here, when I say ‘conditions of their education’, what I mean is the value that they give to the time schedule of their lessons, to books, and, above all, the devotion and effort with which they try to grasp the content of their education. An overview of the conditions that facilitate their learning process will help us to reflect on the extent to which church schools have been engaged in, and carry on, the cultivation of scholarship.

The value that students as well their teachers attribute to books should be given special attention when we are trying to reflect on scholarship in church schools. And this is reflected in many ways. This enthusiasm is manifested by the quality and number of books that students would like to own. Moreover, it is

revealed through their actual possession, and above all by examining the values they attach to books on the basis of the observation of their daily conversations and interactions with each other.

As I have gathered from their daily discussions and from my conversations with them who come from different schools, one of the issues in which students are keenly interested is books. There are certain books that every student must own. Even though teachers do not make any work of supervision, the fact that students need a few basic books such as an elementary Ge'ez textbook, the Psalms, etc. seems to be clear almost from the very start. Although students may have already owned a Ge'ez textbook, which is known as a book of *Giss*, they discuss, and discuss very heatedly, that one version is better than the other since they are well aware of the writers who authored the text at different times. In their normal conversation, they even discuss who the first writer to produce the original text was, and then who came up with an improved version and whether the new edition is really an improved version or not, etc. Most students are also well aware of not only the existence of many editions of a given manuscript, but also about the number of the editions and the differences, including the subtle variances between the different editions.

The field observations attest to the value that students attach to books and their eagerness to acquire evermore books for their continued education. While I was in the Bahir-Dar *Qenie* school, those who would like to go to the *Aquaquam* school of Gondar, which is the highest centre of excellence for *Aquaquam* education in Ethiopia, usually talk of a basic book known as *Ziq* in a way, which is alluring and tantalizing. Similarly, when students discuss books they beam unimaginably.

During the research in the *Qenie* school of St. Michael's Church of Bahir-Dar, I attended lessons until very late hours and then returned to my hotel in town. I was forced to rent a car that would take me back during these few nights. One day, one of the students asked me the amount of money I was paying to the taxi driver for taking me back to my hotel. Though the real figure was 'twenty-five', for reasons of modesty<sup>6</sup>, I said 'fifteen'. Most of the boys and the young man who asked me the question sighed very heavily. They were so sorry for me. Actually, for them there was not much difference between fifteen and twenty-five. Both are a lot of money in Bahir-Dar.

I relate this story for a good reason. A few minutes after we discussed the huge amount of money I paid to the taxi driver, we switched to one of the

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<sup>6</sup>Money is a very rare thing among church school students. Thus I had to be very careful when I talk money matters because they assume that people must lead a frugal life.

prominent topics they raise almost daily: books. This time, one of the boys informed his colleagues that a new edition of the book entitled *Ziq* is published and it is out on the market and that he would like to buy it. When they asked him its price, he said, "It is eighty-five Birr." He did not show any sign of astonishment when he uttered it. It was as if he was talking of eighty-five cents. The other students, on their part, were equally unsurprised. Instead, one of the boys advised his friend that it would be better if he could buy the older edition for one hundred and twenty-five Birr because the older version includes a part of another book. Some of them agreed to the suggestion that while a few objected on the grounds that the new edition is much better for many reasons. Money was therefore not an issue at all (this held true many other times).

Senior *Aquaquam* students at Ba'eta Church in Gondar affirmed to me that one of the things that they wish to see happening while they are at school is securing all of the books that were needed for their lessons. According to them, they need to have about twenty books – books that they regarded as basic to an ideal *Aquaquam* student. They listed the books to me and related to me what most students do to acquire as many of them as possible within a few years time. We estimated each book at an average of thirty Birr and when we added up the price of the estimate for the total number of textbooks they need, the sum exceeded six hundred Birr. Given the conditions under which the students live, and viewed in terms of the deprived situation of the boys, this sum seems that it should be unaffordable and even unimaginable. But then, this shows the degree of perseverance that they possess when it comes to acquiring books. The boys declared firmly that they would have them by any means.

It is important to bear in mind that these boys are full-time students with no one to support them. Most of them put aside some time to work as casual labourers during breaks in order to raise the necessary funds to buy books. They may go hungry for days, eating only a meagre amount to keep them alive, and spend the money they acquired, so dearly, on books. This is, in my opinion, hard evidence that demonstrates the high value that they attach to books.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>When I told this account to my colleague, Shiferw Bekele, he pondered over the matter and sincerely remarked, "Oh, how many of us here in the university, I mean the professors – let alone the students – have the habit and the enthusiasm to buy books!" In this and a few other respects, church schools seem to represent correctly the notion of 'university' in the sense that liberal education theorists use it.

#### 4. Limitations and Constraints

As many who are very familiar with the subject know, the very nature of the topic makes it difficult to design an exhaustive study. The topic is so broad that dividing it into segments is mandatory in order to gain a comprehensive understanding and formulate an in-depth analysis of the subject. When it comes to methodological considerations, it has become apparent that there is a need to formulate and test approaches that have not been employed in the study of the educational system of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For example, a close observation of the lifestyles of students, and more importantly, the examination of the import that this observation would have to the understanding of church scholarship is a useful augmentation of the methodology used in this research area. This methodological consideration is valuable for researchers of church education in Ethiopia. Ultimately, this should lead to the formulation of a more rigorous and sound methodology.

Another important observation that has resulted from the field research is the need to divide the research area into sub-projects. The very fact that the area is vast, as has become apparent to many researchers, is one reason for this. A second cause is that the educational system of the Church is not a single whole, as many seem to have presumed.<sup>8</sup> *Zema*, *Aquaquam*, and *Ze'marie* are essentially hymns whose contents are substantially different from that of Qenie lessons. In addition, the study of the former requires expertise in music composition and probably choreography, in addition to conventional research methods in anthropology or other social sciences.

The broad nature of the topic poses inherent time constraints. Within the period allocated for this research project, it is possible to collect only certain basic data and put forward some preliminary findings, which are useful for reconsidering the methodologies that have been used to study church schools. In this regard, a

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<sup>8</sup>Many of the researchers on the area as well as a great number of popular, but uninformed commentators seem to assume that the church schools do not have any differentiation. The recurring comment, that traditional church education is uncritical and intellectually dull, is for example cried out wholesale; it does not discriminate one level of education from another, nor one school from another, whereas a closer scrutiny of the different levels of education does not allow such an indiscriminate criticism. In other words, one of the serious oversights of the literature in question is to label all kinds of church schools as uncritical and inert.

longer period of time is required in order to gather the necessary information. Moreover, there are many well established churches in northern and central Ethiopia. Reaching most of them presupposes a considerable period of time.

Funding is obviously another major constraint for such a project. The very time-frame that the study demands and the fact that some of the church schools are considerably removed from main roads, means that such a project requires rigorous funding and support.

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