

Teaching Article

Exploring Ethical Research Practices in Ethiopia: Philosophical, Cultural, and Social Reflections – An Educational Perspective

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Abstract

Background: In the current globalized scientific research environment, effective and responsible research across cultures requires researchers and their institutions to conduct themselves in culturally sensitive ways. The contract between researchers and society involves knowledge of and respect for cultural values and belief systems. It is increasingly recognized that engaging the local community as a partner, rather than imposing demands, helps to build mutually beneficial research cooperation and partnerships. This exploration explains some of the gaps that can be created between the researcher and the researched by cultural, political, socioeconomic, and other differences.

Methods: This study reviews literature and considering the following exploratory points. If there is a philosophical, and historical background in Ethiopian society that could be linked with research ethics and communication, and if there are cultural factors in Ethiopia that could influence doing research ethically.

Conclusion: To enhance a responsible and balanced approach towards research ethics in Ethiopia, a clear understanding of the social, human, and cultural meaning of informed consent, privacy, and the rights of the individual and the protection of personal, family, or local community interest must be considered. To conduct research responsibly, the involvement of the community, including key decision-makers in healthcare, ethics, research policy, governance, and science is crucial.

Keywords: Research ethics; Philosophy; Culture.

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Introduction

Research plays an essential role but it must be based on sound scientific and ethical principles, including community participation, informed consent, and shared benefits and burdens (1). From a historical perspective, the development of ethical principles for the conduct of health research was influenced by many past atrocities involving the abuse of human beings in medical research (2). These experiences eventually led to the development of ethical codes and regulations: the Nuremberg Code (1949); Declaration of Helsinki (1964-2000); The Belmont Report (1979); CIOMS Guidelines 1982 Rev. 2002; WHO, UNAIDS, TDR Standard Operating procedures; ICH Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice 1990; Good Clinical Practice (1996); UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights 2000(3).

These documents helped raise awareness of ethical challenges in research involving human participants; the rights of research participants the obligations of researchers and the duties of research ethics committees

(3,4). The primary goal of health research is the generation of useful knowledge about human health and illness. Ethical requirements are needed to ensure that the rights and welfare of subjects are respected while contributing to the generation of knowledge. Research should avoid causing harm, distress, anxiety, pain, or any other negative feeling to participants. Participants should be fully informed about all relevant aspects of the research before they agree to take part. The challenge for researchers is to take a variety of ethical and practical considerations into account in order to negotiate and find an acceptable balance between general research ethics principles and particular real-world situations. (5, 6). The most powerful and well-resourced research institutions are predominantly in the developed world while the greatest burden of disease is in developing countries. Conducting research in developing world settings tends to be less expensive than in developed ones, and research participants may be easier to recruit for biomedical research where local

healthcare access is limited (7, 8). One prominent problem with the research relationship between developed and developing countries involves ethical double standards: many studies have been done in the Third World that would be considered unethical if conducted in the countries sponsoring the work. For instance, a trial on Mother-to-child HIV transmission conducted by the National Institutes of Health in a number of developing countries used a placebo arm despite the fact that zidovudine had already been clearly shown to cut the rate of vertical transmission greatly and was recommended in the United States for all HIV-infected pregnant women (9, 10). Such conflicts about standards of care in international clinical trials are challenges in global health research (8).

It is clear that health research, no matter where it occurs, needs to be responsive to a number of ethical concerns: having a valuable (and locally relevant) scientific question, using valid scientific methodology, selecting subjects fairly, having a favorable risk-benefit relationship, reviews by an independent committee and voluntary informed consent. How these concerns are understood and met is bound to be influenced significantly by local cultures, religions, and ethnic traditions (11, 12). For instance, some cultures have spiritual or magical beliefs about the origins of disease, and it is sometimes difficult to reconcile these beliefs with the tenets of science and modern medicine (13). Western thinking is strongly characterized by the values of self-reliance, and self-realization. (14, 15). In some cultures, these ways of thinking and their assumptions may be less strongly present and to some extent alien. Research ethics as commonly understood often does not give much argumentative weight to traditional values, but in other settings, collective values and interests may be seen as more valuable than the perspective of individuals; religious norms can be considered indispensable sources of social connection and self-esteem (16).

To conduct research responsibly in Ethiopia, it is important to investigate its history, philosophy, culture, language, customs, expectations, and the aspirations of its ethnically heterogeneous community. There are no publications available to compare the reviews in this context, and given the limitations, this exploration explains some of the gaps that can be created between the researcher and the researched by cultural, political, socioeconomic, and other differences. These gaps if not understood and treated, can hinder the responsible conduct of research. The study concentrates on Ethiopia, where health research is sponsored by foreign and local institutions conducted by both Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians. By identifying some of these gaps, suggestions will be forwarded so that researchers can avoid pitfalls when conducting research with human participants in Ethiopia.

Methods

This study reviews literature and considered the following exploratory inquiries.

1. Is there a philosophical, and historical background in Ethiopian society that could be linked with research ethics and communication?
2. Can the Ethiopian philosophy of 'Yilungnta' influence conducting research ethically in Ethiopia?
3. Are there cultural factors in Ethiopia that could influence doing research ethically?
4. What roles do Ethiopian civil societies, and community leaders/institutions play during research undertaking (participant recruitment, data collection, and dissemination)?
5. Is there a historical and philosophical background in Ethiopian society that could be linked with research ethics and communication?

The emergence of what came to be the nation called Ethiopia can be traced back to a period that begins with the ancient hominoids of Australopithecus and extends to the early inhabitants of the pre-Aksumites (the dominant kingdom at the turn of the first millennia). As confirmed by paleontological data, *Homo erectus* evolved from *Australopithecus afarensis* (discovered in 1974) which expanded out of Africa to populate Eurasia 1.8 million years ago (17). The ancient city of Axum became a political, economic, and cultural center in the region. The Aksumites dominated the Red Sea trade by the 3rd century. By the 4th century, Axum was one of the few nations in the world, along with Rome, Persia, and Kushan Kingdom in northern India. In 333 A.D, Ethiopian Emperor Ezana adopted Christianity; this was the same year the Roman Emperor, Constantine converted (18). The importance and long history of Ethiopia are reflected in the fact that the word Ethiopia appears in the Bible numerous times (19). The classical language of Ge'ez has a vowel system that has evolved into Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. It is the only indigenous writing system in Africa that is still in use. Many apocryphal texts such as the Book of Enoch, have been preserved in their entirety in this language. Ge'ez is to Ethiopia as Latin is to the west. Ge'ez is the precursor of Ethiopia's Amharic, Tigrinya and Tigre languages (20).

ZeraYacob (1599-1692) wrote 'The Hatata'[that is compared by scholars to Descartes' 'Discourse de la method (1637)] in the Ge'ez language (21). As the historian Sumner writes of his discovery of the Hatata: "It was June 1962. I was then writing the manuscript of the Philosophy of Man, a vast inquiry into the notion of man throughout history, from the Upanishads of ancient India to logical positivism in our days. At that time I was completely ignorant, not only of the content of Ethiopian Philosophy, but even of its very existence ... I therefore went to the archives of the National Library. At that time the archives section was poorly lit. The halo of my flashlight was gliding along the shelves when suddenly it quivered on a rather big manuscript covered with wooden boards whose title startled me: "The Book of the Philosophers"! Well then! There was a philosophical manuscript in Ethiopia! It was written in the ancient Semitic language

called Geez which survives only mostly in the liturgy of the church. This is how my adventure started. I was searching for the human, I found the African.” (22)

The Ethiopian people are ethnically heterogeneous. Each speaking dialect of one or more languages, At present, around eighty languages are spoken. (23)

From 1529-1632, Ethiopian history was marked by hardships and civil war, where much damage was done to the religious and cultural life of the country. In 1528, the Islamic offensive led by Ahmed Gran caused damage to the cultural inheritance of Ethiopia. However, the heritage of Ethiopian written literature survived, which allowed the people to record their thoughts, philosophy, and traditional wisdom, and transmit it from generation to generation. It was during that time, that ZeraYacob (1599-1692), a 17th century Ethiopian philosopher, was born (24).

In his philosophical investigation, ZeraYacob put man at the center and came up with his ethical principle which was based on man as a preeminent symbol; His message contributes to the betterment of human life (25). Even though written philosophical documents are scarce, the linkage between understanding Ethiopian philosophy and doing research ethically can be assessed.

Fundamental elements in Zera Yacob's philosophy

1. Zera Yacob's Ethiopian Ethical Yelugnta (ይሁንታ) -Selflessness or Public Self-Consciousness:

Utilitarianism and ethical egoism are goal- and outcome-oriented philosophies. The first aims to make the world a better place for all, and the latter to make the self the beneficiary of one's activities (14). Zera Yacob's ethical 'Yelugnta' has similarities and differences from utilitarian and deontological views.

According to Zera Yacob's ethical Yelugnta, acting ethically means acting according to the perception that others may like the act or that they may feel good about it. By incorporating the perceptions of others into the definition of ethical conduct, an action can be ethically good even if it is 'self-regarding', as long as it accords with what others would also find well (22,25).

Humanity in any culture and society has its own philosophy. Ethiopia has a unique, diverse culture, beliefs, history, and philosophy. Communicating with the Ethiopian community needs a prior understanding of what is inherent in the outlook of the society particularly with the Yilugnta philosophy. For instance, we do not explain or show our sympathy to our loved ones. We simply keep it in our hearts; we cannot impose the food habits of another country only by accepting the nutritional value of some food items (frogs, grasshoppers, dogs, horses, some wild animals, etc.); raw meat consumption is exotic among Ethiopians but could be offensive to other cultures; Eating from the same plate is our food etiquette, etc. Communities have different mindsets and whenever

we approach them to do any research the outcome will depend on what the community accepts. Besides ethics as a moral responsibility of all Right or wrong that can have legal implications.

2. Theory of truth, Ayenehelina- (አይነሕሊና) "the light of our will"; Ayenelebona-(አይነልቦና) "light of our hearts". ZeraYacob wrote, "As my faith appears true to me, so does another find his own faith true; but the truth is one." (22). Literally means the mind's eye/Ethiopian third eye. It is a state of philosophical and psychological stability and tranquility, a sense of the truth and a total surrender to it.

3. Zera Yacob's rational inquiry: Hatata (ሐተታ) - meaning 'inquiry': Everything (including faith) should be subjected to rational inspection before it is accepted. In this regard, Yacob was impartial and anti-traditional, rejecting all prejudices (religious or personal, indigenous or exotic) that did not survive his rational inquiry; this aspect of his thought is close to that of his contemporaries in the European Enlightenment.

ZeraYacob's approach implied a radical understanding of the self as subject and object in relation to problems and their solutions. In order for humans to be self-governing in the realm of moral life, they must at all times consult the Law of God and the Law of humans; it is the Law of God that completes the incomplete and deficient Law of man. He exposed the falsity of blind faith of religious tenets on fasting and celibacy, and marrying more than one wife. Moreover, in his book of 1667, ZeraYacob proclaimed that a man and woman are one in marriage and have equal property rights. Yacob also wrote on women's rights and Human rights in general, criticizing slavery as well as any form of violence against humans (22, 25)

1. Can the Ethiopian philosophy of 'Yelugnta' influence conducting research ethically in Ethiopia?

Ethiopian philosophy (Yilugnta) and research ethics 'Yelugnta' is not just a philosophical concept used exclusively by academics.

culture and makes an impact on everyday life and behavior. As mentioned, Ethical Yelugnta (unlike utilitarianism) does not involve transcending the interests of the self in order to further the greater good of society. Acting well according to Yelugnta is an act that is conducted on the perception that the act is good as seen, and could be regarded as such, by others (25).

Implications of 'Yelugnta' for research ethics

In Ethiopia where the spirit of 'Yelugnta' is prominent, there is a tendency towards a certain conformism. People tend to believe that 'doing the right thing' means pleasing their real peers. In research, this attitude could hinder individual creativity and progress. On the other hand, it could also facilitate the conduct of research involving human participants, in ways that are ethically questionable as religious, civil society leaders and authoritarian rulers may be less threatened guided by Yelugnta.

Researchers may find it relatively easier to select a population and recruit participants for risky health studies. Yelugnta could motivate persons to act in ways that would please those perceived as worthy of respect. Ethiopians feel obliged to do something if asked, believing that refusal would not just be an expression of personal choice, but an ethically wrong thing to do. This obviously relates to the issue of voluntary informed consent for research.

In so far as they follow Yelugnta, do Ethiopians have the ability to refuse participation in a research study when asked to join, or the ability to end participation once they have joined? The same concern can be posed at the community level: when researchers (particularly from respected institutions) approach communities about conducting studies involving their members, will local leaders have a real choice to refuse consent? While this is a concern for all research studies in all regions of the world, in Ethiopia Yelugnta powerfully combines obedience to authority, peer pressure, and moral obligation.

Simply informing participants that they are free to join or refuse to join a study is unlikely to be sufficient. Yelugnta is also reflected in speech and communication: Ethiopians tend to speak in quiet tones, use indirect speech (metaphor and quotation), and make subtle, witty remarks involving implication. With this in mind, insider knowledge of Ethiopian culture is essential in order to conduct the consent process in a way that ultimately conveys the appropriate information, but does not come across as aggressive or confrontational.

Yelugnta has a positive side of respecting others and an interest in listening to others' thoughts. Its negative side is putting aside personal interests, while openness, free thoughts, and individual interests could be jeopardized.

Are there cultural factors in Ethiopia that could influence doing research ethically?

Common customs and research ethics

There are elements of Ethiopian culture important for the responsible conduct of research.

Ethiopian naming customs

Like Western countries, in Ethiopia, there is no family name inherited from generation to generation. Ethiopians are given one name at birth, and the biological father's name is added. In research publications, editors and publishers often confuse Ethiopian names by erroneously looking for a "family name" or surname, which does not exist. For example, if Beyene Wondafrash is cited as Wondafrash B. and if my sister is Beletu Wondafrash that will also be Wondafrash B. It will be difficult to identify who is who in publications. Another example of disfigured name citation is: If Maza Haile-Yesus is cited as Yesus M. simply with the intention of making a family name, Ethiopians will find this amusing because Maza now possesses an Amharic translation meaning Miss Jesus. But Haile-yesus is one 'poly name' (father name in this example) Hence, Ethiopian authors tend to write their full name (given name and father's name and if necessary include grandfather's name to differentiate from another duplicated name) so that authorship problems and confusions can be clear (26)

Besides publication ethics issues, there are other issues regarding names in Ethiopia that can impact the responsible conduct of research. To respectfully address individuals, for instance in official documents, and for some written and verbal communication, individuals are addressed with their cultural honorific title followed by their first name. "Ato" meaning Mr, "Woizero" meaning Mrs., and "Woizrit" meaning Miss, are used to address a man, married woman, and unmarried woman respectively. 'You' as in the English language is not applied across both sexes. 'Ante' for male 'Anchi' for female and 'Eirso" to respect both sexes are used. The relationship between researchers and research participants is based on trust especially when research is conducted by foreign scientists and institutions, it is important that persons are named and addressed with the appropriate terms. For this reason, it is important to confirm the appropriateness of the prefixes used in research information sheets and consent forms. Errors can be insulting and compromise relations during the conduct of research.

Family and kinship relations

In Ethiopia, the extended family remains the focus of the social system. Family needs are put before all other social obligations, including business affairs. For instance, in some parts of Ethiopia, if a family member is killed by someone either by chance or purposefully there exists a so-called "blood feud" culture where the perpetrator is not excused, but instead hunted and killed by male brothers and other male relatives of the victim. The killing of the perpetrator is regarded as a way of honoring the dignity of the victim and the victim's family (31). This aspect of common morality obviously can be a matter of concern if there is a question of research-related harm, in certain communities in Ethiopia. The researchers who conduct

risky research procedures may find themselves at risk for serious harm, and not just legal sanction, though there have been no documented reports yet. Obviously, any health research study that risks causing serious harm is liable to lose community support and future long-term collaboration (30). In this case, researchers in Ethiopia have to be highly vigilant to avoid the risk of harm, potential for harm, and even the appearance of harm.

Social etiquette

The coffee ceremony is considered a central social occasion in Ethiopian life. Coffee is the national drink and its drinking is a ritualized process that generally takes at least an hour or more. The coffee ceremony commonly includes a large group of family members, neighbors, and friends (roughly 5-10 people). Many important issues are discussed at the coffee ceremony, including family, local, and political disputes. Given its social importance, it is considered impolite to refuse an offer to join a coffee ceremony. Historically, coffee has also been a significant agricultural commodity for Ethiopia. The ceremony's significance culturally has evolved over time, however, at its core, it remains a community-building tool, a time to connect with friends and family and to catch up on news and events (32). In research studies, the coffee ceremony can be important to discuss proposed research activities in the community or at sites to conduct research, particularly focus group discussions but people may also talk to others about information shared within the FGD which needs a systematic approach. During meals, participation in conversation is considered polite, and excessive attention to the meal is thought to be impolite. Only the right hand may be used for eating. Ethiopian greetings are intricate, and greetings should never be rushed. People of the same sex may kiss three/four times on their cheeks. Men should wait to see if a woman extends her hand. In the Oromo and southern nationalities they grasp each other's hands and kiss the top of the other person's hands. Elders should be greeted first. It is customary to bend over when introduced to someone who is older or has a more senior position. When an elderly person or guest enters a room, it is customary to bow and then stand until that person is seated (33). Understanding the cultural context could help keep smooth relations with the community. Honor and dignity are crucial to Ethiopians. Disrespect, verbal harassment, dishonesty, and not keeping promises, are all intolerable. For instance, to demonstrate honesty and integrity, orthodox Christians put black thread around their neck to show every kind of truthfulness and obedience to humans and the almighty. In traditional Christian Ethiopia, there are around 250 days of fasting per year. During fasting days it is prohibited to consume animal products. Researchers therefore need to respect the customs and symbols of the society, when approaching potential research subjects and initiating study activities.

Ethiopia is nicknamed "the land of 13 months of sunshine". The New Year starts in September and each month has 30 days. The Ethiopian calendar also has an extra five-day month called Pagume (ጳጉሜ). Each month has a meaning related to seasonal changes and the life of the community. Day and night contain 12 hrs each, and there is no 24 hrs. system. There is also an eight-year gap between the Ethiopian and Gregorian calendars.

Official calendars are published incorporating both local and Gregorian systems. Without adapting to this calendar system, researchers may create confusion when they develop a work plan for research, conduct formal communications, and set appointments. Even though the calendar may create problems during the research process when one is not accustomed to it, this does not create a practical problem for the nation. It is rather part of what makes Ethiopia unique and ties its present day to the past (28).

What roles do Ethiopian civil societies, and community leaders/institutions play during research undertaking (participant recruitment, data collection, and dissemination)?

Ethiopian civil societies and social welfare for researchers to consider

There are many different types of Ethiopian social institutions, locally grown means of managing lives. The most prevalent are Eidir (burial services and condolences), Debo (temporary labor unions), Eikub (saving unions), Mahiber (social group), Shimgline (mediation), Afersata/ Awchahne (community consultative resolution), Shengo (advisory team), Gadaa system (expression of Oromo civilization.) etc. (27)

Civil society's custom/culture in Ethiopia: some definitions and examples

Afersata or Awchahne: a social system that treats all 'civil or criminal cases' in traditional ways. If research is conducted in a community with such a system, legal concerns about the research (such as conflicts of interest) should normally engage with these local ways of resolving disagreements. To do otherwise may bring further complications.

Gada system: the Oromo democratic political and social institution that governs the life of individuals in the society from birth to death advocating the belief that all people should have equal political, social, and economic rights.

Debo: a labor exchange group whereby groups work together to complete certain communal projects on time, such as building construction, weeding, and harvesting.

'Equb': a local social support system used to assist those with financial and other needs. Local communities pool money and each month someone will take the collected money to use for his/her own purposes. Since this is a kind of collective association, the power of the social support system extends beyond finance; sometimes Equb may be helpful for conducting research in the

community or to consent individuals within the association.

Idir: a burial association for mutual support in relation to funerals. Considered as a third party between governments and family.

Shinglina/MehalSefari: 'The one that camps at the center.' Refers to those community leaders who take centrist or neutral positions on fairness and social justice, and advocate for a peaceful and fair resolution of any conflict. This can be useful in resolving research-related conflicts. In some societies, health is viewed from a religious and taboo angle which is sometimes difficult to reconcile with modern medicine. Notions like Evil eyes, witchery, and fortune-telling influence health behaviors. These customs can affect the implementation of health intervention strategies.

Invasions of privacy, breaches of confidentiality, stigma, and rejection by families or Communities, and social harms could happen if we do not take into consideration the influence and the roles of civil society institutions and stakeholders in the Ethiopian context. A country's identity has influences on basic human values, priorities, beliefs, and behaviors. Understanding and respect for Ethiopia's history, philosophy, culture, traditions, and customs through acknowledgment of its community values, differing worldviews, and moral practices are essential for the responsible conduct of research in this country (27, 29).

As we live in a time of scientific and technological advancement, moral and philosophical preconceptions about the world in which we live are challenged by new discoveries and innovations. To achieve a credible balance between the progress of science and the protection of the rights of individuals and their cultural values, researchers require ethical norms which are acceptable internationally but which are sensitive to cultural diversity. We must also adapt our traditional concepts in the face of changes in a context of interaction and interdependence on an international scale. On the other hand, existing ethical codes may not always sufficiently address the issues of multiple and complex cultural and contextual differences.

In Ethiopia, higher education institutions, particularly Jimma University, implement translational community-engaged research guided by the motto: 'We are In the Community'. In this regard, to do research ethically means taking into account cultural and contextual differences among researchers, among participants, and between researchers and participants (34).

Ethical principles can be truly respected through practices based on local values, collaboration, consensus, communication, negotiation, and partnerships. Research design, informed consent, participant roles, entry into the field, approaches to data collection, and dissemination of results must be contextualized by respecting local tradition and cultural values integrated

into the process through dialogue and not by imposition. Cultural differences must be evaluated carefully to undertake research for better outcomes and prevent misunderstandings, stereotyping, cultural barriers, or interpersonal conflict before, during, and after data collection.

Conclusion

To enhance a responsible and balanced approach towards research ethics in Ethiopia, a clear understanding of the social, human, and cultural meaning of informed consent, privacy, and the rights of the individual and the protection of personal, family, or local community interest must be considered. To conduct research responsibly, the involvement of the community, including key decision-makers in healthcare, ethics, research policy, governance, and science is crucial.

Research should adhere to the highest international standards and ensure that there is no danger of exploitation of the participants of vulnerable populations. This could be achieved through capacity-building exercises, and collaborative networks by understanding the challenges and opportunities of modern science and technology advancement. To do research ethically, through the ethics of beneficence and maleficence, understanding ethical dilemmas and Decision making, promoting the National Research Ethics Review System, Strengthening ethical review capacity within countries by considering the complexity of cultural variations, national laws, local medical and research practices, and local knowledge is crucial.

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