

Between the University and the Monastery: The Ethiopian Church and the Transformation of Knowledge

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Abstract

This article examines the transformations of the Ethiopian Orthodox educational system *’Abənnat Təmhərt* in the context of modernity and digital culture. It argues that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church constitutes a unique case in which education, faith, and social responsibility form a coherent epistemological framework. The paper first outlines the historical development of this system, grounded in the interconnection of theological study, *qine* poetry, and *zema* liturgical chant, before comparing it with European and African theories of knowledge. It then analyses how the Church has reinterpreted the pressures of modernisation through a spiritual idiom and how digital media have reshaped the authority of spiritual teachers. The conclusion formulates the concept of “spiritual modernity” — an alternative form of modernity in which knowledge remains inseparable from its moral and communal dimensions. The Ethiopian case demonstrates that modernisation does not necessarily entail secularisation but may instead lead to a renewed synthesis of faith, reason, and social ethics.

Keywords

Ethiopia, Orthodox Church, *’Abənnat Təmhərt*, spiritual modernity, epistemology of faith, religious education, decolonisation of knowledge.

Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the few African countries in which religious education has for centuries formed the backbone of its intellectual culture. The traditional ecclesiastical schools of the *’Abənnat Təmhərt* (“education of the fathers”) system have long served not only as instruments for transmitting faith but also as centres of philosophy, music, poetry, and ethics. Within these institutions emerged a distinct conception of knowledge — an understanding of learning not as an intellectual achievement, but as a spiritual journey in which scholarship and sanctity form an inseparable whole.

In the modern era, however, this model began to lose its privileged position. The establishment of state schools and universities, oriented towards a Western conception of rationality, created a fundamental tension between spiritual formation and secular expertise. As Muluken Andualem observes, “the Ethiopian educational system today stands between two poles — between a tradition that has shaped national identity and a modernity that introduces new ideas of knowledge, authority, and progress”¹. His study of *’Abənnat Təmhərt*, conducted within a collaborative project of the University of Hamburg and Bahir Dar University, demonstrates that the conflict between religious continuity and secular transformation is among the most defining features of contemporary Ethiopian society.

Yet traditional ecclesiastical institutions have shown a remarkable capacity for adaptation. Recent research indicates that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has succeeded in linking its theological structures with modern forms of education: “Whereas Western schools separated faith from reason, the Ethiopian model approached learning as an activity meant to cultivate both the soul and the mind”.² This approach is rooted in a long tradition of ecclesiastical literature, in which the Ge‘ez language functions not merely as a liturgical medium but as an instrument of spiritual understanding and national identity.

Nonetheless, present-day Ethiopia faces growing pressure to modernise and internationalise its educational institutions — a process that frequently conflicts with traditional conceptions of knowledge. As Tesfaye Demelash notes, this trend leads to the erosion of “the intellectual orientation that once linked education to a moral commitment toward society”.³ Whereas the ideal scholar was once synonymous with the ideal of holiness, today the educated individual is more often perceived as a technocrat or a specialist devoid of spiritual depth.

This article therefore explores which values and conceptions of knowledge persist within Ethiopian religious education and how they are reinterpreted in dialogue with the modern state school system. Its aim is to understand how the relationship between faith, education, and identity is being redefined in contemporary Ethiopia — and whether the traditional *’Abənnat Təmhərt* model may offer an alternative vision of “modernity” capable of enriching the global debate on the relationship between religion and knowledge.

¹ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *’Abənnat for Ethiopia’s Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

² AYALEW, Senkoris. *Zena-Lissan*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2020, pp 57–58.

³ DEMELASH, Tesfaye. *Ethiopian Intellectuals and the Lost Vision of Reform*. Addis Ababa University, 2017.

1. History and Structure of the 'Abənnat Təmhərt System

Over the centuries, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church developed a distinctive system of education that shaped not only theological thought but also the very cultural identity of the nation. Within this system — known as 'Abənnat Təmhərt (“education of the fathers”) — generations of clergy, scribes, poets, and musicians were trained. The system possessed not only a religious but also an intellectual and social dimension: it embodied the Ethiopian understanding of the relationship between knowledge, piety, and authority.

The roots of 'Abənnat Təmhərt reach back to the Aksumite Empire (4th–7th centuries), when the Ge'ez language served as both the liturgical and educational medium. As Senkoris Ayalew notes, it was precisely the tradition of Ge'ez writing and ecclesiastical literature that enabled the emergence of “an autonomous Ethiopian concept of scholarship, in which language functions simultaneously as an instrument and a symbol of sacredness”.⁴ The earliest texts written on parchment (*brana*) possessed not only religious but also aesthetic value; their transcription was considered a spiritual act, and the very act of writing assumed the character of prayer.

According to Steven Kaplan, the formal educational system of the Ethiopian Church evolved from early monastic communities that, after the Christianisation of the country (from the 13th century onwards), systematised the relationship between the study of Scripture and spiritual asceticism. Kaplan observes that “the monastic ideal of holiness became simultaneously the ideal of scholarship — education was a path to sanctification, and sanctification a path to knowledge”.⁵ This unity of faith and learning remains a defining feature of the Ethiopian conception of education to this day.

Education within this system was structured in several stages, corresponding to the student's spiritual maturation. It began with reading and memorising Scripture (*qeddasse*), continued with the study of *zema* (liturgical chant) and *qine* (allegorical poetry and hermeneutical interpretation of biblical texts), and culminated in the manuscript and exegetical schools (*metsehaf bet*). Each level demanded years of study, ascetic discipline, and often itinerant movement between monasteries that functioned as centres of learning. As Muluken Andualem remarks, “the Ethiopian tradition of 'Abənnat Təmhərt does not associate knowledge

⁴ AYALEW, Senkoris. *Zena-Lissan*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2020, p. 57.

⁵ KAPLAN, Steven. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009, p. 112.

with the accumulation of information but with the transformation of the self — to learn is to become a different person”⁶.

A paradigmatic example of this comprehensive education is the discipline of *qine*, allegorical poetry that serves as a theological exercise. The teacher might, for instance, assign the verse:

“ብርሃን ይወጥ ከጨለማ” (*bərhan yiwäṭa kăčäläma* – “Light arises from darkness”).

The student must uncover two meanings: the literal (the creation of the world) and the hidden, moral one (the discovery of truth through spiritual trial). Such verses are described as *wax and gold*, after the ancient Ethiopian metaphor of double meaning. The exercise demands not only theological knowledge but also poetic intuition and rhetorical skill.

Similarly, in the study of *zema* (liturgical chant), students learn melodies corresponding to the daily rhythm of prayer. Chanting is itself a form of bodily asceticism: the student learns to stand, breathe, and pray in harmony with the liturgy, uniting spiritual and physical discipline within a single pedagogical practice.

A central role in this system was played by the *debtera* (plural *debtarat*) — scholars, singers, scribes, and healers who acted as mediators between the spiritual and the popular realms of religion. According to Donald Levine, the *debtarat* were “the most mobile bearers of Ethiopian culture, who ensured the continuity of ecclesiastical learning outside the monasteries and also served as creators of poetry, music, and medicine”.⁷ Their authority derived not only from profound scriptural knowledge but also from a magico-symbolic interpretation of language and ritual. As Habte Mariam describes, “the *debtera* knew every tone of liturgical chant and every secret of the signs, for his knowledge was embodied rather than merely intellectual.”⁸

The *debtarat* often acted as intermediaries between the official Church and rural communities. Many practised healing, music, and calligraphy, and their understanding of both theology and natural science carried significant practical value. Their existence challenges the Western dichotomy between the “sacred” and the “secular”: in the Ethiopian context, these scholars embodied the unity of faith, knowledge, and everyday experience.

⁶ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *Abənnat for Ethiopia's Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

⁷ LEVINE, Donald N. *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 172.

⁸ HABTE MARIAM, W. *T'əntawi yä-It'iyop'iya šər'ata təmhərt* [Ancient Ethiopian Educational System]. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Culture, 1976.

The authority of the teacher — the *abə net* (“father”) — had both educational and spiritual significance. The teacher was not merely a transmitter of texts but an exemplar of moral life. The relationship between teacher and student was grounded in devotion and obedience, resembling monastic initiation. The goal was not only to comprehend a text but to internalise the spiritual disposition it expressed. As Ayalew puts it, “the Ethiopian model of scholarship rests on the conviction that wisdom cannot be transmitted — it can only be mirrored through one’s life”.⁹

For centuries, this educational model constituted an autonomous sphere distinct from both state authority and colonial influence. Church schools were self-sufficient, closely integrated with local communities, and conceived of education as service to God and society rather than a means of personal advancement. This autonomy was gradually undermined in the twentieth century with the introduction of modern schooling under Emperor Haile Selassie. Secular education began to supplant the traditional system, which was increasingly dismissed as “outdated” or “inefficient.” Nevertheless, as Andualem observes, “‘*Abənnat Təmhərt* has survived as a living tradition — in smaller monasteries, rural areas, and through spiritual lineages that continue to transmit an older way of thinking about knowledge”¹⁰.

Today, therefore, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church finds itself under dual pressure: on the one hand, it faces the demands of the modern state and the globalised labour market; on the other, it seeks to preserve its distinctive spiritual heritage. While some members of the clergy advocate for the modernisation of the curriculum and its integration into the university system, others warn against losing the spiritual depth that has for centuries been the core of ecclesiastical education. This internal dialogue — between tradition and modernity, between faith and rationality — represents one of the most compelling and least explored aspects of Ethiopia’s contemporary cultural landscape.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Knowledge, Authority, and Epistemological Decolonisation

The European tradition of education has, since the seventeenth century, been shaped around the ideal of rationality and the methodological investigation of the world. René Descartes, often regarded as the founder of the modern concept of knowledge, did not seek to reject faith but

⁹ AYALEW, Senkoris. *Zena-Lissan*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2020, p. 58.

¹⁰ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *‘Abənnat for Ethiopia’s Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

rather to discover a form of certainty independent of both authority and sensory instability.¹¹ His famous *cogito ergo sum* was intended to restore confidence in reason as a divine gift — not to set it in opposition to revelation. It was only the later radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century that began to frame faith and science as opposites; by the nineteenth century, this dualism had become embedded in the emerging scientific discourse.

During the age of Darwin's theory of evolution, the division between theology and science deepened further, even though Darwin himself maintained a moderate outlook and never denied the idea of Creation.¹² It was his followers — particularly materialists and social Darwinists — who turned evolution into an ideology of progress stripped of spiritual dimension. From that point onward, European epistemology came to rest upon the conviction that what is rational must also be secular, and that science is the sole legitimate means of describing the world.

Michel Foucault demonstrated that this notion of “scientificity” is intimately linked to disciplinary power — the capacity of institutions to control, categorise, and define what may count as knowledge.¹³ The educational system thus became not merely a site of learning, but a mechanism for the reproduction of power. Pierre Bourdieu elaborated this idea through his concept of *cultural capital*, which explains how education legitimises certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others.¹⁴

In contrast, the Ethiopian system of *'Abənnat Təmhərt* conceives knowledge as a moral, spiritual, and communal experience. Knowledge here is not an act of domination but of transformation; not a separation from the sacred but its deepening. Learning is understood as a process in which reason and faith do not diverge but mutually refine one another. As Muluken Andualem writes, “education in the Ethiopian tradition is not the accumulation of facts but the transformation of the heart, leading to the understanding of both God and humankind”.¹⁵

This perspective resonates strongly with the modern African philosophy of knowledge, which seeks epistemological decolonisation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o speaks of a “return of language and meaning,” arguing that “colonial education compelled Africans to think in concepts that were not their own”.¹⁶ Frantz Fanon asserts that “true liberation begins within the

¹¹ DESCARTES, René. *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. Paris, 1641.

¹² DARWIN, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859.

¹³ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

¹⁴ BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹⁵ ANDUALEM, Muluken. c. d, 2025.

¹⁶ NGŪGĨ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind*. London: James Currey, 1986.

mind that refuses to be measured by foreign standards”.¹⁷ Achille Mbembe likewise calls for the recognition of a “plurality of rationalities” — the capacity to think beyond a single centre of modernity.¹⁸

Ethiopia represents a truly exceptional case: though it was never colonised in the long term, it now faces the forces of cultural and educational globalisation that have similar hegemonic effects. Its ecclesiastical tradition functions as a living laboratory of epistemological plurality, where the Western notion of reason encounters the theological notion of wisdom. Where European rationality seeks objectivity, Ethiopian scholarship seeks balance; where Europe grounds knowledge in method, Ethiopia roots it in relationship and ethics.

This contrast is not a clash of civilisations but a reflection of two distinct anthropologies of knowledge. Whereas in European modernity education became a path toward individualisation, in the Ethiopian conception it remains a path toward transcendence. The Western university arose from the model of disputation; the Ethiopian school from the model of prayer. And it is precisely in this comparison that the deeper significance of the present inquiry lies: the Ethiopian system of *’Abənnat Təmhərt* demonstrates that modernity need not be inherently secular, and that education can still, even today, serve a spiritual and communal function.

3. Methodological Perspective

This study is grounded in the triangulation of three complementary methodological approaches. Their combination allows for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between knowledge, authority, and spiritual practice in the Ethiopian context—both in their internal logic and within a broader global dialogue.

1. Hermeneutic Analysis of Religious and Educational Texts

This approach is crucial for understanding how key concepts such as “knowledge” (*’ilm*), “learning” (*mātshaf*), and “wisdom” (*hikmāt*) are constructed and transmitted within the Ethiopian tradition. The aim is not mere description, but the interpretation of their inner meanings and their cultural-theological layers. Through the analysis of ecclesiastical writings (for instance, within the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and contemporary academic discourses, the study traces how these concepts have been historically formed and how they continue to function as foundational pillars of local epistemology. Hermeneutics thus

¹⁷ FANON, Frantz. *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952.

¹⁸ MBEMBE, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

makes it possible to approach Ethiopian knowledge “from within,” in its own linguistic and symbolic coordinates.

2. Comparative Epistemology: A Dialogue of Traditions

To avoid a binary perspective that would oppose traditional Ethiopian knowledge to “modern” European science, this research adopts a framework of comparative epistemology. Such an approach enables both traditions to be understood not as antagonistic but as complementary models of the relationship between reason, faith, and social responsibility. The comparison focuses on questions such as: How is legitimate knowledge defined within each tradition? What is the role of the scholar, and how is his or her authority constructed? This dialogical framework makes it possible to identify not only the differences but, more importantly, the points of potential mutual enrichment.

3. Critical Analysis of Power Discourses and Educational Institutions

The third axis of this research is a critical reflection inspired by the work of Michel Foucault¹⁹ and postcolonial theory. It examines how Ethiopian educational institutions—both ecclesiastical schools and modern universities—construct and legitimise particular ways of knowing. This analysis seeks to answer the question of how knowledge becomes a tool of power and authority, and how these mechanisms evolve under the pressures of globalisation and encounters with “foreign” epistemological models. In doing so, the research moves beyond purely philosophical reflection toward a sociologically and politically engaged critique.

Synthesis of Approaches and Contribution of the Study

This methodological design enables us to transcend the limits of mere exotic description. The Ethiopian tradition is treated here as an epistemological counterpart of equal standing—an active participant in the global conversation, not merely its object. Its alternative conception of rationality, linking knowledge with ethics and spirituality, offers a valuable source of inspiration for contemporary debates on the crisis of modern science and the search for integrative models of knowledge. The triangulation of the outlined methods ensures that the research remains hermeneutically sensitive, comparatively fruitful, and critically relevant.

¹⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

4. Contemporary Transformations of the Ethiopian Church and Education

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church today stands at an exceptionally delicate threshold between tradition and modernity. For centuries, it was the principal institution of education and the custodian of written culture. In the twenty-first century, however, it faces the challenges of modernisation, globalisation, digitalisation, and growing social scrutiny. While Western universities grapple with a crisis of meaning, the Ethiopian Church strives to reform without losing the spiritual essence of its knowledge. As Muluken Andualem observes, “Ethiopian education faces a dilemma: how to preserve continuity with the tradition of *’Abənnat Təmhərt* while opening itself to the global horizon of knowledge”.²⁰

Changes that once affected only the periphery have now reached the very centre of ecclesiastical life. New theological faculties are being opened, church universities established, and at the same time, public criticism of clerical authority is spreading across social media. These transformations may be understood as an Ethiopian form of modernity, in which the notions of “progress” and “faith” do not oppose one another but continually reshape each other.

4.1. Reform, the State, and the Idea of “Spiritual Modernity”

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) was for centuries inseparably linked with the state. As early as the Aksumite period, it provided the foundation of royal legitimacy, with rulers governing “by the grace of God.” This theocratic symbiosis endured until the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1974), who introduced a modern constitution but retained the Church as the principal institution of moral education.

Following the fall of the empire and during the rule of the Derg (1974–1991), ecclesiastical power was drastically curtailed. Many clergy were imprisoned or forced to abandon their monasteries. Paradoxically, this persecution turned education within the Church into a form of resistance — the clandestine study of Ge‘ez, liturgical chant, or *qine* (poetic theology) became a means of preserving both national and spiritual identity.

In the present era, particularly since the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (2018), the Church has re-entered dialogue with the state. Ahmed’s reformist discourse promotes ideas of “development” and “unity,” which have also influenced the sphere of education. Church

²⁰ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *’Abənnat for Ethiopia’s Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

schools are now encouraged to adopt modern teaching methods, testing procedures, and administrative transparency.

This trend, however, has created tension between spiritual and state logics. As Tesfaye Demelash points out, “educational reforms pursue economic rationality, not the epistemology of faith; education is measured by efficiency, not by holiness”.²¹

A telling example is the newly founded “Ye Abənnat Təmhərt” school in the city of Sheger, whose establishment was ceremonially announced in October 2025 on the Facebook page of the Tewahedo Media Center (TMC). The post describes how Church leaders laid the cornerstone of a “model school” intended to be “a bridge between faith and modern education”:

“Development is important for the Church, but the cultivation of the mind through the Gospel comes before all else. Today’s generation is the heir of yesterday’s Church — therefore we must shape its mind through the Gospel. Where there is a generation, there will be development.” (Tewahedo Media Center, Facebook, 12 October 2025)

This statement inverts the Western chronology of progress. It is not that spiritual formation should merely precede development, but that development itself is meaningless without spiritual continuity. In theological language, this represents a reinterpretation of the concept *ləmāt* (“development”) — not as economic growth, but as the maturation of the human spirit.

The Church thus seeks not to reject modernisation but to reformulate it in spiritual terms. This gives rise to what Ayalew²² calls *spiritual modernity*: progress understood as the inner renewal of society rather than technocratic transformation. In this sense, the Ethiopian experience offers an alternative to the Eurocentric model of secularisation.

For instance, the “Holy Hands Cooperative,” founded at the Debre Libanos monastery, integrates spiritual formation with the employment of young people. Monks teach baking, tailoring, and weaving, framing each craft within prayer and biblical reflection. The working day begins with the morning litany and concludes with a reading from Scripture. The goal is not mere economic self-sufficiency but the “cultivation of the spirit of responsibility” (*menfesawi māwäq‘at*). In this way, the economic language of productivity is translated into the language of the Gospel: success is measured not by profit, but by service to others (EOTC Development Office, 2023).

²¹ DEMELASH, Tesfaye. *Ethiopian Intellectuals and the Lost Vision of Reform*. Addis Ababa University, 2017, p. 42.

²² AYALEW, Senkoris. *Zena-Lissan*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2020, p. 63.

4.2. Crisis of Trust and Internal Accountability of Authority

The contemporary Ethiopian Church is undergoing not only spiritual but also moral crises of trust. Social media platforms now feature posts criticising how the Church handles finances and authority. For example, Yidnekachew Shumiye publicly called in 2025 for an investigation into funds raised for the construction of a church in Addis Ababa's Bole Mikael district, noting that "over 17 million birr donated by the faithful from their salaries and allowances disappeared without audit" and demanding that "the monastery administration present an immediate report" (Facebook, October 2025).

This language resembles that of a civic petition rather than a religious appeal, yet within the Ethiopian context it carries deeper meaning. Shumiye's call is not anti-clerical; rather, it expresses inner loyalty to the Church, which he describes as "the house of all" (*betekristiyanachenin inادن* – "let us save our Church").

Anthropologically, this reflects a transition from institutional to moral-communal authority. Whereas in the traditional 'Abənnat Təmhərt system the teacher's (*abuna*'s) authority was unquestionable, today it becomes the subject of public discussion. Social media amplify this shift — believers are no longer passive recipients of doctrine but active participants in the discourse over what constitutes "true service to God."

This shift is evident even within the internal organisation of schools. In certain monastic centres, such as Debre Tabor and Lalibela, regular assemblies (*'andənet mēla'əkt*) have been introduced, where students debate moral dilemmas and teachers respond — a practice once unthinkable. The authority of the teacher (*abə net*) remains, but its nature is changing: it relies less on obedience and more on trust. As one young student explained in an interview for Gurage Media Network (Telegram, June 2025): "Our generation does not want only to listen but to understand. The *abuna* who listens to us is the one we follow."

This transformation demonstrates that ecclesiastical education is becoming increasingly dialogical without losing its spiritual framework. It corresponds to what Foucault²³ described as the "microphysics of power": power does not disappear but disperses into many small centres. The Ethiopian case shows that this dynamic unfolds even in the religious sphere — authority today is created through performative action, visibility, and transparency.

²³ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

At the same time, the Church has responded by introducing new forms of internal control. As Demelash²⁴ notes, committees for “moral governance” have been established within the patriarchate to monitor priests and prevent financial misconduct. Reform thus paradoxically mirrors Western bureaucracy — but articulated through a theological vocabulary.

4.3. Digitalisation and the Transformation of Spiritual Communication

Digitalisation has brought about a fundamental change. Ecclesiastical communication, which for centuries was exclusively oral and liturgical, has now moved to Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. Major theological events are streamed online; patriarchs deliver sermons via digital platforms; and young *debterat* (students of church schools) upload videos reciting *qine* accompanied by modern music.

This process alters the relationship between the sacred and the profane. As Senkoris Ayalew²⁵ observes, digital media “dissolve sacred time into the rhythm of everyday life.” What once required ascetic discipline and distance from the world is now accessible with a single click.

Yet digitality also becomes a tool of a new form of evangelisation. The Tewahedo Media Center, the EOTC’s official platform, regularly publishes videos that blend spiritual messages with imagery of development and national pride. For instance, during the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the school in Sheger, construction workers in reflective vests stood beside the bishop — an image unthinkable twenty years ago.

Social media have thus become a new form of liturgy. Users respond with comments such as “Amen,” “By God’s will — may it flourish!” or share posts accompanied by the phrase *ye menfesawi lāmāt* (“spiritual development”). What was once confined to the space of the church is now enacted within the digital sphere.

Digital environments, however, generate new hierarchies. Some young preachers, endowed with charisma and media fluency, command hundreds of thousands of followers and, in some sense, replace traditional teachers. A new form of authority emerges — the *digital abuna* — one derived not from ordination but from visibility.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through the concept of “post-institutional charisma”²⁶, which fuses traditional spiritual legitimacy with modern tools of communication.

²⁴ DEMELASH, Tesfaye. *Ethiopian Intellectuals and the Lost Vision of Reform*. Addis Ababa University, 2017, p. 43.

²⁵ AYALEW, Senkoris. *Zena-Lissan*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2020, p. 63.

²⁶ KAPLAN, Steven. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.

In the Ethiopian context, this does not signify secularisation but a redefinition of the sacred space.

4.4. The Social Dimension and Communal Ethics

In the Ethiopian ecclesiastical tradition, education is inseparable from moral commitment. A Facebook post by TMC expresses this clearly, stating that “students should learn in order to serve the Church and protect their country.” This reflects the principle of *’agəlgot* — service understood simultaneously as an act of faith and a form of social responsibility.

This ethos can be seen as a theology of labour: work is not an economic activity but a continuation of liturgy. As Kaplan reminds us, “in the Ethiopian Church there is no distinction between serving God and working in the field — both are forms of spiritual duty”.²⁷

Contemporary reform projects seek to revitalise this ethos. The Church promotes cooperative bakeries, agricultural schools, and craft workshops connected to monasteries. In this sense, *’Abənnat Təmhərt* remains a living system: it does not produce academics but “bearers of service.”

From a European perspective, such orientation may appear anti-modern, but within the African context it represents a distinct response to globalisation. As Kwame Gyekye notes²⁸, African cultures have traditionally understood knowledge as a “social good,” not as private property. By emphasising the communal character of education, the Ethiopian Church thus maintains continuity with this worldview, even as it adopts modern technologies.

4.5. The Dialectic of Renewal and Loss

Current reforms within the Ethiopian Church unfold between two poles. On one side lies the pressure for institutionalisation and standardisation — the state and the public demand transparency, efficiency, and measurable outcomes. On the other stands the enduring conviction that knowledge is above all a spiritual journey, one that cannot be assessed by tests or certificates.

This tension is not merely practical but profoundly epistemological. In the Western tradition, knowledge is conceived as the uncovering of objective truth, whereas in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition it is a process of inner transformation. The goal is not to know more, but to become a better person.

²⁷ KAPLAN, Steven. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009, p. 117.

²⁸ GYEKYE, Kwame. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing, 1996, p. 54.

In this respect, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church offers an alternative to the modern conception of rationality. As Achille Mbembe²⁹ has written, African modernities are not oppositional to the West but are “ways of making modernity a human experience rather than a technical project.” Ethiopia embodies this principle in practice: it does not resist reform but translates it into the language of the Gospel.

Yet this translation involves its own losses. With the expansion of teaching in Amharic and English, knowledge of Ge‘ez — the language that shaped Ethiopian thought for centuries — is fading. Andualem³⁰ warns that “the translation of Ge‘ez into modern languages signifies not only linguistic loss but a transformation of thought itself.” At the same time, however, Ge‘ez is returning in new forms — in digital art, in the music of young composers, and in symbolic references to the roots of faith.

Thus the circle closes: the Church that has learned to use Facebook and Telegram is, in a sense, rediscovering what it already knew in the Middle Ages — that both knowledge and communication are sacred acts.

5. Conclusion: The Plurality of Modernities and the Ethiopian Contribution to the Epistemology of Faith

In European discourse, modernity has typically been understood as a process of emancipation from religion, the rationalisation of the world, and the transition from theological to rational forms of knowledge. This narrative, associated since the eighteenth century with figures such as Bacon, Kant, and Comte, became a universal measure of progress. Only the radical Enlightenment and its nineteenth-century heirs began to conceive of reason as a tool that replaces faith. Yet, on a global scale, this model has ceased to function as self-evident. Many societies — particularly those outside Europe — did not enter modernity through the rejection of faith but through its reinterpretation. Ethiopia is among the most striking examples of this trajectory.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has never positioned itself in opposition to rationality. On the contrary, the concept of reason (*säbäl*) has always been linked within its theological framework to moral responsibility and spiritual discernment. Unlike European epistemology, which since the seventeenth century has separated knowledge from ethics, the Ethiopian

²⁹ MBEMBE, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

³⁰ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *‘Abənnat for Ethiopia’s Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

tradition conceives knowledge as a moral act — inherently personal, yet never self-centred. The aim of learning is not the mere accumulation of information but the cultivation of character and wisdom, which are then placed in the service of the community. Self-transformation thus becomes the necessary condition for becoming a true bearer of goodness in the world.

5.1. From Secularisation to the Sacralisation of Knowledge

In modern times, the Western model of education evolved into a system in which knowledge is measured quantitatively — by degrees, publications, and outcomes. In the Ethiopian context, the opposite applies: the measure of knowledge is one's spiritual maturity and capacity to transmit faith. As Andualem³¹ observes, “in the *'Abənnat Təmhərt* system, a student is not complete until his knowledge benefits the community.”

This notion lies at the heart of what might be termed the *sacralisation of knowledge* — a process in which education is understood as a form of spiritual vocation. Whereas the European university in the nineteenth century became secularised and detached from ecclesiastical authority, the Ethiopian church school remains a place where knowledge is still referred to a transcendent order.

The difference is not only theological but epistemological. In the Western tradition, to “know” means to have access to truth; in the Ethiopian one, it means to live in truth. Hence also a distinct relation to authority: in European modernity, knowledge becomes an individual achievement, whereas in the Ethiopian modernity it remains collective and hereditary.

5.2 Knowledge as Relationship, Not Power

Michel Foucault³² demonstrated that in most Western societies knowledge has become an instrument of power: those who know, rule. The Ethiopian experience, however, reveals that knowledge can also be an instrument of humility. The spiritual teacher (*abuna*) is not one who knows more, but one who educates through relationship. This hierarchy is based not on domination but on care — akin to the bond between parent and child.

In this respect, the Ethiopian model represents a pedagogy of relationship — learning grounded in spiritual accompaniment rather than in testing and evaluation. Teacher and student share a common journey of faith; hence knowledge is transmitted not merely intellectually but existentially.

³¹ ANDUALEM, Muluken. *'Abənnat for Ethiopia's Modern Education*. Bahir Dar University – University of Hamburg, 2025.

³² FOUCAULT, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

Digitalisation has transformed this model, yet not abolished it. The phenomenon of so-called *digital abunas* — priests and theologians active online — illustrates how the relationship between teacher and student shifts into new forms rather than disappearing. These digital clerics represent a new kind of authority: their influence stems not from ordination but from media visibility and the ability to create emotional bonds with audiences. In the online sphere emerges a peculiar form of *charismatic power*, which Max Weber associated with the personal magnetism of a leader — here shaped by algorithms and numbers of followers.

Many young believers perceive the digital *abuna* as more approachable than their parish priest. This shift carries the risk of fragmenting spiritual authority but simultaneously creates a space for dialogue that traditional hierarchies did not allow. As one comment on the Facebook page of the Tewahedo Media Center (October 2025) reads: “The *abuna* I follow every evening teaches me more than the one I meet in church — because his words live even between my prayers.”

The courtyard of the monastery is thus replaced by Facebook, YouTube, or Telegram. Comments such as “Amen, may God strengthen you in knowledge” become a new form of Christian greeting. The digital Church thereby reaffirms that faith is not the opposite of modernity but one of its forms. Ethiopia thus becomes, in a sense, a laboratory of global modernity — a place where the endurance of spiritual epistemology within a secular world is being tested.

5.3 African Thinkers and the Plurality of Modernities

The Ethiopian case fits into the broader framework of African reflections on modernity. The philosopher Achille Mbembe³³ argues that African societies did not enter modernity “belatedly” but differently — through hybrid forms that merge religion, collective memory, and local rationalities. Likewise, Paulin Hountondji speaks of “endogenous epistemologies” — modes of thought that are not translations of the West but distinct forms of rationality.³⁴

Ethiopia embodies this idea in practice. Its *’Abənnat Təmhərt* system is not a relic of the Middle Ages but a dynamic model of epistemological plurality. Within it coexist reverence for tradition and openness to innovation. Young theologians from the Holy Trinity University today combine biblical studies with programming, the teaching of *qine* with multimedia production — perceiving no contradiction between faith and science.

³³ MBEMBE, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

³⁴ HOUNTONDJI, Paulin. *Endogenous Knowledge: Research Trails*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 1996.

This integration is not accidental. In the Ethiopian worldview, there is no sharp boundary between the “natural” and the “supernatural.” Every act of knowing possesses a spiritual dimension, and every act of faith rests on a rational foundation. This stands in marked contrast to the Enlightenment dichotomy that separated fact from value.

From this perspective, the Ethiopian Church can serve as inspiration for Western debates on the decolonisation of knowledge. Decolonisation here does not imply the rejection of science but the broadening of its foundations to include the spiritual dimension.

5.4 The Crisis of the Western University and the Ethiopian Response

In recent decades, the West has increasingly spoken of a “crisis of the university” — the loss of meaning, the commodification of education, and the dominance of managerial logic. The Ethiopian model offers the opposite pole: church schools are not profit-driven institutions but spaces of spiritual formation. Students there do not pursue a “career plan” but a vocation (*qəddus sära* – “holy work”).

This difference is not merely cultural but epistemological. It expresses a fundamental divergence over what it means “to be educated.” In the Western conception, education implies the ability to produce knowledge; in the Ethiopian conception, it means the ability to live according to the truth one has recognised.

This does not make the Ethiopian tradition conservative. On the contrary — precisely because of its sacralised epistemology, it can absorb modern technologies without losing its identity. Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram are not seen as threats but as new channels of grace. As Patriarch Mathias I declared at the inauguration of the Church’s media school: “He who masters the word must also master the image — for the image is also the word” (EOTC Media School, Addis Ababa, 2023).

5.5 Spiritual Modernity as an Alternative Paradigm

The Ethiopian ecclesiastical experience thus represents not a return to the past but an alternative modernity — one in which the spiritual dimension becomes not the victim of rationality but its corrective.

This model can be described as *spiritual modernity* (*menfesawi zemenawi*), grounded in three principles:

1. Knowledge as relationship – the teacher and the student form a community, not a hierarchy.
2. Education as service – to learn means to be of benefit to others.

3. Faith as a form of reason – faith is not irrational but extends the horizon of rationality into the realm of meaning.

This triad provides a response to the crisis of the modern world, which has often lost the capacity to unite knowledge with ethics. In an age when artificial intelligence can generate information but not wisdom, the Ethiopian approach reminds us that wisdom is a form of moral discipline.

5.6 Ethiopia and the Future of Knowledge

Ethiopia thus paradoxically offers something the West is losing — the conviction that knowledge can serve as a means of salvation rather than of power. In its church schools, students still recite Ge'ez, even as they use smartphones and share chants on Telegram. This contrast is not a contradiction but a symbiosis.

When a Facebook post by the Tewahedo Media Center concludes with the words, “Today’s generation must learn to serve the Church and protect its country” (TMC, 2025),

this is not a mere slogan but a formula of spiritual modernity: knowledge must be both an act of service and of responsibility.

This ethical dimension makes the Ethiopian Church not only an institution of faith but a civilisational alternative. It shows that a globalised world need not be uniform — that alongside technocratic modernities there exist spiritual modernities whose aim is not to dominate the world but to understand it.

5.7 Between Success and Meaning: Responding to the Dilemma of Material Prosperity

A natural objection arises: can the Ethiopian model truly be taken as an alternative when the country that has cultivated it for centuries faces chronic poverty and political instability? This question strikes at the very heart of the debate about the nature of modernity. It rests on the assumption that the only measure of a society’s success lies in its material performance and technological advancement — precisely the criteria derived from the Western model whose universality is here being challenged.

Ethiopia’s reality, however, is not evidence of the failure of the *’Abənnat Təmhərt* model but of its marginalisation and incomplete synthesis. In the twentieth century, this traditional system was pushed aside by secular state education, which failed to create a viable substitute for its communal and moral dimensions. The result has been “the worst of both worlds”: a society deprived of the spiritual core of its own tradition yet without achieving Western-style material prosperity. The current ethnic and social tensions are not the fruit of strong spiritual identity but rather of its crisis and its instrumental exploitation by political elites.

The Ethiopian ecclesiastical system does not offer ready-made solutions to Ethiopia's problems. Rather, it demonstrates that solutions based solely on imported Western models are inadequate. The value of the Ethiopian contribution lies not in proposing a competitive economic model, but in reminding us of another metric of success — social cohesion, resilience against alienation, and the ability to withstand crises of meaning. While the West struggles with epidemics of loneliness, depression, and the erosion of trust in institutions — symptoms of “spiritual poverty” amid material abundance — the Ethiopian tradition still holds the key to cultivating a person who knows *why* they live, not merely *what* they produce or consume.

The aim, therefore, is not to renounce rationality or technical progress but to subordinate them to higher ethical and spiritual purposes. Ethiopia does not proclaim “a return to the Middle Ages”; it shows that any modernity worthy of the human condition must be culturally grounded. Its current crisis is a warning of what happens when such grounding disintegrates without being replaced by something equally profound. Yet its ecclesiastical education remains a hopeful example of how traditional wisdom can be rendered living and relevant in the digital age. The true alternative lies not in imitating Ethiopia, but in understanding its message: *progress without wisdom is merely chaos with better technology.*

5.8 Summary

Despite its internal tensions, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church represents one of the most vital experiments in epistemological plurality in contemporary Africa. Its *’Abənnat Təmhərt* tradition demonstrates that faith and knowledge can form a coherent whole.

While the Western educational system faces a crisis of meaning, the Ethiopian model reveals that knowledge without a spiritual foundation loses its purpose. Digital reforms, media communication, and the critical voices of believers do not weaken the Church but transform it into a space of dialogue between the old and the new.

In this sense, Ethiopia — the cradle of Christianity in Africa — once again becomes its laboratory. Not because it resists modernity, but because it reshapes it. And therein lies its universal significance: it shows that the future of education may not lie in the automation of knowledge, but in its re-consecration.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian experience challenges the very framework through which the West has long conceived the relationship between faith and knowledge. It shows that spiritual rationality is not an anachronism but an alternative form of modernity — one that integrates knowledge, morality, and community.

’Abənnat Təmhərt is therefore not merely a historical institution but a living metaphor — a reminder that education without a spiritual horizon becomes a technique without purpose. In a world drowning in data yet starving for meaning, the Ethiopian model stands as a call to relearn how to think with the heart, without ceasing to think with the mind.

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