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The 'Other' as *'Yäne-Biṭe'*

Reimagining an Ethiopian Ethics of Moral Responsibility

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Abstract

In today's world otherness has been a source of disruption of coexistence. Othering based on ethnicity, race, color, sex, and economic status have been a threat to human dignity and existence. In Ethiopia, ethnic-based otherness disrupts the solidarity of the country and has led millions of people to displacement, hunger, death, and unceasing conflicts. The notion of the 'other' is a central concept in ethical theories and moral philosophy. The other is the locus where ethics and politics overlap and materialize. In this article, I seek to construct a moral responsibility of the other using the common Ethiopic term *Yäne-biṭe*, a term used to identify beggars. *Yäne-biṭe* is a blended Ethiopic word from y*äne* or *yä'ənе* meaning 'mine', 'myself', 'someone or something that belongs to oneself or the I' — it indicates both *selfhood* and *belongingness* or *possessions*. *Biṭe* also has the meaning of 'the one that is like me', or 'my identical' or 'my twin', a 'close acquaintance'. Thus, *yäne-biṭe* means the *one that is like myself* or the *one that is like me*. Drawing from Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Riceour, the article rehearses some of the theoretical considerations on the notion of the *other* vis-à-vis moral responsibility, thereby situating the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian ethics of moral responsibility that seeks moral responsibility through recognition of the other and also reveals its embodiment in a profound theological anthropology. Revitalizing such social practice is indispensable in construing otherness and in harnessing moral responsibility in a disrupted state like Ethiopia.

Résumé

Dans le monde actuel, l'altérité est une source de perturbation de la coexistence. L'altérisation fondée sur l'appartenance ethnique, la race, la couleur de peau, le sexe, et la situation économique constitue une menace pour la dignité et l'existence humaines. En Éthiopie, l'altérité fondée sur l'appartenance ethnique perturbe la solidarité du pays et a

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conduit des millions de personnes au déplacement, à la famine, à la mort et à des conflits incessants. La notion d'« autre » est un concept central dans les théories éthiques et la philosophie morale. Y*äne-biṭe* est un mot éthiopien composé dérivé de *yäne* ou *yä'əne*, qui signifie « le mien », « moi-même », « quelqu'un ou quelque chose qui appartient à soi-même ou au moiz » — il désigne à la fois l'identité propre et le sentiment d'appartenance ou la possession. *Biṭe* a également le sens de « celui qui est comme moi », ou « mon double », ou encore « mon jumeau », une « connaissance proche ». Ainsi, *yäne-biṭe* désigne celui qui est comme moi-même ou celui qui me ressemble. S'inspirant d'Emmanuel Lévinas et de Paul Ricoeur, cet article passe en revue certaines réflexions théoriques sur la notion de l'autre face à la responsabilité morale, situant ainsi la notion de *yäne-biṭe* comme une éthique éthiopienne de la responsabilité morale qui recherche cette responsabilité à travers la reconnaissance de l'autre et révèle également son incarnation dans une anthropologie théologique profonde. Il est indispensable de redynamiser cette pratique sociale pour appréhender l'altérité et assumer la responsabilité morale dans un pays en crise comme l'Éthiopie.

Resumo

No mundo atual, a alteridade é uma fonte de perturbação da coexistência. A alterização baseada na etnia, na raça, na cor da pele, no sexo e na situação económica constitui uma ameaça à dignidade e à existência humanas. Na Etiópia, a alteridade baseada na etnia perturba a solidariedade do país e levou milhões de pessoas ao deslocamento, à fome, à morte e a conflitos incessantes. A noção de "outro" é um conceito central nas teorias éticas e na filosofia moral. *Yäne-biṭe* é uma palavra etíope composta, derivada de *yäne* ou *yä'əne*, que significa 'o meu', 'eu próprio', 'alguém ou algo que pertence a si próprio ou a mim' — designa tanto a identidade própria como o sentimento de pertença ou posse. *Biṭe* também significa 'aquele que é como eu', ou 'o meu duplo', ou ainda 'o meu gémeo', um 'conhecido próximo'. Assim, *yäne-biṭe* designa aquele que é como eu próprio ou aquele que se parece comigo. Inspirando-se em Emmanuel Lévinas e Paul Ricoeur, este artigo analisa algumas reflexões teóricas sobre a noção do outro face à responsabilidade moral, situando assim a noção de *yäne-biṭe* como uma ética etíope da responsabilidade moral que procura essa responsabilidade através do reconhecimento do outro e revela também a sua encarnação numa antropologia teológica profunda. É indispensável revitalizar esta prática social para compreender a alteridade e assumir a responsabilidade moral num país em crise como a Etiópia.

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Keywords

otherness; *yäne-biṭe;* moral responsibility; the face*;* the other*; imago Dei*; *theosis*

Mots-clés

altérité ; *yäne-biṭe ;* responsabilité morale ; le visage ; l'autre *; imago Dei* ; *théosis*

Palavras-chave

alteridade; *yäne-biṭe*; responsabilidade moral; o rosto; o outro; *imago Dei*; *theosis*

Introduction

For a person who lives and works in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, the poorest of the poor countries where hunger and famine are marks of uniqueness, violence and atrocities looms in everyday life, the mushrooming of internal displacement incapacitated many millions, and the place where ethnic based atrocities and killings normalized,[1] talking about the ethico-moral principle of the notion of the other, otherness, and moral responsibility is critically fundamental.[2] In world history, Otherness, both individual and communal, is a source of disruption of coexistence.[3] Othering based on ethnicity, race, color, sex, gender, and economy have been, and continue to be, a threat to human dignity and existence. The war between Ukraine and Russia, the ethnic-based conflict in Ethiopia, the violence and religious fundamentalism in Syria, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, the Israel-Palestine war — these are just a few examples. A wide range of conflicts, insecurity, violence, and human right violations in the African continent has led millions of people to experience displacement, hunger, diseases, gender-based violence, unceasing conflicts, and death, serving to continue the vicious cycle of poverty.[4]

A 2022 report on conflict trends revealed even though the number of state-based conflicts in Africa declined slightly in 2021, it remains "higher than a

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[1] See Theodros A. Teklu, "Politics as Hatred of the Ethnic Other," 9–24; and Youdit Tariku Feyessa, "The 'Ethnic Other' as the 'Neighbor': A Perichoretic Imagination of Moral Responsibility," 137–154.

[2] Teklu, "Introduction," 1–2.

[3] E.g., the Rwandan genocide (and broader Hutu-Tutsi conflict) and Jewish Holocaust (in which 6 million Jews were massacred) are classic, and horrible, twentieth century examples of othering and its consequence of disruption of life and existence.

[4] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Causes, impact and implications for the Greater Lakes Region*, 1–3; UNECA, *Socioeconomic Impact of Conflict in Africa*, 1–5.

decade ago."[5] According to the report, non-state conflicts are currently increasing compared to state-based conflicts in Africa.[6] In the informally organized identity groups conflicts are mainly "communal, where incompatibilities are based on communal identity."[7] Thus conflict mainly arise around common identity such as "religious, ethnic national, tribal or clan identity."[8] The identity based conflicts, like religious, ethnic, racial, gender incompatibilities are the main reasons of the death since it sets apart the I and the other in a contesting relationship. This is also prominently evident in contemporary Ethiopia, which is stirred by chaos and conflicts based on identity. Ethnic based conflict led over 5.1 million citizens to be internally displace only in a single year 2021.[9] Othering based on ethnicity is becoming a threat to existence and peaceful cohabitation in Ethiopia currently. The recent war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigrians' opposition party left the country in a devastated state: many were displaced, raped, lost their lives or their beloveds — people suffered from poverty and instability.[10]

Thus, I argue for the importance of reclaiming contextually embedded moral responsibility to enhance "peaceful coexistence" and harnessing the "bond of togetherness" in Ethiopia,[11] therefore reclaiming the notion of the *other* from common Ethiopian day-to-day language — *yäne-biṭe,* which is used to identify beggars as a source of moral responsibility to the other. Rehearsing some of the theoretical considerations by engaging with Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricoeur in construing the notion of the other vis-à-vis moral responsibility, I position the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian ethics of moral responsibility that not only seeks moral responsibility through the recognition of the other but also resurfaces its embodiment in a profound theological anthropology.

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[5] Siri Aas Rustad, "Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023," PRIO Paper 2024, 9.

[6] Non-state conflicts could be of three types: formally organized groups, informally organized groups, or informally organized identity groups. Both the formally and informally organized groups, though they differ in using announced name for their group or not organized groups but not necessarily organized based on identity. Rustad, "Conflict Trends," PRIO Paper 2024, 16.

[7] Júlia Palik, Siri Aas Rustad, and Fredrik Methi, "Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2019," 28.

[8] Rustad, "Conflict Trends," PRIO Paper 2024, 16.

[9] Council of Foreign Relations, "Conflict in Ethiopia."

[10] UNECA, *Socioeconomic Impact of Conflict in Africa*, 1–5.

[11] Teklu, "Introduction," 1–2.

The Other as the Locus of Moral Responsibility

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) claims that "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought," noting that "the category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself."[12] Usually otherness is in a contesting relationship of either competition or/and domination. Being critical of her philosophical predecessors, de Beauvoir avers philosophy and tradition, including the Abrahamic Religions, are reasons for the assignation of otherness to women. Using a feminist approach, de Beauvoir argues that most world religions' view of women is patriarchal, especially for Islam and Christianity, and laments that "Christian ideology has contributed no little to the oppression of women."[13] According to de Beauvoir, the Jewish culture and early Christian teachings, especially those of Saint Paul (as portrayed in the interpreters), promoted a form of inequality of women that is subordination in a vivid sense.[14]

The notion of the other is vital in the discussion of inter-subjectivity; interpersonal encounters and relationships. Generally, scholars categorize the Self-Other relationship discourse into two major broad categories. The first is the Cartesian tradition that views the self or the subject as an autonomous entity in and of itself, both in epistemology and in practice. Such traditions consider the self as "a sealed entity, locked away as it were in its own mind, fully present, unified, and self-certain,"[15] or *being–in–itself* and *being–for–itself* in Heideggerian terms. The relationship between the self and the other is in a reciprocal relationship. The second approach understands the self within relationship, inter–subjectivity that acknowledges "the existence of others."[16] It is with the latter tradition that this paper situates the notion of the other, the *yäne–biṭe* in Ethiopian case, as the ethical and moral foundation for the self–other relationship.

The notion of the other is a central concept in ethical theories and moral philosophy, and it is the locus where both ethics and politics juxtaposes and materializes.[17] Otherness often construes recognition, belongingness, inclusion, and exclusion simultaneously. It is in this tradition that Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Emanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) situate their discussions, despite heterogeneity in argument as well as presuppositions. Drawing from their work,

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[12] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16.

[13] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 120.

[14] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 120–121.

[15] Owen Ware, "Ontology, Otherness, and Self-Alterity: Intersubjectivity in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty," 503–504.

[16] Ware, "Ontology, Otherness, and Self-Alterity," 504.

[17] Dana Hollander, "Is the Other My Neighbor? Reading Levinas alongside Hermann Cohen," 90–91.

I explore theoretical considerations on the notion of the other vis-à-vis moral responsibility to pave ways of formulating the ethics of the other in the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian Ethics of moral responsibility.

The Other as the Face: Emmanuel Lévinas

Emmanuel Lévinas, a French philosopher with a Jewish background his contribution towards philosophy and ethics is immense.[18] The self-other relationship discourse in philosophy and ethics developed a step further with Lévinas's great contribution to the subject matter. Unlike Martin Buber (1878–1965), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and others, who situate the self-other relationship in a reciprocal, symmetrical relationship, Lévinas introduced the asymmetrical relationship between the self-other relationship in an ethical response of responsibility. Most of his ethical and philosophical writings hang on his prominent concept called the 'other' or the 'face'.[19] Understanding Lévinasian ethics of alterity,[20] the view of the other, and the extent and proximity of relationship between the self and the other is based on his notion of the 'face'.

According to Lévinas the other — or *otherness* or *alterity* —is the basis for ethics and morality.[21] Lévinas describes otherness as "the face;" the face of the other.[22] He ascribes the ideas of proximity and encounter to the face in a relationship geared by an ethics of responsibility, which is usually asymmetrical. One has responsibility to the face because the face utters language that says "Thou shalt not kill" and orders rather it take responsibility.[23] The responsibility to the other, the face, is a primordial order and command. To elaborate this, Lévinas brings three components whenever one encounters the face. First, there is a fundamental lack, destituteness, poverty in the face. Second, the face is exposed to nuisance that invites towards an act of violence and at the same time

[18] Emmanuel Lévinas was a native Lithuanian who emigrated to France. Studying philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, he was interested in existential philosophy which put ontology before epistemology. Both his Jewish background and his interest in German phenomenology shaped and influenced his ethical sensibilities as well as the directives of his philosophical writings. Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 304-305.

[19] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 69.

[20] Alterity, according to Lévinas, is the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation. He maintains that both engage other beings in the mode of knowing them, thus reducing them to our experience or representation of them Lévinas also insists that inter-subjectivity is asymmetrical; the other calls me, commanding me. Otherness for Lévinas located not on the self rather on the face.

[21] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 103-104.

[22] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 170-172.

[23] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 104.

forbids you from doing it. Lastly, in his ethics, the face and discourse are subsumed in each other giving automatic response and responsibility.[24] Therefore, the responsibility to the other is a necessity; as it is a major and fundamental structure of subjectivity since subjectivity is subsumed within responsibility.

Subjectivity, according to Lévinas, is not relegated for its own self but rather for the other.[25] Because, as Lévinas avers, in the face there is the highest authority that always commands, which is the word of God; hence the face is the locus of the word of God in the other.[26] God speaks through the other person that is the real transcendence that encounter as a stranger, widow and the orphan. Thus, the encounter and the relationship with the face is related with God, hence knowledge of God is impossible without such an encounter. Also, the encounter with the face is indispensable for the relationship with God (but not as a mediator rather as the manifestation of the height of God revealed through).[27] Therefore, Lévinas understands the other as the face which always commands and demands our responsibility to take care of them and not to kill. Any encounter with the face, the other, is geared with ethics of responsibility expecting nothing in return. In simple language, for Lévinas when one sees a hungry person, destitute, rejected person, the face orders and commands us with the responsibility of feeding them, clothing, and restoring their humanity via recognition.

The Demand of the Other: Paul Ricouer

The contribution of Paul Ricoeur, another French philosopher and ethicist, towards the self-other relationship is significant. In one of his notable works, *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur reveals three converging philosophical intentions: "the first intention was to indicate the primacy of reflective meditation over the immediate positing of the subject, as this is expressed in the first-person singular: 'I think,' 'I am'."[28] Such intention posits the dialectic of the "self" and the "I" drawing from various semantic studies in usage of the terms. "The second . . . intention, implicitly present in the title in the word 'self,' is to distinguish two major meanings of 'identity' (the relationship between this 'identity' and the term 'self' . . .)."[29] The third philosophical intention of writing

[24] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 104-105

[25] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 221.

[26] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 104.

[27] Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 104–106.

[28] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 1.

[29] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 2.

oneself as another is, for Ricoeur, explicating the "the dialectic of self and the other than self."[30]

According to Ricoeur, "Oneself as another suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms."[31] Ricoeur stresses in *oneself as another* that the "as" connotes "not only . . . a comparison" but also "an implication." By "implication," Ricoeur argues the implication of "oneself inasmuch as being other."[32] Thus, otherness construed the self and its demands of the other. Selfhood is construed through the genuine response to the other, in the way of responding to the other.[33] Ricoeur implied that selfhood of oneself always entails otherness with which the self is understood, oneself in the dialectics of otherness, and the ethical responsibility and relationship geared with it.[34] Though the self and the other are in a dialectic relationship, however, "the autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbor and with justice for each individual."[35] Such self-other relationship implies ethical imperatives for the responsibility towards others.[36]

In the ethical perspective of the demand of the other, the demand implies one's responsibility for the other, mutual vulnerability to each other, our being indebted to the other, and our being dependent on each other. Responsibility for Ricoeur is the concept of responsibility in relation to obligation has two faces one is violation and compensation, but it is not enough. The concept of responsibility goes beyond the legal obligatory act: "it is an obligation that overflows the framework of compensation and punishment."[37] Responsibility for Ricoeur inculcates the inter-relationship of the idea of "imputability, solidarity and shared risks."[38]

While discussing the ethics of our lives, Ricoeur introduces a concept of "imputation" which expresses the core of his ethical reflection. The responsibility for my actions involves an imputation of my deeds. My actions can be imputed to me, and as a result my character can be valued according to the ethical value of my actions. The response to the other which ensues from

[30] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

[31] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

[32] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

[33] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 169–173.

[34] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

[35] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 18.

[36] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 171–173.

[37] Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, 12.

[38] Ricoeur, *The Jus*t, 34–35.

the demand of the other possesses an irreducible quality. It is the primordial character of the demand of the Other, which so much permeates our lives, that it is a voluntary act of our choosing to perform an activity of benevolence, care, love, or, on the contrary: hostility, indifference, violence with all the minute shades of meanings and underpinnings.[39]

According to Paul Ricoeur, both the self's subjection to moral norms and those moral norms themselves arise from respecting others. The self-respect gained as a result of obedience to moral norms turns out to be respect for oneself as another. This involves empathy and kindness. The demands of the other, the demand of right treatment, and the call for just conduct are constitutive of one's moral identity.[40]

The Notion of the *Yäne-Biṭe*

Thus far, the previous section generally outlined the notion of the other in the self-other relationship and denoted the indispensability of the demand and responsibility to other. Now, we turn to the notion of the *yäne- biṭe* as an ethical category.

Yäne-biṭe (የኔ-ቢጤ) is a common Amharic[41] term, which is used daily by the society to identify beggars. *Yäne-biṭe* is a blended Amharic word from *yäne* or *yä'ənе* and *biṭe.* According to the renowned Ethiopic elite Aleqa Kidane Wold Kifle (c. 1862 – 1944), *yäne* or *yä'ənе* means 'mine', 'myself', 'someone or something that belongs to oneself or the I'; it indicates both selfhood and belongingness or possessions simultaneously.[42] *Biṭe* means 'the one that is like me', or 'my identical' or 'my twin', or 'the one that just looks like me'. It has the connotation of 'showing closest adherence', 'having similarity in status' or 'the one that just looks like me'. Thus, *yäne-biṭe* means the one that is of mine, like myself or the one that is like me or the one that is like mine/myself. In Amharic there are different terminologies used to identify beggars such as **ነድያን፤ ለማኝ፤ ምንዱባን፤ ምጽዋተኛ** *(nädəyan, lämañ, mənəduban, məṣəʿwatäña:* 'those in need, the poor', 'beggar', 'those who have nothing, those in need and distressed seeking a way out', 'a person who lives on alms or receives alms'). *Yäne-biṭe* and the other similar terminologies connote, according to Desta Tekle Wold, the one

[39] John Wall, "Ricoeur, Poetics, and Religious Ethics," 52–53.

[40] Ricoeur, *The Just,* 11–12.

[41] Amharic is one of the Ethio-Semitic Afroasiatic languages spoken in Ethiopia; it is related to Gəʿəz, the ancient ecclesial language of Ethiopian and Eritrean Christianity. Note that transliteration from Amharic is tricky: depending upon context this term can be written *yä'ənе* or *yäne* or *ye'en*.

[42] ኪዳነ ወልድ ክፍሌ፣ *መፅሀፍ፤ ሰዋሰው፤ ወግስ፤ ወመዝገበ ቃላት፤ ሐዲስ* (ዐዲስ አበባ፣ ኢትዮጵያ፡ አርቲስቲክ ማተሚያ፤ 1948) ፣ 230:: Kidane Wolde Kifle, *Mäṣḥafä säwasəw wägəs wämäzgäbä qalat ḥaddis* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Artistic press, 1948), 230.

who waits for another hands to be fed, who has nothing, who is poor, who is below others, who is alone and does not have anyone or anything, a kind of stranger.[43] The semantic range shows complete destituteness, poverty, and otherness.

Furthermore, *yäne-biṭe* terminology is often used in religious circles and in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition; it can be used to identify those who beg for their daily bread. However, such beggars could be of different types: youths who left their family to study church liturgy, *qenē* ('improvised oral poetry'),[44] or *zēmā* ('[religious] melody, song, or chant') usually beg for their food by carrying a small basket or bag;[45] others wander from place to place to get something from their audience; there are also "professional beggars — the maimed, the diseased, and the poverty stricken;" and the *lālibalā* who sings door to door as a seeking any contributions.[46] Most commonly, beggars beg by uttering stock phrases: ስለ-እግዚአብሔር *(səlä ʾəgziʾabəḥer)* or በእግዚአብሔር *(bä-ʾəgziʾabəḥer:* both phrases mean 'for God's sake') or ስለ-ማርያም *(səlä-marəyam* , 'for the sake of Mary'). Such begging strategy urges people to give whatever they have out of reverence and love for God, or any of the Saints and angels.

Almsgiving is a common experience in Ethiopia, especially in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwaḥədo* Church (EOTC) tradition.[47] Beggars often beg based on the date of saints' or angels' days on the church calendar. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, all the days of the months are specifically designated for commemoration of either Mary, God, Jesus, the Trinity, or a particular angel or a saint. On each day a commemoration, liturgy and celebration, is performed by the church for the designated honoree. On those days beggars beg either in the name of God, Mary, or a saints: *səlä - marəyam, səlä -Giyorgis, səlä Gäbərə'el* ('for Mary's sake, for Saint George's sake, for the angel Gabriel's sake'). If a person has something — perhaps a penny or some food — they will give it as alms to the beggar. A person who doesn't have anything to give in their pocket will reply, bowing their head, እግዚአብሔር ይስጥልኝ፣ *(ʾəgəziʾabəḥer yəsṭələñ*, 'May God give to you' or 'May God provide for you').

According to Aleqa Kidane Wolde Kifle, *ʾəgəziʾabəḥer* (Amharic: 'God') is blended *əgəzi* and *bəḥer* — *əgəzi* means 'the Lord' or 'sole administrator' and

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[43] ደስታ ተክለ ወልድ ዘሀገረ ወግዳ ፤ *ዐዲስ፡ ያማርኛ፤ መዝገበ ቃላት፤ በካህናትና በሀገረ ሰብ ቋንቋ፤* (ዐዲስ አበባ፡ አርቲስቲክ ማተሚያ ፤ 1970 ዓ.ም.)፤ 183. Desta Teklewold, *ʿAddis yamarəña mäzgäbä qalat. Bäkahənatəna bähagärä säb qʷanqʷa* (Addis Ababa፡ Artistic Press, 1977), 183.

[44] Also transliterated as *qenē* or *qinē*.

[45] Donald N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, 255–256.

[46] Levine, *Wax and Gold,* 256.

[47] Levine, *Wax and Gold,* 255.

Beher means 'the cosmos'.[48] Thus God, *ʾəgəzi'abəḥer*, is Lord of the Cosmos, the visible and the non-visible. The phrase *ʾəgəzi'abəḥer yəsṭələñ* means 'May the Lord of all provide for you." The sense of this is "I don't have but since God is the owner of everything, God is the one who has everything to give." Those with empty pockets redirect requests to God himself who is the giver of all. What is surprising here is that the one bestowing this blessing bows or prostates towards the *yäne-biṭe* people when they say *ʾəgəzi'abəḥer yəsṭələñ*. This symbolizes giving respect and dignity for the image of God present in the *yäne-biṭe* person. There are two types of bowings in the church tradition; one is exclusively given to God and the other is bowing out of respect or reverence to another person.[49] Here it is the latter form of bowing. In EOTC teaching, humanity is created in the image likeness of God, which means the Image of the Triune God. Humanity is referred as *ʿärʾaya səlläse* meaning image of the Trinity. *ʿärʾaya səlläse* is a relational concept describing imitation of the life of the Triune God, specifically in love and mutuality. The image and likeness of God is understood in two ways: *image* is related to identity but *likeness* is achieved through daily striving to imitate Christ in action, through worship and performing moral and ethical endeavors.[50] Thus, caring for the *yäne-biṭe* is an ethico-moral obligation and duty of being and becoming the *ʿärʾaya səlläse*.

Theology of Almsgiving and *Yäne-biṭe* in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition

Almsgiving in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition has long been prominent in church teaching and practice. Articles 16 and 17 in the *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt*[51] are

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[48] ኪዳነ ወልድ ክፍሌ፣ መጽሐፈ ሰዋሰው፣ ወግስ፣ ወመዝግብ፣ ቃላት ሐዲስ፡ ንባቡ፣ በግዕዝ ፍቺው በአማርኛ (ኢትዮጵያ፡ አርቲስቲክ ማተሚያ ቤት 1948 ዓመተ ምህረት)፣ 200. Kidane Wolde Kifle, *Mäṣḥafä säwasəw wägəs wämäzgäbä qalat ḥaddis: nəbabu bägəʾəz fəčč̌əw bamarəña* (Ethiopia: Artistic Matemia Bet, 1948 Amete Miheret), 200.

[49] The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, *Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations*, 85–86.

[50] ቄስ መዝገቡ ካሳ ፈለቀ፣ *በትረ ሃይማኖት፡ ተዋህዶ ነገረ መለኮታዊ አስተምህሮና የምዕራባውያን ፍልስፍና በሚንፀባረቅባቸው ክርስትያናዊ አመለካከቶች ላይ የሚሰነዘረው ትችታዊ ዕይታ* (ዕዲስ አበባ፣ ኢትዮጵያ፡ ብራና ማተሚያ፣ 1918)፣ 268–279. Transliterated as Qesis Mezigebu Kassa Feleke, *Bätra haymanot: täwaḥədo nägärä mäläkotawi astämähərona yämaʾərabawyan fəlsəfəna bimənṣäbaräqəbačč̌äw krəstyanawi amäläkakätočč̌ lay yämisänäzäraw təčč̌itawi ʿəyəta* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Brana printing, 2018), 268–279.

[51] The Arabic document مجموع القوانين *(Majmu al-qawanin:* 'Collection of Canons' or 'Compendium of Laws') was composed by Abul'l-Fada'il ibn al-Assal, a Coptic (Egyptian) Christian writer, c. 1240, and compiled from biblical texts, patristic writings, and the canons of various church Councils, including the First Council of Nicaea (325). In the 1400s, this was translated into Gəʿəz as ፍትሐ ነገሥት *(fəṭḥa nägäśt:* 'Law of Kings' or 'Justice of Kings'). The *Fetha Negast* became a standard ecclesiastical text in Ethiopia, containing customary and other laws through which king and society establish order, including ordering the practice of almsgiving. An Amharic translation was published in 1958: ፍትሐ ነገሥት ንባብና

about almsgiving.[52] Especially, article 16 is dedicated about "በእንተ ምጽዋታት" *(ba-ʾənta məṣwatat;* 'about alms giving'). Alms are given for the *yäne-biṭe*, those who are needy. The *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* instructs people to give and share from what they have for all needy ones irrespective of who or what they are.[53] The *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* instructs the adherents of faith to purposefully take alms to the church on Sundays and on other holidays in order to give it to the poor and the needy, the beggars. That is why it is common to see the *yäne-biṭewočə* (the plural of *yäne-biṭe*) usually sitting around church compounds on Sundays and other holidays. People get ready and prepare what they would give for the poor on Sunday and holidays and will distribute what they have on those days.

The writer of *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* instructs Christians to give to the poor every day, but especially on Sundays it is a tradition and faith obligation to carry something to give to the poor or beggars or any sort of needy persons.[54] Almsgiving on Sundays is considered as bringing sacrifice to God, a beautiful and worthy sacrifice.[55] It is doxological at the same time theological. Furthermore, almsgiving is associated with God's commandment to be generous with the promise of divine blessings or benefits in return. According to the *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt*, almsgiving should be practiced in secret as the Lord of all rewards for the good deeds that are not limited to earthly rewards that extends to eschatological judgment day of being found righteous due to the good deeds done for the poor and the needy.[56] From my experience, even though I am from the tradition of Evangelical Christianity, I usually collect pennies for my old grandmother in a *muday* (a beautiful handmade small basket used to collect precious things like expensive jewelries, money, or anything precious) every day when I get back from work. During weekends, my granny will collect those pennies and will distribute them to the beggars at the church gates.

Based on the *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt*, giving alms to the poor is a way of purity, holiness of deeds; it is also a pleasing to God and one of the ways through which believers imitate Christ.[57] Further, almsgiving is associated with the sacrament and pure sacrifice given to the Lord. The *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* defines almsgiving as compassion and an act of mercy. In common practice, alms are given for people in poverty, hunger, thirst, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment, and

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ትርጓሜው፣ (ዕዲስ አበባ፣ብርሃንና ማተሚያ ቤት)፣ 1958 ዓ.ም; *Fəṭḥa nägäśt nəbabəna tərgʷamew*; (Addis Ababam Berhan ena Matemia Bet), 1958. Henceforth abbreviated as *Fetha Negast*.

[52] *Fetha Negast*, 227–241.

[53] *Fetha Negast*, 233.

[54] *Fetha Negast*, 234.

[55] *Fetha Negast*, 237.

[56] *Fetha Negast*, 230.

[57] *Fetha Negast*, 228.

persecution.[58] However, it is not only limited to these group of people but extends to the beggars, the orphans, the widows, the needy, and students at the *qenē* school.[59] The *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* instructs alms to be given to all people irrespective of race, religious affiliations (including atheists and the areligious), political view, and so on[60] (cp. Jas 2:1–9)— the *yäne-biṭe* is anyone who is in need.

More interestingly, the *Fəṭḥa Nägäśt* records that spiritual perfection, or *theosis*, is achieved through the act of almsgiving to the poor, beggars, and the needy: ፍፁም ሊሆን የወደደ ሰው መላ ገንዘቡን መመጽወት ይገባዋል፡፡ …. ፍፁም ልትሆን ከወደድህ ገንዘብህን ሁሉ ሸጠህ ለነድያን ስጥ ብሎ ጌታ ስለተናገረ ነው *(fəṣum lihon yäwädada saw mäla gänəzäbun mämäṣəwät gabawal. . . . fəṣum lətəhon käwadadhə gänəzabəhən hulu šəṭäh lanädəyan səṭ bəlo geta səlatänagär näw):* 'If anyone wants to be perfect or righteous that person must give alms of what he possesses; because Jesus Christ said if you want to be righteous sell everything what you have and give it to the poor;' ref. Matt 19:21; Mark 10:2; Luke 18:22.)[61] Thus, righteousness/ perfection is associated with giving what one has to the poor. This builds on the EOTC teaching of the interrelationship of faith and work. In her teaching, the church stresses that "faith should be practiced along with deeds"[62] and faith without work does not count (ref. Jas 2:14–26; cp. Eph 2:10, Tit 3:8, and Gal 5:6). Almsgiving is the order of the church and counted as "good deeds." According to the church's teaching "almsgiving cleanses sins, brings about blessings,"[63] and many more things.

The theology of alms giving in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is part of spirituality, one of the very important ways of loving God through loving the neighbor (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27–28; John 13:34–35; Rom 13:9–10; Gal 5:18; Jas 2:8; 1 Jn 3:11–20; 2 Jn 1:5–6). By giving to the beggar, people often think God returns salvation and eternity, usually associated with Matthew 25:40 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (ESV). This may be is a way of *theosis*, for, according to John Chrysostom, helping the poor and lowly is a way of "nourishing Christ in poverty" that has great reward in later life.[64] In this way giving to beggars is

[58] *Fetha Negast*, 230, 330.

[59] *Fetha Negast*, 331.

[60] *Fetha Negast*, 233

[61] *Fetha Negast*, 237.

[62] The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, *Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations*, 69.

[63] The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, *Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations*, 90.

[64] John Chrysostom, "Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," in *On Wealth and Poverty*, 55.

considered as part of spirituality and a way of *theosis,* becoming like God in Christ, in Ethiopian Orthodox Church belief and practice — "*if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?* (1 Jn 3:17, ESV). These commandments of social responsibility are to be obeyed with "devotion and inner simplicity."[65] The one who is obedient to the teaching and commandment of God will be blessed not only in eternity with God but also will live a fulfilled life while on earth.[66]

The practice of almsgiving as a commandment of social responsibility and the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* in the EOTC have strong theocentric foundation. According to church teaching, the doctrine of God as Triune is "directly associated" with believers' worship and ethico-moral life.[67] Since the Trinity is about perfect relationality and unity, it symbolizes the archetype for human relationship. Since human beings are created in the image and likeness of the Trinity, that image and likeness are understood in two ways: *image* is related to identity but *likeness* is achieved through daily striving to imitate Christ in action, through worship and performing moral and ethical endeavors.[68] Thus, caring for the *yäne-biṭe* is an ethico-moral obligation and duty of being and becoming the *ʿärʾaya səlläse*. Encountering the *yäne-biṭe* is encountering the image of the Trinity, *ʿärʾaya səlläse,* and responding to that image, is the crucial part of contemplative life and social responsibility. The response might be giving for those in need or saying *ʾəgziʾabhér yəstələň*.

Reclaiming *Yäne-Biṭe* as an Ethiopian Ethics of Moral Responsibility

The renowned historian Bahiru Zewdie once said "Ethiopia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century AD determined the course of the country's history in more ways than one."[69] The Ethiopian Orthodox Church — characterized by Ullendorff as "monophysite Christianity" (though *miaphysite* is a more accurate term) — was the official religion and it is "also the most profound expression of national existence of the Ethiopians." Ullendorff further noted that this form of Christianity had long become "the store-house of the

[65] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*,168.

[66] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

[67] ቄስ መዝገቡ ካሳ ፈለቀ፤ በትረ ሃይማኖት፡ ተዋህዶ ነገረ መለኮታዊ አስተምህሮና የምዕራባውያን ፍልስፍና በሚንፀባረቅባቸው ክርስትያናዊ አመለካከቶች ላይ የሚሰነዘረው ትችታዊ ዕይታ (ዐዲስ አበባ፣ ኢትዮጵያ፡ ብራና ማተሚያ፣ 1918) ፣ 268–279. Transliterated as Qesis Mezigebu Kassa Feleke, *Bätərä hayəmanot: täwaḥədo nägärä mäläkotawi ʾasʾtämərorena yämaʾərabawyan fələsəfəna bäminəṣäbaräqəbačäw kərəsətəyanawi ʾamäläkakätoč lay yämisänäzäraw təčətawi ʿəyəta* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Brana printing, 2018), 268-279.

[68] ቄስ መዝገቡ ካሳ ፈለቀ፤ በትረ ሃይማኖት፣ 266–271.

[69] Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, 13.

cultural, political, and social life of the people."[70] The long history and the way of contextualizing Christian theology had a determinant influence on the country socio-cultural realities. Ephraim Isaac argues that in Ethiopia, ideals of "religious ethics determine the sociological characteristics and basis of the Ethiopian church" and society.[71] As Isaac elaborates, the Ethiopian church has contributed towards formulating a community that gives due emphasis to keep "the law of God, justice, and social responsibility in the here and now."[72] He further argues that

> The Ethiopian church explicitly teaches that man is saved by his merits and good deeds, such by keeping the ten commandments of the Old Testament and the six of the New Testament ('feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, invite the stranger to your house, clothe the naked, visit the sick, visit the prisoner', . . . by fasting and by fulfilling his moral obligations, rather than by faith in Jesus alone."[73]

These commandments of social responsibility are to be obeyed with "devotion and inner simplicity."[74] The one who is obedient to the teaching and commandment of God will be blessed not only in eternity in God's eye but also will live a fulfilled life while on earth.[75] Thus giving alms to the needy is part and parcel of keeping God's commandment to perform good deeds.

Furthermore, Isaac avers that "the Ethiopian church does put more emphasis on good works, including almsgiving, than on faith . . . and obedience to the moral law is regarded to be of the utmost importance in the sight of God, a quality the church itself can hardly achieve."[76] But putting faith and good work does not do justice to the Ethiopian church who gives not more emphasis to good work than faith rather good work and faith are twinned together, good work, almsgiving is an expression and practice of faith. Isaac argues that almsgiving is part of the moral law in Ethiopia which is not only religious (biblical law) but also state law as well as both has no distinction, both contains provides legal tradition for the nation.[77] Since "the one who is obedient to the church attains spiritual value in the sight of God, as well as happiness on earth."[78]

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[70] Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, 97.

[71] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

[72] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 168.

[73] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church,* 168.

[74] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*,168.

[75] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

[76] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

[77] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

[78] Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahïdo Church*, 169.

Thus in the Ethiopian culture and context, the ethico-moral principles are in one way or another taken, shaped, and influences by the religious, Judeo-Christian, values and principles.

The notion of the *yäne-biṭe* signifies the beggar as the other, who embodies responsibility and the ethical demand of care. As in Lévinasian ethics, the face, which commands and obliges to take moral responsibility, the *yäne-biṭe* also calls for such an endeavor. Whenever an Ethiopian encounters the *yäne-biṭe*, they are obliged to give whatever they have regardless of who they are. In the same vein, most profoundly, the *yäne-biṭe* is the other-as-oneself, as Paul Ricoeur argues, that demands moral responsibility not only for the sake of the other but as a way of achievement of selfhood. Here, selfhood construed with a *telos*, achieving the authentic self which only attained via caring for the other, the *yäne-biṭe*. Thereby, the relationship between the self and other is profoundly theological and ethical. As for Ricoeur, essentially, selfhood is constituted in the dialectics of the self and other without shadowing the autonomy of the self rather by bringing it towards authenticity.[79] Such a selfhood is also noticeable in the ethics of *yäne-biṭe*; people give to the *yäne-biṭe* as part of their spirituality, a journey towards perfection or holiness that is the authentic self.

Moreover, in the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* not only do we encounter the other but also the Trinity; in Ethiopian Orthodox theological tradition there is a strong belief that people hold the image of the Trinity, *ʾärʾaya səlläse,* and responding to that image is the crucial part of contemplative life. The response is twofold: either giving to those in need or, if one cannot (or will not), saying *ʾəgziʾabhér yəstələň* ('May God give you'). However, this is not evident in Lévinasian ethics. Claire Katz beautifully captures the missing link in the Lévinas's account of the face of the other,

> Emmanuel Lévinas's conception of ethical subjectivity emphasizes an obligation that is not chosen and from which we cannot recuse ourselves. It emphasizes our obligation and response to the Other, which cannot be discussed in terms of failure — we are already obligated. But in spite of this claim, certainly it is the case that this obligation to others is violated, betrayed, and ignored. Not only do we often fail in our response to the Other, it is also unclear how this response occurs or why it fails.[80]

Perhaps surprisingly, the Ethiopian ethics of the *yäne-biṭe* admits such impossibilities. In failing to respond and act out responsibility to the *yäne-biṭe* poor, one says "*ʾəgziʾabhér yəstələň*" ('May God give you') —*I don't have any, I*

[79] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 171–173.

[80] Claire Elise Katz, "The Presence of the Other Is a Presence That Teaches': Lévinas, Pragmatism, and Pedagogy," 92.

failed you, but God has everything and may he give you what you wished and begged for. In case of lack, it would be automatically referred to God who is all able, the omnipotent and benevolent God, the ruler, creator and the provider of all.

In addition, while the people give to the *yäne-biṭe* especially on holidays and Sundays when they come to church services with honor and contemplation and prayer, taking moral responsibility for the *yäne-biṭe* is considered a daily part of contemplative life, which is always founded in *theosis* . . . the active securing of salvation, enjoying the eschaton in the already-but-not-yet future, so that Jesus will not say "truly, I do not know you" on the final day (Matt 25:12; see also Matt 7:21–23 and Luke 13:22–27). Instead, those who care for the *yäne-biṭe* will be known by Christ on that day. Therefore, the Ethiopian notion of *yäne-biṭe* is a space of not only entering the Trinitarian life with contemplation and prayer but also a space of Christian hope and eschatology. As Jürgen Moltmann beautifully captures such moments,

> Eschatology means the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue**,** Christianity *is* eschatology, *is* hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day[81]

That is where the notion of *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian ethics of responsibility leads towards eschatology, not as something that will happen one day soon but rather bringing the *not-yet* into the *already*, dictating how Christians should live *now*. Thus, the here and now is lived well, ethically and morally, considering the future that God promises. Thus, the *yäne-biṭe* is a category of moral and ethical principle with a strong theocentric foundation as an Ethiopian ethics of moral responsibility.

Conclusion

The renowned African ethicist Bénézet Bujo (1940–2023) argues that although African ethics emphasizes the anthropocentric approach, the theocentric approach is also evident — it is impossible to talk about the anthropocentric foundation of morality without implicitly mentioning the

[81] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, 16.

theocentric.[82] According to Bujo, for Africans God is the Creator and "the source of life" who answers prayer and punishes wrongdoings. Thus, God remains central in the ethico-moral thought of Africans.[83] The notion of *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian African ethics fulfills both the theocentric and anthropocentric sentiment. On the one hand it is anthropocentric, in a sense of not merely caring for the *yäne-biṭe* rather it has strong theological foundation. On the other hand, it is theocentric, Trinitarian at the same time eschatologically grounded.

In the world where otherness is a threat, reclaiming the notion of *yäne-biṭe* brings a new light towards moral responsibility by positioning the other as a locus of not only ethical obligation and demand but also of a space of securing Christian hope while living in the already-but-not-yet eschatological age through active contemplation and prayer towards the *telos, theosis*, by loving God through loving other.

The *yäne-biṭe* as an ethical category creates such a contemplative space grounded in a practical life of social responsibility. Therefore, revitalizing such social practice has massive importance in construing the view of otherness and in harnessing moral responsibility to the other in a disrupted state like Ethiopia. Therefore, the notion of the *yäne-biṭe* as an Ethiopian ethics of moral responsibility not only seeks moral responsibility through the recognition of the other but also it resurfaces the profound embodiment in theological anthropology that guides the self towards its perfection, *theosis*, participation in God.

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ቄስ መዝገቡ ካሳ ፈለቀ (Qesis ['Reverend'] Mezigebu Kassa FELEKE)፤ *በትረ ሃይማኖት፡ ተዋህዶ ነገረ መለኮታዊ አስተምህሮና የምዕራባውያን ፍልስፍና በሚንፀባረቅባቸው ክርስትያናዊ አመለካከቶች ላይ የሚሰነዘረው ትችታዊ ዕይታ (Bätərä hayəmanot: täwaḥədo nägärä*

[82] Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 32–37.

[83] Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 32-33.

[84] 1948 on the Ethiopian Calendar corresponds to AD 12 September 1955 – 10 September 1956 on the Gregorian calendar.

mäläkotawi ʾasʾtäməhərona yämaʿərabawyan fələsəfəna bäminəṣäbaräqəbačäw kərəsətəyanawi ʾamäläkakätoč lay yämisänäzäraw təčətawi ʾəyəta [Staff of *Haymanot:* A critical perspective on Christian viewpoints that reflect *Täwaḥədo* theological doctrine and Western philosophy])፣ አዲስ አበባ (Addis Ababa): ብራና ማተሚያ [Brana Printing], 2018.

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