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Whose Authority? The Religious Conditioning of Decision-Making in the Context of Right to Reproductive Choice in North-Western Tigray, Ethiopia

Sous l'autorité de qui ? Le conditionnement religieux de la prise de décision dans le contexte du droit au choix en matière de reproduction dans le nord-ouest du Tigré

In the ethnographic research for my doctoral thesis on processes of social reproduction and change in north-western Tigray, North-Ethiopia (Mjaaland, 2013), one concern was to identify how "choice" is conditioned from the perspective of religion and the authority of the dominant Orthodox Church in the region.[1] This was based on the common assumption that religious exegesis and religiosity impact on what is perceived as possible and permissible in reproductive matters. For example, religious sentiments in Tigray (and Ethiopia in general) have required giving birth to the number of children God gives. The ambitious development and health policies of the current TPLF-based EPRDF-coalition[2] in government, concerned with both improving maternal health and curbing population growth, has aimed at doubling family planning services and increasing the contraceptive prevalence rate by 55% by the end of 2020 (FDRE-NPC, 2016; FDRE-MOH, 2015). However, while the

* Affiliated researcher at UiB Global, University of Bergen (Norway) and Centre for Gender Studies, Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia). Contact: Thera.Mjaaland@uib.no or theramjaaland@yahoo.com. [1] According to 2007 Census, 95.6% are Orthodox Christians, and 4% are Muslims in the close to ethnically homogeneous region of Tigray (FDRE-PCC, 2008). [2] TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front, EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front.

major religions in Ethiopia, Orthodox Christianity and Islam,[3] do not take a clear official stand against family planning, as they do in the case of abortion, they do not openly approve of it (UNFPA, 2012: 22). Nevertheless, the use of contraceptives has risen steadily for married women from 8% in 2000 to 15% in 2005 and 29% in 2011 (CSA-ICF, 2012). In fact, nation-wide fertility rates have decreased from an average of 7.7 children per woman in the early 1990s (TGE, 1993) to 4.8 in 2011, and in Tigray to 4.6 (CSA-ICF, 2012).

Since I have known the area of study since 1993, it has been possible to observe over time the country's development efforts that include increased access to education and health services also in rural areas. Relying on long-term informal dialogue with Tigrayan women and men spanning two decades in one rural and one semi-urban community in the administrative district (*wereda*) of Asgede Tsimbla in the north-western zone of Tigray, four ethnographic fieldworks were conducted for this study, totalling 15 months (2008-2012). Fourteen expert interviews as well as life-story-based interviews with 25 purposively selected women aged 18-75 from these two communities were conducted in 2008, and followed up by informal dialogue during subsequent fieldworks up until the present. Women across the same age-groups were also included in one exploratory enquête conducted in 2009 in 109 semi-urban and 61 rural households. In addition, a two-month follow-up fieldwork was carried out in the summer of 2015.[4]

According to McQuillan (2004), most studies on fertility behaviour that include the issue of religion have been concerned with differences between religions regarding contraceptive use. This is also the case with studies from Ethiopia (e.g., Hogan & Belay, 2004; Wegene & Fikre, 2007; Wubegzier & Alemayehu, 2011). Referring to the influential work of Goldscheider, McQuillan reminds us that the assumed association between religious affiliation and fertility is often spurious (McQuillan, 2004: 26). In fact, Goldscheider and Mosher (1991) note that, rather than simply preventing the use of reproductive technologies, religious beliefs would more likely influence which contraceptive style/method is used (see also Hill et al., 2014). Given the lack of in-depth knowledge on the complex relationship between religion and the use of reproductive technologies, my line of argument is based on a critical attitude to the perception that religiosity and contraceptive use are, by default, antithetical (see e.g., Jones & Dreweke, 2011). Here, I will identify and discuss how contraceptive use can find its place alongside committed religiosity. I will, therefore, start by discussing how "choice," as a central parameter in

[3] According to the same census (FDRE-PCC, 2008), in Ethiopia as a whole 43.5% are Orthodox Christians, 33.9% Muslims and 18.6% Protestants.
[4] Part of the data material in this article has also been discussed in Mjaaland (2013, 2014) and Mjaaland (2016) from different perspectives.

empowerment frameworks together with "options," "control" and "power" (see Malhorta et al., 2002), relates to the Orthodox Christian understanding of the transition between God's power and the person's control as reflected in the concept of *ʿïddïl* (fate/destiny).

1. Theoretical Perspectives on "Choice"

Personal integrity and bodily autonomy are commonly taken for granted when "choice" is founded on a (Western) liberal understanding of the person. In one of her many publications on empowerment, Kabeer emphasises that she seeks to steer away from the neo-liberal connotations and individualistic understandings of choice without ruling out the power and agency implicit in choosing (Kabeer, 2002: 18-9, n. 1). This specification has often been lost when her most frequently quoted definition of empowerment is recycled in the gender and development literature: "One way of thinking about power is in terms of ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice" (Kabeer, 1999a: 2, 1999b: 436, italics in original). In her empowerment framework she also distinguishes between "transformative agency" where women act against the grain of patriarchal values, and "passive agency" that might increase their efficiency but without challenging existing power relations (Kabeer, 2005: 15).

Perspectives that base women's empowerment on the ability to make choices stand in stark contrast to Bourdieu's understanding of the generative principle of *habitus* as "the unchosen principle of all 'choices'" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 61). Choice, in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, implies that agents refuse what is perceived as impossible and love what is within the reach of loving; in short, *amor fati*, to love one's destiny (Bourdieu, 1990a: 63). Based on this double negation, choice is never free, it just feels as if it is (see also Bourdieu, 1990b) since *habitus* allows for "*intentionless invention* of regulated improvisation" (Bourdieu, 1977: 79; italics in original) whereby agents act within specific "fields." Consequently, as the material environment or "field" is understood to structure a *habitus* which structures both practices and what the person is able to imagine as possible and permissible, agents would not project their desires beyond the possibilities that *habitus* makes one think one has at any moment of time. In this framework it becomes difficult to incorporate the transgression of norms that was involved when Tigrayan women were taking up arms on equal terms with men and claiming rights as women during the liberation struggle in Tigray (1975-1991). From Bourdieu's theoretical perspective, women would more likely conform to prevailing norms. In her discussion of empowerment and "adaptive preferences" (similar to the structuring dynamics of *habitus*), Khader (2011) follows up on this line of reasoning when emphasising that people can conform to structures of disadvantage and make choices that are disempowering (see also Tebeje & Cuthbert, 2014). For example, women

might accept dominant moral codes that condemn contraceptive use and deny them the right to safe abortion even when these services are legally available (see also Meselu et al., 2012).

Surfacing in the life-story-based interviews with Tigrayan women—and reflected in their meticulous religious practice—is also the notion that one's own efforts might not always be enough to succeed in life. One is also dependent on the will of God[5] and a favourable *ʿïddïl*[6] (fate/destiny), suggesting that God is perceived as constituting a significant agentive power in their lives. Empowerment frameworks circumvent this spiritual/religious dimension when dealing with the issue of choice and women's agency in both a transformative and passive sense. At issue is also the uncertainty entailed in defining what exactly the divine influence on the person is.

2. God's Power and the Person's Control in the Case of *ʿÏddïl*

Interviewing Tigrayan women, their use of the word "choice" (*mïrch'a*) was scarce, and most often related to being asked explicitly about it. This is not to say that the women do not have desires about their own lives and the future of their children. "I wish" (*yïmïne*), which can also mean "I hope" (*temeneye*), and "I want" (*yïdeli*), with the latter also meaning "I need," were frequently used. To account for the course of one's life, and offering explanations as to why things did, or did not, happen, people would often use the word *ʿïddïl*, which in English translations is most often interpreted as "fate" or "destiny." However, the way *ʿïddïl* is understood in the Tigrayan context does not imply "fate" in a fatalistic sense only, but points to "chances"[7] beyond the predictable. To claim that I came to the market town, Endabaguna, the administrative centre of Asgede Tsimbla Wereda, the first time by *ʿïddïl*, is much in line with how people would reason about the often unpredictable unfolding of life—regardless of positive or negative outcomes. Messay (1999) asserts that the notion of *ʿïddïl* in the Ethiopian context synchronises the Orthodox Christian vision with the social order and the person's aspirations. In his elaboration of this relationship, fate does not simply befall the individual from an Almighty God; God is dependent on the person for divine manifestation in the social order. Consequently, this perspective suggests that *neither does individual choice renounce God's power nor does ʿïddïl make a person's choice redundant*.

In the life-story-based interviews with Tigrayan women, questions about God's will, *ʿïddïl*, and what is perceived as occurring "incidentally" (*agat'ami*) were included to establish how the women distinguish these interrelated

[5] God's will is entailed in the following expressions: *bïamlaḳ dïlét* (God's want/will), *bïamlaḳ fiqad* (God's permission), and *bïamlaḳ hasab* (God's thought/intention). [6] Other common transliterations based on Amharic are *eddïl* (Levine, 1965) or *idil* (Messay, 1999). I have also used *eddil* (Mjaaland, 2004). [7] In fact, the English word "chance" is commonly used in Tigrinya.

concepts in an agentive sense and in relation to choice. With this line of enquiry, I wanted to establish whether one's own efforts are understood to make a difference in relation to *ʿïddïl* and the will of God. While rural peasant women dependent on rain-fed subsistence farming emphasised their lack of control in relation to nature (particularly the rain), they stressed the importance of work for survival in this harsh drought-prone environment. Her own work-effort is also at issue in Zaid's (48) account. As a businesswoman with education up to grade 9 and female head of a semi-urban household, she elaborated:

> *ʿÏddïl* is incidental. It's both incidental and by God. It's by God and if … God commands something … if God wants it, now look, it's said that God decides it for me or you … the level you will reach, as you can see, you are educated in your country and came here, have started a good job, you have a volition, receive a good income; you have got a good *ʿïddïl* that means. How was that possible? By God, that's what it means. Now, I didn't get the *ʿïddïl* I wanted. However, in between I didn't do that badly. Meaning, even if I thought it was a problem for me from the start, it wasn't. That's because of my own labour, my own work. (…)

Likewise, I asked Beriha (36), who lives with her three children in her mother's household in the market town, with their main income coming from brewing the local millet beer, *sïwa*:

> *– Does ʿïddïl come through your work or by itself?*
>
> [Does it come by] itself, [it comes] if you work, otherwise would it simply drop down? (Both laugh). Now, if I sit here like this for the whole day, will money come to me then? It will not come to me. If you work, if you are effective, then it will come. If you sit with your hands [in your lap], now what do I have? There's no one to fetch water. (…)
>
> *– So, where does ʿïddïl come from? From God, or is it incidental?*
>
> No! *ʿÏddïl*, basically, if it's from God, or from yourself; how can I evaluate that, I really don't know (both laugh). The more you think it worries you.

Across rural and semi-urban contexts, women in my study understood their own work effort as decisive, even though it might not always be enough to sustain livelihood in practice. However, the question is still how much one's own work-efforts can be attributed to personal control in the context of God's power. When I consulted an urban Orthodox priest, *mïhïrey* (literally, teacher) Tadesse (75), he explained:

> Listen! When one is created, it's according to one's *ʿïddïl* either to be poor or rich. Eh? … One is made rich by God and the *ʿïddïl* that He gives; the other one is made poor. One is made ill and another is given good health; this is what is called *ʿïddïl*. Eh? *ʿÏddïl* is like that. That is why they say, "how did my *ʿïddïl* turn out like this, eh? Is this my *ʿïddïl*; do I get the *ʿïddïl* to do this? God must have wished this to happen to me that means; God gave me this." *ʿÏddïl* is always given by God, eh? (…).

– So why does God give them different ʿïddïl?

Some are … listen! Some are kings, some are not; some are kings.

– I was born in a rich country; what have I done [to deserve that]? Some have an extremely difficult ʿïddïl simply because they are born in another place. Why is it like that?

For you? For you? Do you know what he destined you to do? He destined you to travel around, nothing else. (…) He destined you to travel around, and see, you are travelling around, eh? That is your *ʿïddïl*. (Laughs).

The priest's elaboration is similar to how Levine explains the concept of *eddïl* (*ʿïddïl*), translated as "fate" in his book *Wax and Gold*, in overall fatalistic terms. *ʿÏddïl* signifies God's will in relation to the person, and, in Levine's opinion, is "more important than human effort in attaining one's goal" (Levine, 1965: 87). In his critique of Levine's perspective, Messay (1999) classifies *idil* (*ʿïddïl*) as a particular style that informs and authenticates all aspects of Ethiopian life. In line with how the concept of *ʿïddïl* is used in my study area in Tigray, he also incorporates the notion of "chance:"

It [*ʿïddïl*] is doubtless related to fatalism since it serves to indicate the inevitable. Even so, it means not so much necessity as *chance*. For an Ethiopian, an event can be inescapable without being determined; especially, its inevitability is due to its being an occurrence rather than a determined outcome. The Ethiopian calls this *chance*, whether the event is good or bad. (Messay, 1999: 208, italics added)

Messay emphasises that *ʿïddïl* expresses opportunity "in the sense that it should be sought. Not only is chance conditioning people, it is also a pursuit, an ideal" (ibid.). He also asserts that, "Ethiopians will not accept that birth, age, or any natural attributes prevents social rise and decides their fate" (ibid.: 165). It is on this point that *ʿïddïl* departs from the more pervasive structural conditioning of choice implied in Bourdieu's *habitus* concept which obliges the person to love her/his destiny, since an important aspect of *ʿïddïl* is that it can take one *beyond* the material context one is born into. Hence, it is on the issue of transgression that the structuring aspect of *ʿïddïl* differs from Bourdieu's *habitus* concept. Furthermore, what Messay sees as the fleeting nature of the concept of *ʿïddïl* and the volatile nature of fate (Messay, 1999: 208-209) points to the uncertainty related to establishing what exactly one's destiny is as things can also be understood to happen incidentally. Likewise, the interpretive indeterminacy in the common-sense understanding of the transition between God's power and the person's control, as reflected in the concept of *ʿïddïl*, points to uncertainty as to how these powers intersect, or where one power stops and the other takes over. Rather, since *ʿïddïl* allows for the projection of the person's ambition beyond the inevitable, it indicates that the religious conditioning of choice is, in itself, unpredictable.

3. Gendered Implications of Sin and Reproductive Risk

Gendered differences in religious practice are mentioned by writers on Ethiopia (Wright, 2002; Biseswar, 2008) as well as by writers on women's religiosity in other cultural contexts (e.g. Iannaccone, 1998). For example, Miller and Hoffmann (1995) explain gender difference in religiosity by way of "risk preferences," which means interpreting religious practice as risk-averse behaviour and, conversely, that rejecting religious belief is risk-taking behaviour.[8] Nevertheless, gender differences in religiosity correlate only partly with risk preferences in their US study (ibid.: 73). However, many of the Tigrayan women I interviewed mentioned that they follow religious prescriptions more meticulously than men because of the larger risk related to their reproductive roles and the notion that women carry a greater burden of sin (*hat'iyat*). This latter point is confirmed by the Orthodox priest, *mïhïrey* Tadesse:

> It was Hiwan's (Eve's) eating of the forbidden fruit (*Ïtse-Beles*) that above all made women inferior; the sin that was committed then was serious; you couldn't say it was minor. It was this which caused death; it was precisely that [sin]. Eh? It was this that brought us all into trouble.

The general economic and ecological insecurity in Tigray makes life risky for *both* women and men. Women's awareness of their vulnerability in relation to pregnancy and childbirth, when taken together with their being considered responsible for human misery in general suggests, however, gendered aspects of insecurity that, from the perspective of risk preferences, *might* increase their religiosity relative to men. In fact, over the seven-year period included in the latest Demographic and Health Survey in Ethiopia 2011, the maternal mortality rate was 676 per 100,000 live births (CSA-ICF, 2012). In the same period, unsafe abortion was estimated to constitute 32% of these deaths (see FDRE-MOH, 2006: 16). As the business woman Zaid said: "Since there are problems, we will pray, we will worship … meaning you know … it's we [women] who receive the problems, like the many problems in relation to giving birth. 'Forgive me,' you say and beg God for everything." To make sure that her sins have been forgiven before she dies, Zaid has ventured on numerous pilgrimages to seek absolution for previous sins:

> When I go to worship [at churches], I say forgive me for my past sins … forgive me for my wrongdoings, let me confess before I die, meaning, let me confess before I die about what I did *that I believe was a sin*. Meaning, at first, I had given birth

[8] These authors note that gender differences in risk-taking have commonly been understood as based on biological strength, and difference in gendered socialisation into risk-taking behaviour, including the structural location of risk as it relates to gendered division of labour, and would also include what Bourdieu (1977) defines as the division of sexual labour.

> with a Muslim, but afterwards, I dropped him and eventually I will take the Holy Communion, meaning I wish to become a nun … a religious person. Now, when I go to church in the early morning (…) I pray, my dear Lord I beg him, "the past harms I have done forgive me; let me confess before I die, lead me along the right path, give me a long life." That's it, because God is forgiving, he forgives you. (…) I have asked forgiveness for the sins that I have done, meaning what is said to be a sin, even though deep down *I don't believe it [was a sin]*. However, since I hear it's a sin, I'm asking God's forgiveness (emphasis added).

Counter to the dominant clerical opinion and common religious sentiments, Zaid is convinced that her relationship with a Muslim man and having children with him was *not* a sin. When I ask her explicitly about it, she said:

> That's what they [the priests] say. It's said it is a sin; according to religion some say it's a sin. But me … in my own belief, I don't call it a sin. The reason is that according to my own belief I have not sinned since the difference is only that we are Muslims and Christians, otherwise, I consider us to be the children of one God. What is sinful is to steal, to lie, to kill people, to put the blame on other people; that's what is called a sin. Otherwise, in my belief, to be with a Muslim … to give birth with a Muslim, myself, I would say that I haven't sinned.

Despite considering themselves more vulnerable than men as a consequence of their reproductive roles and Hiwan's (Eve's) sin, women might still subject religious exegesis and penance to reflection and considerations of their own that do not directly overlap with what clerics define as sin. As Iannaccone (1998) reminds us, there are also uncertainties connected to religiosity itself since the *effect* of religious practice is itself unpredictable.

4. The "Field of Religion" and the "Field of Science"

In the historical relationship of interdependency between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the state, according to Messay, the church served as authenticator of God's choice of emperor, and ensured that divine guidance would descend upon the state (Messay, 1999: 71). While relying on an autonomous status to fulfil its role, the Orthodox Church was not detached from issues relating to political power in the Ethiopian context. As Messay emphasises, the doctrine of the Orthodox Church unites, on a fundamental level, the political and the religious. In spite of the military Derg regime (1974-91) disrupting this historical linkage, the Orthodox Church's power continues to seep into the political process by way of the considerable influence it has on people's lives in highland Ethiopia where it is still dominant (see also Young, 1997a). Pressuring the church too far on issues of reform, as was the case during the liberation struggle in Tigray over women's issues (e.g., Young, 1997b), might result in losing not only the clergy's support in the present development process concerned with girls' education, marriage rules,

women's political participation and family planning but, more acutely, and by implication, the support of the people itself.

After the mass on holy days, religious holidays and Sundays, the priests can approach the congregation outside the church to give religious teachings in Tigrinya about what is considered correct interpretation of the scripture, since the mass is in the church language Ge^{c}ez that most people do not understand. The time after mass is also an arena that community leaders and civil servants (like teachers, agriculture and health extension workers) use to mobilise people on current policy issues. However, experts I interviewed within education, health, agriculture and women's affairs downplayed potential tension between the authority of the church and that of the government when asked explicitly about it. In the case of contraceptive use I was told at the *wereda* health bureau: "The priests might be against family planning, but they don't express their opinion openly anymore. They don't raise the question or express their resistance at the church. They don't express support for it either. They simply keep quiet about it." However, one male agricultural development expert addressed this tension more explicitly:

> There's a problem in relation to the religious aspects; women [according to the priests] should … stay at home. The priests here ignore them as participants in [community] work. They say that women inherently, according to their nature … must keep to the house. They must not participate in [community] work, in the meetings or assemblies … in things like that, so the priests ignore them. This is hard to change. Every farmer who dwells here, believe in God; that's why they are fright[ened] of the priests. As a [development] expert, I've told the priests not to say that women must stay at home. The priests say, "this is our custom; this is none of your business. Don't interfere with our teaching. We are the ones who know. You have no [right] to say that." But I don't accept their teaching, and for the future I will ignore them. I'm going to teach them [the people] as an expert from [the domain of] science in line with what the government says.

This suggests that demanding non-interference in one's separately defined domains is a strategy used by servants of both state and church authorities. This separation of domains re-emerged in answers to questions about how these different authorities' stands, in the case of contraceptive use, are perceived. For example, the peasant daughter and divorced day labourer Gwey (30) explained: "(…) the government follows science, scientific education, the clergy [follows] only religion; so there is a difference." Asking an urban priest (50) whether the Orthodox Church and the government are now on collision course on the issue of contraceptive use and abortion, he said: "We follow separate paths." As Messay (2010) notes, the church's rejection of science as part of its teaching moved religious doctrine towards a more rigid dogma, alienating itself from the project of modernising Ethiopia in the process.

These references to a distinction between the religious domain and the authority of the church on the one hand, and the authority of the government within the domain of science on the other actualised, in my opinion, Bourdieu's "field" concept. In Bourdieu's theoretical framework, different fields are relatively autonomous (Bourdieu, 1990a: 130), but structurally and functionally homologous with dynamic borders (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 104-105). In his perspective, the religious field structures a religious *habitus*, which structures practices and representations, aspirations and hopes justified by a religious *doxa* that misrecognises the power and control exerted by the clergy and the limits to the church's actual knowledge (Bourdieu, 1991: 14). In fact, *ʿiddïl* and *doxa* both legitimate a specific social order. Relations of power in one field can also reaffirm power relations in another, as in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's role in the past as authenticator of God's choice of emperor and, hence, of his authority. However, when claiming to follow separate paths defined in terms of religion or science, as in the case of contraceptive use, this potential for reconfirmation of authority across fields weakens.

Bourdieu acknowledges contradictions between fields. However, for him these discrepancies result in a "destabilized *habitus* torn by contradictions and internal division, generating suffering" (Bourdieu, 2000: 160; see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127). Consequently, the agentive negotiations that contradictions between fields might generate are not considered. In this respect, Grønhaug (1978) provides a more flexible view when emphasising the multiplicity of structural determinants in his use of the concept of "field." He asserts: "In the total picture, locality is just one 'field' among others, and we need a multi-field picture to evaluate how significant locality is in comparison with other fields, i.e., how strongly it determines the formation of the societal whole and the social person" (ibid.: 86). His application of "scale" (size in terms of the number of people involved and extension of the field in social space), further suggests indeterminacy in terms of the structural impact of different fields intersecting one another. Thus, Grønhaug's analytical take on fields, which allows for uncertainty about the structuring effect of *habitus* on the person, opens up a discursive space for agentive negotiation of reproductive choice also when religiosity is at stake.

5. Negotiating Authority in the Case of Contraceptive Use

One question about family planning was included in the life-story-based interviews and in the exploratory household enquête conducted in both the

rural and semi-urban area of my study with women aged 18-75.[9] When the church's attitude to the government health strategy was addressed in their answers, three categories of respondents emerged: (1) those who will *not* use contraceptives and explain this with reference to religious sentiments and/or that the church does not allow it; (2) those who interpret the church's current silence on the issue in public to mean that it is now allowed by the church, and that they are free to use it *if* they want to; and (3) those who believe that the church is still against contraceptive use, but will use it anyway since options are available. These diverging answers point to significant confusion concerning the Orthodox Church's stand on the matter. Bearing in mind that there are still women who will not use contraceptives for religious reasons, as well as women who think that the church now allows it, it is the latter category of answers that will be at the base of my discussion below, because of the contestation of authority implied.

According to McQuillan (2004), researchers have struggled with why religion influences fertility behaviour and contraceptive use in some settings but not in others. He suggests that we rather ask: *When* does religion influence fertility decisions, including contraceptive use? He emphasises three elements that increase the likelihood that religion influences reproductive behaviour: (1) the religion must articulate behavioural norms that have linkages to fertility outcomes; (2) a religious group must possess the means to communicate its teaching to its members and to enforce compliance; and (3) members must feel a strong sense of attachment to the religious community (ibid.: 49-50). The third element is particularly strong in the predominantly Orthodox Christian context of Tigray. However, the diverging interpretations of the church's official stand on the issue of contraceptive use point to the fact that the church is vague in relation to the first and the second element since it has downplayed its rhetoric against contraceptive use in public (as opposed to its stand against abortion). This is in line with what Goldscheider terms the "particularized theology" hypothesis where lower contraceptive use among Catholics than other religious groups is a consequence of clear church-teachings forbidding it (in McQuillan, 2004: 26).

As a result of the considerable divergence in women's perceptions of the Orthodox Church's position on the matter, I asked the old orthodox priest, *mïhïrey* Tadesse:

– Now the government allows birth control, but is it allowed according to religion?

[9] The question was: *Do you know about family planning? Would you consider using it? Why?* In the life-story-based interviews, this question was followed up with questions on the church stand on the issue and to what extent it was considered a sin to use it. Those issues were only mentioned in some of the questionnaire answers, as the extent to which the three local (female) assistants followed up this question differed significantly.

> Hah! We never say; we never say that. Even in the Bible … we found nothing in the Bible about giving or not giving birth. (…) But one thing that I told you earlier, the Bible says (quotation in Geᶜez), "multiply," and as to not multiplying as He said, the government says that we have already multiplied past what is required; that's what they say, hah! We don't interfere if that's what the government wants. We never tell her to leave it, we never tell her to stop, to stop giving birth, nor do we tell her to give birth; she will act according to her capacity. (…)

When one woman present in the room added: "It's a sin if she does an abortion after getting pregnant," *mïhïrey* Tadesse immediately responded:

> That's indeed a sin. Who told her to get pregnant in the first place? What has it [the foetus] done to not [be allowed to] grow up? This is obvious. But if she aborts she is a murderer; she is killing a person that means. (…) That is a big sin.[10]

Still classified as illegal in Ethiopia in the new Criminal Code (FDRE, 2005), regulations in Article 551 allow abortion in the case of rape or incest, where the woman is not able to take care of the child because of psychological or mental deficiencies or minority (defined as girls under 18), or in cases impairing the mother's or child's health (see also FDRE-FHD, 2006). This legal access to safe abortion services is, however, not commonly known (see also Fasika, 2010). Interviewed health extension workers employed at the health post in the rural study area simply replied that abortion is illegal without expanding on the issue. Women confirmed that the priests do not mention contraceptive use in their teachings at the church, and said their focus is now on marital fidelity, in the case of the risk posed by HIV/Aids, and, in line with common sentiments in this area (and Ethiopia in general), against abortion.

Women in the older generation, it seems, are also increasingly accustomed to the idea of contraceptive use. A divorcee (70) living alone in the semi-urban market town, said: "What about it; it's good to give birth, but if you don't want to, you can prevent it. The priests don't have knowledge about this; it's the doctors who know. Who will tell them [the priests] about it?" In the same manner, Gwey (30), who above differentiated the government and church domains in terms of science and religion, added: "It is right [to use family planning]. But my opinion and the priests' opinion are different. They say it's a sin; that it's not allowed. From the point of view of science it's allowed, I think." Furthermore, another peasant woman (46) in the rural area said: "About [whether it's a] sin; we don't ask the priests. Who will ask them [permission] anyway?" One peasant woman with seven children said: "I will take it [contraceptives] from now on, I have enough children now. It's said it's a sin, but who will tell them [the priests]?" Another rural woman (38) said:

[10] However, it is also emphasised by the Orthodox clergy I have discussed the issue of abortion with that life is considered to start 40 days after conception.

"I don't know if it's allowed or not. We [women] will allow it ourselves!" In fact, these women do not feel obliged to tell the (male) priests what they do when it comes to their reproductive decisions even if they, as Mulumebet (2006) notes, are supposed to include sexual matters in their confessions. When I asked a newly-ordained priest (30) in the rural area whether contraceptive use is allowed by the Orthodox Church, his answer shows that even priests might not be in agreement on the issue:

> It's not!
>
> – *Is it written in the Bible?*
>
> It's in the Bible.
>
> – *But women use it…*
>
> They hide it and do not talk about it. How can we know?

The resignation in his answer points to the fact that women can choose to use reproductive technologies when the government provides access to services as a right, in spite of the risk of committing a sin. This confirms, as Miller and Hoffmann (1995) assert, that explaining gender difference in religiosity by way of risk preferences—which means interpreting religious practice as risk-averse behaviour—only partly explains women's reproductive strategies. Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) understanding of risks as ranked according to which dangers are worthy of attention makes more sense in this context, where real risks to women's lives and health in relation to pregnancies and childbirths can be ranked above the risk of committing a sin. Nevertheless, many of the women who answered that they did not want to use family planning said that it is Mariyam (Virgin Mary) who has authority in reproductive matters and decides whether or not one becomes pregnant. Women's reverence for the holy day (*beʿal*) for Mariyam, the 21st day of every month (E.C.), with the celebration of her in religious associations (*mahiber*) on the same day, attests to the fact that women continue to perceive themselves as needing divine protection in these matters in addition to available health care.

Furthermore, while women might prefer to be in agreement with their husbands on the issue of contraceptive use, it was emphasised at the *wereda* health bureau in my study area that a woman does not need her husband's consent; it is *her right* to decide on the issue of contraceptive use and abortion. The health bureau and the health extension workers in the rural area also asserted that family planning services can be provided in secrecy to avoid husbands denying their wives this right. Of concern is also to protect women from gossip, as there can still be a certain stigma of promiscuity connected to women's contraceptive use. Family planning services can also be provided on house-to-house visits by local health extension workers or during vaccination campaigns, if it is the mothers who come with their children. However, the

perception that the church is against contraceptive use, and that it is a sin to use it, prevails. For example, when I asked Barnesh (22), mother of two, if contraceptives are allowed by the church, she said:

> No! It's bad; it's said it's not allowed, but what about it? It's said it's a sin, but they [women] use it, meaning some of those who use it are wives of the priests. (…) Afterwards, I will also do that. Now, I'm fine (laughs), but later I will do that too.
>
> *– But do the clergy say it's a big sin?*
>
> They say, yes! That's what they say, but what about it? I wish to give birth to two [more children]. Afterwards, God knows. Otherwise, I think I will use contraceptives. I think it's better to make use of contraceptives and bring up the children I have borne, if they live. That's what I wish. What my husband will say, I don't know, I'm yet to hear (laughs). If he refuses, I will do it secretly. I will do it myself, but if he's angry, let him be angry, meaning that is what I think. That's what I wish that means, I will give birth to up to four [children], then I will not give birth [any more], I think.

Again, Barnesh's answer shows the willingness to stand up against others who claim authority on the issue of contraceptive use, be it the clergy of the Orthodox Christian Church or her husband (who happens to be a *haleqa*/deacon). Furthermore, when I pointed to the difference between the priests' point of view and the government on the issue of family planning, the female student Awetash (21), married, with one three-year-old child, and about to leave for university, emphasised her own authority on the issue: "But, I will go my own way. Whether I'm to have a child or not, or whether I'm to continue my education, I act according to what I think is right. (…) The priest cannot do anything about it. (…) It's no sin [to use contraceptives] in my opinion, I don't know about others (laughs)." Almaz (29), a married housewife living in the semi-urban market town, also provided insight into how the relationship with the priests and her own religiosity is mediated when contraceptive use is involved: "If we follow what they say it might not be good for our lives. But, that's it, we tell God [what we did] and say, Lord forgive us, and do what we want (laughs)." The peasant woman Tigist (40) also expanded on how women deal directly with priests who are against contraceptive use:

> (…) They ask, "why [do you do it]?" and get angry. You keep quiet and don't tell them; you keep quiet and take the injection. "Why are you late [why don't you give birth again]?" they ask you, and I keep quiet. "Hah! Have you taken the injection?" [they say, and you say], "no, I didn't take the injection." Otherwise, they become angry.
>
> *– That you must give birth to all, is that what they say that means?*
>
> Yes, ehe, ehe. They say all people should give birth. How can the priests open up [for the idea of controlling birth]? They say it's a sin; taking the [contraceptive] injection is a sin. They say you commit a sin. (…). So what can you do? You make

> your own decision; you take the injection and say, "I haven't taken it." … If he [the priest] asks, "did you take the injection," you say, "I didn't do it". [You] keep quiet. [If the priest asks], "why don't you give birth?" "That time has passed" (laughs) you tell them, "that time is over."

This indicates that, while the clergy might downplay their opinion on contraceptive use in public, it might still influence the religious instructions they give at the household level. In fact, a specific priest/spiritual father (*abo nefsi*; literally, father of a person's body/soul) is assigned to Orthodox Christian households to give religious advice in matters concerning life and death, to order penance for sins committed, and to partake as God's representative in the household's celebrations (e.g., religious associations, christenings and weddings as well as in the case of deaths). Tigist's strategy is, nevertheless, to keep quiet and make her own decision; she is even willing to lie—which might be risk-ranked as a lesser sin. One rural female teacher (38), when asked about how she relates to the advice given by her household's spiritual father, said: "Why should I confess anything to the priests? They do not live by the book themselves. I admit things before God though, and pray." Hence, a person's religiosity does not necessarily overlap with what the clergy requires of their followers.

Contrary to the suffering generated in Bourdieu's theoretical framework when a destabilised *habitus* is torn and divided by incompatibilities of intersecting fields, contradictions between fields constitute, in the above narrative accounts, a space for agentive negotiation where women have the option of choosing which authority to follow based on their own needs in reproductive matters. In fact, by moving the legitimisation of contraceptive use from the field of religion to the field of science in a discursive sense, dilemmas in relation to their religiosity can potentially be circumvented. However, it is important to note here that women's challenge to the church authority is done in a non-confrontational manner by keeping quiet about what they do (see also Mjaaland, 2004). This is in line with what Meselu and colleagues call, when addressing women's agency in reproductive matters, a "negotiated silence" (Meselu et al., 2014: 668). However, silence is also used as a strategy by the church, when downplaying their opposition to contraceptive use in public, and the health institutions in providing family planning services to women in secret (if needed). This interactive strategy draws on the skilful layering of communication in social practice in the highland context of Ethiopia (e.g., Levine, 1965, 1985) and, hence, reproduces the socio-cultural dynamics where authority in a predominantly vertical social structure is challenged by being "active silently" (Maimire, 2010: 76). Hence, if the pressure on family planning from the current government, which is also concerned with

curbing the country's population growth (TGE, 1993),[11] exceeds women's own interests, this socio-cultural dynamic would allow them to refrain from using contraceptives—again in silence.

Concluding Remarks

While empowerment frameworks tend to take rather lightly the structural conditioning of choice in general, and in relation to religion and religiosity in particular, the problem I see with Bourdieu's perspective on choice, conditioned by a *habitus* that structures preferences and perceptions of what is possible and permissible, is that it places people in a constant state of false consciousness. Being able to adapt to structural conditions is both a sensible and necessary human capacity. However, as noted by Anthony Giddens, "[i]f we do not see that human agents stand in a position of appropriation in relation to the social world, which they constitute and reconstitute in their actions, we fail on an empirical level to grasp the nature of human empowerment" (Giddens, 1991: 175). However, women's non-confrontational strategies when doing what they want/need in silence might, rather than posing a challenge to the predominantly vertical social structure in the Ethiopian highland context, leave existing power relations in place. In this sense, women's agentive negotiations could, according to Kabeer's (2005) empowerment framework, be understood as passive rather than transformative agency. However, based on an expanded range of actual reproductive options to choose from, Tigrayan women, when *redefining* who holds authority in the case of family planning and *extending* their own authority on the issue, resonates with Mosedale's (2005) definition of what it takes to be empowered. Furthermore, in the case from north-western Tigray presented here, where the Orthodox Church is perceived as having authority in the field of religion and the government in the field of science, a more dynamic and multiplex understanding of "fields" manages to encompass women's agentive negotiations of authority on the issue of contraceptive use. Intersecting with the interpretive indeterminacy implied in the common-sense understanding of the transition between God's power and the person's control as reflected in the concept of *ʿiddïl*—and the consequent unpredictability related to the religious conditioning of decision-making—these intersecting dynamics enable a discursive space where women have a *chance* to claim authority in reproductive matters also when their religiosity is at stake.

[11] This potentially more controlling aspect of the provision of family planning (see e.g., Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991; Greenhalgh, 1990, 1995; Kabeer, 1999a; Wilson, 2015) is not the concern here. In fact, as loyalty to the TPLF-based EPRDF-coalition in government is still strong in Tigray, and Tigrayan women commonly feel they have the government on their side as far as gender issues are concerned, it did not emerge as an issue in my data.

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Abstract

The discussion in this article takes as point of departure the common assumption that committed religiosity hinders contraceptive use and abortion as the person would be obliged to comply with what is perceived as God's will and give birth to the number of children He gives. However, among the women (aged 18-75) who were included in this ethnographic study in one rural and one semi-urban area in Asgede Tsimbla Wereda in north-western Tigray in North-Ethiopia, there existed considerable confusion and opposing opinions about what the Orthodox Christian Church's official stand on contraceptive use actually is. Even priests were not in agreement on the issue when asked individually. Furthermore, the interpretive indeterminacy in the common-sense understanding of the transition between God's power and the person's control, as reflected in the concept of *ʿiddïl* (fate/destiny), points to the uncertainty entailed when attempting to define how religion conditions decision-making. Considered significant in women's narrative accounts when legitimisation of contraceptive use is at issue, are the agentive negotiations involved when moving authority, in a discursive sense, away from the church and the field of religion to the field of science where the government backs women's reproductive choice as a right. In the current context where the public health system provides a range of reproductive options for free, this discursive move allows women reproductive choices that are not over-determined by religion.

Keywords: *ʿiddïl* (fate/chance), reproductive choice, religiosity, science, authority, Tigray

Résumé

Sous l'autorité de qui ? Le conditionnement religieux de la prise de décision dans le contexte du droit au choix en matière de reproduction dans le nord-ouest du Tigré – L'analyse développée dans cet article procède de l'hypothèse couramment admise selon laquelle une fervente religiosité entraverait le recours aux pratiques contraceptives et à l'avortement car la personne serait tenue de respecter la volonté divine et d'engendrer le nombre d'enfants décidé par Dieu. Cependant, parmi les femmes (âgées entre 18 et 75 ans) sur lesquelles a porté cette étude ethnographique menée dans une zone rurale et semi-urbaine du *woreda* de Asgede Tsimbla, situé dans le nord-ouest du Tigré en Éthiopie, une grande confusion et des opinions contraires existent quant à la position officielle de l'Église orthodoxe éthiopienne sur la contraception. Les prêtres eux-mêmes étaient en désaccord sur cette question lors des entretiens menés individuellement. En outre, l'indétermination perceptible dans la compréhension populaire de la transition entre le pouvoir divin et le contrôle personnel, telle qu'elle apparaît dans le concept de *ʿiddïl* (sort/destinée), met l'accent sur la difficulté à appréhender de quelle façon la religion conditionne le processus de décision. La légitimation de la contraception dans les récits de certaines femmes invite à étudier l'agentivité en jeu lors du déplacement de l'autorité – au sens discursif du terme – de l'église et du champ religieux vers celle de la science, sous laquelle le gouvernement se place lorsqu'il soutient le droit des femmes en matière de reproduction. Dans le contexte actuel où le système de santé public propose un éventail étendu de moyens de contraception gratuits, ce déplacement discursif offre aux femmes la possibilité de faire des choix en matière de reproduction qui ne sont pas surdéterminés par la religion.

Mots-clefs : *ʿiddïl* (sort/destinée), choix en matière de reproduction, religiosité, science, autorité, Tigré