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Mind the Doxastic Space: Examining the Social Epistemology of the Ethiopian Wax and Gold Tradition

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Abstract: The wax and gold tradition is mainly known as an Ethiopian literary system that plays with layers of meanings. It has also established itself as a system of knowledge and/or belief production and validation. However, its social ramifications have presented scholars with conundrums that divide their views. For some, it is an Ethiopian traditional society's crowning achievement of erudition—a poetic form that infiltrated communication, psychology, and social interaction. For others, it is a breeding ground for social vices, i.e., mutual suspicion, deception, duplicity, etc., because its autochthonous nature means it is inept in terms of modernizing and unifying the society. In this essay, I aim to argue that there is one critical historical element that holds the key to the conflicting social ramifications of the wax and gold system and, yet, is neglected by both sides of the debate: the original doxastic space of *qine* (poetry) and *sem ena werq* (wax and gold system)—a hermeneutic tool that deciphers the meaning of poems. This literary system was born in the space of worship and liturgy. I will contend, therefore, that a shift of doxastic space from sacred to *saeculum* (the world) is the reason not only for the behavior of doxastic agents but also for the social outcome of the knowledge they create.

Keywords: Ethiopia; wax and gold; social epistemology; social harmony; cultural innovation; indigenous knowledge

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1. Introduction

After conducting ethnographic research, Levine published his book, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, in 1965. The book pulls together sociological, anthropological, and literary horizons to understand the tension between tradition and modernity in Ethiopia from a pragmatist's point of view (p. 13). He then goes on to deploy the wax and gold tradition—the literary system that plays with layers of meaning—as a metaphor that captures these dynamics. Claiming that the tradition is an Amhara cultural innovation, he extrapolates the significance to the whole of Ethiopia. He asserts that the wax and gold is "...simply a more refined and stylized...manner of communicating" (p. 9). At the initial glance, Levine depicts the tradition as charming, innovative, and even seductive. However, it is as if his closer investigation found out that secretiveness and indirection are the hallmarks of the wax and gold style of communication.

As a style of communication, Levine surmises, the wax and gold tradition has shaped the psychological and social character of the people. Despite the innovative potential, the tradition has become a breeding ground for social vices. The reason is that this culture has failed to come to grips with modernity. As a result, it has produced a social epistemic framework that fails to lay down the ground for unity and social harmony. Instead, the ambiguity and plurality of meaning in the wax and gold tradition are used for deliberate conceit, dissimulation, and self-assertion (p. 248). Territorial mentality and social discord, as a result, are very prevalent social ills in Ethiopia.

Levine's bold assertions sparked responses and critiques from some Ethiopian scholars. Maimire counters Levine's claim by pointing out that his project has no intention to account

for Ethiopian self-understanding. Instead, his work is mainly driven by the impetus to offer legitimation to the Western self-understanding using Ethiopia as a mirror. All Levine's work accomplishes is illustrating a *tabula rasa* theorization which has very little contribution to the constructive transformation of Ethiopian society (Maimire 2005, pp. 2–3). Messay blames Levine for dehistoricizing and essentializing the wax and gold system, disregarding the contextual background of each *qine* (poem). Furthermore, Messay argues that the nature of Ethiopian religiosity militates against Levine's idea of the prevalence of the cult of ambiguity, dissimulation, and deceit. This is because, according to Messay, religion cannot be cultivated independently of loyalty and steadfastness (Messay 1999, p. 181). He then goes on to affirm the social benefits of *qine* by quoting from Mahteme Selassie Wolde Meskel: They "...teach patience to those who suffer, moderation to those who are happy, to the former eventually becoming the later" (Wolde Meskel 1970, p. 67).

This article is motivated by two factors. Firstly, the national unity of Ethiopia is at stake. The social fabric that used to glue together diverse ethnic and religious groups is fracturing. Religious and cultural values that used to give epistemic direction that transcends ethnic boundaries are rendered either outdated or even oppressive. The national discursive space is littered by toxicity that comes from mutual suspicion. It is a good time, therefore, to revisit the debate which seems to add value to the ongoing conversation on social trust and national unity. Secondly, this article aims to bring a fresh perspective into this debate by highlighting the significance of the doxastic space in which the *qine* and wax and gold systems originated. *Qine* was born in the context of liturgy and worship where the human and divine horizons meet each other. This sacred space elicits different doxastic postures—a sense of awe, humility, and curiosity—from doxastic agents compared to the knowledge production process in the *saeculum*. This aspect of the wax and gold tradition, I contend, is entirely ignored by Levine and not sufficiently explored by Maimire and Messay in their response to Levine.

I venture to argue, therefore, that the de-regionalization of the wax and gold system from its original doxastic space has rendered it an orphan hermeneutics. Out of its original doxastic space, the wax and gold system has become a breeding ground for social vices. The reason is that the epistemic process in the *saeculum* lacks the purifying force that elicits humility and reflexivity which only a worshipful posture would offer. I will support this argument by giving a comparative analysis of the use of *qine* and how their meanings are postulated either to seek a divine window in social issues or to project power, seek revenge on supposed enemies, and plant seeds of mutual suspicion. By implication, I will argue that the current Ethiopian discursive space can be transformed by bringing intellectual humility and self-reflexivity.

2. Awe and Aesthetics: The Theological Origins of the Wax and Gold Tradition

Historically, *Qine* (poetry) was an important dimension of the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC hereafter). According to Maimire Mennasemay, *qine* was composed in Ge'ez—the church's liturgical language—between the 6th and 13th centuries. However, as Amharic evolved into becoming the Ethiopian *lingua franca*,[1] by the same virtue, it became the language of *qine*. In its Ge'ez form, the purpose of *qine* was mainly theological—"...dealing with the fallen conditions of humanity and the consolation and salvation that awaits the faithful" (Maimire n.d., p. 1). In the EOTC's tradition, mastering *qine* is an endeavor that takes years of education, discipline, and spiritual reflection. The reason is that it is a rich and complex literary system with multiple genres known as *qine bet* ("the houses of *qine*"). Alaka Imbaqom Kalewold, one of the well-known *qine* scholars, points out that each *qine* house has its own unique style, structure, and rhetorical trope (Kalewold 1970, pp. 26–27).

One of the common characteristics of *qine* is mystery (ምስጢር). The rationale for connecting mystery to *qine* is anchored on theological backdrops of early church fathers such as John Chrysostom.[2] God, in this tradition, is conceived to be utterly incomprehensible—he is totally other and immeasurably majestic. Being in his presence elicits a sense of awe,

trembling, and mental disarray in the submergence of contradicting feelings of fear and delight at the same time (Roosien 2017, pp. 2–4). Rudolf Otto captures this as *mysterium tremendum*. *Tremendum* denotes a tremor-like overwhelming fear in the presence of a majestic being, while *mysterium* portrays unapproachability.[3] Human response to the awe-inspiring presence of God is personal nothingness, on the one hand, and an "aesthetic rapture and moral exaltation [. . .]", on the other (Otto 2021, p. 17). The sheer inability to fully grasp and articulate the divine produces a sense of human fragility, which results in dependence and religious humility. *Qine*, therefore, is meant to capture these complex dynamics in the context of liturgy and worship. It is also important to stress that religious and aesthetic awe share borders. In fact, Phillip Quinn argues in his article, "Religious Awe, Aesthetic Awe" (Quinn 1997), that it is almost impossible to make a clear demarcation between "purely aesthetic awe and purely religious awe as they both possess aesthetic characteristics" (pp. 290–95).

Awe is emotion—it is a deep stimulus that goes beyond understanding. Such an emotion, according to Keltner and Haidt (2003), is generated by two central appraisals: perceptual vastness and the need for the accommodation of an overpowering experience into the current mental structure (pp. 297–3145). Vastness shows a rapturous departure from one's normal frame of reference, while accommodation signifies humans' struggle to domesticate the awe-eliciting experience into normal mental schema. This demonstrates that the emotion of awe is triggered by a conscious or subconscious assessment of an event or a phenomenon. Therefore, it is safe to say that awe is an epistemic experience. A. J. Heschel, a Jewish theologian and philosopher, adds a stronger theological accent to this epistemic process. In his book *God in Search of Man*, "The Bible", he claims, "does not preach awe as a form of intellectual resignation [. . .]. Its intention seems to be that awe is a way of wisdom" (1955, pp. 74–75). His contention seems to be supported by the Bible as it asserts, "The fear (awe) of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding" (Job 28: 28).

In the same vein, in the Ethiopian poetic tradition, creative obscuring of meaning (ምሙስጥር) is as valuable as revealing it because it represents the incomprehensibility of the divine horizon. It is also important to underline that awe inspires curiosity. Empirical research findings by C. L. Anderson et al. indicate that "awe is an epistemic emotion" that "moves people to be curious about the world and pursue such curiosity in acts of exploration and innovation" (Anderson et al. 2020, p. 762). The wax and gold system, therefore, represents the aspect of accommodation in an awe-inspiring experience. In other words, it is a hermeneutic (deciphering) tool that is triggered by curiosity to make sense of the total otherness of the majestic encounter.

Dan Levene et al. (2016, p. 6) argue that the metaphor "wax and gold" for this hermeneutic system is taken from *cira perdue*—an ancient gold-casting technique. In this process, a "master pattern" is sculpted in wax before being covered with clay and heated in fire. The heating process forces the wax to melt away leaving an empty space to be filled with liquid gold. The upper ceramic mold becomes a temporary structure in which the golden object is cast. However, when the inner golden structure is solidified, the ceramic structure is broken away leaving the golden object in its original shape sculpted by wax. Levine defines the wax and gold tradition as a "poetic form which is built on two semantic layers". The apparent literal layer is called *wax,* while the hidden and "actual" layer is known as *gold* (Levine 1965, p. 5). Messay elaborates: "The prototype being the superposition within a single verb of the apparent meaning in the hidden significance, ambiguity, or *double-entendre* pervades the whole style" (Messay 1999, p. 180).

Let us now consider an example of this literary system to have a better understanding of how it works. Alaka Gebre-Hana, an EOTC priest, was also a famous poet. Once, he was invited to his friend's house for dinner. While waiting for the meal to be served, he was revolted to see a rat jump out of the *mesob* (=a traditional breadbasket) where they put *enjera* (=an Ethiopian staple food), which is usually served with diverse stews and sauces known as *wett*. Aleka Gebre-Hana was known for his "quick and biting wit", to

borrow Levine's words, and unleashing scathing criticisms, even over the authorities, when he thought necessary. The hosts, however, were not aware of the fact that the priest had seen the "party crasher"—*ayt* (= a rat). Aleka-Gebre-Hana is now confronted with two contradicting truths. The first truth is the praiseworthy kindness of the hosting family, whereas the second truth is the determination of the family to serve him unhygienic food. At the end of the dinner, he, as a priest, had to say words of blessing. He then went on to employ a poetic form that requires the wax and gold interpretive approach to do justice to his gratitude and displeasure at the same time. He said:

በላነው ጠጣነው ከእጀራው ከወጡ (Bellanew tettanew ke enjeraw ke wettu)

እግዚአብሔር ይስጥልኝ ከመሶቡ አይጡ (Egziabeher yestelegne ke mesobu aytu)

We have eaten and drunk, from the *enjera* and the *wett*

May God bless you, your *mesob* (breadbasket) may remain full

To decipher the meaning of *qine*, the wax and gold system uses three interpretive steps. The first step is identifying *hebre-qal*—the word or words with double layers. Maimire calls the *hebre-qal* a "harmonizer or bridge" (Maimire n.d., p. 2). In its original context of worship, the *hebre-qal* is laden with theological significance. It typifies the meeting place of the divine and human realms. It is a place where intellectual curiosity is triggered through the feeling of awe and disorientation. The second step is understanding the wax layer—the meaning that is immediately accessible. This is normally achieved through a literal reading of the *qine*. The meaning at the wax layer is imperfect or even an intentional disguise. However, this does not mean that the wax-level meaning is always a mere window to the golden meaning. It has the capability of conveying some truth in its own right. The third step is excavating the veiled or hidden "golden" meaning. The golden meaning constitutes the *telos* of communication precisely because it takes the contemplating individual closer to the divine abode of meaning.

The *hebere-qal* (the double-layered word) in this poem is *aytu*. Its manifest meaning (wax) renders "I have enjoyed your food, and I pray that *you may have plenty on your table*". The intended (surplus) meaning (gold), however, is far from an innocent blessing—the word *aytu* can also mean "that rat". The gold rendition therefore is "I have eaten your food but do not think that I did not see *that rat* jumping out of the *mesob*". While he used the wax (the meaning on the surface) to express his gratitude, his main intention (the gold) was to criticize his friend for serving him unhygienic food (Girma 2011, p. 175).

3. Poesis and Ethiopian Social Epistemology

Now let us consider the wax and gold system as an Ethiopian version of social epistemology before evaluating its social ramifications. Epistemology is a philosophical exercise through which knowledge and beliefs are created and justified. In the Western philosophical tradition, until recently, this exercise was constrained to individuals as a *doxastic* (believing or non-believing) agent. In other words, it is a means by which individuals venture to determine what is true and believable without relying on others. Thinkers such as Descartes and John Lock insisted that valid knowledge can be developed through intellectual self-reliance as opposed to communal collaborative acts (Goldman and O'Connor 2021). People in the business of acquiring incontrovertible knowledge are advised to distance themselves from traditional and religious influences. This is precisely because preunderstandings coming from social norms and religious dogmas can invite opacity, instead of objective clarity, into the process of the acquisition and validation of knowledge and beliefs.

In recent years, however, social epistemology has gained traction as a valid means of achieving doxastic outcomes. The major reason, according to Steve Fuller, is the crisis in "...science's status as the exemplar of rationality for society at large" and the increasing rejection of excessive "scientization of social judgment" (Fuller 2002, p. ix). More importantly, there is a growing recognition, by scholars in this area, of the benefits of epistemic diversity to the process of inquiry. The benefits, as outlined by Miriam Solomon, include the division

of cognitive labor which allows people to "...work on different aspects of a problem rather than simply attempt to replicate each other's work", adding a range of knowledge from groups with different emotional intelligence and social skills and reducing the chances that valuable ideas are left out (Solomon 2014, p. 257). Intentional or unwitting, these dynamics bring Western epistemology one step closer to African, and therefore, Ethiopian philosophy. This is because, in Ethiopian culture, knowledge is inherently social. After all, in this context, both the formation and validity of knowledge are determined by communal and religious conditions.

Let us now investigate how the Western version of social epistemology is articulated before establishing the wax and gold tradition as an Ethiopian epistemological category.

In his article "A Guide to Social Epistemology", Alvin Goldman outlines three types of social epistemology. The first one is what he calls "individual doxastic agent social epistemology". It focuses on how individual belief-forming agents respond to social sources of evidence. The second type is depicted as "collective doxastic agent social epistemology", which captures how collective belief-forming agents such as juries and committees go for communal acquisition of knowledge and form a shared belief. The third type is "system-oriented social epistemology"—it investigates knowledge-creation and belief-forming mechanisms in the entire social system. Examples he gives of the system-oriented social epistemology are the jury system and academic peer review groups (Goldman 2011, pp. 11–20).

The main value of Godman's systematic sketch of social epistemology lies in three useful insights it offers. Firstly, it makes a compelling case for the formation and justification of knowledge and belief by a collective body. Secondly, it effectively demonstrates how knowledge can be created and shared within an intentionally designed and structured social group, i.e., juries and committees. Thirdly, it gives a helpful tool by which doxastic claims are evaluated and justified. This includes induction, perception, memory, and testimony (p. 11). One of the shortcomings with the types of social epistemology as articulated by him, however, is that it is limiting, especially in articulating a non-Western doxastic attitude. To wit, all the epistemic categories he offers assume a high degree of intentionality in the process of knowledge acquisition and validation. This highly formalized and modernist epistemic approach excludes the role of informal and non-modernist doxastic agents, such as traditional elders, indigenous sages, cultural social groups[4], etc., in the formation of belief and knowledge. While these doxastic agents play an important role in the formation and adjudication of beliefs, they are not formally institutionalized. Furthermore, from the examples given (i.e., juries, peer review groups, etc.) one can deduce that the classification is limited to doxastic agents within a compartmentalized institutional parameter such as the justice system and academic knowledge validation system. This marginalizes the knowledge-creation and legitimization process in less structured and more porous cultures.

As a response to the Western epistemic process as elucidated by Goldman, I, in what follows, attempt to discuss doxastic agents and the knowledge-creation process, tools of knowledge creation, and the means of validation of knowledge in the wax and gold tradition.

In the wax and gold epistemic tradition, knowledge is created by key religious leaders (i.e., clergies and theologians), cultural figures (i.e., elders, poets, sages, and singers), and government officials or political thinkers. These doxastic agents do not necessarily gain their credence from their academic (analytic) qualifications or solitary intellectual exercises (like Descartes). Instead, their intellectual authority is drawn from the position they obtained through their service to society. This includes their experience of negotiating complex matters, capturing the imagination of society through artistic performance, mediating in the context of conflict, and wisdom in deliberating on the direction of their community (Oruka 1990, pp. 26–28).

In this tradition, knowledge and beliefs are not created in silos guided by solitary contemplative processes. Alan B. Dixon points out, in his study of the Ethiopian indigenous knowledge system, that the knowledge acquisition process is very communal and informal.

The communal acquisition of knowledge, though, has different faces such as intergenerational, intercommunal, and intra-communal (Dixon 2005, pp. 311–17). Intergenerational acquisition of knowledge and belief takes place within tight mentoring spheres in family and extended family settings. These settings are used to pass on important social norms, valuable belief systems, and essential social and technical skills that help the new generation to negotiate their space in the religious, social and economic milieus. Reta Regasa's research on indigenous knowledge of medicinal plant practices in Ethiopia shows that family-based medicine accounts for the highest (71%) of healing (Regassa 2013, p. 520). The same applies to knowledge and belief acquisition and validation.

While intergenerational acquisition might be dogmatic in the sense that the older generation wants to cement certain values and beliefs in the consciousness of the younger generation, intercommunal acquisition of knowledge is more open. This is because it allows individuals to learn from what works for others within the community. It also opens a critical space even though managing the social damage of criticism requires a level of witticism. The sharp edge of criticism is carefully managed by adding entertaining and innocent-looking poetic tropes. Intra-communal acquisition of knowledge, on the other hand, requires stepping outside one's immediate communal boundaries. Movements such as internal migration and family visits can provide opportunities to acquire new knowledge and share beliefs outside their immediate community. Even when knowledge is created by prominent individuals, it is done with full awareness of and respect for religious principles, social norms, and political relevance.

On the surface, it looks like the wax and gold epistemic posture comes with the risk of totalitarian parameters that impinges upon people's freedom to create and validate knowledge. The story of Zara Yacob—an Ethiopian philosopher who faced persecution because he criticized the Church's theological stands—can serve as a telling example. However, this does not necessarily mean the knowledge and beliefs shared from the top will be unconditionally endorsed by society. History shows that a change of theological or ecclesiastical position costs some political leaders their position. King Susenyos who was converted to Catholicism under the influence of Jesuit missionaries was dethroned after a popular civil and religious unrest (Abera 2016, p. 432). Lij Eyasu, the heir of Emperor Memilik, was ousted from power when he brought some radical reformist agenda. His reformist plans elicited great hostility from the political and religious establishment because it was feared that his plans would put the existing religious and social order at risk (Omer 2014, p. 86). In this vein, new knowledge categories might be met with a forceful rejection when the belief or knowledge created does not fit with the existing social norms.

Moreover, the poetic form that the wax and gold system deploys leaves a space for subaltern doxastic agents to stream their critical voices. The "dark and deep" space, to borrow Gerard's words, of poesis shields marginal epistemic agents from hostile and domineering epistemic forces. This is because, firstly, the wax level is playful and has great entertainment value. Secondly, excavating the golden meaning leaves considerable room for interpretive pluralism. An example might elucidate this. Bereket—which literally means blessing—is a popular name in Ethiopia. Once, a maligned politician named Bereket was visiting a village which made the inhabitants tense. Openly opposing his presence would come with forceful repercussions from the government. However, there is one tool that helps them to channel their displeasure with his presence and, yet, get away with no major consequence. Thus, *Azmaris* (local minstrels)—important indigenous doxastic agents—subscribed to wax and gold systems to make their feelings known. They sang:

በረከት ከሰው ቤት ሲገባ ሲወጣ (Bereket kesew bet sigeba siweta)

እኔም ቤት አልቀረ መርገም ይዞ መጣ (Enem bet alqere mergem yizo meta)

When *Bereket* (a blessing) visited people's house

It also came to mine, but only with a curse.

Bereket is the key word with a double-layered meaning. It could be a common noun—a blessing, to be specific. However, it could also be a proper noun—the name of a person

(the politician in this case). The wax level of this poem shows that the minstrel is lamenting something others consider to be a blessing that has proven to be undesirable to him. The intention at this level, therefore, seems to be educating the audience not to take for granted things that are usually considered to be "blessings". The golden meaning of the poem, however, is criticizing the politician—who did not live up to his name—for daring to visit their village. In doing so, they are generating certain knowledge about the popular feeling not only toward the individual politician but also about the political establishment that he was representing.

How is knowledge validated in the wax and gold tradition? The Ethiopian epistemic approach—this might apply to African philosophy in general—tends to focus on practical holism rather than analytic abstraction. In other words, the philosophical problems that Ethiopians deal with are not of an abstract conceptual nature—they are real problems that involve actual intervention. This does not mean, however, that rationality has no place in such an epistemic exercise. In fact, rationality is not a Western invention. It rather is an irreducible aspect of being human (Ani 2013, pp. 300–2), and as Kaphagawani and Malherbe rightly pointed out, "To be human is to be rational [. . .]" (p. 209). However, it is also useful to highlight that these doxastic agents use rationality without analytic awareness.

Furthermore, unlike the Western epistemic process, knowledge and beliefs are not necessarily justified based on factual veracity. In fact, some of the shared knowledge is enveloped in mythologies, stories, and legends. These myths often involve the enemy who is often hell-bent on subverting the truth, larger-than-life heroes who are committed to restoring the truth, and God the ultimate source of truth. As I argued elsewhere (Girma 2022, p. 26), myths are often used as a way of negotiating a common space and embracing or excluding what is considered to be the other. As a nation with a long religious and political history, Ethiopians often felt they faced enemies of a religious and political nature. Providing a powerful narration of the foundations of its statehood was tantamount to survival. Mythology as a tool of knowledge belief creation is important because it provides a Socratic form of *poesis*. The reason is that raw facts are not only too narrow but also too dull, lacking flair in a philosophical culture of practical holism. This is precisely because an argument, to be considered valuable, needs to combine persuasion, problem-solving capacity, and entertainment.

An example is an Ethiopian indigenous court system known as *Shengo* or *Teteyeq*. The litigation method is called *Mught*. Edward Ullendorff, an eminent Ethiopianist, writes, "Their sense of honour and justice is satisfied once the matter has been properly argued out: thus they will present a case with a great dexterity and a distinct flair for oratory" (Ullendorff 1960, p. 46). Tsegaye Beru adds, "Back when there is (*sic*) no major sport engaging the people, litigation was a national pastime where everyone in the neighborhood, including young children would attend just about any court proceeding" (Tsegaye 2013, p. 345). The poetic space created in such settings comes with a challenge of ambiguity. In the meantime, it is liberating in the sense that it invites the others (attendees of the court in this case) for a communal meaning creation journey. Therefore, presenting the bare facts is not enough to win the case. The jury must also be entertained.

The wax and gold tradition offers the epistemic process with flair, entertainment, belief, and knowledge. In Ethiopian culture, therefore, the knowledge-creation process is not compartmentalized—it is not confined to institutional and professional spheres. It is fluid and holistic in that beliefs and knowledge formed by epistemic agents can infiltrate different levels and spheres of society. The reason for the easy flow of knowledge and belief is a higher level of social interdependence compared to individualistic cultures. The same applies to individual–society relationships (Oyeshile 2006, p. 103). For example, Ethiopian culture like any society has individual doxastic agents. The difference between the Western and Ethiopian epistemic processes lies in the fact that individuals as doxastic agents are not isolated from the community. They are positively open to tradition and religious principles to inform their epistemic attitude including the formation and validation of knowledge. This is different from the Cartesian exercise where the individual must take a distance from

religious and traditional influences to arrive at an indubitable conclusion about the validity of a belief or disbelief.

4. Wax and Gold Tradition: Social Ramifications

In my book, *Understanding Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia* (2012), I characterized the wax and gold tradition as a "philosophical paradigm"—bearing the hint of the Ethiopian ideological terrain from the Axumite Dynasty to the twilight of the Solomonic Dynasty (Girma 2012). Doubtless, wax and gold tradition as a literary system does not always neatly fit into a paradigm. The reason is that it goes beyond the aforementioned range of time. However, as I indicated above, this tradition is more than a literary device—it is also an epistemic framework betraying an element of pre-modern and patristic philosophy. Patristic philosophy, on the other hand, is a composition of the Christian thought of early centuries conceptualized using elements of Greek philosophy. My depiction of the wax and gold tradition as a paradigm, therefore, has to do with the philosophical category that pervades the literary system.

How did this play in the Ethiopian construction of social reality? To have a better understanding of this, it seems to be imperative to sketch a generic "Ethiopian worldview". It is legitimate to ask, at this point, whether there could be such a thing as the Ethiopian worldview. In fact, is it not true that the wax and gold tradition itself is a cultural product of EOTC's liturgical tradition and northern Semitic languages? True, Ethiopia is a culturally diverse country. It is beyond contention that the wax and gold tradition was invented within a specific geographical and cultural location in Ethiopia. However, it is equally undeniable that the Semitic culture and the EOTC have played a seminal role, for better or worse, in creating a system of thinking embraced by many Ethiopians beyond the northern regions. I always insisted, as a non-northerner and non-Orthodox myself, that it is nearly impossible to understand the "we" of the Ethiopian way of life without fully accounting for the cultural and religious values created and promoted by political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual leaders in the past. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann rightly explained, "Only a limited group of people in any given society engage in theorizing, in the business of "ideas", in the construction of *weltanschauungen* (worldviews). But anyone in society participates in its "knowledge" in one way or another" (1966, p. 27). The Ethiopian past and its collective memory are shaped for the most part by drawing elements of politics and theology. John Markakis, therefore, is right to characterize Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as "*weltanschauung* of a refined, literate culture which remained distinct and isolated from its neighbors in the Horn of Africa" (1974, p. 1). The Ethiopian worldview, therefore, is that which makes Ethiopia different from its neighbors as well as the rest of the world.

This distinct understanding of national individuality serves as a map. Even though it does not provide us with a fully detailed and all-agreed-upon itinerary, it gives people a general orientation in a world full of conflicting ideas and beliefs (Griffioen 2012, p. 25). This is the reason why, as the account of Levine shows, Gonderes and Manzes differ on the details of their philosophy of life despite both being Amhara and Christians (Levine 1965, p. 48). However, that does not mean they are inherently dissimilar. They share generic elements of the Christian worldview as well as Amhara culture. More importantly, Ethiopian belief in the Transcendent has brought together even Muslims and Christians, not to mention ethnic groups. Embedded in the Ethiopian generic conception of Transcendent are shared values and norms. We could mention the national values of *fereha-egziabeher* (the fear of God), *mechachal* (toleration), and *mekebabel* (reciprocity) as worldview elements undercutting every Ethiopian religion as well as cultural group. The overarching rationale here is that, in the Ethiopian worldview, Transcendent is not fully comprehensible, and yet, it is the most perfect horizon that provides critiques and examples to guide and sustain social covenant.

From the analysis above, it is possible to surmise that *qine* was borne out of spiritual dynamics that bring together the sublime (the divine) and the imperfect (the human) dimensions. However, as it stands, the social ramifications of the wax and gold tradition

are a subject of debate. Levine (1965) starts his seminal book *Wax and Gold* by recognizing the wax and gold system as a cultural innovation and adding that he was "seduced by the charm" of the Ethiopian traditional life" (p. vii). He then points out that, drawing from the worldview of the militaristic Manz and pious Gondar, the wax and gold system offers two important social and political benefits. On the other hand, the militaristic outlook offers a sense of homeland, whereas piety benefits society by giving a realistic and humanitarian outlook that is often exhibited by the peasants (p. 94). In other words, ordinary citizens do not expect moral purity from their political leaders—they are fully aware of human imperfection. In the meantime, the self-centered nature of *Realpolitik* does not discourage them from endeavoring to contain human conflict and seek arrangements for human interest.

He then blames political leaders for "inhumanitarian (sic) impulse" and the masses for uncritical conservatism, the combination of which made the wax and gold tradition stagnant and dangerous. The outcome is that this cultural innovation has become an instrument for "self-assertion through litigious disputes" (p. 248), "deception" (p. 250), "secrecy" (p. 252), "domination" (p. 253), and veiled insult, breeding mutual suspicion (p. 251). Because of this, he argues, the day-to-day communication is littered with "lookout for latent meaning and hidden motives" (p. 251). James Bruce—an eighteenth-century Scottish traveler who reportedly spent several years in North Africa and Ethiopia—seems to re-enforce Levine's claim. In his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, Bruce (1790) points out that dissimulation and ambiguity are as natural as breathing among all ranks of people in Ethiopia (1967, p. 83).

Levine's characterization of the wax and gold tradition is met with forceful responses from Ethiopian scholars. Maimire, a political philosopher, is one of them. He postulates his objection by pointing out that Levine's study is not motivated by the need to understand Ethiopia. Instead, he argues, it is closely tied to the "West's quest of comparative self-understanding" (Maimire 2005, p. 3). It is an extension of *tabula rasa* theorization that adds very little value, if at all, for Ethiopians in terms of forming their own knowledge. By providing anamorphic reading of Ethiopian culture, Levine's task, according to Maimire, is producing surplus knowledge that highlights the positive side of his own (Western) society from a new point of view, while leaving the Ethiopian self-understanding opaque.

Messay's defense of the wax and gold tradition is more substantive compared to Maimire's ideological response. In his book Survival and Modernization (Messay 1999), he starts by criticizing Levine for failing to acknowledge the place the literary trope occupies in Ethiopian social practices (Messay 1999, p. 180). According to Messay, Levine tends to stress the pivotal place of authority and individualism as opposed to its poetic nature. In addition, Messay points out that Levine's list of the social functions of the wax and gold tradition does not replicate the Ethiopian way of life, nor does it reflect the true nature of the literary tradition itself. All Levine's argument can accomplish, Messay explains, is to provide a justification for Bruce's unfair depiction of Ethiopian social practices. Two reasons are in order: First, Messay explains that deep religiosity in Ethiopia contradicts the use of deception and self-exertion to advance individualistic interest. He adds, "The very survival of Ethiopia, this unfailing commitment to Christianity and to a long-standing sociopolitical system, militates against the importance attached by Levine to the 'cult of ambiguity'" (Messay 1999, p. 181). Furthermore, Messay argues that authority in Ethiopia is displayed and affirmed with great ostentation, and ambiguity and dissimulation do not fit very well in this scenario.

Messay then subscribes to Albert S. Gerard's understanding of the wax and gold tradition in Ethiopia. A specialist in comparative literature, Gerard describes the Ethiopian trope as "a unique kind of wisdom, dark and deep" (Gerard 1971, p. 274). It, according to Gerard, has a unique philosophical significance "affording exercise in fathoming secrets which open the mind and thereby enhance the student's ability to approach the divine mysteries". In doing so, Gerard connects the wax and gold method with the Aristotelian claim that "metaphor is the essence of poetry" (Gerard 1971, p. 274). Messay then takes

advantage to make further elaborations on the manifest meaning (wax) not only veiling reality but also usurping the place of reality by passing itself off as the truth. In contrast, the dark and deeper meaning is thought to be "propaedeutic" to exploring the religious truth. Messay then argues that the wax and gold system is no different from methods of attempting to grasp truth in Western thinking (1981, p. 181). His illustration comes from Platonic thinking in ancient Greek. The simile of Plato's cave, for example, "presents the visible or the physical world as a projected and distorted image of the true world". "Knowledge," he adds, "consists in the ascent of the mind from appearance to reality". The main objective of knowledge, according to Messay, therefore is to restore the truth by way of "denouncing the usurpation and recovering the veiled, hidden reality". The wax and gold trope is no different (Messay 1999, p.182).

Maimire's objection that Levine's project has more to do with Western comparative self-understanding (within the framework of the Enlightenment notion of the noble savage) than capturing the internal logic of the wax and gold system is warranted within the wider scheme of how Western scholarship approaches Africa. However, his critique fails to recognize the evident adverse effects of wax and gold social epistemology and offers compelling reasons why this is the case. *Ashmur* and *shimut*, techniques through which two friends insult one another using a third person or object as a recipient, take their cue from the wax and gold tradition. A popular example of this is when Aleqa Gebere-Hana greeted a donkey driver "እንዴት አደራችሁ?"—how was your (plural) night?—dehumanizing the person by putting him and the donkey at the same level. Messay demonstrates the place and value of the wax and gold tradition in a very insightful manner. Again, he tends to paint a more optimistic picture of wax and gold eschewing its potential to breed mutual suspicion and, as a result, social discord.

I would argue that pivotal space and time in the evolution of the wax and gold epistemology are not fully accounted for in these scholarly debates: the birthplace of the wax and gold system and the historical instance in which the wax and gold tradition was de-regionalized from its birthplace. Wit, worship, and liturgy are the birthplaces of the wax and gold tradition. Worship demands a different posture from a doxastic agent. As we discussed earlier, in the context of worship, *qine* represents the meeting place of the divine and human. The doxastic posture of the agent is that of awe and humility, on the one hand, and intellectual curiosity and reflexivity, on the other. The doxastic goal is gaining access to the divine mind through humble but curious spirit. The vices surrounding the knowledge-creation process are cleansed and purified because of the presence of the divine, which shapes the doxastic outcome.

In this context, the language of *qine* was Ge'ez, the EOTC liturgical language which is not accessible to the masses. Then, as Maimire pointed out, Amharic became the Ethiopian *lingua franca* transporting *qine* from the sacred space of worship to the *saeculum* (the world). Outside the feeling of awe and humility that comes from the divine presence, *qine* became an orphaned communication technique. Disentangled from its spiritual and moral roots, it falls prey to those who instrumentalize it to accomplish other ambitions. Outside the divine shadow, power, sex, and control often become the driving forces shaping the public imagination of *qine*.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the wax and gold tradition has become a mixed blessing. On some occasions, it is still used to convey messages about human fragility and the need to connect with the divine realm. Let us look at the following example:

ሸክላን በሩቅ ሲያዩት ብረትን ይስላል (sheklan beruq siyayut beret yiselal)

ለመረመረው ሰው ገፅ-ኦፈርኖሯል (lemeremerew sew *gel-afer* noroal)

Looking from afar, clay looks like it can sharpen an iron,

It is only dust when you closely examine.

The double-layered words are *gel-afer (clay-dust).* Maimire suggests a "four-eyed approach" to fathom the meaning of this poem by way of dissecting the sounds and shapes of the two words (Maimire 2005, p. 11), but I will focus on two. The manifest meaning aims

to describe how illusive clay is when it is looked at from a distance. The poet, therefore, conveys a message that clay from afar might look very strong to the extent that one could mistake it for a metal and start to sharpen another iron with it. However, if one takes time to examine it, the poet concludes, they will find out that it is just dust. Emerging amid the utterance of these two combined words is another word "*gela-afer*" (human body–dust). The golden meaning, therefore, is that human beings look invincible to a naïve observer. However, closer contemplation (or examination) reveals that they are just dust. Through a powerful reminder of the inevitable death, this poem, therefore, is meant to highlight the insignificance of humans in the presence of the timeless divine. The humbling awareness of human fragility is the source of the "humanitarian" and "reasonable" outlook of the Ethiopian commoners that Levine rightly observed. In this sense, it is a tool that critiques and corrects social vices such as individualism, self-assertion, deception, and mutual suspicion. The awareness of the divine presence in everyday life and imminent death calls for solidarity and togetherness instead of division and mutual destruction.

On other occasions, the wax and gold system is used to create toxic knowledge. There are poems that, for example, promote revenge and aggression instead of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Let us look at the following popular *qine*:

የምን ጠላ ጠላ የምን ጠጅ ጥጅ (yemin tella tella, yemin teji teji)

ጠላትን ሲሸኙት ቡና አርጎ ነው እንጂ (telaten sishegnut buna-argo new enji)

Why bother preparing *tella*, why bother preparing *teji*[5]

Offering simple coffee is the best way to see off your enemies.

The words with double layers are *buna-argo*. The logic behind the wax-level meaning is anchored in the Ethiopian *yilugnta* (shame) culture. This tradition is strong enough to force people to entertain someone even when they deeply resent them. The main cultural current behind this particular *yilugnta* tradition emanates from the Christian value of *fereha-egziabeher* (fear of God). Therefore, the poet advises those who are meant to host their enemies not to bother about an elaborate banquet with prestigious local drinks—just offer them simple *buna* (coffee). The gold-level meaning, however, reveals that the author has more sinister intentions than just reducing the entertainment to a simple coffee ceremony. This is because, when the two words—*buna-argo*—are combined, the way they sound can also be interpreted as "breaking something into pieces" or "turning someone into ashes". The intention of the poem, therefore, is to create a different knowledge category in which enemies can be treated more harshly than the culture usually allows.

What is fascinating about this *qine* is that the doxastic agent behaves differently compared to the previous one. As a result, the usual *qine* knowledge-creation flow from the distorted material order to the sublime spiritual order is reversed. In fact, the doxastic agent mocks the value of spiritual order—showing kindness to the enemy—by using it as a disguise to channel their vindictive message. Instead of crafting social knowledge that emancipates them from the operative cycle of revenge, they promote a lust for revenge and desire to project power.

Ethiopia is a nation with a difficult and complex history that has struggled to find a working formula that does justice for its diversity. As a result, it continues to experience political disarray. Political consensus on important issues, i.e., state building (crafting political architecture that holds diverse ethnic and religious groups together) and nation building (finding a chemistry that helps people to forge a common identity), has proven hard to come by. Its discursive space seems to be splintering at an alarming pace. Each group comes with its own formulation of reality. Very few, if at all, are willing to embrace the humility that enables them to enter the world of their political interlocutors or reflexive courage for self-critique. This is a clear demonstration of how the wax and gold tradition—as an orphan hermeneutic de-regionalized from its natural space of humility and reflection—can put a strain on the social fabric and promote division and violence.

As Maimire expertly puts it, "...all Ethiopian social practices, norms, institutions and circumstances have a *sem ena werq* structure and could be treated as *qine-analogues*" (Maimire

2014, pp. 42–43). *Qine* had the potential to provide a discursive space in which knowledge can be formed and validated through questioning, imagining, and critiquing. However, *qine* itself needs to be reoriented to the space where the political interlocutors have common anchorage and points of reference. Without an anchorage that transcends ethnic and religious divides, it is nearly impossible to form a common knowledge and forge a common identity. An example of such an anchorage is the concept of *fereha-egziabeher*—the fear of God. *Fereha-egziabeher* is more than a religious slogan or maxim. It is a highly reverent and the most persistent awareness of the ideals and values of the ultimate (divine) horizon among the masses. Deregionalizing *qine* and the wax and gold system from that area has proven to be costly. In as much as moving forward toward modernizing Ethiopia's discursive space it is also critical to look back and revisit indigenous value systems in which the discourse is anchored.

5. Conclusions

This article set out to examine the role of the wax and gold paradigm as social epistemology. Wax is a symbol of an earthly order, full of distortion and disorientation. However, it must be stressed that it also has great value in that it facilitates a meeting place for the imperfect and sublime realms. Gold is a symbol of emancipation from worldly distortion in two ways. Firstly, it fosters intellectual curiosity, a culture of healthy questioning and critical thinking. Secondly, the worship dimension that the golden meaning brings helps the doxastic agents to check their motives and behavior vis-à-vis cultural religious norms. *Qine* can be useful outside the worship context, but the examples we examined demonstrated that it can produce orphan hermeneutics with negative social consequences. The reason for this is its disconnection from the moral anchorage that religious aura and spiritual reflections provide.

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Notes

1 There is no scholarly consensus on when exactly Amharic became the Ethiopian lingua franca. Read Ronny Meyer's (2006), "Amharic as *lingua franca* in Ethiopia". *Lissan: Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 20, no. 1/2: 117–132 for an insightful detour of the evolution of the Amharic language into the national *lingua franca*.

2 John Chrysostom, known as ዮሓንስ አፈወርቅ (Yohannes the golden mouth), is one of the highly regarded church fathers in the Ethiopian Orthodox church.

3 The Amharic equivalent can be ፈርሃ-እግዚአብሔር—fear of God. While *fereha-egziabeher* is used as moral uprightness that assumes the presence of God in all spheres of life, *mysterium tremendum* is a spiritual or religious phenomenon that takes place in a specific experience of worship.

4 There are numerous informal and traditional doxastic agents in Ethiopia who shape. Examples are *Afersata* and *Shengo* which are traditional jury systems, *Gada* tradition of Oromos which focuses on social organisation and distribution of power; *Edir* and *Equb* which look into financial and social welfare of the society.

5 *Tella* and *Teji* are popular local drinks usually prepared for special occasions.

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