

## ETHIOPIAN JEWISH MEN: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

**Orly Kayam**

Wingate Academic College

Netanya, Israel

### ABSTRACT

**T**his cross-generational study focuses on Ethiopian Jewish men's struggles to adapt to their new culture, new language, new socio-economic status and in many instances, new status within the family. The aims of the study are a) to explain the relative importance of Hebrew and Amharic for these men in their daily lives; b) to discuss how their culture is reflected in the host country, Israel and c) how immigration has affected their socio-economic status. The study was based on data collected and analyzed from a questionnaire that was distributed to Ethiopian students at a college, who answered for themselves and for their fathers, and from workers at a community center in Netanya, Israel. Data was also collected from interviews based on the questions in the questionnaire.

The findings show that the younger the participant was at the time of immigration, the easier it was for him to master Hebrew, to find employment, to integrate into the society and to have a higher socio-economic status. As in my previous paper, *Ethiopian Jewish Women Language and Culture* (Kayam in press), Ethiopian Jewish men are concerned that the younger generation will forget their history, their traditions and their language, Amharic. Most of the participants expressed their feeling that there is not enough incorporation of Ethiopian culture into Israeli culture. The positive and negative impact of immigration for Ethiopian Jewish men is discussed. Since immigration, their women have more equal rights. Men have had to accept changes to their traditional role as head of the household and main breadwinner. For most it is a search for balance in their lives between holding on to their traditions while incorporating various aspects of Israeli culture into their lives.

**Keywords:** Amharic, Hebrew, migration, adaptation, socio-economic status, *qessim*, marital conflicts

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to research the phenomenon of Ethiopian Jewish men in Israel who, like Ethiopian Jewish women, are striving to preserve their culture and language on the one hand while adapting to Israeli culture and the Hebrew language on the other. This paper adds information to a series of research papers dealing with the integration of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Netanya, Israel with respect to language barriers (Kayam, 2014 in press), and is the counterpart of my last paper, *Ethiopian Jewish Women: Language and Culture* (Kayam, 2014 in press). Offer (2004) explains that these barriers affect the socio-economic integration of both Ethiopian men and women in the Israeli labor force. Based on the 1995 census taken by the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, only 66% of Ethiopian Jewish men and 23% of Ethiopian Jewish women were employed. At that time most Ethiopian Israelis were salaried workers. Self-employment did not exist. Only 59% of Ethiopian Israeli men were employed full-time. Among Ethiopian Israeli women, on the other hand, the percentage of women who were employed in full-time positions at low-paying jobs was high. Her research showed that there is a very large gap between the educational level of Ethiopian Israeli men and women as compared to the general Israeli population. Ethiopian Israeli men had only 5.12 years of formal education and Ethiopian Israeli women had 3.3 years. Kaplan and Salamon (2004) added that the majority of Ethiopian immigrants, men and women alike, never completed high school in Ethiopia. Among those who were born in Israel and were educated there, few go on to university. At the end of the 1996-7 school year, for example, only about 19% of Ethiopian students passed their matriculation exams. Lazin (2002) claims that education is crucial for the Ethiopian community. It is a key to their integration into Israel's modern society.

This study aims for a cross generational perspective as to the sociolinguistic adaptation of Ethiopian Jewish men in Israeli society. There is a need to research this group as there has been greater interest in Ethiopian Jewish women's success in Israeli society (Kaplan and Salomon, 2004) than there has been interest in Ethiopian Jewish men's accomplishments. The research delves into men's issues such as a discussion of the Elders and Priests, the emergence of young, high-achieving men who are very involved in issues concerning the Ethiopian community, the Ethiopian family involvement in Israel and marital/divorce issues.

## Theoretical Background

### Elders and Priests

According to Kaplan and Salamon (2004) in Ethiopia there were no nationwide institutions. Instead there were local leaders, elders and priests who were called *qessotch* or *qessim* as they are known in Israel. They "led religious services and performed: weddings, funerals, divorces, ritual slaughter and sacrifices" (p. 132). They played a very important role in decision making in everyday life. The *qessim* used their common sense skills and their experience in guiding the *Beta Israel* or *Falashas*, the names given in Ethiopia to Ethiopian Jews (Offer, 2004 p.32). According to Germahu Mengistu, editor of *Yediot Nagat*, (May, 2014), the *qessim* and the elders were role models for the younger generation. *Qessim*, espoused the values of modesty and humbleness. While speaking of a particular *qess*, Maharat Sahalu, Mengistu explains that he was a spiritual leader who led a life of austerity while trying to help the weaker elements in the society, such as widows and paupers. While in the transit camps awaiting immigration, he encouraged Jews who had converted to Christianity to return to Judaism. Upon arrival in Israel, however, he and the other *qessim*, according to Offer (2004), quickly lost their status. The absorption agencies did not see them as an asset but as an interfering group. The religious authorities did not allow them to perform weddings or any of the rituals that they had performed in Ethiopia because they lacked any knowledge of rabbinic law. This loss of status affected not only the *qessim* but the greater Ethiopian community itself. At the time of the Ethiopian

community's immigration, when they could have used the help of the elders and priests, those elders and priests could not help themselves, let alone help others. As being older, the *qessim* had great difficulty in acquiring Hebrew and could not communicate their and their society's needs to the Israeli authorities. According to Ponizovsky et al (1998) the Ethiopians had no foreknowledge of Israeli bureaucracy or of living in a Western society. They were not able to negotiate with authorities or cope with daily situations. Kaplan and Salomon (2004) explain that after arrival a younger generation of mainly male activists, who speak Hebrew and have a better understanding of Israeli society than the elders, have taken over the role of community leaders' vis-à-vis the greater Israeli society (Weil, 1995 in Kaplan and Salomon, 2004). In 1992, a group of these activists demonstrated on behalf of the *qessim*. They wanted the *qessim* to be recognized as the "spiritual – ritual leaders of the Ethiopian community" (Kaplan and Salomon 2004, p. 132). The chief rabbis would not allow this because they didn't want the Ethiopians to be separated religiously from the rest of the Jewish people. In November, 1992, the government decided to have the *qessim* sit on the local religious councils as salaried workers. This decision helped create an atmosphere of cooperation with the government and the religious authorities. Today's challenge is to enable co-existence between the *qessim* and the rabbis. In conclusion, Ethiopians have traditions that they want to maintain while adding the traditions of the Israeli religious establishment.

### **Family Men**

Briggs (2008) found in his research that many Ethiopian men have not been able to make the switch from being the one to go out to the fields and be the main breadwinner for the family, to becoming a poor provider for their families in the technologically advanced society that is Israel today. Mengistu (May, 2014) blames this on the fact that many men could not transform themselves from being part of a patriarchal society to being part of a society based on equality in the family. There have, unfortunately, been many tragedies where men committed suicide or hurt their loved ones. According to Shoham (2013) thirty Ethiopian women were killed by their husbands after immigration to Israel, between the years 2002-2013. Kassin, Suffer and Keidar (2005) explain that there are a number of factors that can increase the amount of incidents of domestic violence by Ethiopian men towards their women. They are:

- a. Reversal of gender roles: Women are now breadwinners, and have integrated into the society while their men have not.
- b. Patriarchal leadership has weakened. The women started using the formal welfare available in Israel while the men still insist on the traditional ways.
- c. Welfare and police insensitivity to cultural diversity between the Ethiopian Jewish culture and Israeli westernized conceptions led to violence.
- d. Issues of financial and social difficulties which added extra tension in the family (in Shoham, 2013).

Mengistu (May 2014) feels that equality in the family should be encouraged while at the same time making sure that this equality will not turn into tragedy. Hyman, Guruge and Mason (2008) authors of a Canadian research paper on the impact of migration on marital relationships of Ethiopian non-Jews to Toronto found that couples who were forced through migration to accept more egalitarian ideas of gender roles and changes in power in their relationships, may have increased marital conflicts and difficulties in communicating with each other. Some men refused to take on tasks they perceived belonged to women. Women took on the burdens of work and family. This led to resentment on their part. I believe that this applies to the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel as well.

### **Young High-Achieving Men**

Flum (1998) explains the high motivation that young Ethiopian men have in joining the Israeli army (IDF) is seen as the chance to integrate in and contribute to Israeli society. It gives them an increased sense of belonging and at the same time it is the gateway to individual advancement. According to the IDF, there is almost complete enlistment of Ethiopian males: 90% in comparison to 72% of non-Ethiopian recruits. They also volunteer for combat units at a greater rate than other recruits (Kayam, Talmor and Galily, 2013). Mengistu (Feb. 2014) explains that the IDF has decided to offer courses, such as computer courses, to Ethiopian recruits at the beginning of their service in order to advance and gain experience. After their stints in the army many young Ethiopian men play an active role in the Ethiopian community's issues. These young men's identities are embedded in their community and their individual struggles to succeed become a "struggle for the larger cause of the community" (p. 155). Most of them have a "communal mission" to enhance the well-being of the Ethiopian community (p. 156).

Many view higher education as an avenue where their individual successes enhance the entire Ethiopian community. Acceptance to university is considered to be a great accomplishment for these students. Many, however, need assistance in completing their education. According to the findings of Elbogán-Frankowitz et al (2004) these students eventually do well in the work place. "The majority have integrated into academic, general or technical professions" ( in Kayam, Talmor and Galily, 2013 p. 19). These men grapple with the community's main problem of what traditions of the past should be preserved while taking on aspects of their new culture.

### **Methodology**

The same questionnaire was used in this research as in my previous paper, *Ethiopian Jewish Women: Language and Culture* (Kayam, 2014) and for this study it was distributed to 20 Ethiopian Jewish male students at Wingate Academic College and at Beit Yehidut for Ethiopian immigrants in Netanya, Israel. Beit Yehidut means Friendship House. It is a community center that tends to the needs of the Ethiopian community. The participants who filled out the questionnaires are either employees who work in different capacities at the center, or Ethiopian men who attend vocational courses there such as using a PC, computer programming, Hebrew language courses, parenting classes, high school equivalency courses and many other activities that are meant to advance Ethiopians. Three male students at Wingate Academic College answered for themselves and for their fathers, and one female student answered for her father. The participants ranged in age from 22 - 74 years old, with the mean age being 40. All of them were born in Ethiopia with the exception of one participant who was born in Israel. Two of the participants' first language was Hebrew but for all the rest it was Amharic. Then there were others who answered the same questions in face to face interviews.

The questionnaire consists of four parts. Part A consists of demographic questions about the participants themselves with regard to their age, when they arrived in Israel and questions about their languages. Part B asks the participants to self-report on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being very poorly and 5 being very well, how well they speak, understand, read and write Amharic, Hebrew and English. Part C instructs the participants to put an X next to the situations where they speak Amharic, to put a V next to situations where they speak Hebrew, and to leave a blank next to situations that are irrelevant to their lives. The situations are: talking to a cashier in the supermarket, talking to their parents, with their spouses, their children with their spouses and children in a public place, with their neighbors, at work, in the bank and on the beach. Part D consists of 15 open-ended questions such as: In your opinion, to what extent is the Ethiopian Jewish culture and the traditions perceived in Israeli society? In which situations do you speak Amharic and in which situations do you speak Hebrew? How important is the English language in your lives? And what are the most obvious differences between the Ethiopian culture and the Israeli one?

This current study expands on the previous study *Ethiopian Jewish Women: Language and Culture*, Kayam (2014) to compare and contrast the experiences of both Ethiopian Jewish women and men as to their acquiring Hebrew and their acclimation to their new country, Israel.

These experiences translated into three research questions as follows:

### Research Questions

1. What is the relative importance of Hebrew and Amharic in the daily lives of Ethiopian Jewish men?
2. How is Ethiopian Jewish culture reflected in the culture of the host country, Israel?
3. How has immigration affected the socio-economic status of Ethiopian Jewish men?

### Results

#### 1. What is the relative importance of Hebrew and Amharic in the daily lives of Ethiopian Jewish men?

The data shows that the younger the participant was when he came to Israel, the better the chances of his mastering Hebrew. The same was true for the fathers who participated in the survey. It was found that the younger the father, the better was his Hebrew.

The oldest participant was 74 and the youngest, 22. All of those who were born in Ethiopia reported that they speak and understand Amharic well. Only one of the participants, aged 65, claimed he is able to read and write Amharic well. The rest read and write Amharic with difficulty. The oldest did not acquire Hebrew at all. The 65 year old had greater difficulty in reading and writing than the younger men did. Two do not work, and there is a marked difference between them and the rest of the participants as to their lack of the use of Hebrew in their daily lives. One expressed his fear that Amharic will disappear and this is why it is so important for him that his children speak Amharic with him. The youngest father was the only one of the fathers who claimed to read a newspaper at all. All of the other, younger participants read newspapers. From age 56 till 36 they read newspapers in both Amharic and Hebrew. From 36 till age 22, they read newspapers only in Hebrew. Only five of the younger participants claimed to have perfect knowledge of Amharic. Four others stated that they cannot read or write Amharic. All of the rest have imperfect speech, understanding of the language and some difficulty in reading and writing Amharic. All of the younger participants claimed excellent Hebrew skills, except for the 45 year old who reads and writes Hebrew with difficulty and speaks and understands only slightly better than that. Two participants claim that they speak Hebrew only, with all the rest stating that they speak Amharic with their parents, their friends and with their spouses/partners.

Most of the participants admit that they speak Amharic with their parents. However, a participant stated that his father and he speak to his mother in Hebrew purposefully in order to help her improve her Hebrew language skills because she doesn't work outside the home. Some of the participants expressed the desire that their children should know Amharic; however they speak to them in Hebrew. Another participant explained the need to embed the importance of Amharic in the collective psyche of the younger generation so that they will keep the tradition, their identity and that the language should not be forgotten.

#### 2. How is Ethiopian Jewish culture reflected in the culture of the host country, Israel?

The participants mention that there are some Ethiopian musicians who have become famous in Israeli society; Ethiopian music and Ethiopian food is known and appreciated as well. Yet, there are many aspects of Ethiopian Jewish tradition, history and lifestyle that are totally unknown in Israeli society. For the most part the host country, Israel, has accepted these immigrants into its society, but it is not incorporating the Ethiopian narrative into its culture. One of the participants feels that the Ethiopian community has to prove itself constantly and fight continuously for its rights. This same participant feels that the Israeli culture would do well to learn patience and tolerance from the Ethiopians. He explains that Ethiopians give respect

to the family and to the society. He sees Israeli society as very open and free and one where there are no limits and where everything is permissible. One of the younger men echoed this by saying that they can learn respect for their parents from the Ethiopian culture. Another young participant added that if there were more knowledge of the Ethiopian culture within the wider Israeli one then it would bridge the gaps that have formed between the cultures. Another participant added that when all Israeli children who were born in Israel will be taught about the Ethiopian culture, traditions and history, then the Ethiopian community would not be different from the rest of the society.

### **3. How has immigration affected the socio-economic status of Ethiopian Jewish men?**

From the questionnaire it was found that the younger the men were when they immigrated, the better were their chances of finding employment and becoming more integrated into the society. Two of the participants were unemployed. As one participant explained, they have had to make a giant leap from living in a village to living in a modern Western society. They have had to make a switch to accept the Western mentality itself. Some were more successful than others. Most participants didn't respond to this in the questionnaires, but more so in face-to-face interviews. One recalled how he used to be the manager of his lands and he had the responsibility of making a living in his own way, from the fruits of his labor. Now in Israel it is difficult for him to accept that he is no longer the boss, and has to work according to the dictates of others. This is why those who are able to, go to adult education courses and retraining courses, even after putting in many hours at work. There are those who are trying very hard to set an example for the younger generation to succeed way beyond their elders.

### **Discussion**

From the findings we see the impact of immigration in the outlook of the men who participated in this study. The findings corroborated what Roer-Strier (2005) expressed in her study of immigrant fathers which was that immigration had a serious impact on the traditional role of Ethiopian fathers which was to "preserve the honor and pride of the Ethiopian family and community" (p. 326). It challenged their position in the family as head of the household and as being the breadwinner of the family. Their main stumbling blocks have been unemployment and difficulty in acquiring Hebrew language skills. Immigration, on the other hand, may lead to new situations that transform the traditional fathering roles into something different. Parenting classes are available for the Ethiopian community where they can redefine their parenting skills.

Ethiopian Jewish culture is being incorporated into the host culture as seen in the fact that the current Miss Israel is Ethiopian, they are found on TV in popular shows, in the current Knesset there are two Ethiopians, and a torch was lit by an Ethiopian woman on Independence Day. However, there is much that is not known in the general Israeli public about the heroes and heroines of their trek to freedom through Sudan. The trek is part of their immigration story and the Ethiopian Jewish community has succeeded in perpetuating the memory of the almost 6,000 men, women and children who perished on their way out of Ethiopia and to Jerusalem by building a memorial on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in their memory. This memorial was built in 2007 and a further wall inscribed with the names of those who perished was added recently.

An increase in marital conflict has been reported in this community. As in the Canadian study of Hyman, Guruge and Mason, (2008), many couples in the Ethiopian Jewish community have difficulties in "renegotiating new gender roles and responsibilities" (p. 156). Though a study of gender roles and its impact on marital conflict is beyond the scope of this study, one of the sons in our study did relate the fact that his father never goes to the supermarket. This may be a continuation of what that father perceives as a task that belongs to women, and one that he may be unwilling to do. Hopefully, the next generation of Ethiopian-raised males who are exposed to 21<sup>st</sup> century greater gender equality in a Westernized society will view male/female roles differently.

### **Conclusions and Limitations**

In the 30 years since the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel began, Ethiopian Jewish men have faced many challenges in learning to adjust to a new culture, a new language and new avenues of employment. Many were illiterate. They are now making great strides in learning Hebrew, adjusting to a Westernized technological culture where their women have more rights, and in finding employment. Many find knowledge of Hebrew and to a lesser extent, English, as the door to advancement in Israeli society. Ethiopian men and women are turning to education as the source of financial advancement. At the same time, they are trying to hold on to their traditions and their language, Amharic, and not let them disappear. They strive to find a balance in their lives between the old and the new, the traditional way of Ethiopian Jewish life and the Israeli culture. Hopefully they will succeed.

This study includes some limitations as it was based on subjective self-reported material. It is quite possible that a study that was measured objectively or one whereby participants were observed in their daily interactions in Amharic and in Hebrew would have resulted in different conclusions. An additional limitation is that the study was conducted using a relatively small sample which was not totally random. Future research might include a larger sample base and the participants would be chosen at random.

Another limitation was that the questionnaire was worded in such a way that the participant could answer very tersely if he so chose. A questionnaire where the questions demanded fuller answers might have brought different results.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that immigration agencies should help the Ethiopian Jewish community to become absorbed in the society and not to become, as the director of the Ethiopian branch of the Ministry of Absorption, Amir Tuaba states, eternal immigrants. His vision is that the younger generation will move away from the Ethiopian enclaves and settle in different places all across the country. He feels that it would be destructive to raise another generation of Ethiopian Jewish families in Ethiopian Jewish neighborhoods (Yediot Nagat, Feb. 2014, p.9). Another aspect is that agencies involved in Ethiopian Jewish communities expand their efforts in helping families and especially fathers in negotiating family life and in bridging the gap between the more traditional father roles to adapting to the more child centered family life. A third aspect is that studies such as the present one can be applied to help empower Ethiopian Jewish men in situations where they encounter difficulties in employment and in acceptance into Israeli society.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Part A:

1. Gender: F/M
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Country of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Year of Immigration to Israel: \_\_\_\_\_
5. What was the first language that you spoke? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What other languages have you acquired? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Which language do you speak at home? \_\_\_\_\_
8. When you read a newspaper, what language is it written in? \_\_\_\_\_

Part B:

Please rate your current ability in the four skills listed below in Amharic, Hebrew and English, according to the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Unable To	With Difficulty	Fair	Good	Very Well

Skill	Amharic	Hebrew	English
Speaking			
Understanding			
Reading			
Writing			

Part C:

Please mark: **X** for situations where you speak in Amharic

Please mark: **V** for situations where you speak in Hebrew

Please leave a blank for situations that are not relevant in your lives:

- In the supermarket, in a conversation with the cashier \_\_\_\_\_
- With my parents \_\_\_\_\_
- With my close friends \_\_\_\_\_
- With my co-workers \_\_\_\_\_
- With my brothers and sisters \_\_\_\_\_
- With my spouse at home \_\_\_\_\_
- With my spouse in a public place \_\_\_\_\_
- With my children at home \_\_\_\_\_
- With my children in a public place \_\_\_\_\_
- At my workplace \_\_\_\_\_
- Where I study \_\_\_\_\_
- In the bank \_\_\_\_\_
- With my distant relatives \_\_\_\_\_
- In my attempts to get information from customer service on the telephone  
\_\_\_\_\_
- With my childhood friends \_\_\_\_\_
- With my neighbors \_\_\_\_\_
- On the beach \_\_\_\_\_

Part D:

Answer the questions:

1. In your opinion, to what extent are the features of the ethnic background and the identity of the Ethiopian Jews shown in Israeli society (through its music, art, special holidays)?
2. In your opinion, to what extent are the traditions and the culture of Ethiopian Jews thought of and shown in Israel?
3. Write when you tend to speak in Amharic and when do you speak in Hebrew?
4. In your opinion, to what extent the English language useful to you in your lives?
5. Write which language do your children speak with you at home? Outside the home?
6. In your opinion, how important is it for you that your children speak Amharic with you? With your distant relatives?
7. In your opinion, how important is it for you that your children speak Hebrew with you? With their friends?
8. In your opinion, how important is it for you that your children speak English?

9. In your opinion, even after living in Israel for many years, in what ways do you feel different from the *Sabras*?
10. In your opinion, what are the obvious difference between the Ethiopian Jewish culture and the Israeli one?
11. In your opinion, how can the Ethiopian Jewish culture improve the Israeli one?
12. In your opinion, to what extent is preserving Amharic important for you?
13. I3. In your opinion, to what extent is preserving the Jewish Ethiopian culture in Israel important for you?
14. In your opinion, how important is it for you to preserve your Jewish Amharic names?
15. In your opinion, to what extent is the Jewish Ethiopian culture valued in the world, or in Jewish Ethiopian communities abroad?

Questionnaire based on Blustein, 2006